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C O U S I N S .

PART L

CHAPTER I.

SIMON.

Come, come, return; return, thou wandering lord."

Henry VI,

I SUPPOSE we are to call him Simon, as he is our cousin ?""

"Call a man of forty 'Simon'!"

"He is not forty, Hester: he is only thirty-eight; and I do not see what else we could say. We could not call him Colonel Lutteridge."

"I could," said Hester, promptly.

"Well, you, perhaps/" replied her elder sister, with the natural contempt of twenty-four for seventeen; "you are such a child. But for Jane and me it would be ridiculous; don't you think so, Jane?" appealing to a new-comer of an age between the two, but apparently nearer to that of the last speaker.

"Think what ?" said she, not having caught the beginning of the sentence.

"That we could not call Simon Lutteridge anything but 'Simon.' He is our own first-cousin, you know; and though we should not, of course, rush into names of any sort all at once, by-and-by it will be the only thing we can say."

"It will be a long by-and-by with me," added Hester.

Jane agreed with both. Certainly "Colonel Lutteridge" sounded too formal; but as certainly did "Simon" seem too familiar. She thought—with the common-sense that usually distinguished Jane Manners—that until a nearer acquaintance had shown them upon what terms they were to be with their unknown kinsman, it would be safest to call him nothing at all.

"Mr Nothing-atrall! The very thing!" cried Hester "I shall say—making my reverence, toes in, arms out, countenance expressing mildness and candour—look, Agatha. Jane, *do*, look ;—'Mr Nothing-at-all, I am charmed to welcome you back to your native land. I trust, Mr Nothing-at-all, that you are in excellent health and spirits—that in t&e trying Indian clime you have imbibed no insidious disease, no mysterious disorder,—in short, Mr Nothing-at-all, that, whatever else accompanies you back to England, you will of that sort of thing bring home—nothing at all!' Rather a collapse at the end, I am afraid !"

The object of discussion was, as has been already shown, an absolute stranger to the speakers, to whom he was, nevertheless, on the maternal side, closely related.

His father had been Lady Manners's own and only brother ; and Lady Manners was the mother of the three young girls thus gathered in conclave.

Lutteridge Manor, and Wancote Hall out of whose windows one of the group was now looking, faced each other on opposite sides of a broad, smooth river, and the boat-house of the one was within five minutes' pull of the boat-house of the other.

Along one bank, the slopes of Wancote stretched for several miles; and the woods of Lutteridge, on the other, extended still further; while, even by the road, the two mansions were barely three miles apart.

The neighbourhood of each to each being thus close, it may be thought strange that it should be possible for any of the cousins not to have met; but this can be easily explained.

While yet a minor, Simon Lutteridge had come into his inheritance; and caring little then for a quiet residence in a rural part of the country, he had, at a very early age, entered the army, with an express view to foreign service. He had gone to India, and exchanged into the native cavalry; soon after which he had married, without any particular act of

volition on his part, a lady of large fortune and pleaajpg manners, whose friends had joined with his in helping forward the match.

All had been agreed in thinking that the best thing possible had been done for the young people; and when, after only one year of wedded life, the gentle girl sank into an early grave, at the birth of her first child, pity and sympathy were abundantly bestowed on the youthful widower.

Nor would a second bride have been wanting, had such been desired.

But not, although the child thus left to him was ere long seized with one of the ailments of infancy, to which it succumbed, and he was now without wife or son, did Colonel Lutteridge appear disposed to make a second venture towards domestic happiness.

For fifteen years he remained as he was, rising step by step in his profession, until, at the date when our story commences, he had been colonel of the regiment for a year and a half.

He had then suddenly, and without assigning any particular reason for doing so, thrown up his command, and announced his intention of returning to England and taking up his residence at Lutteridge.

So long, however, had he been absent from the Manor, that his brother's widow, who, with her two children, had tenanted it during his foreign sojourn, had almost come to be looked upon, and certainly looked upon herself, as its sole mistress.

Her son, a boy of twelve, was at this time heir-presumptive ; and over his interests she, herself a woman still young and handsome, kept watch. She was startled, more than she would have owned for worlds, by the intelligence that her brother-in-law was actually on his way home, and that, not as a mere visitor, but to take up his position as lord of the manor and master of the household.

Wherein she expected to be caught tripping, she knew best herself.

Not in any great matters, we may be sure : it is in very filmy and delicate peccadilloes that people like Mrs Robert Lutteridge dabble; and the " Ah !" which escaped her lips on the perusal of Simon's letter may have been due rather to apprehensions connected with the future than the past.

She had reckoned as much on his absorption in military

duties as on his residence abroad for preventing that nightmare of her imagination, his second marriage, from becoming a reality. Coining to England, to Lutteridge, and to leisure, how would lie now escape? Here he was to be within range of Wancote, in close proximity to the three charming girls, to whom he must appear, when he came, in the guise of a relation, yet with the halo of a stranger! What position could be more dangerous?

On his former visits home he had not happened to meet them, it being only since he had gone out for the last time that their father, Sir John Manners, had succeeded to the title and estates of Wancote. Up to that time Sir John had not resided in the county, and though he could just recollect that he had at intervals seen and spoken to a young man who he was told was his nephew, in point of fact he remembered nothing more about him.

"I think he was fair,"¹ he said once, but it turned out to be a bad shot, the person in question being as black as a coal; and in consequence it may be doubted whether the uncle had not some other man at the time in his eye.

At the time when Agatha, Jane, and Hester were discussing the title they should append to their cousin, whose near approach had just been announced, their father could give them no help. He could not even say what his nephew was likely to think himself on the subject; he could tell them his age to a year, reckoning up on his fingers by data known to himself alone, but he could do no more; nor, truth to tell, were the daughters themselves eager on the subject.

Their lives were pretty well filled up at this period. They gave to their cousin's arrival all the attention they could spare from their books and rides, their music and embroidery. They prognosticated *fetes* at the Manor, and wondered if Constance would like the change. Agatha, who was old of her age, went a step further, and took into consideration the prudent question as to whether it would or would not make any difference to Jack.

But when they had done so much, and had even disposed of his name, they forgot all about the event which so powerfully agitated the mind of their cousin Robert's widow. It was infinitely more to her, as was natural; but she did not guess, nor would she indeed have believed, how little it was to them.

It happened on the day she entered with her budget of

new*, which was intended to take the people at Wancote by storm, that all three sisters were deeply engaged over a book of manuscript songs which had been lent them, and which they durst not keep beyond a set time. How to make the most of that time was the question. The music had taken their fancy, and they were greatly pleased to have even a brief and restricted opportunity of making it their own. Each had to choose rapidly what she would have; that was done during Constance's stay; directly she left, Agatha, losing not a moment, sat down in right of her seniority to transcribe her choice; and it was not till she was thus engaged, and Hester was idling in the window recess longing for her turn, that they found a moment to talk about their cousin's return. All that had to be said about him had been done with long before Agatha yielded up the borrowed volume, and before Jane and Hester had both likewise finished with it they had wellnigh forgotten his existence.

They were engaged you see in a great work.

First had to be made a rough pencil-draft; this was next tried on the piano, tested, and all faults corrected, the amended version having finally to be copied out with infinite pains and skill into their beautifully bound and illustrated musical albums. As may be imagined, a great deal of time was needed, since such labours could only proceed at stated hours when free from interruption; and naturally in the press of business less important matters slipped out of sight. The school children, to be sure, were not neglected, nor were rides and walks omitted; neither did the two elder girls fail to shoot their correct number of ends at the archery targets on most days, but certainly Colonel Lutteridge was as though he had not existed, or to speak more correctly, as though he existed exactly as he had done for the last twenty years.

We are, however, going too fast, and must return to Constance and her announcement of the expected arrival.

"He is coming home, think I" cried she to her aunt, Lady Manners. "He really is, at last! Poor old Simon, how he must hate it! A man who has spent all his life in that odd sort of way, you know, will be puzzled what to do with himself in a place like this. Of course, for *us* it will be charming, but for him I am afraid that it may be just a little dull. Do you not think so? However, he must judge for himself; and I suppose he is not likely to remain

very long at a time in any one place. He has actually started, did I tell you? We may expect him in about three weeks. He comes overland, and had got to that place I forget the name of on the other side of the Suez Canal. He would have let me know sooner, but just missed the Bombay mail."

"When did you hear?" inquired her aunt.

"Yesterday. I expected a letter this week, for he is a capital correspondent,—he is always writing. Of course it is natural—he has no one else—and a man must have some one to open himself out to. When I saw Simon last—it was in London, seven years ago—what a handsome fellow he was then to be sure! but no doubt"—hastily—"he is changed by this time. It was just after my husband's death"—with a suitable fall of the voice—"and he was so good and kind that I shall never forget it. He said we were to look on the Manor quite as our own home, and asked me to write regularly and keep him up to all that went on there. Such an epistle his was yesterday! Really, I have hardly had time to read it, which is too bad of me, for I daresay it took the poor fellow an age to write;—but I have been so busy. Lady Westmacott came to call, and then I had to go to Seeley; and it rained afterwards, or I should certainly have come yesterday."

"No need to apologise, Constance," said her aunt, quietly. "It is quite good enough of you to come to-day; and, as it happens, we should have missed you if you had come yesterday, for we were out."

"Then I am in luck, for I hate to find you out. I like to get into this chair, and have a good talk, when I come to Wancote. But about Simon, I thought you would have cared to know at once," she added, with a little air of reproach.

"You see he has been so long away," apologised her aunt. She could not, to be sure, be expected to be violently agitated, but she felt rather ashamed that her lack of interest had been so obvious.

"So long—yes, that is it. That is what makes it so exciting, such an upset,—his coming home at all, I mean. He has been so long away that really he might almost—well—have stayed away, eh?" said she, laughing. It was an honest laugh, betraying the inner man, and even Lady Manners smiled. "However," continued Constance, recalling herself, and dropping back into the tone her aunt knew so well, and

disliked so much, the peculiarly artificial accent which Mrs Robert Lutteridge assumed when she was saying what she wished to say, rather than what she felt—"however, you know, it is really a delightful surprise. I made all the haste I could in coming over, knowing that you and Sir John would be particularly pleased.

"It does seem a pity that Lutteridge should be so long without its master," said Lady Manners, when at length she had the chance of saying anything. "It never seems quite right that the number of people who live on such large properties should be entirely at the mercy of agents and stewards—people who can hardly have the same——"

"Oh, as to that, I don't see that it makes much difference," interrupted her niece, shortly. "We go on, you know, very well; quite as if he were here, indeed. Lewis looks after the farms and tenants—I have nothing to do with the outdoor workers, they are not in my department, and as to the management within, I think you have always allowed, my dear aunt, that it is very fair, all things considered."

"More than fair, Constance. That was not what I meant. You are an excellent manager, and I have no doubt Colonel Lutteridge will say so, when he arrives."

"Oh, don't call him Colonel Lutteridge!" exclaimed the visitor, throwing up her hands. "Oh, how horrible it sounds! A poor broken-down fellow like Simon to be so spoken of by his own father's sister! My dear aunt, I shall expect to hear you address me as Mrs Lutteridge next!"

Her aunt coloured.

"Just when he expects to come home, and be made much of among us all!" cried Constance, further; "just when he is looking to be received by his own family • "

"But, my dear Constance——"

"My dear aunt, Simon is the last person to wish it, I assure you; and you will allow that I ought to know. He would be quite hurt."

Hurt! Her aunt's lips opened, but she thought better of it, and forbore. Little did her niece know how often she was indebted to this habit of forbearance, nor did she so much as suspect that it was taxed in the present instance.

"Being, as we suspect, indeed as we very nearly know, on account of his health that dear Simon comes home, I think he will expect us all to be particularly easy and

friendly; no stiffness you know, no formality between such near relations; so I have thought of a little plan/* continued the gay lady, who was always thinking of little plans which were the plague of her aunt's life. "I mean to call our neighbours together, and give him a merry welcome,—to kill the fatted calf, in short,—though it would be impolite to call it so. We shall receive him with due honour, with bonfires, bells ringing, and arches in the village; don't you think so?"

"From what I gather of my nephew," said Lady Manners, stiffly, "he would scarcely care for such demonstrations."

"But they would surely be suitable? Fancy, he has been absent for nearly eighteen years; he knows nobody; he has hardly ever been even seen by any one! Let us show him first to the public in his own halls. None of them will know which is he, until they are told! Absolutely! There will be all sorts of mistakes made. Think how droll it would be if Simon himself were asked, 'Pray tell me which is Colonel Lutteridge!' Oh, I should die with laughing-Hester and I would shout!"

"It is hardly likely——"

"The most likely thing in the world, my dear aunt; of course neither Sir John nor you would make such a mistake, you of course recollect him——" pausing for the negative which she well knew must come.

"Sir John, oh yes," said Lady Manners, too truthful to be silent; "but I—I do not think—I do not remember ever having met—my nephew."

She blushed as she spoke, for it went against her to allow so much. Why, she could not have told. "There is nothing extraordinary in it," she argued mentally, "considering that we lived almost at the other end of England, and had only paid visits to this neighbourhood at long intervals, until within the last few years. We had hardly ever been at Wancote, at least I had not, when he left Lutteridge, and he has been home but seldom since."

All the same she would have given something at the moment to have been able to say that she knew her nephew perfectly.

Of her side was the relationship, his was the home in which she had been brought up, her family was represented in him, and it did seem hard thus to hear him chattered about and vouched for by a little pert interloper, who, when she

Lad married even the inferior second son, had not been looked upon with any particular favour by the family in general.

Her good looks and a certain vivacity which passed for wit among some people had procured for her the promotion, for such it was.

To see her, owing to Simon's generosity, enthroned at the Manor, and to be forced in consequence to admit her to all the intimacy of relationship, had long been a thorn in her aunt's side; and although she could not help owning that, considering the circumstances, it had perhaps been the right thing to do, she never in her secret soul could reconcile herself to the necessity.

Perhaps Constance had never tried her patience so severely as she did at this juncture. The look of elation, of superiority, which her aunt's confession produced, pricked that good lady to the heart.

That she should be swamped with the rabble, counted in with the benighted ones over whose ignorance Constance Wcis exulting, was the last drop in the cup of her humiliation; and she felt that she must at least vindicate herself from the imaginary charge of inquiring which was Colonel Lutteridge, from Colonel Lutteridge himself.

"We have his photograph," she said.

"So have we; dozens. But what are photographs? They never give the slightest jidea what a person is like, do they?" (Sir John always complained that Constance tailed off every sentence with an appeal.) "We make him send us one nearly every year; we write to him, and worry him till we get them; but we never think they are like what he really is,—do you? Jack has his book quite full of his uncle; and every time he comes home, he asks if there is not another."

The suggestion was not, however, lost. "I think I shall have a dinner-party on the night of his arrival," she subjoined, suddenly. It was true that only at Wancote and at Lutteridge were these likenesses of her brother-in-law to be found; but still there were other ways in which he might get to be known in the neighbourhood without her means: people would call, he might be met on the road, seen at church,—a dozen things might happen which would be fatal to her *coup*, if delayed.

She had set her heart on introducing Simon in his own

county, and in this curious piece of ambition she was not to be thwarted. She would take the field in person, and at once.

"He writes from that place—Suez—is it Suez? Never mind, one name is as good as another; this is all I care for, that he will be here in less than three weeks," she said; "he will write again from Paris, and name the exact day we may expect him. The whole thing has been done in such a hurry, that I cannot understand it, except by supposing it has had to do with his health."

The conjecture seemed probable, and there was nothing to be said against it.

"In fact it *must* have been so," continued Constance, warming into confidence. "I shall have to be terribly particular about the cooking, shan't I? I must make him tell me what dishes he has to avoid, and if there are any his doctor recommends. I shall have to coax, I daresay; men don't like to confess to being obliged to live by rule; they would rather eat all sorts of unwholesome messes than have it supposed they are afraid of them. If Simon should be forbidden to dine out, even at a family dinner, my dear aunt, you won't take it amiss, will you?"

"Are you wise to have a party for him before you know——"

"Oh, I am not afraid."

"Before you know——"

"But he gives me *carte blanche*!"

"Before you know,"—Lady Manners was determined to be heard—"whether he is really coming home ill, and unable to stand the fatigue——"

"111! But who said he was coming home ill?"

"Well," exclaimed her aunt, opening her eyes a little wider than her surprise made absolutely necessary, in her determination that her niece should see that she had opened them,—"*well*, my dear! Certainly, if you did not say so, I don't know who did."

"Dear auntie, you have taken me up so sharply! 111! I never said ill! There has not been a word of illness, and if I feared that he might turn out to be something of a—well—chronic, respectable, comfortable invalid, I was but giving my own impressions. Everybody comes home from India with *something*, now, don't they? And his throwing up his profession* without so much as a hint of the how or

why, looks suspicious, you will allow. Dear Simon ! I am sure I hope and trust he is not ill. It would be quite too sad, if he were only coming back to his own, dear, beautiful home to be nursed ! I declare it would be dreadful I Mrs Edwards said to me directly I told her—and you know what a shrewd old thing she is—that I ^o might depend upon it there was something wrong with him.

"Very forward in Mrs Edwards, I think,"—the elder lady drew herself up, "Quite out of her place to make such a remark."

"Oh, well, she is privileged, aunt; I only mentioned it to show what people say. I don't want the girls to be disappointed,⁹¹—they had taken no part in the conversation, being occupied, as we have before stated,—” I don't want them to be looking for a dashing young soldier. They will think him quite an old man, I daresay; will you not, Agatha]"

"I daresay we shall," said Agatha, demurely.

"Of course we shall,¹¹ decided Hetty.

CHAPTER II

A MODEL NEIGHBOURHOOD.

¹ We loved each other, It is true,
 As such near neighbours mostly do."
 —*Recreation.*

Constance was obliged to rest content with achieving a very small part of her programme, since Colonel Lutteridge's next letter put an emphatic negative on any public manifestations of welcome. As he had not been asked about the party, he could not put a veto on it, and accordingly, cards were issued, immediately that the date could be fixed.

Her dinner-party, at least, she would have.

It was very welcome at Wancote, since the neighbourhood was a sociable rather than a gay one, and an invitation finding its way to one house, meant that a corresponding billet would be dropped at most other houses within a range of seven miles or so. There would be the Westmacott,

the Parkers, the Searles, and probably Mr and Mrs Martin, Mr and Mrs Martin were the only doubtful people. They generally managed to slip in—were sure, indeed, to be asked if others failed, but were not so certain of being included in the first list.

At these little gatherings there were no uncomfortable folks to be left out in the cold, no intruders whose reception by fellow-guests would be doubtful—very few open dislikes even. Everybody went everywhere.

The explanation of so amicable a state of things lay, it is probable, as much as anything else, in the absence of numbers, and in the distance which divided each from the other.

Every mansion was well encompassed by its own surroundings, and consequently there were not above half-a-dozen families within driving distance. The county town was fully fifteen miles distant; and though the large and prosperous village of Seeley, where all shopping had to be done, was more accessible, it was sufficiently far off from most to make going there an afternoon's expedition.

Towards it the woods of Lutteridge Manor stretched for several miles, and the spires of its churches were visible from the upper windows of the mansion. The property was a fine one, and contrary to what is usual, had not suffered from its master's absence. He had done a wise thing in doing a generous one. He could not have installed a better viceroy than his brother's widow, who, without superiority of mind or extraordinary talents of any kind, was nevertheless endowed with a cool, shrewd head, an indomitable will, and the fortunate knack of making those under her authority do as they were bid.

Nothing imposed on her; nothing escaped her.

What she meant to have done, was done in spite of opposition or obstacles; argument or appeal was vain if she took her stand on the other side of any question; and, in consequence, she was well served, feared, and disliked.

Her own interests were, we may be allowed to affirm, paramount. That her son would one day succeed to all the fair lands which daily met her view, she scarcely doubted: and she felt much in the position of a queen-mother holding the kingdom till the youthful prince should come of age; but all the same, no fault could be found with her administration, save perhaps in such trifles as were nobody's business but her own.

Her brother-in-law was, of all men, the least likely to call her to account; and they even escaped her memory in the tumult of new thoughts and feelings which surged through her brain whenever she thought of his return.

And when was she not thinking of this? It was her last recollection at night, her first one in the morning; it touched her too closely to admit of any rival interest.

However, now that he was actually on the way, and that no representations would suffice to hinder him for so much as an hour, there remained nothing for it but to put a bold front on the matter, tell the news with a joyous face, and insinuate apprehensions, which she was not herself aware how ardently she hoped might prove to be well founded.

Accordingly, she hastened herself while the day was yet her own, trotted her ponies from door to door, and made Colonel Lutteridge's return the theme at every morning call.

Wancote, whatever she might otherwise insinuate to her aunt, was the last house she went to. She had a reluctance to inform its inhabitants of what concerned them more nearly than it did any of their neighbours, which she could not overcome. Why should she? After all, she argued, he is nothing to them personally; they can, so far at least, have no special interest in him; they can very well wait.

But even while thus pooh-poohing any claims to priority, and resolving to evince no undue eagerness on the occasion, she felt awkward when brought face to face with her aunt.

The very equanimity with which Lady Manners received the news threw her back. She had been prepared for excitement, for questions, for a measure of appropriation in the event, which should enable her to be civilly impertinent. The absence of all this was bewildering: she did not know how to take it; and of one thing only she was certain—that she did not wish it to come out that she had been to Westmacott Castle, to Wet Cliff, to Earl's Court, and to Seeley Vicarage, before she came to Wancote. She had even been to Oakbank, had even given that little absurd Mrs Martin the chance of talking to Lady Manners about her own nephew's intended return before it was known to his aunt.

She felt ashamed of herself (such is the effect of good breeding over bad), and resolved, in so far as she could, to atone; and accordingly her note of invitation, which was written immediately on the receipt of Simon's second letter,

was sent over within the hour, wd was all that it ought to have been.

Of Likdy Manners, Constance, in common with all the neighbourhood, stood in considerable awe. She was a gentlewoman of the old school, with some pride, and still more dignity, in whom, moreover, reserve was so natural, and self-control so habitual, that she would have died sooner than have shown the annoyance her niece perpetually caused her. With her husband it was different: neither art nor nature could repress his honest opinion; his feelings must be even on the tip of his tongue; but as, to do him justice, they bore that dangerous altitude better than most would have done, perhaps he did not lose much by his frankness.

He too was of the old school, in the full vigour, if not in the prime of life,—whose boast it was that he could still shoot, fish, walk, ride, and row as well as either of his sons, and better than any of their companions.

In outdoor pursuits he found his chief enjoyment; although, if confined of necessity to the house, he could still manage to pass the day, for he had Scott's novels to read, and salmon-flies to tie.

Politics disturbed him but little; while of "Church, army, physic, law," he knew as much or as little as country gentlemen usually do, who are domineered over by their own parson, pay the bills of a soldier son, send their tenants to the Hall to be dosed, and as fast as they lose one lawsuit begin another. He knew enough to keep him silent.

But perhaps the single point in Sir John's character, which distinguished him from the thousand and one other Sir Johns, to whom, in many ways, he bore resemblance, was the antipathy he had for men of his own age. They had, as a rule, outgrown the pleasures in which he still delighted, and were unequal to the tasks he could with ease accomplish. Consequently they bored him, he fretted in their society, was nervous, unhappy, and unnaturally mild and amiable.

When he heard that his nephew was about to return home, his first thought was, that with Simon he would not need to be on any ceremony.

"He is young enough for that, at least," he said; "I shall treat him quite as if he were a young fellow, in spite of the ridiculous stuff Constance talks. Thirty-eight is no age for a single man: it would simply annoy him to have

me making a fuss." His wife had proposed his waiting on his nephew, or even meeting him at the station. After such an absence, it seemed the right thing to do. But Sir John saw it otherwise.

"You say we are to dine there—and that on the very night he comes/" said lie. "I am sure I wish we were not; but since we must, we must. Well, that will do. One nuisance is enough."

The nuisance had escaped from his memory, however, when the day came; and about six o'clock he tramped in from the coverts, wet and weary, after a long October day's shooting, expecting nothing less than to be forced to leave his own doors again that night. The sportsmen were three in number, since the two young Manners', his sons, had run down for the month. Of these, it may for the present suffice to say, that Bertie, at Aldershot, was expected to reflect credit on his family; while of Jem, at Oxford, it was merely hoped that he would get along as well as many a stupid fellow had done before him.

Moist from the many wettings of a showery afternoon, but radiant from the good luck which had attended their guns in spite of such interruptions, the party now made their way into the drawing-room, where the ladies were sitting over their tea-cups.

"What o'clock is it? How dark it has grown all of a sudden! Surely it must be long past six, though," cried Jem, while his father and brother examined the letters which the afternoon's post had brought in for them, and which were ranged on the mantelpiece. Jem seldom had letters. "I say, it's only just a quarter past," exclaimed he, peering into the clock's face, "and scarcely light enough to tell a rat from a weasel! Well, give me some tea, if there is any, Agatha; I don't mind if there is not."

There was plenty, but it was cold.

"A pity to spoil your dinner," observed his father, looking round in time to see the cup filled, and eyeing it, as if, but for the recollection, he would have had no objection to one himself. "Nasty stuff! Very bad for you."

"I shall have forgotten all about it before dinner," said Jem. "Eight o'clock, is it, Agatha?"

"Eight o'clock!" repeated his father, in a tone of surprise. "Why should it be eight o'clock? There is no one coming, is there?"

His usual hour was seven, and it was one of the minor grievances of Lady Mannera's life, that when the hour was changed, as it was occasionally, to suit the more fashionable folks who now and then stayed at Wancote, he was certain to let out, the fact to their faces. He neither remembered nor cared. His "What time do we dine to-night, eh?" was not even spoken in an aside. But on the evening in question he could not understand what to expect; no one was staying in the house, and they rarely had dinner-parties when alone; he looked at his son in very natural astonishment.

"This is the night we go to Lutteridge, papa," explained Agatha.

"To Lutteridge!" The mystery indeed was at an end, but dreadful was its ending.

"To Lutteridge!" cried Sir John, looking from one to the other, whilst despair and incredulity strove for the mastery in his countenance. "To Lutteridge!" he repeated, for the third time, and both sons burst out laughing.

"Well, sir, I hope you have taken it in at length," said the elder, merrily. "That was why I hurried you along at such a pace over the last mile,—I was afraid we should be late."

"You never said a word!"

"I thought you knew. I thought it was later than it was, the evening was so dark; but we shall do very well. Jem and I had a shilling on that it was half-past six when we passed the turnpike. By the way, I owe you that, Jem. Tea, Agatha."

Bertie's demands were always more peremptory than were those of his brother; his "Tea, Agatha," was as characteristic as was Jem's "Give me some if there is any; I don't mind if there is not."

With blackened brow Sir John sat; and the moment his son's voice ceased, the thunder began to roll. "Do very well!" he echoed—"do very well \ I—I really don't know \ what you mean by doing very well! What is it all about, Emily?" turning to his wife. "What nonsense is it they are talking?"

"Why, my dear, you know this is the night of Constance's dinner-party. You spoke of it yourself the other day. You remember I wanted you to call at Lutteridge this afternoon, and you thought there was no occasion, as we were to dine there so soon."

"Well?" said her husband; "well 1"

"Well,"¹ replied Lady Manners, smiling with the satisfaction of one who had made good her point, "since you said you would go, you know, you must go."

"But that is not to say I must go *to-night* I To-night is not the night! Of course it is not. Speak, Agatha. Jane, you know. It is all a mistake about its being to-night, is it not? I met Constance just the day before yesterday, and I'm positive she said it was Wednesday."

"And this is Wednesday."

"Wednesday? No, this **is** Tuesday. Is it not Tuesday, Bertie? I told you," turning to the others scornfully, "that you were all wrong. I knew this could not be the day, or I should have remembered it myself. It is detestable having to go at all; but you need not have frightened me," altering his note to one of reproach, "by pretending I was to set off *to-night*"

"It is a pity," said Jane, gently, and glanced at her mother. "I am afraid, my dear——" said she, and looked at Agatha.

"It cannot be helped, papa," said Agatha, manfully. "I am very sorry, but it really is to-night that we are engaged for, and you will have to go."

A general sensation of "Bravo! Well done, Agatha!" made Sir John nearly weep.

"I don't believe it!" he cried. "Bertie, can't you speak 1 That Agatha is such a goose, she does not know one day of the week from another!" (Agatha was the only person in the house who invariably did.) "Can't you tell her, and perhaps she may believe you, though she won't me?" continued the poor gentleman.

"She is in the right, sir, all the same."

"Tchick! Taking her part! You have agreed together to torment me! It really is too bad of them," turning fretfully to his wife. "They know that if there is one place more than another that I hate to dine at, it is Lutteridge; and after a day like this, when I am wet through and tired to death——oh!" with a groan. "Constance will talk, talk, talk—she never knows when to stop, she never leaves you alone for a minute. And nothing but kickshaws for dinner I I am always ill the next day, you know I am; why could you not get me off?"

"You told Constance yourself, my dear, that you would go/

"I told her that I would go on *Wednesday*; I never thought that was *to-day*"

"I am afraid you will have to go. We are all going, even tittle Hester; it is her first formal party; and Constance made a point of every one of us coming."

"Yes, papa, I am to go." Hester had not before spoken, but the prospect before her was as delightful to her vision as it was distasteful to her father's. "I am to go," said she, gleefully. Agatha has been telling me what a *menu* is, and Jane says I am not to take wine."

"She took it every time that it was handed," explained Jane, in answer to the boys' laugh and "What a shame!" Jane saw nothing to laugh at. "It was at uncle Walter's last month, and Hetty had never dined down-stairs before," continued she; "she thought she ought; it was not that she wanted it."

"Never mind, Hot; take a sly glass when Jane's head is turned the other way. Poor little innocent!" said Bertie, in his lordly way. "And so this is only her second appearance; are you not afraid for her, mamma?"

"Not at all," answered his mother with spirit: "I never was less afraid for any one of you."

"Has she a gown?"

"Indeed she has, and a very pretty one."

⁴¹ My bridesmaid's," subjoined Hester. "You know,—when Gertrude was married."

"What time are the carriages ordered, Agatha?" pursued Lady Manners, who often now left arrangements to her eldest daughter.

"I said half-past seven, mamma. I knew we should not all be down to a moment, and it will take us longer to drive to-night, the lanes are so deep in mud."

"Ay, that they are! Deep in mud. And yet you want to have two carriages out! If Hester and I had stayed at home, you could have managed perfectly with one; Jem could have gone outside." Sir John had now collapsed, and was sitting heavily in his chair; the sparkle had left his eye, his shoulders drooped, and his arms hung heavily by his side.

No one cared to take up fresh cudgels, and after a few minutes the mother rose, saying, "Now we must not run ourselves late. Now, little Hester, run away; and, boys, do try not to keep us waiting."

"I take no time," said Bertie, notoriously the most unpunctual present. "Are you going to see the game laid out, sir?" to his father. "You will hardly have time. I had better send word we shall not go out."

"I don't care," said poor Sir John. "Yes, send word. I little thought I should have this to go through to-night; it has spoilt all my pleasure. I think you have been very cruel, every one of you; and," looking back as he left the room, "after all, I don't believe it is the day!"

There was no doubt about its being the day at Lutteridge, and by dinner-time all was smooth and smiling there.

But great had been the fears of the hostess during the previous hours, and sincere her regrets that she should have acted in the matter on the impulse of the moment; for a letter had been received on the previous morning, delaying the arrival of the man whom she meant to honour, and she felt that she ought at least to have ascertained that he was in London before she had reckoned on his arrival at Lutteridge.

But she was not a woman to sit down and wail. Her carriage was at the door, and she herself on the road to the nearest telegraph office within half an hour; and the upshot was that Colonel Lutteridge arrived the next afternoon, and all was right. She had kept her anxiety to herself, and none knew of it. She looked at him almost with affection when he walked in. He had responded to her appeal, and saved her party: that, for the moment, was sufficient.

She was now in a happy flutter of importance, secure that her cook was equal to the occasion, that her new dress was becoming, and not even displeased that her brother-in-law was younger-looking than she had expected him to be.

He had not a young manner, she reflected, and youthful looks are nothing without manner.

The handsome presents he had brought her she looked forward to exhibiting during the evening, and nothing could have been more satisfactory than his having forgotten to pay the same attention to his aunt and cousins. He was not indeed aware what cousins he possessed; but when Lady Manners was mentioned, it evidently struck him for the first time that he had been remiss.

In the hurry of departure the near neighbourhood of the

family had been overlooked, and while Constance's letters had served to keep her prominently before his mind's eye, there had never been much in them to stir up his memory with regard to the others. She wrote lively and entertaining epistles, and even such as knew Mrs Robert Lutteridge's faculty for turning a fact upside down, might give some degree of credit to the statement that her brother-in-law had sought the correspondence; but in all she wrote, she herself, or her children, or matters connected with the estate, alone figured with any prominence.

Simon was now annoyed with himself for having neglected relations to whom something was due; but his half-jesting suggestion that the shawls and boxes beside them should be put aside before the evening, not being favourably received, he could say no more. Constance was mistress of the situation; he was despatched to his room with many injunctions not to be late, and she had only herself to think about.

Her little Ellen, a harmless child of eight, not pretty, went for nothing. Ellen would appear in a white frock before dinner, and be taken possession of by some shy man; but as she was a plaintive, well-behaved little thing, as far removed from the *enfant terrible* as it was possible for a child to be, she could not cause anxiety to any one.

Jack was his mother's darling; like herself he was fair and handsome, and in consideration of his looks, his abilities, and his being the heir of Lutteridge, she condoned the fact that she had a son twelve years old.

He was now at Eton, and Constance was ready primed with exploits, achievements, and masters' opinions, all duly medicated for the uncle's ear.

The readiness with which she was listened to increased her good-humour on the evening in question. She hummed a tune as she tripped along the passage to the nursery in time to let the nurse know to put on Miss Ellen's sash of a shade to match her own dress; then she summoned her maid and was ready in a trice.

Everything she wore was new, pretty, and becoming, and so satisfactory was the verdict of the looking-glass on the completion of her toilet, that she was fain to linger before it for a moment and wonder what Simon would think.

That he too should look young was provoking. He did

not look a day older than when she had last seen him; but she supposed, with a smile, that it was no fault of his; and certainly she, of all others, was the last person who had a right on this point to say anything.



CHATTER III.

CONSTANCE HAS HER WISH.

' Decks with a huge bouquet her breast,
And flaunting, fluttering up and down,
Looks at herself, and cannot rest."

—LOSOFELOW.

The host and hostess had been clown for nearly twenty minutes before their expected guests began to arrive.

Colonel Lutteridge, one of the most punctual of men, was fully aware, when he was hustled off to dress by his sister-in-law, that she had sent him too soon,—but he had reckoned on her being late; and having promptly despatched his toilet, he had descended to take a leisurely survey of the rooms, at a time when he could recall associations, and conjure up past scenes unobserved.

But this was not to be.

Constance had been equally on the alert, she too having designed to review her field of action without a disturbing presence, and she too having calculated on being able to do so, from the conclusion that so recently arrived a traveller would be in no hurry to quit his dressing-room fire.

She was busy adding a few finishing touches to the arrangement of plants in front of one of the long mirrors, when the opening door revealed Simon's tall figure, and also his sudden, his involuntary halt at sight of her; and perhaps even the resplendent vision whose reflection first caught his eye was less distasteful to him than was his black-coated apparition in the doorway to her.

He could afford to wait; but for her, the present was her only time. She wished to collect herself—to be sure that she exactly remembered who were coming, and to take in the whole importance and gratification of the moment.

However, there was nothing now for it but to compli-

inent him on his celerity, and to await his response on his own. She was prepared with her "Dear, I really thought I had dawdled! it seemed to have been an age! My poor maid got quite a scolding; for, to be sure, she can be quick if she likes!" But, some alterations in the apartment catching his attention, he merely replied to her first arch address, by comments on them, and appeared neither to be thinking of her nor of himself.

"So unobserving," murmured she, discontentedly. "How ever!" with reviving spirits, "perhaps, all things considered, he could not have a better fault."

Fidgeting as she now was with impatience and excitement, it was a severe strain to have to talk sober sense to a man who appeared to have no nervousness on his own account, and to be perfectly insensible of hers.

She could ill sustain her part in the conversation, when every gust of wind seemed to bring the roll of wheels beneath the window, and when in every movement of her companion she could fancy she detected the echo of the distant door-bell. Lutteridge was a house in which the door-bell penetrated to the farthest extremities—nowhere less audible, it is true, than in the great saloon in which they were now sitting; but still even there it might just be heard.

The house was perforated by so many passages, and along these and on the staircases there was so much uncarpeted oak, that the sound was only deadened by the distance it had to travel, not lost.

No summons, however, did in reality reach the ears now on the stretch until two minutes to the hour.

For the last ten, Constance had scarcely spoken, and had been almost annoyed at the non-entrance of her child, who, although usually looked on in the light of an interruption, might, in the present instance, have been a help.

"The only time she ever was late in her life," muttered the mother. But even at the moment when she was inwardly fulminating anathemas at the head of the nurse who had been thus inopportunely at fault, the unmistakable though faint and far-off clang-clang made her rise, not more pleased to begin the real business of the evening, than to put an end to the *titled-tfa*. She was beginning to feel a little awe of her companion.

He would do excellently well to stand by her side and be presented to her guests; and in the renewed anticipation of

their curiosity, their surprise, and their undoubted deference, she glanced at her Colonel with all the pride of possession—but she did not exactly care to be alone with her brother-in-law.

She could not make him out.

There was no fault to be found with anything he said, if only he had not left so much unsaid. She gave him openings and he passed them by: he took no hints, followed up no suggestions.

She wondered if she wearied him; she had never tried harder in her life to please any one; she had racked her brains to think of things he might like to hear; and, harder still, had restrained herself from uttering a word that he might not like. She had striven to be good-natured oil all subjects—had even said as much in favour of Lady Manners and her daughters as she could force her tongue to say. He should have no chance of thinking as men do think—that women pick to pieces behind backs; or if he did, he should perforce make her an exception to the rule.

It was well done, and she knew it; but the smile which brought her little pale girl at once to her uncle's side, had not so far been bestowed on the mother.

Constance, however, seldom stopped to think. She meant Simon to like her, therefore, of course, he must like her. Whatever might be said of Mrs Lutteridge, to her face she had a host of open admirers, and she might almost be excused for imagining, as she reflected on the flattery and admiration which invariably attended her, that she had but to put forth her hand to conquer.

She was scarcely even puzzled by her brother-in-law's indifference. She settled it that he was shy; and happily the reflection came in time to restore her spirits to their proper pitch, as she moved forward to receive her guests.

In their countenances she read enough to maintain these—nay, even to cause an additional glow.

In her secret soul she was well aware, to be sure, that there was nothing to elate in the fact that the master of Lutteridge had returned to his home, a young, handsome man, instead of the worn-out soldier she had led everybody to expect; but where is the woman who, in the presence of a momentary triumph, will not disregard ulterior evils?

She would not have had her brother-in-law an inch shorter for the world.

It was quite a touching sight to behold the pretty widow nestling by the side of her tall companion, looking up into his face, laying her little hand upon his arm,—so pleased, and proud, and gay.

"Go away again? Oh dear, she hoped not! *That* was never to be mentioned! There was no idea of such a thing/

Indeed it had been one of the very first points on which she had sounded him: it had only succeeded to her tender inquiries after his health. He had answered both satisfactorily, if not to her, at least to himself: he was well and strong, and proposed settling at the Manor for the rest of his days.

Whatever might be her secret feelings, she was now all animation on this, as on every other point.

"Rather a mistake taking him for an invalid!" she whispered to Lady Manners; then aloud to all, "There are people in the world whom one can just do without, when one is obliged to do without them; but when once they appear"—with a charming expressiveness—"they really cannot be spared again. Colonel Lutteridge cannot be spared again, Lady Westmacott; you must tell him so, in the name of us all."

She was rather put out that Lord Westmacott had not come. He had been called away at the last moment, and no time had been allowed to let her know; it was tiresome, the absence of a defaulter of such prominence might well have disconcerted any hostess; she was obliged, even while talking aloud to her guests, to be conning over in her mind how she was to rearrange them at the dinner-table.

Sir John Manners must now of course take her in; he was no worse off than he would have been before, as it was inevitable that he must sit on the left, if riot on the right hand, but he chose to be aggrieved afresh. He would at least, he said inwardly, if Westmacott had been there, have been let alone in the interval before dinner; he wanted to take a good look at his nephew, as well as to pay him a little of the attention due to him as head of his family, and colonel of his regiment; but Constance gave him no opportunity.

As soon as her circle was complete—and in spite of Agatha's forethought, the Manners' party was the last to arrive—she devoted herself to her uncle, as to the principal

gentleman present; and after a few minutes he was, as he had foretold, desired to take her to the dining-room. **lie** had no time for more than the hasty conclusion, "A determined-looking fellow," ere he was separated from his nephew by the entire length of the table.

Those who had come earlier were more fortunate. In the fitful pauses of the "long half-hour," they were able to satisfy such curiosity as could be satisfied by gazing to the full.

Colonel Lutteridge did not sit down, and seemed, as no doubt he was, perfectly unaware of the interest he excited. The people did not stare, you see, they only chattered very fast, and found the fire hot, and pulled their chairs about, and were so delighted to see each other that they had to move from one place to another several times—and so they got views of the stranger on all sides.

He was certainly worth looking at. His person was striking, and his features perfectly regular; but his countenance would have been more generally attractive had it not been for the gravity which overbore, and seemed habitual to it.

No mouth could have been more beautifully formed, but the lips were locked together, unless when in the act of speaking; and his eyes, which were magnificently large and soft, had an absent look, which could scarcely be found flattering. In manner his repose was absolute, but it approached too nearly that of a statue. All felt there was a want; he had no life, no animation.

It was too probable that the complaisance he had shown in hurrying his arrival in order to be present,—a complaisance which Mrs Robert Lutteridge was vaunting on all sides,—was due rather to a sense of duty than to any expectation of pleasure.

It was, in fact, even so: his military career had made him regard all engagements as sacred, to be fulfilled if possible, at whatever cost, and as she had answered for him, he would be there. He would not leave her in the lurch, nor would he even pass animadversions on her behaviour. She had meant well, he supposed, and perhaps it was the right thing to do; he did not understand such matters.

But he was as particular not to fail her, as if he were due at a military durbar or native banquet. He stood by bet

side, as she had ordained that he should, rather less comfortable, it is true, than if he had been in uniform, with his sword to lay hold of,—but nevertheless stately, unconscious, perfectly indifferent to anything ludicrous or unusual in the situation.

Lady Manners felt more than ever that she could not call him "Simon," as, in the few minutes which elapsed before they went to dinner, she took covert glances upwards, from the sofa where she sat in heavy converse with another matron.

He did not look young of his years to her, as was perhaps natural. She was herself barely fifty, and had, so far, scarcely realised that her brother's son could be within twelve years of her own age. She almost blushed at Constance's unnecessary "Your nephew, aunt."

Why should it have been so emphatically uttered? Of course he was her nephew; but although she had begged Sir John to remember the fact in his greeting, she had not herself intended to do more than merely shake hands as the others would. It was in compliance with her eldest daughter's acknowledged sense of decorum that she had agreed to add the "I am glad to see you at home again,"¹ which finally faltered from her lips, and was never heard by anybody.

She felt that Agatha was right, and wished that she had had the courage to speak louder.

She was conscious afterwards of having almost whispered, and was not altogether easy at the recollection; but the more she looked at the person for whom the greeting had been intended, the more she wondered at her having been able to deliver it at all. She had never seen so unresponsive a face.

It was enough to chill any feeling she might hitherto have entertained, or have hoped to entertain for her nephew—enough, at any rate, to check the slightest expression of it: as to a second essay of welcome, such as Agatha might have recommended, her very soul sickened at the thought. Whatever was said on the subject, nothing should induce her to tell such a falsehood again; glad to see him back, she certainly was not!

In the evening, however, she was surprised to find him seated by her side, and a little of this feeling wore away in conversation. It is hardly possible for any woman to be

sought out by the great man for the nonce, and not, ere long, to be easy with him—at any rate, for the passing hour.

Lady Manners was astonished to find that she could actually both breathe and speak in the neighbourhood of her terrible kinsman.

He did not, to be sure, say much, but he did what was infinitely better—he smiled.

When he smiled she lost, for the time, half her tremors. To be sitting there, in view of all, and have him paying her this tribute, was enough to gratify, it must be owned; and in the strength and fulness of the moment, she asked him forthwith to Wancote.

"When are we to see you at Wancote?" was distinctly caught by Constance, as she tripped past to beg for Agatha and Jane's duet. It was not a welcome sound. She had known, of course, that such an invitation must be forthcoming, and was indifferent to it, but not so to the tone in which it was spoken. Reproaching herself for forgetting that "blood is thicker than water," and that the blood in question was the same which flowed in her own veins, Lady Manners had striven to throw into the words some of the warmth, some of the kindness, which had been so conspicuously absent from her first greeting. He had responded with cordiality, "And now she looks quite gay," murmured Constance. Her aunt's miserable face during the interval, as she strove, and strove in vain, to make something of her magnificent nephew, at whose left hand she found herself placed, had not escaped the notice of the hostess.

Constance had laughed to herself, and had done all she could to deepen the impression afterwards. Simon had taken in Lady Westmacott, who, it was supposed, might have been able, at any rate, in her own county, to cope with anybody who crossed her path.

Even Lady Westmacott—a portly dame, possessed of equal dignity of mien, and far more knowledge of the world than Lady Manners,—even she was checkmated.

Both dowagers had had a wretched time of it; and the relief they experienced, when at length the signal for rising was given, was simultaneous.

For that night at least the aunt dreamt of no further intercourse with her nephew; and when he drew near her sofa she might be flattered, but she certainly was frightened. He

had talked to her for nearly twenty minutes before she had summoned courage to ask him to Wancote.

Having promised to come, he had next to open the piano and stand beside Agatha, as Jane played the accompaniment for their song.

The heavy-curtained room was too severe a tax upon their fresh young voices; but it may be doubted whether to that or to the near presence of their cousin was due the feebleness of the performance.

Agatha attributed the failure solely to Simon.

"I can always sing very well in that room," she explained afterwards, in an aggrieved voice. "I don't mind the curtains; it is nonsense to say curtains make so much difference; but it was enough to make any one nervous to have a man standing close by your side, with his arms folded, and a look of attention that might have made one fancy one's self a public singer! Did you not feel it, Jane? I could hardly get out the high notes at all!"

"You certainly did not sing particularly well," confessed Jane; "but," she added, kindly, "I have heard you do worse. I do not think it had anything to do with Simon, Agatha: it was just that you did not begin well, and then you could not go on well."

She was felt to have disposed of the question by all but her eldest sister.

"But why did I not begin well?" said she. "Because he was there. Another time I shall ask him to go away. Was it very bad, mamma? Hester, what did you think?"

Neither of them had thought about it. As is usually the case, the performers themselves had been more sensible of their deficiency than had any one else; and though Bertie did observe, off-hand, "I wish, next time, you would sing something you *can* do, Agatha, and not frighten us by threatening a full stop every minute," the remark gave keener mortification than he was the least aware of. As soon as it was over, none but the Misses Manners themselves remembered that they had sung at all. The company were not musical.

Bertie himself was more silent than usual on the homeward drive. He had made one or two little advances towards his cousin, which had been somewhat absently responded to, and he did not feel that he had been honoured with any particular notice.

Now Mr Manners did not like to be passed over. He thought that people ought to see a difference between him and the rest of his family, and feel that, while they were very good sort of country folks, he was a young man of the period. He felt that it was only due to himself to be thus discriminated, and was unwilling to lose time in making his newly-found relation understand this.

It proved to be a task beyond his strength. Colonel Lutteridge, after the ladies had left, talked principally to his uncle, and bracketed the sons in the civilities he proffered : he was not remiss, but he appeared to be undiscerning.

The provoking part was, that there was nothing one could take hold of; Bertie, like Constance, found his grievance vanish directly he attempted to grasp it: he could scarcely even to himself allow that his vanity alone had suffered.

Of course everybody outwardly lauded Colonel Lutteridge to the skies.

Each felt that to have it thought that he or she had not found their host agreeable would never do; each was eager to make him out as charming as he was handsome, as friendly as he was courteous.

Thus, at every "Good-bye," Constance smiled back to some congratulatory whisper, until at length, when the last guest had departed, and the last carriage had rolled from the door, she met her brother-in-law, as he returned to the room, with the unexpected ejaculation, "Simon, you have won all hearts !"

But either the hearts were not felt to be won, or to be worth the winning — coupled with Simon's smile was a yawn, which, although he strove to suppress it, escaped him before he was aware.

Constance sat down upon the ottoman to review the evening, and began to sum up with the volubility which a quick memory and still quicker observation could furnish. She had not a fault to find. She wished to be permitted to expatiate; to remember who praised this, and who had admired that; she was bursting with information as to the opinions she had gleaned from one and another, and could scarce refrain from telling Simon to his face that Mrs Martin had pronounced him to be the very handsomest man she had ever seen.

Mrs Martin, on the strength of being now a married woman, felt herself at liberty to make such remarks. She

patronised the daughters of the houses at which she visited, and called them "you girls." She only danced square dances, and the half of these with her husband; in short, she enjoyed to the full the satisfaction of feeling herself to be young, pretty, and a bride, yet the quintessence of propriety and self-abnegation.

No one laughed more heartily at Mrs Martin than Constance. Constance, who went here, there, and everywhere, joined in every diversion, and renounced no portion of the devil and his works, was amused to the last degree by little Mrs Prunes-and-Prism, as she designated the bride. She herself had no mind to bear the stamp of "married" on her brow; and as, to do her justice, she looked sufficiently youthful and agile to be taken for any age, it was not surprising that she was often paid the compliment of exaggerated surprise on the part of strangers, when she talked, as she did now and then, of "My great boy at Eton."¹

Her manner alone betrayed her to observant eyes. There was a self-reliance, an independence, which single women rarely attain until middle life is entered on, but which the wife or widow earlier acquire.

She had nothing in common with Mrs Martin, and would have scorned to heed what she said on an ordinary occasion; but to the success of such an evening, even Mrs Martin could add her mite. For some time she kept it valiantly to herself, but at length it slipped out in the ardour of the moment, and no sooner were the words uttered than they were repented of.

She saw her mistake.

Still, such a mistake could not provoke lasting harm; he might look coldly on her for the moment, but he could not cherish resentment; he might question her taste, but he could riot her good nature. Since he said nothing, she would hope for the best. Presently she bade him a good-humoured "good night," and, as to this he responded with alacrity, she took herself and her finery off to bed, without feeling that she had injured herself in his opinion.

Alone, her reflections were now of that mixed nature which may be supposed to attend a schemer, who, though successful for the moment, sees in front a difficult and dangerous path.

xsow that the *eclat* of Simon's arrival was over, she had to face the disagreeables; she could no longer shut her eyes to the future.

For that one evening all had gone well; she alone had held the strings of the puppet-show, and moved them as she would. She had gloried in displaying her ease, her intimacy, and perfectly good understanding, with one whom no one else could venture to approach in like manner. Aware of the impression he was making, she had been bent on showing herself at home with him; he was treated with a freedom which had not been accorded him in private; she was now not only easy, but familiar.

His arm was tapped, confidences were breathed up to his ear, and he was told what he was to do, with a certainty that he would do it, which was quite engaging.

He had submitted, obeyed his mentor, permitted her caressing fingers, and his phlegm had been proof against it all.

But she could not discover that she had advanced a step in his good graces. He looked charming, to be sure, or she would long before have pronounced that he was not worth the trouble he gave. "So distinguished-looking!" she murmured. "Such fine eyes! That air *distrain* is perfectly fascinating. Robert had something of it; but he was not the man in point of appearance that Simon is. I don't wonder at that little twopenny-halfpenny Mrs Martin; I am inclined to agree with her. It is to be hoped, however," she reflected, in some dismay, "that we are singular in our opinion: it would never do to have it generally received. Oh dear!" (prolonged sigh). . . . "I must make the best of it; but I had no idea of the sort of man he was. The only comfort[^] is that there must be two words to the bargain; and as he has been so long without marrying again, we may hope he will stand out to the end. Surely," she mused, "he must have had thousands of opportunities. Why should I fancy that he is to be stricken down at the bare sight of these simple country girls, when he must have stood sieges from beauties, wits, and fortunes! There, I am talking like a book! And after all, I can do no good. If it is to be, it is to be, and there is an end of the matter. I won't think of it."

She could, however, think of nothing else.

She was excited and restless. Simon, standing by the piano, or talking to his aunt, was ever before her eyes. True, he had not been for any length of time either at one post or the other; he had slipped away during the sisters*

second performance, and he had talked to Mrs Martin quite as much as to Lady Manners.

But then Mrs Martin was a very safe young person indeed—not a dowager, with three bright, pleasant, marriageable daughters.

"Of course it will be Agatha if it is any/" cogitated the watcher; "and of course, if he means to marry at all, it will be one. He seems to have been brought to their very door on purpose. So tiresome! I had hoped that both Agatha and Jane would have been out of the way long /before now. I was only twenty when I was married, and Agatha is twenty-four! Even Jane is older than I was, and Hetty is coming on too. To be sure, they are not marvellously beautiful—not likely to set the Thames on fire with their loveliness; but still they are pretty, they are attractive, they are popular with most people; and they see good society, if not very much of it. I don't understand how it is. Three of them! I should not care to trail three grown-up daughters about after me, I must say. Hester is the cleverest, but Agatha is the best-looking. If he takes to any, it will be Agatha, to a certainty!"

In both of her estimates Constance was right: as to her prophecy, we shall see.

Agatha was a bright-complexioned, fully formed blonde, with a well-cut nose and chin; and wherever she went, the impression she made was immediate.

Jane was less striking in countenance, but her figure was elegant, and she had a gentle expression which could not fail to please.

Of Hester there were as yet more predictions than positive opinions. So far she was only a rosy, large-eyed, brown little girl, who looked almost too young to be out of short frocks.

Each of the three, in her own way, filled a niche in the family circle. Agatha was the wise one, Jane the loving one, Hester the pet.

Disputants appealed to Agatha, culprits to Jane. Father and mother alike turned to their second daughter when refractory sons were to be admonished, or by persuasion brought to repentance. Hester could but weep with the offender; Agatha would lecture and harden his heart; Jane alone could bribe him subdued and in his right mind to the parent's side.

In practical matters, however, Miss Manners took the lead; she it was who decided what was what in nice points of etiquette or expenditure; and although her mind was not strictly intellectual, nor could she be termed more than tolerably accomplished, she was a well-informed, properly educated, and indeed, as Constance would often observe, a "superior person."

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG FOR THEIR YEARS.

"Why must everything smack of man and be mannish? Is the world all grown up? Is childhood dead? Or is there not in the bosoms of the wisest and best some of the child's heart left to respond to its earliest enchantments?"—
L*MB

Constance, to be sure, was a universal mocker; but what she said in jest was nevertheless true.

With no one had the opinion of her eldest daughter more weight than with Lady Manners; and the knowledge that while obeying Agatha's injunction as to giving her nephew a welcome, to the letter, she had lamentably failed in the spirit, made her uneasy.

If he had caught the sound of her voice at all, which was more than doubtful, it must have reached him in an inarticulate murmur, calculated to produce no feeling save that of mystification.

"I did say it," she affirmed, however. "I did not like saying it at all, but I did it because Agatha wished me."

Agatha demurred. If the words had not been uttered so as to be heard by any one—not even so that she herself, who was close behind, and knew they were to be spoken, could catch a syllable—they might as well have been left unsaid.

But this was hard to bear.

It had cost the shy, stately dame some effort to speak in the first instance: had the words been the spontaneous effusion of the moment, they would have flowed easily and pleasantly; but, as it happened, she had learned them by

rote, like a parrot, and they were absolutely meaningless, consequently difficult to utter.

She disliked to feel herself dishonest, and had at first objected to the phrase prepared for her as savouring of hypocrisy ; but her feelings had been worked upon, and she had been at last brought to allow that she was glad—perhaps—that her nephew should return.

"At least," said Agatha, "you would not like him to feel that you were *not*. That would be what he must imagine if nothing is said by any one, and that would be really untrue."

This was allowed; and as even Sir John, finding that it was not he who was expected to do anything, had observed, "I daresay Agatha is right," his wife had given in her adherence.

But having gone through the ordeal, she was prepared to defend herself, and spoke of it with spirit.

She had done, she affirmed, what none of the others had. It was very easy to talk about relationship, but when a full-grown man confronts you as a perfect stranger, and you know nothing in the world about him except that he is your brother's son, it is impossible to rush at him with open arm. As for those behind her, not one of them had had the courage to say a word !

There was no gainsaying this. Even Bertie, whose spirit was not supposed to be easily quelled, had found his little phrase sink out of sight when the moment for delivering it had arrived, and one after the other they had shaken hands in solemn silence, with the exception of little Hester, who had looked up sparkish and bright into her cousin's face, saying, "How d'ye do?" in a little chirpy voice that nearly made her father, who was next to her, die with laughing afterwards.

He took her off to her face. "How d'ye do?" he cried. "That was the way she said it. How d'ye do?" Hetty, look here, "How d'ye do?" The monkey! In its little high voice! Mamma was frightened, and so were all the rest, but no one can say that he had not a word from the little one. «How d'ye do!" Ha! ha! ha!"

But even while Sir John, happy in the relief of a disagreeable duty accomplished, was rubbing his hands over his joke, more troubles were in store for him. Colonel Lutteridge must be asked to Wancote, Lady Manners

proudly retailed her general invitation, and the question now was whether he should be invited in state as a neighbour for the next Monday, or brought in impromptu as a nephew for the same evening.

Bertie was in the full tide of laying down the law—even his mother and Agatha could not be allowed to know, while he was there—when Simon himself was seen walking up the slope straight to the hall door.

Bertie was there before him. It was Bertie's delight to receive guests, convey them across the hall, wonder where everybody was, order up luncheon, and show himself cock of the walk generally—in other words, the eldest son and embryo baronet dispensing hospitality in the halls one day to be his own.

In the present instance he was defrauded of much enjoyment by the fact that all the party were assembled in the drawing-room when he ushered in his cousin, and that the luncheon-gong sounded at the moment of his opening the door.

He could still, on the pretext of the servants being dismissed to their own mid-day meal, bustle around Colonel Lutteridge's chair, ask whether he would have wine or beer, wonder that there was no venison on the side-table, and complain that the plates were cold.

But he could do no more. He could not wait on everybody, and the only vacant seat, when he wished to sit down, was out of his cousin's range of vision.

Sir John, while disdaining anything of a solid lunch, partook of his own pudding, which was placed at his elbow, and all demonstrations of attention on his son's part were peremptorily checked by a wave of his hand, for he was soon interested in what his guest was saying.

Simon had come to ask advice on several matters, and it was such advice as Sir John dearly loved to give. His brow cleared, his voice softened, he grew all that he was when in company congenial to him, and ever after he continued to treat his nephew "as a young fellow."

Nor was Colonel Lutteridge less successful with the lads. He had not only come early, in the hope of finding his uncle at home—he wished to engage them all to shoot with him on the following day.

Sir John was engaged—his duties as a magistrate could not give way even to partridges and pheasants—but Bertie

and Jem accepted the proposal with eagerness, Ways and means were soon settled, and it only remained to be seen whether the sportsmen should finish their clay at Wancote or at Lutteridge.

Now was Lady Manners's opportunity. She knew what was expected of her, and had she been alone could have delivered her invitation with dignity: no one usually was more happy in her method of performing a courtesy. But the pause, the authoritative eye of her eldest son, the expressive looks of her daughters, and the unconsciousness of the guest, all served to embarrass her.

She feared she knew not what; and the civility, if such it could be termed, was at length hurried into, and brought forth with a trepidation which would have astonished any spectator not already prepared with foregone conclusions.

In it Constance would have detected deep and sinister meaning; in it little Mrs Martin would have found endless source of conjecture; in it almost any one present, who did not know the speaker, would have seen something more than what lay on the surface; and scarcely any would have seen the truth.

No one in the world deserved less the title of a match-making mother than did Lady Manners, and no one was more afraid of it. Fear drove her to the other extreme. The more suitable the match, the less would she see of the man; the more likely he was to attract, the less opportunity should be vouchsafed him for proving attractive.

She invited her nephew to the house, with a look that ought to have driven him from it.

Either he did not see the look, or it did not affect him, for he gave a ready assent, and then the party adjourned to the drawing-room.

The afternoon was fine, and since no shooting was to be done, it remained to be seen how the gentlemen were to amuse themselves. Sir John accepted a seat in his wife's landau, as he had a neighbour to see at some distance, and a riding-party for the others was talked about.

Colonel Lutteridge was offered a mount: Bertie's bay hunter was in the act of being pressed upon him, but he had not been allowed to say that he preferred a walk, when an interruption occurred.

A party of riders went past the window, and proved to be acquaintances who lived at a distance and were seldom

«een, and who had now come over in the hope of inducing the Miss Mannerses to ride back with them.

They were brought in to eat such of the luncheon as was available, and the proposal being agreed to, Agatha and Jane hastened up-stairs to don their habits.

Bertie, now regretting his urgency of the moment before, again, but in a different manner, proffered his horse to his cousin. Simon was, however, this time allowed to know his own mind, and since he absolutely disclaimed any desire to ride, all was right. He hurried away to make himself smart, and only Jem and Hester, the two youngest and most insignificant of the family, were left to entertain Colonel Lutteridge in the drawing-room.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" said Simon, suddenly addressing himself to the pair.

"Eh?" said Jem, starting.

"Aren't you hatching a scheme?" said his cousin, coming forward.

Weil, yes, they were. At least it was nothing of a scheme; it was only that Hetty and he were going to look for cedar-cones in the Manor woods: it was not quite time for them, but some were sure to have been knocked down by the late gales.

Both were shamefaced, evidently considering the amusement unworthy their mature years, and Jem hastened to add, as including an occupation more manly, "But we are going to take the dogs for a run and a swim first."

"May I come?"

Come with them! With the two left behind to follow their own devices! Partake of their humble sport, when he might have joined the great ones, who would have been only too proud of such companionship!

The brother and sister scarcely knew their own voices in the solemn assent they gave, yet even while feeling the honour, they would gladly have dispensed with it.

Their walk was spoilt—knocked on the head. They would have to talk to him, to attend to him, to point out this and that—worst of all, to go round to the gates, where for years they had leaped the fences.

No fence-jumping would do in the presence of this stately colonel, and down came Miss Hester for her walk, with as demure a step as if she had never in the course of her life heard of such an impropriety.

She and Jem were as uncomfortable as it was possible for the two young creatures to be.

In general, neither of them was afflicted in this respect,—Hester from a general feeling of acceptance, from the amount of popularity which in her small way she enjoyed—Jem from native modesty. As he never pushed forward, he could scarcely know a rebuff; in the background he was at home, at ease, and contented; and he was generally in the background.

Had he been asked beforehand if he would mind taking a walk with his cousin, he would have answered that since it was his cousin's own look-out, since he had himself proposed coming, he saw no earthly reason why he, Jem, should mind. Had he of his own accord invited Simon, that would have been a different thing; he would have bitten his tongue out sooner than have done that.

Nevertheless there was something appalling in the silence with which the three set forth, and the boy's heart sank, in spite of himself.

Hester, he thought, ought to talk. He had reckoned on her talking. While he ran round to see the dogs coupled and let loose, he had taken comfort in the reflection that such a chatterbox would be sure to find something to say.

But behold, Hester was as mute as a mouse! She laughed a little, it is true, as the dogs barked about her in the wild delight of their release; and told their names, and patted their heads while her cousin, with *an interest that gave hopes of a thaw*, inquired and commented.

But *all too soon so fair a, beginning fell* away, and a full mile had been traversed ere anything beyond a few questions and answers, broken ejaculations, and calls to Dash, Duke, and Gyp had been arrived at.

Gradually, however, things began to brighten, moods to change.

It was one of those fresh, dazzling October days, which continually surprise the beholder with new and unexpected beauties: ruddy copses glowed in the sunlight, and far as the eye could reach, a vast undulating plain faded into blue mist.

The air was crisp and exhilarating; it was not in human nature, certainly not in youthful human nature, to walk at a brisk pace through the pleasant uplands without experiencing a buoyancy of spirits which made silence impossible. Hester began to break it.

She had not much to say, poor child, but she had little bits of intelligence to give, fractions of information for the benefit of her cousin, reminders wherewith to assail her brother.

"Jem, don't forget about Mrs Ilewson."

"No, remind me coming back."

"We can't take the dogs into the woods, Jem."

Jem smiled. That, he thought, he might have been allowed to recollect for himself.

"Where will you leave them?" pursued she.

"At the farm. I will take them round directly."

"Don't you think the view from this bridge pretty?" said Hester, turning to her other companion, timidly. "People," she added, with some pride, "often come a long way to stand where *you* are standing. On a very clear day we can see the cathedral tower just over the river."

"And how far is that?"

"Thirteen miles."

"Will you and Hester wait here?" suggested Jem. "It will hardly take me a minute longer to run round with the dogs from here, than it would if we went along—you know where, Hetty. And I shall know better where to find you if you stay on the bridge."

Off he ran, and—awful moment—she was left alone with her cousin!

She was dumb with horror; she had not thought of *this*.

As long as Jem was there it was not quite so bad; though not much of a help, Jem was at least a third person, and she knew that that third person was as miserable as herself.

It was unkind in him to desert her—mean of Jem to run off so gaily, knowing to what a fate he had left her.

Why could they not all have gone together? What did it signify if the farm were one hundred, or two or three hundred yards off? The *additional* few steps were nothing to her, as he very well knew; even had they been, it would have been infinitely preferable to this.

She had nothing to do, and nothing now to say, and her companion apparently had no intentions of helping her out.

Perhaps he was at this moment voting the walk a mistake, wishing himself out of it, and resolving not to let himself in for the like again. Perhaps he was thinking her stupid and tiresome.

How Should she be otherwise? She did not know how

to iLake conversation, like Agatha; and she had never been anywhere, and had never seen anything.

How was she, then, to help it ?

Had he looked at her he would have seen her forehead wrinkled into a frown of vexation, but as it happened, he was neither looking at her nor thinking of her. He was gazing around, and beneath; on the broad level turf with which, on one side, the Wancote park began, and on the avenue of stately oaks which stretched behind the iron gates of Lutteridge on the other.

In front still further beauties riveted the eye. A long sweep of the river, lit up and quivering in gold and silver flakes of light, moved with indistinguishable current among its sedgy islands and bending willows. Over it the swallows were still skimming, and now and then a lazy boatman paddled along the banks.

It was so English, so home-like, so different from any scene to which he had for years been accustomed, that Colonel Lutteridge, who was of a dreamy, susceptible nature, may be pardoned for being at the moment so engrossed as to forget all else in the new sensations it inspired. Jem's breathless "I hope I have not kept you Baiting," alone recalled him to a knowledge of his other cousin's presence.

"I beg your pardon," he said to her, waking up; "I am afraid I have been dreaming. I—I really did not remember you were there."

She liked him for forgetting, was pleased at such a tribute to nature, and, looking up in his face, longed to tell him so, but could not. They now moved towards a side gate, and after about ten minutes' stroll through the woods, reached the cedars. It was not until this luckless moment that the reflection occurred to the would-be marauders that the spoil which they contemplated bringing away belonged of right to their companion.

The awkward absurdity of the situation now flashed on both, and both were instantly aware that he had seen it from the beginning.

When he had first been informed of their destination, and seen the value they placed on the booty, he had been amused; but he was still more so now, when his eye fell •upon the boy and girl who, with crestfallen faces, were making a feint of fatigue in order to escape embarrassment.

Hester leaned against the giant stem of the tree, it being too damp to sit down : Jem appeared to be lost in sudden meditation.

"Well?" said Simon, looking from one to the other—"well"]

Hester took him off afterwards. She said he gave his head a little jerk to one side, and that one eye went up, and one corner of his mouth went down, and that, in short, he looked, taking him all in all, exceedingly like a half-awakened cockatoo. And then the little witch mimicked his "Well"] to the life.

Jem never could hear her without laughing, although he affirmed that he had never felt less inclined to laugh than he did at the time.

Of course cedar-cones are not much, still one would not willingly pick pebbles off a man's own ground in his presence without saying "By your leave;" and to have asked leave after bringing their cousin to the spot with the avowed intention of purloining his property, would have been, it must be allowed, droll.

It might have been done, of course. A saucy smile, a mock reverence, and a jest would have made the whole thing simple; but Hester, who could be saucy enough, Heaven knows! on occasion, was now as much engaged as her fright would permit of, in making a mental note of the scene, which found expression, as we have said, afterwards.

It was, however, impossible not to say something; and at length, in solemn, tremulous accents, which rang in Simon's ears afterwards, and brought a smile to his face whenever he thought of them, came the apology.

"Jem and I have always come here, but perhaps you would rather that we did not, now."

Colonel Lutteridge looked at the speaker with a covert amusement which did not appear. She had no idea that she was at least as great a curiosity to him as he was to her, and that though he was not likely to mimic afterwards, as she did, he often repeated, with an inward laugh, the scene to himself.

"By all means, come; wherever and whenever you please. I am the stranger here; you are the residents," he said, with his old-fashioned politeness; "it is for you to tell me the ways of the place."

Still in the pretty speech there was not the pleasantry of

his "Well?" He had been nearer making friends with them at that moment than afterwards. They seemed to him such shy, wild creatures that he was afraid every moment of scaring them afresh; whereas if he had only been less afraid—but the reader will understand how each was acting on the other, and instead of lessening, increasing the difficulty.

"Would you like to have them for yourself?" suggested Hester, next. "We can gather them all the same, you know," she added, earnestly.

"That will do," subjoined Jem, with evident relief.

"Thank you. Well, I will go shares, then."

"And you can have ail the large ones."

"Certainly not."

"But we have numbers at home," pleaded little Hester; "we have huge ones in the drawing-room, and in mamma's room; it was only Jem and I who wanted them for ourselves to-day, and we would much, *much* rather you had them,—would we not, Jem?"

What age could they be, these funny people? Hester, Simon thought, might be fifteen or so—Jem a year or two older; but even if that were the case, they must be curiously simple-minded. He liked that. Their eagerness, their ardour, the importance they attached to the search, the way they ran about over the ground, and their rush each to each when either proclaimed a treasure-trove, pleased him hugely. He began to feel himself quite anxious to discover something. He wondered what they would say if he did : whether they would fly at him as they did at each other: if they would despise him should he, after all, be unsuccessful.

The idea quite spurred him up; he poked and poked, and bent his tall figure, and scanned every nook, and turned over every twig and leaf, until at length, to his infinite satisfaction, a cone of some size actually did reward his diligence.

"Look!" cried he, holding it up with lively exultation.

The result was all that could be desired; they could not look enough, could not praise enough; and he was informed at least half-a-dozen times that it was the largest found that day.

Neither evidently dreamt of taking it from him, and he began rather to repent of his discovery. "What am I to do with this?"

"Put it in your pocket, won't you?" Jem's own pockets were fast filling, and it seemed to him the right thing to do. Still, he looked at his cousin with a momentary suspicion, as he said, "Put it in your pocket," aware that if Simon were of Bertie's sort, the suggestion would not be acceptable.

For a moment Simon did falter.

In his pocket! To bulge out, press, and bump against him while he walked, and to awaken a fresh difficulty when he should take off his coat as to where further he was to bestow it! His soul revolted from the idea of tossing it, later, aside; yet he could not but feel the thing an incubus. He had meant it, when found, to be for them. For little Hester, who looked so bright and piquant, with her hat awry over her curly brow; he had intended to laugh away his first proposal to go shares, and put it in her hand at once; but he saw his mistake.

Neither of the two would have taken it for the world, and to both it had afforded such evident and heartfelt delight that he, whom they had still qualms about defrauding of his property, should have himself made the most valuable discovery of the day, that there was nothing left for him to do but to insert forthwith the sticky monster in his clean coat-pocket. He did it with ineffable gravity and apparent satisfaction.

"And," said Hester afterwards, "wasn't it fortunate, Jem? Wasn't it delightful? To think of his getting the largest, the finest, the most beautiful of them all, himself!"

She used to go and look at it on the table at Lutteridge afterwards, and note that whatever else was moved from time to time off that table—it was in a corner close to the master's chair—the cone was always there.

Once she saw him turning it over in his hands, and told Jem.

Jem was knowing on the subject. "Depend upon it, Hetty, it would never have done for you or me to have found that fellow. Don't you remember how pleased he was, and what a hurry he was in to bag it, in case anything was said? He was afraid that we might expect him to offer it us, you know."

"And though we went the whole round of the woods," said she, "we never found another like it."

"Hester's Walk has done her good," observed her mother, commenting on the pair of rosy cheeks and bright eyes which surmounted Miss Hester's white frock that evening. "It could not have been so very terrible after all, Hetty. I think it is a pity that you are all so much afraid of your cousin" (no one of them was more afraid than she herself)—"he seems very kind and gentle, and it will be so difficult for him ever to be at home with us if we do not meet him half-way."

"It was civil of him to come up so soon," remarked Sir John.

"Shall you ask him to shoot here, sir?" inquired Bertie.

"Of course. Let me see; when can we say? To-morrow you go there, next day Parker and Searle come here—I don't care for more than five guns. That brings us to Sunday, does it? I suppose you know the day of the week among you," sardonically. "You all seemed so precious sure of it yesterday! Does that bring us to Sunday?"

It did; and since it was apparent that Monday or Tuesday would be the earliest date at which his nephew's civility could be returned, even Sir John was fain to allow that it was as well that he had been asked for the following evening.

"The light lasted long this afternoon," observed Lady Manners; "did any of you notice the sunset on the river? The water was very high, and the reflections were beautiful."

"We did," cried her youngest daughter. "We did, mamma. Simon and I did."

"Simon and you," laughed her father. "The mountain and the mouse! The ox and the frog! All the giants and pigmies in Christendom are a joke to * Simon and I!"

"It will be 'I and Simon' next!" observed Bertie.

"I thought Hester did not intend even to call him Simon," added Agatha.

"Neither I did, neither I do—to his face. But behind his back I may say it if I like, may I not, mamma? What are they laughing at?"

"I don't know, really, Hetty. I don't know why it should have sounded odd, I am sure—but it did." Even her mother was smiling.

"And I know him better than any of you do now," added Hester, valiantly. "We went such a long, long walk, and at the end he was really very nice—was he not,

Jem? I did not dislike him at all. But, mamma, think of his going with *us* I with only Jem and me! At first we thought it was going to be dreadful. Did you see the set-out? Did you see him stalking along with measured step in the middle, and Jem and me doing our best to stalk along likewise, one on each side?"¹

"I suppose he did not favour you with much conversation?" inquired Bertie, looking at his brother; but Jem, engrossed with a whip he was mending, made no response. "What on earth did you talk about?" pursued Mr Manners, sharply; he was not in the best of humours, although he had had his ride, and might have been presumed to have enjoyed it. He was astonished at his cousin's taste, and in the mood to cavil.

"Oh, we talked," said Jem, placidly. "I don't know. We did very well."

"Did you show him the stables?"

"No."

"Nor the kennels?"

"No."

"Jem is such a donkey," said his brother, turning to the company, "that he never remembers to show people anything."

"Why should I?"

"Of course he would have liked to see them."

"Of course you would have liked to show them," struck in Hetty, Jem's defender at all times. "Then you should have stayed yourself, Bertie, instead of riding off with those Miss Bells and their husband."

"I tell you what, mamma, if Hester is allowed to talk like that she will get herself into a scrape some day. 'Those Miss Bells and their husband'!"

"But I never can recollect which of them it was he married. And we have known them so long as the Miss Bells, that I never can think of him but as the husband of the Miss Bells."

"She ought not to be allowed to say such things, mamma."

¹ Hester, my dear, you must not say such things."

* What things, mamma? Did you call him a thing?"

'Him! Whom?"

'The husband of the Miss Bells! Ho! ho! ho!"

'How can you allow it, mamma? She does not mind you a bit."

"My dear Bertie, she is only mischievous. Hetty! Hetty!"

"Of course if you encourage her"—he was now surly and rude—"she is not likely to be anything else."

"You ought riot to speak so to me, my dear." Lady Manners no longer smiled. "Your doing so is much worse than anything Hester said."

"Oh, well, if that is the way——"

"Oh, shut up," muttered Jem.

"What a noise you are making!" followed the softer plaint of his father, who had been roused from a gentle nap by his son's loud tones. "Do not bellow into my ear like that, Bertie. Can't you go away? So very disagreeable!" his head sinking gently down again.

Every man's hand being thus against him, nothing better occurred to the petulant young man than to leave the room, which he did forthwith; and certainly the move for all was a good one.

There was seldom peace long anywhere when Bertie was present; he was too vain, too grandiloquent, too irritable, except when in an unusually happy temper, to be safe company for any length of time. Relief, although they might not say so, invariably followed his departure from home; and in the present instance all in their secret hearts felt that he had been at home long enough.

"I do wish Bertie would not be so quarrelsome!" cried Agatha, as the door closed. "He must always put everybody right. He was quite rude to me about my riding to-day," added she, having a grievance not yet declared. "He talks about saying things before people, but I am sure no one else would have made me so uncomfortable—and before everybody too. Then he is by way of being so particular about Hester!"

But then they were all by way of being particular about Hester now. After having petted, pampered, and indulged their youngest for seventeen years and a half, they had suddenly awakened to the fact that she was spoilt—the only wonder being that they had not done so long before. She was too apt to put herself forward; *too* ready with her opinion; too smart with a reply. She was therefore to be repressed, kept under, and taught better ways.

It was late now to begin the task, but it might nevertheless have been effected by united and consistent effort;

undertaken as it was, how should it prove anything but a failure? Only by fits and starts would one of the family be roused to the necessity for action—only when smarting under some personal wound, some affront.

Then, true, the eyes of the injured would be opened, the rebuke would be administered, and a general accusation of forwardness, impertinence, and conceit be made. But as surely as this was done in public, so surely was any benefit that might have accrued to the reproof wiped away by a laugh from some one not interested, a foolish consolation to the undeserving girl, or even an attack on the attacker. No one liked to have Hester "spoken to," except by him or herself. She was so soon cast down, so easily crushed, that the lesson, unless an exceptional opportunity had been embraced, was sure to be followed by the caresses of some would-be friend; and thus the little maid, whose spirits were high, would forget five minutes after, that anything had been said. Of course one and all put the blame off their own shoulders. "Hester has been too much encouraged," Lady Manners would say, with a glance at her elder daughters; but when it was their turn to remark, "Hester, you are growing unbearable," the observation was not relished in high quarters.

When the mother frowned, the father would smile; when the sisters scolded, the brothers would kiss; while even if the whole circle—as sometimes though rarely happened—were against her, it needed but to see Hetty in tears to reinstate her in all the rank she had lost. She was at once the scourge, the torment, and the darling of the household.

PART II.

CHAPTER V.

"A3 LITTLE OF A HERO AS IT IS POSSIBLE FOR
A MAN TO BE."

"The man whose virtues are more felt than seen,
Must drop indeed the hope of public praise;
But he may boast what few that win it can,
That if his country stand not by his skill,
At least his follies have not wrought her fall "

—COWPER.

"AND what did you think of them ? " demanded Constance, immediately the servants had left the room and she was alone with her brother-in-law over their dessert that evening.

" You must have had full opportunity of learning who was who, and which was what, during such a long stay. You were the whole day at Wancote, were you not ? I declare I ought to be affronted at your taking yourself off in this manner, Simon, on the very first morning after your return. But I suppose you were obliged to stay, having gone before luncheon ! By the way, you naughty man, I waited luncheon for you."

He was sorry, but it had not occurred to him that any one would wait.

" Oh dear, yes, to be sure I did," said she, gaily. " And very hungry I was ! Ellen too. But we never thought of your giving us the slip so soon. We were amazed to find you were off to Wancote already. Shooting arrangements, I suppose ?" added she, raising the wine-glass to her lip* with a careless gesture, which the sharp scrutiny of her eyes belied.

The correctness of her surmise was allowed; and she

would with this have been fairly well satisfied, havl not something been added that was not quite so palatable. She was enjoined never to wait for him should he be absent at two o'clock. He could not engage to be in for luncheon, nor, indeed, for anything but dinner; he would let her know beforehand if he intended dining away from home. Having tasted the sweets of liberty during the last two months of Iiis life, he boldly proclaimed his intention of securing it for the future.

This was rather strong, and not at all what she had expected.

She had reckoned on his riding with her, driving with her, and attending on her generally, unless when closeted with his steward or out among his coverts. To these she would of course yield pre-eminence; and by-and-by, should he become fairly established as a county man, other claims would naturally appear—but amidst such duties and occupations he would of necessity be safe, if not from all danger, still from the only danger she dreaded.

She only desired to know that when absent his absence could be thus comfortably accounted for.

But if he were to take to roving about, making calls at neighbours' houses during morning hours, and that without her knowing either that he was going, or even that he had been, unless it transpired casually—as in the present instance it had done—who could say what might, or rather what might not, be the consequences]

Wancote, to be sure, could hardly be looked upon as a mere neighbour's house; but then, in Wancote lay her chief anxiety.

Too wise, however, to let a glimpse of this appear, or even leak out through overdoing her part, she played it to perfection. Above all things, she must win his confidence, and to attain this end, she was ready to be, do, seem anything for the time.

Accordingly, she linked her reproaches with smiles, and tempered her inquiries with moderation.

She mingled other interests in her talk. Even the jest with which she might have rallied a younger man was forsworn : he was to take it that he had done the natural and proper thing to do; and that the only point—the only little speck of a point—on which he had been remiss, was in not having given notice of his intentions.

If she could but get him to give notice 1

Easy then would it be to arrange obstacles, suggest difficulties, or if nothing better offered, accompany him to the post of danger herself.

"It cannot last long," she argued, referring in her own mind to the necessity for such precautions. "He will be struck *all of a heap/ as Robert was; or he will escape scot-free. After a few weeks I shall begin to breathe, provided there are no indications of the malady."

Then another idea occurred which pleased her mightily. "Robert was my slave from the first. Simon cannot be so very insensible to the same attractions which won his brother. He shall at least admire me, find me charming, and discover that my companionship is more delightful than that of any bread-and-butter Miss! Agatha cannot compete with me in *agremens*, and it is a mere matter of opinion which of us is the best-looking. What fun! He will not be the first man I have won from Wancote! And it would be a religious act to save my respected brother-in-law, because of the near relationship. I wish we were all Papists! That would settle the matter comfortably, and let us have done with it. Even as it is, I daresay Uncle and Aunt Manners are not particularly anxious for the connection: to do them justice, they are great fools about their daughters' marriages; and one thing is certain, they won't help on Simon, whatever they do. They will rather approve of my little hindrances, but I don't imagine Agatha and Jane will be quite so well pleased. He is the very man to take their fancy."

She was, accordingly, impatient to begin, almost chagrined to hear that the afternoon had been spent, not in riding with Agatha and Jane, but in a walk with the younger ones.

Unable, however, to credit that so simple an arrangement had been made without premeditation, it had scarcely been told ere she had fathomed the reason to her satisfaction. All was as she had foreseen: Lady Manners had already taken fright; Sir John and she were alike in their old-world ideas, and the grown-up daughters were not to be thrown in the way of their cousin. Perhaps they had already shown signs of susceptibility, the quiet Jane might have been impressed—who knows? Those quiet people are the romantic ones.

And there was certainly something romantic about Simon. His domestic misfortunes, his melancholy, his loneliness, his

wealth,—she sighed herself as she drew the picture and glanced at her brother-in-law.

To be sure, he did not look melancholy, and was sipping his wine with a serene air that spoke of a man at ease with himself and all the world; but she had determined that if she had to endure the drawbacks of his presence, she would have the sweets also. Since come he must, he should come as a hero.

The hero, she had at first predestined, should take the form of a worn-out soldier, wearily sinking into the splendours of the Lutteridge family vault.

That image dispelled, there arose the grief-stricken widower, living in the memory of bygone happiness, round which was wrapped a halo of letters, pictures, and locks of hair.

Over this gradually supervened the admired, courted, but relentless lord of the manor, sighed after by fair ones to whom he was indifferent, devoted to solitude—and herself.

It was all very pretty if Simon would have fallen in with it.

But the time has now come when the reader must have a word about Simon himself.

He was as little of a hero as it is possible for a man to be. He was a good fellow, with more looks than wit, more heart than head. He had not as yet one idea about his sister-in-law, except that she bored him; he wished she would not talk so much, nor laugh so much; he wished particularly that she would not ask so many questions.

What could it matter to her how he had spent every hour at Wancote, and why should she tell him all the tittle-tattle, not only of the people in the neighbourhood, but of their grandfathers and grandmothers? Her interrogations were annoying, and her information superfluous.

Never were there lips less likely to tell her so.

When Simon was pleased, he could say so; when not, he could but be silent. He was hardly ever known to speak in anger; and Heaven had gifted him with such an inscrutable countenance that he did not even display it there.

To be plain, Simon's face belied him.

We have purposely allowed the reader to receive along with the people who came to greet him at the Manor the impression that Colonel Lutteridge invariably made on strangers.

"A determined-looking fellow," Sir John thought hia

nephew; his wife could not bring lierself to utter a commonplace in tones above a whisper; all the younger ones—his cousins, the young Westmacotts, and the Martins—experienced a creeping awe in his presence, and if he addressed them, replied with a nervous timidity they could not account for.

Constance herself, even while she called him a "naughty man,"¹⁷ felt her way in making each advance as though she were treading on a quicksand.

All this was simply a delusion on the part of the good folks.

Colonel Lutteridge was not a fool, but he was almost equally little of a genius.

He was neither melancholy nor morbid, ill nor sad. He had a magnificent *physique*, and enjoyed his life heartily.

It was not his doing that this enjoyment was but seldom manifested in his countenance; this was partly the result of a stubbornly fixed set of features—partly because, naturally reticent, he had spent the greater part of his manhood among a people who never show emotion.

He had learnt from them the trick; and it had answered, as most things did answer with him.

It had never been necessary for him, even in his youth, to exert himself about anything. In company he had never needed to raise his voice to be heard,—the slightest word was certain to be caught up by some one—and whatever that word was, it was sure to please.

Had his lot been cast in another sphere, he had been another man.

Had it been his hap to have struggled with the crowd for a maintenance, we may safely affirm that he would not have set his foot many steps on the ladder—that he would have been jostled aside, thrust back, trodden under foot. As a clergyman, he might never have been offered a living; as a barrister, he would scarcely have possessed a brief.

But as the lord of Lutteridge Manor, Simon did excellently well. He went to India because he liked it, and stayed there for the same reason—the rich, imaginative oriental mind pleased him, even while his own could not cope with it; and had his wife lived, and had children been born to him, it is probable that he might not have left the country of his adoption until, at least, he was no longer fit for foreign service.

But as he had been so speedily released from all domestic

ties, he had had nothing but his military career to fall back upon, and gradually it had closed in upon him, and become the absorbing interest of his life.

His promotion was rapid, as promotion is in an Indian regiment; and when the amiable young subaltern became in due course major, and then colonel, he found himself the most popular commanding officer that had been known for many years.

But why? Because he had grown up in it, and his comrades knew Simon. His majestic mien could not impose on them, nor could the frown with which he was wont to receive a petition take in the weakest. Everybody got everything they wanted: it was taken for granted that a request would be acceded to ere it was made; plans were laid with no reference whatsoever to authority; and, in short, the regiment grew disorderly and unmanageable.

It was at this time that—whether in obedience to a hint from high quarters, or whether from an inward consciousness that such would not long be withheld if he remained at a post for which he began to feel himself unfit, we need not inquire—Colonel Lutteridge threw up his command without giving his subordinates time or opportunity to remonstrate.

While Constance was filling her imagination by turns with images of the invalid and the inconsolable, her brother-in-law was in reality to be pitied for a simpler sorrow. His military reputation was indifferent; he was not retiring full of years and honours, nor—happier still—of honours without the years; he was seeking to hide among the shades of Lutteridge regrets and mortification.

He was not a man to whine about it, even to himself, and his departure took place with due decorum, and—as may well be imagined—much heartfelt regret expressed on all sides by those left behind.

Their colonel's stoical face did not deceive *them*.

"The old boy feels it," they said, one to another; and the knowing ones pursed up their lips, and wagged their heads, aware that the good time had now gone, and that it was—contrary to all regulation—the bad time that was coming.

For the major, who was now promoted to reign over the unpromising crew, was in every way the reverse of honest Lutteridge. A little ferrety man, with no blood and no

means, yet with brains enough to bother them all. It was he indeed who had, in the primary instance, bothered the poor colonel away—of that they had evidence, and accordingly they owed him a grudge on that score, to begin with; and then, when no one had dreamed of his succeeding, and Talfourd had made sure of stepping over his head—and Talfourd would have been another of Lutteridge's own sort—the little wretch who had set the whole thing agoing came forward with the money, which he had scraped together somehow—begged, borrowed, or stolen—and laughed in their faces.

Grief and lamentation followed Simon, and the glories of his dynasty were long remembered in the place that knew him no more.

Not a whisper of this, however, reached Lutteridge.

To all there the tall man, with his straight figure and stately bearing, was, as we have seen, one to impose reverence. His square brow betokened talent, his curved chin resolution.

All the men agreed that he must have an iron will and an infernal temper, which the women more gently construed into a high spirit and that decision which every character ought to possess.

Out of this material Mrs Robert Lutteridge had now to construct her puppet. We left her inspecting him over her wine-glass, with a little startled look upon her face, as if she was not so absolutely sure as she had been at first of the sort of man she had to deal with.

He was not munching dry biscuit and sighing over a glass of pale sherry, as he ought to have been; he had filled his plate with a rich cluster of raisins with their accompanying milk-white almonds, and was eating as if he liked them. Absently eating, it is true, with his arms on the table and his eyes fixed on a corner of the room, but still with a look that denoted nothing more—if the truth must be told—than calculation.

She was right. He could not, when taxed, affirm that his fancy had taken flight beyond the consideration of how many couples of dogs would be wanted for the following day, and whether it would not perhaps have been as well to have permitted his cousins to bring one or more from the Wancote kennels, as they had proposed doing.

At the time he had declined the offer, but on going to

inspect his own afterwards, he had found that a retriever on which he had reckoned would not be forthcoming. The novel interest had awakened him to more lively animation than he had yet shown, and he was quite eager in explaining to her the difficulty. His old regiment, and his grievance connected with it, were so far removed from this quiet place as to be almost invisible; and being now surrounded by new, and, above all, unconscious faces—faces who had heard nothing of his trouble and vexation—he began to brighten under the genial influence. Even the journey down to Bombay, and the voyage home, had not, as we shall show presently, been without their effects; and although he had been, so far, still sore enough about his enforced return as to put down peremptorily all ideas as to a reception on his estate, he had been in the humour to be gratified with the quiet and unobtrusive welcome vouchsafed to him.

He was very well pleased to find that he should have, in Sir John Manners, a relation so close at hand, and so well qualified to advise him on points as to which there would be no disgrace in seeking advice. In the ladies of the party he had merely recognised a different order of beings from those he had been accustomed to meet; he had not done more—their nearer acquaintance he could wait for. But he was delighted to find the sons at home. Their reputation was joined to their father's as the crack shots of the county, and it had reached his ears, even before he arrived at the Manor. He had heard of them in London, and the prospect of shooting in their company had roused him more than anything else to interest in Lutteridge.

It was no wonder that, instead of hanging with drooping eyelids over the table, he should be enjoying with his almonds and raisins the animating consideration concerning the retriever, and that when questioned he should cheerfully avow it.

"Let me write," cried Constance. "Let me see, James can go over and bring their answer. Do not *you* take the trouble, Simon, but just tell me what I am to say, and I will write directly."

"You write!" said he, surprised. "By no means; a message will do."

And he rose to ring the bell.

"But I had something to say, at all events," protested

his sister-in-law. "One note will do for all, if you will tell me the names of the dogs you want."

"I don't know his name. It was a large black retriever we had with us to-day. Since you are going to write at any rate, perhaps you will kindly mention it."

"The large black retriever who went with you to-day. I know him; he is a splendid fellow. What is his name? I know it perfectly, only it has gone out of my head at this instant. Don't you love retrievers? There is something so grand about them, and they have such noble, thoughtful faces. Little dogs are my aversion, silly little spoilt things. They have such an absurd pug at Wancote; did you see it? Of course; it is always in the drawing-room, but none of the others are allowed into the house. Now I would sooner, if I had any, have some of the larger ones, some of those beautiful retrievers; would not you?"

"They generally do their work," he said.

"Do they? But of course I don't know anything about that, I was looking upon them in another light. I like to make friends of horses and dogs" (no one liked it less, but she wished to discover his sentiments on the subject). "How any one can shoot an animal that has grown attached to them, and followed them about all its life, I can't think."

"What can you do? They must be shot when they are old."

"Oh, Simon! I did not expect that from you. How would you like to be shot when you are old? Oh, I could never, never kill any creature that I had once been fond of; the bare idea is horrible!"

As it was improbable that she would ever be called upon to do so, this called for no reply, and the lady paused for breath.

She was uncertain how to go on.

She awaited an argument, a deprecation, or at least a laugh; but as none of them were forthcoming, she rose from the table and went off to write her note.

When finished, she took it back with her to the dining-room. A thousand pardons, but she was obliged to intrude on him for one single moment, just to see if what she had said was correct. Aware that it was at least elegantly expressed, and that her handwriting was pretty, he was begged to peruse the sheet for himself.

He could not help thinking how much less trouble the message would have been.

"Will it not do?" inquired Constance, misinterpreting the gravity of his "Thank you."

She turned it over in her mind that evening, and was unable to arrive at anything she could have said amiss. He had taken no notice of her note beyond merely allowing, when pressed, that it would "do;" therefore, she argued, there must have been a flaw somewhere, which his quick eye had detected. Long after the messenger had returned, and all had been satisfactorily understood, she was still by fits and starts meditating on the subject.

We need scarcely say how groundless was her chagrin. The interruption, nothing more, accounted for the momentary shade of annoyance on Simon's brow; and well accustomed to the style of his sister-in-law's correspondence as well as to the size of her capitals, the fresh specimen called for no comment. How should he know that she wanted to show, more than all besides, more even than her graceful penmanship, her affection for the "Dearest Agatha" to whom the note was written?

Left at length to himself, Simon breathed a sigh of relief.

It was not that he objected to conversation, even to such lively chatter as Constance's, if she would have been content to prattle herself, and would not have compelled him to bear a part, whether he would or no.

She plied him too continuously, and he felt that if he committed himself to one rejoinder, it did but open the way for a dozen more attacks.

This to a man just awakened out of a long slumbrous lethargy, arid scarcely yet sure of the ground whereon he stood, was bewildering.

All his thoughts were now so novel and so strange, that, since he was not a person accustomed to dwelling deeply on subjects, he found difficulty in mastering them. He could scarcely realise the life upon whose threshold he stood. It seemed easy—it seemed pleasant; he hoped he should be found equal to it—do better in it than in that which he had left behind. He liked all he had seen; he would not even recognise the presence of his brother's widow and her child as a disturbing influence. No; he argued, if there was some ill, some trifling inconvenience attached to their residence, there was much counterbalancing good.

Alone, he would assuredly have been dull. The little one especially was an addition; he had sent for her in the

dusk, and had amused her for nearly an hour before dinner: and further, he could not but perceive that order and discipline were maintained within and without the place to an extent that it was but too probable he, single-handed, would have been unable to enforce. To Constance this must be due, and he was the last person to underrate his obligations to her.

She had, indeed, got the Manor up to a pitch of perfection before his approach which was creditable to all concerned. Never had it looked more beautiful, more luxuriant,—since her "What would your master say to this?" or, "Don't let your master have to speak about that," had not once failed in their effect.

She was quite sure that nothing escaped Simon—convinced that he was passing his own observations, drinking in all that went on. And the less of his opinions she was able to gather, the more value she set upon them.

"But I must not throw myself too much in his way," she shrewdly discovered. "I have told him where I am to be found when he wants me • and nothing plagues a man more than being followed about. If he seeks me out, I will make it pleasant for him to the very best of my power—I will encourage him to come again, and again, and again; but I will never go after him. No, indeed, monsieur, I know better! Well, I daresay we shall get on capitally by-and-by; but at present——" She sighed; and the same reflection in substance passing through his mind at the same moment, he sighed also.

At present they hardly knew how to suit each other

CHAPTER VI.

TWILIGHT IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

'* Twlxt the gloamln' and the mirk, when the kye come hame "
—Hooo.

Very particular, and somewhat tiresome to boot, was Bertie Manners as to all arrangements for his first shooting-day with hi* cousin.

At Lutteridge he and Jem often shot—Constance herself bringing out their lunch in her pony-carriage, and carrying back as much of the spoil as had fallen to the guns ere she came. But shooting over the manor in that free-and easy way—letting off birds by way of not killing down the game, and taking pot-shots on the sly, since there was no one by to see—was a different thing to going out in state with the proprietor, and feeling conscious that every manoeuvre would be under the eye of a practised sportsman. He, as well as they, had been heard of by repute; and it behoved the lads, for the credit of their name, not to be outdone.

Much sensible advice was therefore lavished on Jem, little by-counsels about hen-birds and the like, which, though delivered by the elder brother, were, in truth, only needed by him. Jem would have scorned to have shot down a single hen-pheasant more during his cousin's absence than in his presence.

Bertie's toilet was, moreover, elaborate; and as he descended to the breakfast-table in all points accoutred, he was perhaps, in his secret heart, not displeased to note his brother's inferiority.

He must affect, however, to be so. "Have you nothing but that to put on 1" he remarked, stopping short in his walk up the room.

The "that" referred to was a short, tight, ragged jacket, tinged with drops from the mouth of many a hare, and dear to the owner as a part of himself.

"Nothing but what 1" said he. He did not even look up, but continued eating.

"Well!" rejoined his brother. "Well!" added he, after a pause, during which he had walked up to Jem, walked round him, and surveyed him from head to foot. Then he turned to the others, "Ought he to be allowed to go out like this!"

"Why not 1" said Jem, finding all eyes upon him. "'Why on earth not?" added he, getting flustered.

When it was explained to him—"My jacket!" cried he. "What is the matter with my jacket 9 I have no other. I go out in this every day,"

"But perhaps, as you are going to Lutteridge/" suggested his mother, pleasantly, "I think, dear Jem, you might make some change. You are not to be alone, you know. I should not quite like your cousin to see you dressed so"

* But it's my shooting-jacket," expostulated her son. " I could not shoot in any other jacket I always go out in this. You see me in it every day."

" Simon does not see you in it every day."

" He will, though—at least whenever I shoot with him."

" You might change for this once, my dear."

" Change to what, mamma ? I have nothing to change to. I have never had any other. I would not have another for the world. I have shot in this ever since I've had a gun."

" So I should imagine," said Bertie, drily.

"Imagine! Why?"

" It is no wonder that you have grown out of it!"

" What does it matter if I have grown out of it ? The arms are all right. I hate things that get in the way."

" Your pocket is torn."

" What does it matter if it is torn ? It can be mended to-morrow. It will hold my things right enough for to-day."

Very few things "mattered" in Jem's opinion. It mattered if the sport was bad, or if Bertie cheated him, as I am sorry to say he sometimes did, as to the dogs he got; but if he were fairly used, and let alone, and provided he could kill his birds—for that, after all, was the great thing—it mattered not to him whether the day were good or bad, whether he were wet or dry, in company or alone. He could not understand a hiss about clothes. What were clothes ? When his torn pocket was spoken of, he looked down at the place and patted it. So long as it held his cutty-pipe, his tobacco, and his match-box, it was immaterial to him whether it had a piece hanging down by the side or not.

"I suppose the maids can mend it," he repeated. "It will do for to-day."

He was as much in awe of his cousin as were any of them, but he felt sure Simon would not judge him by such appearances. "He is not the man to care for that sort of thing," said Jem, simply.

"How can you tell that ?" said his brother. " He is just the fellow to surprise us all some of these days. But, however, have your own way; luckily no one else is to be there."

Breakfast concluded, the two hurried off. They were anxious not to be late, not to keep their host waiting ; and Bertie, who was usually, nay, as invariably behindhand as was his brother, was now the one to inquire the time most

frequently as they ran up through the woods from the boat-house.

It was too much trouble of course to take out his owo watch, but he could refer to Jem ; and by Jem it was only two minutes after the appointed hour when they reached the kennels.

Simon was there before them, but not as they had pictured him, coolly superintending operations. He looked hurried and worried, yet gave the boys a more hearty, an infinitely less ceremonious, greeting than they had yet received from him.

" Awfully glad you have brought that dog. We are two short, as it turns out. Can't think how it has happened." He was evidently accustomed to having difficulties smoothed before him when he went on the war-path; to having obstacles thought of and put out of the way; every evil contingency guarded against, and emergency prepared for.

The stolid face of the head-keeper, as he repeated without variation the statement which he had first made, and which he considered unanswerable, was irritating to a man who was used to having his own way; and it said something for our soldier that he merely showed, and did not give vent to, his annoyance.

Even after this was explained, they did not start.

There was a hitch—the plain truth being, that Colonel Lutteridge was obliged to be told where he was to go. He had already been coached up on the subject, but he had got confused, was nervous, and had forgotten. The keepers were pretending to help, delivering audible asides, contradicting each other, but at the same time uniting in exposing their master's ignorance, and letting the young gentlemen see how he was reduced to entire reliance on them.

The situation would have grown to be awkward had it not been for the straightforward Jem Manners, who, directly he understood what was going forward, turned to his cousin and said right out, " I say, we had better show you when to begin, hadn't we ?"

Bertie might frown, but it was plain that the knot waa thus cut; and the proposal being gladly accepted, it waa soon obvious to Constance, by the joyous clamour set up among the dogs who were starting, and by the disappointed yelps and whines of those left behind, that the coast was clear. The sport was excellent, the birds lying close* **and**

making short flights. The day, too, was dry and fine, with scarce a breath stirring, so that the party stayed out late, and did not arrive at Wancote till the light was nearly gone. On such field-days Sir John consented to dine an hour later. It was but for a short time in the year, and there were not many days, even in September and October, when the request was made.

Only Hester was in the large firelit drawing-room when Bertie ushered in his guest, and Hester's trepidation was awakened anew when she found that she was thus, for the second time, singled out to be alone with the formidable visitor; for no sooner had her brother opened the door, than, muttering something about finding out what room Colonel Lutteridge was to have, he immediately disappeared, to seek the glass of beer which a long day in the woods made imperative.

It had already been offered to his cousin, but had been declined with a curtness which made him fancy it despised.

It was not; Simon was merely hoping that his avowal of not drinking beer would not be construed into the possession of a liver complaint. He was thinking of this as he entered the drawing-room, unwillingly, afraid of a circle, and disinclined for feminine questions and cross-questions.

He was very well satisfied as to his day; but even the knowledge that he had both shot well and walked well, was not sufficient stimulus to provoke him to say so. He hated to speak while others listened; it was said of him that with but one auditor no one knew better what to say.

"No one here but you!" he began, in the tone which the walk of the day before entitled him to. ^{<k}When I first came in, I fancied the room was full of people. I saw all sorts of shadowy figures in the twilight"

The discovery that the figures had been phantoms of the imagination produced a sudden alertness in the step which had before been reluctant, and he came up to the only lady present, looking very handsome and pleasant indeed.

"I am afraid every one is gone to dress," said she. "I—I think you are late. But some one said—Agatha said—dinner is to be late. We were to wait for you."

"That was very kind. We certainly are late."

"Will you have some tea?"¹ inquired the little maiden, supposing that she ought to ask, but hoping devoutly that he would say "No."

She knew it was cold and weak, a watered pot, abomination of abominations; and he was sure to like it strong.

But how tiresome of the boys to come in just when hei sisters had not been gone up-stairs above five minutes! five minutes sooner, and she would have been let alone, left to the bliss of finishing her book, her delightful all-absorbing book, in peace. Sfce was so comfortable—did so hate the interruption. For any cause it would have been distasteful to have to put down 'The Children of the New Forest/ just at the moment when Edward and Patience were having their final interview before the separation \ but to have to quit the company of such a pair of lovers for that of an ordinary everyday visitor—or at least one who was likely to become so—was trying in the extreme. She was a little shy, and a little out of humour, but naturally the latter mood did not appear: still her "Will you have some tea 1" spoken by instinct, was not, perhaps, all that it ought to have been in politeness.

"Let me help myself," replied her cousin, sitting down by her side at the little table in the corner of the room, on the long settee which ran round it. She had been curled up beneath the corner window to catch the last glimmer of light, and accordingly here she was now caught and hedged in. "What are you reading?"

"The most delightful book there ever was," said Hester, with a smile, which was for the book, not for him, "Are you looking for a cup? I saw some—somewhere——" Even yet she was hardly awake; her mind hardly followed her words.

"Don't let me disturb you," said he, kindly. "I know what it is. I used to be desperately fond of a story-book. You go on with what you are doing, and I will look after myself."

But this was too much: she was alive at last to the discourtesy of her demeanour, when she perceived him endeavouring to pour tea from a teapot from which every drop had been drained.

"Oh, I am so sorry! The kettle, please," cried she. She had been spoken to about her tea-making only that afternoon. Every one had complained of inattention to their likings and dislikings; and albeit just promoted to the office, there had been a threat of taking it from her. How she wished it had been, if not for ever, at least for that

afternoon. The kettle was her last hope : it looked so large and trustworthy that she thought the water in it must still be hot, even though the lamp had been put out; but all conjectures on that head were soon at an end, since it became evident, by the way it rose when grasped by her cousin's hand, that the kettle too was empty.

"It was papa," said Hester. "He neYer—that is, hardly ever takes tea in the afternoon, but to-day he had a great breakfast-cup,—look, there it is ! He called for all I had left; and I did not think that any of you would be home in time. But please let me pass; I will ring, and we shall have more in a minute."

"Thanks. I'd rather not."

She sat down again hastily, uncertain what to do.

"I frightened yoi> ? " said Simon.

"Oh no. But I.am sure I ought to ring. Mamma would be so vexed, and it was *ny fault."

"Not at all. We had no right to expect any at this hour ; and if I had not been thirsty I should not have wanted it. Have you any milk 1"

"There is cream."

She poured it out, cool and bubbling, into the cup, relieved to have the difficulty over, and with evident satisfaction inquired if he liked it. Was it good 1

Very good, he said; he had not tasted anything so good for a long time.

"I am so glad."

Bertie, entering by the dining-room door, caught the last sentences. "Oh, tea," he said. "None for me, thank you, Hester; I have had beer. Is it really fit to drink, what you have there? If it is, it must be something uncommon."

The smile of one, and the blush of the other, were alike lost on him: he passed on to the fireplace, where his eye had caught his name outside some letters, and with these he was soon engrossed. It seemed long to him ere he looked round again, but he was conscious that the voices had not ceased in the interval. "You shall come, I promise," his cousin was saying, wh^n at length he returned to the outer world.

"What is Hester making you promise?" inquired her brother.

"I did not make him,⁰ said Hester, hastily. "I only said I would like it."

"It? What?" pursued Bertie, with an air that said, "Whatever 'it' maybe, it can have nothing to do with me; I am not responsible for the nonsense of such a child."¹

No time, however, was given for explanations: the words had scarcely passed his lips ere the door at the far end of the room opened, and down came Agatha in her evening dress, flowers in her hair and bosom, and a roll of music in her hand.

"Agatha! What is the meaning of this? What are you down at this unearthly hour for!" demanded Bertie, as Agatha, looking charming, came forward to shake hands with her cousin. "Do you know what o'clock it is?" continued he.

"I had a song to practise, and the library is a difficult room to sing in; so I like to come here, when there is no one to be disturbed by me. How late you all are! I heard you come in long ago! Hester, how are you still here?" added Miss Manners, rather coldly.

"The second gong has not sounded, Agatha."

"There it is, now. You had better be quick."

"So I shall—when I go; but I don't want to go yet. It is much pleasanter here. Why should people always be hurried away to dress when they don't want to go?" said Hester, plaintively.

"You will be late," replied her sister, turning away. She could not understand Simon's sitting down again, after he had risen to greet her; she thought he ought at once, on her giving so broad a hint, to have apologised for his negligence, and made off.

Instead of this he resumed his seat by her sister; and Hetty, now emboldened by numbers, began to show herself in her true colours—as perverse a little witch as any to be found out of fairyland.

Afterwards she alleged that she could not have passed, without forcing her cousin to stand aside; he had fairly put her into the corner, and it would have been rude to ask him to rise.

"But what were you doing to get wedged into that corner?" demanded Agatha.

She was very cross with Hester, and took her to task roundly, when it was found that the three who had despised her exhortations, actually did in the end prove defaulters.

"Hester would not stir, though I told her," she an-

nounced to the rest of the party, assembled and waiting .
"I knew how it would be."

Simon was at the drawing-room door, when he heard a light sound, and saw a thing like a bird skim down the staircase and fly towards him. "Do you want to come in under my wing?" he said; "it is a pity Bertie is riot here too." But they agreed that it would not do to wait, and entered together, with apologies which did not go any way towards soothing the feelings of the one most aggrieved. As soon as she could, she took her sister to task, as we have said.

"Perfect nonsense, Hester. You could have gone, had you chosen. What did it signify whether the others went or not? It was not for you to keep them."

"I did not keep them. How could I keep anybody?" It was Hester's whim occasionally to be over modest, and her tone was now meant to express, "Such a thing as I!"

"You should have gone, and they would have followed. It was for you to make the move. Nothing kept you but idleness; you would finish your wretched novel——"

——"My novel? I had not read a word for half an hour!"

"What were you doing then?"

"Talking."

"You kept them all. As you sat still, Simon thought he must. I daresay he did not care to stay at all, but you sat on and on,—I thought you would never go."

The truth was, Agatha had found the party unmanageable. Bertie, on purpose to show that he was not to be ordered by an elder sister, had taken out his letters again, and re-read them, before her face. Hester had set herself to argue the point, enjoying a tilt in which her ready tongue enabled her invariably to come off the victor. And Simon, on his part, had chosen to be amused by the skirmishing: he was passively on the side of the majority, diverted by the smart repartees of the sisters, and not aware, as Bertie and Hester were, what the red spot on the cheek of his eldest cousin meant.

All this incensed the correct and decorous Agatha.

"I cannot think how you could have behaved so," she now cried, having had much ado to keep her temper under, and carry on the jesting in presence of the others. "I am sure mamma would not have liked it at all. Although he

is a relation, you should remember that as yet he knows nothing whatever about us, and he may fancy all soils of absurd things from what you said to-day."

"Because we laughed at you!"

"It was only you who laughed,—you should not say 'we.' I thought it very ridiculous, and unkind too."

"You looked so solemn, who could have helped it? You ought to have joined in the joke."

"Joke! There was no joke," angrily. "You were giggling at nothing."

"We were giggling at you."

"You ought to be ashamed to say so if you were. Such a thing to do! No well-bred person would ever think of doing such a thing."

"Agatha, how can you be such a goose!"

"You know if I were to tell mamma that nothing would vex her more. How was Simon to know that you were only teasing when you looked quite grave, doing all you could to put me in an absurd light?"

"You did still more yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"You went preaching on, with a red face, and as solemn as a judge, when you saw that we were all laughing. You have no idea what a figure you cut."

"Hester, you are perfectly vulgar!"

"What is all this about?" cried Hester, at last. "What has brought about this rhodomontade? I was late for dinner—so were we all, by the way; Bertie was not down till after we had gone in, though I alone am to bear the brunt: well, have I never been late for dinner in my life before? Surely if mamma lets me off, you need not follow me about to say disagreeable things!"

"You know very well that was not what we were speaking of just now; it was the way you behaved in the drawing-room that was the worst."

"You made the other a peg to hang your lecture upon. Well, I have had enough on either head."

"You don't want me to speak to mamma!"

This told.

"If you will promise not to do it again," continued Agatha, "I will not say anything; but really it is not nice. Before Simon, too, of all people. Why, yesterday you pretended to be quite afraid of him!"

« Pretended ! I was."

" I am sure you were not to-day."

" Well, no," said Hester, thoughtfully, " I don't know that I am now. I begin to think that I rather like him. Even when I *am* afraid of him I don't want him away. You see we had quite a long bit of walk alone together yesterday—for Jem had to take the dogs along the road, and we went through the woods—and he was so nice, he told me so many things. I think I could get on with him very well if all of you were away."

" Absurd!" exclaimed her sister, the "all of you" grating on her ear; she would even have preferred a personal accusation to being thrown into such a contemptuous "all of you;" "he is not an ogre to eat you up!" she added, grandly. "The truth is, there has been such a fuss made about his being silent, that you exaggerated it until you imagined he would not say a word like other people!"

" Neither, he does, when other people are by. You need to be just you and him together."

" You don't expect him to talk to a child like you when he has any one else to talk to I"

" You don't understand," muttered Hester, hopelessly.

" You fancy that he is easy only with you," said Agatha, whose turn it now was for scorn, "whereas he is the same with every one of us. He was quite talkative to me when we were by the piano in the evening, and I daresay he was the same to Jane. You think too much of yourself, Hester."

In another part of the house an admonition something similar was also being given.

The two sons were smoking in the gun-room before bedtime.

" I should take care what I said to Simon if I were you," observed Bertie. " It was rather cool your telling him we had better show the way on his own ground."

" How could he know ? "

" He had his own men to tell him; it was no business of ours. Oh, of course there was no harm in it, only it might have looked as if we were taking the lead—some fellows would not have liked it. I don't know that he minded, but he might have taken you up precious short."

" We should never have got off if I had not."

" Oh, I know. I was glad you did. I only meant for

another time. I was uncommonly glad you had said it, since it did no harm; and I say, what an ass that Butte did make of himself! As if we don't know a long way better than he does where the birds are! , But what I meant was, take care not to go too far—don't do it again. Now that he has been out once, he will think he knows all about it."

"He won't, though."

"Let him find that out for himself."

^f"I think he is a nice fellow," said Jem.

"Give me a light, will you? Oh, nice enough, I daresay; but he is awfully hard to get on with. I hate a fellow who won't open his mouth."

"He is going to have an otter pack here next week."

"Good luck! You don't say so!"

"I think it will be Wednesday."

"Wednesday? That will do very well. We have nothing on for Wednesday. Did he ask us?"

"Ask us! Of course. He spoke as if we were coming at least,—or I did. It is all one."

"That's what I tell you," said Bertie, laying down his pipe. "That's just the sort of thing you do. Why could you not have kept quiet, and let him say it?"

"He did say it; we both said it. Of course he never thought of anything else."

"It would have been so easy just to have held your tongue!"

"Oh, shut up,"—the only expression of annoyance Jem knew. "I tell you it was all right," he added, sulkily.

"Just the sort of stupid thing——"

"No stupid thing at all. He was as pleased as he could be. I showed him where we found the old one, and told him about the hunts last year. He was as interested as possible. As if we needed to be asked to go, when any one cango!"

"Go with the tag-rag and bobtail, of course.¹

"Well, I'd far rather go with the tag-rag and bobtail. If you don't think we had invitation enough, let us join in at the start, and papa and the girls can go to the house."

This he knew would, in his own parlance, draw his brother.

Bertie wondered what good that was to do—whether it

was more fit for his father and sisters to go to a house unasked than for them; finally told his brother frankly that he was a young cub, and ought to go to school to mend his manners.

CHAPTER VII.

SIMON GOES HIS OWN WAY.

•• Forgive him, then, thou bustler in concerns
 Of little worth ; an idler in the best.
 If author of no mischief, and some good,
 He seeks his proper happiness by means
 That may advance, and cannot hinder thine.
 Nor though he tread the secret path of life,
 Engage no notice, and enjoy much ease,
 Account him an encumbrance to the state."
 —COWPER.

Although Colonel Lutteridge had neither the talents nor the temper which common opinion credited him with, he was not by any means wanting in strength of character, and was to the full as self-reliant as even the world accounted him to be.

He had no love of power, but he would still less have liked himself to be under authority: he could not awe his subordinates out of pursuing their own courses, but none ever presumed to interfere with his. If he permitted each to go his own way, he at least allowed none to cross their colonel's path. He exacted for himself the liberty he granted others.

What he chose to do, he did; where he pleased to go, he went. He was neither in the habit of asking advice nor sympathy; and as he had scarcely ever in his life been required to give an account of himself, it was unlikely that he should begin to do so in the thirty-ninth year of his age, and to a person who had no claim to expect so much.

Accordingly, Constance found herself unaccountably baffled in the plan she had laid down for ruling her brother-in-law with a charmed rod.

She used to flutter out of the porch when he was seen coining up the avenue, bring him his letters, and entreat that they might be read by her boudoir fire. She would

Bet Ellen to watch for his return, till the poor child was sick of her unrewarded task: what pleasure was it to her to detect her uncle's figure among the laurels, when it was but the signal for her being hustled out of the way herself before he came in?

True, she was allowed to appear for half an hour before dinner, and even to sit up to it occasionally, at Simon's intercession; but Constance permitted no one to be present during the cosy twilight hour, which was her chief opportunity of ingratiating herself with her brother-in-law. At no other time in the day could she catch him, and as time advanced he was not often in at this.

He began to understand the manoeuvre, and quietly, as was his wont, undid it; he came in late, and went straight to his dressing-room.

He now began to have engagements, duties of one sort or another; and it was only by her being told that a horse or a carriage had been ordered at such and such a time, or to meet such and such a train, that she would be informed that he had gone off for the day.

Of course it was all as it should be; when, on his first arrival, she had felt herself compelled to suggest—as faintly as possible, but still she had spoken the words—that she and her children should seek an asylum elsewhere, he had replied by an earnest protestation that, at any rate for the present, no change should be made.

She was, as both knew—with the exception of a paltry two hundred a-year, which barely sufficed to dress herself and Ellen—dependent on Simon. He had been sent for to his brother's deathbed, when he had voluntarily taken upon himself to be her support; and looking on her son as his heir-presumptive, he had undertaken his expenses entirely.

He was not prepared, at any rate until he had thought the matter over, to make new arrangements. He had settled in his mind the question of a separate establishment, and found it easier, so long as Constance remained inoffensive, and there were no disturbing element introduced into the household, to continue things as they were.

He could not even bind himself to live regularly at Lutteridge, since he was uncertain what kind of life it might prove to be; and were he, after turning away the widow and her children, to discover that it was uncongenial to him, he would be shown to have done a foolish thing.

But in giving her his renewed assurance that she might still look on the Manor as her home, he had added a word which should have been regarded as a command, had she had the sense to see it so. His gentle, "We shall both go our own way," should have been interpreted into, "I shall not meddle with you, but you had best not meddle with me."

Since he found, however, that she did not take the hint, as any one better acquainted with the speaker would have done; that she was perpetually fidgeting round him with interrogations, and finding out about him from the servants,—he simply said less, and acted more independently than ever.

He was not to be coerced.

She did her best, was always cheerful,—since men, she knew, liked cheerful people—invariably prettily dressed to catch his eye, kind and thoughtful to engage his gratitude.

Any little service which he asked her to perform was rendered with effusion, and he heard of it a dozen times before it was done with.

Any subject likely to interest him was dwelt on, and he was felled with his own schemes.

Outwardly they got on very well, but she had no real influence; and as to her exercising the surveillance she had at one time anticipated, it proved to be the veriest mirage.

When Wancote was the theme, Constance shone. All the girls were praised, Agatha more than any. Agatha was *tin* one, the flower of the flock, the Miss Manners *par excellence*—did he not think so? Did he not agree with her? Stupid man, then; he must have no eyes.

All the time she thought him wondrous sly.

She did not think him in love,—he was not interested enough, not impatient enough, not often enough at the house for that; but she suspected him of a little dissimulation, and dissimulation on such a point meant something.

He mentioned that he had been at Wancote, if asked, and he did so unconcernedly; but she got little else out of him.

She never knew, for instance, that he had learned his way to the sisters' morning room, and had spent one whole wet afternoon there.

His uncle and aunt had left that morning for a short stay *way from home, and the young people had had a merry time of it. Agatha had played waltzes, and Jane had boiled the kettle, and Jem had burned his face over the toast—and

they had all frolicked together, even Bertie condescending to join in the fun.

Bertie thought it rather fine on the whole," since his cousin was there, and since that sort of thing has been the fashion of late; and he went round with the scones, and ate Jem's toast quite good-naturedly for so great a man.

Hester sat on the rug with Jem, helping him, and scorching her own chubby cheeks; but even Agatha could not chide Hester's mirth when she was so gay herself.

The otter-hunt, which had been put off for a week, was again fixed on, and all were engaged to come, and were invited by their cousin to dine at the Manor the night before. "We shall have a lot of people in the house," he said, "and Constance will send Agatha a note to-night." He had learnt to call them by their names by this time; and since all was to be done with such propriety, Agatha was graciously pleased to signify that they would go.

Only a few of the more ardent feminine spirits were disappointed to hear during the dinner that unfortunately the hunt for the next morning had been arranged to take place where carriages could not follow.

Captain Cotterill was exceedingly sorry—he had misunderstood; but on the following day, on Thursday, if any of the ladies would honour him with their presence, he would be at their service; and Mrs Robert Lutteridge would chaperon all who stood in need of a duenna. He was extremely sorry, he hoped no one was disappointed; and on Thursday they would have a regular show-day.

A suggestion was now, however, made by the host. He understood that there were excellent walkers among the ladies present: since carriages could not follow, what was to prevent their doing Captain Cotterill the honour of going on foot?

In all probability they would enjoy much more of the sport; and the weather was all that could be desired.

Constance was appealed to, and she made no objection—she was not the one to make an objection to any scheme; and in the present case if a party could be made up, she professed herself ready to join it.

"Speak to them, then,"¹ said her brother-in-law, aside. "Get them to go if you can."

Constance nodded. "Certainly, I will speak to Agatha, as soon as her song is finished." In a few minutes she went

obediently to the piano; but Agatha attested afterwards that, so far from her understanding from Constance that their presence was really desired, an agreement, at Constance's instance, had been entered into by both, to resist all entreaties.

Constance, she allowed, had at first certainly inquired if Agatha wished to go.

If Agatha did wish it, was really anxious about it, Constance would see what could be done; but for her own part she did not altogether approve of the expedition. She did not know where the hunt might go; it would be a scramble, the ground was very wet, and she did not think they would enjoy themselves.

Agatha drew back, of course.

To tell the truth, such expeditions were never much to Agatha's taste: she liked a steady, straightforward walk, drive, or ride; she liked an evening of music and pictures. A drawing-room where there were no corners, where the people grouped around a centre ottoman and sofas, and where no one had a chance of saying a word unobserved, was what she approved of. She had an indefinable dislike to nondescript forms of entertainment, at which, in spite of her youth, she was out of her element.

There was no buoyancy, no mischief, in Agatha, and she could not endure the latter quality in others.

She was only too glad to be let off "a mad escapade," as she truthfully assured Constance. The two heads were some time over their confabulation, and, in the meantime, another was going on at the other end of the room. Colonel Lutteridge was leaning over the sofa on which sat his youngest cousin.

"You see I have not forgotten my promise, Hester."

"Oh no, you have done all you could. I am so sorry."

"Sorry? Why? Do you not want to come after all?"

"Indeed I do. But I am afraid I shall not be allowed. I don't think Agatha cares about it herself."

"Well, but if Agatha does not care, why should that keep you and Jane? Constance will take care of you."

"If Agatha will let us go?"

He began to perceive.

"Is Agatha left in charge?" he said.

"Oh yes. Oh, I do want to go so very much; I do think Agatha might allow us just for once. It is the walk-

ing after the hounds that I should like; I should not care nearly so much about going if I were to be boxed up in a carriage.¹¹

"I don't understand," said Simon, thoughtfully. "There is no possible reason against it. You have been before?"

"Yes, with papa, often. And I know if papa were here I could get leave; but I have no one now to speak for me," added she, with childish despair.

"I will speak for you. I will do better than that, Hester. I will manage that you shall come. Leave it to me: I can't have you cheated after making a promise, can I?"

"Now then," said Colonel Lutteridge, aloud, "how is it to be? Who is going to volunteer? Now, Constance, we are all looking to you."

"We have settled it," replied she, gaily. "Agatha and I have decided, and we are going to keep our decision a secret. No one is to know anything about it to-night."

"Very astute indeed," said Captain Cotterill, who did not care two straws whether they came or not, and who wanted to be off to bed, in preparation for the early start. "Very good idea, that. We will be discretion itself, and not tempt you."

"And we will say * Good-bye,¹ and give you no opportunity." Accordingly "Good-bye, Good-bye," went the round, and Hester found her cousin's inquiring eyes seeking hers for direction, ere she had any further directions to give. She shook her head. He smiled reassuringly, and disappeared.

"I say, Bertie, don't fail to bring your party to-morrow," said Simon a few minutes afterwards in the hall. "Hester wants to come, and I promised her that she should."

"Well, why shouldn't she?"

"They are trying to knock it on the head, Constance and Agatha between them. I can manage Constance, if you can Agatha."

He knew the weak point in Bertie's nature, and put his finger upon it.

Manage Agatha? By Jove, he'd like to see Agatha manage *him*! "It's just like some of her nonsense," said he; "she never cares for these sort of things, and she is always trying to put her foot in them. What business is it of hers who goes? No one asks her to go, unless she likes. Why should not the others have their way too? Agatha is always wanting to domineer over everybody."

To this Simon listened gravely. He thought it veiy likely but he thought none the worse of Agatha for it; he only felt that for once he should like to balk the young lady.

"Jane is under her thumb," continued Bertie, as they stood together waiting for the sisters to come down-stairs. "She will say she does not care to go either, if Agatha tella her. But Hester shall come if she wants to come. I suppose she is sure to want, too."

"That she is, but she thinks she is not going to get the chance."

"I'll see to it."

"Do; mind you do. I'll put it right with Constance. And be sure that you are not later than half-past six. We must be off by seven, sharp."

Bertie knew better than to repeat a word of this. On the homeward drive he smoked a long cigar outside, and when the carriage stopped, he allowed Jem to hand his sisters out and follow them into the house before giving the coachman orders to be round at six precisely, the following morning.

Had Agatha heard, she might have remonstrated against having horses out, considering that he and Jem only were going,—might have suggested that they could run down the slope, cross the river, and go up to the Manor in a quarter of an hour; and had he not intended to take Hetty, so they would have done.

But Bertie's ideas of propriety, which occasionally bordered on the ridiculous, were of service to his sister in this instance. He intended both to save her extra fatigue and to enable her to appear suitably at the rendezvous.

Therefore, although he could have overborne Agatha, and silenced her on the matter, he preferred not to make it a matter of contention; he did not wish to be asked questions which might, so he said to himself, entail fibs. He listened to his eldest sister's "None of us are going, Bertie," with due submission, and turned away his eyes from Hester's wistful glances.

But no sooner had all gone to their rooms, than she heard a low tap at her door, and there stood her champion, enjoying the situation.

"Look here, you're to go. Don't say a word to either of them, for there will only be a fuss, and I should think I have as good a right as Agatha has to know what papa and mamma would like. You be ready at six, and I'll come for you."

"Oh, Bertie! Bertie! Stop!"¹

"Well?" said Bertie, who was turning away, well pleased with his own gumption. "What now? It's all settled."

"Oh, but there's Constance, too. What will Constance say? Does she know I am coming, and does Simon? Won't they think it odd?"

"Simon? Not he. It was he who put me up to it. And he said he would put it right with Constance, and make her go too."

"Did he? Oh, how kind of him, how good of him, how *delightful* of him, Bertie! And oh, Bertie, thank you for coming; you have been very, very kind too."

"I will say, Het, you are worth doing a thing for; you always make the most of it."

"I shall make the most of this. But do stop a moment, Bertie; what was it I wanted to say? Oh, I know. How am I to wake in the morning?"

"Tell your maid to call you, of course."

"But she has gone to bed—they all have; mamma never allows us to keep them up. You forget how late it is. Nearly twelve. Oh dear! how shall I ever get to know the time?" cried Hester, disturbed in the midst of her delight. "The clock is in their room," looking at the door which opened into her sisters' larger apartment.

"Arid you can't fetch it? Well, no, it wouldn't do. That Agatha is as cunning as a fox. I could lend you my watch, but it wouldn't wake you; it would do no good. I'll tell you what I'll do. Perkins is to call us; I'll tell him to rap at your door——"

"That would never do."

"Then I'll send Jem."

His room was next Jem's; and as it never occurred to either of them that Bertie could by any possibility have come himself, the idea of Jem was grateful to both.

"I'll go and tell him now," continued Bertie, gently closing the door, and stealing off down the passage with the trepidation of a conspirator in spite of his bravado.

Too much excited to feel fatigue, and aware that there would be barely time for all she had to do in the morning, Hester now began cautiously taking out the hat, frock, gloves, and boots she would require to put on for the hunt.

The hazard of the enterprise, we must confess, increased its attractions. The consciousness that long before her

Mentor was awake or stirring she would be far beyond recall, in the midst of the wild scene her fancy kept ever before her, intoxicated her youthful blood.

Perhaps she did not herself suspect how much the glory of the enterprise was enhanced by the fact that she was eluding Agatha and aided by Simon. She was, as we know, a naughty puss, and as full of tricks as a monkey; but the time had not yet come to show what metal underlay such surface; it is the best fruits that need the hottest sun.

Sleep, Hetty thought, she could not. She tossed and turned, fevered by the prospect before her, heard the large clock in the gallery boom out "One," and thought she had been half the night awake. But the truth was, she fell into a sound slumber almost immediately afterwards, which lasted till she was aroused at daybreak by a candle flashing in her eyes, and by Jem's urgent whispers to get up and make no noise.

"I was afraid they would hear me," he said. "You were having such a good sleep it was a shame to poke you up; but you'll have to look sharp, Het, for you have only twenty minutes. It is twenty to six now."

"Oh dear. I will be as quick as ever I can."

"Never mind if we do keep the carriage five minutes or so. Only the quicker we are off, it's the safer, you know."

He had brought her his own cup of tea, Bertie having, of course, forgotten to tell Perkins there were three to be provided for; and as he stood at the bottom of the bed, shivering and rubbing his eyes, and not at all certain what sort of day it was going to be, both he and Hester felt their courage and inclination for the adventure a degree damped.

However, when she had drunk the warm beverage, and had plunged her burning face into water, and had got over the first throes of awakening, the tumultuous delight of the evening before was again astir in her bosom. She would not now have had her compact with her brother cancelled for the world. This, truth to tell, had been her first waking desire, and Jem's protestations that all he could say about the day was, that it was not raining, and it was too dark to tell more, had not tended to rekindle her ardour.

Once the flame caught, however, it lit up and burned quickly.

She slipped noiselessly from wardrobe to mirror; her dress, a trim dark serge, was well looped up; her stout

boots were laced tightly and tidily on; and her hair was knotted and bundled away under a close-fitting, jaunty little hat. Had not the hair by nature been glossy, curly, and bright, it would have been a spectacle, for she was not accustomed to doing it up herself, and in her haste was even less fitted for the task than at another time she might have been; but as it was, it rippled about, and ran over her neck and brow in so pretty a fashion that even Bertie, when appealed to, could find no fault.

"You do very well," he said. "That's the right sort of gown. Let me look at your boots."

These were also passed, and by that time Jem had appeared. Poor Jem ! He had felt the loss of his tea, but he never spoke of it, and he did not even ask for more, as he might have done. He did not think of things—unless they were for other people.

He was several minutes later in appearing than the other two were, and they were seated in the waggonette ere he ran out, all eager animation now, in the ragged jacket—which had, by the way, been mended, but was scarcely improved by the process—while on his head the oldest cap he could select from the crowd on the hat-stand was pulled down over his left ear.

"What a fright Jem always is !" said his brother, turning round from the box-seat, where he was already perched, the reins in his hand—Jem had darted into the house again for something—"it's of no use speaking to him, he is always the same/

He himself was as nicely got up in the rough as one need wish to be; and he thought that he and Hester, without any further addition to their party, would have been presentable on the occasion. However, as he said, it was of no use speaking; and luckily, he for once acted on the sentiment.

"I wish we were off!" cried Hetty, intent on that alone.

"Oh, we shall do very well. It is only three minutes past the hour now, and we did not reckon on getting off before five minutes past. Look alive, Jem !"

"Do, Jem, come ! I am sure I heard a window open," from Hester. She was shivering in the cold air, the particularly chilly atmosphere of breaking dawn.

"Eh ? All rights" responded Jem. "Only went to get a rug. It is cold," getting under it himself, as he huddled it round his suttr. "All right now," to Bertie, who, en-

veloped from head to foot in his comfortable overcoat, cast an eye of contempt on the shabby covering.

"They ought to have some new carriage-rugs," he made a mental note, but outwardly he only observed, "Shut the door, Perkins," to the sleepy footman, who, now that he was awake and up, half hoped to be allowed to attend the party. "And I say," turning the horses slowly round, "we shall put up at the Manor, so let Miss Manners know not to expect us till she sees us. Will that do, Hetty?" added he, with an audible chuckle, whereof both groom and footman understood the meaning perfectly. It was to him a rare feat to score off his sister thus.

As the carriage turned, and the horses set off at a brisk trot over the gravel, the noise they made at such an hour seemed startling and unearthly. The still house, with its windows shuttered and doors closed, the solemn silence over all the land, gave to the rattle of their wheels a defiant, indecorous sound. Rooks flew in and out among the trees in much concern. Here and there a heron started from the marsh, and the flap of its wings arose by the roadside. The sun crept up in a faint pale glow on the eastern horizon. More and more distinct grew the landscape, and pearly mists spread themselves, and vanished into air above the woods.

No mistake now about the day. It was all that could be wished, more than had been hoped for. A bank of light feathery clouds just veiled its brightness, and the heavy dew which glittered on the grass foretold heat.

The party were in excellent time; some had arrived before them, but many more came after.

Nothing could be more agreeable to the feelings of all than to find their cousin at the hall-door avowedly looking for their waggonette, to be brought by him to the dining-room, and seated at his own end of the table. He took Jem by the arm, as he gently pushed him into his seat, with an extra, "Glad to see you, old fellow;" he extolled Bertie for the masterly manner in which he had executed his part of the bargain, and he looked into Hester's face with a smile.

Then Constance was sent for. He had not been remiss—he had made her understand that she must go; and she had, as she invariably did, acceded immediately to a command taking the form of a request. "Oh dear, yes. He might depend on her. What fun to cheat Agatha!"

But nevertheless she was not quite sure whether more were intended than met the ear. He had said that possibly Jane, and certainly Hester, would come. Could it be Jane, then?

CHAPTER VIII.

WALKING APTEE THE OTTER-HOUNDS.

" Bind me, ye woodbines, in your twines;
 Curl me about, ye gadding vines ;
 Do you, O brambles, chain me too;
 And, courteous briars, nail me through."
 —MARVELL.

One point was clear—she was not going to put herself about for Hester.

She durst not play Jane false; but when a peep from behind her window-blind, as wheels were heard approaching by the Wancote entrance, assured her that it was only Hetty's black hat which surmounted the old wrapper, she laughed to herself, and popped back into bed again.

She thought that Simon had inclined to gratify Hester's whim out of the general wish to oblige which all now ascribed to him, and that he had no idea that such an act would annoy Agatha. But knowing Agatha as she did, Constance laughed long and heartily.

It diverted her to the last degree to think how, supposing there were nothing even but cousinly friendliness between the two, he must unwittingly have offended against it. And supposing there were, or were ever to be, anything more ?

It was very funny, and she enjoyed her joke all the more thoroughly that she could have her laugh out among the comfortable sheets, and had not to rise and dress for her *rdle* of duenna, one which was never to her taste, and which, under such circumstances, would have been doubly repugnant.

As for little Hester, why should the child not go and enjoy herself ? She was quite glad Hester should have the treat, and thought all the better of her for having shown spirit enough to brave her all-powerful sister, and come in

spite of her; But it would be sheer nonsense to trouble herself in the matter.

As to breaking faith with Simon, that was easily arranged. Her maid was sent down with apologies, and explanations that hei mistress had a headache, was unable to rise, and had begged not to be disturbed. If any of the ladies had come, she hoped they would kindly excuse her, and would not mind going without her.

Thus, at the expense of only a few "white lies/" which were not only fabricated in presence of the woman who knew them to be such, but were again palmed off by her, at her mistress's desire, on Colonel Lutteridge, Constance secured her morning.

Her only fear was lest Hester's heart should fail. Hester, she opined, was a shrewd little thing; and if she had come relying on the support and countenance of her cousin, she might, on receiving the excuse, draw back from the expedition also.

This would not do. She could not have Hester at home and have to practise headache all the morning. She wanted to be about, bustling hither and thither; had notes to write; a new riding-habit to try on; above all, a call to make, which could only be made that forenoon.

It was this call, more than anything beside, that had with her damned the otter-hunt from the first.

Constance, ever alive to self, had, immediately she found that it lay between paying a civility to Lady Westmacott and the minor affair of pleasing the girls, resolved on her course. Lady Westmacott, with whom she chose to fancy herself a favourite, and who, little aware of her real character, spoke of her as a charming creature, and accepted her attentions graciously, was about to leave England, and Constance's only opportunity of conveying to her certain information which might be useful on her travels was on this identical Wednesday. Lady Westmacott was to leave by the afternoon train.

On one point, however, justice must be done her.

She was regardless of truth, and careless as to her breach of faith, but she was not to blame concerning Hester personally; she was not putting her cousin into a position she would herself have shrunk from. She was not, as we know, particular; and if there was no harm in a thing—no positive, tangible, ostensible harm—she cared little for appearance*,

She would merely have forced herself to go with either of the other sisters because evasion would have been useless; they would have remained behind too. But she did not imagine that Hester would be so absurd—the idea was in her eyes simply absurd—and the event proved her to be right.

Hester never thought of it; and although she sought her eldest brother's eye immediately the message was received, she was prepared to combat scruples, not to suggest them.

Bertie was known to be scrupulous, and accordingly she half expected him to raise a difficulty. He did not.

"Constance not going?" was all he said. "Well, never mind, Het; you keep by me as long as you can, and then you can hang on to Jem."

"Nothing of the sort," said his cousin. "Hester shall be under my charge, and you two have your sport, and don't think more about her. Constance ought to have said so before," he added, his tone betraying annoyance. "I suppose there is no harm in her going, though?" aside to Bertie.

Bertie vowed there was not; again protested his intention of burdening himself with the care of her—at any rate, as long as he could—and had a comfortable certainty that when he should find her in the way, she would have her cousin to fall back upon.

"After all, people must please themselves," observed Simon, more cheerfully. "Now, Hester, do you see, I have got you to look after, and am responsible for delivering you up safe and sound at the end of the day. If you get tired, or think you have had enough of it, you have nothing to do but to tell me, and I will find means to send you home. Now, I suppose, we are all ready. I don't know when I have seen a finer day, Cotterill."

"Capital. Excellent. Now," said Cotterill, with a pleasant air of deference, "where would you like us to try first 1 Round the lake 1"

"Just where you please. They say the lake is as good a place as any. Are the dogs in front?"

They were waiting outside, some eight or ten couple of wiry, true-bred otter-hounds, clustering round the whip, and emitting little ejaculatory yelps of anticipation and pleasure,

"Nice-looking set, eh?" said Cotterill, eyeing them with pride.

He had not long been master, and was rather pleased with

his position, his pink suit, and his horn. They became him he thought, very well.

He was an airy little fellow, with a pale face, and a fragile form that gave no indications of the amount of work it was proved capable of going through.

"Nice-looking, eh? Don't you think so?" he said. "Hie, then—Scurry, Diver, Wanderer, Rally, Screech,—hie-up! hie-up! Whoo—oo—oo—oop!"

A crowd of people had collected in the background, armed with sticks, and eager for the sport. Every sort of rough fantastic garb was there, from the baggy, shapeless, but whole and decent suit of the farmer, to the keeper's cast-off velveteens, seeing their last days on the keeper's boy. All stood waiting for the move, and, after the usual delays, it began with a general skirmish round the lake.

Expectations were of course immediate, and false alarms rife even from the start.

"This is all foolery,¹* said young Manners to young Parker; "Cotterill knows that as well as we do. There are the whole lot off after a hare!"

Off they were, bustling, pushing, and jumping the underwood; back they all came again, no whit the wiser.

Another hare, and the same result.

Little groups trotted about, and posted themselves at different stations of presumable merit, the more ardent following closely behind the huntsman's "Yo-ho la! For—ard! for—ard!" and themselves stirring up the bushes on the banks. The wary, meanwhile, lit their pipes and bided their time.

To them even, however, there was in due course communicated a thrill of excitement. An otter had been seen, or it was thought it had been seen; it had taken to the water, and had swum to the island. The next intimation was that it had turned a point, and had entered the mouth of a slovenly streamlet which fed the lake from the upper end. Two distinct parties were formed, and both had seen the otter. It was plain that though Cotterill had an ear for all, he believed none. He listened, questioned, and shook his head, made a feint of pursuing up the streamlet, but would not be troubled to take boat for the island.

Meantime Hester walked and stood between her eldest brother and her cousin. So far, so long as nothing else allured him from her side, Bertie was quite attentive. Two

or three neighbouring squires were of their party, and they were occasionally joined by the master, but at this juncture she saw nothing of Jem. Jem was not needed, and accordingly was not there. With his unsightly cap well down over his ear, he was the life of the rabble, the leader of every forlorn hope, the discoverer of otters' heads in every blackened stump and stone.

"This is all very nice," said Lutteridge, waking up suddenly, "but it is not otter-hunting. Cotterill, let us take to the river."

Every one but he knew why Cotterill had not taken to the river long before,—that the master was but paying the compliment which was supposed due to the little lake in front of the Manor, in searching its banks, because once, years before, an otter had been killed there. Ever after, when hounds were in the neighbourhood, they were supposed to make a raid at some time or other on the lake; and going from Lutteridge itself, Cotterill imagined he could do no less than begin with it.

He now gave the recall joyously, and all made off to the river. They were to pursue up the other side, and it was this which had prevented carriages following, as there was no road near.

When they arrived at the boathouse they found the Wancote boats had been brought over to aid the transit, and it was accordingly soon effected. The boats were of fair size and well packed.

In the last were the master, the two elderly squires. Colonel Lutteridge, and Miss Manners. They pushed out into the cool misty flood, with the hounds frolicking round the stern; some of the younger ones attempting to lay their paws on the sides, while the older and calmer, disdaining such child's play, merely raised an eye from time to time to see that all was well, as they swam steadily behind.

"Are you still good for the walk?" inquired Cotterill, as he handed Hester out. "I presume we are in your own grounds now, would you——Down, sir! down! get down, I say!" to the hounds, who were now, with dripping coats, sprawling all over him in their affection. "Would you like to be rowed up a little way?" suggested the little man, kindly. "You could see a good deal, at least if you keep up with us, and there is a boat going. Only you will have to keep mid-stream."

She would not hear of it.

Accordingly off they all set up the river. At first with no more success than had attended their onset on the lake. A mile or so was passed, and there was still the same halting, indecision, uncertainty, and disappointment.

Suddenly breaks out one prolonged cry. "Boo—oo—oo—oo!" "Boo—oo—oo—oo!" goes another and another. At last every hound is in it. "By Jove, they are off at last!" cries Bertie Manners, and, throwing aside his cigar, he dashes to the front. Cotterill, in his excitement, is almost dancing there already; languid energies are revived, as if a new breath of life had been poured into them; all discontent is at an end, and every nerve is strained to keep up with the pace at which the hounds have now started.

Somewhere about the centre of the crowd Lutteridge hurried his charge along. To each of his steps she took one and a half, until at length, as in his eagerness the strides grew longer and longer, even that accompaniment proving impracticable, her dignity fairly gave way, and she broke into a run, or rather a series of short runs, with intervals of walking, during which she fell visibly behind.

Both were too full of the sport to think or care.

"How beautiful it is! How glorious it is!" broke out Hester once, when a sudden opening in front showed the scene along the banks of the smoothly-rolling stream, over which the mists were breaking in the sunlight. "Listen to that deep note! That is old Lottery, I am sure,—the one that followed us so—close—behind—the——"

"Don't talk, Hester. Save all your breath now."

She trotted along in silence.

"We are keeping up famously," said Simon, after some minutes, looking over his shoulder; "there are numbers behind. How are you holding out?"

"Oh, I have not begun to think of 'holding out' yet."

"Quick here!" said he, hustling her over a fence—he almost lifted her, but she did not notice it. "Now then, Hester, across the field. Do you see that point up there) If we make straight for it, and they don't find before we come up with them, we shall be in the very first ranks."¹¹

"I see."

"You are getting out of breath. You won't manage it, I fear"

"It is only—going—uphill."

Uphill, however, they must go; and although the pace was slackened, she was obliged, after another few minutes, to acknowledge that she could not keep it up.

"Don't wait for me. Go on—do go on. I won't be waited for."

"No one is waiting for you. You can walk as well as the best of us. There is really no hurry,"—philosophically surveying several who were now passing them on the way. "Let them go," said Simon, with excellent contempt. "They will only have to stand still afterwards!"

"No, they won't. Don't you see? Look below—they are gaining on us."

He came to a full stop. "I intend to remain here."

She looked thunderstruck.

"Here! We shall see nothing!—we shall be left behind altogether! ph, why here!" cried Hester, clasping her hands with mingled entreaty and despair.

"Where, then?"

"Anywhere but here. Rather up there at the wall;—but why should we stop at all?"

"True; we will go on, now that you are all right again."

She understood. It was on her account—it was out of sheer consideration for her—that he had tricked her thus into a halt. But how ill-timed was the kindness! What could it matter, she argued, now that her heart beat less violently, since she was going down-hill again with comparative ease,—what could it signify if she had been a little out of breath? And that minute's pause had cost them the loss of their position; they might be still fairly well up, but they could not head the little band below, as she had hoped to do.

In the heat of the moment, and in her mental strife between gratitude and indignation, all fear of Simon vanished.

She who had considered, on her first walk with him, that nothing would ever induce her to take a fence in his presence, now hopped over them like a bird, and her artless expressions of delight, when another short-cut enabled them, after all, to obtain the coveted post in the van, were unchecked by any doubts as to his sympathy. He was as proud as she.

The hounds were still giving tongue steadily—another half mile, another mile was passed, and at length some of the less sturdy were fain to lag behind.

Gradually the single huntress present felt herself dropping back also. She struggled bravely, would not own to weariness, and alleged that, were the pace a little less severe, she could hold out yet awhile. She could walk, but she could not run; and, unfortunately, many besides herself were obliged to take an occasional trot.

Again she begged to be left to take her chance. Cotterill assured everybody that it could not go on much longer; the otter was being repeatedly sighted, and at any moment the chase might cease.

Then they might return for her, affirmed Hester; or if not, there was old Mr Parker far behind, he was evidently not coming much further, she would fall back and keep in his company. To this even Jem yielded. He had walked with her on her other side, since the second cut across had brought her to the front, and had pushed her along by the elbow in a way that was excruciatingly uncomfortable, but which she could not induce him to believe she would be better without.

It was a relief when he ran on, suggesting that he would send back old Hutchin, their own old forester, to take Hester home, if she chose to leave off altogether. He would tell Hutchin to be in the way, and she could signal to him if he was wanted, at any moment.

"Never mind about Hester at all," bellowed back his cousin. "Run on, old fellow! Don't miss the death!"

"I am keeping you, now," said Hester, sadly. "It is a pity I came."

"Indeed it is not," said Simon, patting her shoulder kindly. "It is anything but a pity. You are the best little walker in the world, and ought not to have been left behind to-day, whoever was. Hester, I had no idea girls could walk like this."

"Like this! And I have spoilt all your sport!"

"Do I look as if you had spoilt my sport? I say! What's that! They are at fault! Upon my word they are! Don't hurry—take it easy—take it easy,—we shall be up with them after all."

"No; they are off again, harder than ever!"

"What a despairing voice! Hester, if you speak like that, I shall turn myself back into the ogre again!"

There had been a laugh over this, on the wet day at Wan* cote—over Jem and Hester's walk, which had frightened

them both out of their wits,—none of the older trio, of course, being supposed to have participated in their feelings.

He, too, had confessed. He had owned that he had not supposed his youngest cousin to be within three years of her age, and there had been a great jubilee of mirth over this at the poor little sister's expense. She had blushed afterwards at the recollection, being mortified, as was natural, and had resolved to show herself a very prude on every possible occasion.

But the feeling died away when alone with Simon; it was only in the presence of the others, under their smiles, that she resented the little fatherly airs which he almost from the first assumed towards her. Even when he went a step further she took it in good part, so long as they were by themselves: he might tease, provided no one were at hand to hear.

This exactly suited Simon, who hated to be heard. He had taken a liking to the little thing who was so easily moved to smiles and tears, who was merry, vexed, dignified, and babyish, all in half-a-dozen minutes.

He could not now let her dwell on the idea which was tormenting her—on the misery of feeling herself in the way.

"I say, Hester, what will Agatha think of all this?"

"Agatha? Why, what made you think of Agatha?"

"Because I have a great respect for Agatha. Constance tells me that she is a very remarkable person. And I have no doubt," slyly, "that she understands the art of keeping younger sisters in order."

"She does not always understand the art of finding them," said Hetty, with a joyful laugh. "Did Bertie tell you how we came away to-day?"

"No, but I guessed. You stole off while they were all asleep. Was that it? Fie, Hester. I think you must be a very naughty little girl! I would not have believed it of you, Hester. Now you have got your feet wet, and your clothes torn, and your hair disordered! Let me take a look at you. Yes, it is just as I thought. By this time, if you had stayed at home and had risen at a proper hour, you would have been sitting at your nursery breakfast——"

"With my pinafore on!"

"With your pinafore on. With your hair nicely brushed back behind your ears, and a blue ribbon tied round your waist. Then your nurse would have brought in a bowl of

warm bread-and-milk, and you would have had your own silver spoon given you to eat it with. You see I know all about it. That is what my other little niece is doing at this moment."

"I am not your niece."

"You are my cousin, are you? Oh!" a pause. "You are not quite so young as Ellen, then? How many years are there between you and her?"

"Nearly as many as between you and me."

"So? I am a sort of father to you then, am I?"

"A sort of father? Yes. Only a sort of father, mind. You are not to punish me, nor to scold me, nor to say 'No' to me, whatever I want."

"On those conditions you shall be a sort of child to me. You are not to be scolded, nor to be punished, nor to say 'No' to whatever I bid you."

Still the otter was not found.

The otter was there, beyond doubt, and on and on the pursuers went, but imperceptibly they had fallen into a steady march, and there was none of the wild enthusiasm of the outset. Another quarter of an hour went by. The dogs began to drop off, and to the unspeakable disgust of all, at length their music altogether ceased. The hunt came to a standstill, stragglers made their way down the banks, and up again, and heated faces and mud-girt figures gathered in general consternation.

Jem, wet to the waist, burst through the thicket, close to where his cousin and sister stood. Whatever it was to Dthers, it was a moment of triumph to her. She was there; many had fallen away, and there were others still to be seen in the distance, coming after, but far behind; but she had not given in. She could not but feel a glow of complacency, and the general disappointment scarcely extended to her breast.

"It is very vexatious," said Cotteriirs cheerful voice. "What do you think? Shall we try further, or go to the stream?"

"I should not go further, I think," said Colonel Lutteridge, to whom the appeal was made.

"The stream is always a good place," subjoined Jem.

"Anything you please. Shall I turn them, then? It seems a pity; they are still snuffing about. Suppose we wait a minute. I will go on, and see what our whip thinks."

"I say," said Bertie to his brother, aside, "how did we come to lose the brute?"

"Oh, he wasn't half pressed."

"Cotterill doesn't know his business. Parker is disgusted. Think of our going no harder than that: we have regularly crawled over the last half mile. Holloa!" shouted Bertie, suddenly. "They are off again! By Jove! HE'S HERE!!"

Both dashed forward, Lutteridge after them. There was a splash, a worry in the water, and the thing was done.

The otter had risen to the surface, and had been strangled almost before he had been seen. One good dog had done the job, as the rest were moving on to Cotterill's chirrup forward, and only the three cousins saw the end.

Great was Hester's relief to have it so: the boughs hid the scene from her, and as it had been the only part of the day she had secretly dreaded, she was well pleased to have it over.

The head and pads duly cut off, "Now then," said the master, with renewed spirit, "where next?"

"The stream," said Jem, in an undertone.

"The stream," said his brother, aloud.

No voice being raised in opposition, whatever may have been secret desires to the contrary, to the stream they all turned.

The walking was now rougher than any they had yet gone through. The brushwood was one thick tangle, and every attempt at a footpath lost itself in the surrounding woods.

Several who thought they had had enough, slipped away unperceived, and there were plenty of opportunities for Hester to have returned had she been so disposed. But her blood was up, and she scorned the idea. Go back now? No indeed. As long as they walked she would walk; none of them were inclined to go fast, and she was more fit for steady lengthy exertion than she had been an hour before.

Her cousin laughed and backed her up. She had been in at the death, he averred, and must not tarnish her reputation by fighting shy of the end of the hunt.

It must of necessity be short. The day was already far advanced, and little more could be done.

In another half hour, "Do you know how long we have been at it?" he cried. "Four hours and a half! What is Cotterill thinking of! Every otter is in its den and asleep by this time J"

"If you please, sir," said a groom, coming up, "we had orders to send the break and the waggonette to Barley Hill, in case Miss or any of the gentlemen would like to drive back. They are there now, sir."

"Ah! a good idea. Let the gentlemen know, Dick. *Miss' won't be sorry at all, I should say," giving her his hand over a ditch. "Poor little *Miss'! she has done her very best. Upon my word / am t%red. I am grateful to Constance. She has done the right thing this time."

But ere they could reach the carriages they were caught in a shower, and had to shelter in a deserted cottage half way down to the meeting-place.

"You were left rather in the lurch to-day, Hester?" said Simon, who had been wondering what she had thought about it. "Constance in sending the carriages wished to make some atonement to you, I suppose."

"Not to me. She would not think about me."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't suppose she would."

"Don't you think she treated you shabbily?"

"Well," said Hester, truthfully, "I think she did a little." Both knew how to interpret the headache, and made no pretence of belief in it. "But then, you know," added she, too happy not to be benevolent, "she would think it was only me. Of course I could not expect her to trouble herself about me."

"You think she would not?"

"I am sure she would not. She doesn't think anything of me, you know."

"Oh, you are mistaken. She told me the other day that you were the clever one of the family."

"Just what I hate to be called."

"What!" said Simon, opening his eyes.

"Clever! The very thing of all others it is most disagreeable to have put down to you. If there is an ugly duck in any family—one of whom nothing else can be put forward—she is sure to be called *clever.'"

"Then I suppose," said he, immensely amused, "that you are the ugly duck, or rather duckling. You are not quite a duck yet, Hester, though I own that you are growing. Let me see, I should not mind now people saying that I was clever. On the whole, I think it is a reputation that might be endured. Well, what now?" added he, quickly,

catching a sight of her face. "What is that quizzical look for? There is something passing through your mind which it would be more salutary than agreeable to my feelings to hear. Now then for it! Come, there is not a soul to tell, and I won't bring you into a scrape, I swear."

"Nonsense!"

"That was quite an Agatha's 'Nonsense!' That should have been said *to* Hester—not *by* Hester. But come, I must have the meaning of that look."

Whatever had been the meaning, it had vanished—nothing now remained of it; and in its place was a blush of confusion.

"I don't know——" Then she stopped. She could not with truth affirm that she did not know what he meant,

"You do not think me clever, eh?" said Simon, after a pause.

He was exactly right. It was a discovery which, when announced at home, had been received with derision; and, in consequence, Hester had made a stand by it. She had been sure, certain, pertinacious in adhering to her opinion that their new cousin was not the brilliant light the others took him for.

Clever or not, he had at any rate been quick enough in detecting something of the kind in her face, however, and he was not to be put off.

"Was that it?" said he, sticking to his point.

Still no reply.

"Oh, don't mind," with rather a forced laugh. "Pluck up heart and have it out, Hester. You don't think me clever enough to have ventured on such an observation?"

She was now crimson,

"Am I not clever?" said Simon, with mock piteousness.

"Well," he added, presently, seeing it was hopeless to expect an answer, "you have been hard upon me, I think. I merely said I could stand being *called* clever—observe, I laid not the slightest claim to being so; and if ever a little malicious fiend got up and looked out of a pair of eyes, one did at that moment out of yours, my cousin I"

PART 111.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN OOTTBILL DISCOVERS HESTER TO BE PRETTY

"A fair and meaning face, an eye of fire,
That checked the bold, and made the free retire."
—CRABBE.

THE carriages were duly found at Barley Hill, and were *by* no means an unwelcome sight even to the most vigorous of the otter-hunters.

Although Hester was handed inside by her cousin, instead of up to the box-seat beside him, as she had half expected to be, she was too tired and too happy to mind. Cotterill, who had entirely overlooked her on the previous evening, was astonished to find the face opposite him not only pretty, but brilliant with colour, and aglow with animation. He had admired the other sisters, Jane especially. Her quiet elegance struck him even more than Agatha's beauty. He had thought them both agreeable, but had not discovered until their departure that there was a third Miss Manners in the room; he had fancied the young lady in white belonged to another set of people.

On her first appearance the next morning she had been colourless and silent. It was only as she freshened with exercise, excitement, and the morning air, that he discovered she was worth looking at—found a resemblance between her and Jane.

To be sure she was smaller, rounder, more youthful, and less coy; she had not Jane's air nor her distinguishing grace, but she was pretty—she was perhaps, in the mere

countenance, handsomer than her sister. An opportunity for instituting a comparison occurred sooner than he had anticipated.

Collected in the bow-window, and smiling down upon them as they drove past to the door, were other ladies besides their hostess.

The two eldest Miss Manners' had driven over, in their pretty hats and pelisses, dainty from head to foot, and with a pleasant security of welcome in their faces.

This was the secret Constance had spoken of on the night before; this was the agreement which she and Agatha had entered into, but which none of the gentlemen were to be informed of. It was to be quite a novelty. Constance's suggestion that silence on the subject would not only protect them from farther importunity, but would also make a charming surprise when the other pleasures of the morning had gone by, had completely satisfied Agatha.

When, after all, Simon upset everything by his clumsiness, and told his sister-in-law that he and Bertie had made another arrangement, she was only half alarmed.

She thought she could reckon on Agatha, and her curiosity did riot do more than just rouse her to look out with momentary interest, when the carriage drove up by the Wancote entrance. Very few other neighbours came that way, and none were likely to have driven, since all the principal houses of the neighbourhood lay on the other side of Lutteridge.

When Hester alone was visible to the scrutiny of her cousin, Constance, as we know, had jumped back into bed with a laugh.

When, shortly after twelve, Agatha and Jane arrived, true to their appointment, she received them with open arms at the front door. She had made her call, and Lady Westmacott had been so kind, and so much obliged, and so entirely all that she had been expected to be, that Constance was quite in love with herself for the way she had managed. It was something to have pleased Lady Westmacott; it was nothing to have cheated Hester.

"I did just tell one little fib," she confided, as she slipped her arm through Agatha's, ascending the steps. "When Simon got quite teasing about my going I was obliged to call up a headache. I had promised you, had I not, dear t And we were sworn to secrecy, so I could not divulge **our**

plan. You would have thought me wicked, now wouldn't you, if you had heard I had gone off with them after all! Well, you know, he would take no denial; I suppose he had heard of my pedestrian feats, for he caught me on the stairs last night, and said I *must* go, and that some of you were certainly coming. Of course I said *yes/ to pacify the man, although I was *quite sure* he was mistaken. Then this morning I sent down an apology."

"But where is Hester?" inquired Agatha, evading giving her opinion of a line of conduct her conscience disapproved. "I suppose she stayed with you?" she added, a sudden dismay seizing her as she saw Hester nowhere. She had made sure either that both had gone or that both had stayed. When she saw Constance she was at once relieved on her sister's account, convinced that where one was the other would also be found. Surely, surely Constance could not have been so regardless of appearances as to send the child alone with the hunt.

Even Constance quailed for a moment before the eye turned upon her; but she rallied, resolved at least not to show that she had done so.

"Oh, we are all among friends/" she said, lightly. "Old Mr Parker will take care of Hester; and she has Bertie and Jem as well. Simon, too—dear old fellow—is as good as a dozen chaperons. She will come to no harm among them. I have been out myself often when I was the only lady, and every one knew how it was to-day."

Agatha said nothing; even Jane looked grave.

"If she had disliked going, you know/" continued Constance, shabbily diverting the blame from herself, "she could have come up to me."

"Did you send for her?"

"Oh no, I did not interfere. You see I did not know what to do, they were off in such a hurry, before I was half awake. It was all Simon's fault for being so stupid. You must speak to *him*, Agatha, if you think my uncle and aunt would be displeased. Perhaps it would be better not to say anything to them, or"—reading Agatha's feelings aright at the suggestion—"if that would be improper, just tell them that it was all a mistake. Perhaps I had better be the one to make the apologies. When do they come home?"

They were expected that evening. "Let me say how it was, then," cried Constance. "I would not have *you**

Agatha, blamed for the world. Simon and I—oh, and Bertie, for, after all, he was in the conspiracy too,—we must take each a share. We must not let it fall on the poor little naughty monkey's head alone, though we may administer a little private rebuke to her on our own account; now does that satisfy you?"

It could not satisfy, but it could silence.

Nothing could now exceed Constance's complaisance towards them; and when Ellen came in dressed for company, the sisters could talk to her, and endeavouring to forget what it was awkward for the time to remember, laugh themselves into good-humour before the carriages drove up.

It was hard upon Hester to have to appear at such a moment. Rosy and bright she could not but look; but in all else she did not certainly contrast well with the other ladies. Her hair had long ago escaped its bonds, and fell in long waving locks over her shoulders; her necktie was loose, her hat on one side, and her dress, which had been hastily let down to hide a muddy petticoat, only half did its office.

Constance, however, flew to her.

"You dear bad thing, what have you been about! Come, give an account of yourself. Captain Cotterill, we lay this at your door," wishing to draw him forward. "But I arraign Hester before the tribunal," taking her hand with a mock grimace. "Now Agatha and Jane, ye judges, what must be done to this offender, charged with high treason against your most august and righteous authority?"

"Lead the prisoner away, I should say," interposed a voice from behind.

"To what, most noble Colonel? Are you too sitting on this court-martial?" Constance wheeled about to face her brother-in-law, still holding the culprit fast. "I should have thought," she added, "that your place were fitter before the bar than on the bench."

"I humbly submit. Let us both depart, if not to bread and water, at least to water. Take her to your room, Constance," he added, aside, "and make her fit to appear before luncheon."

Accordingly a quarter of an hour elapsed before the party reassembled in the drawing-room.

A few pretty frills, and the deft fingers of a clever maid, had trimmed Hetty up, so that she no longer, even in Agatha's eyes, appeared unsightly; and as she stole quietly

in and began playing with Ellen in a corner, she did not for the present draw down the reprimand which she was well aware hung over her head.

When Simon came in, which was riot for some minutes after, he looked at the two for a moment, and made as if he would have advanced towards them, but stopped short with a laugh, and addressed Agatha.

"They make a nice little pair, don't they ?"

"Very."

"You and Jane must come to-morrow,"¹ continued her cousin, changing the subject. "If it is as fine a morning as this was, it will be delightful. And we will have luncheon brought with us, and make a day of it."

Her face brightened.

"What do you say, Cotterill ?" he went on. "How do you like the idea ? When the hunt is over, instead of returning here for luncheon, we will diive further on, as far as we can, and turn the expedition into a picnic."

"Charming !" said Cotterill, looking at Jane.

"What we had to-day was hardly fit for ladies," pursued he, confidentially. "It was uncommonly rough walking, but your sister stood it out magnificently. I hope she will not be the worse for her exertions. *You* were wise not to attempt it; it was too much for a lady—altogether too much. To-morrow, now—that is an excellent idea of Lutteridge's."

So all thought.

"We had a glorious start," continued Cotterill; "but we had one heavy shower, about an hour ago. By the way, Lutteridge, you had the best of it—you and Miss Manners finding such snug quarters in that old hut. I got drenched."

"Why did you not shelter there yourself, then ? You must have been close to us."

"Never saw you till it was over. We caught sight of you just as——"

"Now Agatha. That means luncheon. Will you come?"

The first roll of the gong had hardly made itself heard ere Simon offered his arm, and carried her off rather hastily, cutting short any further communications, whatever might have been their nature; but she observed nothing—only felt pleased to be led to the dining-room by him and seated at his right hand.

"What waterspouts you have about here," pursued Cotterill, seizing his opportunity, and following with his fair

companion close behind the other two. "There is a deluge about your ears before you know where you are. Seems to have been a good deal of rain about everywhere lately, though."¹

He had not got beyond the rain before he had found places for them at the table ; but by the time all were seated he had thought of something more to say.

"I don't suppose we shall have much snow this winter. They say these wet summers make wet winters. For my part, I like a wet winter; don't you?"

She assented—at least she thought she did; even the pliable Jane could not be quite sure on such a question without more argument to hold by, more reason given why she should now like what she had hitherto disliked.

"There's nothing to be done in snow," continued Cotterill, instructing her. "You can't hunt, or fish, or shoot, or anything in snow; and as for town, it is simply awful. Oh, there is nothing like a good open winter with lots of rain."

"He sticks to the rain," muttered Hester, who, having no one to talk to—no one at least who cared about being talked to—by her side, could afford to listen. "He finds something more to say about it after every pause. How can Jane look so pleased, so interested? How can she bend her head like that to a man who talks about nothing but rain!" Then the little critic turned the other way. "And if Simon talked to me and looked at me as he is talking to Agatha and looking at her now, I should like as little to have anything to do with him. What a mouth, what an eye he has! He looks as hard as flint and as stiff as a poker. So! you are looking at me now, Colonel Lutteridge! Pray, what may that look mean? You have not said a word to me since I came in; but don't suppose that I care for that. You may talk away to Agatha just as much as ever you like for me. What a wooden physiognomy ³ So that is the sort of face Agatha gets, is it?"

Apparently Agatha was content with the face.

She thought her cousin more pleasant and animated than she had ever before seen him. He was even talkative. True, every word he said might have been put into a trumpet and sounded aloud to the company, but then there was no need for it to have been anything else. She was not, like Hester, exacting. To be talked to, to be asked what she would have, to be given some account of the sport, and invited to parti-

cipate in it on the next occasion, was quite enough. She wanted no special looks, no suggestive undertones.

Such, if addressed to herself, would have been beyond her, had she overheard or seen them, when intended for another, her spirit would have recoiled.

Hester's frank give-and-take in conversation was a puzzle to her eldest sister. She could not see a jest herself, ere Hetty had responded to it, and flitted off to something else. She felt herself left behind—stranded, as it were, on some barren beach, while the fairy bark skimmed backwards and forwards over the sparkling wavelets; and in consequence, when at length she lumbered off, she bore down upon the little bark heavily at times. Hester, she said, chattered—was too free, too careless. It was all very well when they were alone—she was not disposed to be quarrelsome, like Bertie—but the line must be drawn somewhere, and for Hester's own sake she regarded it as part of her bounden duty to point out this line.

"How could you not even let us know?" she murmured, aside, luncheon being over; but her tone was certainly less arbitrary than might have been anticipated.

"I knew you would stop me," replied her sister.

"Of course I should. You ought never to have gone, but it was not your fault as much as Bertie's and Constance's."

"And Simon's."

"Simon's? No \ he had nothing to do with it."

"That he had, Agatha. It was he who asked for me, and I shall feel grateful to him all my life for it."

"Nonsense. I shall tell mamma that you were not to blame so much as——"

"Come, come!" cried Constance from behind. "We are not going to have lectures, curtain or no curtain. Come out from behind there, you two. I have undertaken to stand your friend, Hester: Agatha, you know, I told you so. I am going to drive you and Jane over by-and-by, in time to see the parents arrive and tell my own tale. We will let these wild otter-hunters out of the way first. Hetty, the carriage is at the door."

An arrangement so agreeable to her feelings could not but put the dominant sister into fresh good-humour; she stayed chatting in the drawing-room, watching the departures from the window, and ready to receive Colonel Lutteridge whenever he chose to return to her with becoming complacency.

He was some time in coming.

The hall was full of loungers—some seeking their hats and sticks, some making further appointments,—all filling up the room, and making ingress and egress alike a slow process.

"Look here, Hester," said her cousin, coming up to her, "what did you do with that stick I gave you to walk with?"

"It is up-stairs; I will fetch it."

"If I were to treat you as you deserve," said he, looking hard at her, and holding her by the arm at the same time, "I should let you go. But I won't be cruel—here is the stick; how comes it here?"

"I suppose you brought it down."

"There was no need to bring it down; it was never taken up. I found it lying on the floor in the drawing-room. That is the way you treat my presents."

She laughed and held out her hand.

"No; you will have to walk again to-morrow to regain it."

"Come along, Het. What have you lost? Your stick? That's it, isn't it?" said Bertie. "Look at mine; it is the best of the set. I say," to his cousin, "it's awfully good of you to give it me, you know."

"Take any you like," said Simon, coldly. "Will you leave it here, to be ready for you to-morrow?"

"No, no. Suppose some one else takes a fancy to it before to-morrow! Take my advice, and bring awciy yours too, Hester."

"It is not hers yet." Bertie had turned away, and this was for his sister only.

"And suppose, as he says, some one else takes a fancy to it in the meantime?" said she.

"I'll take care that they do not."

"Did he not give you yours after all?" cried Bertie, afterwards. "That was too bad. It was not much of a thing either."

"I am to get it to-morrow. Oh, I do hope to-morrow will be like to-day."

It was, and yet how different!

The morrow dawned, still, beautiful, and clear, but it was now Hester's turn to stay behind, nor participate in the joyous start

She was not, indeed, slumbering, her ears having been the first to catch the earliest sound in the house—the pattering of footsteps along the passages, stopping at her sister's door. Then the two came into her room, half exultant, half commiserating, feeling her disappointment, but still more sensible of their own good fortune. She was sitting up in bed waiting for them, very wide awake and miserable, but resolved that no one should know the half of what lay at the bottom of her heart. She sat up and eyed them over. Agatha, as usual, looked the best; she was in special good looks and good spirits, with so much superfluous good-humour, that she forebore to add more than the mildest infusion of "I told you so/* to her condolences.

"You know, Hester, you can go another time, and I dare say Captain Cotterill will be here again before long. You *must* be tired too, after such a walk. And it would really have been rather hard on poor papa and mamma to have left them alone the whole day long."

Poor little Cinderella ! I fear she did not feel all the dutiful pleasure she ought at being thus selected to solace them in their bereavement. I fear she raged in her despair and impotence. She had hardly been able to credit her hard fate on the previous night. It had been too terrible a sentence, too speedy a doom. Her mother, she thought, must relent; Bertie or Jem would intercede; her father would put in a word; something somehow—the last resort of the sanguine—would surely come to pass in her favour.

But Lady Manners, stern as Lady Macbeth on such a point, was inexorable.

She was seriously annoyed at what had happened, and like a wise woman, she said little, but acted. She did not make too much of a thoughtless prank, but she kept up her daughter's dignity, and at the same time inflicted a proper penance, by debarring her from joining in the next day's amusement.

"You chose to go in your own way, Hester, without leave from any one, and without so much as consulting your sisters. Had you said anything to them, they would have put the matter before you in its proper light, and you might now have gone happily all together. But I cannot allow any more of these wild, independent ways. You will stay at home, and that will show Constance also how much displeased I am."

Constance had not succeeded in making "all straight," as may thus be seen, and she had gone home somewhat smaller than she set out. "What a ridiculously strict woman Aunt Manners is," muttered she to herself. "She was angry. I had no idea she would have taken it up like that. Poor Hester ! What a sermon she will get to-night ! I am thankful I am not there to come in for a part. Although," she added, with a touch of humour, "I think I did not come off badly either. I think the edge of her wrath was blunted upon me. Upon my word, she can be disagreeable when she likes; I don't know anybody who has the gift of making herself more so. Even Agatha might take lessons."

But Constance having thus disposed of the matter, and joked about it at the dinner-table, was hardly prepared to see the carriage drive up the next morning without the little culprit.

"Oh, what a shame !" cried she. "Oh, Agatha, you need not make believe ! I know as well as possible how it was ! It really is too bad ! I have a great mind to send over and fetch her."

"Fetch whom ?" said Simon's voice behind. "Are you not all here ?"....

The same moment he saw who was missing, and even in that face, which never showed an emotion, there might have been seen the falling of a shadow by any one who had cared to look for it.

If people, however, are not looking for shadows they rarely find them; not one in a hundred has eyes to see what is printed in capital letters on his neighbour's brow.

Nobody was watching Colonel Lutteridge at the moment, and nobody saw his face fall. His voice could not have been less concerned than it was when he replied to Constance's "Hester is not come," by "Hester ? Oh, is Hester not here ?" as though scarcely even troubling himself to ask why. He did just inquire whether she had been over-tired, but receiving a simple negative from the truthful Agatha, he said no more.

Agatha assured her sister afterwards, that since she had been afraid of its being known why she had stayed, she might set her mind at rest on that score, as no one had asked. Constance, of course, knew; but all that Constance had clamoured into their ears on their arrival had been for them alone; she had had too much *savotr faire* to make a

remark on the subject afterwards. There had been a number of other ladies besides themselves, and since there were two from Wancote already, it was not likely that the absence of a third had been noticed.

It had been delightful. The day had been so much finer and warmer than the one before, that their cousin's idea of turning the expedition into a picnic had been quite successful. They had driven twelve miles through a fine open country, and had encamped by the side of a stream, and really if it had not been for the midges there would not have been a drawback to anything.

To her mother's investigations as to wet grass, and mists from the marshes, Agatha had nothing but satisfactory replies to give. They had had planks of newly-sawn wood, from a saw-mill close by, to sit upon; and rugs had been spread under their feet; and as for the mists, there were none rising till long after they had started on the homeward drive.

Captain Cotterill and Jane had stayed in the dogcart which had brought the provisions; it had been wheeled alongside of the luncheon-party, and Agatha smiled as she related that Constance had been evidently not a little put out at the best seat present not having been first offered to her. Coming home, she had had another disappointment: she had been prepared to drive the pair in the break, and Simon had stopped her.

A great deal was said about Simon, but Hester could not gather that he had said anything about her. It was for this her hungry heart was listening; for some kind slip of the tongue, some chance remark which should reveal she had been at least thought of. She had wearied through her day, keeping up as Best she could the farce of indifference. She had driven with her mother, and had had the usual sort of luncheon, and had gone to see a few poor people after it, but unutterably tame and dull had seemed the routine, which so often had sufficed her well.⁴

By five o'clock, however, things had brightened; there was something to look to—something to wait for in the return of the carriage.

From Agatha she hardly expected more than she goU Jane's memory appeared to be warped, or concentrated on one object. She tried Jem.

"You had by far the best of it," said he. "We neve?

saw an otter to-day. There was no fun at all; everybody was taken up with the women—Cotterill as bad as the rest. As a picnic it was well enough; but you never saw such a hunt in your life!"

He was the only discontented one of the set; but his repeated assurances that Hester had been better off at home did not go far towards making her think so. They were based solely on the fact of there having been no otter, and she cared not a jot whether such an animal existed or not.

Alone with Bertie, she ventured forth one other timid observation, to see what it would elicit.

"You might have got my stick for me."

"Your stick?" said he. "Well—if you had told me, but I never heard a word about it. It was stupid of you not to bring it home yesterday; I told you so. You will never see it again now."

"But Simon was to keep it for me."

"He will forget all about it. Look here, Hetty; I am going to carve my name on this. It is an awfully good stick. Feel it. Just the sort of stick I like. As soon as I set my eyes upon it I knew it was the one for me, but I was afraid to seem too anxious, in case he wanted it for himself. Now that he has given it to me I shall have my name on it, though, or I should soon have somebody smuggling it off."

There was nothing to be made of Bertie either.

CHAPTER X.

SIR JOHN DISCOURSES.

"A man's nature is best perceived in private ness, for there is no affectation in passion, for that putteth a man out of his precepts: and in a new case or enterprise, for there custom leaveth him."—BAOOV.

"It must have been a stupid sort of day!" said their father when he heard the accounts. "Just the sort of day I hate. What business had Constance there? I do think she might sometimes know to let people alone."¹

It was suggested in vain, that the expedition having been

specially got up and originated by Constance, she might perhaps find a better opportunity of letting people alone. He could not see it. Even his wife's observation, that in her opinion her niece was quite enough, not to say a great deal too much, inclined to take the course he advocated, did not alter his mind.

"I know she plagues me wherever I go," he said, "I never can take a quiet walk along the road but I must have those ponies down upon me. Wherever we go out to dinner, she is sure to be sitting on the sofa—the first person I catch sight of in the room. And there she is in church——"

"My dear!"

"She is. Well, of course I am not saying she ought not to go, but why can't she sometimes go of an afternoon when I am not there? Why need she always make her way up to the very top of the pew, right in front of me? That pink bonnet gets into my eye, whichever way I look. I call it vulgar—a bonnet like that."

"Poor Constance! And such a pretty bonnet too!"

"Humph! Do you call it pretty? I see nothing pretty in it. But whatever she puts on it is always the same—you see it till you are sick of the sight of it. Then she comes running up behind you, if you are trying to get out of her way, and it's 'Sir Joh—n! Sir Joh—n!' at the top of her squeaking voice, so that there is no pretending that you don't hear. But what I dislike most of all about Constance is that nasty little laugh of hers. She will talk the most egregious nonsense about things she knows nothing in the world about, and then laugh in a way that would make a saint swear. I think I gave her a settler yesterday, though. She began to me about this ridiculous otter-hunt—as if I did not know about otter-hunts before she was born! 'Do come to my hunt. I can't let you off coming to my hunt. Quite a ladies' day, I assure you.'¹ A ladies' day indeed!" with a bitter sneer. "I just said—very shortly indeed, I can tell you—'No, thank you; ladies' days are not at all in my line.'¹ She will think twice before she holds out that sort of bait to me again."¹

All was now plain.

He had never cared for otter-hunting, and to have his dislike attributed to the exertion it required, was hard on him, confident as he was that none of his physical powers were

yet on the wane, but aware that few would probably credit so much.

He had exaggerated the inducement which Constance had held out as an olive branch, intending it solely for her aunt's benefit, into a personal slight to his sportsmanship. The speaker had certainly been nervous, and not being quite so much herself as usual at the moment, she had not made it sufficiently clear that she was addressing Lady Manners alone.

But after all, in spite of the injustice of the accusation in the present instance, those before whom it was made were too well aware that it mattered not a whit to Sir John what he had to go upon when he was in the humour to attack his niece, to consider it worth while to explain, or defend her.

"What a nuisance she must be to Simon !" proceeded he, presently.

"I think she is, rather." Hester was the speaker; she was alone with her parents, engaged with her sketch-book.

"Eh ?" said Sir John, pricking up his ears. It was a wet morning, and he had nothing to do; he had brought his paper to read in his wife's sitting-room, and having come to an end of it, wished to talk.

"He is such a quiet man that I think she fidgets him."

"She would fidget any man."

"She makes so much of him," continued the observant one of the family. "She puts him forward with such an air of holding back herself, whenever anything is said about the Manor. She never can let a thing pass."

"No. That's it," said her father, delighted. "Catch her let a thing pass ! Do you hear that, Emily ? Do you hear what Hester says ? That was Constance to the life. She can never let a thing pass."

"She is certainly anything but well-mannered," said her aunt.

"Well-mannered ? No. But what can you expect ? She is not thorough-bred ; it is the garron coming out in her."

"To make a joke of Hester's doing what she well knew I should disapprove—and you too ; to come over here afterwards, and to try to laugh it off to my face ! Really, I never was so ill-pleased with Constance in my life as I was on Wednesday."

"Ah ! that touched *you* up. But after all, that was not so bad as inviting us to go ourselves because it was a——"

"I own I did wonder at Constance."

"Yes. I am sure I did."

"After seeing what I thought; and, indeed, she must have known before."

"Calling it a 'ladies' day'!"

"I thought her part in the affair the worst of any."

"The worst? But no one else said a word?"

"Hester was to blame, but"—softening—"Hester does not understand about such things, and she had Bertie's sanction. Another time, however, Hetty, recollect that though he is your eldest brother, and though I certainly own you had some grounds for supposing he might judge for you—since he usually has a strong sense of propriety—still, you must consult you sisters should such an emergency ever again arise. • Bertie has shown that he is not a safe guide in such matters. But as for Constance, she knew as well as any one: it was no ignorance on her part; it was not that she did not know; it was that she did not choose to care. Still, I can forgive her all the rest sooner than I can her coming over here, to beg Hester off, as she called it. As if my own child needed any 'begging off' by a stranger!"

"Mamma, she only meant to be kind."

"My dear, what was there kind in it? Am I such a terrible person that I need a mediator to come and propitiate me? Even if I am a tyrant——"

"Hut, Emily I who said you were a tyrant? I saw no harm in that part of the business. I suppose she thought Hetty would not speak up for herself. She does not know her, eh, Hetty? Well," continued he, "three miles is something; but I wish we had six between us and the Manor. I should not object to sixteen. What do you say, Hester? Sixteen would take us out of the reach of the ponies, I take it."

"Papa, how can you be so——"

"So what?"

"Unsociable; uncharitable. Why should you want to be out of the reach of everybody?"

"I don't want to be out of the reach of everybody; but I should like amazingly to be out of the reach of Constance. You are not going to stand up for her, surely?"

"I do not see that she does us any harm."

"Harm! Who talked about harm? People may be

great pests without doing you any harm. I hope and trust Simon will not take to coming over so often; but he has more sense."

"He has more to do, at least," said Lady Manners. "If Constance could only be got to occupy herself a little more in indoor pursuits, she would be much improved. It is that perpetual gadding from door to door that spoils what mind she has, frittering it away in gossip and idleness."

"Well, tell her so," said Sir John, deeply interested. "Just you tell her that, Emily, and see what she will say. It would do her a great deal of good—all the good in the world."

"She ought to be more with her little girl. There are a great many things that no mere nursery governess can teach, unless she happens to be a very exceptional one. I do not like Ellen being so entirely handed over to Miss Lane. Ellen is a delicate little thing, and I do not feel sure that Miss Lane understands her. I don't much care for Miss Lane; she appears to me to be too much engrossed in her own affairs. The child has not the attention she ought to have."

"Miss Lane is going away for a week on Monday," said Hester, who knew all the movements at Lutteridge. "Mamma, do let us have Ellen here, and let me look after her myself. I should like it so much," she continued, eagerly. "She would give no one any trouble—she is the best little creature in the world—and she could sleep in my room. May I, mamma?"

"Let me think a moment. Well, I don't see any objection, Hetty. Poor little thing!" Lady Manners was devoted to children. "It is really a good idea. I should like myself to have her. The change would do her good, and she shall at least have wholesome food, and plenty of it."

This had long been a burden on her mind. She could never forget having once visited the child in her nursery when suffering from some infantile ailment, and seeing her turn away in disgust from the dinner which the mother, engrossed with visitors below, had thoughtlessly sent up. Everybody at Wancote soon knew the dinner—the only proper dinner—which Ellen should have had; it was something to have the chance of bestowing it now, though late, upon her.

Visions of strong chicken-broth, good brown beef-tea, mutton-chops, and rice-puddings, rose before her kindling maternal eye, and she fell into Hester's plan with alacrity.

"I will write myself. Not that Constance deserves it; but, however, that may pass. She will be more inclined to agree if the proposal comes from me."

Constance was only too happy to accept what she looked upon as an overture of reconciliation. She did not suppose that Ellen's going or coming mattered very much to anybody; but there could be no objection. It pleased the child, and it was comfortable to feel that all was smooth again at Wancote. She wrote a grateful answer, and promised to bring the little visitor on Monday afternoon.

Saturday and Sunday passed without anything to mark them; and Monday morning opened with a fresh, blustering breeze, more like March than November.

The sisters were busy with their morning occupations, when, to their surprise, Constance in her pony-carriage, and without Ellen, drove past the window. Hester ran to take her to their mother, the others lingering to finish what they were doing ere they followed. She was not long in explaining what had happened, and what she wished next to happen. Ellen had caught a cold, or a chill, or something tiresome the night before; and though it was nothing to speak of,—nothing to interfere with Miss Lane's going away—in fact, she had just returned from seeing her to the station,—they had agreed that the child was not fit to go out on a visit.

"For my own part, I should have thought she might have come perfectly well," confided Constance the next minute. "She could not be in a better house; and in your hands, Aunt Manners, I should have known she would be well taken care of. I should have been quite easy about her. But Miss Lane impressed it on me—I believe she had not got the frocks and things ready, or something of that sort,—I daresay that was at the bottom of it; but still the child certainly has a cough, and perhaps she is as well at home. So I thought I would look in on my way back, and see if you would allow Hester to come to us instead of Ellen's coming here? We are to be quite alone, and J promise"—with a twinkle of her eye—"to keep her as strictly under orders as you could wish, aunt"

"It was not an out-of-the-way request; indeed it was

one so frequently made that unless any engagement actually stood in the way, permission could be reckoned on. Had it been otherwise—had there been anything new in the proposal—it may be questioned if Lady Manners's "Oh, certainly, my dear, if you wish it," would have come so readily. But Hester was often at Lutteridge, when Constance had no one else at hand—nothing better wherewith to entertain herself. She was then in her best moods—more rational, more sensible than at other times; and as the visits seemed to be spent in harmless occupations and amusements, no objection was ever offered to them.

Hester went thrice for once that either of her sisters did, partly because Constance liked her the best of the three, partly because she was willing to pass a good deal of her time with Ellen, so that the child would become a different creature under the genial influence,—would light up even at the sound of her cousin's name, and beg for her society, till the mother, who loved to be amused herself, and to be thought an indulgent parent at the same time, would make Ellen's desire the groundwork of nine invitations out of the ten.

Had Agatha been the one asked for, she would by no means have been so ready on the present occasion.

Had she had the slightest suspicion of the sudden thrill, the throb it sent through the veins of the quiet girl who stood by her side, she would have flung it from her, and trampled it under foot. But Hester's ready, cheerful "Oh yes, I'll come if mamma likes," betrayed nothing. Lady Manners saw no objection, Constance saw no delight, and the thing was done. Ere her sisters had come in to see what was going on, half her trunk was packed.

She was directing her maid as to the remainder when Agatha came to her room.

"Mamma thinks, Hester, that it is a pity for you to go."

"Why a pity? Mamma gave me leave."

"The Forsters are coming to-morrow, you know, and the Browns and Parkers dine here to meet them."

"I know. But what are the Browns and the Parkers to me? They are not coming to see me; nor the Forsters neither. Gertrude is your friend."

"I don't think mamma cares for you to go all by yourself to Lutteridge."

"All by myself! What can you mean, Agatha? I hare

gone by myself to Lutteridge whenever I have been asked, ever since we have lived here. Mamma never minds our going there."

"It is different now," said Agatha, looking out of the window. The maid had left the room for a minute.

"How different? Did mamma tell you to come to me?"

"No. But she said she had forgotten the party to-morrow. She could not well say more before Constance; and I think she would like to speak to you about it."

"What am I to do? Am I to go or not to go? I do wish mamma would not say one thing to you and another to me. However, I suppose I must go down."

"I am to put in these two evenings and this one morning dress, Miss 1" said the maid, as the young ladies were leaving the room. "And shall you want a bonnet?"

"Oh no - I shall be back before Sunday at any rate," said Hester, mournfully; "and I don't know that I am going at all now. You had better wait here till I come up to tell you, Price."

"I had better finish while I am about it, Miss Hester, and then it's no matter taking out the things again; but if they have to be got ready in a hurry afterwards, there's sure to be things forgotten."

"Well," acceded Hester; but she went down-stairs with a hopeless step, unlike the one with which she had flown up them; afterwards, however, she blessed Price in her heart.

A number of people were in the drawing-room, and it took a minute to discover that the unusual amount of talking was due to the presence of the bride, Mrs Martin, who was the centre of the group.

Mrs Martin had felt herself quite stirred up by the delightful day she had had on Thursday, and had come to propose another picnic, which she and Mr Martin wished to have in the Barley Hill woods.

Of Mr and Mrs Martin much need not be said. They were an eminently amiable, respectable, worthy, and dull young couple, who lived in a small domain of their own, with a household of trim maids, a coachman, a gardener, and a boy between the two to do the dirty work of each. They were greatly taken up with each other, but it is to be feared outsiders found them uninteresting. It is not, you know, of vital importance to you what hours your friend's husband has always been accustomed to keep, nor the exact

amount of exercise your friend herself finds she can take without being over-fatigued. These matters were samples of Mrs Martin's style of conversation. Unless she was gossiping, she prosed; and to do her justice, she prosed oftener than she gossiped. She was more concerned in her own affairs than she was in those of her neighbours.

But, after a fashion, Mrs Martin liked society too.

To sit up by her husband's side in their little phaeton, nicely dressed, with her card-case in her hand, and a round of morning calls before her, was her sum-total of earthly bliss. Dinner-parties were likewise to her taste, provided only that they were long enough, stiff enough, and stupid enough. At her own house she aped these to the best of her powers. Two had been already given, and, for a young couple but four months married, nothing could have been more creditable. The soup was eatable in spite of its pepper, and only the ducklings were so raw that they could not be cut on both sides.

She was now fired with a desire to emulate the impromptu picnic of the week before.

But this, Lady Manners thought, was carrying things too far : she had dined at Mr Martin's pretty cottage, and considered that in so doing she had fulfilled all that could possibly be required of her; she did think that it was not for such very young married people to be taking the lead in further entertainments. To tell the truth, an invitation from them at all had rather taken her by surprise: she had felt that she would be glad to see them both occasionally at Wancote, without any need for such hospitality being returned; and it was not without an inward protest that she had brought herself to bring Sir John on the above-named occasion.

A frolic on the part of Colonel Lutteridge and his sister was all well enough, but to have it taken up and imitated by Mr and Mrs Martin was really—really——! She drew herself up, and showed her "reallys" in her face.

The bride, who had come full of confidence, was not, however, to be easily daunted.

"We did enjoy ourselves so much," she said, with a pretty look at Mrs Robert Lutteridge, "that we thought everybody must have done the same. And it was my husband's idea. He said, *Why should we not have a day in Barley Hill woods?' So then I ordered the phaeton, and came off at once."

"Very kind," murmured Lady Manners. "But it is hardly the time of year—the woods are very damp."

"Oh, I assure you, we did so well on Thursday. Did we not, Mrs Lutteridge? None of us got in the least wet; and we could take plenty of rugs, and our waterproofs, and the carriage macintosh—we could manage perfectly, I am sure."

"I am afraid we must not make an engagement. We have guests coming to us to-morrow."

"Do bring them with you. Bring any one you like. We shall be delighted. Because, you know, it is not like an indoor thing—one has not to think about the room; and it does not matter about the day, for any day will suit us. If you will fix it," meaning to be especially polite, "then we can ask the other people. And our housekeeper will have the provisions ready; she only wants to know a day or two beforehand."

"Housekeeper!" muttered Lady Manners, who had tasted the very ordinary dinner of a very ordinary cook. She had tried to think well of Mrs Martin, but that "housekeeper" undid all.

"Summer is the time for expeditions," she said, decidedly.

"And you will really not come? I don't know what I shall say to Furnival. I answered for you, and he will be BO disappointed. We had arranged to have the fly from the turnpike, besides our own phaeton; I spoke to the man about it as I came through; I wanted to be sure that we could have the horse. And now——" She stopped consolately.

But pity was absent from the breasts of those around. Even Hetty, preoccupied with her own concerns, forgot them for the moment to smile; and Jem, when told afterwards of what the arrangement was to have been, exclaimed, "The horse with the wall eye! Lor*!"

Lady Manners was so taken up by her indignation, and her desire to restrain it within the bounds of moderation—between her feeling that the offender ought to be put down, and yet not utterly crushed—that Mrs Martin was paramount in her thoughts. She did not wish to say anything which in a calmer hour she would wish unsaid; at the same time she did not care to wait for any of the numerous smart replies which Sir John would be sure to coin for her when he came to hear they had been required—any one of **which**,

he would aver, she might have thought of at the time, if she had only had her wits about her.

Between letting Mrs Martin down gently, and making sure that she understood that her ways were not the ways of the Lutterridges and the Manners', she scarcely understood what Hester meant when at length Constance rose to go, and her wishes on the question of the proposed visit were consulted anew.

"Yes, my love," she said, rather bewildered. "I gave you leave. I thought you understood so."

"Agatha told me you had forgotten the party to-morrow, mamma."

"The party 1 Oh, I don't think you care much for dinner-parties, Hetty. Never mind the party, my dear."

"You are sure you don't mind my going, mamma?"

"Oh no, no; not for this once. Don't want to go often, and don't stay beyond Saturday, little one."

CHAPTER XL

CONSTANCE IS LISTENED TO.

¹ Discretion of speech *in* more than eloquence; and to speak agreeably to him with whom we have to deal, is more than to speak in good words, or in good order."—BACON.

Saturday ! She had only thought of Thursday—Friday at the very outside. It was almost incredible that she had caught the word aright: that she should be coming at all was wonderful—that she should see her little black box carried out to the carriage was delightful—but that she should have been given permission to remain till Saturday was too much to believe!

"How long am I to stay, Constance?"

"Only till Saturday. You are not to stay over Sunday, because of your school children, I believe. I asked for you till this day week, but I did not expect to have you. People always like to cut a slice off a petition before they say 'yes,' you know. Had I suggested Saturday, you would have had to go on Thursday."

"I never thought I should be allowed to stay beyond Thursday."

"* By the way, do you like to stay? I never thought of asking you that. We have no otter-hunts going on now, and not a single thing on hand for this week, except the concert at Seeley on Friday: that we have promised to go to, because our choir is to be part of the orchestra. There are to be no very great people, but there will be some lesser lights; and Lord Westmacott is coming to dine and sleep here, as he is alone at the Castle, and he is obliged to be present at the concert, at any rate. Are any of you going?"

"No. We had not heard of it; at least I had not."

"Just as well," pondered Constance. "And just as well, too, that I held my tongue. Simon ought to go, as Lord Westmacott goes, so I shall not want any more of the Manners party."

She and Hester were not sorry to get indoors.

The wind blew in their faces, and in spite of wraps, they could not get warm. Luncheon was more efficacious, but the afternoon was not tempting for further outdoor projects, and Hester was well pleased to get Ellen down and play with her beside the fire, while Constance lounged over her fancy-work, and warmed her feet on the fender.

Neither of them expected to see Simon till dinner-time, but soon, after five o'clock he came in, having got wet through, and been obliged to change his clothes for the evening. It was growing dusk, so it did not signify: he looked his best, Hester thought.

He did not manifest any particular surprise or pleasure at the sight of her; he gave her his polite, Agatha-like reception, asked if it had rained when they were out, and took Ellen on his knee. Nor did his cousin expect anything beyond this; she replied with becoming reserve, and took her seat on Constance's sofa.

Half an hour passed quietly, at the expiration of which a servant entered, announcing that a person—he would not commit himself further—a person from Seeley had come, by appointment, to see Mrs Robert Lutteridge.

« A person !" said Constance. « Who ? »

"I think he is a blind person, ma'am."

"Oh—my blind boy. Oh!" a pause. "Dear me!" cried she. "I wish he had come at any other time: I did

tell him to-day would do, but I had forgotten about it altogether. Could he not wait till after dinner—no, for the carrier is to drive him back—I know, I remember; he must be shown into the music-room, John. Give him something to eat, and let me know as soon as he has had it."

"What now, Constance?" said Simon.

"The blind boy in our choir—Malachi Tonkin is his name."

"Malachi Tonkin!"

"Yes, j funny, isn't it?" But you know him, for you noticed his voice once. I have undertaken to put him through his facings for the concert on Friday. Oh, is he ready so soon?" as the footman re-entered. "Won't he have anything? Well, I'll come. Have you taken in lights?" I must go, I suppose," with a sigh, as the last pretext for lingering was cut from beneath her feet. Lights had been already put in the room, and the boy was there awaiting her.

Scarcely had the first notes sounded through the folding-doors—for the music-room opened out of the little chamber in which the rest of the party were gathered—than Colonel Lutteridge rose, put Ellen down, and walked across the rug to the vacant place on the sofa.

"Hester," he said, "do you know who sent for you to come to-day? It was I. Nobody knows that—not even Constance; but with me rests the sole credit of the performance, notwithstanding. The idea was communicated from me to her, and from her to Ellen, and from Ellen to Wancote. I thought you had been in the corner long enough. Poor little girl! It was rather a big punishment for playing truant once in a way. Tell me, Hester, did you think a great deal about us the other day?"

"Oh, a great deal—a great deal; I knew Mr and Mrs Martin were going, and the girls from Wet Cliff, and a number of other nice people. I did envy you; I did wish to be with you."

"You would rather have gone out on the second day than on the first?"

"The second was the ladies' day, you know."

"Very true. You would have had a pleasant drive and a great deal of amusement. You would have had a nice corner of the large barouche beside Agatha and Mrs Martin. Mrs Martin looked very pretty in her hat; so did Agatha

I never saw Agatha look better. Thursday was a much finer day than Wednesday, Hester."

"Was it? I don't think it was. Not very much finer. Wednesday was fine enough."

"Oh no, it did not turn out nearly so well as we thought it would. Have you forgotten that long shower when we were in the old cottage?"

"No."

"There were no showers on Thursday."

"Well?"

"And there was no Hester on Thursday. Somehow I liked Wednesday best."

The blind boy's voice came rich and sweet through the half-closed doors, in the pause that followed. Little Ellen, attracted by the sound, ran off to listen, and the wood-fire blazed up and fell, emitting a flickering light that danced up and down over the old furniture, and into the wainscoted windows of the room cheerily.

"This reminds me," said Simon, presently, "of that first evening when Bertie brought me to your house after shooting, and I found an elf crouching in the corner, so shy and frightened that she could hardly lift up her voice to weep, much less her eyes to find the missing tea-cups."

"I was not more frightened than other people would have been."

"What people?"

"All of us. I think the rest of those at home are more afraid of you than I am. They think you are——"

"Clever, eh?"

She blushed crimson.

"Never mind," said Simon, laughing, "I am not going to tease you more than I can help to-night, Hester. You can stand a little, can't you? It is so nice having you here. By the way, what will Jem do without you for a whole week? He must not come over; I want you all to myself. Will he be very forlorn?"

"No indeed! Perhaps he may, though. He does not know I am gone yet—I mean, he did not when I came. I daresay he will miss me a little."

"Would he have tried to stop you?"

"Jem! Oh I"

"Pray, what may that 'Oh*' mean?"

"You don't know Jem if you can think such a thing. D

I had had any difficulty in coming, he would have been the one I would have gone to to help me, if I could have got at him. He would have been the one to speak to mamma for me; he would not have minded a pin's point about himself, so long as I got what I wanted. Nobody knows Jem—nobody understands him."

"Hike Jem."

"Jem 1" Hester lifted her head, and her eyes dilated as she turned them towards her cousin—"Jem is the best, and the nicest, and the—the—the—worth a dozen Berties," the panegyric broke off short. "None of the others love him as I do, unless it is mamma. But the rest think—I mean they see—they just see what they see in Jem—do you know what I mean 1"

"Not quite."

"It is often not the least what he feels, or what he wants, that Jem shows; and no one takes the trouble to find that out; and it does make me so angry sometimes, the way that Bertie behaves to him——" She stopped, with revelations on the tip of her tongue.

Simon was regarding her steadily, with his elbow resting on the back of the sofa, his head on his hand.

"Hester," he said, "you see this is very interesting. I like to hear about them all when you are sure you are telling me nothing that they would mind your saying, but—do you understand—one forgets a little, and things creep out that you neither mean to reveal nor I to listen to. See here, I have something else to talk about. None of you ever call me by my name. I suspected as much before, but now I am certain of it. Why don't you?"

"I am not sure. We did not think we ought."

"Because I am too old?"

Because he was too old] Surely not. Looking at the questioner it seemed an impossible solution. Nor was he now to them a stranger. They were a homely, easy, old-fashioned family, who had instantly admitted their kinsman to all the privileges he chose to claim.

In Simon himself lay the difficulty. Had he been a "Hail-fellow-well-met" sort of cousin, or an easy, slouching, good-natured cousin, or a dapper little cousin, or even a sober, middle-aged cousin, it might by this time have been got over by one and all.

But there was a barrier, or at least a something in Colonel

Lutteridge which made any attempt upon his Christian name seem like riding at a fence in the dark: it might be cleared safely, but the chances were equal the other way.

"No, you are not too old," said Hester, smiling, "but you are too—grave."

«Grave!"

"Yes. And perhaps a little stiff—a little awful," she added, archly deprecating his resentment by peeping from under her eyelids as the words dropped out

But to her surprise he replied with a seriousness and gentleness at variance with the scene.

"I can't help it, Hester. Do you know I would give anything in the world to shake off that absurd manner? It quite drags me down as I go on through life. You don't know how I envy fellows," he went on, earnestly, "when I see them chattering away quite at their ease, and see how much more pleasant it is for everybody to be with them than with me. When I speak to people I only make a fool of myself. If you knew how I hate my own pompous talk, and how I rack my brain to think of things to say!"

"Not with me."

"No; not with you. So you have found that out too, you little witch? I was just coming to that part; I can talk to you, Hester, like a rational being, and you don't mind a little nonsense either. That is to say, you are neither a child nor a—contemporary. We suit each other exactly. But there is not one person in a thousand with whom I can get on as well; and it is certainly my own fault. I know it," he added, with an evident sincerity and humility that showed her it would be useless to affect any pretence of believing the contrary. "I am perfectly well aware of my deficiencies, but I am hopeless now of overcoming them. I don't know why I speak about myself either, except that it is a relief, just once in a way; and I thought that it was barely possible you would give me a grain—a crumb of the sympathy you bestow so abundantly on Jem."

"Oh!" said Hester, with a little smile. "You do wonderfully well. If you were only Jem, you know, or me, it might not be taken to mean so much; but they all think that whatever you say must be good. I heard mamma this morning declare that she really did not know what you would have thought of something or other; and papa holds you over the boys' head——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Simon leaned back on the sofa and laughed outright.

Then he resumed, laying his head again on his hand, and gazing into her face thoughtfully. "You would not have told me that if you had not seen it was a farce? I hope you don't shed the rays of your intelligence on all around, though? I hope you are not a cruel little thing even to such an idiot as I!"

"No, indeed."

"I am an idiot, am I?"

"You can call yourself so if you like."

"Constance thinks me a profound philosopher," he said, "and all the others respect me more or less, except this chit of a girl, and she thinks nothing of me at all! Well, chit," added he, rising up, "it is time for you to go to dress. I hear Constance ushering forth her victim, so it is meet that I should release mine. We shall have other opportunities of renewing this vexed question."

When Constance came in she found Simon alone, sunk in reverie.

Where was Hester? Gone up-stairs. Ellen? He did not know; probably gone up-stairs too.

He had then to hear about the blind boy, how well he had done, and how much was predicted of him. Constance thought his voice even better than she had expected it to be. It might, to be sure, have been the room—Agatha always liked to sing in that room—but even, making all allowances, she was charmed with the performance, and with herself for the part she had taken in it.

"Sometimes we sit there in the evenings, when we have musical people here," observed Constance, further. "Agatha always begs for an adjournment; but I am not such a devotee, and, to own the truth, I do not care to go out of my way for any reward Agatha's songs are likely to give. I had rather hear Hetty singing hymns to Ellen a great deal. Hetty does not set up to sing, but she has a nice clear little pipe, and makes no pretence."

"Ah!" said Simon. "I thought Agatha was a great musician," he added, after a little.

"What do you think yourself? You have heard her!"

"I am no judge."

"Neither am I; but I know good from bad. Really that blind Malachi's voice rings in my ears,"

"Yes. I liked it. We heard it in here as loud and sweet as a blackbird's. But then you know that is not the way young ladies sing."

"Would it were!" with a mock sigh, and a sharp glance at him.

"There was a fellow in our regiment," he continued, absently—"I never heard a fellow sing like him. He used to go at it for hours, and be as fresh at the end as he was at the beginning. We set him up to sing every night."

"Indeed!"

"That was the way to hear music. Just to sit in your chair and listen, without having to say anything. All the pleasure of hearing is taken away when you have to force out a compliment at the end of every song."

"Just what I think. We will make Hetty give us some of her little ballads to-night—they are really very nice; and you and I will sit in the great chairs by the fire, and tell her to go on till further orders."

"And some hymns to end with?"

"She won't sing those unless Ellen is by. But what do you say? Shall it be as I have said? Shall we inhabit the music-room to-night? It must be wanted first if we do."

He made no objection, and the order was given; but both Constance and Hester sang long for their own edification alone.

"What a Goth he is!" cried the former as ten o'clock struck. "He always stays in the dining-room half the evening, and what he does there I cannot imagine, for he takes very little wine. You must not be affronted, Hester; it is no special disrespect to you; he always does it. Ah! here he is at last," she exclaimed, as the door opened to admit her brother-in-law; "and though it is at last, Simon, still it is better late than never. Now what have you to say to Hester for treating her in this way?"

"Only this, that I would have come before, if I could."

"Explain."

"Lewis has been with me ever since you went."

"Too bad of him. Why could he not have left you in peace till to-morrow morning?"

"He is obliged to go to town to-morrow morning. Well, Hester," turning to her, "Constance has bespoken you for our evening's entertainment. She has promised that you

will sing for us straight on, till you are told to stop without expecting either money or thanks."

"Yes," subjoined Constance, comfortably settling down opposite him, as he drew one large chair forward to the side of the fire, "I answered for you, Hetty. Now begin."

The singing was not much, but it was all that it had been called: it was natural, unaffected, and tuneful; not worth moving out of one's way to hear, but pleasant when brought to one's own door.

At the close, Simon surprised the other two. He had been lying back in his chair, looking up into the dim, half-lit ceiling, with his arms folded and feet stretched out. So silent, and so motionless, that from time to time he was looked at to be sure whether he was awake or slumbering; but when the piano was closed, and his cousin drew near the fire, he turned his head and addressed her. "Thank you, Hester," he said, emphatically. "This," he added, "has been the pleasantest evening I have spent since I came home."

Constance's noisy laugh brought a flush to the singer's cheek. "Now, Simon," cried the gay lady, "you who bargained you were to pay no compliments, what do you call that?" Hester may well be proud of such a tribute. And you were really not asleep either. I know he was not, Hetty, for I kept watch and ward all the time."

"Did you notice him?" she whispered afterwards. "Did you see what he was like, as he lay back in his chair, with his eyes half-shut and his arms folded? It was the dead Napoleon—Delaroche's picture. I have seen Simon often look like that. By the way, you little creature, it was you who first told me of it. Well, never mind—I am sure you never can have seen him look half so like before; for it is only when he is alone with me, and at rest, that that look comes over his face."

Now why should Hester turn away from such a speech in disgust? Why should her cousin Constance all at once become distasteful to her in a variety of ways?

Within the next few days the young girl seemed to make a leap forward in discoveries which at another time might have been the work of years. She understood, as if by magic, motives and springs of action that would have been overlooked but a week or two before—things which had

puzried her, and made her frequently in her secret heart call her mother uncharitable. For Lady Manners, not desirous of enlightening too much, had often felt herself obliged to condemn vaguely; and when pressed by the vigorous young ones for reasons, had known that those which she alone cared to give were unsatisfactory. She did not like to say to her young daughters, "Your cousin is a shallow, petty-minded, unprincipled woman;" she preferred such phrases as "Constance is not all that I could wish," or "I should be sorry to see you grow up like Constance," and left them to make further conclusions themselves. She would not permit unrestrained intimacy, but the claims of relationship were strong, and she could not but allow that it might be her duty to give countenance to a young widow, beautiful and high-spirited, who was living within a few miles of their own door, and who, with the exception of herself, had absolutely no one either to restrain or to support her.

Neither Agatha nor Jane betrayed their mother's confidence ; they were good friends with their cousin, but were not influenced by her. For Agatha, Constance had never professed much affection, and with Jane she had still less in common; Jane, she said, was too saintly for anything. But she took an early fancy to Hester, who was funny and clever, and not particularly good-looking: she liked to single Hetty out, and make much of her, while she was yet only a little roundabout school-girl, and had been wont to insist upon it that the youngest of the sisters was the "favourite," who would win in the long-run.

Not that she thought it, but she thought that it teased Agatha to have it said. She began to be rather astonished herself when ripening years not only moulded the youthful form into better shape, but softened the complexion, and retouched every feature. Hester now began to be called "pretty,"—to be admired, not only talked to \ and although Constance's prognostications were not likely ever to be fulfilled, they were so much nearer being so than they had formerly been, that she ceased to make them.

But if she was surprised, she was not on the whole displeased. She had no jealousy of the younger ones, such as made her enjoy a secret cut at the eldest. In Hester's countenance there never was, and never would be, any of that calm superiority which fretted Constance, and which

made her feel that she was looked upon by Agatha as frivolous, if not absolutely untutored. She suspected herself disapproved even by the gentle Jane; but there was a breadth of vision, a lurking *diablerie*, about Hester, which made her cousin easy about her opinion.

"I don't understand that child," she said once to Simon. It was on the Sunday evening previous to her inviting Hester to Lutteridge. "She is a puzzle to me. She has been nowhere, and seen nobody; but while her sisters are the veriest prudes—regular old maids—Hester is a woman of the world."

"Well?" said Simon, with interest, "How do you account for it?"

"She is clever, you know, but that is not all. She is original; she is daring; she is not to be put down and cut and trimmed, and made to think just what everybody thinks, and do just what everybody does. I liked her running off here with the boys that morning. How she must have enjoyed it! For you see, Simon, those girls are as entirely under orders as any of the men in your regiment. It is nonsense to talk of the freedom and independence of English girls of a certain rank. The good old-fashioned fathers and mothers never loosen their grip till they hand over the daughter to her husband; and neither do the fashionable people, though for a different reason. Hester may think for herself as much as she like, but she won't act for herself again in a hurry."

"Bertie and Jem were on her side, you know."

"Jem's consternation when he found himself implicated in the sinful deed was delightful. He was as innocent as a baby of all the machinations. If he had suspected what Bertie very well knew—that he was bringing Hester to grief with her mother—we should never have had her here. He thought she was only giving Agatha the slip."

"And he would have put her off?"

"He can do anything with her—and, upon my word, I don't wonder at her fondness for him. He is worth all the rest of the family put together. But, you know, he is not bright; he is, if anything, rather below par. Bertie is supposed to have the brains; but I don't think Bertie's are in any way remarkable—do you?"

"How comes it," said Simon, pursuing his own thoughts, "that Jem should have the influence you say he has with

Hester, when she has so much the better head of the
fcwof

"Oh," said Constance, with a passing tribute of sincerity, "Jem is a wonderfully good boy. I don't wish to say a word against him. I quite agree with Hester; he is—let me see, I think the word I want is, *honest* Jem, in a world of shams, is actually and absolutely honest. There now, is that not something to say?"

"Go on. I want to hear more."

"If you ask for his opinion, he tells you straight off what he really thinks, without stopping, as you know we all do a little, whether consciously or unconsciously, to consider if we shall say it or not. If he offers to give up a thing, he means to do as he says—not to be prevented and reasoned with, and given credit for unselfishness, while all the time nothing has been done to deserve it. And then the presents he gives! I don't suppose he ever buys a thing for himself! And all the time he is so natural, and foolish, and shabby, and happy, that he is not the least one's ideal of a religious youth."

"You are good at descriptions, Constance."

"Oh," said she, elated at praise seldom bestowed, as well as at a degree of interest her conversation did not often elicit, "I had a good subject in Jem. Ask me about Bertie and I should have nothing to say."

Accordingly he did not ask.

"He is the ordinary, commonplace, good-looking young man," she went on, however. "He thinks an immense deal of himself, and is to the full as great a prig as either of his sisters. I cannot understand his bringing Hester here on Wednesday, unless it was to spite Agatha. He is jealous of her rival authority in the family. He wanted to please you too, I daresay."

"Why to please me?"

"You are a great man to him. He never neglects a chance of gaining favour with great people."

"You are severe, but I agree with you in your estimates. I don't much care for Bertie, and I like Jem. I like Hester too. Since you say Ellen is not to go there to-morrow, let Hester come here."

"Or one of the others?"

"Why one of the others? The child would rather have Hester.*"

" So she would. Agatha certainly would not play with her, and Jane is not amusing—not the one to stir her up and make her bright and lively/

"No. Not the one."

"I shall not ask either of them, then. I shall confine my invitation to Hester.¹

"I should."

And thus, as he afterwards averred, the proposal had actually emanated in the first instance from him.

CHAPTER XII.

"'TIS ILL CLAYING WITH EDGE-TOOLS."

" Hearts are not flint, and flints are rent*
Hearts are not steel, and steel is bent"
—SCOTT.

Hester's eyes would have been opened long before with regard to Constance had she not been blinded on the subject by the constant partiality shown and, as we have seen, sincerely felt for her by her cousin. It is hardly to be wondered at that a girl not yet eighteen, who, as Constance herself said, had been nowhere and seen nobody, should have been unconsciously bound and bewildered by this. She was not duped to any extent, did not vow a life-long devotion in return for caresses; but much that would not have been tolerated in another was endurable in Constance.

But if a charitable veil had hitherto been cast over all defects at the Manor, everything connected with it was now seen through a glamour—a roseate mist.

True, Constance had never appeared to less advantage, but what was Constance to Hester when Simon was by!

He was a good deal at home during her stay—not often visible, it is true, not giving them his company for long at a time, but surprising them by appearances at odd hours, by coming straight indoors direct to the sitting-room after riding or shooting, and by lingering after meals, instead of cutting them short, as Constance told Hester was his habit

"Neither of us care to sit long at table," she said.

Bat Hester could not help noticing that the move wa* made again and again by her ere he took it up. He was by no means so unsociable as she made out, and there was but one inference to be drawn—the society of his sister-in-law was not what he cared for.

Coming upon him one day in the hall, she applied for her stick. It was not hers, she was told; she had forfeited all claim to it, and it was only to be regained by taking another walk—a walk of at least five miles in length—with him and Jem, in memory of their first expedition, and in expiation of their confessed shortcomings on the occasion. Various other small articles, however—pretty ivory and sandal-wood toys—found their way to her room up-stairs, and were treasured (or more than their intrinsic value. In spite of its being "dull November/" there were rides and drives, and pleasant evenings in the music-room,—and altogether the time passed only too quickly. %

Ellen's "Only two days more of Hester," and at last, he* "Only one day more of Hester," was mournfully echoed in Hester's own bosom.

Never mind; she was not going to spoil that one day at least.

After all, even when she should have to leave dear delightful Lutteridge, she was but going three miles off,—was but removed by one mile when the river could be crossed; and at any time she could come over, or they (Simon and Constance were bracketed even in her inward communings at this time) could come to Wancote. Of course she had enjoyed her visit—she had been very happy, she frankly owned, and would certainly come again whenever she was wanted; and then she ran up-stairs singing.

"Is she not a jolly little thing?" said Constance. "I wish Aunt Manners were not such a disciplinarian, and I would keep Hester another week."

"Can you not?"

She shook her head.

This was on Friday, the day of the concert, and also the day when the Quarter - Sessions took Colonel Lutteridge away immediately after breakfast, not to return till late in the afternoon.

Constance and Hester busied themselves after lunch in the old schoolroom—a long low apartment down in the bowels of the house, cut off from the more inhabited por-

tion by an interminable passage out of which opened the billiard-room, the smoking-room, the butler's sanctum, and chambers of that kind.

The schoolroom, thus inconveniently situated in some respects, was, however, for one purpose, the best place in the world. It opened by a large glass door into the conservatory—having been originally intended for the drawing-room, until a more commodious saloon was built in the new wing of the house—and, accordingly, when arrangements of flowers were wanted, nothing was more handy than to have the vases and glasses carried in there, and trim them, as it were, upon the spot on which they were gathered.

The afternoon was fine, and the two ladies, with scissors in their hands, exacted unsparing tribute, not only from the plants under cover, but from such as had not suffered from the autumnal rain and wind without. They were themselves surprised at the goodly array they were able to muster, when at length the final round had been made, and, ferns and leaves having been added from the stove, they proceeded to deck the glasses. These were to be numerous.

Constance had been not a little gratified by the prospective addition of Lord Westmacott to her party for the evening. He was the principal person of importance in the next district, not near enough to overshadow the Lutteridges or the Manners', yet sufficiently close to make it agreeable and desirable that the terms of intimacy they were upon with each other should be exhibited in public. He was also a guest whom everybody liked to have, irrespective of the honour bestowed by his presence; a stout, talkative, unaffected, and amiable peer, not much of a sportsman, and still less of a scholar. And then he was a professed admirer of Mrs Robert Lutteridge, with whom he danced a great deal at county balls, and who had always her smile and her jest ready for him. When he was at her right hand he did not, like Sir John, complain of her talking. He thought her remarkably talented and agreeable, and finding that he could amuse so fine a woman, invariably put him into the best humour possible, both with her and himself.

Being *en garçon* at the Castle, he accepted the invitation to Lutteridge with alacrity. It was shockingly dull, he wrote—the country was positively unendurable in wet weather, and it was only too kind of Mrs Lutteridge to ~~take~~ pity on a lonely man. He must have gone to the

concert at any rate, but her charming proposal had converted the penance into a pleasure.

Since he was thus coming prepared for enjoyment, she took care that nothing should be wanting which could even in the smallest measure contribute to it. She ordered a dinner of dainties, roaring fires in all the rooms, the large close carriage for the drive, and a nice little supper to be ready for them on their return. Dine they must at the unearthly hour of six, and as they could not be expected home until after ten, they would certainly want supper. After all, just for once, such an odd jumble of meals was not disagreeable. There is nothing to do in the country after dark, and it is dark by six in November. Constance only hoped that Lord Westmacott would mind the arrangement as little as she did.

He was expected in time to dress and no more—would return with Simon, since both were attending the Sessions; and accordingly, at four o'clock the fair flower-gatherers, having collected their materials, set to work with a clear hour and a half before them.

They were in frisky and volatile spirits. Hester snatched from Constance the large blossom designed for the centre-piece, and Constance snatched it back. Hester spilt the water—Constance broke a glass. At each misfortune they only laughed.

All their prattle ran on the evening before them.

"Lord Westmacott sits in front with me," said Constance. "I must tell you, Hetty, that our four seats are all together—two in front and two behind. You and Simon will take the two behind; because, you see, Lord Westmacott ought to be seen. I think the Lys Castle people will be rather astonished to see Lord Westmacott with us! I daresay they will not expect that. And we have always such fun together."

"Yes; I daresay. If you laugh too much I shall give you a pinch, or a prick with this pin."

"Hester! You really—you must take care, you know! If you were to do anything of that sort it would be dreadful! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, I shall take very good care. I shall choose my own time. In the middle of Madame—what's her name? Giggles's finest wriggle—and I shall just pull that little curl on your neck."

"Oh, if you dare!" cried Constance, not in the least alarmed. "Oh, you wicked child! But I know you would not dare. Imagine Lord Westmacott's feelings!"

"Lord Westmacott's feelings!"

"Simon, then. What would he think?"

"Simon!" Hester was on her guard in a moment. "Ho I who cares what he thinks?"

"* Don't be so contemptuous. I care a great deal"

"¹ Do you, indeed?"

"* He would be horrified."

"Delightful! Let us horrify him."

"* You are a mischievous monkey. Hester, if you don't behave properly I shall tell Agatha, and all the rest of them; I won't have poor dear Simon vexed."

"Poor dear Simon!" cried Hester, mimicking. "Poor dear cockatoo! Look here, Constance, I'll show you exactly what he would look like," letting fall her scissors, folding her arms, and dropping her head on one side. "Now, look—stop that for a moment, and listen. * Constance, I am shocked at the behaviour of that child. I don't know much about such things, but all the girls that I have ever had to do with have known how to conduct themselves in public. I am really—hum—ah—distressed at such an exhibition; it has annoyed me beyond measure.' Then down go the corners of his mouth—no more to be got out of *them*—up goes the chin—back as straight as a board. Behold 'poor dear Simon' to the life!"

"Yes,"¹ said a gentle voice from the conservatory. "Yes, Hester—to the life!"

He stood there to verify the portrait, in the very attitude she had assumed; how long he had preserved it was unknown.

Possibly but a minute. That last phrase, then, had revealed to him the meaning of all that had preceded it. Had his own name not been distinctly caught he might never have known of whom she had been speaking—he might not have discovered that any one was being represented—might have supposed anything but the truth.

But vain now was it to wish the words unspoken.

She had been caught in the act, drawn up to her full height, with pursed lips and crossed arms, and the next moment had been audibly uttered, "Behold poor dear Simon to the life!"

One scarlet cheek was turned towards him, and like a flash Hester had gone.

Constance shrieked with laughter. "Oh dear! How amusing! How very good! And you were there all the time, you cruel man? Well, you know, there is but one thing to be said—the old consolation—'Listeners never hear any good of themselves.'"

He came into the room.

"Was it not well done?" continued Constance, doing honestly her best for the culprit. "Did she not look *m engaging little soul, making that funny little face to imitate yours 1 You must not be offended with her, Simon. It was ail in the merest joke. We were laughing together, she and I, over Lord Westmacott and all sorts of people, and I told her that if she ran wild and did not behave properly at the concert to-night that I did not know what you and Lord Westmacott wotild think. Then we began laughing about Lord Westmacott."

"And imitating him."

"Yes; I daresay we did. Hester can, I know. I have often seen her take him off admirably."

"But to-day I was the favoured one?"

"Oh, don't be stupid about it," said she, trying to coax.

"Dear Simon, the child meant no harm. She is as full of tricks as a monkey. No one ever minds what Hester does. It was merely because I held you up as a bugbear that she turned round upon me, to show that she was not to be overawed."

"I think she ought to apologise."

"Well, of course. That is, if you wish it. Bat you must not look at her in that horribly stern, severe way. She is sorry enough by this time, I am sure. I daresay she is in a great state of mind. And she has left me to do all these flowers, too! Silly child! what good did it do to run away?"

He said nothing, and she ran on. "May I not tell Hester that you will forgive and forget, Simon? You don't want to take the spirit out of her, and spoil her last evening, do you?"

"I think she ought to beg my pardon."

"But—well—you see it is rather awkward. She is a grown-up young lady, though we have not come to realise it yefc—it is hardly pleasant, hardly the thing—but to be save

you are cousins; you must manage it your own way. Suppose I tell her that I have interceded on her behalf, and that you will not think any more about it?"

"By no means; that will not do."

"It will make us so uncomfortable for to-night," murmured Constance. "I think you might look it over just for this once—just to please me." No answer. "What] Lord Westmacott come already," she exclaimed, in accents of vexation, as a footman, opening the door, announced that "his lordship was in the drawing-room."¹¹ "Already?" added she, the bouquet falling from her fingers.

"He came with me," said Colonel Lutteridge. "I came down here to tell you so."

"But why did you not say so before? And why did you both come so early? I had forgotten all that. We did not expect you for another hour."

"We got off earlier than we had thought we should."

"And he has been here all this time! Why did none of the servants let me know? But I must go to him, of course; and, Simon," with a little hesitation, "pray don't make yourself disagreeable—3 mean," correcting herself, "don't make us uncomfortable. Remember, Lord Westmacott has never been here with you before; and as to Hester, what does it matter?"

"Send her here, then."

"Here! Just now? Are you not coming to the drawing-room?"

"Not till I have seen Hester."

"Well, I will send her. But, Simon, Lord Westmacott will expect you to be with him."

"On the contrary, Constance, he would far rather have you. I have been with him all day."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense!" placably, however.

"I shall come up by-and-by," pursued her brother-in-law; "but I mean to speak to Hester first, so unless you send her you need not expect to see me up-stairs."

"How tiresome of him to come. But I suppose the poor man had nothing else to do. Don't be cross with Hester, Simon; and will you ask her to finish these two glasses, and to make them look like those others? They are all one set. I shall tell her you are very angry; but I hope you will think better of it before she comes."

She nodded and left the room; but it seemed an age before

fore Hester appeared. He almost thought she was going to disobey, and was afraid that he had overdone it with his messenger. Suppose Constance had drawn too grim a picture, and Hester had refused to face the irate monster! He thought his cousin understood him, and had meant to meet her at once with a smile; but in the interval that elapsed ere she opened the door, he changed his mind. It would be something new to try the effect of coldness, of the face which had alarmed his sister-in-law. He thought for this once he would like to take the upper hand, and see what came of it.

Accordingly, when her trembling footstep was heard, he was standing by the window, stiff, immovable, unapproachable.

"You must go," Constance had said. "You cannot help it, Hetty, since he is so determined; but I am sorry for you." Hester's heart now died within her. It had beat loudly all the way down-stairs—it had nearly choked her with its pulsations as she stood with the door handle in her hand, unable for a minute to take the last plunge, but now it stood still.

He turned his head at her entrance, and surveyed her without a word.

She shut the door, came slowly forward and opened her lips, but no sound escaped them.

"Well I" said he at last.

No answer.

"You wish to beg my pardon, do you?"

She did not attempt to do so.

"Do you wish it?" he went on. "You might, I think. You have been very unkind to me—laughing at me behind my back, and making a jest of me to Constance. If I had not happened to come up just then, I daresay there would have been a great deal more."

A pause.

"You and she were having some rare sport together, no doubt. It is not safe to play at such games when there are open doors and windows near. You should wait till you are safe in your own rooms, with all the bolts fastened. Even then little birds in the air do sometimes carry whispers. Don't try it again, Hester, if you take my advice."

Her head sank a little lower, but he could not see her face.

"Not that I did know you made game of me," he continued, in the same dry tone. "I confess that I had not

considered myself so honoured. Of course I might have suspected it if I had had the skill to think of such a thing, but you see I am not clever. I have not the wit that you have—not that delicate turn for raillery——Why, Hester!¹¹

She had broken down in sobs and tears before him. Without warning, without his having the remotest suspicion that such a catastrophe was imminent, she had suddenly given way, unable longer to endure the mortification—the shame with which every word he spoke overwhelmed her.

Never was hunter held more fast in his own trap than was Colonel Lutteridge now.

"Hester!" exclaimed he, petrified.

The position was terrible to him.

"Why, Hester! Don't go," catching her by the arm. "What have I done? My poor little thing! Good heavens! What a brute I am! Look at me, Hester; do I look angry? It was all a pretence; I was only playing with you—upon my word I wad. Oh, don't cry—don't cry. I declare I never was so ashamed in my life. See; now you know it was nonsense, wipe away these tears. Why," said he, getting flustered, "they come faster than ever. Hester, dear! do stop—there's a good girl! You will make yourself ill," as she still sobbed convulsively. Then he drew a breath and began again.

"I am so sorry. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I will beg your pardon a hundred times over if you will only lift up your head. As if I cared a straw for anything you said, You might have known me better. I only sent for you because I preferred to stay and talk with you here to sitting up in state with Lord Westmacott and Constance in the drawing-room. There now, you know all. Let me——" taking the handkerchief himself. "And you *will* stop, won't you, dear!" But it was all to no purpose. When an excitable impulsive woman has been once set off, she does not cease immediately she is bidden, as may be imagined; and Hester, strung up to the last pitch of endurance and vexation, could not, even under the subsequent relief, any more restrain her tears at the bidding of her captor, than she could escape from his hold, until at length, overpowered by remorse and the sight of her distress, and rendered desperate by the fruitlessness of his efforts to console, he fairly took her in his arms, and kissed her heartily with such as-

severancy of penitence and affection as must have expiated any offence.

After this, and after some minutes spent in protestations, assurances, and caresses, she was at length calm enough to think, and to feel the touch of his arm round her waist. She knew the precise moment when it dawned upon her that there had been enough of this ; and himself taking away the protecting arm, he took her hand and led her to the sofa.

" Sit down by me a little. I won't go up-stairs yet awhile; and as for you, Hester, it would be wisest for you to hide your little head till dinner-time. My dear little cousin, I have behaved so very badly to you that I wish—well, it does not matter what. Now tell me," continued he, rightly divining the best comfort he could bestow, " what you were doing when I came in. I know there was no ill-nature in it. I never thought there was."

She explained as well as she could.

^MConstance held me up as a bogie to frighten you with," said he.

" Yes; but she was only laughing. We were both laughing. Of course I do care what you think. I care a great deal more what you think than what Lord Westmacott thinks, or Constance either, though I pretended I did not."

"Do you?"

" Yes; indeed I do. I should be very, very sorry to vex you. But I just did that because—because—to pretend to seem as if I did not."

" I see. Hester, I wish you were not going away to-morrow."

"I'm sure I wish it too, with all my heart."¹¹

" Will you come back soon ? "

" No, I don't think so. Not soon. I don't come above once in two months or so."

" Then in about two months we shall have you again ? "

" That is when I generally come. It is just two months since I was here last."

"Never mind. You are but going three miles off. I shall see you often; and recollect that we have cleared off all scores now. I have forgiven you, and you have forgiven me. You will never be anything but good friends with me, will you ? You will never remember against me what happened just now, eh ?"

But Constance was highly indignant with her brother-in-law when she came to Hester's room before dinner.

"To make you cry !" she said. "Of course I can see; your eyes are quite swollen with tears. It was a shame; it was too bad of Simon. That is the worst of these men ; they are so overbearing."

She protested she had done all she could with the inhuman wretch, but to no purpose. He would have his say out; she supposed he had been very angry? Very awful!

Oh, well, it was a good thing to have it over, and she hoped he was satisfied now that he had made them all unhappy. Tiresome creature! He had spoilt everything.

Had he not spoilt everything? Had they parted amicably? She was glad to hear that, at least. It would have been too vexatious if there had been anything going on to interfere with their pleasant evening. She had brought up a flower for Hester's hair.

"And you are a good little thing," said she, enthusiastically, "and I am very angry indeed with Simon. Going and spoiling your looks in that way! I don't know that he has, though. Your eyes look larger than ever, child. Well, thank Heaven, Lord Westmacott is not an observing man, and I daresay you will forget about this, and enjoy your concert after all."

How much Hester enjoyed it none ever knew, but it was not forgetfulness which brought the pleasure. It was not forgetfulness indeed which shed a light into her downcast countenance, and a sweetness into the low notes of her voice. Absolutely silent, she sat in her dim corner of the carriage on their way to the Town Hall; but no sooner was her hand within her cousin's arm, and she found herself being led by him to the seat behind Constance and by his side, which she was to occupy during the evening, than her spirit expanded, as it were, in sunshine.

He was kinder, gentler, gayer than she had ever known him.

The singing was not much, but he had something to say in praise of every performance. He spoke a great deal, applauded vehemently, and leaned forward to smile and laugh into his companion's eyes.

Constance, occupied with herself and her position and Lord Westmacott, had no idea of all that was going on behind. She looked from time to time over her shoulder, whispered a comment to Hester, asked Simon if he were bored, and was in a very happy state of good-humour and importance. The little concert-room flaring with gas, and

filled to overflowing with excited and irrepressible townspeople, was a pleasant enough place to her.

It was more than that to one behind.

"Nevertheless you look pale, little one!" said Simon, when the usual reply to Constance's "Enjoying yourself, Hetty?" had been given. "You are not accustomed to crying, and it has made your head ache."

Very, very little, she said. Her head hardly ached at all

"Have you had a happy evening? Has it put away from you all that went before?" her cousin asked next.

She smiled; and with such a smile he could not fail to be content; but she herself only knew all its meaning.

Then the concert broke up with a great bustle, everybody flocking to the small entrance-hall and making a stand there. It appeared as if there were a block beyond, and a block indeed there proved to be, caused by the state of the weather. It was raining heavily.

Colonel Lutteridge's carriage failed to make its appearance.

Colonel Lutteridge's carriage—where was Colonel Lutteridge's carriage? Had it gone to the wrong stables, or had the coachman been given the wrong hour? He was a new man, and might easily have made some mistake.

At length, however, he was found, and the next point was, where was Colonel Lutteridge himself? Constance, not ill-pleased to wait on Lord Westmacott's arm in view of all the people, cloaking, shawling, and jostling each other, calmly bade the footman seek his master. Serene in her superiority to vulgar cares, she noted with inward contempt the agonies of the departing ones, the rush out into the overcrowded cab, the impatience of those left behind to be fetched again—their shivering complaints.

Wrapped in her furs, and with no fears as to the comfort of Lord Westmacott, who was also sheathed from head to foot in the same, it was diverting to see the fuss made, to hear the fearp and cautions given vent to by the natives. She quite forgot her brother-in-law, but was entertained afresh at the excuse he made for having lingered.

"It was pleasanter there than here," he said.

In such a case, with such a plain choice of evils, she appealed to Lord Westmacott as to the suitability of the phrase. The idea of its being "pleasanter!" It was possibly less unpleasant. Did he mean less unpleasant?"

He did not say.

PART IV.

CHAPTER XIII

"A BBTBB MAN, SIB, I NBVBB KNEW."

⁴⁴The world is in general selfish, interested, and unthinking, and throws the imputation of romance and melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own. I cannot but think that in those regions which I contemplate, those feelings will subsist,—they are called, perhaps they are, weaknesses here; but there may be some better modifications of them in heaven, which may deserve the name of virtues."—MAN OF FEELING

OF a certain kind of world Simon Lutteridge had seen a good deal; into another, of which we shall presently speak, he had never yet penetrated.

From his earliest days he had been habituated to society—to mixing with people of different nations and of different grades—to seeing life, in short, though it was life under a single aspect. He had never been wild; he had never been wicked.

He was a serious, even a devoutly minded man, who knew in what he believed, and acted up to what he professed, with a certain simple, dogged straightforwardness that either kept aloof from him such as did not lead a decent life, or forced them in his presence to assume that they did.

He was generally known to be religious; but as he was also a so-called good fellow, and, as we have said, a lenient—not to say lax—commanding officer, his religion was respected even by those from whom he had not sympathy.

But for all that, Simon was, when approaching forty, conscious of an unsatisfactoriness in his existence. He had a heart, and it was slowly withering up for want of nourishment.

ment. Tear after year brought the same interests, the same recreations, the same frigid routine. It was a dry solemn progress through the world; and though it may perhaps be urged that he had made it so for himself, that he had cut out his own pathway, none the less did he in secret fret over it.

Had a high command and military honours been likely to fall to his lot while still in the service, these would probably have formed a goal for his ambition—a something to look to; had an ardent missionary spirit inspired his bosom, it might have expanded in a large sphere of usefulness. But here was a plain soldier who did his duty, took care that the regimental school was well taught and properly attended, backed up the chaplain in whatever he undertook, was regular as clockwork in his attendance at church and sacraments, and gave openly and in secret at all times and places. He had not exalted aspirations, but such as he had he carried out, at whatever cost to himself. "A better man, sir, I never knew," said little Winter, the chaplain, when, years afterwards, he too came back to this country. "A less obtrusive, less pretentious, more honestly upright Christian never lived. Why, sir, that man's influence *told*,—it couldn't help telling, whatever they may say. Talk about his not keeping the regiment in order—it was a regiment that wouldn't be kept in order! Not by a man like Lutteridge. They wanted a Czar, or a Shah, or a Khan of Tartary over them. See how they shook into shape under that little beast Jones. A little beast he was, I tell you—a regular little vagabond. But he made them all look about them before they knew where they were! Snapped them up right and left as if they had been schoolboys! Lutteridge, now, couldn't do that; he *could not* do it. It was no use his attempting it—it was not in the man's nature. He could not say *No/ if *Yes' was possible, to save his life! Weakness? Well, it may have been weakness—I am not saying that he was a man of ability, that he was a particularly strong-minded man—but this I do say, it was a weakness that never interfered with his sense of duty. I have seen him smarting under the obligation to give a reproof, ready to give the world if he could but back out of it with a good conscience, but not one bit would he shirk, if it was before him as a case of right and wrong. He hated to speak—that was the truth; unless you could lay it down to him clear as the

day that it was a case of right and wrong, he would hold his tongue. As long as he could, he would shut his eyes. But that was his only fault. Never did he shut his ears—no, that he did not—to the needy or the oppressed." Here good Winter would shake his head and wipe his eyes, struck with his own eloquence. "Why, sir/" he would go on, warming up again, "that man would give and give, till there was no end to it! I have, I do assure you, felt ashamed to come to him sometimes, having been so often, and maybe I would be hanging back a bit"—the worthy chaplain in colloquial moments resumed his native brogue—"and he would see it in my face,—he could be quick enough at times, Lutteridge could, and he would say, just as pleasant as if he had never heard a word of the sort before, 'Well, Winter/ he would say—'Well, Winter, and how much is it now?' with his hand in his pocket before I could answer. Wherever that man went, God's blessing would go with him, for his prayers and his alms have gone up like those of Cornelius, or I know nothing of the Holy Gospel."

So spoke Winter; and, speaking with all the warmth of conviction, it may be supposed that he knew. Another testimony bore out something at least of what he averred, "Lutteridge/¹ said young Carlton, who left not long after the new *regime* was inaugurated, and while yet the days of mourning in the regiment were not ended—"Lutteridge had the dryest, stiffest manner, and the kindest heart of any fellow I have ever met."

But of the existence of this heart Simon was himself hardly aware.

He was conscious of a want—a void which he had no notion how to fill; and in breaking up his whole scheme of life, and turning towards the home of his childhood, he carried with him a vague hope that he should there find wherewith to satisfy his silent cravings.

His farewells once said, his spirits rose in the anticipation.

Even the independent mode of travel, the having only himself to consult and look after, was a luxury. Stepping down, so to speak, from the platform on which he had so long been the focus for six hundred pair of eyes, was an untold relief.

He could now do what he chose, go where he liked, without giving warning and making arrangements for contingencies which always might happen, and seldom did

He was now at large, responsible to nobody, an example to nobody, a terror to nobody,—he still fondly hoped that sometimes he had been a terror,—whilst a bulwark and rock of defence, though he scarcely durst arrogate to himself as much, he could not but know he had actually been to many.

How easy seemed the transit from place to place, now that he had no longer a great unwieldy tail of human beings to draggle after him! How glorious to be free, bound to no hours,—at peace, subject to no interruptions! To be no longer a colonel, but simply a traveller! To sink from something into nothing!

Under the new influence there began to peep out indications of a change of temperature—a thaw in Simon's deportment. No longer watched, understood, and made allowances for, he found it almost agreeable to have to go out of his way to make friends. Formerly all who desired to know Colonel Lutteridge—and who that had the opportunity but did desire it?—had to be brought to him, and to make their own impression. As to the impression he made on them, it had never occurred to him to think of it; he was as free from vanity as he was from solicitude. He did not think himself attractive; his manner he was wont to consider especially unfortunate; but as none of the slights which fall to the lot of underlings could ever have been offered to him, he could not know diffidence. He deplored his formality and reticence, but more on account of the effect of these on others than for any other reason.

Such a thing as his evincing anxiety to make an acquaintance was unheard of: he had lived on such a pedestal, that ere a wish of that kind was barely formed it would be discovered and gratified. It was therefore altogether new to him, feeling himself unknown, and comparatively little accounted of, to have occasionally to make the advances which some one must make if people are to come together at all.

To be sure, he was not a man to be passed over anywhere; but nevertheless he was, during his homeward voyage, not the personage he had been—not what he would become, directly on his arrival at Lutteridge.

No regretful and condoling countenances followed him about; no expressive silences showed that suspicions as to the cause of his removal were rife. He was—unspeakable comfort—with people who did not *know*. His affairs were not their common talk. He was nothing to them. Nothing

at least, except as being a fellow-passenger, interesting, reserved, and shy. There was no barricade to keep intruders off his sacred person, and accordingly, in spite of his gravity, his silence, and his buckram, he found himself gaining in popularity every day.

His good looks in themselves won him the hearts of the women; and of these, two half-fledged pretty things of fourteen and twelve were his especial favourites. Though at an awkward age, they were not awkward; though undeveloped, they were not rustic.

They were a cheery, blithe young pair, budding into beauty, and full of that frank coquetry which is the charm of happy girlhood.

With them our soldier had many a pleasant hour; they taught him to be merry,—he could not teach them to be grave. He teased them; they played him tricks. He learned the secret of their hearts, their invincible horror of being treated as children; and holding this key, he made use of it—shabby wretch—against the innocent blabbers themselves.

They had no mother; and the prim *gouvernante* who tyrannised over them afforded an endless amusement to Simon in this respect. She could not pursue them into the actual presence of "cet fort bel homme, M. le Colonel," nor flout them openly when he was by, but she could cast a shadow over their mirth from afar, and take it out of them in the depths of her secret presence-chamber afterwards.

The abject air of the pretty couple, as they slunk off when the time came to this curtain-lecture, was deliciously ludicrous in their champion's eyes. He would pull his long moustache and laugh to himself as he looked after them, and prepare afresh his next homily on the subject.

Their resentment, their small *amour propre*, their attempts at dignity, were more diverting than anything he had ever known; and as they made no secret of their partiality for him, he was almost as much flattered as amused.

Such an experience had never before fallen to his lot. He parted from them with a sense of desolation, and an avidity for more of the same kind of nourishment, if it could be had.

Their companionship had opened a way into his inner man, and the gap was still yawning when he met his

Agatha and Jane were too old, his niece was too young. He wanted a playmate, but something beyond a baby. His eye fell on Hester; and albeit that she was different from the two fairies who had charmed him before, she took his fancy quickly.

In all that had followed their first meeting, he had no idea that he had passed beyond the bounds of what might be ceded to so near a relation. They were of one blood, one kin. This, he thought, should be weighted against the few years that she was older than his former little friends: they had sat with him, one on each side, by the hour together, Mademoiselle being often incapacitated for exertion, and in her heart too thankful to have them taken off her hands; they had accepted toys from him, and given him in return treasures to be kept for their sakes, and we will not say to what lengths they had proceeded when the doleful hour of parting arrived. He had, he thought, a right to something of the same freedom of intercourse with his young cousin.

But behold ! his young cousin was more than a match for him. It might be all very well to try over again the same kind of talk which had tormented and delighted the children on board the *Orinoco*, but he was not prepared to find himself in turn affected. That he was playing with edge-tools, and might not only wound but himself get wounded in the sport, did not for a moment cross his mind. His cousin was his cousin, and she was a child, and he was approaching the meridian of life; he saw no earthly reason why he should not pet his favourite. For him all was safe enough, and as for her, any care on her account would have seemed in his eyes the presumptuous supposition of a coxcomb.

He did not yet know Hester. He had so far seen only an apt, intelligent, charming companion, with a pair of grey eyes, in which every fleeting thought was instantly mirrored. They spoke for her, laughed for her, frowned for her, and at times, alas! they betrayed their mistress.

And then it must be owned that our colonel, though not a man of talent, had a natural genius for love-making. Where he had hidden it for twenty past years, or why it had up to the present time existed in a purely dormant state, must ever be a mystery. So soon as he gave it rein, so soon as he began to exercise his faculty, it was astonishing the progress he made in the art. He knew exactly when to speak and when to hold his tongue, was complete master of

those furtive looks, those intelligent indefinable nothings which convey meaning to the one, and to the one alone, for whom they are intended. He was never at a loss, never put out, never taken aback. His phlegmatic countenance could wear, when he so chose, an expression which defied inquiry; his dignity overawed intrusion, and his speech let out nothing.

Constance, not more penetrating than other people where self was concerned, was delighted with the cool preference so openly manifested by her brother-in-law for the cousin of whom she was least afraid. "Hester, you know, is the favourite," she now imagined herself saying on the first opportunity. "Hester, my dears, has cut you all out in his good graces. The truth is, she is but a child, and Simon, between ourselves, is a woman-hater." Or, "My dear Agatha, what have you been about not to fascinate our Colonel? He amuses himself with Hester."

Neither she nor he dreamed of the depths of the waters thus troubled. They looked at the little maid's brisk youthful face, and had no conception of the nature which underlay it. It is, to be sure, an unusual thing to see brought up in a homely, old-fashioned family, a daughter who does not easily and harmoniously fall in with the ways of her people. Trained to think and feel after one approved fashion; holding intercourse with minds all of one stamp; breathing one atmosphere, and guarded from every untoward influence,—it is a curiosity to find a meditative, original, audacious mind like Hester's. She would not have dared, even had she known how, to give expression to the thoughts which often filled her soul. Everything beyond her grasp, incomprehensible, unfathomable, had immediate attraction, and she was at an age when fancy, tyrannical and lawless, holds reason in check.

Then comes Colonel Lutteridge, strikes the fancy with an electric shock, lays hold on midnight musings, and extends his grasp still further. The heart-strings will be touched before she is aware; and as for him, he scarcely believes in her having them yet. Which come first—heart-strings or wisdom-teeth? Who knows? His wisdom-teeth have come and gone so long ago that he forgets all about them; but, so far, he has had no experience of that other possession. He is not inclined to give little Hester credit for having outstripped him. Truth to tell, he never pries into such matters;

and this is the world—the world of thought, study, and reflection—into which he has never set his foot.

He rises on the last morning of his cousin's visit with an unaccountable disinclination to the parting, but with an easy conscience. In reply to Agatha's gay, "I am come to take Hester home,"¹ he says, "Must she go?" Oh!" pulls his long moustache, and looks kindly at Hester, but is unable to think of any argument in favour of her remaining.

It must not be supposed that during the week no communication had been held with Wancote. The ladies from Lutteridge had driven over there twice, and each time Hetty's heart had palpitated with joy at finding herself safely reseated in Constance's carriage. She had feared to be kidnapped, or, at least, to have a day of her visit curtailed; but not to have gone—not to have looked in at least twice during her absence—was out of the question. Then Jane and her mother had called once at the Manor, and Agatha had walked over by herself the day before the concert.

The concert was mentioned by Simon, and perhaps there had been a momentary expectation on Agatha's part of being asked to join the party. To be sure, since Lord Westmacott was going—a fact which Constance hastened to make known—the carriage would be full; and the weather was not such as to make it agreeable for any one, least of all for a man just arrived from India, to go outside on a six-miles¹ drive. It was fully three miles each way; November nights are dark and raw; she could not expect any one to volunteer such a proposal; she only felt that if by any chance Lord Westmacott should fail, she would not object to taking his place.

Since Lord Westmacott, however, had been there, and since he was actually at the breakfast table when she made her appearance, she had nothing to complain of.

Breakfast was later at Lutteridge than at Wancote; they had not yet finished—the gentlemen were enjoying their second cups of coffee when Miss Manners was ushered in.

It was in reply to Constance's "Why so soon?" that Agatha made answer, "I am come to take Hester back."

She had then to explain that she had been seeing Bertie to the station—Beitie had gone off on a round of visits—and it had occurred to those at home that she should look in and fetch Hester afterwards; it was going to be a wet day and more horses than were necessary need not be taken out.

Hetty's feeble protest, " But, Agatha, I am not ready—I have nothing packed," was easily overruled.

" Of course I know that, dear. I have sent the carriage round. I knew Constance would let me stay a little."

Constance jumped up. " Now do, Agatha, just go back and say this is all nonsense. Hester is not thinking of going home to-day. You just give Aunt Manners my love, and say we can't spare her."

"Yes, do," said Simon, coming forward—a great step for him. "There are so many of you at home, she can't be missed very much."

"I will drive her over on Tuesday or Wednesday," added his sister-in-law.

But all in vain. Agatha was smiling and resolute. She had been sent there, she said, to fetch Hester, and Hester knew as well as she, that since that was the case there was nothing more to be said. She had no authority, she protested, to give her sister leave to stay; and there was that in her tone which Hester durst not disregard. She had had her lesson the week before, and was not likely to set Agatha at nought again for a while.

"You are only wasting time," said Miss Manners, gently.

Even Constance saw that protestations were unavailing and while laughingly denouncing the cruelty of such a proceeding, bade Hester go. As she left the room, a movement of Colonel Lutteridge's seemed as though he would have followed, but he checked himself, if such had been his purpose, and returned to the dregs of his coffee.

These he was still thoughtfully stirring, when she reappeared, fully equipped. He gave a quick look up, but the presence of others, as usual, held him in check, and instead of expressing regrets at her going, or even coming forward to stand among the rest who were now exchanging farewells, he busied himself in feeding his dog, and talking to him, until summoned by Constance to see the sisters to their carriage.

He led the way then, with Agatha; but just at the last came a consolatory moment. He took the cloak off Hester's arm and wrapped her in it, and then he did say, " I am so sorry you are going," in a tone of voice perfectly inaudible to the lady who was already sitting in the brougham.

Agatha alone smiled, and bent forward as they drove away, and Simon returned to Lord Westmacott.

Lord Westmacott had got as far as the hall, with the intention of paying parting civilities to the young ladies, but something there had attracted his attention, and he had only reached the door in time to wave his hand, and bow distractedly in reply to Miss Manners's graceful movement forward, as the carriage whirled away.

He now wanted explanations and attention.

"What is this extraordinary production, Lutteridge 1"

"A fish's nest."

"And this? And this?"

They were soon in full career round the hall, handling and examining curiosities.

"Hester's gone!" cried little Ellen, running in. "Oh, why did Hester go?"

"Eh? My little girl, take care!" said Lord Westmacott.

"This your niece, Lutteridge 1 Bless me, what a delicate-looking little thing! Not the least like her mother!"

"Why did Hester go 1" repeated the child, looking up at her uncle.

"I don't know, Nelly," said he, kindly. "I suppose she had to go."

"She has gone to her mamma, you know," added Lord Westmacott, condescendingly. "She is as glad to go to her mamma as you would be to go to yours, I daresay."

"Was Hester glad 1" said Ellen.

"Well, I don't know; I suppose so. That your grandfather, Lutteridge? Fine-looking old gentleman!"

"Was Hester glad?" repeated the child, laying hold of her uncle's hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because she did not seem glad, and I'm so very, very sorry. I wanted her to sing hymns to me all day tomorrow. Don't you like when Hester sings hymns, and you take me on your knee, Uncle Simon?"

He did not show that he had heard the question, and by-and-by she ran away again.

It was long ere Hester had another chance of singing hymns to the little girl. "It is not her turn to go," Lady Manners said when the next invitation came from Lutteridge. "She can be the one to dine at the Parker's next week. And here is that absurd little Mrs Martin asking one of you and a brother. Really she must be taught if she knows no better. Such a note!"⁴ (Reading.) "'One

of your daughters and one oi your sons.' Well, Agatha, if you or Jane wish to go, you can, but I cannot have Hetty taken out in that way. If either of you elder ones choose to accept, Jem can take you."

"I don't think either of us would care to go!" said Agatha. "Would you, Jane?"

Jane was equally unwilling, and an excuse had to be found. None so simple as to ask the cousins from Luttedridge for the same evening; but the cousins had already been bespoken by Mrs Martin herself.

They had consented to go—Constance because, to do her justice, she was devoid of airs of superiority, and if great people were not to be had, did not disdain small; Simon because he had no other engagement, and with him such calls were obligatory. A glimmer of impatience was, however, manifested when the invitation to Wancote afterwards came in for the same evening. Waficote was undoubtedly to be preferred, and he said so, Constance agreeing outwardly, but in her heart his having originated such a sentiment caused her to look more favourably on the Martin entertainment than she had done before.

He had never till now said in so many words that he liked going to Wancote.

He went there pretty often, it is true, but he had invariably an errand, an arrangement to make, or a matter about which he required advice. Not unfrequently he only saw his uncle, choosing a time when Sir John was likely to be at home, and as often as not, when the rest of the party were most sure to be out. He would look in for about half an hour, making the father his avowed object, and it was but natural that Sir John should be consulted on points as to which his knowledge of country life must entitle him to be considered an authority.

But if Simon took to liking evenings at Wancote, that was another thing altogether.

She dressed for the Martins' "little rubbishy party," as she secretly designated it, in very good-humour, but she turned up her nose as she did so. She had done the best she could for Mrs Martin when she put forth her relations to give her consequence in Simon's eyes, as she had done on the occasion of his first arrival. An Irish baronet is not much, neither is a Welsh bishop; but upon these two minute pegs hung all Mrs Martin's claims to notice. One

was her father, the other her uncle; and Constance had dinned the fact into Simon's ears.

In herself the lady was nothing. Neither was her husband; and he had not even the bishop and the baronet in the background. They were not likely to gather round them any people worth meeting.

CHAPTER XIV.

"WHAT A FRIGHT HE GAVE ME."

"Suspensions amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds,—they ever fly hy twilight."—BACON.

Everything within and without the small domain of Oakbank was in apple-pie order by eight o'clock on the night of the dinner-party.

The result of many cares was now to be seen in a settled hush—the calm before the storm. The tiny drawing-room, fragrant with flowers, had had its furniture extracted till nothing remained but the piano, the sofa well pushed back into the bay-window, and a few easy-chairs standing anywhere and everywhere but in the places to which they were accustomed. The dining-room, with its table elongated till there was just room and no more for the servants to pass between Mrs Martin's chair and the sideboard, shimmered with silver and glass, wedding-gifts, and pretty toys of every description. A cloak-room, with a mirror draped in muslin, and the orthodox ivory toilet-set on the table in front, had been prepared for the ladies; and a similar but somewhat smaller den was duly set aside for the gentlemen. Everything within was complete, and the gravel was raked in front of the entrance-door.

Husband and wife, equally up to concert-pitch in their own persons, stood on each side of the drawing-room fire; she, in pink with braided hair—he, shaven, brushed, starched, and stiff, in the highest of collars. It needed but to pour eau-de-Cologne on his pocket-handkerchief, and finish could go no further.

"I wish they would come now," said she. "I begin to get nervous."

"I want my dinner/¹ said he. "I hope it won't be spoilt."

"Furnival! *did* you get the coffee t "

"Good gracious, Katie, how you startled me! Why do you speak so quickly? I could not think what was coming."

"But did you get it 1 If not, I must fly—"

"Of course I got it; I went to Seeley on purpose. What did you suppose I went to Seeley for?"

"Oh, well, I forgot. But have you shown Hannah how to use the machine 1 You know she made a bungle of it last time."

"I know she did. I never tasted such stuff in my life."

"She will do the same again unless you show her how it ought to be made yourself."

"I have shown her,—in fact, I have put the coffee in and made everything ready. When the time comes, she only needs to light the lamp and pour in the boiling water."

He was invaluable. She had no further anxiety.

"Does not the room look nice?" she said, presently. "These are the antimacassars Mrs Bell gave, Furnival. I think they are much the prettiest I have ever seen; and it was very kind of Mrs Bell to give them. The only pity is that they slip so," lifting one up as she spoke. "You saw that one? I think I shall turn this chair with its back to the wall; only if I do, Mr Searle will be sure to take it."

"And why should he not take it?"

"He always makes a chair in a mess."

"How can a chair be made in a mess?" said her husband, with a laugh of superior wisdom.

"There now, I will show you." With which the little housewife pulled forward the loose cover of the chair till it hung about the legs, and threw the tidy which she had in her hand down in a heap on the seat. "Now, if Mr Searle gets into this chair, that is what it will look like directly he gets up again. Only that half of the muslin will have disappeared down the back of the cushion here. He manages somehow to work it in and in, until once, when we had a tiny lace thing out, there was nothing but the edge——0 Purnival! A carriage!"

A pause and expectation.

"It is only a single horse, Furnival," in a whisper.

"Cab," in a whisper back.

"Searles?"

"Didn't come their way."

"Coulters. I heard the cloak-room door shut."

"I will go and bring him in."

"Oh no. Don't go, Furnival. They will come in together."

After the Coulters came the Bells, and after the Bells the Rector and Mrs Searle, and then a Mr Barry, and then a Mr Knight, and, last of all, Colonel Lutteridge and Mrs Robert Lutteridge.

Constance was in brilliant looks, and by no means above her company. To dazzle and condescend, provided there was no better sport on hand, suited her very well; and she rustled in to dinner on Mr Martin's arm, slipped into her seat, which was scarcely a pace from the fender, and sat there smiling and chatting throughout the meal, as though she neither felt heat nor cold, draughts, nor the occasional rub of an arm against her back hair.

Simon was riot so engaging. He sat bolt upright; and although his person adorned the room, his tongue did little for the entertainment.

This was, however, no loss to the hostess. She had to keep one eye on the table and another on the servants. It would have been too much had she been expected to bestow one ear on Mr Searle and another on Colonel Lutteridge.

Mr Searle was bent on being agreeable. He was much taken with the bride, and was also—being a good-natured man—anxious to show that, although parson of the parish, he did not resent her having put him only on her left hand. He thought he had a right to the other. It was he, not Colonel Lutteridge, who should have been helping the soup and the chickens; but since Mrs Martin wished to do honour to the Colonel, and since she was probably quite unaware that, in putting him up, she had put the Rector down, he was not the man to sulk. Having nothing to do, and only Mrs Coulter on his other side, he did not give his hostess much peace; while, for her, one man's talk was as good as another's, for although she had pronounced her right-hand neighbour to be the handsomest man she had ever seen, she might have made the remark of a marble column for all the desire she entertained for intercourse with him.

It was enough that he had come to her house, that he had been seen there, and that the Searles and the Coulters and the Bells, besides the odds and ends of young men, would all go away and tell that he had graced the party.

To have made everything complete, she reflected, Miss Manners, and her eldest brother—who was so much the better looking of the two, should have come in place of Mr Barry and Mr Knight.

These two unfortunates, hailed at the last moment, had taken each other into dinner, and now sat on opposite sides about the middle of the table, indignant to find themselves let in for a party of only married people. One had expected to meet Miss Bell; the other had made sure that some sister, or cousin, or young lady friend of Mrs Martin's would be staying with her, and would be intrusted to his care.

Both thought they had been ill-treated, and although somewhat dashed, in their own phrase, by the presence of the lord of the manor and his handsome sister-in-law, whom they knew by sight, but to whose acquaintance they had never before aspired, they reflected that, after all, even Colonel Lutteridge was a widower, and the lady a widow. There was positively not a young person there, thought the two very young men.

Accordingly they partook but gloomily of all that went round, and were certainly, as Mrs Martin indignantly affirmed afterwards, "No acquisitions."

"We hoped to have had your cousins here to-night," said she, trying to interest her silent neighbour in a new topic. "We asked them, but they have another engagement."

"They have a dinner-party of their own," put in Mrs Coulter, bending forward from the other side of Mr Searle. She was always skirmishing up and down the table to see into whose dialogue she could insert an observation. "I'll tell you how I know, Mrs Martin," she continued, eagerly: "their side gate was open as we passed."

"I suspect that was our fault," said Colonel Lutteridge as Mrs Martin, rather ashamed of her guest, made no reply.

"We drove in on our way here, and came out at the side gate," added he in pity for the blush which he had seen and understood. It had been a vexed question between Mr and Mrs Martin whether the Coulters should be admitted or not; but several negatives coming in, and it being imperative that the Coulters must come some time or other, the contro-

versy had ended in their being asked, with this proviso on Mrs Martin's part, that they should be placed where they would be entirely in the background. She had not reckoned on the quickness of Mrs Coulter's ears and tongue.

"Indeed, Colonel Lutteridge?" replied that lady across the table. "The side gate by the Seeley road I mean."¹

"Ah, yes. I am afraid we forgot to shut it. We must stop on our way back."¹

Now what had he been doing at Wancote? There could not be much intimacy if he did not know that they were engaged that evening, and yet going in and out in that easy manner looked ominous. Mesdames Coulter and Martin, in common with the rest of the world, predicted a Lutteridge-Manners alliance, but since she durst not put point-blank questions, Mrs Coulter's greedy eyes searched in vain for any information on that head; and in the face of his obstinate silence afterwards, even Mrs Martin felt he was not by many degrees so handsome as she had at first declared him to be.

Unaware of the motive which had prompted him to cover her confusion, she avowed afterwards, resentfully, that the only time he had voluntarily opened his lips was when Wancote was alluded to; and to more than one confidential ear she whispered her opinion, that after all, however good-looking a countenance may be, when it has but one expression it grows tiresomely monotonous.

So monotonous, indeed, did the countenance referred to become before the evening was over, that Constance considered it was imperative on her to administer an admonition on the drive home. "Were you not well to-night, Simon?" she began, as soon as they turned from the door.

"Quite well. Why do you ask?"

"You looked so exceedingly bored."

"So I was."

"No wonder. So was I. But, you know, it hardly does to show it. They are harmless people after all, and if one does make up one's mind to go to their house, it is as well to get the credit of it."

"I don't understand. What credit?"

"I mean that, considering we go to their dinner-party on purpose to please the Martins, not for any enjoyment that we expect ourselves, it is a pity to spoil the effect when the sacrifice is actually made."

"It was stupid, of course," continued she, seeing that he made no response. "I am sure I agreed in everything that your face expressed."

"I did not mean my face to express anything."

"Did you not?" said his sister-in-law, coming to the point at last. "Then you should not write on it in blazing characters, *I wish I were anywhere in the world but here/ That is what Hester would have said she saw if she had been there."

"If Hester had been there," said he, smartly, "she would have seen nothing of the kind."

"Hey-day! That is strong! Tell me honestly now, Simon, was it because none of them were present that you were out of humour—that you found the evening so dull? If any of the cousins had been there, would it have made a difference?"

"Any of them? No. It would if Hester had."

"It would if Hester had!"

"Yes, decidedly. I wanted Hester. I have not seen her for some time."

"Was that why you made me go in to Wancote on our way, that you might see your friend?"

"Yes. And get her to walk with me to-morrow."

"My dear Simon!"

"Well?"

"It's not—proper."

"How not proper?"

"You can't go walking about with young ladies like that."

"But she is my cousin."

"That makes some difference, but not enough. You will have to be taught *les convenances*, sir, the usages of society, the manners and customs of the natives. No girl of Hester's age walks about even with a cousin of the other sex, unless she has some one with her."

"But Jem is coming too."

"Jem? Why did you not say so before? Of course if Jem goes it is all right."

"Oh yes—I asked Jem," responded the offender, relieved. "But, Constance, I am afraid I must have transgressed before, unwittingly, for when Hester was at Lutteridge we walked together several times."

"That is different. She was staying in the house with you, and I suppose you kept to the grounds pretty much."

You were not met by people. Don't you see, of course it is not the thing itself—there is no harm whatever in the thing itself—it is merely the look of it."

"But there is no harm in the thing itself?"

"No, no—certainly not. Many people would not be so particular as Aunt Manners, either. I must tell you, Simon, that Aunt Manners is a person you have to be very careful with. If Jem should fail, you must not think of inarching about alone with Hester.*

"I'll ask Agatha."

"Agatha?" said Constance, slowly; and in her heart she thought, "Aha! This looks more like the point now!"

"Why Agatha?" she said aloud.

"To put all straight. Agatha is a sort of chaperon, you see."

A chaperon? Was the man mad] Agatha—the family star, the pride and beauty of all the Manners race—to be termed a chaperon! Or was he merely seeking to mislead, to put her off* the track?

She thought it best to laugh. "My dear Simon, that is beyond everything! Agatha a chaperon! Ha, ha, ha!" After which she waited with some curiosity for what was next to follow.

"That is what she always seems to me," he said. "No disrespect to Agatha. I am a chaperon myself, of course. I have had to chaperon lots of ladies in India; their fathers and husbands used to ask me to take care of them when they had to go to the hills, when I was quite a young fellow. Coming home, I had two of the nicest little girls in the world to look after; they were with an old governess, and she was ill half the time; so I am quite an old hand, you see. Some people get into the way of it, and I thought Agatha seemed one of those.¹

"So you two chaperons are to go out together?"

"With only one ewe lamb to look after."¹ He seemed amused at the idea.

"Seriously, Simon, if it would be improper for you to be met walking about the country alone with Hester, it would be doubly, trebly so with Agatha."

"Would it?"

"It really would."

"Why?"

"Why?" said Constance, rather at a loss. "I can hardly

explain why. She is so well known, and so remarkable looking, and so entirely grown up; while Hetty is little more than a school-girl. You really must not ask Agatha."

"But I have no intention of asking Agatha."

"Oh, I thought you had."

"Only if Jem failed; and since you tell me that I must not look upon her in the light of a substitute, I have given up the idea of asking her at all. Hester is the one I want; she is lively, and amuses me."

"Brightens us all up, does she not? I am charmed that you agree with me in my fancy for Hetty. She is quite *my* child. We always get on so well together; I don't know how it is, but I never can get on so well with Agatha and Jane."

"Oh, they are all nice," said he, good-naturedly.

"Nice? Oh yes. Certainly they are nice, but they are such solemn, pretentious girls. I never feel sure how they will take a thing." She was now much less guarded as to her real sentiments than she had been at first. Since it was clear that he was heart-whole so far, she might, she thought, venture on what would have been too dangerous ground formerly. "Aunt Manners is bad enough," continued she, confidentially, "but really Agatha is worse. And I always feel that every little thing one does or says gets reported to the upper ranks—to the parents, aunts, uncles, and elder people generally. Now I call that mean. There should be honour among thieves, they say; and among cousins many little things pass that are never meant to transpire. But one cannot trust Agatha. She often gets Hetty into hot water, I know."

"Does she? What a naughty Hetty to deserve it."

"Ah! you are thinking of the trick she played you the other day. Well, you bear her no grudge, and that is about the worst she ever does. She gets into tremendous spirits, and they boil over now and then. Then Agatha will be looking on as cool as a lump of ice,—even when she is out for a holiday she keeps all her wits about her, never spoils her clothes nor says a word she should not, and, like a spectre of propriety in armour, keeps watch over all who do. You may think that Aunt Manners delights in such a daughter] But to my certain knowledge Hetty is the favourite. Agatha is very useful—and Agatha being the most noticed and admired, it must be a great relief to find her such a piece of moral perfection—but Hester is the

mother's darling. She nearly kept her in the schoolroom for another year, however. I think she would have shown her sense if she had."

"Well, why did she not?"

"The boys made a fuss, and there was an alarm that she was growing eccentric. It would never do for one of those girls to be singular,—we leave such excrescences to the *bourgeoisie*; with them I believe it is quite the correct thing to have a daughter who goes her own way, manages her own concerns, and gets talked about. Our girls do as they are bid, and walk in the steps of their forefathers."

Not having been herself brought up precisely in such steps, it was pleasant to Constance to associate herself in phrases like these with the girl she spoke of.

"What made them think there was anything eccentric about her?"

"It was the greatest nonsense. She is at the age of romance and Scott's novels, and promulgated a little high-flown contempt for the stupidity of society as it now is—dinner-parties, such as we have just come from, especially. I don't wonder at the child a bit; she likes a dance as well as anybody; but we never have anything but dinners, dinners, dinners, all the year round, because Aunt Manner? sets the example. Always the same people too. There is never any chance of meeting a face one does not know. Hester was delighted to come to that party I gave in your honour, because she wanted to see *you*. You were the attraction. I believe she thought of you as a sort of crusader or paladin—a mysterious being with all the halo of the East around your brow. India with Hester is the India of old, not the India of to-day. She has read books on it that would make my head ache; and she gave me such a tirade on Vedas, and Shasters, and Brahmins, and what not, the other day, that I have hardly yet recovered! I believe it was some idea of traditionary glory adhering to you that made her come to Lutteridge at all that night, for, as I said, she hated all the dinner-parties she went to before."

"I understood it was her first."

"Was it?" said Constance, who as usual had rattled OD without adhering either to the letter or the spirit of the law.

"Well, I am sure I have heard her rail at them often. It must have been from what she had heard, not what she had seen, I suppose."

"Stick to Hester," added she, mentally. "As much about her as you like. But no 'chaperons' are needed, Monsieur le Colonel. We will do without chaperons, if you please. A plague upon the man—what a fright he gave me!"

CHAPTER XV.

OUTWITTED.

"The fire¹ the flint
Shews not till it be struck."
—*Timon of Athens.*

The walking party had been altered and increased before the arrival of its originator on the following day.

Miss Manners and Jane had on their hats as well as Hester, and Mr Edward Searle, the Hector's son, who had just been presented to a small living in the neighbourhood, and who had been dining at Wancote on the night before, summoned thither on the defection of the two cousins, was professing his readiness to join in the expedition at the moment Colonel Lutteridge entered the room. He had not, the young man said, been to Barley Hill for years, and as Barley Hill was the object of the walk, it was plain that nothing could have fitted in better.

Several others were present—in fact the whole family were assembled—discussing plans for the afternoon, and for some minutes it did not exactly appear what had been fixed on. Mr Searle was duly presented to Colonel Lutteridge, named as a very old friend,—and Constance was inquired after. There was a great amount of talking going on, orders were given and countermanded; and to Simon, just come from a house where two solitary people—if such a phrase may be permitted—each went their way, with no dependence on the other, it was bewildering. He did not understand who was to be with him, and who was not. He stood by, taking no part, until Jem, after rushing in and out of the room a dozen times, as was his wont when any event was in anticipation, at length announced himself ready, and proceeded to hasten his sisters, with the haste of a man never in time himself.

Agatha, Jane, and Mr Searle obeyed the summons, and passed out one after another; but Hester sat still. "Come along, Hester,"¹ cried her cousin, cheerfully, as he waited by the doorway to follow her out.

"Hester is going to drive me in the pony-cart," replied Lady Manners for her daughter. "I am getting too old to drive myself, am I riot, Hetty?"

Looking at Hester, he saw there was something wrong; he could just catch a glimpse of an angry lip trembling ere she turned her head aside.

"Is Hester not to come with us?" he said, taking a step into the room. He had her stick, as she saw, in his hand, and this was the walk she was to have taken to win it. It was four miles each way to Barley Hill from Wancote; it would have been seven from Lutteridge.

"Not to-day," said his aunt, pleasantly, in reply to the inquiry. "She will go another clay. She will not mind taking care of me this once, will you, Hester? I have sent back the landau, for," turning to her nephew, "none of the girls care to give me their company in that, but they are very good in carting me about—into the ditch even, sometimes," added she, with a smiling allusion to an overturn which had taken place shortly before.

"What could be said? Hester had been the one for whom the plan had been originated; it was Hetty's walk, and he was instantly conscious that he cared not to go at all if she were not to be with him.

Since it appeared that both the elder sisters were likewise going, he had not the slightest objection to a quiet-looking young clergyman being also of the party; but if, as it turned out, these three were to be accepted in lieu of his chosen companion, he was anything but obliged to them.

The whole aspect of the afternoon was now changed. He felt that he had been cheated—done. It had been so cleverly managed that he was actually powerless in the matter, and that was a feeling Colonel Lutteridge had very seldom in his life experienced. He knew not what to do: he could hardly rush after the others, seize one of them by the arm, and bring him or her back to be his aunt's charioteer; he could not well propose to Lady Manners to give up her drive; he could neither do nor say anything to alter the arrangement.

He looked at his cousin, bit his lip, and went quickly out

"Teally, Hester/" said her mother as soon as the door was shut, "you are not particularly polite to me. What is there in giving up a walk, which you can take any other day you like, to make you look so sullen? It is not very pleasant for me to think that I have such an unwilling companion. I could not have believed, my dear, that you would have shown so disobliging a spirit. It is not often that I ask you to take me anywhere; and I am sure, since it is so great a sacrifice, I am not likely to do it soon again!"

No answer. Increase of gloom, if possible.

"I was quite mortified before them all/" continued Lady Manners with some asperity. "Such a little thing to be asked! Agatha or Jane would have come without a word."

"I did not say a word."

⁴⁴ You did what was worse: you showed it by your silence and your ill-temper. Jane drives me nearly every day, and you told her yourself that you would take her place when-over she wanted to ride."

"Mamma, she did not want to ride to-day."

"That is a mere quibble, Hester; she wanted to walk."

"Why did she not tell me before, then?"

"Before when?"

"Before I came down. They never said a word, but let me go and get ready, and come down thinking it was all right, and then, just at the last moment, I am told, when every one is by, that Jane is to go and I am not!" A great tear rolled down her cheek as she spoke.

"Hester, I could not have believed it of you! So childish! I am sorry for your disappointment, but," said Lady Manners, uneasily, and with an increased certainty that her prohibition had been a wise one, "you must not make such mountains out of mole-hills. I could not let Agatha go alone; you know Edward——"

"Oh yes, mamma; every one knows about Edward. But why should Jane go instead of me?"

⁴⁴ I thought it better for several reasons. Jane has more tact—more thoughtfulness. As soon as I found Edward was going——"

"But why was Edward asked at all? Why could he and Jane and Agatha not have ridden together, or gone somewhere? Why need they have interfered at all with us—with Jem and me and—and Simon?"

It was an awkward question, involving more than the speaker had any idea of.

Nothing was further from the mother's wishes than to introduce into the mind of one so young and unsophisticated thoughts which must open her eyes, and destroy for ever that simplicity of ignorance which in early youth is so delightful. As long as she could she would keep the bloom upon her floweret; and even now, brought face to face with those tearful demanding eyes, she strove to evade the difficulty.

And again she had really nothing to say—nothing to take hold of. Could she have put her hesitation into words, it might have taken shape thus: "Your cousin looks on you as a pleasant child, but I fear you will not long be contented that he should do so;"¹ but since she could not bring herself even to hint at such a possibility, she scarcely knew how to reply.

"Well, my dear," she said, after a long pause, during which there had been time for Hester to mark, and even to grow a little reluctantly inquisitive over her dubious countenance, "if I must say it, I did not particularly wish you to go, at any rate." She was, of course, prepared for the "Why not?" which followed, close as a clap of thunder on lightning just overhead.

"I think that your cousin—ahem—Simon scarcely realises, seeing you so much younger than your sisters, and made a pet of by them" (inward protest on the part of her auditor), "that you are as old as you are. He has a habit of calling to you to go with him wherever he goes, and a brotherly way of expecting your company, and claiming it, which is all very nice, and I have nothing to say against it, poor dear fellow," said Lady Manners, beginning to flounder in deep waters—"only these little ways, Hetty, may be carried too far. Don't misunderstand me. I have no fault to find with either him or you. But I think—we all think, dear—that it is not for your dignity to be treated like a plaything. You must riot mind my saying so. Who should tell you if your own mother should not? And I am not blaming you, love; I am only guarding you, shielding you from anything that might make you uncomfortable in after life to think of."

"Yes, mamma."

What did her mother mean—how much, how little?

Alas for the warning ! It was the old story of shutting the stable-door when the steed was stolen. The woman outruns the man in such matters; and here it was the pupil who had stolen a march on her preceptor.

" Yes, mamma/" said Hester in a low voice. " He is my cousin," she faltered the next minute. The argument he had himself used with Constance.

" He is ! And of course your father and I wish him to be treated as a near relation in every way. We are particularly glad that all of you young ones like him so much, and that he takes so much notice of you. Being so *very much*"—*emphatically*—"older, we could scarcely have expected that he would. It might have been supposed he would have had his own friends. I own," with a little glow of gratified feeling, " that I do feel pleased; I do feel the compliment of his coming among us so much. I like Simon extremely. There is a straightforward plainness, a perfect simplicity about him, which can be the result of nothing but a superior mind; there is a repose in his manner which is only seen among the very best-bred people. For your brothers—for Bertie in particular—I could riot desire a better companion ; and, indeed, only yesterday I said to papa how glad I was to think we should have such an influence over him when he is at home, for really, in general he is so turbulent, so wilful, and so determined to have everything his own way, that sometimes I hardly know how to put up with him. He is always worst when his own friends are staying with us; but I am in hopes that he will be a little more particular as to whom he brings down, since he has such an opinion of his cousin."

" But about you, Hester," continued she, after a minute's reflection. " It is such a small matter, my child, and so easily put to rights, that I am almost sorry that anything has been said. I would not have spoken if you had not forced me to do so. It is merely a little way Simon has—a manner to you that I don't notice to any of the others."¹

" He has, he has !" cried aloud a voice in Hester's heart.

" Do you know what I mean, my love ? I daresay you have not observed it; it is we older people who look on, who take heed of such things; we see the *beginnings*—the little feathers that show the way the wind blows. Cousins—even first cousins—must stop somewhere. I remember myself." proceeded Lady Manners, waxing eloquent, " how

difficult it was for my sisters and me, when I was about your age; we had two cousins—Hugh, and another who died——"

"I know," said Hester. "Percival. Well, mamma?"

"They had grown up with us, and as we had only one brother, you know, your uncle Henry, Simon's father, these cousins were almost the same to us as brothers would have been. They spent all their holidays at the Manor; and when they came home from Harrow and from Oxford, we welcomed them just as if we had been all one family. It was not till they grew to be quite grown men, and we were girls of eighteen and nineteen, that they left off kissing us, just as brothers would!"

She could hardly bring herself to tell such a tale; and had she not been preoccupied with the recollection, would certainly have wondered at its effect on her auditor. All Hester's indignation and her wrongs were for the moment forgotten, and without the smallest feign of honor, she was listening with a smile upon her face.

"Did they do it often, mamma?"

"Oh, well, I don't know about often," said Lady Manners, testily. "Quite often enough. It was really a ridiculous state of things. Percival was twenty-three, Hugh was only a year younger, and we did not like it at all."

"Did you not, mamma?" "But I," thought Hester, "liked it very much."

"It was altogether unsuitable," proceeded the mother, with energy. "There we were, young men and women, no longer girls and boys, mingling together without any one to have the slightest restraint upon us. Your uncle Henry was years and years older; and, indeed, he was married, and had a house of his own, and these two sons, Simon and Robert, at the very time I speak of. My father thought he was doing his orphan nephews a kindness, since they had no home of their own to go to, in giving them the run of his; and so long as we were all children it was all very well; but then, when we began to grow older, he found out his mistake."

"Oh!" said Hester, with great interest. "Go on, mamma."

"Well," proceeded Lady Manners, entering into the spirit of a narrator, "it ended as these things always do end. Poor Percival! He would not believe that Anue did not

care for him ! He used to hang about her for years, always hoping against hope, and she really could not shake him off. She pitied him, and up to a certain point she liked him, but it never could have gone further on her part. He was not a man to have had any sway over her, and she was one who must always have looked up to a husband. The man she really would have married did not, as you may have heard, come forward till it was too late. I think you must know about him ?"

"Yes—a little. But tell me all."

"He followed us to Italy, but she had begun to sink before he came. The end came on so rapidly that the doctors forbade the least excitement, and I fear even at the last the poor dear did not know all that he felt for her!"

"Surely she might have been told then ?"

"She might, and would. I would have taken it on myself to tell her, but we had no idea that the crisis was so near. We thought she might live through the winter at least, and then if she were very very carefully dealt with, and if her mind was kept perfectly quiet, hopes were still held out to us of her ultimate recovery. It is not for me to say," Lady Manners sighed; "we acted for the best; but I still believe that if she could have been allowed to see him—if he could have been permitted to watch over her and tend her—it would have done good, and not harm."

"Then there was Hugh, mamma !" Hester waited a due interval, and then started again in a lively voice. "I know what became of Percival, but what about Hugh !"

"Hugh," said her mother, with a faint tinge of colour in her cheek. "Oh, Hugh is alive, married, and prosperous."

"Ah, but——Now, mamma," said Hester, laughing.

"But what, you mischievous little face ?"

"Tell me about him; there's a good mother. I know there is something, but I never could make out what. Mamma, mamma, you cannot get out of it now! Was it he that—that you *did not like it at all' in, you know?"

"Hester!"

"Well, but just say, mamma. Did it too 'end in the t\ay it always does'? You said it always had the same end, didn't yon?"

"I am afraid this had. But it is hardly fair," proceeded

Lady Manners, with undeniable enjoyment, "considering that he is alive, and that I am alive——"

"But you are both married and happy!"

"And it is an old story. Well, I suppose there is no harm in speaking of it now. Hugh was quite as bad as Percival, Hester; though matters were brought to an end more quickly. We were told it was impossible——"

"We were told!" cried Hester. "Oho, mamma! That sounds much better. I was afraid poor Hugh had been turned off as Percival was. It was *we' this time, was it?"

"I was so young," pleaded her mother—"hardly older than you are now, Hetty; I had seen scarcely anything of the world. But still, I must say this for Hugh, that even if I had, I should have met with few to equal him! He was—he *is*, you know, exceedingly clever, and though not exactly good-looking, he had a resolute, expressive face, and a remarkable, fine, strongly-made, tall figure. Something like your cousin's—like Simon's. The same broad shoulders and erect carriage. The same kind of walk too. Simon reminds me frequently of Hugh, especially at a distance,—for their faces are not alike."

"Yes!" said Hester, with renewed zest. "Yes! Now go on, mamma, and don't stop! This is very interesting. I never heard a word of this before."

"You think it makes up for the lost walk]" said her mother, smiling, and secretly glad to have the matter so happily closed. "Well, you have not been a bad little body on the whole, so I suppose I must reward you. What do you want to know more?"

"Mamma, stop! Mamma, I have caught you. How came you to say that you could not shake them off? You did not *wish* to shake them off—to shake Hugh off, I mean!"

"Well, no, Hetty; but I was not thinking of myself just at the moment; I was thinking of Anne. No, I cannot say that I wished anything of the kind. I was well content to go on as we were, but Hugh was not, and that—in short, that was what led to an explanation," concluded she, lucidly,

"Do tell me about it," pleaded Hester. "How did he go on when the *explanation' was near? What did he do *just before*? How did he look? Did he say anything to show it was coming?"

"You don't expect me to remember his looks as well as

bis words, Hetty." (She remembered them perfectly all the same.) "But I will try to recall what went on as well as I can, though I confess I feel something of a traitor."

"Oh no, mamma. Not to me!"

"It was in the summer—at least it was at the end of the Bummer—that things came to a point. My father had been away, and though he had left our old aunt in charge, she was a mere nonentity—a feeble, selfish woman, who neither knew, nor cared to know, what we were all doing. Throughout the long vacation these cousins had been almost entirely at Lutteridge, and we had had nothing but riding, boating, and picnicing from morning till night—Percival always with Anne, Hugh with me. Your uncle Henry did come down now and then to see us, and there were other people in the house, but as we behaved outwardly with all propriety, nobody interfered. I see now that such carelessness on their part was very wrong, very reprehensible, and certainly it ruined the happiness of one at least. Percival never got over his attachment."

"But about Hugh?"

"One summer evening—it was after a dance at one of the neighbours'——"

"Oh, mamma, tell me the whole truth; don't stop to consider how much or how little I am to hear! What dance?"

"At Earl's Court," said Lady Manners, reluctantly. "We had been dancing a great deal together, and before the night was over——"

"Where?" demanded her daughter. "Where?"

"Where? What do you mean, child?"

"Where did he do it? Where did he speak? Not in the ball-room, I hope? I hate ball-room engagements."

"So do I," cordially agreed her mother. "But, you see, this was hardly a ball, and certainly it was not a ball-room engagement, in the popular acceptance of the term. Hugh was the last person to care for balls, unless—well, unless we were there."

"You are so modest, mamma, you can hardly bring yourself to say 'I.'"

"It was 'I' nevertheless," replied Lady Manners, unable to deny the charge. "But it was not only at balls: wherever we went they had the prior claim to us, which, as we chose to allow it, was undisputed by others. I am afraid it was during the evening of the ball, however, Hetty, that he spoke,"

"Where was it, mamma? In the garden? On the stairs?"

"How came you to guess? It was on the stairs. Then when my father came home he was sadly vexed."

"Was he? Because you were cousins?"

"No; I have reason to think that was not the cause, although grandpapa—I am afraid he was not quite truthful—did at first seek to make it out so. I think now that he must have imagined that it would be impossible for Hugh, without influence, to rise in his profession as he has done. He did not wish me to marry a poor man."

"Did you mind very much, mamma? Were you *dreadfully* sorry?"

"I think that at first I was *dreadfully sorry/ Hester."

"Then you plucked up heart, and married papa!"

"Not for several years. I had never seen papa at the time Hugh was dismissed/

"Poor Hugh!"

"Poor Hugh was far enough away when I was married. He was ordered at once never to come near the lipuse again, and we were not allowed even to hear about him as long as I was at home. Percival, whom my father knew he could trust, was forbidden to speak of him to us; of course, the least suspicion that Percival had any feelings of the same sort would have sent him into banishment likewise, but since he kept it for long afterwards to himself—indeed he never openly spoke at all, knowing that it would be useless—we, too, said nothing. We knew that Anne was unchangeable, and that, since she did not return his affection, there was no occasion to betray him. Grandpapa would not have troubled his head about either of them if the feeling had not been reciprocated by us."

After this, and throughout the drive which followed, Hester was as bright as a lark. It might almost have seemed as if the mental thunderstorm had cleared the sky, or at least as if all clouds had been lifted off it, since not another word was heard of rebellion or regrets.

She flourished her whip, laughed, chattered, and took the pony along at a pace which astonished her mother. Over the common, through the lanes, up the great Northern road, and back by the river-side they trotted fast and fearlessly; and having started so much later, they had not been long in the house again ere the walkers were heard in the porch.

CHAPTER XVI

ROWING HOME.

** At first a simple liking, and no more,
 He sits considering, 'Do I love, or not?'
 He seems the pleasing object to explore,
 ASmen appear to view a pleasing spot;
 Then forms a wish that Heaven would fix his lot
 In that same place; and then begins regret
 That 'tis not so. But may the prize be got?
 Then comes the anxious strife that prize to get,
 And then 'tis all he wants, and he must have it yet."
 —CRABBE.

"After all, you did enjoy your drive, I suspect/¹ said Lady Manners, as she lingered by the drawing-room fire, loth to leave it even for the one awaiting her up-stairs. "Say that you did, if you can, Hetty, or, at least, let the others see your bright face. It is quite gay now. I should be glad for them to know that you did not dislike being left to take care of your old mother quite so much as you thought you would."

"They shall see it," thought Hester. "He shall see it at least—Master Lutteridge shall! Wretch! To go off in that way! It was all very well for mamma to try and come between us—she does not understand; but he should not have given in so tamely. If he had been Hugh or Percival he would have made a stir."

"Mamma and I had a delightful drive," she said, loud enough to attract attention, when all were gathered in the room, and there was a momentary silence and sinking into easy-chairs. "We have only come in half an hour ago, and did not expect you nearly so soon."

Now how was it that, without speaking to or even looking at her cousin, Miss Hester was aware of how the person for whom her little speech was intended, took it to a nicety.

She knew the moment when he entered the room, though her head was turned the other way—knew that he stood still at the door, and was almost certain that he had been coming up to her, but had been checked by the sound of her own blithe accents.

Accordingly she instituted a running fire of questions

about the walk, plied Edward Searle with good things which he had no appetite for, and skipped from one to another, bent on effacing as completely as possible all recollections of the face which had haunted Simon throughout the afternoon.

He turned on his heel and walked to the fireplace.

The rest of the party were in excellent spirits,—even the young clergyman reviving under the good fortune of finding a vacant seat by Agatha's side. This was nothing new ; he was an old adorer, and the family had long been accustomed to look on him as such. No result was ever expected to come of it; and since it was tolerably evident that the walk had not been so enjoyable to him as it had to the others, Lady Manners felt she could do no less than invite him to remain to dinner.

The hospitality being extended to both visitors, neither were able to accept it. Mr Searle had an appointment; but the regret he testified was so unfeigned, that it was soon discoverable he only needed to have the invitation altered to the following evening to restore him to unanimity. Colonel Lutteridge was more brief in his denial. He had promised, he said, with a shade of irony in his tone, not to be out at dinner without letting his sister-in-law know not to wait for him, and it would not be fair to break his word without special necessity for so doing.

Of course a messenger was proffered, but declined with thanks. He would prefer to stay another day, but not the next day. He expected a friend then at Lutteridge. He did not look at Hester nor come near her, and yet she felt that she could have kept him with a word. "It will end as it always does !" she said, gleefully to herself. "Mamma is right. He is angry with me now—angry because I am pleased. He had expected to see me sorry, as I was when he left, and when he never made an attempt to help me. I have not forgiven you yet, cousin. But since you are not going to stay, and since I fancy you have missed me a little—just a very very little—I think I will take over your tea to you and see what will come of it. I must have a chance of telling you how badly you behaved to me, at least. It won't do either of us much good to sulk in different quarters of the room."

"Who is that for, Hester ?" said Agatha, seeing her sister, cup in hand, steering across the room, which, now all

in shadow, was full of treacherous pitfalls and dim obstructions.

"Allow me," said Edward Searle, darting forward.

Their united exclamations made Colonel Lutteridge turn round ; and as he took what she had brought for him, he looked inquiringly into the giver's face. Apparently he found in it something to bring him after her, for in a very few minutes he had followed to her corner, and sat down by her on the old settee.

"Bread and butter ? " said Hester, as innocently imagining he had come for something to eat. " Or cake ? "

"Thank you, no. Yes ; give me some cake, to eat which I must remain by this tray. I wish they would talk over there. Don't get up, Hester ; wait here till they do."

"Has everybody got what they want ? I must attend to them all," responded the tea-maker, looking assiduously about.

"Of course they have. You looked after every one of them before me. Now they are as silent as the grave, just because they have all got their cups and plates full. Ah I here is Sir John ! He will set them agoing."

He rose to shake hands with his uncle, and sat down again. Sir John had been shooting, and was eager for a listener. He stood in front of the tea-table, charmed to find his nephew there, explaining about this shot and that shot, the nature of the ground, and the working of his dogs, till Simon, wellnigh worn out with saying, "All ! Indeed ! Very good ! Excellent !" long after his attention had flagged, was ready to think he should, after all, have to depart without the few words he coveted from the silent girl at his side.

That she remained there—that she did not embrace the opportunity to slip away—was his only consolation.

Luck, however, was not altogether against him. It appeared that Sir John had not before seen the other guest of the day ; and his attention being at length gently drawn to the fact by his daughter, he was instantly anxious to make up for his apparent neglect

"Edward Searle 1" he said. "*Here !* Where ? In this room 1" wheeling about and looking round him. "Why, Edward," striding up to the young man, "never saw you till this moment ! Jane, give us a blaze. I thought -you were Jem all this time ! How long have you been here t And so I hear you are going to turn into a neighbour.

What does your father say to it? He will want to manage your parish as well as his own, eh? Now where do you think I have been to-day?"

Preliminary civilities disposed of, he was burning to begin over again his narrative, and, with his gun between his knees, pulled a chair in front of his victim, and pinned him down to the spot*.

The huge arm-chair thus wheeled round with its back to the tea corner, formed a regular rock of defence. His loud steady tones had scarcely got as far as "Now where do you think I have been to-day?" ere Simon had turned to his cousin; and while affecting to pass over her, and help himself afresh from the table, had taxed her with breach of faith to him.

"What have you to say, Hester? You threw me over remorselessly."

"Certainly. We throw over anybody if mamma requires us."

"Did she require it?"

"* Us, I said—not it"

"You meant it. I understood tolerably well all that passed before we went out. I did not blame you, little chick, for looking like a thunder-cloud. I was rather glad that you did; but what was the meaning of those superabundant spirits as soon as we came in? You thought to cheat me, did you?"

"I thought you might have put in a word for me."* Hester was still injured and unforgiving. (

"That was it! O——h!" his brow cleared at once, "Now, I comprehend the whole. It seemed to me that your face had changed—that it was not toward me as it had been——"

"My face had nothing to do with it. Besides, you have no right to look at my face."

"Not even as a cat may look at a king? I had a very good look at it, however, my little termagant, and never did I see it half so fierce before. Yet I think, Hester—I think there were tears not far off. And you thought I might have put in a word for you! But what could I say? Tell me what I should have done. I am ready to be reproved—corrected. As for me, my walk was spoilt; but that was nothing. Show me how I could have amended my error——" He could have discussed the subject by the

hour, but the ladies rose at the sound of the dressing-bell. Perforce his departure must be taken, and she could but feel that her hand was held long and pressed closely, ere he was gone.

It fell out that the next day was warm and balmy, as autumn days occasionally are, and a scheme of going on the river, originating with Bertie Manners, who had returned in the morning for a brief stay at home ere he quitted it for a season, was unanimously agreed to by Agatha, Jane, and Hester, who had fixed on nothing for the afternoon.

Perhaps some of them half expected the visitor who walked in ere they had separated to make ready. Colonel Lutteridge had been in Seeley with Sir John, and now looked up the boys, he said, to engage them to shoot with him on the next day. It was too late to go out that day, and though Sir John invited him to take a walk instead, he did not close with the proposal.

A row up the river suited him much better.

Sir John went up to his wife. Who was suffering from cold—she had caught cold during the long drive of the day before—and the young ones hurried off merrily down the slopes.

Jem was already at the boat-house, preparing to go out on his own account. It needed only to exchange the skiff he had just brought out for a good-sized broad-bottomed tub, and he was delighted to make one of the crew. The three girls sat together in the stern, while their brothers rowed, and their cousin smoked in the bow, with Jem's retriever at his feet. Several other boats were passed—it appeared they were not the only people who had been tempted by the beauty of the afternoon—and congratulations on it, and on their cleverness in having made such an excellent use of it, passed between one and another.

They rowed up about four miles, and halted for the business of the inevitable pipe. "What do you want to smoke for?" was protested in feminine accents to no purpose. Rest they must—even Agatha would allow that: well then, why not smoke? She was not required to stay and partake of the refreshment. She and the other two girls might land and take a walk, and return in half an hour. There were plenty of pretty walks about, and they had spoken of gathering ferns.

It was a good arrangement, or at least the boys thought

so; arid no further objection being offered, the sisters rambled about for the time given, and returned punctually at its close. Of course they were kept waiting; Bertie had objections to urge—delays wherewith to tease Agatha,

At length, however, and in what was really very good time, they pulled alongside grumbling, the elder sisters were handed in, and the boat was gently pushed back a few paces.

»

"Hester is going to sit with me in the bow/¹ said Simon, who had jumped ashore to superintend the embarkation.

Agatha protested. How could he think of such a thing? It would be very unsafe. There was not room—never had been considered to be room for more than one in the bow. There was more than room by her and Jane.

"Plenty of room here," said Simon, taking Hester's hand. "Now, Hetty, steady! Don't move till I tell you." She was silent—unwilling to take either part \ taken by surprise too. He had not said a word of such an arrangement to her.

"Bertie," cried his eldest sister, "you know how easily these boats are upset. Don't you think it would be very unsafe?"

"Oh, unsafe!" Bertie laughed in derision. "You girls think everything is unsafe. One seat is as good as another."

"You know how particular papa is."

"I know about boats as well as papa, and so does Simon."

"Such nonsense in Hester!" muttered Agatha in Jane's ear. "I suppose she asked him to take her. She really ought not to do these things; she ought to be more careful. Mamma said she had given her a hint too. Oh!" with a little cry of alarm, as the boat certainly did turn slightly over when pressed by her sister's foot.

"All right, Agatha," said Jem, kindly. "It was only that she did not step into the middle. Do remember to step into the middle, Hester, *always*"

"I know it is not safe," said Agatha, with some real and much apparent anxiety. "How can there be room for two people on that little bit of a scat? And look how near the water's edge they are!"

"Fudge!" said Jem. "Here, Dash," to the dog, "you come here, sir, and lie down—down. There, you see, he'll lie like a log. Now you're all right, Agatha," as with a head-long plunge Dash roiled to the bottom and curled up there.

"He'll keep the balance!" added Jem. "He'll weigh as much as any of you, I daresay!"

"Such nonsense in Hester!" muttered Agatha again. Then she called aloud to her sister. "I do wish you would not lean over the side in that way, Hester. It makes me quite frightened to see you. I know you will be in the water before any of us can see—it is getting so dark."

"All right, Agatha." This time it was the Colonel's deep voice which spoke from the bow. "Don't you be afraid. I'll put my arm round the little one and hold her fast."

In the silence which followed his conciliatory overture he SAW nothing. He did as he promised, drawing her close to him, while the deepening twilight of the November afternoon gradually fell on all around. Then they began to talk. "Look at that poplar, Hester. What a giant fellow he is! Look at his long shadow stretching right across the river. I like poplars; do you?"

"I like them," said she, "because they give me the idea of sentinels left to die, each at his post, deserted by all around, yet true to themselves and their duty."

"What do you know about sentinels, child?"

"I know—I have read."

"And I have seen; but I should never have thought of that. Hester, whenever I speak to you I wonder where you have learned so much. I seem to have gone through the world blindfold."

"Don't laugh at me."

"I am not laughing; I am not in the mood for laughing. How much I have lost in my life; how little I have gained! When I look back and think of the years I have wasted, the opportunities I have thrown away, the good I might have done, and the happiness I might have had, if——" He stopped abruptly.

"If what?"

"If I had lived here and known you."

"But," said Hester, puzzled, "surely it is better to have been of some use in the world—to have done something for your queen and country, given up for them, fought for them—oh, I think a soldier's life must be the grandest there can be! I would not live at home and do nothing, if I could go and fight, and work, and make a name—feel one's self of use in the world, and—and——"

He smiled. The old dull routine, the petty chatter, the

aimless round, rose before him; and yet it seemed a shame, even if he could have done so, to open the eyes of the enthusiastic maiden.

"That is your idea of a soldier's life," he said. "Battles, and glory, and epaulets?"

"No, of course not—of course not. What nonsense you talk! I know you have long marches to take, and that you are often at a station for months together, away from all your friends and relations, and that you have hospitals to look after, and children's schools, and other things——"

"Upon my word you know a great deal."

"You mean that I know nothing at all. But I don't care. I say it is a fine life. You are only making a fuss, as Bertie does, and as they all do, to try and get pitied!"

"Perhaps I was, Hester; and you don't intend to pity me. You think I should have stayed where I was, and not have come home to interfere with my nephew's prospect[^] and take the reins of government out of the hands of Constance, eh?"

He was looking at her keenly, but she did not wince. "No," said she, promptly. "I think nothing of the kind. I think you have been away quite long enough; but I don't think you have thrown away your life by having given up some part of it for the good of others."

"The question is," said Simon, "whether it was for their good. But never mind," clearing his brow; "you can't help me to decide that point. I shall do my best among my own people for the rest of my days, and hope for more apparently good results. I am come to settle down at last, Hester; how do you like the idea, the prospect of having me always about? Am I a bore to you all? Do I come over too often? Shall you feel it a relief when I am away now and then?"

Something in the hesitation of her laugh was answer enough; he was satisfied to have no other. "How quiet it is!" he resumed, presently. "What a still, solemn landscape, and how easily the oars dip in and out, without a sound! We are going with the stream now, I suppose, but one could not tell it; there is no current visible anywhere. The banks seem as if they fell behind us, rather than as if we glided past them. Are you enjoying yourself, little one?"

"Very much—very much."

" Very much What a vehement little soul it is! What a number of things you like 'very much/ Hester. I wonder, now, if you extend the feeling towards people—whether you like—well, me—very much] You won't tell me that, I suppose? However, say, do you prefer your seat here to the one you had coming? Do you like being with me in the bow, or would you rather be down at the other end with your sisters 1"

" Oh, here—here, of course."

" Why here ?"

" I can see much better. I can look into the water. It is nicer every way. Here, it is delightful; down there it was—stupid."

After this nothing was said for some time. Then a remark she made, on the flight of a bird passing, drew his head again down to hers; he appeared to have been thinking, for, instead of answering, he said softly, " Do you like me, Heater ?"

She made a petulant movement.

"Don't be cross," said he; "I did not mean to vex you. Give me your hand. Here, under the plaid. How warm the little fingers are ! No—don't snatch it away; as long as you leave it there I will ask you no more questions; I will reserve them for——" He stopped, wondering in his own mind if she had any suspicion what he meant.

Oh, why was he so old, or why was she so young? He would have given half he possessed to sweep away the twenty years between them, to make sure that she understood what she was doing—felt all that the moment meant. He half hoped she did, and yet he durst not risk it without further evidence—something more to go upon.

" You are not angry with me, Hester 1"

"No."

" Nor put out, nor annoyed ?"

"N—no."

"Why are you looking down so pertinaciously into the water?"

No answer.

" Is it to avoid looking at me ?"

No answer.

" Hester, if I thought you were not happy I would not keep you here a moment longer 1 Listen. They are talking of landing to walk home. Shall I give my vote for it, or

against it? Shall we get out, or shall we stick by the boat? You shall say; I will be guided entirely by you. Shall we go, eh?"

"No."

"It is so much nearer," said Agatha's voice in the distance. "We are barely a mile from home at this point, if we go across the meadows; and the river takes such a curve, that we are at least two by water."

"What does it signify? It is down stream," said Jem.

"Just as you like," said Bertie.

"I really think we had better. It is getting dark so fast, I think mamma will be growing nervous."

"It is lighter on the water than on the land; but do as you please," said her eldest brother, who, for a wonder, did not raise his voice in dissent; the truth being that he had no objection to having the boat lightened, and had the proposal come from any one but Agatha, he would have seconded it heartily. But the chronic feud between the two did not admit of any armistice. He could not bring himself to do more than leave her to work the matter herself, unsupported by him.

She appealed to Jane. Jane agreed; and that not solely because Agatha bid her. She had quietly watched the two in the bow, and thought, as her mother had done, that matters were being carried too far. She was not personally interested—had not Agatha's feelings on the subject; but she had a sense of what was right and fitting, which was now roused to indignation. She thought her sister ought not to be treated so; she did not like to see Hester so engrossed by their cousin—so ready to do whatever he told her—so entirely mastered by him in whatever he proposed. Neither of them were behaving well; and as, in common with all the rest, she had no conception of anything on Simon's part beyond the merest fatherly, friendly, cousinly liking, she thought he ought to know better than to manifest it in such a fashion.

She was now quite of Agatha's opinion as to the expediency of quitting the boat; but their united voices could not prevail.

Simon declared the expedition would be a failure if cut short at this point. The meadows were dripping, a white steam was spreading all over them even now, and would be worse every moment, and, moreover, he would be landed on

the wrong side for Lutteridge. Surety Agatha would not be so cruel, so barbarous, as to land him four miles from home at that hour)

Certainly not! But why should he not go on in the boat?

Were they then to be without attendants? He would not hear of that; if they went, he would go. He would certainly see them safe home.

She protested in vain, and a dispute seemed imminent.

"What on earth is it all about?" said Bertie at last. "Pull on, Jem."

"I am sure you will both be tired," murmured Agatha, desperate.

"They are hardly rowing at all, you see, Agatha," answered her cousin, "willing to pacify; " they can almost rest on their oars and let the boat float. Though there is no current to be seen, it must be stronger than we think."

"You do not take an oar yourself, however," said she, feigning raillery.

"I will, if either of them are tired. Tired, Jem? Shall I take yours, Bertie?"

Of course they were not. What did he mean? A paddle like this tire them! The girls could pull as far.

After that suggestion they would have died sooner than have yielded their oars, and nothing but the regular dip of these and an occasional low murmur at the upper end of the boat broke the silence all the way home. The elder sisters were too much annoyed, too indignant, to care for conversation; each was brooding over her own thoughts, and the boatmen, from different reasons equally silent, drew their long strokes in placid enjoyment of the scene.

"Well, a row like this is really rather nice," said Bertie, as at length, having landed their cousin on his side of the river, they pulled ashore, left the boat, and resumed their jackets. "Holloa! Whoo—oop! Good night!" in answer to the "Good night" which came down to them from the heights on the other side. "Has he got no further than that?" added he to Jem.

It would have astonished them both somewhat if they had followed, and, unperceived, had seen him stand still, and at length turn, deliberately retrace his steps, and walk slowly along the river-path away from his destination. He could not yet face Constance; he wanted to be by himself to think.

Could he make her happy? Was he to believe that one so young and fair and sweet could be content to pass her life with him? If not, it must come to an end this delicious dream; he durst not venture on such another afternoon—it was too bewildering, intoxicating. He was sure now of what he wanted. It was no longer to keep one thrilling voice by his ear, to tame a wilful child, to gratify a moderate measured affection—he must have her for his own.

Now how about his chances, seeing it was all or nothing? Up to this time he thought,—he was a modest man, but still he thought he could be sure that she loved him as much as, so far, he had loved her. She had allowed that she was satisfied in his presence, with his arm around her and her hand in his. She had never rebuffed him, never pained him, never slipped out of his way. All as yet had gone well, but the step he presently desired to take was of such a nature that if he did not gain what he sought, he must lose all that he actually possessed. It was a terrible leap in the dark; but be the result what it might, he felt that he had no choice but to take it.

His own sensations, the throbbings of his pulses, the phrases which formed themselves in his innermost heart,—all these were so many tell-tales of what was hidden there. The moment that the truth dawned upon him, the moment he knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that he loved his cousin—that moment he decided to ask her to be his wife. But, alas I he should have done so before.

PART V.

CHAPTER XVIL

"IT WAS FOR HEBSTBR^ OWN SAKE I DID IT."^M

" Better a little chiding than a great deal of heartbreak '
—Merry Wton c Windsor.

SOLITUDB would have been no less welcome to Hester than to Simon, but since she could not expect any such luxury she made the best of matters as they were. With a jaunty step she accompanied her sisters ujt to the house, and her air of complacency and inward satisfaction, her utter disregard of the impending reproaches, was the last drop in the cup of their exasperation. Agatha was dangerous—in a white heat—resolved on strong measures; Jane even was urged to language which she seldom made use of; but Hester laughed at them both.

What had they to complain of 1 What was the matter 1 Was it because they had not got out at the point? gone home across the marshes 1—they were marshes, not meadows, at this time of year—was that why they were both so cross and disagreeable? She would go back to the boys, since she was to be found fault with for their misdemeanours.

" You had better have gone home with Simon," sneered Agatha.

" So I had, much better for all the pleasure your company and Jane's is likely to prove. Simon was a great deal more agreeable."

" Really, Hester, I was ashamed of you," said Jane, seriously. " You ought to have come and sat with us—with Agatha and me—as we told you. You had no business up

at that end of the boat at all. And—together, it was not nice,"

"Do you mean to say that I may not sit at one end of the boat with my own cousin, whom we see every day, because the rest of you are at the other? You will say next that I ought not to sit in the same boat with him! I never heard such a thing in my life!"

"You know very well that it was not merely sitting at his end of the boat."

"That was what you said!"

"You must have settled it beforehand," put in Agatha.

"I never heard a word till he said it out before you all!"

"Then why did you not stop it? You could have said immediately that you would prefer sitting with us."

"I should have told a lie if I had."

"Hester!" remonstrated Jane.

"How can you talk so?" reproved Agatha. "Such a word to use! I never feel sure what things you will say. I do not wonder at mamma not liking you to be alone with Simon. You will not take a word from anybody——"

"I don't know what all this is about," cried Hester, at last. "I wish you would let me manage my own affairs. Scolding away—both of you—with nothing in the world to scold about! If any one was to blame, it was Simon—why don't you preach to him? I never said a word; I never took any part in anything; and yet you blaze up like two furies, and turn all your wrath upon me! You could smile upon him to the last, but the moment his back is turned you begin to rail at us both! I suppose the whole storm is because he asked me instead of one of you to be his companion; *that* is the only thing I can think of; and it is very hard that I should have to bear the brunt if he displeases you." This was a dexterous feint to throw off and silence the enemy, now that the near proximity of the house began to cast its shadow over the three. Still the little maid was in too high a state of exaltation and bliss to be troubled with any deep forebodings. It must end now, must end soon, she hoped, she felt a firm conviction, "as such things always do end."

Poor Lady Manners! Could she have known the effect her admirable lesson had had in reality! Could she have suspected how it was at this time steeling her daughter's courage to face the future, she would almost have shed tears over her, deluded as she believed the child to be.

"Hester! Hester!" came the boys¹ voices from behind, AS their quicker steps made them gain on those in front.

"Well?" said Hester, turning gladly back. But the next moment her heart, which had been beating evenly enough before, began to patter loud and fast as she beheld their faces brimming over with ominous mirth.

"I say, you had a jolly time, hadn't you?" cried Bertie. "By Jove! I had no idea Simon had been such an old flirt!"

"I tell you what, Hetty, you don't catch me going out to make No. 3 at any of your promenades again, I can tell you! I have no fancy for playing gooseberry," subjoined Jem.

"Be quiet." Hester frowned to enforce her imperative whisper. "Bertie, Jem, do take care. Don't go on before them!" looking after her sisters. "I don't mind your laughing when there is no one by," she went on, bent on pacification, "but please, please don't say anything—you have no idea——"

"Oh, that's it, is it? Oh!" said Bertie, intelligently. "I saw Agatha was savage. She did not approve of being passed over?"

"They wanted to walk, you know," evasively. "And Agatha always does like to get her own way."

"That she does!"

"I thought it had been something to do with Simon," said Jem.

"Well," said Hester, hesitating, "she is put out with him too."

"Eh?" said Bertie, suspiciously. "Holloa! I believe you know more than you want to say. Well, I'm not the one to spoil sport, and upon my word it was fun to see Agatha's face. I studiously rowed as slowly as ever I could to prolong the agony. She was always pretending she was cold, and it was dark, and everything she could think of to hurry us on. But I saw through her! You ought to thank me, Het; you owe me a debt of gratitude. If it had not been for me you would have been put alongside an hour ago."

"Much obliged, I'm sure." But the gay retort sank away to a whisper, and her face fell the next moment, at a summons to her mother's room. She knew what that meant. There would be no question now of putting down the attack with a high hand, as in the first instance she had

done; nor yet of turning it aside with easy pleasantry, as in the second; and the only defence—the one, true, real, honest defence which alone could justify all—must never be spoken. Bat it was hard that it should not be understood without words: she felt that both he and she might have been trusted; that it needed not to have been thought so altogether out of the bounds of possibility that he should love her, and desire to make her his own. Certainly, were she not to believe this she would have nothing to say—nothing. But then, you see she did believe it, only, unfortunately, she could not say so, could not have said it had she even been given the chance. That, however, at least, she would be spared; she guessed what would be said, how she would be rebuked and admonished in general terms, how her mother, herself loathing the task, would slur it over quickly and have done with it, scarcely liking to hint at what she so strongly disliked, and thankful when her duty had been done.

It would be disagreeable, but Hester thought she could bear it. With Simon's words still ringing in her ears, with his clasp still warm upon her hand, she was lifted above much.

But she had to go through more than she had bargained for. Feeling that she had been too reticent before, Lady Manners was resolved to be explicit now. If it had been by Agatha only that the evil report had been brought—Agatha being known to exaggerate, and be occasionally prejudiced—it might have been taken in a modified form; but Jane was to be trusted. Jane was never unjust—was never known to make mischief.

And now here was even the indulgent, forbearing peace-maker of the family up in arms, to the full as indignant as her sister! Feeling all the weight of such an ally, Agatha, with the wisdom of the serpent, stood back and let Jane speak.

A few words explained all, and by the time the trio behind reached the front-door, Lady Manners' maid was waiting to intercept them.

"Whew !" said Jem, with a comical look. "Poor Het!"

"Brazen it out, I would !" whispered Bertie. "Don't let Agatha have it all her own way. She is not to twist mamma round her finger. Stick up to them well, Hetty!" nodding to her as she went up-stairs.

But no Agatha was there to be stuck up to. Not a woid could Lady Manners have spoken had such an auditor been present: so soon as she had heard the accusation she had dismissed the accusers, and she now sat alone and terrible, loathing, as we have said, the task her conscience would not let her shrink from. Her very repugnance wrought her up to increased severity. Her daughter—the one she loved the best—ought to share the pain she felt—ought to learn a woman's lesson.

And that lesson was, it must be confessed, enforced with unsparing tongue. Not with raised voice, not with gross epithets—oh dear, no; but words were spoken, hopes were dashed to the ground, a heart was crushed, and the life well-nigh wrung out of it, all in one short half hour.

Jem, hanging about the stairs, like Moses* sister of old, to see how it fared with her, was scared by the apparition of Hester's face when at length she emerged from the interview. He seized her, and would have questioned and consoled, but she wrenched herself from his grasp and hurried past. What if she should meet any of the others, with such eyes and such a face? Not even Jem, her dear, kind, understanding brother, could keep her from that haven of refuge she sought, and up she flew to reach it.

*• And I think I shall not have to speak to her again," reflected the parent, calming down into judicious complacency. "I had to be exceedingly serious. Such a thing was never heard of! I am astonished at Simon. I thought, considering all I told Hester yesterday, that she herself would have been more careful; but it seems not to have had the slightest effect. I shall take very good care that nothing of this sort ever happens again. Come in."

It was Jem who had tapped at the door, and who now entered, untidy and unready as usual, with a wistful smile upon his face. "You have had it out with Hester, mamma; I met her running up-stairs just now, with all the starch taken out of her. Have you been down upon her awfully?"

"I don't know what you call being 'down upon her,'" said his mother, shortly. "I had to speak to Hester very severely—very severely indeed. I never had to speak to any child of mine about such conduct before, and I hope I shall never have to do so again. The idea of such a thing!"

"I am afraid you have been awfully down upon her."

"My dear, what would you have? Am I to allow one

sister to behave, as I never have, and never will permit the others to do t It was for Hester's own sake I did it. I am sorry that you and Bertie should have known anything of the matter; but since you were both present, and saw it all, you ought to know how very much I consider her in fault."

"It was not her so much as he."

"Very true; but I cannot speak to him. Although, Jem, I intend to *show* him pretty plainly that there is to be no repetition of such doings. At the same time, you must know that no young woman can be taken liberties with, except with her own free will."

"Liberties!" said Jem, deprecatingly. "You know, mamma, he thought it was only Hester."

"It has been 'only Hester' too long. We passed it over as long as we could;—his being so much older, and our own near relation, I thought it best to take no notice, hoping it might pass off without any disagreeable feeling arising between us. It is awkward having anything of that kind—would be more than awkward in this case. We wish to be as kind as possible to Simon, but if he abuses our **confidence**."

"That's a shame. He is as good a fellow as ever lived I"

"You ought not to speak to me in that way, Jem. You ought not to say it is 'a shame.' No one can think more highly of your cousin than I do—than I have done up to the present time; but he has, I must own, disappointed me—hurt me very much in this matter. I could not have believed he would have treated one of my daughters so!"

"Mamma, you speak as if——"

«As if what?"

"As if," said her son, with an embarrassed laugh—"as if it were something awfully bad. You are making far too much of it. What did he do after all?"

"If you choose to take it in that way, my dear, of course I can say nothing." Lady Manners drew herself up, and her eyes sparkled.

"Of course," she continued, "if you and Bertie choose to encourage your sister, and tell her it was nothing after all, I may as well hold my peace. She will attend to you more than to me, I daresay! I might as well have spared myself the pain of speaking to her on the subject, if she is to be taught that I am only a foolish, ignorant person, who knows nothing about the matter!"

"Mamma, I only meant to say, that when you talked about *treating one of your daughters so,¹ any one would have supposed he had done a great deal more than merely put his arm round Hester to keep her from falling out of the boat."

"Was there the slightest danger of her falling out?"

"Agatha thought there was."

"Agatha told me she was never more shocked in her life."

"I daresay," said Jem, angrily. "She always goes ajid tells. What business had she to come to you making mischief?"

"% You would have preferred that I should not know, I can believe." This was a point on which Lady Manners was vulnerable.

"Let Hetty tell herself. Or Jane. Why need Agatha always be the one to fly and report everything?"

"Jane told me more than Agatha did. Jane was the one who said the most: it must have been bad indeed for Jane to think so much of it."

"It was just what I told you."

"You have not told me-anything."

"He took her to sit with him in the bow, and Agatha Called out that it was not safe, and that she was sure Hester would fall overboard, and a lot of that sort. Then Simon said he would put his arm round her to hold her safe. He only said it to satisfy Agatha; he never would have done it but for her. Upon my honour, mamma, that is the whole story."

"But," said Lady Manners after a pause, during which she had time to reflect that the story in these new hands did undergo a wonderful collapse, "they sat thus all the way home, and refused to get out when the others wished to do so."

"Nobody did wish it but Agatha. Agatha wanted to ge,¹ out and land at the willow fence behind the long island. They would have had to walk all across those long marshy meadows, and through the woods, home by themselves—for we must have taken on the boat—and, of course, we would not have let Simon go with them, to have all that round afterwards 2 It would have been the stupidest thing to do! Agatha no more wanted it than—than anybody; she only did it to plague us all. Jaue only agreed because she alwayi

says *yes' to everything. I thought it quite rude the way Agatha went on. Simon hardly said a word either way."

"And Hester?"

"Hester never opened her lips."

"But Agatha said she was quite wild and flighty, making game of it all afterwards."

"Because she saw no harm in it, don't you see, mamma? I do wish you had not been down upon her so—so awfully."

She began to wish it a little herself. She bethought her of sundry expressions which had escaped in the heat of the moment, and would have recalled them if she could. She had been worked up to speak in the excitement of the first shock by the united representations of the two on whom she relied, and justly, for discretion; their joint account had been such as to admit of no delay in arraigning the culprit.

Well, she hoped it had been for the best, and it was some comfort to think that no more was likely to be required. But to Jem's repeated aspiration she returned no answer, and it by no means irritated her as at first. He was a constant mediator; she well knew his tap at the door after a conference, and his blundering attempts, which were certain, in the primary instance, to draw down the vials of wrath on his own head,—but in the long run she rarely failed to be softened by his influence.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "I am glad there is anything you can say, my dear, to extenuate the fault; but I really cannot see that, considering what I understood at first, I could have spoken to Hester otherwise than I have done. I am sure if you knew what it cost me to have to speak on such a subject at all——"

"Well, but mamma, don't let Agatha and Jane crow over her."

"You are not just to your sisters, Jem. They would not do such a thing. It was their bounden duty to let me know what went on to-day, considering that I was not there to see for myself. How am I ever to trust Hester out of my sight, if I have no confidence in her discretion! I would not have her stay at Lutteridge now for the world!"

"Not with Constance?"

"Constance is the last person I would trust her with," avowed Lady Manners, in the ardour of the moment. "I know Constance too well; and had I entertained the least suspicion of Simon's taking such notice of Hester, when she

was at the Manor lately, nothing would have induced me to let her go. But I thought he was the last man in the world—I never thought he talked to girls at all."

"He always talks to Hester, mamma; he's fond of her, of course. But there was surely no harm in his sitting with her and talking to her to-day,—nothing to go and make a story about——"

"There was *something* 9"

"They are great friends, you know."

"I understand. Well, Constance may ask many times before Hester goes to stay with her again!"

"Perhaps she won't ask."

"Not ask?"

"I don't believe Constance cares for Simon's being here so often."

"Perhaps not. But I should not imagine," said Lady Manners, loftily, "that he will concern himself much as to that. It is natural that he should like to come, and will not regard absurd suspicions. We shall make no change towards him; there will be no decrease of friendly welcome because of what happened to-day, and what I am willing to believe was through mere thoughtlessness on his part. But one thing I am resolved on—where he goes, Hester shall not go; what he does, she shall not join in."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"I NEVER WANT TO SEE HIS FACE AGAIN."

"To look a sorrow in the face,
False magnitude imparts .
All sorrows look immensely large
Unto our little hearts."

—FABER.

For all that had come and gone, Hester was obliged to go down to dinner as though there had been nothing; and it may be presumed that her spiritless manner and pale tear-stained face caused some surprise to Edward Searle, who, shy as he always was in the presence of Agatha, usually found relief in the lively chatter of her youngest sister. He found he?

no help to him now; his sallies were unresponded to; and at length it became obvious, even to his preoccupied observation, that something was the matter. Sympathising, and yet unable to do more, all the attention he could proffer was a large fire-screen, which, having wheeled up to Hester's chair, he insisted on placing before her. The act, she could not tell why, annoyed Lady Manners. She was still displeased with her daughter—still regarded her as under the ban; and felt that, until her own hand had been extended in forgiveness, it was not for Edward Searle, nor for any one else, to soften the sentence. Satisfactory as it was in one way to perceive its effects, she experienced, moreover, some irritation that these should be visible to other eyes than her own: could she have said what she wished, she would have dictated an inward martyrdom, combined with outward serenity.

"Do let Hester alone," she said to Jem, as she observed him in his own clumsy fashion endeavouring to "make it up" to his sister. "It is right that she should suffer, and it will not do any good to draw attention to her. I can see that Edward¹—he had been "Ed ward" to them from early years—"notices already that there is something amiss. I do wish Hester could learn to control her feelings/

"Why should she go to bed?" further demanded she of Jane, who, now melted to pity, offered the gentle suggestion. "Why should she need you, or any one else, to come and ask me? Late? It is not late at all. It is barely half-past nine. Let Hester speak to me herself if she wants to go; it is absurd for her to keep away from us all in that marked manner, making herself conspicuous: she ought to know better than to let every one into her feelings as a child would."

"Mamma," said Bertie, scarcely taking the precaution of lowering his voice, "what is the matter with Hetty? Have you been pitching into her about Simon? She looks like a half-drowned robin, with her feathers all the wrong way!"

"She is very foolish to look anything of the kind."

"Oh, the poor little soul! So that's it! I'll engage she'll be a good girl from henceforth, and behave, as nurse used to say."

"I sincerely hope she will."

"Simon is the last fellow I should have dreamed of a girl's going on with."

fiis mother winced.

"It was the richest joke," continued he ; "if it had been any one else——Eh 1 What ?"

"Do take care, my dear; I would not have you overheard for the world. It was," said Lady Manners, equal to the occasion, "a mere error in prudence, which any one of her age, barely out of the schoolroom, might make once in a way, without thinking. Of course," emphatically, "now that it has been put before her, she is vexed with herself, and very properly so : she will never be so thoughtless again. Hester, my love, bring your little chair here—that one; I have slipped a stitch, and no one but my own little knitting-woman can pick it up for me."

Bertie had involuntarily accomplished that which Jem and Jane had alike failed to bring about; but it may be doubted whether he had as much interest as they had in watching the hand which now lay on the brown head, bent over the task thus timely furnished. Bertie seldom looked into anybody's affairs, unless they were absolutely forced upon his notice; unless some suggestion or deprivation in the months that followed reminded him of that afternoon, it never recurred to his memory. For the moment, however, he was indubitably on Hester's side; Agatha was the only one of the family circle who was not altogether pleased to see the little chair by the side of the big chair once more. She thought that her sister had been forgiven too soon—had been too early in the day restored to favour. She recollected the cheery welcome which had greeted them on their return from walking the afternoon before, and felt that, as the admonition which had been delivered then had been of none effect, even the present more stringent one was likely to pass off without better results. She sang, and played for Mr Searle to sing, and talked to him between whiles with her accustomed grace and dignity, but she did not approach the other end of the room.

"Hester used to sing that with us," said Edward, holding up an old favourite. "Shall we have it ?"

"I think Hester has a headache,"¹ replied Miss Manners, feeling sufficiently convinced of the truth of her statement to have no hesitation in making it—since violent weeping is the surest recipe for headache known. "However, I will Ask her. Hester, Edward wishes to have 'Night;' can you come and take your part ?"

"She is being useful to me just now," interposed their mother's voice; "leave * Night' for another evening, Agatha, and let us have your and Jane's pretty new duet—my one, you know."

"Mamma, we have sung it already!" Nothing but extreme annoyance could have betrayed a young lady of such excellent breeding into the *brusquerie*. Agatha rose from the piano, and would sing no more.

"Oh, don't go!"¹¹ implored her companion. "Let me look over the portfolios, and see what new things you have got. I don't wonder at Lady Manners asking to have that duet again; it was lovely, and I could listen to it half-a-dozen times in an evening."

"Of course, if they will talk, mamma cannot hear what we are singing when the piano is at such a distance from her," explained the artiste, recovering. A slight to her music was what tried Agatha's temper more than anything, but the compliment, and the tact which supplied it, were equally soothing. "Mamma says she never can enjoy music when anything else is going on," added she, anxious to make the best of it. Edward Searle really was musical; Agatha loved to be thought so; he liked Agatha, and understood her; accordingly her attempts were tolerated because of herself, and he was smiled on because of his toleration. "Does your cousin sing?" he inquired, presently.

"Our cousin Simon?"

"Simon? Colonel Lutteridge, I mean. Is he Simon? *

"Yes."

"Is he musical?"

"Oh dear, no. He does not know one note from another."

"Ah! Curious! One can hardly believe in such a deprivation. But I suppose such semi-complete people are themselves really unaware of the extent of their loss."

"I suppose so. People have different gifts, you know."

"What does your cousin do? How does he employ himself?"

"Oh, he finds plenty of things to look after. He is not an idle man."

"Is he going into Parliament?"

"Not that I know of. Papa thought he would, at first, but he does not seem to care about it himself; and then, you see, there is no opening. It would never do for him to represent any county but this."

" I suppose he manages his estate himself t"

"Ye—es. At least he will, presently. Only, having been in India all his life, he cannot be expected to know much about it as yet. Mr Lewis is really a first-rate person—even papa allows that; and he has looked after Lutteridge ever since Simon inherited it—ever since Simon was a mere boy, in short."

" Then what has your cousin left for him to do ?"

"I really do not know," said Agatha, laughing. "He will attend county meetings, and quarter-sessions."

"County meetings once a month, and quarter-sessions once a quarter!"

"He shoots."

"The shooting will soon be over."

" Well, Edward, you must ask him himself."

"What L want to know is," said Edward, coining to the point at last, "whether he has anything in the world to amuse him but coming over to Wancote?"

" Oh, that," said Agatha, demurely; " I am sure I cannot tell you. All I can say is, there is very little going on here to amuse him or any one."

" He was here both to-day and yesterday."

" And probably will be here to-morrow and the day after."

" Do you mean that, Agatha ? "

"I do indeed. Very few days pass that he does not look in at some time or other. When the boys are gone, of course we shall not see him so often; but if they are not shooting together, they are arranging about shooting, and as the two grounds march, they generally end here."

"Never there?"

"The house is much further off; Lutteridge is a good deal further away from the river than we are—from the boat-house at least."

" I, however, shall have but little time for morning calls," interposed he ; "I shall have other things to do than shooting, and making arrangements for shooting. If you do not see me except at long intervals, you will know that it is my work, not my will, that hinders me. My time will be more fully taken up than Colonel Lutteridge's this winter, I suspect," he observed, moodily.

" Of course we shall understand that. But still we shall inert, you in the evenings now and then, I daresay. And

we must have those musical afternoons we talked about. We have spoken about them to Gertrude Parker already, and we have wanted a good tenor for so long that we shall depend upon you whenever we fix anything."

And with this she rose and closed the piano resolutely. At his first entreaty she had resumed her seat on the stool, and had listened to him without ill-will, when the workings of a rising jealousy were apparent throughout the questions and comments which followed; but she felt that enough had been said for the present. Even his petition for another song had no response; and she told her mother afterwards that she thought a musical afternoon once in two months or so would be sufficient. Edward's allusion to her cousin, however, had not been lost; she was gratified that it should appear even in *his* eyes that she was the attraction; and the evening ended with her, as well as with the rest, better than it had begun.

There was no occasion for anything to be said to Sir John of Hetty's delinquency. Full well Lady Manners knew that nothing would have disturbed him more; for though the most indulgent of fathers, he was as sensitive as any Manners among them all on the point of decorum. It was not like him to be so. Indeed it was a feature in his character so ludicrously out of keeping with the rest, that it appeared rather to have been dovetailed into it after marriage, than to have been the original growth of the soil; and so it was. As the father of grown-up girls, he was a declared foe to anything that savoured of giddiness; no one, he was wont to boast, could accuse his daughters of that. No, by Jove! The Miss Manners' might go where they pleased, and people would not have a word to say against them! He did not know much about such matters, but he did know this—he would have them respected. It was not enough for a young woman to be admired—she ought to be respected; and he would not give a fig for any girl who could not make fellows keep their distance. He was proud to say his could,—every one of them. It was not every father who could say as much.

And indeed the worthy gentleman plumed himself not a little on being the parent of such orthodox young creatures, and was scarcely inclined to share even with his wife the credit of having trained them thus diligently in the way they should go.

Luckily he took much for granted, and was not a keen observer. His hearty kiss was bestowed on Hester's brow without a glance at the flushed eyelids underneath; and she had at least the relief of one unsuspecting "good night" ere she crept away to the solitude of her own chamber. To have that little abode all to herself had only once before been estimated as so high a privilege; and how far in the background of time seemed now Jem's figure in the flickering candle-light standing at the bottom of her bed, summoning her to rise and dress for the otter-hunt! That she should have dared to do so seemed all at once incredible; that she should openly have lamented when kept at home the next day, and that she should almost have been stirred up to rebel when deprived of her walk the afternoon before, seemed still more impossible to believe. After this, come what might, never again could she show disappointment or chagrin. Could she ever, indeed, speak to her cousin on the most ordinary topics, meet him, catch his eye, without shrinking? He had been spoken of as amusing himself at her expense—of behaving towards her less deferentially than he behaved to her sisters. Lady Manners had spoken, as she had herself allowed, severely; but even she had not calculated on the full effect her words produced. She could not gauge the pain she gave—pain tenfold increased because it came with all the shock of a novelty. Her tongue, if it had not outrun her feelings, had at least kept pace with every flash of indignation which darted through her mind, and had rendered it with unsparing faithfulness. Had she waited till night—had she waited but an hour—she would have been gentler, wiser; but although she would herself have repudiated the suggestion, there is no denying that the excellent mother spoke unadvisedly and in anger.

There was, to be sure, this excuse,—she had awakened from an afternoon nap, not long after the party set forth, and, feeling her cold no worse, had made up her mind to rise and come down-stairs at four o'clock, inclined to be cheered and made much of by the usually attentive daughters. She was informed too late that all had gone out for the afternoon, and a dreary hour and a half had to be gone through, and her own company had to be endured till long after dusk, when the voices of the party underneath her bedroom window, to which she had retired in dudgeon, awoke no particularly pleasant feelings in her bosom. In

short, she had felt herself neglected, and was prepared to meet the recusants with, "I think you might at least have paid me the compliment of letting me know your intentions;" but when the two elder girls entered, and in no measured terms denounced their sister, all the previous petty workings of irritation were gathered up to swell the tide of her wrath; and, with scarcely a word of her own wrongs, she dismissed them, and sent for the arch offender. At another time—at any time, indeed—Hester would have incurred rebuke; but it would have been different from that which now fell upon her.

It was seldom indeed that Lady Manners so spoke. She had been a gay, high-spirited girl in her youth, not overburdened, as she had herself confessed, with discretion: as the inevitable result, she was the most rigid of matrons. She knew. Having abjured all draughts of doubtful pleasure on her own account, she now abhorred them for others. She would not for worlds have her daughters learn ways which, however agreeable they might have been found once, were now odious in her eyes. She had rejoiced much in their ignorance of the world, in their simple tastes and contented spirits; and in hearing Agatha's tale, it was the grief which mingled with her indignation which gave to it its exceeding bitterness.

But, blinded with her new misery, it was no wonder that Hester was unable to see this. She had been brought up so uniformly by the one hand, had been so continually overshadowed by the one presence, that she never attempted to throw upon it the focus of her own penetration. Clever enough, quick enough as she was, she was young throughout, and the emancipating spirit of the age had not found its way to her bosom.

Every word now uttered about her, and about her cousin, she believed, and suffered under; it remained to show her resolution and her pride, and for this ordeal she must brace every nerve.

Would he but go away! Would he but keep away at least from Wancote! If he must come, could she not hide from him—shun his presence? Never to see his face again, never to speak to him again, was all she wanted; no, not even to—to—thank him for the dear little puppy he had promised, and say that she was not to be allowed to take it. What should she do if he appeared next time with it in hit

arms? How could she tell him to take it back again! Perhaps he would give it to Agatha then. He would be sine to be surprised, and ask her what she meant; most likely he would be vexed; but then, if he had only been playing with her—fooling her—he had no right to be vexed. He had been cruel from the first—very, very cruel. She would not take the puppy from him—nor the stick—nor any of those pretty things he had given her at Lutteridge: she would put them all away out of sight, since she could not exactly restore them to the donor—and never, never look at them again.

She had offered shortly before to make for her cousin a woollen waistcoat like the one her father wore; no one had thought anything of her doing so at the time; her mother had herself bought the materials, and the work was by this time nearly complete. He should never have it now, she resolved. There it lay in her work-basket, and there it should remain. Should any one else have the useful article? Bertie? Jem? No, indeed.

If it was not to be for him for whom it had been intended, it should never be worn by another. It should be laid by, with the Indian treasures, and some day perhaps, when years had gone by—sob, sob—she might take them out, and look at them, and think of him.

How grandiloquent are our childish sorrows! how complete and without reservation their anguish! Half measures are an abomination to us at such times,—a drop of comfort infused into the cup would be rejected with the energy of a Titan. It was really a concession on Hester's part to admit that, after years had passed, she might cast an eye upon the blighted waistcoat. I doubt if, at that moment, she contemplated ever using a crochet-needle again. Already she cast a halo of the past over everything connected with her cousin, and looked back from the future with pitying eyes upon herself lying sleepless and tossing all through the first hours of the night; until, at length, forgetfulness came in the very most pathetic portion of the tale which she was recounting at full length to her own imaginary little Hester, when she, too, should have married a Sir John, and all that was now so terrible a reality should have faded into a retrospect. The difficulty to be got over was, would she ever, under any circumstances, marry any one but Simon? Had her mother ever felt like this about Hugh 1

And that story—that love-tale—had gone so much farther, cut so much deeper!

True, but in this very consciousness lay the sting of the present wound. If he had only spoken, though it had been to be rejected, it would have been a greater and a dearer sorrow; as it was, it was but a smarting trifle. Simon would come and go as usual, look in at luncheon, and stay dinner; there would be no difference made—all would be glad to see him, all would speak to him and smile on him. Soon her offence, too, would be forgotten, when it was understood that no repetition of it need be apprehended,—when it was seen that it had led to nothing, and had terminated abruptly. He had been kind, and she had misunderstood, and that was all. This was what she had to look to; and it added inconceivably to her self-disgust and shame to feel that what was so much to her, was to all the others so little. "I never want to see his face again!" was the final outcome of her despair.



CHAPTER XIX.

IT WAS NOT HESTER'S WAY.

" Habits axe soon assumed; but when we strive
To strip them off, 'tis being flayed alive."

—COWPER.

Constance was not altogether satisfied with her companion's mood on that evening so eventful to Hester. He was thoughtful, abstracted, and, though particularly kind and attentive to her, more disposed for silence than for anything she could say. She detected latent gleams of sunshine, almost breaking into smiles, upon his face, for which, when taxed with, he had no reason to give. When roused from the reverie into which he was perpetually falling, he seemed, moreover, anxious to infer that he had not been in one.—and altogether he was in a humour to stimulate curiosity already provoked, if not to provoke what had not before existed.

The expedition of the afternoon he seemed inclined to dismiss summarily; but this was too much.

"How charming it must have been!" said she. "I wish I had known you were going. But I daresay you got on just as well without me?"

"Oh no; it was a pity you were not there."

"I daresay there would not have been room in the boat."

"Plenty of room. We could have taken in a dozen more."

"You had out the large boat, then?"

"Yes."

"Who pulled?"

"Bertie and Jem."

"How is Jem still here? The Christmas term began long ago."

"He is not* going up this term. The doctor advised him not, after that illness he had in the summer, I believe, and they took fright. I heard something said about it yesterday."

"I wonder what sort of illness it was that he had. I heard," mysteriously, "that it was the heart; but surely if that were the case he would not be allowed to row. Rowing is always forbidden to people who have anything wrong with the heart."

"I don't think he does row much."

"Did he—ah—did you not release him to-day?"

"He would not let me. We went slowly."

"You did not row at all? I suppose," archly, "you preferred talking with the girls."

He smiled. For once in his life he actually smiled at the supposition.

"Fie, Simon!"

Still he only leaned back, smiling. "Well, if you had all three to amuse yourself with," continued the lively dame, "you certainly needed no one besides. I should have been decidedly one too many. Had you all three?"

"All three were there, but I was not with them."

"Oho! Where then were you, recreant?"

"At the other end of the boat. Hester sat with me one way."

She was satisfied—more than satisfied; he was let alone for the remainder of the evening. At Wancote, however, it was, "Well, you water-sprites, so you can never keep off the

river! To think of your going all that way up, on a November afternoon, and not coming home till it was dark! Simon told me about it; he enjoyed himself immensely, and declared that I ought to have been there. I told him I should have been one too many."

"There was plenty of room," replied Agatha's matter-of-fact voice; "but I think, after all, it is a mistake going on the water at this time of year, unless one is rowing. We got quite chilled coming home, and our feet were so cold that we nearly landed at the Willow Point to walk the rest of the way back."

"Very sensible; and why did you not?"

"The boys had to take the boat on, and we should have had to come quite by ourselves; we could not have allowed Simon to take such a round."

"Surely you did not stop for that, you all-prudent Agatha! Three of you! Is an escort absolutely necessary for every step you take out of your own grounds?"

"The village people and poachers are often hanging about that meadow—poachers especially. Papa says the marsh is a great place for snipe. It would not have been pleasant to encounter a set of poachers, since papa has been having several of them taken up lately. They might have made themselves disagreeable. At least," said Agatha, exact as ever, "Simon and the boys thought so. I confess I forgot all about it at the time."¹

"Well, my Hester, when are you coming to Lutteridge again?" Constance had had enough of Agatha, whom she always averred prosed; she lolled back in her chair, tossed off her hat, and said the first thing that came to hand.

"Hester cannot expect to be always running over to Lutteridge," answered her mother for her, with a smile, but an underlying accent of determination that was not lost on three of the four present. "Now that Bertie is going, we shall want all our forces to keep us bright in this dismal weather; we cannot spare even such a small cricket on our hearth as Hetty."

"When does Bertie go?" inquired Constance, turning, as was her wont, to the new interest without pursuing the former one. "I did not know that he was to be off again BO soon."

"He is to take his friend Mr West by the way He goes to-morrow."

"Oh!" A pause; then, "Jane, I heard from Captain Cotterill this morning."

"Well?" said Jane, steadily, in accents intended to convey, "And why 'Jane'?" What is that to me?"

"You are his friend, you know," explained Constance, answering the tone, and regardless of the frown on her aunt's brow—"quite his particular. Dear little man! Now don't you want to know what he said?"

"Who would not want to know what he said when you announce it in that way, Constance?"

"Spoken like an oracle. Never knew Jane Manners say a thing to be repented of yet. Well, *he* is not one of your very, horribly sensible people, at all events. He is a flighty little rat. Come now, Jane, confess that his face,—with those whiskers,—is something like a rat."

"I have never seen it without the whiskers."

"Who said you had *1* That is no answer. You are not as clever by half as Hester at repartee, Jane. You made one smart answer, my dear, but you failed in the second. I'll excuse you. You are dying to know what he said in the letter."

"Constance! Really——" remonstrated her aunt.

"But, my dear aunt, she is. You all are. You are perfectly famished for want of news this dreary afternoon; you especially, who have not been able to get out of doors. I know. That was why you were so glad to see me. Now if I can do anything further to make myself welcome, I am sure I am very happy. Consequently I introduce Captain Cotterill into our conversation. At least he is better than nothing, and positively we have nothing, and no one else to talk about.¹

"Oh, well, if that is the case," said Lady Manners, laughing, "we will gratefully accept your good intentions. So now pray tell us about Captain Cotterill."

"He is coining down here next week."

"Indeed?"

"On Tuesday next he is to appear. This being Saturday we cannot well get up a party for him on such short notice—we cannot ask any but near relations. Some one, however, we must have; and such being the dilemma, I am about to call upon you to perform the act of charity. Will you all dine with us on Tuesday?"

"Some of us will, at any rate."

"Which of you 1 Jane?"

"It will depend on whom you ask, my dear."

"But why not all? There will be no others."

"I am not fit to go; and Sir John, you know, is no great diner-out. I think you must be content with the young ones, Constance."

"Very well. I shall be thankful for small mercies. Now mind, Jane, that you come, whoever does not. If Jane were not present, I should be confronted by a little blank face, peeping out from between two little feathery whiskers, during the whole of the entertainment. Unless Jane promises to come, I shall write and put off the man rather than endure his disappointment."

All this was not to the Wancote taste; but by this time they knew Constance too well to expect that she should conform to their standard. So long as she confined herself to raillery in which there was no undercurrent of anything more serious, they made up their minds not to take offence."

"How terrible!" said Lady Manners, even exerting herself to carry on the jest. "Surely, Jane, you will not reduce your cousin to such an extremity; surely you will intercept yourself between Captain Cotterill and his rejection!"

"My dear aunt, you alarm her. Rejection! She will think that our *petit ami* has already offered his little self to me, and that she is only to have the remains!"

"I understood he had offered himself to Lutteridge."

"Oh, that was it? You are quite right, too; he did offer himself, and gave us very little time to say 'yes' or 'no,' I can assure you. He wants to come and hunt again. Ridiculous! The water is far too high; and no one knows better than he that the season is over; but he wanted to come and see somebody here"—with a smile to Jane—"and thought that he had taken the only way to remind us of his existence."

It was settled that Jem and his two eldest sisters should join the dinner-party, Hester's accompanying them being negatived with decision; she was to stay and keep her parents company. It was a relief rather than otherwise this time. She had no wish to go; and since Constance did not press the point, a discussion was avoided. Their visitor was still lounging in her easy-chair by the fire, turning her head by turns to address one and another of the

party scattered about the room, when the door opened to admit her brother-in-law.

He had come over, full of his own new thoughts and hopes, unable to delay a day in carrying, or at least beginning to carry, them into effect. He entered with the air of a man sure of his footing, and for the first time, perhaps, did not seek out his youngest cousin with his eye as he stood in the doorway. A something of consciousness just sufficient to prevent his doing so sent him straight to his aunt's side as soon as he had discovered where she was sitting. Instead of occupying her usual chair, she was ensconced in one of the large sofas, which had been turned round so as to bring it within the circle by the hearth, and a large screen had been spread behind to keep off draughts, if draughts could ever penetrate into that well-warmed and thickly-walled mansion. Lady Manners, shivering from her own chill, rather than from any sense of the damp atmosphere without, had fancied the screen; and as it was not usually to be seen, being huddled out of sight in a corner, its appearance for the moment confused Simon.

At one end of the sofa half reclined the invalid; at the other sat a little figure, who was not generally to be found in such a seat of honour. Between her mother and the fireplace, with the screen at her back, so that no intruder could approach from that quarter and leaning over whisper in her ear, Hester was, she thought, as safe as she could expect to be. She had expected her cousin; he had told her that he would bring the puppy that afternoon, and great was her relief to see that the puppy was not there.

The explanation was that the keeper thought it as well for Master Don to be left with his mother for another week; and his new mistress, on hearing the decision, acquitted herself fully as well as could have been expected under the circumstances.

She wished that Simon would not continue to stand beside her, and devoutly hoped that for this time at least no more would be heard of the puppy; but she did not show any of the gruffness, the haughtiness, the incivility she afterwards acquired, when the wound within began to fester and gangrene. For the moment her pain slept. She listened to his voice, felt his presence, breathed the same air, and could not be unhappy. He thought he had never seen her look so sweet. Since she remained by the fireside, so did he, sit-

ting down at last in the chair next Constance, and entering into a discussion with Sir John on the poaching affray which Agatha had alluded to before they entered the room.

Hester could not tell if he ever looked at her or not. She durst not raise her own eyes above his boots, and with the odd habit we all have of scanning objects at such moments, she knew every lace and hook on them ere long. They were unremarkable boots, but they fascinated her in spite of herself, even while ostensibly stitching away with such diligence that Constance drew attention to the fact.

"Look at that little sempstress sewing for dear life; and if ever there was an idler in creation it is Hetty, as a rule. What are you making, Het? Doll's clothes? Is that a sheet for the cradle, or a long robe for Miss Dolly herself?"

As she answered, there was a pause in the poaching dialogue, and Hester knew a smile was directed towards her which she could not meet. The unintentional accuracy of the guess had, however, to be acknowledged; the doll's frock was for Ellen, and she hoped to have it ready for Constance to carry off when she left. There were only the buttons to sew on, and a tape to be run round the waist, and it would be finished—Constance must not go without it.

"You good child! And I only said it to tease! I meant to mount you on your high horse, and cause you to disdain the idea of dollies."

"I don't think Hester despises a doll by any means yet," observed her mother, with, Hester felt, the intention of Simon's hearing. "She has one out even now sometimes to look at, and it seems no very long time since she and the young Parkers had their baby-house together. But a few years make a great difference, do they not, Hetty? She has put on her long gowns now, and means to turn into a staid and sober little woman at last!"

Did Simon understand? The staid and sober little woman blushed at the supposition—blushed even to think he had heard so much. She could not understand Agatha's gentle request that he would give his opinion on some mooted point; it seemed quite forward in Agatha. Jane's offering him a hand-screen, since the fire was scorching, seemed even bolder. She herself could not have set a foot in his direction—could not have spoken to him, unless he had first addressed her, for her life. She could just sit

there with her head down, and listen to all that went on—so long as it did not concern her—with tolerable equanimity ; but she could do no more. There was, however, no display of feeling, such as had called forth censure on the evening before. There was even a satisfactory pretence of diligence and cheerfulness, so that no eye but that which was already on the watch, could note anything unusual in Hester. He, it is true, saw; he saw and wondered, but to no purpose. As yet he had no clue to the root of the matter.

Tuesday came, and the Miss Manners', neatly attired in dresses not too fine for the occasion, betook themselves off to Lutteridge, under Jem's escort. Each of the sisters expected to have a pleasant evening, and neither one nor other was disappointed. Captain Cotterill was eagerly attentive to Jane, and Simon all that Agatha desired in his manner to her. He had not been vexed that only two of the three came, not having understood that the third had been asked; and, indeed, she had scarcely been asked—had received only the slightest of invitations, Constance having thought the present a good opportunity, when she expected no particular entertainment for herself—no lively young officers, no Lord Westmacott—to kill off Agatha, as she expressed it. Her attention being free to bestow on this cousin, with whom, in spite of herself, she stood on some ceremony, she thought it as well to reserve Hetty for other occasions. Hetty expected nothing, exacted nothing; she could come at any time, interfered with nobody. As for the evening in question, it clearly belonged to the other two.

Of those two, however, Jane was the queen of the night. Constance was astonished to find that, in her bantering suggestions as to the cause of Captain Cotterill's sudden reappearance, she had fallen short of, instead of overstepping the mark. He had immediately on his arrival inquired after the Wancote party—had evinced such unqualified pleasure at hearing who were expected at the Manor that evening—such interest, consciousness, and flutter, as soon as Jane's name was mentioned—that she perceived he was much more in earnest than she had had the least idea of.

Absence had fed his flame. He had heard the Miss Manners' highly spoken of; had found that a connection with them would be in every way satisfactory, and at once gave

rein to the admiration he had from the first experienced. Nothing could have been more felicitous than the arrangement which brought them to Lutteridge in that easy fashion on the very first evening of his stay. As the morrow must be prepared for, however, if he did not mean it to be wasted, he wormed an invitation out of Jem to come to Wancote early in the day. "Though what he is coming for, I am sure I don't know!" declared the insensate brother. "It was something to do with the kennels; though I told him we had not a clog in them worth looking at just now. However, as he said he would come, I just let him come."

Lady Manners, to whom this was said, did not press the point. She was seated in state when Captain Cotterill was brought in the next morning, and nobody took him round to the kennels after all. It was raining, and the billiard-table was more tempting. A great fire was announced to be wasting itself in the billiard-room; and Jem, who did not well know what to do with his guests, Simon being also present, proposed an adjournment thither. Colonel Lutteridge was an excellent player, and the girls were summoned to come and look on, if they were too doubtful of their powers to take part in the game. Agatha and Jane went, but Hester did not appear till luncheon-time. "You missed a great deal, Het," cried Jem. "I nearly came for you a dozen times, but they said you knew where we were. Why did you not come?"

"I was busy."

"Busy about what?"

"Drawing, and—writing—and other things."

"You would have been far better with us, Hester," said her cousin, cheerfully. Finding himself unaccountably baffled in his attempt to obtain a chair by her side, he had seated himself opposite; and to an observation directed so pointedly towards her, she could not turn a deaf ear.

"I had a great deal to do," she muttered. But it was a lame apology. It was not Hester's way to have a great deal to do when there was anything else going on; and the more unlike her it was, the more difficult did she find it to account for her new line of conduct.

"Hester is right, I think," said her mother, assisting her. "Billiards are all very well when there is nothing else of more importance to be done. For a wet afternoon there is no better game——"

"Will you come this afternoon then, Hester?" inquired her cousin; "we are going to have a match."¹¹

"I don't think any of the girls are much of players," continued Lady Manners. "Agatha is the best; she has the coolest head; but their cousins, Gertrude and Mary, are far better hands at it than any of us are. I used to play, but [have not done so for a long time."

"Do come. By the way, I heard you were a great player. I have never seen any really good lady players. I wish you would come."

"Oh no. The billiard-room is far too cold a place for me to-day."

"We have a splendid fire."

"The passages are full of draughts. Besides, you smoke."

"Well, yes, we do smoke. But, of course, if you were there——"

"Eh? Getting your aunt to play?" cried Sir John. "That's right, Simon. I have not seen her take a cue in hand these ten years. She was a rare good player when we were married. None of the girls can play a bit."

But Lady Manners, though gratified, was not persuaded. No, no. She was too old; too much out of practice; her hand had lost its cunning,—in short, she was not going to lose her *prestige* and her comfortable afternoon at one and the same time.

But even while discussing the point, Simon was turning over another in his mind. Why would Hester give him no reply? And why would she speak to all the others, but avoid looking at him? He became suddenly aware that she was doing so; and then he remembered, that on the previous Saturday when he had last seen her, she had sat looking down in the same way, and that when he had spoken to her, her mother had answered. She had not dined at Luttridge; she had not come to the billiard-room. It was unlike Hester. And the worst of it was, that there was nothing that he could complain of—nothing that he could take hold of. He could only feel, with a start of pain, that it was precisely the sort of neutral passive resistance which might be offered by a woman to a man whom she suspects has begun to give her more of his heart than she cares to possess.

CHAPTER XX.

41 THEY ABE ENTERING ON A PERIOD OF
ENDLESS FELICITY/

" *When sanguine youth the plain of life surveys,
She does not count on dull und rainy days.*"
—TAYLOR.

Lady Manners having, as will be seen, no further cause to be disquieted by her daughter's conduct, Hester was re-established in favour, and permitted to accompany her parents and Jem to the Parkers' large Christmas party, which was an annual event intended to celebrate the return home of all the men, youths, and boys of the family for the vacation or holidays, as the case with each might be. It was supposed to be exhilarating to her spirits to be seated in white muslin on a centre ottoman for twenty minutes, and handed in to dinner by a nice young Parker afterwards. Poor soul! He had a bad time of it! He did not bargain to have Miss Hester Manners reserved for him again, I warrant you. Colonel Lutteridge and his sister-in-law were not present, nor had they been expected to be, by the Wancote party, it being known that they were engaged elsewhere. Captain Cotterill was, however; and great was his chagrin at finding that the Miss Manners whom he had understood he was to meet, was Hester, not Jane. He had obtained his invitation and come again to the neighbourhood, expressly on Jane's account; and the very next day, in despair of finding another opportunity, and overcome at once by love and effrontery, he appeared at Wancote, and declared himself in due form to the lady's father.

A proper amount of hesitation having been gone through, and all inquiries satisfactorily answered, he was permitted to speak for himself; and to the secret amazement of both the elder and younger sister, he was listened to.

The gentle, serious Jane was taken with the flibberty-gibberty fellow, whose good heart and good principles she, and she alone, had discovered beneath an exterior which none but herself found attractive. She vouched for him, however; cheerfully avowed her preference; laughed at

his jokes, and was deaf to everything but his praises. "The very *last* man," the others might whisper, when he back was turned, but they had not a word to say against him to her face; and, as events proved, she showed herself a better judge than they thought.

Constance was on her side from the first. "He is the best little rat in the world,"¹ she said, "and will do the thing handsomely. I always said Jane was made of sense. Now you, Agatha, would have turned up your lovely nose at a most eligible *parti*, and an excellent husband in embryo; while that monkey, Hester, would have made a *moue* in his face! You are both wrong, my children—wrong altogether; Jane has the discernment, the discrimination of the family; she sees the greatness of the soul within the smallness of the body; she—well, Jane," as the door opened, "if you had come in one minute sooner you would have heard me sounding your praises; as it is, permit me to say that you have my best wishes for your happiness, my warmest approval of your marriage, and"—with a gulp—"my highest opinion of your choice."

Simon's congratulations were also ready and sincere. He thought Cotterill the very man for Jane, and Jane the very woman for Cotterill. True, he had not studied the question previously—he had not given much attention either to the one or the other. He was pleased, he scarcely knew why. He thought he had done a good thing for his cousin, somehow; and though it was the cousin who interested him the least, still, in having made her acquainted with a respectable young fellow of good family and fortune, who had so quickly gained her affections and the consent of her parents, he felt a glow of self-approval which prompted an increase of goodwill towards all concerned.

One wedding leads to another. He would see what Hester thought about that—would find out the meaning of Hetty's pranks of late. He could not get hold of the little creature, do what he would, else—Cotterill had succeeded, and why not he? No one would have said Cotterill's chances were worth much beforehand, and all had been astonished at his success. It put new life into Simon; he resolved to lie in wait, and surprise some day the coy maiden who was now so hard to come at.

The task proved to be more difficult than he had imagined, but at length a happy thought occurred, which he resolved

to lose no time in carrying into effect. On Sunday afternoons he had found out that Hester taught a class of village girls in the schoolhouse, and as the schoolhouse was only on the other side of the road, opposite one of the Wancote entrance-gates, the young teacher was allowed to go and come the short half-mile alone. The avenue she traversed lay along the river's brink, and on the raw and gusty afternoons which had set in with December no one ever came to meet her. At other times she might occasionally be joined, but he had heard her complain in jest that she had no chance of a companion now. He resolved to risk the attempt.

Accordingly, about four o'clock on the following Sunday, he crossed from the opposite side, chained his boat to the bank, and walked slowly along. Even should he be met by others, his taking a quiet stroll in their grounds would excite no surprise; he was easy on all scores, and his spirits rose in the anticipation of the meeting. He knew to within five minutes when she ought to appear, unless hindered—and that she was not likely to be, as her mother would fidget if she were late. So much he had often been told—he resolved that for once his aunt must fidget in vain.

When, therefore, having diligently taught, reproved, and exhorted, the youthful mentor dismissed her class, and set off homewards, ever conscious of that dull ache at her heart which of late had settled there, who should she see, not a hundred yards in front of her, but her cousin? For a single instant she wavered, then without pausing to reflect, or gather courage for the meeting, she dashed aside into the brushwood.

Could she hope that he had not seen her? Up and up she darted through the tangle which overhung the cliffs above, panting, tremulous, and nerveless, yet intent only on escape. Had he seen her? He had; he had come straight on, and stood now upon the spot whereon she had disappeared, looking up into the wood, as vainly seeking to find her place of refuge. From her vantage-ground, where she had halted to gain breath, and reconnoitre the country below, she could perceive him—perceive at least his figure, barred and half obscured by intervening branches. He seemed undecided what to do. What if his next step should be in pursuit? The idea set her heart palpitating afresh, and in terror she began to steal softly upwards

Cautious as her footsteps were, however, his ear caught the sound. He moved quickly to the side of the road, stopped, and called aloud, "Hester!"

Not now—not after that—could she by any means descend. What? Meet him in this lonely place, come down at his beck and call, risk inquiries and reproaches, with this additional trespass to account for also! Never. With one desperate sally she burst through the thicket, gained the plateau above, and was soon within the porch.

He turned back confounded. That something was seriously amiss he doubted no further; and unable to resist longer the fancy which had risen in his breast at Wancote, he felt it taking fresh hold of him every moment. True, he had but just discovered the state of his heart when the ominous change took place. Was it possible that she on the same day had made the same discovery? He thought—he fondly believed—he had given her no grounds for doing so. Yet there was the coincidence, and there was the undeniable result. Say that it was so; say that directly *he* knew, *she* knew; say that from that moment she, who had up to that time been so ready to listen to him, so willing to be with him, had become all on a sudden cold, distant, and reserved,—what other interpretation would make all plain? "Bah!" and "Pshaw!" as much as he might, these were the facts. It was clear that no supervision was now being exercised against Hester's own inclinations; she evinced no rebellion towards authority as of yore, no sullenness at prohibitions such as would once have made her pout—indeed she rather besought, embraced them. She was gentle and temperate in her manner towards him, but he could never gain her ear for himself. Invariably he found her in the midst of the party, not, as had been her wont, a little apart, where he could draw his chair to her side. Not once did he find her in the drawing-room alone, at this time, nor for many a day afterwards. "Came he early, came he late/* she was either surrounded, barricaded by others, or she wa* not to be seen at all. If she appeared at Luttreidge, it was in the landau by her mother's side, and they usually called at an hour when he was out

All this passed unnoticed by Constance, engrossed as she now was with Jane's affairs. At Wancote in the present Emergency she proved herself an invaluable counsellor, an active and efficient coadjutor. Lady Manners confessed

that hi the ^patter of the wardrobe she would hardly have known what to do without the experience of a later bride, fashions had changed since her day; and since it appeared that even in her own affairs she had taken but little part, everything having been managed for her as was the way in those times, it was but too evident that she was not to be relied on even for such information as she fancied herself able to give. She was not above, on so important an occasion, taking hints even as to etiquette & *la mode*.

Captain Cotterill's family had to be made acquaintance with, and to be received at Wancote; uncles and aunts had to have civilities duly responded to; presents began to appear, and plans must be laid. The wedding was to take place as soon as a wedding could j there was no let or hindrance—everybody was satisfied, and the settlements were suitable. Accordingly it was fixed for the first week in February; and in the constant company that was now at Wancote, and the bustle consequent on the new state of things, Hester did not find the difficulty she had anticipated in carrying out her plan of defence. She stuck to it.

"If he likes me as Herbert"—Herbert was Captain Cotterill's Christian name—"liked Jane, he can speak out as Herbert did. Why, they had only met—those two—a few times, and he did not know her half nor a quarter as well as Simon knows me! Herbert did not hang back, and look at Jane, and say nothing. He came forward like a man—no one would have guessed he had it in him—and it was all settled immediately. Jane liked him, and he liked her, and there was an end of it. But how different Simon is!" A smile chased away her sigh. "I should think he was different! To see the two together! The 'little rat,'¹ as Constance calls him, and the great lion! That's what Simon is. Ha, ha, ha! Certainly he's not much like one, with his smooth dark head, and his square chin, and that grim determined jaw that frightens everybody but me! Oh, if things were only different—if I only knew, if I could but believe what I once thought so sure, I should snap my fingers at that wicked mouth. But now I dare not look at it, nor at him. Everything is falling away from me instead of coming nearer, and bringing him nearer. The puppy died, and I never got my stick, and now he hardly takes any notice of me because I am so unkind to him. It is all miserable, wretched. . . . But I would not be anywhere

eke for the world!" She was the most useful of bridesmaids, the most active and efficient of entertainers. Simon often met her now cantering across the country with one or other of Captain Cotterill's sisters—both of them came down for Christmas; and if she were encountered out walking, she had Anne and Chatty—one on each side.

Agatha did not take nearly so much pains to make those young ladies' visit agreeable; she found time to come to Lutteridge oftener than any of the others did, and even spent a day or two there when Constance, in an unwonted fit of good-fellowship, invited her. The coming event softened Agatha; she cared for Jane more than for any other member of the family, and already felt overshadowed by the loss that was so soon to befall her. Of Jane's happiness, however, she entertained no doubts, and, indeed, regaled Constance at times with such accounts and prognostications as greatly diverted that astute auditor.

"Yes, yes, my dear," replied the lady who had been married herself, and knew all about it, "I have not the slightest doubt on the subject—recollect that *you* had, but I knew better. I am quite convinced that at the respective ages of five-and-twenty and three-and-twenty they are entering on a period of endless felicity. He is perfect, and she is perfect. All the letters on both sides say so. They vie with each other in extolling the charms of the bride and the good-luck of the bridegroom. Jane is now declared on all hands to be *the* Miss Manners, the flower of the flock, the rose of the garden, the everything of everything. So will you be, my love, when your turn comes; and finally, so will Hester. Neither of you need be tormented by the green-eyed monster, I assure you. Why, Agatha, you with all your wisdom, don't you know that the same things are said of every bride-elect? That the moment her banns are published, there is a general rush to be the first; hey, presto! old relations, who don't know one of the girls from another, and old friends who have not seen them since they were babies, jostling each other to be in the front rank. One vows she is the prettiest; another she is wittiest; another the one that he loves best. Some aver (if it can be done with decency) that she is all three. *Entre nous*, my dear Agatha, that was said of your humble servant a dozen times; and for at least a year afterwards I believed implicitly in my own infallibility. Now, I know better. Of course," continued the widow,

not wishing to push matters too far, "I am not insinuating a word against Jane—Jane is as charming as any one could desire; and considering the celerity of our little friend, and that he is not a man of overwhelming personal attractions, he has done marvellously well for himself. At the same time, he is just the right kind of husband for her. He will keep her lively, and she will keep him in order. He has a place of his own, a good income, rather high connections, and a character that will stand election test. By the way, Simon says he once tried for a seat and failed, but means to make another attempt. I hope he will, and wish him every success. Then Jane will have a house in town, go to Court, and present you both."

Constance was so well pleased with what she chose to consider her first essay on behalf of her cousins, that her vigilance as to other matters slept. "Jack is coming down for Christmas," she said, "and the poor boy is wild to be asked to the wedding, Agatha. Can you have him? Not if it is any trouble, you know. I know that in winter one has to consider the limits of the house, and especially of the dining-room, but I thought I would just ask you."

"He is to be invited. Mamma has put him down on the list."

"How good of her! He comes to-morrow; he has been at a schoolfellow's till now, for you know I really hardly liked to ask Simon to have him here the whole five weeks. Why they give such insufferably long holidays no one can imagine. It seems to me that a schoolboy's life is *all* holidays. Listen, Agatha: seven weeks in the summer, five weeks at Christmas, and a month at Easter. Is it not absurd? How are they ever to get on in life, when they are doing nothing but running wild at home, and plaguing everybody all those months out of every year?"

"But," said Agatha, who had been meditating, "if Jack has only five weeks now——"

"*Only* five weeks! Good heavens, Agatha!"

"He will not be here for the wedding."

"Well, you see, he is so anxious to come, that—well, I suppose I do spoil him rather, but I told him he should run down for the day, if he was invited. It was weak, I know."

It was; and it was like Constance; while finding that she could easily have too much of her son when alone, she could not resist the gratification of exhibiting him in company.

"Don't scoff at me, Agatha; I am scoffing already at myself. By the way, I forgot I promised to see Ellen's bridesmaid's frock tried on before dinner. I declare, I said I was coming an hour ago, and there is the second gong! It must wait for another time, or perhaps I shall have a minute to spare when I am dressed." She had; and meeting Agatha on the stairs, bade her go down and she would follow. Simon was in the drawing-room, and the ready welcome he gave increased his cousin's good spirits; she grew quite bright under the genial influence of circumstances; he would hardly have known Agatha, usually so staid and prosaic in her demeanour; she was now almost frolicsome. Music, of course, filled up the evening, and all passed off so well, that Constance hugged herself for having paid a civility, run a risk, and escaped without harm being done. She noted that, so far from appearing oftener than he had done during Hester's stay, Simon was far seldomer visible; and that although he had taken his youngest cousin to the heronry one day, and to the hut in the woods where the young pheasants were reared another, he never asked Agatha to accompany him on his walks. All this was delightful to the hostess, and since it appeared to afford no disappointment to the guest, all went on as harmoniously as possible.

One day during Agatha's visit Simon found his way to Wancote; he had an idea, a sort of wild dim hope that with the eldest sister out of the way, and the second engrossed, he might make something of the youngest yet—might catch her alone—come upon her unawares. He was mistaken; his going was to no purpose. The ride which the young lady took that afternoon must have been prolonged, he declared to himself, on purpose. She certainly knew he was coming, since an appointment with his uncle on business had been made in her presence; but the gentlemen had quitted the house—Sir John proposing to convoy his visitor half-way home—ere Hester appeared. They passed her in the avenue; Simon had a vision of a rosy cheek and a long brown lock of waving hair, as she galloped past, and that was all. Although they stood aside and waited, by an involuntary movement of his own, no halt was made.

"Are we to have no sort of dance after the wedding?" inquired Constance that evening, she and Agatha having

discussed every other point connected with it. "I know you are not ball-going people, but a little quiet country-dance among ourselves would be nice, don't you think? There would need to be only a very few people invited besides those in the house—only the Parkers, the Westmacotts, the Searles, and one or two more. Those odious little Martins would expect to be let in, I suppose. By the way, she was hinting about it the other day, when she was here. Not that she would dance herself, you know; oh dear, no! Mrs Prunes-and-Prism would consider anything like that quite out of the pale of her marriage vows; but she thought it would be nice for the *young people.' Fact, Agatha. You and I—no, not I, perhaps—but you and Jane, and all the other girls who are not Madame, are the 'young people' with this slip of a girl! I daresay she was not a bad young person herself in the days of her youth—as she would herself call it—but she is a dreadful bride; she is an instance of what we talked about the other day, of belief in all the flattery and humbug which assails one on that dangerous pinnacle the altar. As to this dance, she wants an excuse for wearing her white satin before the Brussels point has left its rouge mark upon it! Did you know about that, Agatha? I warned Jane. The poor souls who make Brussels lace have to dip their fingers in rouge to enable the threads to bear the strain, and unless you take care, in laying it aside, you will find the dress in a pretty state when you take it out again. I did. I had no proper maid at the time; and the one I had, knew as little as I did about it. Now how about the dance?] "

"Papa and mamma would never agree to it."

"Not if you and Bertie put your heads together?"

"Not if we all did."

Constance pulled a face.

"You remember how we wished to have a garden-party in the summer," continued Agatha; "and we thought that was just the kind of thing that mamma would not dislike; but we could not prevail. We never had had a garden-party, and mamma does not care for changes. I did not care—I rather prefer dinner-parties, for my own part—but as the others wished it, I did what I could."

"I remember; Hester came to me; she could not endure the thought of those solemn festivals that we all sit down to, month after month, and year after year."

"Bather absurd in Hester, considering that she had never been at one," said Agatha, with asperity. "I don't understand her setting herself against them, before she could possibly know what they were like."

"She could pretty well guess; and I agree with her perfectly. I detest them. If anything better—even a degree better—offered, I should abjure them for ever; but nothing does. You are such a sober, old-fashioned set of folks down here, that none of you ever originate a new idea. I have tried Lady Westmacott over and over, but she always tells me to wait till Thurston comes of age—by the way, that will be next Easter, so there is something to look to; but now, Simon, what do you say? Will you try what you can do towards persuading your aunt to give a ball? No, not a ball; it would be death to our hopes to call it that; it would undo everything—ruin us at the outset. But—stop, let me think—say this, Simon,—mildly, you know, with an expression of gentle regret on your countenance that such a suggestion should be necessary,—'Dear aunt, I fear it is expected in the county that some little entertainment should be given to the neighbours on the occasion of Jane's wedding; I imagine that they will scarcely be satisfied without something. Say a small—a very small dance! Do you not think, dear aunt—you who are such an excellent judge of these matters, that it might be advisable to give a very diminutive dance—a mere trifle of a dance?' "

Both laughed.

"Well?"

They laughed again.

"Oh you two dead-weights, damping one at the outset! Well, if no one else can be found to scale the breach, to lead this forlorn-hope, I will myself volunteer. I will beard the—ahem!—don't be shocked, Agatha, I stopped in time. In my passion for metaphor, I forgot for the moment to whom I was alluding. Honestly, however, should I have any chance of success? I do not want to get myself into hot water for nothing; though, if it were for any good in the end, I have no objection to running a tilt of arguments at the beginning. Stay; there is a better than I—I will depute Hester——"

An inarticulate exclamation, proceeding she could scarcely tell from which, stopped the speaker. Agatha's frown she could understand, but Simon was positively scowling!

PART VI.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER THE FESTIVAL.

"Idly did we bend our eyes upon one another, when the chief performers of the morning's pageant had vanished. No one knew whether to take their leave or stay. We seemed assembled on a silly occasion."—LAMB.

THE wedding was over, the bride and bridegroom had departed, and the wedding guests turned and confronted one another with a stare of surfeit. It seemed years since they had seen other faces than those they were now gazing upon; ages since all that babble, and chatter, and millinery had been collected into the space before them. The blue gown and the purple gown, the embroidered yellow and the dull brocade, had grown to be a part of the furniture; the swan's-down bonnet had become associated to the end of time with the crimson necktie which approached it so continuously.

Tired and flushed faces now looked wearily round, wondering how soon they might slip away to their own homes, or—as most of those present were staying in the house—to their own chambers. Bonnet-strings had become loosened, and gloves had been thrown aside. It was felt by all 'that there had been enough; they were satiated—stupefied.

It had indeed been an interminable affair. For five mortal hours they had stood and sat, eaten and drunk, talked and smiled in battle array, and all at once ensued the collapse. Lady Manners, in her bronze satin, wondered if Mrs Cotterill, in her dove silk, could be as weary as she was. She had attended on Mrs Cotterill, presented Mrs Cotterill, done her part by Mrs Cotterill till she could do it

no more. When not engaged with her, there was Mr Cotterill; when free from him, there was Miss Cotterill. Cotterills confronted her whichever way she turned. When puzzled by the presence of a strange countenance at her own board, she knew it must be that of a Cotterill; when accosted by a new voice, it could be none other than a CotterillFs.

Weddings had come but seldom in the way of the bride's mother, and she was astonished at the all-pervading element of Cotterill; she did not understand the rampant ascendancy obtained on such occasions by the relations of the bridegroom. No cares, no responsibilities attach in any way to them; and but rarely is there in their hearts the grief, the void, the sense of loss which hangs its shadow over the family of the bride. They are unweighted; they come to make merry and rejoice; they expect to be put forward, made much of, given the seats and places of honour. Their dresses are sure to be chronicled in the public accounts, whosever garment may be omitted; their names, down to that of the least in his father's house, are written down.

When Lady Manners read, the next morning, that Mr J. Cotterill, Mr J. C. Cotterill, and Mr J. A. H. Cotterill had been present, she almost thought that she could never care to hear the name of Cotterill again.

Had she come to know these people in an ordinary way, they might have been found sufficiently agreeable; but to have thrust upon her a crowd of people with whom she was, while ignorant of everything connected with their tastes and characters, at once required to be intimate—who took it for granted that their representative was all to her that he was to them—who usurped Jane, adopted her then and there, and expected from her in all time to come, Cotterill sentiments and Cotterill prejudices, —was, it must be owned, a trial to Jane's mother. She could not even obtain her parting kiss in peace; and although her sense of justice acknowledged the well-meant pressure of Mrs Cotterill's hand, she would have dearly liked to have extended that pressure into a shake, and have said "Good-bye" to her on the spot.

It was the presence of this lady which chained her to her post in the great saloon, now that she yearned to be in solitude and at rest. Had it not been for her dread of that

slim woman by her side, whose cheeks were only faintly pink, and whose dove-coloured robe was as trim as when it was first put on, our poor mother, whose heart was full, and whose eyes were red, would have been able to cast off her heavy bronze armour, and lay her tired head, divested of its plumed bonnet, on the peaceful pillow. The few old neighbours who were now waiting for their carriages would have taken no offence had Agatha been deputed to receive their adieux, and her absence would have been unperceived by the multitude; but she could not elude Mrs Cotterill—and what Mrs Cotterill would think, held her fast.

Constance was the first to find out her hostess for parting congratulations. "Carriage come at last!" she said, gaily. "How tired you look, poor Auntie! How thankful you will be to get rid of us all! Everything has gone off so well, has it not? And the weather has behaved admirably; it is raining fast now, did you know? If it had begun a few hours ago everything would have been spoilt, and now it does not matter in the least. I was terribly afraid when we were in church; I thought I heard a patter. Good-bye. I am sure no wedding could have passed off better."

"Agatha," said she, as she left the room, "you ought to send everybody away as fast as you can, before things begin to drag."

Devoutly Agatha wished they would go. Cheerful and attentive to all, watchful that none were neglected, that no part was overstrained, no eldest daughter of a house could have appeared to greater advantage than Agatha had done throughout the day. As chief bridesmaid, she had of course been relegated to the care of Colonel Lutteridge, the "best man." She had walked on his arm down the church aisle, aware that at least as many eyes were resting curiously upon them as were upon the pair in front; she had sat by her cousin during the long repast which followed, contrasting him secretly meanwhile with the minute Cotterills and the rustic Manners by whom they were surrounded; and proud of her kinsman, of his looks, his air, and his near relationship, she had paraded him as much as she could in view of the allied forces. But she had omitted no duty, overlooked no stranger on his account, and even Constance was satisfied that since on this occasion it was not within her province to show off her brother-in-law, Agatha should do it for her. He was brought up to one and another, and had scarcely a minute

to himself during the festival. One opportunity, however, came to him. The guests were being marshalled to breakfast, and that duty having devolved on Bertie and his eldest sister, it was much more quietly and prettily done than is the case when it is performed by servants. Agatha, of the two, gliding from one to another with her soft intimations, was the best performer. She had just united a couple, each of whom was known to be so uninteresting as to have been certainly avoided by more attractive people, when her eye fell on Hester standing within the large bay-window looking out, and Simon at her back.

"Mr Cotterill," said Agatha, quick as thought, to one of Herbert's brothers, "will you go next with my sister Hester?"

"Hester is coming with me," said Simon, hastily, with a sudden reassumption of his old appropriating tone.

It was ill-timed. The bridesmaid flushed defiantly, as she turned from the window and passed him without answering; while Agatha explained, "I am afraid you are bound to me; we must sit on Jane's left hand, but we shall all be together. Keep near us, Hester; you will find your places left for you." They found them—on her other side; Hester was as much separated from her cousin as though the whole length of the table had been between them.

Of late Simon had given up attempting to explain away the gloomy interpretation of her behaviour towards him which had presented itself first to his mind. It was but the impulse of the moment, when he saw her unattended in the window-recess, and unnoticed in the surrounding hubbub, which had prompted him to draw near. He had gone up and spoken to her, and she had made him some ordinary reply. Then he had asked if she were tired, and the question had been put in such a tone that she had turned and looked out of the window. His courage rose; he waited a moment to consider, and that moment was fatal. Had he offered his arm and walked her off to the dining-room while she was collecting herself, and whilst Agatha's back was turned, he would not afterwards have been moved from his purpose by any one; he would have stuck to his seat and his bridesmaid; he would in all probability have found out all that he wanted to know, and this little history need never have been written.

But the opportunity passed. Agatha's eye fell upon them;

she had pounced upon Hester's Cotterill, and had brought him to her ere Simon had found his tongue, and his hasty and unguarded assumption, his "Hester is coming with me,*" was the wrong thing at the moment. Her pride flew to arms, and without so much as deigning a negative, she placed her hand within the arm presented to her.

Mr J. Cotterill was her portion—Herbert's next brother, and another edition of himself. They were all "ratty," Constance affirmed,—had all the same small pointed noses, narrow chins, and thriving whiskers, even down to the tiny thing, the J. A. H., who was about the size of a harvest-mouse.

All were excellent chatterboxes, and in high feather, as was natural. Even at the last, when Agatha in the doorway was sighing her satisfaction over the final departure, and when her mother was imploring Mrs Cotterill, as they separated, not to think of coming down again before eight o'clock, the youthful brothers and cousins of the bridegroom frolicked in the hall,—they were fencing with walking-sticks when Lady Manners passed through.

The bridesmaids, having had enough for the present of flattery and flirtation, now moved languidly up-stairs, in yawning anticipations of dressing-gowns and a dressing-gown tea, over which Hester, more languid than any, but willing to be in company rather than alone, presided. Agatha excused herself. She wisely retired to solitude, to think and smile, perhaps to shed a softened tear or two; but certainly she reappeared at dinner-time refreshed and bright, ready again for all the duties and pleasures of her position.

Singing without Jane was a momentary effort; it cost her a pang to see the well-known duets so often gone through together; but she called to Hester, and Edward Searle joined them, and he was particularly pleasant and thoughtful, and inobtrusive in his admiration, so that without being conscious why, the evening passed for her as well as the morning had done. No one from Lutteridge came again, and she was not sorry—she was glad to have a quiet close to a day so exciting and successful.

On the following morning as many as could ride were swept out of the way by Bertie, who had begged and borrowed mounts for such as the Wancote stables could not afford horses for, to join the hunt, which luckily met at no great distance from the Hall on that day. The rest yawned

in the billiard-room until the afternoon, when they were politely got rid of; and the next day only a few elderly folks and near relations remained to be entertained. Having come from a distance in mid-winter, they thought they might as well stay for several days at least after the great event. It was a mistaken notion; the days dragged. Nevertheless they came to an end, as others do, however long; and at length the last carriage rolled from the door, and the last flicker of the candle was put out.

The drawing-room looked its comfortable homely self once more. Lady Manners resumed the ancient black velvet evening robe, which had not been allowed to run the gauntlet of Mrs Cotterill's eye, and Sir John got, as he expressed it, his dinner at a decent hour again.

"I do think it is the most ridiculous nonsense,¹" said he, "to make a change for anybody. Cotterill likes to dine at seven as well as I do, I'll be bound! In my young days it was six—ay, and five! My father and mother dined at five o'clock every day of their lives. I was quite ill for want of my dinner all the time those people were here. Heigh-ho! well, that's over, anyhow. I hope Jane's content. I am sure I am."

"Did you take Mr Cotterill to see the church on the hill,—papal" said Agatha. "He told me he wanted to go to it."

"To the church? Oh yes, I took him. I took him here, there, and everywhere. I toiled about with him day after day. He had the most insatiable twist for seeing rubbish, of any one I have ever had to do with; you could not name a place, or a tree, or a stick, or a stone, but he wanted to see it! I am sure no one can say that I did not do my part by him,—eh, Emily? what do you say? Did I not, now?"

"Oh yes, my dear, you did your part, of course. So did we ail." (She thought hers had been the harder part of the two.) "We all, I hope, tried our best."

"All? Not one of you came near him! I had him on my hands from morning till night. Wherever I went, there went he. He stuck to me like a leech. Do what I would, I could not get rid of him, and—by the way, I thought I understood that they were to have gone yesteday; how came they to stay till to-day?"

"The young ones had an engagement, but when I found

the father and mother was going straight home I had to ask them on; I thought they rather expected it."

"That was it? Well, they're gone at last; and I really think it all passed off as well as could have been expected. Did it not, eh? Not a break-down; not a bungle made of anything. No *contretemps*, eh, Agatha?"

His French always caused a laugh. He looked round to see why.

"Did you think there was? What are you laughing at? Was there anything wrong? Can't you say? Tell me if there was."

"Nothing whatever, papa; we were only laughing at your '*contretemps*.'"

"Hoot! Is that all? If you have nothing but that to find fault with, I don't care a button; I was afraid there had been something you did not wish to tell me about. I thought that perhaps Bertie—eh——!"

"No, indeed; Bertie was very good and nice," said his mother. "I was really quite touched with poor Bertie. He came and sat in my room after it was all over, and seemed quite low; he was always so fond of Janie."

A pause; then, "Well, I'm sure I did my part by old Cotterill," reverted Sir John, "and Mrs Cotterill too. She seems a nice woman. I took her all round my collection, and showed her everything. She was quite interested. Really she made some good remarks. I meant to have taken her to the rookery, but there was no time."

"Indeed? I should not have thought any one need have complained of want of time," Lady Manners smiled. "It seemed to me as if we should never get through each day. I should have been only too glad if you would have carried her off for an hour, it was really—whether I went in or out, to have her always sitting there, in the one attitude, with her work before her! I got so tired of the sight——"

"I thought you liked her," burst in her husband.

"So I did like her. There is a great deal that is very good and amiable about her; but one does get terribly tired of a woman who sits the whole day long in one gown——"

"She changed it for dinner, mamma——"

"She could not change her *face*. It was the face more than the gown that never altered. Her little thin set of features, and her one smile——"

" Mamma, mamma!"

" Well, Hetty, you must let me say it for once. If I am tmfair to poor Mrs Cotterill, at least I have kept it to myself all this time, and you don't know the relief it is to me now that she is gone. You young ones could come and go, and amuse yourselves sometimes with one and sometimes with another, but I had to be with Mrs Cotterill or with nobody. Would you not have felt naughty too—come, Hetty—if you had been in my place?"

" Ay, that was it!" said Sir John, reflectively. " That was just what I had to be with Cotterill. I never could get away from him, and he was such a queer poky fellow, always wanting to go ferreting in some out-of-the-way hole or other. I am sure when he was cross-questioning me about Roman remains, and Druidical temples, and what not, I did not know which way to look! Did any of you ever hear of a Roman circle, or camp, or anything of that sort, within the park? I am sure I never did."

None of them had. " He seemed to know all about it," continued their father; " he pestered me with questions till I was nearly beside myself. Was it here? Was it there? Where was there a stream of water running into the river by the side of the hill? I supposed he meant Barley Hill, so I took him there, but he could not find the place. He made me wait for nearly an hour while he tackled an old man by the roadside, who did not know the country one quarter as well as I did."

" Did you take him to Lutteridge, papa?" said Agatha.

" He did not care to go to Lutteridge; there were no * remains' there, he said. Really a man makes a noodle of himself when his brain runs on nothing but nonsense of that sort."

It was not, in short, Sir John's hobby, and he could not understand it. Would his guest have talked of breech-loaders, muzzle-loaders, setters, and pointers, he would not have found his companionship wearisome. Would Mrs Cotterill have laid down for half an hour of the day her canvas-work, Lady Manners would have been better able to endure her smile. She was no needle-woman, Sir John no antiquarian, and thus all sympathy of taste between them and their guests was wanting. While he complained that his contemporary made a noodle of himself over Roman camps and remains, she was exclaiming, aside, " How

can any human being spend whole days doing worsted work?"

Even Agatha and Hester had their minor grievances: Anne and Chatty had developed traits that had not been altogether expected. Anne had shown herself a flirt, and Chatty was found to have nothing in her beyond a good temper, good spirits, and good manners. On the whole, the family had outstayed their welcome, and would have done well to have departed directly after the marriage compact had been signed and sealed. People like the Manners' get into their own ways of thinking too much to assimilate readily with others; and people like the Cotterills are better liked at first and at last than during that intermediate stage, which is the test of those who are really excellent, but not quite so excellent as has been at the beginning imagined.

"But, poor souls, they came to enjoy themselves!" said Constance, when Hester had confided to her something of the state of the case; "and I suppose they found it all very pleasant; you could not expect them to betake themselves off in a hurry. It was only a pity you had no dancing—that would have passed the evenings, and I'll answer for it, every one of those little Cotterill brothers would dance like greyhounds. They were eyeing the floor at the wedding, and they whispered to me an inquiry as to whether the gallery was ever used for balls?" You may be sure I put my finger on my lips, Agatha. But I must tell you one thing—Herbert is a lovely partner; it is the best thing he is at. Well, he is a good little man, as I always said; and by this time, or soon—very soon after this week—you may prepare to see Jane a Cotterill from head to foot. Between ourselves, I would sooner have the Cotterill *foot* than the *head*; but then she never set up to be clever."

"Although Mr Searle did say in his speech," said Hester, "that she had 'the brightest intellect, the most intelligent observation, the sweetest disposition.' Stop a moment. 'No fairer ornament has ever adorned these ancient walls' (as if she had been a picture); 'no kinder heart has ever dwelt among these ancestral domains; no more beloved daughter, nor sister' (here he began to get mixed), 'nor young friend—ahem!—ahem! Known her from a cradle! First break in the family!' (everybody's eyes on their plates)—* ahem! ahem!""

"Hester, how can you!" said Agatha, angrily.

"How can I?" Hester was grave in a moment. "I'll tell you why I can. Because it was the most absurd speech ever made ; because it made Jane cry, and us all wretched; because it was not the time nor the place for Mr Searle to show off his own eloquence at our expense. He knows nothing whatever about Jane, or he would know that she has *not* the brightest intellect; and about her being the fairest ornament was all *fudge*——"

"True," observed Constance, in parenthesis; "what I always said: she is neither the prettiest nor the wittiest."

"I never was so angry with any one in my life," continued Hester, her eye kindling with growing indignation. "What business was it of his? Though we have known him in a sort of a way *from a cradle/ he has never shown any particular affection for one of us; and as to his pretending emotion, and making his voice tremble, it was done for effect, and for nothing else !"

"Of a piece with the letters, Agatha," said Constance, dryly. "Where does Hetty get her worldly wisdom from ? Fou, my love, were fairly taken in. That stupid old proser ! He made me quite cross, I know; and I thought he might at least have let the poor bride get to the farewell scene before he spoilt her beauty; for she did look remarkably nice before: to tell you the honest truth, Agatha, I was quite struck with Jane, for I had not expected that she would look so pretty. All wedding speeches are a mistake, but this was insufferable. A bride should go off in tears, *cela va sans dire*, but she ought not to be seen afterwards."

"Oh, Constance," said Agatha, "you are too deep for us. Fancy Jane's thinking whether she was to be seen afterwards or not!"

"It should be thought of for her, then. Hester thought of it, you see. Hester, my child, you did not look your best. Agatha was quite the show bridesmaid ; as for the others, none of them were much. It was a pity you had not me," said Constance, candidly. "But how was it, Hetty I meant you to look rosy and bonnie, and you were grey all over, and there was no life in you !"

"I hated the whole thing," sobbed Hester.

CHAPTER XXII.

"I HAVE WON HER BACK SO **FAR.**"

Poets, like lovers, should be bold and dare;
 They spoil their business with an over care;
 And though they stumble in a fall career.
 Yet rashness is a better fault than fear."
 —DRYDEN.

However long one subject may remain paramount in a rural neighbourhood, it must at length give place to another. For nearly two months the Cotterill interest reigned supreme at Wancote, but no sooner was it announced that Lord and Lady Westmacott were about to come down and celebrate their eldest son's coming of age by a series of entertainments, than the Cotterill star set, and the Westmacott sun arose.

The first desire in every quarter was, of course, to be themselves invited; their next to know which of their neighbours had been likewise favoured. There was to be a dinner, a football match, divers sports, and a ball,—to all of which both the families at Wancote and at Lutteridge were bidden. To the last the Miss Manners' were to be escorted by Constance; and as Lutteridge lay three miles nearer to Westmacott Castle than Wancote, they were to remain there for the night.

Hearing of this arrangement brought Simon home. He had left almost immediately after Jane's marriage, and had not been expected to return till the summer; but Constance, anxious to take her brother-in-law to a house where she always strove to appear to advantage, sent a piteous entreaty that he would run down for the festivities. She received only a dubious reply; but her next note brought him.

"We shall be three lone women," she had written, "for I do not choose to beg an invitation from Lady Westmacott for any one; and neither Bertie nor Jem can be here. Aunt Manners is not well, and Sir John says he cannot leave her, so they have asked me to take the girls—nice for them, and for us too! We shall be far jollier by ourselves; but still we must have a man. of some sort. They will stay the night here—Agatha and Hetty, I mean—so as to let, the parent

birds get quietly to roost, and save all trouble. Do come, if only for the ball; I will let you off all the rest."

He arrived as the carriage which brought his cousins over drove to the door. "Well, Constance, I am here," he said. "You said you wanted a man of some sort, so I thought I might just fill that category; I warn you that I don't dance."

"You are the best fellow in the world," cried she. "I knew you would come. I knew you would not leave us in the lurch. Now we shall be a compact party, exactly right. Oh, I was so put out when I thought we should have to go by ourselves, Agatha."

It might have been that Agatha had shared the feeling, such an unusual glow of animation was now painted on her cheek. She quite outstripped Hester in anticipations of the evening's enjoyment; and it was she, not Hetty, who insisted on taking off her long cloak—for they had come already dressed for the ball—and displaying the hidden billows of millinery within, to Constance, during Colonel Lutteridge's absence up-stairs. A quarter of an hour was allowed him to make ready; and since they had to wait so short a time, Hester declined to uncloak, averred that it would be a great deal of trouble to tuck herself up again, that her flowery garland would be crushed if once let down, and finally, that it was too cold—with a shiver—to unwrap for any one.

"Hester, you are shivering from excitement, not cold. Poor innocent—no wonder! Your first ball! My child, you are burning hot; your little round cheek is like a ball of fire; it will be cooler and whiter when you come back to-night! By the way, Agatha, you don't dance?"

"No; I don't care for it."

"But Hester does?"

"Hester does," said Hester, for herself. "Hester would stay at home if she did riot. What would be the pleasure of going, if one had to sit still in one place and look on the whole time? What is there to look at? The same stupid faces that one sees at dinners, I suppose; with not even the chance of hearing anything amusing, if everybody but yourself is busy. I cannot think why Agatha cares to go."

"One likes to see one's neighbours," said Agatha; "and there is no need to sit still the whole time in one place; one can move about, and go in to supper."

Constance shrugged her shoulders. "Does it make you uncomfortable, Agatha?"

"I don't know," said Agatha, honestly, "for I have never tried."

"If it was that, I could understand. I know it does make some people quite wretched—men as well as women; my cousins the Townshends delight in dancing, but they get giddy immediately; if that is your case, I pity you; but you will have Simon to bear you company to-night, at all events."

And accordingly it appeared, at least in Hester's eyes, that during the first part of the evening Simon had nothing to do but to bear the lady company. It being found that the second sister danced, and that she was a charming partner, and the only available Miss Manners, her hand was sought on all sides. Ere the ball had well begun her card was full, for she had not only to give every neighbour and friend a turn, but all the partners whom Lady Westmacott in her civility desired to divide between the sisters were relegated to her; all the strangers who were thought to be suitable acquaintances for the daughters of Sir John Manners had to be content with writing their names on one list, and she had soon the pleasure or the pain of seeing it entirely filled.

She gave one uncontrollable look at Simon. It escaped ere she knew \ and though she turned her head immediately the other way, she was aware that it brought him to her side. "Well, Hester," he said, cheerfully, "you will have a merry evening. You have been quite beset. It is hardly fair of Agatha to let you in for all her partners as well as your own; may I take a look?"

"You know I don't dance," he continued \ "but there is a break somewhere, I suppose. I'll take you in to supper, if I may?" It was spoken so pleasantly, so courteously, so exactly in the tone in which Agatha or even her aunt might have been addressed, that she could only assent, and he fancied she did so readily. It was hard after that to find himself, when the hour came, seized upon to conduct a titled dame to a seat of honour, his only consolation being that, looking up and down the tables, he could nowhere perceive the lady he had meant to take. She was still waltzing when he returned to the saloon, easily detected among the few now on the floor; and within five minutes* he had her on his arm.

His heart beat high. "Now¹ he thought, "my chance is come at last. I must be wary. I must not venture too far. I must have no explanations; they can wait. All I now want is to re-establish our old friendly footing, to get her no longer to shun me, no longer to fear me } and then, Hester, then.——"

Accordingly he was grave, polite, and rather silent. He made no attempt at settled conversation, saw only that she had enough on her plate, and when her eating proved to be a failure, insisting on wine. She was then taken back, but not to the ball-room. "You owe me a dance," he said. "More than one, I should say. I am sure I have heard somewhere that after-supper engagements never hold good—isn't that true? Come and sit down here," throwing back a door; "oh—it's full! Never mind, Hester; I know a better place: they are sitting on the window-seats along the old gallery; I saw them just now. Will you come there? Don't refuse."

The last words startled her. They were spoken with an energy unusual in him, and she hesitated, considering what might next be coming. What had she to fear? What to hope? Were he to begin by taking her to task by questions and reproaches, it would be awkward, and she would hardly know what to say. Thrown off her balance, and in the extremity of the moment, she certainly was not happy in her reply: "If you—will promise—not to say anything."¹

"Say anything! What sort of thing? What do you expect me to say?"

They were pushed into a corner, and she could scarcely catch the words, far less tell with what expression they were spoken; but she found that he had not relinquished his purpose: she was being led into the gallery, and a very empty gallery it was. Only one pair of turtle-doves cooed in a distant recess, and another at the far end paced slowly up and down.

"What am I not to say?" repeated Simon, as soon as the coast was clear. "Whatever you bid me, I will do; whatever I am not to do, I will refrain from. Can I offer more?"

«No—but——"

"What are you afraid of? Not of *me*? Dear Hester, I will not say a word of any sort to distress you; surely you know me better than to suppose I would?" But his spirits sank, for he thought, "She is now afraid I am going to

begin my suit, and is doing all she can to stop me. It is aa I suspected. Whatever happens, a word at this juncture would be premature."

Then he essayed to soothe. "I am afraid I have vexed my little cousin sometimes of late," he said. "You have had some charge against me in your own mind, Hester. Now do not tell me what it is, if you would rather not; but if it be what I imagine, you need not*"—*emphatically*—"give another thought to the matter. I will never be the cause of annoyance to you. Should the time come——" He paused.

"Yes!"

"We will leave it to take care of itself," subjoined he, briskly. "We will have nothing to do with it just now; no omens, no prognostications to-night. Only, Hester, there was one day when you ran away from me in the avenue——"

She winced.

"You remember 1"

"Oh, don't."

"Certainly not; I am not going to be troublesome,—don't fear. I merely wished to say that I hoped you would never again feel that such an avoidance of me was necessary. Let us be friends without your having any anxiety, dear, lest I—*stould* wish—to overstep the bounds—of friendship."

He spoke slowly, and as one who had weighed his words well beforehand, and so wisely were they chosen that, though they destroyed in the listener's heart any hopes that might still have lain dormant there unknown to herself, they gave to her pride a momentary thrill of gratification.

He had understood her, then; by her own unaided efforts she had shown that she was not to be trifled with, and he would not again presume. It was now but four short months since the tragical night on which she had forsworn love and happiness for ever; and here she was almost, if not quite, ready to feel that to meet him, to speak with him, smile on him once more, would be possible. During those months she had, it is true, with all the ardour of youth, stood to her guns; she had lived without him, shunned him, thwarted him, thrust him aside whenever he attempted to break down the invisible barrier,—but she was growing tired of the task. To have so excellent an opportunity given for throwing down her arms was not to be despised; and only too glad to have

such a turn given to a discussion which trenched on dangerous ground, she put her hand in her companion's, and accepted the conditions.

Too quickly the time passed, and she was hunted out and taken from him ere he had said more than a few common-places, ere he had fully realised all that had been accomplished ; but the face of his little cousin wore a subdued look of inward peace for the remainder of the evening, which he felt had not been there before.

"She cares for me a little," he mused, watching from the background. "Not as I care for her; she has not yet learned what that great awakening is. But still she thinks of me—she is pleased with me—I have brought that smile to her lips. Well, I have won her back so far—I am no longer to her a trouble and a terror; and now to tame my nestling to my hand."

"Colonel Lutteridge, you are not dancing !"

Colonel Lutteridge did not dance.

Lady Westmacott was shocked at him, wondered what he meant by acknowledging such a thing. Not dance, when so many charming girls were present, and when, do what she would, some of them had to sit down every time] Shocking ! Look at his sister-in-law, look at the lovely Mrs Lutteridge, what an example she was to everybody ! Quite the belle of the room ; and so indefatigable that nothing seemed to tire her. Lord Westmacott pronounced her the best dancer as well as the prettiest woman present.

He bowed.

"Your cousin, Miss Manners, of course might dispute the last assertion ; but she—ah—lays no claim—does not compete in the matter of the first. It is too bad of you both !" In her tone there was a sudden accent of intelligence, of recollection, a latent "Oho, I begin to see !"—but it was lost on him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "she is dancing now with your son/

"What ? With Thurston ! No, that is Hester, the sister who is just out of the schoolroom—a sweet face—but of course you know, I was speaking of Miss Manners, of Agatha. She has sat down all the time."

He had entirely forgotten Agatha. He saw now that she occupied a chair at the upper end of the room, unattended, and with rather a grave face watching the spectacle. In her

own mind Lady Westmacott wondered if they had had a quarrel—she gave him credit for a poor attempt to draw off her attention by remarking on Hester; she went off convinced that she had penetrated into the secret of an interesting attachment—and the sight of the two together afterwards, and the smiles which presently reappeared on the lady's face, confirmed her respect for her own sagacity.

Agatha had certainly expected that, after so fair a beginning had been made, Simon would have been more at her service throughout the evening than had proved to be the case. Since neither of them were taking part in the dance, and since Constance and Hester were equally unlikely to have any idle time on their hands, there was certainly no reason why the two, thus left to themselves, should not have spent the greater part of every hour together. At least she thought so; but there was another person besides the proverbial host on whom she had not reckoned. This was Edward Searle, who, although a clergyman, and supposed in a general way to abstain from such diversions, had come to the Westmacott's ball, because, he said, they were such old friends, and he and Thurston had been schoolfellows, and it was a special occasion. The statements were correct, and the reasoning sufficiently plausible; but it was patent to all that he was there for the simple reason that Agatha was there.

Here again was another non-performer; and so long as he remained, matters were well enough. She would not have allowed that at any time she experienced a sense of desertion—a forlornness to which she was unaccustomed,—but certainly after Mr Searle's departure she was more than once at a loss. It is all very well for one to elect one's self to stand aside and see the giddy throng go by, but when the giddy throng persist in going by hour after hour—when, with glowing, laughing countenances, they bestow that pity which is nearer akin to contempt than love on the one who takes no part—when even the elders descend from their pedestal to take a sober turn as the crowds diminish,—for one who still holds stoutly out, the time is long. She tried to say it was not, tried to speak cheerfully, and assure Constance that she was not fatigued—was enjoying herself as much as they were; but Constance knew better. "I would really have ordered the carriage an hour sooner on Agatha's account, if I had thought of it!" said she to Simon,—she

could afford to say it, since the time for doing so was past. "I am quite sorry for her; she looks so dismal, sitting there all alone. Do go, and take her off to get something; make her move about. I declare it is quite depressing to feel one's self followed about by her poor half-shut eyes, and to know that she is crying shame on us all, for keeping her still here when she is sick of the whole thing! As for Hetty, does she not look a little rosebud? Half the boys are in love with her; and Thurston has thrown over a host of engagements for her sake, I know. Lady Westmacott says she can't spare either of us yet; she looks to us to keep up the spirit of the ball to the end."

"The end must be pretty near at hand now."

"Half the people are staying in the house, you know; and they have no idea of stopping yet. Oh yes, I believe it is ours, Mr Lester. Now, Simon, do just go and keep Agatha quiet."

Thus adjured, he again approached his cousin, and suggested, in accordance with instructions, a turn through the rooms. They were too empty now, however, Agatha thought, for such a promenade; they would be too much observed and commented on: had he taken her when the ball was at its height, it would have been different—as it was, she thanked him, preferred to stay where she was, and as he took a seat by her side, Lady Westmacott caught a look of pleasure whose meaning she settled on the spot.

"Poor Edward Searle!" she said, benevolently,—for she was quite cognisant of the bait which had lured the hapless Edward to her feast. "But really, with such a rival, who could hope for success? His chances may go to the winds if Colonel Lutteridge is in the way."

Then a compliment had to be paid Constance on her having brought *the* party to the ball, and she was assured that without them—without herself and her two lovely cousins, and Colonel Lutteridge—the evening would have been shorn of half its ornaments.

"We only needed the bride: Captain and Mrs Cotterill should have been with us; we owe them a grudge, I assure you," averred the hostess, in the height of her complacency; "but still, you have been so kind, helped us so much, we must not remember the delinquencies of others."

The reply was a matter of course. With sparkling eyes Constance could sincerely declare that the evening had

needed no one—needed nothing in her eyes. It had been a complete and entire success from beginning to end; she did not know when she had enjoyed a ball so much. The sentiment was echoed, but faintly, by Agatha. She could assure her hostess of the general satisfaction, but she could not dilate on her own share in it—she could not aver that she had never enjoyed a ball so much.

Then came little Hester, who said not a word, but looked up into the face of the kind dame with a smile so straggly sweet that Lady Westniacott, by a sudden impulse, bent down and kissed her. "Good night, my pretty child," she said. "You ought to have been in bed hours ago. Don't stay up as late as this often, dancing the roses out of these little cheeks"—touching them with her finger—and then she stopped short.

Colonel Lutteridge was in front of her, looking on. His eyes lit up with such a sudden and sympathetic flash, as, the kiss given, she drew herself up and met them, that when, the next minute, they sank down and rested on the place whereon it had been bestowed, while there was a pause in which she could note it all, she forgot what she was going to say further, in puzzled astonishment. Constance and Agatha had passed on, and no one else was near; the principal actor in the little scene had a full minute to make her observations. "It was very odd," said she afterwards, shaking her head at the recollection. "I do not understand that Colonel Lutteridge. It is *one* of the sisters, I am convinced, but which, I am not so sure about."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SECOND MEETING BY THE RIVER.

"Striving to better, oft we mar what's well."

—*Lear*

In spite of an evening which had been at least partially satisfactory, Simon did not find matters go on quite so smoothly as he had looked for afterwards.

True, there was now no more open defence on feater'a

part, no further surrounding herself with social barricades, no turning aside when brought face to face, but there was a shadowy intangible something which seemed ever to prevent his progressing with her beyond the point he had already reached. So long as he kept to ordinary dialogue, so long as he chose a seat a yard or two away from her side, all went well: but did he advance a hair's-breadth towards a change of tone, she snapped him up; did he touch her hand, were it but accidentally, she knit her brow. He learned to depend upon her looks, studying her face as though it were a chart by which he might steer on his difficult course. Once or twice he was surprised; when taken at unawares he caught lights and shadows, fluctuations and tremors, that were not attributable to any known source. Sometimes it was a blush, sometimes a sigh—once he could have sworn it was a shudder. She gave him no chance of finding out what that shudder meant. He was alone with her in the room for fully half an hour afterwards, and she handed him a book-knife and an uncut magazine. He took it mechanically, met a hard determined look, and began hastily to sever the pages.

She questioned him afterwards as to the merits of the paper he had been engaged upon. Was it the opening one on the state of the French army, or the comedy in verse which followed? She had found those two articles cut, and supposed he had not needed to proceed further.

She was right, he said, as usual; he had not needed to proceed further.

"You were not reading?"

"No; I was thinking."

"* You do not think when you read?"

"I do not read when I think."

"* Why did you prefer to think?"

"* I don't know that I did prefer it."

"Why did you do it, then?" impatiently. "Why can you not give me a plain answer to a plain question?"

"I will, Hester; a very plain one, if you like to put the question."

"Pooh." said she, alarmed at once. "After all, I have nothing to say. I have no one to fight with, now that Bertie is away; and I get cross, you see. But you were wrong not to do as I told you—you missed something good—for I read them both afterwards; and after all, you **were**

only idling away your time, and pretending to think as an excuse."

He turned away disappointed : a moment before, her impatience, her irritation had brought her close to him ; all at once he knew he must beware. He sighed, and the sigh caught her ear. She looked at him, looked at the floor, stole a glance back, and set to wonder what all this meant.

"You need not have been rude to him," said a voice within. "He was in nowise to blame in this instance. He had done you no wrong that you should treat him so. Go forward and say something pleasant, to show him that you can behave properly."

But the prompter spoke too late. Before she could make up her mind the opportunity was gone.

On the next meeting Hester was anxiously polite, would hardly suffer him to take the trouble of putting her on her horse, made a great point of shaking hands instead of nodding her "good-bye" when mounted, and left him less satisfied than ever. He left Lutteridge for all the summer months; and Wancote also was deserted until the shooting season once more collected its inmates. From year to year, as regularly as the 1st of September came round, Sir John was there to hail the happy day. He did not much care, he said, what they did with him from April to August; he liked, to be sure, his fishing-run in the spring, but he did not mind so much about the later rivers. He could manage with only a touch at the Spey in July and a dabble at the Wye in June; provided he had those, he really did not care very much what became of him for the rest of the time. They might take him where they chose, so long as it was not to London, nor to Brighton, nor to any of those vile foreign places. Nor, still more emphatically, he would subjoin, "to pay visits." Visits would be the death of him.

As it may be perceived that a wide choice was not left, matters usually ended in a brief stay at his Devonshire farm, and the mother and daughters taking a fortnight in town once and again, while he was engaged elsewhere—while he was having one of those touches at the Spey, the Tweed, or the Wye in which he from time to time indulged.

All were well pleased to find themselves once more at Wancote after a summer broken up into small pieces of pleasure,

especially as several promising plans had been frustrated, and the weather throughout the season had been unsettled. "Dear old Wancote!" cried Hester, dancing along the wainscoted rooms. "Dear old dining-room! Dear old library! Dear old windows and doors, and tables and chairs!—I love you all. How the dew glitters on the grass, and the sun sparkles through the laurel leaves! There is the sheep-bell coming up the slope, and the herd-boy's call in answer! There is the river, guarded by my sentinel poplars! There is Lutteridge,—no, it has not yet begun to peep out, because the leaves are so thick this rainy year! Constance is not yet come down, but Simon will be there directly. I shall like to see him, I shall be glad to see him again. We shall meet in the lanes, and I shall find him in the house when we come in from our walks and rides. Sometimes he will stay dinner, sometimes we shall be asked there. It will all be pleasant, it will all be delightful; and I am never going to be stupid, and childish, and melodramatic again."

All the family thought Hester improved. Jane's marriage, they said, had drawn her forward, given her a position, a responsibility, which had been beneficial. She was more thoughtful, milder, less abrupt and headstrong than she had been. She was also prettier.

At least so thought her cousin, when, a few days after the arrival of the Waricote people, he too came down, and accidentally met Hester in her pony-cart, driving along the road to the station. He stopped her to inquire for them all. "And how are you?" he said; "and how is my aunt? What sport has Sir John been having in the North? Were the rivers in trim?"

He thought he had quite got over his *penchant* for the little minx who had stolen his fancy and spoilt his first year at home. He was more occupied now with his shooting friends, his battues, and the bag he expected to make on the ist, than with anything else. At the particular moment of meeting, his mind was full of the non-arrival of some fresh stores of cartridges which he had meant to find at the station, but which were not there. As soon as all preliminary civilities had been answered, "Are you going to the station?" was inquired eagerly.

"Yes; I am on my way there."

"It is going to rain, and I want to have my cartridges safe out of the damp. Would you mind bringing them up

if they have come by the train that is arriving now, **and** dropping them at Lutteridge on your way back? If you would——"

"Yes, I will; I can bring them up immediately,—I am going nowhere else."

"That's capital; thank you. Dick," stepping back to direct the groom, "you tell Jobson that you met me, and have my authority to take them, or he won't give them up. I told him I would come again myself; so unless you say that, he will not know what to do. And mind you put them safe under cover; put them well under the seat. I'm not going home yet, but tell Kean to take them to the gun-room. I am really much obliged, Hester," turning to her again. "It will save me a lot of bother, for I was on my way up to the house now to order the dog-cart, and I have to be at Parker's by five o'clock. I hardly knew how to manage it."

"Shall I find Constance at Lutteridge? I suppose not."

"No, not yet. She will not be down for another month. She has got some more lively houses to go to for the present. Are the boys to be here to-night?"

"Jem is; Bertie cannot get away."

"I shall be up to-morrow or next day. What a pity about Bertie! Mind you tell Jem; I shall expect him to give us a day soon, but I shall see him myself about it. Good-bye."

She was off as he spoke, and off while he could ruminate on his part of the interview with complacency.

"Well, I have seen her, and that is over; now I have no longer any objection to going to Wancote. She is just as pretty as ever—prettier; as attractive every way; but I have got over it somehow. A few months make all the difference; new scenes, new people, a good change works wonders with us all. Now if my cartridges get wet——"

His mind was kept more to his cartridges than perhaps might have been the case had it been left to itself. He was not going to think about Hester. She was nothing to him—nothing: he wished that she and Jem had not voices so much alike, that was all; he was sure to be startled every now and then by oddly-timed associations, inopportune reminders. However, so far it was delightful to find that the real voice had been heard so calmly, that he had been able to look in her face, take her hand, and take himself off after-

wards, with a gallant, light-hearted bearing such as must have done him credit. To Wancote he would go the very next day and show his metal

It was a pity he did. He did not find his nerve there quite so steady as he had expected; sundry uneasy qualms made him restless, and he was glad to have an excuse for leaving soon.

"What a different person Simon is sometimes to what he is at others!" exclaimed his aunt, as soon as he had gone. "He is generally silent, but to-day he talked more than any one. He used to come and stand by the fireplace, looking round on us all with his great absent eyes, till I have felt quite uncomfortable, and longed for him to move, or speak, or do anything—to-day I absolutely caught myself wishing that he would not fidget! It was so unlike him; could anything have been the matter? But perhaps he was only impatient to be off."

"You see, mamma, it is the *First/ and he had only run up, he said, in the middle of the sport, leaving his friends waiting at the boat-house. I think it was very kind of him to come at all," said Agatha. "I am sure neither of our boys would have gone in to see Constance if they had been shooting at Lutteridge."

"But still, since he had come, I thought he might have stayed."

She was alone in her opinion; her daughters maintained that all cousinly, relationly feeling had been shown, and were even flattered by his not having more time at his bestowal. When their father came in at night, he too was on their side. "Simon, here?" he said. "I wish I had known he was coming, and I would have left a message for him, but I never dreamed of his coming to-day. I understood he had gone out with a party."

It was explained. "Did you give him luncheon?" next inquired Sir John.

"He would not stay." Lady Manners still half resented the abrupt departure. "He was not with us a quarter of an hour, and seemed all the time in a hurry. He would have nothing but a glass of wine and a biscuit, standing. I thought he might just have sat down; we had a nice luncheon all on the table."

"Pooh! What did he care? They would have luncheon with them, of course. I suppose he left them while they were

at it I wonder he came at all. It mist have taken him fully half an hour all in all."

"Not more, I should say."

"Well, what would you have ^ Half an hour in the middle of the day is as much as an hour in the evening; I would not give up a good half hour at two o'clock for a great deal. And on a day like this when the birds were rising gloriously! —You may take it as a compliment, I can tell you."

"We told mamma so," said Agatha.

"What was their bag?"

"What was it, Hester?"

"Thirty-five brace."

"Only thirty-five! And that will have been the best half; the birds were not doing so well this afternoon: they ought to have had double the number. How many guns?"

"I don't know, papa.*"

"Who expected you to know, Agatha? I don't suppose you could tell how many we were ourselves! Hetty, say.¹"

"Two, papa; besides Simon. A Colonel Bevan, and another man whose name we did not hear."

"Not Parker?"

"No."

"Parker would be out on his own ground," mused Sir John. "There were three of them altogether, then? Humph! Quite enough for thirty-five brace! Jem and I would have had double the number *off* the same ground. I don't suppose there was a shot among them."

"Is Simon not a good shot?" inquired Lady Manners. "He seems very fond of it."

"You can't call him good if you mean to compare him with crack sportsmen. He is a fair shot—only fair. He is not bad, you know: he is a long way better than Parker, or Martin, or any of the Westmacotts; but if you want to know exactly how he stands" (none of them cared two straws), "why, then, I'll tell you," continued Sir John, confidentially. "Bertie, or Jem, or I could beat him hollow, —and that's the long and the short of it."

Colonel Lutteridge was not seen much of for a week or two; but looking in one afternoon, after seeing a party off by the train, he found his aunt alone, and sat with her for upwards of an hour. She discovered that he was out of spirits, that he was silent <ts he had been of old, and that

there was no fidgeting. She further found that he was going home to three days of solitude, since his next relay of guests was not expected to arrive until the end of the week; and since the prospect seemed unwelcome to him, her pity and her hospitality were alike enlisted on his side. Qo and stay there all by himself! He must not do that. He must send for his portmanteau and his man, and remain where he was. When Agatha and Hester came in from their walk they found the matter settled.

Was it a wise step? He could not tell—he did not wish to know; he told himself impatiently that such questions were better left unanswered. It did not do to probe every passing thought, every mere sensation. It was arrant folly to be thinking and brooding over this thing and that thing, whether he ought to go here and there, whether it was for his own happiness to do this and that. It was dignifying a trifle into a matter of importance—a bad habit. At least, come what might, he harmed no one but himself; and if there were imprudence, he alone would suffer.

Having thus decided, he put aside the question; and, to all appearance, everything went on well enough. Hester certainly was less conscious, less sensitive, than she had been; he was talked to freely, permitted once more to draw near to her especial corner. He found her with Jem in the gun-room one day; it was wet, and Jem was casting bullets. "Now, don't you go," said he to his sister, as Simon came in. "It's only Simon. Come in, Simon—and, I say, will you shut the door quickly, please; the draught blows the fire up so. She thought it was those fellows we are expecting for the afternoon. But I tell you, Het, they won't come in here: of course they will have to go to the drawing-room first. I was mortally afraid it was some one coming to call me, though, when I heard your voice outside," to his cousin; "I thought they might have arrived by an earlier train, and I have only done about the half."

"Is Hester helping?"

"She thinks she is, but she is just sitting there talking rubbish. Here, Hester, give Simon that good chair, and you take this."

The good chair was a worn, shapeless block of high altitude and huge dimensions; that which Jem unceremoniously pushed towards his sister was a rocker with both arms gone and a cushion in rags. She rose to take it*

"I might not have wondered at Bertie/" said Simon reproachfully, "but I did not expect that of Jem!"

"Why, she does not mind," said Jem. "Do you, Hetty? She likes that one. Oh, get out!" as the rocker caught his foot and pinched it. "Oh, I say! It is not meant for people like you to sit in. Let Hetty have it; the one she was in was too big for her."

She was now standing. "No indeed," said Simon resolutely. "Hester, if you continue to stand while I sit, I must either stand too or go away."

"Well, stand too." He looked surprised, but did so. Quick as thought she slipped into the seat behind him. "Now then! Oho! oho!" Such a roguish face laughed up to his, that, as he turned to reproach her, he stood mute, bewitched, and forgetful. He gazed for so long that Jem, who had approved of the trick, turned round from his pot to see what was the new hitch. Simon would have given something to have had him away at the moment,—a new courage thrilled through his veins, a new hope took his heart by storm. He spent the next half-hour awaiting with ever-increasing expectation the summons which should leave him alone with his love; but even when the bullet-maker himself had leisure to feel that the call would not be unwelcome, it did not come.

Once he went out to discover if by any chance his friends had arrived, and he had not been told; but such was not the case, and he was back in the gun-room before anything remarkable had taken place in his absence. Then Agatha came in to find where they all were, and finally the whole party was sent for to the drawing-room.

Simon, however, had come to a resolution. The three days, of which this was the last, had not been without result: he was by no means so sure as he had been that he had sifted out the truth, and he was more deeply in love than ever. He had dim suspicions of something going on which was not manifest, of secret workings of the soul, such as he would fain have pried into; and ashamed of his former irresolution, he resolved to have it out now with his sweetheart, whatever the end might be.

Some feeling prompted him to try once more a meeting on the riverside path. Since the friends who were to be with him on Saturday, and for whose coming he had returned to Lutteridge, wrote putting him off till Monday, he would

have the Sunday afternoon to himself, and he scarcely regretted that he had not stayed at Wancote. At Wancote, within the Wancote grounds, he would most certainly spend one part of the day.

The morning was wet, and none of the ladies from the Hall were in church; but the heavy clouds cleared off in admirable time, Simon reckoned, for Hester to go to her Sunday class. He had ascertained that she kept up the practice. When she told him so, both had spoken with a certain consciousness, which he felt might mean anything or nothing, might be for the best or worst. Well, he would hope for the best; he would not let himself again be put off by discouraging doubts; he would be there, he would know his fate, and if need be, meet it like a man.

It seemed like a curious dream when he once again chained his boat to the bank and sprang ashore. He had now to wait much about the same length of time as he had done before; and as he stood still, recalling the scene, living almost more in the past than in the present, she stepped into view and made the bygone picture complete.

Either she did not see him so soon as she had done before, or she was not averse to the meeting. There was no hesitation this time,—the light figure clad in its sober tints, holding a parasol as shade from the sun, which shone straight into her eyes, came swiftly on. She was close to him now: how was it, there was something amiss—no, surely not; still was it not a taller, more erect form? The parasol was moved aside, and disclosed the face of—Agatha.

Jacob, cheated of his Rachel, would have felt for Simon then. He understood now the steady front which had been presented to him; the quick, unwavering footstep. He was nothing to Agatha; hastening homewards, as she was now doing, she would scarcely care to be detained by him, would be reluctant to spare time even for a few minutes' interview. And he had augured so much from that onward movement! In the two minutes in which he had had time to mark it, he had conjured up a thousand hopes; he had already in imagination stopped her, persuaded her to retrace her steps, opened his mission. And now, his house of cards lay in ruins before him!

In the blank disappointment of the moment a faint "Agatha" escaped his lips, and the inflection of his voice might have conveyed to an attentive ear the feeling which

inspired it. But Agatha only heard her name uttered in tremulous accents, and saw a troubled countenance turned upon her. Was she to blame if she misinterpreted? Had not Constance, Lady Westmacott, Edward Searle, and a host of others thought more or less? He had, or so she thought, been put down as her admirer all over the county.

She had never been herself sure of his deserving the title, but she had always felt that it might be so; although his frequent visits, his evident liking to Wancote, and the conviction that there was no one else, was pretty much all that she could see in favour of the idea.

On the other hand, there were no obstacles; had he any wish to enter the Manners' family, he must know that he might; since the question of marriage between cousins had long before been settled in general terms by Mm and Sir John. Both were of one mind; it was not unadvisable unless under exceptional circumstances. Colonel Lutteridge had naturally been the one to introduce the subject; and Sir John, in reporting afterwards what had been said, had alleged that his nephew had seemed so settled in his convictions, so desperately in earnest, and to have given so much thought to the matter, that had he ever shown a liking for any of the girls, he should have suspected him of having a personal interest in it. Since he had not shown the liking, the subject had dropped, and whether Agatha had ever expected anything to come of the conversation or not—she had heard of it, of course—did not appear. She was the last girl to have shown her hopes or feelings; she admired her cousin, she liked him, she was perpetually struck by his person and his air. To sit by him, and be occasionally addressed, to make sure that no one else had more of his attention than she had, was a gratification, and it sufficed her. She did not call for much of his notice, although she could not endure to see any of it bestowed on another.

This was the state of Agatha's heart. If, however, he now desired, though late, to kindle these moderate and unexceptionable feelings into a holy flame, she was not unwilling. She caught his "Agatha," and almost thought he was. Even her well-ordered pulses beat a shade faster. His manner, his exclamation of her name, his uncertain movement forward, favoured the illusion, and once implanted, all he did conspired to heighten it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

INTERRUPTED.

" Broken CDda will never meet."

" Agatha," he faltered, " I—I did not expect to see you."⁹

She felt that such being the case, he stood in need of reassurance, and replied, cheerfully, "You did not know we taught in the Sunday-school? Hester does at least—my scholars come to me;—but as she has a little cold to-day, I have taken hers, and she has mine at home."

" A cold] " he said, quickly. " Nothing much—nothing serious, I hope 1"

"Nothing beyond an ordinary cold; not even a sore throat But she ought to keep to the house for a day or two."

How very unfortunate ! Since it was no more than this, not an illness to be in any way alarmed about, he had leisure to feel—how very unfortunate. He was more embarrassed than ever; and observing his silence, his discomposure, his evident desire to speak, and his equally evident uncertainty as to what he had to say, she continued, in as disengaged a manner as could be expected from a young lady under such peculiar circumstances, "You were taking a quiet walk along the river, I suppose. Did you cross at the boat-house 1"

" Did I ? Ah—yes. My boat is down there."

" Do you come often ?"

" No. I don't think so."

Don't think so ¥ A man must know whether he does a thing or does not; it was scarcely a question of thinking—but Agatha forgave him. She would have been glad, however, if, instead of remaining before her in that irresolute attitude, he would have taken the initiative in some way; she could hardly linger longer, unless he specifically invited her, for Agatha was the last person in the world to bate one inch of her dignity. At the same time, it was so easy to be seen that he was but looking about for an excuse to detain his companion, that she would not hurry him too much.

"Are you going in at once?" said he, at last

"I was on my way home," circumspectly.

"Are you in haste? Are you obliged to be at home by a set time?"

"Oh dear, no."

"Hester gave me to understand once that she had not a single second to spare," he observed, with a half smile. "I came across her in this path one Sunday last autumn, and she would not stop to draw a breath. I was afraid you too might think me—ah—in the way?"

Then he looked at her hard. He was so friendless, so entirely thrown back upon himself and upon his own judgment in the matter, that he yearned for a word of counsel—for a sisterly whisper of encouragement. By making a clean shrift to Agatha, confiding in her all his troubles and perplexities, he might gain a valuable ally, and in any case he could lose nothing. Were her opinion to prove unfavourable, he need only retrace his ground a few paces, and recommence his wooing; he had no intentions now of giving in, whoever might recommend him to do so; but if, on the contrary, she breathed a word of hope, it would be life to him. To go home in the state of wrought-up expectation in which he now was, and have to wait days before he could look for any change—before he could advance his cause a step! The thought was intolerable. He turned two anxious, inquiring eyes upon his cousin's face.

It was a kinder face—a softer, gentler face than he had been used to think it. There was a hesitation, even a scarcely perceptible flutter; he felt that she was not eager to be gone,—at least, that she was not impatient of his detaining her. Suppose she had a suspicion of his reasons for doing so; suppose she knew all about it? Girls, he believed, did at times seem possessed of a spirit of divination on this subject. She and Hester had been much together of late—Jane's loss had drawn them more into harmony—and even though no words might have passed between the two, it was quite likely that she had discerned both her sister's feelings and his own.

If so, this intuition might possibly be at the root of her confusion, and her readiness to hearken to him; she might be anticipating, even while standing there by his side, his confession. She had at least done all she could: she had shown her sympathy; it remained for him to claim it. He

ground himself up to the point. "Can you turn round with me, Agatha?"

Silently she turned,

"I don't know how to begin," said her cousin, with an embarrassed laugh. "I am not up to this sort of thing. You see I have no one but Constance, and she is not here, and even if she were—you won't mind my speaking to you, Agatha? I am not too forward, am I? You see it is so difficult for a fellow, because of your being relations. You are all so kind to me that it makes it awfully hard to know what you really feel:—much worse than if I were a stranger, don't you understand?"

The lucid explanation made an admirable beginning. Agatha bent her head, and felt a little tremble in her veins. It cannot be said that she was wildly shaken, but she did experience a certain amount of nervous feeling, and rather wished it was over.

"I have tried many times," continued Simon, going on with spirit now that he had begun, "to be sure that I was not deceiving myself, but I am still as far from finding out as ever. If there were any one else—if I had a rival—"

"Oh no."

"No?" cried he, eagerly. "Well, that is something; but still that does not do much for me, after all. It only helps me half-way, eh, Agatha? I cannot be content; I cannot wait in uncertainty any longer. If I do not know something one way or other at once, I shall be very miserable. How can I help it? I am no boy to fall in and out of love every month or two; this is to me a very great matter," slowly, "and—and—I am a fool!" he broke off, in a rough, harsh voice, which could not veil the emotion with which the words were uttered.

A few more paces were trodden, and then, "You are very good to let me tell you this," continued the speaker, with another disturbed and anxious look into his companion's face. "I feel as if I were encroaching—as if I had no right to trouble you—but I must brave it. Are you sure that you can have patience, Agatha)—That you will not mind listening——]"

She was scarcely conscious of the strangeness of such expressions—did not indeed ascertain with any accuracy what he said—was only aware that he was agitated and incoherent, that he was addressing her as he had never

done before, and that he was avowing feelings as to whose depth and reality there could be no two opinions. She was willing, indeed, to listen—far more ready to listen than to speak—and, glad to find that she was not called upon for an immediate answer, walked along by his side with tolerable composure. They had traversed the distance between the place of their meeting and the entrance-gate ere he had paused ; and at the moment when Agatha's faintly articulated assent—her "yes" to his inquiry as to whether she would hear him—reached his ears, to the unspeakable disgust of both, out stepped the lady's father from the lodge.

The chagrin manifest on both countenances ought to have told its own tale to any intruder; but Sir John was, as we have said, unobservant. He hailed his nephew with a " Ha, Simon, was it you who left the gate open 1" and planted himself between the two without waiting for a reply.

"Just when I had got so far," inwardly sighed the one. And "Just when he had got so far," sympathetically grieved the other.

"Went in to tell 'em to lock the gates," continued Sir John. "I don't know what they were about to have the gates unlocked on a Sunday. We shall have all the rabble about the place coming in next."

"I am afraid it was my doing," said Agatha. "I made Munday unlock the gate for me, and told him to leave it open."

"You should have given notice when you came back> then."

Both now had to listen, or appear to listen, while the new-comer, pleased to find an audience, peacefully discoursed upon the morning's sermon—a favourite theme with him—suiting his step to theirs. Ere long they came to the boat, half concealed under the boughs of an overhanging tree, and Sir John made a halt. He continued talking, it is true; but as he did so, he unconsciously eyed the boat, until, under the look of involuntary expectation, his nephew felt himself obliged to unfasten its moorings. There was clearly no help for it; and with a muttered apology for he knew not what, and a warm pressure of the hand timidly held out to him by his cousin, he stepped in. He had been baulked, but his blood was up. He was not going to lie quietly down under this; he would not be turned from his purpose because of a mere accidental en-

counter. Agatha, to be sure, he would not assail a second time; but he saw that she had been to the full as much annoyed at the interruption as he had; and when the truth came out, as come out it should on that very night, she would understand all that he had been prevented from disclosing to her. As soon as he got home he rang the bell

"John, are any of you going to church to-night?"

"Yes, sir; I think several of them is going, sir. They were not at church in the morning."

"I have a note to be left at the Hall. You go through the grounds, I suppose? I will ring when it is ready. It can be left as you go, and you can call for an answer as you return. Sir John does not go at night, does he?"

"No, sir; nor the ladies, except in summer."

"That will do," said Simon to himself, his pulses throbbing with excitement; and he sat down to write.

What he said we shall see hereafter. It was not an easy task, and he was in no fit state to write at all. He had to be plain, yet to pick his words. He wished to be particularly deferential, since he could not help knowing that the offer he was about to make was a brilliant one: but even such an attitude might be overstrained; he must be honest as well as modest. Yet, after all, his real difficulty lay with Hester herself—lay in his desire not to assume that he had a place in her heart, whereas he might be found to have none. His anxiety on this point was great. The pains she had taken from time to time to throw him back, to show him her indifference, recurred to him now like so many imps come to torment. Suppose he had read her aright at first—suppose she had only ceased to fence with him when she had considered he had learnt his lesson! That she had of late given some encouragement to brighter hopes was nothing,—they might prove to have been groundless, founded on quicksands. And then if he should have been found arrogating to himself an interest which she had endeavoured so strenuously to teach him was not there, would he not bring trouble on the child? He was going to do what he had set himself to do, nevertheless. We have said that he was a man with a will of his own; and in spite of all his doubts and fears, he would not shirk at the last, especially now that Agatha was half in the secret already,—but his inner misgivings rendered the letter more humble and

touching than surely such an one from such a suitor had ever been before.

There was even a ring of sad anticipation in it, which brought the tears to Lady Manners's eyes.

"Write kindly, very kindly back/" she repeated again and again. "Say as much as ever you can, my dear. Tell him how glad we all are—every one. Give him my love. Be sure you put him out of suspense as well as you can; do not let him have another night of uncertainty—there can be no harm in a *hint* at least."

"It was certainly a surprise," continued she, after a while. "Herbert was not more sudden. I am rather sorry in one way. Every one has always been so positive that it would be so, that I could not help taking a little pride in showing that they were wrong. I confess that I did like them to see him coming here, week after week, and month after month, with no sign of their prophecy being fulfilled. That little Mrs Martin was always prying about; and even Constance was inquisitive—very inquisitive—for some time. I did not choose to take any notice. I was resolved to treat him exactly as if not a word were being said. But this is the only provoking part of the matter; they will all be so triumphant."

"Constance won't be triumphant, you may take your oath on that. It will be the death-knell to her hopes of Luttridge, as well as the signal for her turning out forthwith."

"I do hope she will not think we have furthered it."

"Furthered it! I never was more taken aback in my life, I thought him the last man to be thinking about marrying; I imagined he had had enough of it. To be sure he could not have done better."

Pause. Then, "Well, and we could not have done better, eh, Emily? So we are all satisfied. You will have one daughter settled near you for life, at all events."

"Jane will be surprised."

"Is it to-morrow that Jane comes? You will have something to tell her, then: make her guess what it is. Well, we shall have another winter wedding, I suppose; but mind you, no Cotterills at it this time!"

"Not Jane and Herbert!"

"Pooh! Of course I did not mean them. I was thinking of that faddy old fellow and his wife—I would not have them here again for a great deal. No, we need have nothing

of that sort, that's one comfort; Simon has no fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters to bother us. It must be just a quiet wedding, with a few old neighbours, who will all go away again at night, eh, Emily? There will be no use in filling the house as we had to do for Jane."

"You cannot exclude your own relations, and mine."

"They would not care to come; I'll lay anything they would rather not be asked. It would be only insulting them to ask them to take another long railway journey in the dead of winter—mind I won't have it before;—it must either be in December or January——"

"Some time when you hope the weather will be bad," said she, slily.

"Well, it generally is bad about that time; we can't help that. Of course we are not going to have a marriage arranged to suit their convenience—they can come or not, as they please: if they come, well and good; if they like to stay away, it is their own doing. You don't fix your daughter's wedding with a view to the weather; the weather must take its chance. You might ask them to come if it is fine, eh 1"

She could not but laugh.

"Eh?" repeated he. "Well, we need not settle it to-night. Bertie will want to be at home, and he is about the only one you need think about. Where are the girls? Where has Hetty been all the evening 1"

"In bed, poor child. Her cold seemed worse, so I thought she had better go up-stairs and nurse it."

"She has not heard, then 1"

« No."

But as the above conversation had not referred to her, although the reader may have presumed it did, her hearing or not hearing was, the parents felt, of no importance.

The note had not arrived so soon as its writer had intended, since, finding that they were late for church, the servants had taken the matter into their own hands, and had resolved that John should both deliver it and wait an answer on their return, instead of giving the time for that answer to be considered which Simon had intended. They thought he would never find out, nor indeed did he. Therefore it was that Hester had gone to bed before John arrived, and that her mother being likewise up-stairs, Agatha was alone with her father when the letter was brought in. It

was handed to her, Sir John finding the light not strong enough for him to see to read by, without his glasses, which were not about him. "From the Colonel 1" said he. "Take it to the window, Agatha, and let us hear what he says."

She hesitated. "Why don't you take it 1" reiterated Sir John. "Here."

"It is growing so dark, papa, that really I don't know that I can see. I will light the candles on this table for you."

No, he would not have the candles; he hated to have candles lit till after the daylight had fairly gone,—till the curtains were drawn and the room could look comfortable. A wretched starveling pair of candles made the whole place dismal.

Afraid of more, she was compelled to yield; but instead of going to the window, which would have obliged her to raise her voice, and make herself heard across the entire breadth of the room, she stirred the fire into a blaze, and kneeling on the hearthrug, read much what she had expected to read. The writer hoped that he was not presuming too much in desiring to form a closer relationship. He had for a very long time—almost from his first coming home—felt such a wish. He had been exceedingly uncertain as to his feelings being returned, and he wished to have it expressly understood that if he had been mistaken in supposing his cousin to be not unfavourable to him, the blame was his own. "I tried to speak to Agatha this afternoon," continued Simon, "but I had not been able to bring out what I wished to say before you joined us. Give her my love, and ask her to forgive my having troubled her, especially as I had to leave without offering any sort of explanation."

So illegible was the penmanship, and so blurred and blotted the paper, in the evident haste or trepidation of the writer, that Agatha had some excuse for the halts she made in its perusal. All was at last, however, made out, and to her father's astonishment, she allowed that the confession was neither unlooked-for nor unwelcome.

"She took it as coolly as possible," said he, afterwards. "That Agatha is a tough customer sometimes. I could not have believed it if I had not seen her with my own eyes."¹

But to Simon he spoke of her differently, as was natural

When the letter had been delivered to the Lutteridge embassy, Simon sank back with a sigh of relief. At least

the thing was done. He had done it badly, of course: the writing was execrable, and the ink would not blot—moreover, he had had to cut out one-half that had been written in his first copy, because his pen tormented him, and the servants were waiting. He almost wished, on thinking it over, that he had sent the first scrawl: it was, in spite of the smear across the second page, a better production on the whole than the last. He laughed nervously when he thought of that great bar of ink which had caused him such a moment of despair, and reflected that if all came right in the end, he would tell Hetty some day how nearly he had been put off making his offer because of it. John had come in for the third time at the moment when his master was regarding his work in dismay, and had looked at him, and gone out again.

Simon had set his teeth, seized another sheet, and dashed off such of the substance of his first draft as he thought to the purpose, omitting all the rest. He had not stopped to read it over, dreading to find fresh faults; and there was now no time for further alterations, nor for beginning anew. He himself knew so well what he wished to say, and to whom he was referring, that even if he had run his eye over the sheet a second time, it might not have occurred to him to discover that he had never once named Hester's name. He had called her "my cousin," finding the phrase more congenial to his feelings at the opening, and had, in his first attempt, gone on to speak of "Hester" on the next page. But the sentence which began with her name was precisely the little outburst of honest love and ardour, which, when time pressed, he had thought might as well be struck out of the second letter, the letter which actually went. From explaining his wishes and feelings with regard to his "cousin,"* he had gone, by fateful ill-luck, straight to the name of Agatha. He had been anxious to show Agatha that her kindness, her readiness to give him her ear that afternoon, had not been thrown away—that he was grateful for a sympathy which had gone far towards bracing his resolution. Accordingly that part of the letter had been elaborated; while as to Hetty—he had smiled to himself, and thought she might wait to hear her praises from his own lips.

Such being the blunder into which our lover fell, it is not to be wondered at—indeed it was the most natural thing possible—that he should be supposed by all who saw the

letter to be alluding to Agatha throughout. Her avowal that she was not altogether taken at unawares confirmed the idea; and since she, without hesitation or affectation, owned her happiness, it was in reference to her having done so that the father and mother talked of future arrangements, and that Lady Manners thought a hint, at least, might be given to put her nephew out of suspense.

Since he had actually begun himself to speak to Agatha, and since she had also been by accident the first to read his letter, "I think," said Lady Manners, "that it would not lessen her dignity to let him know that she knows. It is not generally done; but under these circumstances,—he is so entirely one with us—so thoroughly to be depended on—and expresses himself, besides, with such great—great—such extraordinary humility and uncertainty, and seems so unhappy—almost hopeless——"

"Oh, well,"¹ said Sir John, cutting her short, "I'll say anything you like; only don't make me write it twice, for that I won't do. Tell me what I'm to say, and I'll say it."

So well did he say it, that the answer which, with a hand that slightly shook, Simon took from the servant and opened immediately the door was closed, lifted at the first glance half the weight which was lying on his heart. He sprang from his chair, and took it nearer to the lamp. He read with trembling and confused delight, pausing only for that "Thank God!" which will break from the grateful heart at such a moment, and at once made out that his uncle not only gave him free permission to enter, but a cordial welcome, into his family. So much was on the first page. The other began with, "Agatha is the least surprised of any of us"—the reader smiled; "she had to know, as I called on her to read your note to me, when it came in. But you won't mind. I don't know if I ought to say as much, but I may tell you *in your ear* that you have nothing to be afraid of."

Nothing to be afraid of! This must be Agatha's doing; she must have been the one to suggest the kind word of hope, recollecting all he had said in the afternoon. Sir John of himself could not have spoken so confidently, and Simon's heart warmed to Agatha. "We are all pleased," continued the worthy gentleman, who plumed himself for long afterwards on the handsome style of his epistle; "Agatha will make you the best of ~~wives~~——"

"Agatha!" laughed Simon. "No, not Agatha, thank you."

What an odd mistake! His uncle must have been as much perturbed in writing as he had himself been. To think of having Agatha relegated to him as a wife! How »uch a slip would have annoyed Miss Manners.

As he proceeded, however, it appeared that the error was carried on. There was some inextricable confusion apparently in the mind of good Sir John. "Agatha" was not only named, but his "eldest daughter" was referred to. He spoke of the loss his eldest daughter would be to them all. What could the phrase mean? His uncle must have been half asleep.

His "eldest daughter," and the observation that she "had always been her mother's right hand,"—that certainly could be none other than Agatha, but why spoken with any reference to him? It was a delusion—some extraordinary jumble of ideas which had got into juxtaposition by mistake. He rubbed his eyes to be sure that he was not dreaming, turned the page backwards, and read over the whole carefully. "Agatha will make you the best of wives. We Bhall all feel her loss, for she has been more than merely an eldest daughter to us—she has been her mother's right hand." But what was this to *him*? He had a stupitied consciousness of something amiss—of some horrible unfathomable misconception; but it had not yet perforated his brain.

Mechanically he turned to the envelope to see if there was any explanation there—anything further concealed in its folds. There was.

A strip of paper, directed in his aunt's fair flowing hand, thrilled comfort to his heart.

"This will make it right," he murmured, as with nerveless fingers he undid the twisted packet, his eyes staring with excitement, agitation, and terror. Alas! the terror was but too well founded; the next minute his head fell forward upon his hands, and he sank down upon a seat, dumb with an anguish that could find no outlet.

PART VII

CHAPTER XXV.

"I HAVE LOST ALL BUT MY HONOUR !"

"A noble nature may catch a wrench."

—*Timon of Athens*.*

"Bad events peep out o' the tail of good purposes."

—*Bartholomew Fair*.

THE few words which had smitten their reader so hard)) ran as follows : "We are all happy in dear Agatha's happiness, and no one will be better pleased than your little favourite, who has gone off for the night, but will be told by-and-by. We shall expect you to-morrow."

The clock ticked loudly in the silent chamber, as Simon sat hour after hour motionless, stupined by the extremity of his suffering.

Physical extremity of pain, it is known, results not unfrequently in this state of torpor; and when the mind likewise has borne as much as it can bear for the moment, the severity of the blow acts like a narcotic. From time to time he slightly shivered, drew himself together, and tried to think. What had happened? What had taken place to make him feel so strangely? Had some one struck him a heavy stroke? Had he been ill, and wandering in his imagination? What was it? What was he about?

At clearer moments he attempted to go over all that had passed between him and Agatha—thought he could recollect returning home without accomplishing that which he had intended, but still without this blinding mist over all around which had come on since. When had it begun? He tried to consider, to understand something of the accursed business,

out broke off confused and bewildered; he could not even be certain whether it was his own doing or the work of some other band. Not all at once could the depth of the gulf into which he had plunged be fathomed; it came by gradual development, each new thought darting its freshly agonising sting, each half hour bringing to light some as yet unthought-of and hideous reflection.

Hester not his, and he Agatha's! Hester withdrawn from him, and Agatha offered to him! Agatha to be his bride, and Hester his—sister!

At the intolerable, the monstrous vision, he rose at last, goaded to motion. It could not—should not be; it was against reason, right, sense, prudence, law, and justice, that a thing so unnatural should take place. Had he been merely refused by the one sister, he had been prepared for such a blow; but this mockery of happiness and welcome—this assurance that she, his one love, the desire of his eyes, would rejoice to see him take another to his bosom, was beyond what he was able to bear.

What were his petty anxieties of the afternoon compared with this? They were swallowed up—lost—in this great woe.

He looked back a few hours, and felt that he had then been easy, happy, confident; his unreasoning instinct suggested that he should return to a purgatory so preferable to the hell which now engulfed him. And why not? Why should he not? Too late? It was not too late—it was never too late. He was not yet bound; he had but to confess his wretched blunder and be free.

But what then? Would not every member of the family he loved so well curse him in their hearts? Would he not have brought shame and grief on each one, and mortification unspeakable—perchance more—to the breast of a pure-minded blameless girl, who had in nowise deserved it at his hands? Having believed herself sought by him, she had trustfully and unreservedly yielded her heart, and to have it now made public that she had done so too soon would, with the laceration of every softer feeling, unite to blight her whole existence for the time.

Oh, why had she read the letter? If it had been kept a secret between him and Sir John, a mistake so palpable might have been rectified ere it had been exposed. Hester, indeed, might still have been unwon, but that was now

almost a secondary idea; he could have borne in silence, perhaps have gone away to bear in solitude that trial. It would have been bitter, but nothing to this. Now must she be ever before his eyes, if this union takes place! With every after scheme she will be associated; she will be woven into his daily life! He will have to meet her, speak to her, take her hand as a near relation should. At times she will be intrusted to his charge as a younger sister might. She will stay at his home; he will hear her step in the doorway, her voice by his fireside; and finally, will come perhaps another wedding, and another bride! Oh, Hester, Hester!

His shuddering figure leaned against the mantelpiece in the interval of numb unthinking silence which followed. He woke up again; it was one o'clock. Four hours had passed since the letter had been brought to him. He remembered that, just before the handle of the door turned, he had glanced at the clock, and thought impatiently that it was past the hour at which the church-goers generally returned. Usually he went himself to the evening service, and could reckon to within a few minutes on the time he should be at home again. He had given a quarter of an hour for John to have fulfilled his mission, but John, as we have seen, had needed more than that; he had not, however, been questioned; the letter was there—it was enough. As the man left the room, his master noticed that the clock struck nine.

The time had sped unnoted; it was chilly, for the fire had burnt itself out; but he still hung over the fireplace.

No one stirred in the house—the servants having probably gone to bed early, as servants do on Sundays—and no sound but the monotonous moan of the wind among the trees fell upon his ear as the night went on.

He thought it was rather a short night. It did not seem to him half as long as those on which he slept. Wrestling with a misery from which there was no deliverance, great wastes of time passed over him as though they were not.

He was impervious to sensations, insensible to fatigue. Once he thought he would go up-stairs, but the exertion troubled him; he did not know what he had meant to do, and before he had assured himself of his purpose he had forgotten it.

At last, as the grey dawn broke, and its first rays stole through the closed shutters, upon his knees he fell.

* * * * * * *

Before the servant came to make ready the room in the morning her master had left it. He would not be surprised by curious eyes, to be the marvel of prating tongues; and in fear lest he might be overheard, stumbled heavily up the staircase, ere any were up.

His face was drawn and grey, his eyes wild. As he hurriedly took off his things beside the dressing-table he caught his own reflection in the mirror, and paused. "She would hardly know me," he said. "I must not go up wearing such a countenance as this. After all, what is the great thing I am doing? No such unheard-of action. One of us two must bear the brunt, and I have brought it on myself. It would be cowardly, brutal to fix a stigma on an innocent girl. I have lost all but my honour; let me keep that by a paltry sacrifice. Such ease and peace as might have come back to me in time, may well be given up to prevent a great trouble and disturbance from entering that tranquil home. Good old Sir John! He would never hold up his head again before me were the truth to come to light. My aunt, too, has her own share of pride. Agatha would feel the humiliation even more than the sorrow. And Hester—no, my darling, you shall never turn your eyes away in scorn from me—never tell yourself that I was not worthy of you, even had you learned to love me. . . . I must, forsooth, enact the happy bridegroom. Well, I shall. Am I to kiss them all as Cotterill did? No. Luckily for me they did not like it; I might have pressed that little cheek too warmly. She will smile upon me now, no doubt; all her fears and misgivings will be laid at rest from henceforth, and she will be ashamed of them, poor child, now that she learns how groundless they have been. She will take herself out of the way, and leave us together—Agatha and me. My betrothed will not expect any great demonstrations of affection, that is one comfort. I think she will not prove exacting. Every now and then I shall have to bestow a chaste salute, and urge her to hasten the happy day. That, I presume, will be the proper mode of procedure, the sum-total of our *testes*. Cotterill and his beloved used to be absent for hours together in some one of the sitting-rooms, or out in the shrubberies; what on earth could they have found to talk about? Ah, by the by, they will be here to-morrow; another charming scene to go through. I wonder if they too—like all the rest—consider that I shall have the best of wives. . . .

"Hard 1 Well, perhaps it is bard, twice in one's life to lead a bride to the altar with a careless hand. I did not mind once; it seemed all well enough, since it was made easy and arranged for us, and neither of us had any one else; it was all very well—but *now* 1 Now, I know. And I have harmed no one, done wrong to no one; but the Almighty has been pleased to take away from me all that made life dear, and to give me in its place ashes for fruit, stones for bread. The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. But I see no way out of it," said Simon, simply, "so I'll do my best. Come in," as the servant who now entered with hot water stopped short on beholding his master already up. "Come in, and tell them to let me have breakfast soon this morning. I am going out immediately after it."

Allowing himself no time for further reflection, he hastily performed his toilet and descended.

"Let me tell Hester myself," were Lady Manners's last words, as she bade her eldest daughter good-night the even* ing before.

Surprised at the request, Agatha, while assenting, pondered what it might mean. Was there to be anticipated anything uncomfortable—any feeling on her sister's part which might cast a shadow over the happy occasion 1 At one time she herself had suspected some such slight girlish fancy, but it was long ago, and all appearance of it had worn away. She was convinced that if her mother imagined anything of the kind to be still lingering in her sister's bosom, she was mistaken.

But, truth to tell, Lady Manners imagined nothing of the sort. She was perfectly sincere in the statement she had made to Simon with regard to Hester, but remembering sundry awkward passages in her youthful daughter's history during the bygone year, which she felt might be likely to trouble Hetty too, at such a time, she resolved to smooth away with gentle touch any pain that might occur with the recollection.

Her severity on one occasion in particular, she had repented of; and though it had been no doubt beneficial, she still felt she should like to make atonement when atonement was possible. The altered demeanour, the weary spiritless look which had been manifest for many weeks afterwards had not been unobserved, and her mother had

marked with secret relief a renewal of health and energy in the spring. Then she had seen the summer bring its full fruition of life and cheerfulness, and felt that all was well.

But during the past year she had formed more than one resolution never again to be so impetuous—never to be carried beyond what she had meant to say, by the impulse of the moment. She had even, for she was an excellent woman, acknowledged and felt contrition for a fit of undeniable ill-temper.

She thought she would now like to say a pleasant word to Hester. She fancied that she would tell her of what had taken place, in such a manner that no embittering recollections should embarrass; she would even say jestingly, "We have almost forgotten, Hetty, that you were his first favourite. He was quite naughty in taking so much notice of you, and I had to scold. But you never need a word now, my dear; your behaviour to him, as well as to others, is quite what I should wish."

With much satisfaction she rehearsed this little *douceur*. She knew it must please—knew that such praise would be warmly appreciated—would be the particular meed of approbation calculated to gratify.

And Hester would be her only daughter at home now; long as she had kept her elder ones, both were leaving her within one year. -

It was rather hard, but there was much to mitigate the pain of parting. Nothing, to begin with, could be more congenial to every feeling she possessed than to have one of her own family, one who was already half a Lutteridge, mistress of the Manor. She heartily liked her nephew, in spite of his having been now and again in her bad books, and as heartily respected him. She and Sir John had been surprised—although, perhaps, they need not have been—to find their kinsman not only a moral but a religious man. From himself perhaps so much would never have been discovered—on sacred topics his lips were invariably sealed—but actions speak for themselves. His life was enough; it was unostentatious, but consistent.

Again, such a union would hardly separate Agatha from her family at all. Jane's loss had been greatly felt; her going to live in another county, and the prospect of her and her husband's spending much of the year in London, bad taken her altogether out of reach, and it had been with un-

mixed reluctance that Lady Manners had ever contemplated another marriage.

But to this alliance there was no such drawback. When Constance was at Lutteridge she was over twice or thrice every week — Constance who had no special call to come, who merely looked in because she was passing, or because she had an hour to idle away. If she could so come and go, how much oftener might they not expect their own child? A day, or, at most, two, would scarcely pass without a meeting. Simon himself would, she hoped, also continue to drop in and out at odd hours, as was his habit. She had learned to reckon upon his looking in upon them thus, and would have missed his visits had they ceased. She liked to see the tall figure step quietly into the room in the twilight, and as quietly pass out again after a while. Now and then, without any need of invitation, he had appeared for an hour or so in the evening, making an agreeable break; and she felt that she could really add this to the pleasures of the future — that such genial intercourse would not be withdrawn.

Kesolved now to look only on the bright side, she found much to cheer; and even the fact that it was not her Hetty, not her dearest treasure of the band, who was about to leave her, added a ray of sunshine to her reflections.

In came Hetty to know why she was wanted.

First to report upon her cold; then to hear that she had gone to bed too soon upon the night before—she had been out of the way when an event had taken place.

"What sort of an event?" asked Hester. Her cousin was not the kind of person with whom she connected an "event," and she cast about in her mind, with a smile on her lips, what such a portentous phrase might mean. Whom could it refer to? Bertie, or Jane? One or other of those two probably, since, had it been connected with any one in the house, she thought she must have heard sooner.

"Jane?" she said, inquiringly.

"No. Jane will have to hear after you."

"Bertie?"

"Wrong again. Guess nearer home."

"Nearer home?" said Hester. "Not anything to do with *me*, mamma!" But all at once her breath came and went quickly, and her heart started at double its usual pace.

"**T**oo far on the near side, Hetty—if that is grammar/¹

aaid her mother, laughing, "Try once more before you give in."

"I suppose it is Agatha, then," replied Hester, her interest somewhat abated.

But she was curious again immediately. "And what about Agatha? For I see by your face, mamma, that I am right. It is Agatha. Who besides? Is it—oh, I know—Edward."

"You are not half as sharp as I expected you to be, little one. Poor Edward! But I never thought that would come to anything."

"It is *poor* Edward, is it? Oho! That is the kind of thing then, at any rate. I am rather glad it is not 'poor Edward/ do you know, mamma, for his is such a very, very old, sleepy, prosaic affair. Now I like something quick, sudden—something new, at least. But, mamma, I cannot think of any one else."

"Can you not? Well, I should not have imagined it was so difficult."

"That Mr Lowther? But no, I don't believe he meant anything, and I am sure Agatha would never look at him either."

"Mr Lowther? I do not even recollect the name!"

"We met him, mamma, at the Harfords; but perhaps you have forgotten."

"And he paid Agatha attention?"

"Oh yes, in a way; the Harfords said he did. But, mamma, who can it be? It is very odd; I cannot think of any one but Mr Lowther."

"Try another L.," suggested Lady Manners.

She passed into her dressing-room as she spoke, and when she came back after a few minutes, she asked, with a smile—

"Well?"

"I have guessed," said Hester. She looked much as usual, but spoke rather low.

"You had not to go so far after all," continued her mother, gaily.

"Oh no; not at all far."

"I knew that you would be pleased," Lady Manners went on, "for Simon was always your great friend. Do you remember papa laughing at your *Simon and I' on the day you and Jem first walked with him? I made Agatha pro

mise to let me tell the news myself, because there had once been a word or two between you and me about this very cousin of yours, and because I wished to tell my Hetty how glad I have been that I have never had to speak to her *011* such a subject again. Agatha is the last person ever to remember it, dear."

"Well, mamma, what's all this about *1*" cried Jem, entering. "Are you not gone down, Hetty? I say! We are all late together. Prayers are in. That downy old Simon—who would have dreamed he was looking after Agatha? I thought he was rather afraid of her, to tell the truth, and got out of her way whenever he could. Are we to go down, mamma, or wait *for you*?"

"Oh, go down—go down, my dear, and Hester too. *1* am afraid I must be content to be late; I have been hindered. There is Chigwell only at the door now."

"It was rather odd/" mused she, as the maid flitted to and fro; "it was certainly not quite what *1* had looked for. Can I have been mistaken? Can there have been more than I knew of? If so, my poor Hetty!"

"Where are you off too?" said Jem to his sister, as she turned aside after closing the door. "Are you not coming down?"

"Directly—yes. You go, and I will follow. I am only going along to my room for a moment,—for—ah—I have not got a pocket-handkerchief," diving into her pocket. "Fly, Jem, and I will come when I have fetched it."

"But I shall not need one," said the high-spirited girl to herself, as for one minute's space she stood upright and alone, steadying herself beneath the blow. "I am so glad I am not crying. I am not in the least inclined to cry. *1* shall go down immediately—this moment. And I shall kiss Agatha, and be kind to her. It is all right, of course it is all right, and I do not really mind it all. Why should H Now then."

CHAPTEK XXVI.

HESTER PLAYS HER PART.

*' Jtful O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's
 •^yes "'—*As You Like It*.

It was a glorious gay September morning, and the slopes on either side of the river, silvery with dew, and netted with the webs of busy spiders, had never looked more beautiful. Overhead the rooks cawed and circled in a deep blue sky; small biids weie trilling their light-hearted notes, wood-pigeons were cooing in the woods, and the leafy shades on every side were instinct with life and animation.

All the cheerful scene, however, was lost on Simon as he hurried down the bank, on his way to claim his bride; it did not even jar upon him, so absorbed was he in contemplation of the errand on which he was bound. He would not loiter, would not stop to think. Once only he halted—a momentary, involuntary halt; as he crossed the water he lay on his oars for half a minute, while a vivid picture of the boat's crew, coming home through the dusk on that November afternoon, not yet a year since, rose before him. He felt again the little hand in his, watched the downcast face, listened for the low replies—it was but for a passing instant that the moisture gathered in his eyes—he sighed, and pulled on.

They saw him coming from the windows, and though he had been expected early, this was even sooner than Agatha had reckoned on. She was alone with her mother in the morning-room, Sir John and Jem being already off for the day, and Hester having vanished.

"Shall I go, or shall I stay?" cried Lady Manners, nervously.

"Oh, mamma, stay I Receive him here, and then—then you can come—forme." Even Agatha was rather upset; she left the room quickly, and went to her own, where for a short time she waited quietly enough. But by-and-by she found herself unable to be alone; her sister's company would

be welcome; to have Hester to talk to at such a moment would calm her own spirits; and accordingly she essayed to open the door between the two apartments, but it was bolted.

"Hester?"

"Yes."

Agatha paused for admission. She, the heroine of the hour, expected her sister to fly and unbar at the sound of her voice.

No sound from within, however, coming to justify this anticipation, after a pause she again turned the handle, this time with an accompaniment of "Hetty, it is I—Agatha. Let me in."

Unwillingly Hester came. Poor child! she too had seen the figure on the slope.

"I want to come in," said Agatha, showing her blushing face all smiles. "Hetty, did you know? He is come."

"Why are you not there?"

"Mamma is with him; I could not have met him all at once. Mamma will come, when he wants me, so I thought I would sit here with you," said Agatha, conscious of favour bestowed.

Hester turned to the window.

"I wish it were over," continued Agatha with a shy laugh^{ti} "You can have no idea how bad it is when it comes to the point! It had gone so far yesterday, that I do wish we had not been interrupted, and then there would not have been this awkwardness to go through to-day. Do you pity me, Hetty?"

"Very much indeed."

"You hard-hearted child, you don't speak as if you did. You think, I daresay, that it is all pleasant and nice. Now don't you? Do you remember, Hester, how we held our conclave together, you and I, when Jane was summoned to Herbert? Oh dear, I do wish these dreadful summonings were not a part of the business; I am getting quite nervous. There!"

A light rustle at the outer door made both girls start, and perhaps the spasm which shot through the veins of each was something of the same nature, since Agatha's was certainly more akin to pain than pleasure. "Oh dear, I do wish with all my heart it were over," whispered she again, under her breath, as she rose to unfasten the door.

"Well, my love, are you ready?" said Lady Manners, in the studiously cheerful accounts with which a surgeon invites his patient to be seated in the chair. "He is in the morning-room. God bless you, my child!"

"Bless me, even me also, O my mother!" None heard that cry—neither, at least, of the two mortals who were by, when it burst forth. It was an inward wail—a sob of agony. It found its only visible vent in a shudder which shook Hester's slender frame from head to foot, but her back was turned, and it might be unperceived. Suddenly she felt a hand upon her brow. "A headache this morning, little one?"

"Yes, mamma."

"I thought so. Don't come down just yet, dear. You have got a fire? That's right. Lie down for an hour, and no one shall disturb you; I have writing to do, and the house is quiet. I am not sure that you ought to be going about at all, with a cold like yours, Hetty; I really did not half expect to see you up to-day."

"It is getting better, mamma."

"Very well; but take care. Stay here till luncheon-time."

"Ought I not to see—him? To say—something? I hope he will not go till I come; it would seem unkind——"

"You will have many opportunities. He will not miss you to-day."

"Oh no, he will not miss me."

"You and Jane will meet him together."

"You speak as if we should mind meeting him, mamma; why should we mind? We see Simon every day, and it will be nothing to—it will make no difference, you know."

"Well, I *don't* know; that is it! I found it made a good deal of difference to me just now. I thought perhaps, love, that you shared the feeling," turning away her head. "So far from making it better, when anything of this sort happens with a relation, it is worse; I should really have preferred an interview with a stranger. Herbert, to be sure, was so easy to get on with, that I did not mind him in the least; he rattled away as if it had been the commonest thing in the world! As of course it is, when one comes to think of it."

"Only things may be very common," said Hester, "that only happen to each, once in a life."

"That is it, no doubt. We have not been in the way of weddings."

"Yes, mamma, and I daresay it was tiresome for you; I think I should have minded meeting Simon a little." But you see," she went on, steadily, "it will not be the same to us; Jane and I will have no speeches to make, unless," looking wistfully into her mother's face, "it is necessary that we should pretend—I mean, say that we are glad, or something of that sort, is it?"

"You did not say so to Herbert?"

"No, we did not know him—at least we hardly knew him; but I thought—I was afraid that perhaps when it was Simon——"

"There is no occasion, my dear. For my part I cannot but consider displays of affection at such a time in bad taste. Poor little Herbert is such a warm-hearted fellow that it was impossible to repress, or to be vexed with him; but you need not fear any demonstrations on Simon's part, I am sure. Had he been any other of my nephews I should have felt almost obliged to do more than just shake hands with him, but I fancy nothing would have astonished your cousin more. He will suit Agatha exactly," she suddenly began, in the eager tone, which the bright vision of Agatha's future once more prompted. "Simon and Agatha are alike in that," she was running on; but the two names thus brought together, was a shock which was scarce able to be borne without betraying Hester's heart. Her face changed, and all the mother's suspicions were confirmed.

Now was it that she felt that no yearnings of her own must unhinge her child's resolution—now must she support the wavering winglets which were seeking to fly, but were all but failing. Longing to stretch out her arms, she durst not even bestow one word of sympathy; that word would of a surety open the floodgates, and who could say if they would ever close fast again?

She turned in silence and left the room.

If any one else had a sense of something wrong, it was Jem, but to him it was not so much a suspicion as a phantom inkling of an idea which he could make nothing of. He saw the materials for a discovery, but he could not put them together so as to form anything solid. He was puzzled, uncertain, and partially hoodwinked. "And then," he argued, "if there had been anything in it, of course mamma would know."

It did not occur to him that whereas if his mother did know, she might choose to keep her knowledge to herself; he thought she would at least have whispered it, as she did all her other family secrets, to him. "I always thought it had been Hester," he remarked once, hoping for a confidence, and then he did fancy that he caught an uneasy look.

"You know, my dear," Lady Manners said, however, "that I told you once before what I believed to be the case as to that. You see it has been proved to be exactly right."

"You mean after that day on the river? Oh, but that is ages ago. Nobody ever thought much of that, although there was such a fuss made. I was thinking about them just lately. Somehow I had got to fancy they were caring about each other when he was here the other day."

"You did?" said his mother. "Ahem!—Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; I thought so. I was with them a good deal, and I made up my mind that he was coming after Hester."

"Indeed? But I never imagined that he felt for her anything but the sort of—of liking that an older relation—an uncle or brother—has for a pleasant child. He was amused with her playful ways, and he evidently looked upon her as so young that he was warranted in treating her more caressingly than I altogether liked. He has dropped that manner lately, and it is just as well."

"Why," said Jem, "it was that which made me open my eyes. When I saw him begin to treat her ceremoniously, I thought it was time to look for squalls. And besides——"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing, mamma; only I am sure that he *admires* Hester."

"Very likely. It is a face that any one would like to look on."

"Not in that way. You weren't in the gun-room the other day, or you would have thought the same. And as to her being so very young, she is nearly nineteen."

"No, no, no! She was only eighteen in March. Her birthday was just before Lady Westmacott's ball, do you not remember? But you were not here, to be sure."

"Well, but many a girl is married before she is eighteen. I don't think any one else thinks of Hester in the way you do, mamma. You never gave it a thought that Simon

might be taken with her, because you considered hei too young! How do you know he was not, at first I¹⁹

"My dear, think what you are saying."

"And you fancied he liked Agatha all along?"

"No, indeed; I did not. I fancied nothing of the kind. I could not have been more surprised than I was last night, for I felt with your father that he was not in the least disposed to marry again at all."

"Again?" said Jem. "Oh, I had forgotten that. Well," he concluded, doggedly, "I thought it was Hester."

Simon desired not to leave to another day any portion of the ordeal now to be gone through; to go away, and wake the next morning with such another walk in store for him would be impossible; and accordingly, although he would not stay luncheon, having an appointment with his steward to overlook some new cottages he was building, and in which he was interested, he promised to come back in the twilight, shake hands with the Cotterills, and bring his own party to call on Sir John. One of them had known Sir John in his youth, and had expressed a desire to renew the acquaintance.

He took his departure, and Agatha was left to the enjoyment of her own thoughts, and the anticipation of Jane's surprise and Herbert's pleasure. Her own position, unexpected as it was—perhaps more unexpected than she cared to own even to herself, than she was indeed aware of—naturally filled her mind, and so youthf-il and radiant did she look under the stimulus, that in contrasting her appearance with that of her sister, Lady Manners was vexed with herself for the involuntary reflection that Simon's preference was not to be marvelled at. Hester, he might choose to laugh and chatter with, but he would naturally prefer to see his table headed by the belle of the county.

Hester, you see, had not put on a pretty grey dress with a pink ribbon, nor had she corresponding pink tints in her cheeks, nor the light of animation in her eyes. Her eyes were naturally finer than Agatha's,—softer, larger, infinitely more capable of feeling; when gladdened, exalted by any strong emotion, they were lustrous, and shone like stars beneath the long fringes, which formed only half a shade, but their glow obscured, the whole countenance was a blank—there was no regularity of outline, such as saved Agatha from plainness even when looking her worst. But again,

there was no harshness—all was soft, inviting: the mouth, Simon always declared, was lovely; and yet such countenances, whose charms lie like that of some landscapes, in the varying lights which fall across them, lose at times the very beauty of shadow. There come days when they are meaningless, vacant, void—masked, as it were, for the nonce.

Agatha thought it was her sister's dress which was unbecoming, and conjured her to change it before the afternoon. Lady Manners put forth the headache. "I think/" said Hester, briskly, "you both forget my cold; nobody has asked after my cold to-day, and every one wonders that I look ugly. I am better, and I am not going to be ill, as mamma predicted that I should yesterday, but still I am not to be supposed to be looking as blooming as Agatha, who—who/* with a brave smile, "ought to be the queen of the day. Hey, Agatha! It is all very fine for you to put on your nice new gown, but you don't expect me to waste mine, when no one is going to look at me!"

"Oh, for Jane and Herbert, Hetty. Make a change at four o'clock. You can put on a little white shawl, if you are afraid of cold. That pretty thing that came the other day would look nice."

"Do, my dear," added Lady Manners, her heart swelling as she spoke. "My little girl," she proudly thought, "that was well done! And she will see him in the half-light, and among a crowd of people, so it will not be quite so lurd upon her. She will escape, at least, observation."

In the midst of the throng the two hands met. Only for an instant—each heart only conscious of its own bitterness, each only tremulous to screen it from the other. The fingers dropped asunder; and after that it fell out quite easily that no farther intercourse took place between Hester and her cousin. Hetty made great fun with Herbert, who was in rampant spirits; and their laughter—his, at least—was so incessant that it attracted some of the other gentlemen to their corner, but naturally it did not take Colonel Lutteridge from the side of his betrothed. She was of Jane's party by the fire, and it would have been a thing unheard of if her cousin, now her lover, had attached himself to the other group. He needed not, of course, to have turned his back on the merry people; still it was but fair that if he chose to do so, on such a day, he should have the privilege. From time to time he stooped over Agatha with a remark, and it

was he who took her cup, and carried Jane's dressing-bag to the sofa. Sir John, when he and Jem came in soon afterwards, found him in close attendance; and he had two beaming countenances to encounter, and two great clutches of hand to go through, as soon as they saw he was there. Nothing could of course be said at such a time, but the father and brother were resolved to *show*, at all events, their goodwill; the next day's sport must occupy their minds immediately afterwards, and dogs, coverts, and keepers be the staple of their conversation.

On such topics Simon could discourse till the hour of deliverance arrived. He and his friends were engaged to dine at Wancote on the following day, and he left, feeling that no worse thing could now befall him.

His friends had next to be apprised of his prospects. "Just settled, eh?" said one, with interest. "Really? We should have come too soon, on Saturday, then?"

"Jove, you are a lucky fellow!" cried the other. "'Jove, you are! Everything so handy. You run down here, cross in a jiffy, up the other side, and nobody the wiser! Which is the finer place of the two, 'Jove, I don't know! What woods, what coverts you have on every side! And Miss Manners is all that's charming, Lutteridge; so, between ourselves, is her sister. Not the married one, but the little, smart, look-alive thing who rattled the teacups. 'Jove, how she chaffed Cotterill! He seems an awfully good fellow, and took any amount of bullying."

"Cotterill went in for the quiet one, eh?" said the other. "That's always the way. Fellows laugh and chaff with the jolly girls, but they spoon the quiet ones."

"I don't think my cousin Hester," said Lutteridge, with an effort, "is exactly of the genus jolly girl."

"Not at all; of course not. An awfully nice, pretty little thing. I lost my heart as well as Whately, I can tell you. Oh, if I were anything but a pauper, how many places at once my poor heart would be found in! But the other sisters are deuced quiet, you know. No offence, Lutteridge; I call Miss Manners quite unexceptionable, only, as was highly correct, she had no eyes for any one but you."

"You have bespoken the beauty of the family," struck in Captain Whately. "'Jove, you have! Mrs Cotterill has not much looks to speak of, and our young friend—Hall's and mine—has not the presence of Miss Manners. Sho—

your Miss Manners—Lutteridge, has a rattling fine figure—Jove, she has!"

"It is as hard as steel can make it," said Simon, to himself. "And her heart is as cold as the same. And my little Hester has the softest waist, and the sweetest lips—but she is only a cousin, and the other is *my* Miss Manners! You were very gay this afternoon, Hetty; I heard your voice prattling away in the corner, just as it used to do. Somehow, to my ear, though, there was a want. I can tell what that meant; no man thinks a girl's hiugh so pleasant to another as to himself. Dear child, it must have been a relief to her to feel that my ghost was laid at last. I have haunted her pretty continuously of late; but she will think now that it was all for Agatha's sake. And this time, yesterday, I was free!"

A sigh so profound could not but cause a laugh, and he had to stand their laugh most of the way home.

"But, 'Jove,'" I say," confided Whately to his companion, afterwards, "all the same he looks as if he were going to be hung! Eh?"

"Hooked 1"

"Hum! Perhaps. I don't know. They are as good as he. 'Jove, though, something is not straight! Contingent difficulties, eh?"

"Not his style. However, all things are possible. Hang me if I would not present a decent appearance of satisfaction on such an occasion, at all events! Whenever he forgets we are by, the poor fellow sighs as if his hecirt would break. What can the screw loose be 1"

Whately shrugged his shoulders.

"Is he gone to bed now 1" pursued Hall.

"Yes. Good idea. 'Jove, I'll go too. Good night."

* Good night."

But no one had any cause to complain of Simon's behaviour at Wancote. He did not go there on the following day until evening, but when he did, his part was played in a manner that left no room for censure. He was taciturn, it is true, but that he always had been—there was no change of any sort visible on his countenance. From this time it became his habit to take up a fixed position *in* the room as soon as he entered, and maintain it till he left. He seldom went to the house by day, alleging an excuse which even the ladies of Wancote regarded as all-sufficient—the abundance of his

partridges; but he dined there every evening after the departure of his friends, unless invited elsewhere; and no one dreamed of the relief it was to him, when Constance's arrival at the Manor made such daily engagements uncourteous. Even had they desired to have her equally often, she would not have cared to have gone, and they did not make the request.

"Have Constance more here !" cried Sir John, when it was suggested by his eldest daughter. "If you once begin with that, there will be no end to it. You will never be able to call this house your own if once that woman gets a footing. She shall *not* come oftener. No, she shan't. Simon may come as much as he likes, but I won't have Constance."

"We only thought she might expect it, papa; that she would hardly like to be left alone so often."

"Then he need not leave her so often; tell him that you won't expect it. He might come once or twice in the week or so," said Sir John, not altogether averse to such an arrangement

"Simon is a gloomy sort of fellow," he confided to Jem. "I had no idea he was that kind of man until after this engagement. He does not help our evenings at all."

"Don't say so to Agatha."

"Of course I shan't say so to Agatha; I know better than that. And he may come every day of his life if he likes, and she likes. It will not be for long, anyway. But what I mean is, does it not strike you that when he was up here and about with us as he was last year, he used to be more cheerful—pleasanter? I don't know what it is, but somehow I have got to feel about him again as I did when he first came home. He is a perfect dead-weight upon me. Mamma feels it too. I was talking about Simon being so dull," explained he, as his wife came in at the moment.

"He certainly is not improved in loquacity," replied she. "But I see no other falling off. He has been pressing Agatha this very day to have the marriage soon."

"That d(oes not make him a more lively companion of an evening," said Sir John, riot following her train of thought. "I have no doubt he finds plenty to say to Agatha—that is not the point. What I complain of is that way he has of stand, standing from hour to hour with his head down, as if he were going through a martyrdom; and then all at once,

when he thinks it is time to go, he bolts off in a* prodigious hurry. I am sure I for one am always glad when he is gone.¹

"Glad when he is gone !"

"Pooh! You know what I mean. I have nothing to say against himself; it is only that kill-joy phiz of his that is a regular damper upon everybody—a death's head at the banquet."

This of Simon ! Lady Manners felt aghast at the words, all the more that she had herself perceived the altered demeanour, which bore out Sir John's assertions.

Could it be that he was weary of Agatha—disappointed in her? Or was it not more probable that the man's nature, now released from the stimulus of uncertainty and desire to please, had sunk back into its habitual sombre taciturnity] She hoped so. It was a pity, but it was certainly a small matter as compared with the first supposition.

Since Agatha did not mind, since she apparently found no fault, it was not for any of them to hold up to view or even to discuss among themselves more than they could help, his shortcomings. Herbert, they all felt, had improved on acquaintance: his first manner could bear no comparison with that of Colonel Lutteridge; but he was such a good-tempered, obliging, unselfish husband, such a perfect son-in-law and brother-in-law, that they were fain to acknowledge that Jane had shown her usual judgment in the selection.

There was no doubt about Jane's happiness. Her countenance beamed whenever Herbert came near. She was not only fond of him, she was proud of him, and of being his wife. "You have no idea how clever he is," she said one day. "He reads all the great debates, and he makes me read them too. And he is very highly thought of by both his uncles, I assure you. The one who is in India—the judge—wrote me such a letter about him; and his father often asks for Herbert's opinion about the estate. / had no idea how much he knew before."

"And Janie never was our best head either," said her mother. "We did not expect her to find a very learned husband."

"But, mamma, he is much more learned than you think," (or Lady Manners had smiled. "I know a great many

people have told me how well he did at school; and he has a number of prizes, and he once thought of going into the Church!"

"Indeed? My dear Jane, he is much better fitted to be an otter-hunter."

"He is not an otter-hunter now, mamma; he has given it up. I see you don't believe me, but it is quite true all that I have told you. None of you understand Herbert."

Jane, in dudgeon, was too diverting, especially as the complaint was seen as usual in its mildest form. For three minutes she looked pettish, then she exclaimed, "You are all gone off to Simon!" then she laughed at herself. The idea was of course disclaimed, Herbert was extolled to the skies, and harmony was restored all round.

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 is more proficient in thy school aie made
HUIK geuiub '01 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 quartet 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 *tete-ti-tetes* 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,"¹¹ 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 manoeuvres were directed towards the prevention of its immediate accomplishment. Since it was to be, it must be; but could she not have her winter, 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 coining 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 Lutteridge 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 residence 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 increasedlly 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 oftentimes 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 too absent. He does not hear one word in ten she says, Hetty."¹

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

"You goosey I 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 otters' 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-cloth lighter than when the selection

had to be made at a distance. Herbsrt 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 dress-makers—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 excursions—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 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/wr. 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."¹

"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 1" 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 j 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.¹ 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, over hearing the words. "But all the same, at such a moment, I would rather have had him thoughtless."

"That will suit me exactly," Agatha was saying 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, nay, 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,"¹ 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 well-doing 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 ba

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 themselves, 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 trap 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 1 Did Hester not tell you 1"

"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 1" 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, Jern, he does not like to be late for dinner."

"Mamma, it was not five o'clock ! But 1 only meant to ahow 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.¹

"The fifteenth is the day, then 1"

"Ye*."

PART VIII.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY.

"Life's little stage is a small eminence
Inch high tho' 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 Cheshain 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' 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 ner 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 wanner, 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."

"Ob, 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 fur once at home, and your saying that he must be always ' oil the go ?' "

" Was that it, really 1"

"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."¹

" 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!"¹

" 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 1"

" 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 ua——"

" At that place where we chance."

" 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 f "

" 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 iu 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.

⁴⁴ "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 carri<ige. I found that out before. I'll tell you what I'll do, Hetty," he sub-joined, 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 iuch a headache. It i* 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/¹ 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 Pixall 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 I"

"Was what!"

"Working."

« Walking 1" 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.

¹ 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 earned, 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 1" 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 *cortege* 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 *debris*, 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. Bound 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."¹¹ 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?"

"Til 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,"¹¹ 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 pre-

riously. "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 porter 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

#as 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 1 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 1" 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 gore 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 I" 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.¹"

"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.¹"

"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 I" It was well that she was weeping—that the tears had found their way, even though in floods

it eased the poor overwrought 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.

Peeling 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 aw 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 Jew

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?"

"Yea—yes. How good you are!"

"You are growing warm now, are you not I^w

"Quite warm."

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

"No—oh no I" She clutched him suddenly,—so 804 alarmed, that he had again the task, the dangerous privileg of allaying her fears.

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

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

"Will you have some more brandy 1 I have not to j for it; it is in my pocket. You have drunk out of the fla already. Jem," he added, softly, "had the first of it."

She shook her head ; she did not need brandy,—the glo¹ ing forge, the shelter of his presence, and his indulgence her tears, were all she wanted; Jem's name, so spoken, con not pain.

For nearly an hour they sat thus, conversing at interva The rest of the travellers began to grow impatient, no souri of any kind being as yet audible in the distance; and watch were pulled out and interrogations passed. It appeared tt all the available horses, gigs, and carts in the vicinity h. been used to send forward the wounded; and that the WE gons, which were to take on the unhurt passengers, had h: to be sent some distance for. The^ might arrive at a: moment; but it might still be some time before they cai —no one could say.

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

With this assurance from the voluble blacksmith, all hs perforce, to be content. The discussion, however, had rous the groups to interest; they began to look about them, grow alive to the presence of each other, to be less Bt

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 1 You will not dislike it i "

"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 voluntarily 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

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 sote,

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,—gnuit 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 out-pourings 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 tip 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 Luttridge 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 VHL

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 ifl 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 til 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 f I felt nothing."

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

She smUed.

"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 make-shift 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-tapism ! He should really riot be surprised if it were weeks before the thing was looked properly into, supposing, 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 r' 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 vmght 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 hie 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 1"

"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 1 I remember you now!" exclaimed Simon. "I saw you ho'e, 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 1"

"Very well."

"I wish I saw those great eyes closed."

"I can't close them—Simon." How could she 1 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 blunder! "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 De praised! We'll ha' noan moor groomlin* the rioight, 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."¹

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

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

The next moment she exclaimed, starting up. "'T'hat is it) What lathe 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 lie could be doing there at that time of night! No station-master to bow obsequiously before them along the platform; only a shivering under-strapper 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 V

¹¹1 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.

¹¹⁰ 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 T"

"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 tear

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 com-

mitted 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 round 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 tiat by such an illness, slie 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 inquires 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 laurel* 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. "Whaf business Lad 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/¹ 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 coining 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 pitifully 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 aro 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 Baldbead'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 *rigid* 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 lie 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 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 d^n'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, ana 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 1 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 1" 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 1"

"No, thanks; Til 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 riot 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 Bubbly, 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 murmured, "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 it 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; out 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 Mariners, 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 /," 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 v/fcent to Agatha, when I told it to go to Hester f
It shouldn't have done that, you know. I may have told it
wrong, but I didn't moan 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"—point-
ing 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 1"

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. / did not mind being unhappy, but it should
not have gone to *far*. 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 exp/lin 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 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 house-keeper, 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 gam remote conclusions at a jump."
 —Cow PER

"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."¹

"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."

^{1f} 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 I 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~j 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 coining to the house day after day, end 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 be-

etowed 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 riot 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. Ho*v 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——"

"Hute!"

"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.

⁴⁴ "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 timetable 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 penetra

tion, 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!"¹ 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 imagined. 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,"¹ 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 production—"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 Mariners 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, hit 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 wag 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 lounge disappeared, and ere Mr Manners came forth, was replaced by the duly respectful domestic, clothed arid 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 1 But I say, what news have you of the Colonel 1 Where is he now 1 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,¹¹ 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 1st 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 1st 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 inoor," 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 endeavoured 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 waiti
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, inobtrusive 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 riot 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 daylight 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 &quit, 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 I 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.

"**Tia** 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, unvarnished 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 throughout 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.

"^a 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 pre-ordained.

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.

Gaities, 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/¹ 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 coining became of first-rate importance.

And then a lucky chance occurred; at the crisis of hi*

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 1 What do you say to that 1 Isn't that a clincher? Eh t"

"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 1 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 managng 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, lie 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.¹

"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 coinings 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 *Bombre* 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, imagin-

ing 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 some* what 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 Tier 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 1 Now then, Jane, what's your dinner-hour 1"

"Seven o'clock, papa."

"Seven 1 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 chatterbox all to-night, as well as all this morning 1 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 ranch 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?"

"Tull ? No. There are the gardens to look Mito."

"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.¹ 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 Wancot 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 torn-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 Jenu"

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 Wan cote.

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 speak¹?

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 might 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, desponding 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 round-about 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 anus—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 last as they could go.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN THE WOODS.

• ' Calms appear when Htonns are past,
Love will have his hour at last."
—DRYDBH.

"I must say I think that was rather unkind," murmured Lady Manners, having done all she could to linger, in vain. "Rather rjide 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 oi gossiping about the church door. They would have kept ua there an hour, if we had once begun."

"Simon just come back!"

"Well, yon can see Simon to-morrow."

"I am sure he must have felt it——"

"He could have come after us if he bad."

⁴¹My dear I 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 1

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."⁹¹

"Mamma, do you think he will t"

"I don't know, Hetty; but I should not be very, very much astonished if he did. Should you 1"

"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 way-farer out at the bottom of the bank. The little slope had then to be climed, 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 belter 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 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 justice 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."¹¹

"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!"¹

"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.¹

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

* Honoria suits a high estate
 Much better than I hoped ; howr fate
 Pets her with happiness and pride,
 And such a loving lord beside "
 —PATMOEE.

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."¹

"Is it likely to be soon?"

"I asked, but was told it had not yet been considered. Hal¹ 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 fete*; 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 1 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 *hany* somewhat heavy! And what about

little Curly Patel The hours pass more quickly in hei 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."^{1*}

"That's all you can say for him? No matter,—you never go into raptures, not even over Hetty. Aba t 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. "Sht> aright once have been spoilt by *love*, but never by *motiey*. 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 WOL 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 inobtrusive. Everything is done without a sound—with scarcely a movement. He is coining 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!" j)

"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 arid 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, neverthe-

less, 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 cunous excuse that they were too gloomy and old-fashioned, but I can understand the feeling now. Do you know, my *fiear*,¹ 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 waa 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 thero 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 I 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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