Chapter XI - Fieldhead

Yet Caroline refused tamely to succumb: she had native strength in her girl's heart, and she used it. Men and women never struggle so hard as when they struggle alone, without witness, counsellor, or confidant; unencouraged, unadvised, and unpitied.

Miss Helstone was in this position. Her sufferings were her only spur; and being very real and sharp, they roused her spirit keenly. Bent on victory over a mortal pain, she did her best to quell it. Never had she been seen so busy, so studious, and, above all, so active. She took walks in all weathers - long walks in solitary directions. Day by day she came back in the evening, pale and wearied-looking, yet seemingly not fatigued; for still, as soon as she had thrown off her bonnet and shawl, she would, instead of resting, begin to pace her apartment: sometimes she would not sit down till she was literally faint. She said she did this to tire herself well, that she might sleep soundly at night. But if that was her aim it was unattained, for at night, when others slumbered, she was tossing on her pillow, or sitting at the foot of her couch in the darkness, forgetful, apparently, of the necessity of seeking repose. Often, unhappy girl! she was crying - crying in a sort of intolerable despair; which, when it rushed over her, smote down her strength, and reduced her to childlike helplessness.

When thus prostrate, temptations besieged her: weak suggestions whispered in her weary heart to write to Robert, and say that she was unhappy because she was forbidden to see him and Hortense, and that she feared he would withdraw his friendship (not love) from her, and forget her entirely, and begging him to remember her, and sometimes to write to her. One or two such letters she actually indited, but she never sent them: shame and good sense forbade.

At last the life she led reached the point when it seemed she could bear it no longer; that she must seek and find a change somehow, or her heart and head would fail under the pressure which strained them. She longed to leave Briarfield, to go to some very distant place. She longed for something else: the deep, secret, anxious yearning to discover and know her mother strengthened daily; but with the desire was coupled a doubt, a dread - if she knew her, could she love her? There was cause for hesitation, for apprehension on this point: never in her life had she heard that mother praised: whoever mentioned her, mentioned her coolly. Her uncle seemed to regard his sister-in-law with a sort of tacit antipathy; an old servant, who had lived with Mrs James Helstone for a short time after her marriage, whenever she referred to her former mistress, spoke with chilling reserve: sometimes she called her 'queer,' sometimes she said she did not understand her. These expressions were ice to the daughter's heart; they suggested the

conclusions that it was perhaps better never to know her parent, than to know her and not like her.

But one project could she frame whose execution seemed likely to bring her a hope of relief; it was to take a situation, to be a governess - she could do nothing else. A little incident brought her to the point when she found courage to break her design to her uncle.

Her long and late walks lay always, as has been said, on lonely roads; but in whatever direction she had rambled, whether along the drear skirts of Stilbro' Moor, or over the sunny stretch of Nunnely Common, her homeward path was still so contrived as to lead her near the Hollow. She rarely descended the den, but she visited its brink at twilight almost as regularly as the stars rose over the hill-crests. Her resting-place was at a certain stile under a certain old thorn: thence she could look down on the cottage, the mill, the dewy garden-ground, the still, deep dam; thence was visible the well-known counting-house window, from whose panes at a fixed hour shot, suddenly bright, the ray of the well-known lamp. Her errand was to watch for this ray: her reward to catch it, sometimes sparkling bright in clear air, sometimes shimmering dim through mist, and anon flashing broken between slant lines of rain - for she came in all weathers.

There were nights when it failed to appear: she knew then that Robert was from home, and went away doubly sad; whereas its kindling rendered her elate, as though she saw in it the promise of some indefinite hope. If, while she gazed, a shadow bent between the light and lattice, her heart leaped - that eclipse was Robert: she had seen him. She would return home comforted, carrying in her mind a clearer vision of his aspect, a distincter recollection of his voice, his smile, his hearing; and, blent with these impressions, was often a sweet persuasion that, if she could get near him, his heart might welcome her presence yet: that at this moment he might be willing to extend his hand and draw her to him, and shelter her at his side as he used to do. That night, though she might weep as usual, she would fancy her tears less scalding; the pillow they watered seemed a little softer; the temples pressed to that pillow ached less.

The shortest path from the Hollow to the Rectory wound near a certain mansion, the same under whose lone walls Malone passed on that night-journey mentioned in an early chapter of this work - the old and tenantless dwelling yclept Fieldhead. Tenantless by the proprietor it had been for ten years, but it was no ruin: Mr Yorke had seen it kept in good repair, and an old gardener and his wife had lived in it, cultivated the grounds, and maintained the house in habitable condition.

If Fieldhead had few other merits as a building, it might at least be termed picturesque: its irregular architecture, and the grey and mossy colouring communicated by time, gave it a just claim to this epithet. The old latticed windows, the stone porch, the walls, the roof, the chimney-stacks, were rich in crayon touches and sepia lights and shades. The trees behind were fine, bold, and spreading; the cedar on the lawn in front was grand, and the granite urns on the garden wall, the fretted arch of the gateway, were, for an artist, as the very desire of the eye.

One mild May evening, Caroline passing near about moonrise, and feeling, though weary, unwilling yet to go home, where there was only the bed of thorns and the night of grief to anticipate, sat down on the mossy ground near the gate, and gazed through towards cedar and mansion. It was a still night - calm, dewy, cloudless: the gables, turned to the west, reflected the clear amber of the horizon they faced; the oaks behind were black; the cedar was blacker; under its dense, raven boughs a glimpse of sky opened gravely blue: it was full of the moon, which looked solemnly and mildly down on Caroline from beneath that sombre canopy.

She felt this night and prospect mournfully lovely. She wished she could he happy: she wished she could know inward peace: she wondered Providence had no pity on her, and would not help or console her. Recollections of happy trysts of lovers commemorated in old ballads returned on his mind: she thought such tryst in such scene would be blissful. Where now was Robert? she asked: not at the Hollow: she had watched for his lamp long, and had not seen it. She questioned within herself whether she and Moore were ever destined to meet and speak again. Suddenly the door within the stone porch of the hall opened, and two men came out: one elderly and white-headed, the other young, dark-haired, and tall. They passed across the lawn, out through a portal in the garden wall: Caroline saw them cross the road, pass the stile, descend the fields; she saw them disappear. Robert Moore had passed before her with his friend Mr Yorke: neither had seen her.

The apparition had been transient - scarce seen ere gone; but its electric passage left her veins kindled, her soul insurgent. It found her despairing: it left her desperate - two different states.

'Oh! had he but been alone! Had he but seen me!' was her cry, 'he would have said something; he would have given me his hand. He does, he must love me a little: he would have shown some token of affection: in his eye, on his lips, I should have read comfort: but the chance is lost. The wind - the cloud's shadow does not pass more silently, more emptily than he. I have been mocked, and Heaven is cruel!'

Thus, in the utter sickness of longing and disappointment, she went home.

The next morning at breakfast, when she appeared white-cheeked and miserable- looking as one who had seen a ghost, she inquired of Mr Helstone - 'Have you any objection, uncle, to my inquiring for a situation in a family?'

Her uncle, ignorant as the table supporting his coffee-cup of all his niece had undergone and was undergoing, scarcely believed his ears.

'What whim now?' he asked. 'Are you bewitched? What can you mean?'

'I am not well, and need a change,' she said.

He examined her. He discovered she had experienced a change, at any rate. Without his being aware of it, the rose had dwindled and faded to a mere snowdrop: bloom had vanished, flesh wasted; she sat before him drooping, colourless, and thin. But for the soft expression of her brown eyes, the delicate lines of her features, and the flowing abundance of her hair, she would no longer have possessed a claim to the epithet - pretty.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' he asked. 'What is wrong? How are you ailing?'

No answer, only the brown eyes filled, the faintly-tinted lips trembled.

'Look out for a situation, indeed! For what situation are you fit? What have you been doing with yourself? You are not well.'

'I should be well if I went from home.'

'These women are incomprehensible. They have the strangest knack of startling you with unpleasant surprises. To-day you see them bouncing, buxom, red as cherries, and round as apples; to-morrow they exhibit themselves effete as dead weeds, blanched and broken down. And the reason of it all? that's the puzzle. She has her meals, her liberty, a good house to live in, and good clothes to wear, as usual: a while since that sufficed to keep her handsome and cheery, and there she sits now, a poor little, pale, puling chit enough. Provoking! Then comes the question, what is to be done? I suppose I must send for advice. Will you have a doctor, child?'

'No, uncle: I don't want one: a doctor could do me no good. I merely want change of air and scene.'

'Well, if that be the caprice, it shall be gratified. You shall go to a watering-place I don't mind the expense: Fanny shall accompany you.'

'But, uncle, some day I must do something for myself; I have no fortune. I had better begin now.'

'While I live, you shall not turn out as a governess, Caroline. I will not have it said that my niece is a governess.'

'But the later in life one makes a change of that sort, uncle, the more difficult and painful it is. I should wish to get accustomed to the yoke before any habits of ease and independence are formed.'

'I beg you will not harass me, Caroline. I mean to provide for you. I have always meant to provide for you: I will purchase an annuity. Bless me; I am but fifty-five; my health and constitution are excellent: there is plenty of time to save and take measures. Don't make yourself anxious respecting the future: is that what frets you?'

'No, uncle; but I long for a change.'

He laughed. 'There speaks the woman!' cried he, 'the very woman! A change! a change! Always fantastical and whimsical? Well, it's in her sex.'

'But it is not fantasy and whim, uncle,'

'What is it, then?'

'Necessity, I think. I feel weaker than formerly; I believe I should have more to do.'

'Admirable! She feels weak, and therefore she should be set to hard labour - 'clair comme le jour' - as Moore - confound Moore! You shall go to Cliff Bridge; and there are two guineas to buy a new frock. Come, Cary, never fear: we'll find balm in Gilead.'

'Uncle, I wish you were less generous, and more' - -

'More what?'

Sympathising was the word on Caroline's lips, but it was not uttered: she checked herself in time: her uncle would indeed have laughed if that namby-pamby word had escaped her. Finding her silent, he said - 'The fact is, you don't know precisely what you want.'

'Only to be a governess.'

'Pooh! mere nonsense! I'll not hear of governessing. Don't mention it again. It is rather too feminine a fancy. I have finished breakfast, ring the bell: put all crotchets out of your head, and run away and amuse yourself.'

'What with? My doll?' asked Caroline to herself as she quitted the room.

A week or two passed; her bodily and mental health neither grew worse nor better. She was now precisely in that state, when, if her constitution had contained the seeds of consumption, decline, or slow fever, those diseases would have been rapidly developed, and would soon have carried her quietly from the world. People never die of love or grief alone; though some die of inherent maladies, which the tortures of those passions prematurely force into destructive action. The sound by nature undergo these tortures, and are racked, shaken, shattered: their beauty and bloom perish, but life remains untouched. They are brought to a certain point of dilapidation; they are reduced to pallor, debility, and emaciation. People think, as they see them gliding languidly about, that they will soon withdraw to sick-beds, perish there, and cease from among the healthy and happy. This does not happen: they live on; and though they cannot regain youth and gaiety, they may regain strength and serenity. The blossom which the March wind nips, but fails to sweep away, may survive to hang a withered apple on the tree late into autumn: having braved the last frosts of spring, it may also brave the first of winter.

Every one noticed the change in Miss Helstone's appearance, and most people said she was going to die. She never thought so herself: she felt in no dying case; she had neither pain nor sickness. Her appetite was diminished; she knew the reason: it was because she wept so much at night. Her strength was lessened; she could account for it; sleep was coy and hard to be won; dreams were distressing and baleful. In the far future she still seemed to anticipate a time when this passage of misery should be got over, and when she should once more be calm, though perhaps never again happy.

Meanwhile her uncle urged her to visit; to comply with the frequent invitations of their acquaintance: this she evaded doing; she could not be cheerful in company: she felt she was observed there with more curiosity than sympathy. Old ladies were always offering her their advice, recommending this or that nostrum; young ladies looked at her in a way she understood, and from which she shrank. Their eyes said they knew she had been 'disappointed,' as custom phrases it: by whom, they were not certain.

Commonplace young ladies can be quite as hard as commonplace young gentlemen - quite as worldly and selfish. Those who suffer

should always avoid them; grief and calamity they despise: they seem to regard them as the judgments of God on the lowly. With them, to 'love' is merely to contrive a scheme for achieving a good match: to be 'disappointed' is to have their scheme seen through and frustrated. They think the feelings and projects of others on the subject of love similar to their own, and judge them accordingly.

All this Caroline knew, partly by instinct, partly by observation: she regulated her conduct by her knowledge, keeping her pale face and wasted figure as much out of sight as she could. Living thus in complete seclusion, she ceased to receive intelligence of the little transactions of the neighbourhood.

One morning her uncle came into the parlour, where she sat endeavouring to find some pleasure in painting a little group of wild flowers, gathered under a hedge at the top of the Hollow fields, and said to her in his abrupt manner - 'Come, child, you are always stooping over palette, or book, or sampler: leave that tinting work. By-the-bye, do you put your pencil to your lips when you paint?'

'Sometimes, uncle, when I forget.'

'Then it is that which is poisoning you. The paints are deleterious, child: there is white lead and red lead, and verdigris, and gamboge, and twenty other poisons in those colour cakes. Lock them up! lock them up! Get your bonnet on. I want you to make a call with me.'

'With you, uncle?

This question was asked in a tone of surprise. She was not accustomed to make calls with her uncle: she never rode or walked out with him on any occasion.

'Quick! quick! I am always busy, you know: I have no time to lose.'

She hurriedly gathered up her materials, asking, meantime, where they were going.

'To Fieldhead.'

'Fieldhead! What, to see old James Booth, the gardener? Is he ill?'

'We are going to see Miss Shirley Keeldar.'

'Miss Keeldar! Is she come to Yorkshire? Is she at Fieldhead?'

'She is. She has been there a week. I met her at a party last night; - that party to which you would not go. I was pleased with her: I choose that you shall make her acquaintance: it will do you good.'

'She is now come of age, I suppose?'

'She is come of age, and will reside for a time on her property. I lectured her on the subject: I showed her her duty: she is not intractable; she is rather a fine girl; she will teach you what it is to have a sprightly spirit: nothing lackadaisical about her.'

'I don't think she will want to see me, or to have me introduced to her. What good can I do her? How can I amuse her?'

'Pshaw! Put your bonnet on,'

'Is she proud, uncle?'

'Don't know. You hardly imagine she would show her pride to me, I suppose? A chit like that would scarcely presume to give herself airs with the Rector of her parish, however rich she might be.'

'No - but how did she behave to other people?'

'Didn't observe. She holds her head high, and probably can be saucy enough where she dare - she wouldn't be a woman otherwise. There, - away now for your bonnet at once!'

Not naturally very confident, a failure of physical strength and a depression of spirits had not tended to increase Caroline's presence of mind and ease of manner, or to give her additional courage to face strangers, and she quailed, in spite of self-remonstrance, as she and her uncle walked up the broad, paved approach leading from the gateway of Fieldhead to its porch. She followed Mr Helstone reluctantly through that porch into the sombre old vestibule beyond.

Very sombre it was; long, vast, and dark: one latticed window lit it but dimly; the wide old chimney contained now no fire, for the present warm weather needed it not; it was filled instead with willow-boughs. The gallery on high, opposite the entrance, was seen but in outline, so shadowy became this hall towards its ceiling; carved stags' heads, with real antlers, looked down grotesquely from the walls, This was neither a grand nor a comfortable house: within as without it was antique, rambling, and incommodious. A property of a thousand a year belonged to it; which property had descended, for lack of male heirs, on a female. There were mercantile families in the district boasting twice the income, but the Keeldars, by virtue of their

antiquity, and their distinction of lords of the manor, took the precedence of all.

Mr and Miss Helstone were ushered into a parlour: of course, as was to be expected in such a Gothic old barrack, this parlour was lined with oak: fine dark, glossy panels compassed the walls gloomily and grandly. Very handsome, reader, these shining brown panels are: very mellow in colouring and tasteful in effect, but - if you know what a 'Spring-clean' is - very execrable and inhuman. Whoever, having the bowels of humanity, has seen servants scrubbing at these polished wooden walls with bees-waxed cloths on a warm May day, must allow that they are 'intolerable and not to be endured'; and I cannot but secretly applaud the benevolent barbarian who had painted another and larger apartment of Fieldhead - the drawing-room to wit, formerly also an oak-room - of a delicate pinky white; thereby earning for himself the character of a Hun, but mightily enhancing the cheerfulness of that portion of his abode, and saving future housemaids a world of toil.

The brown-panelled parlour was furnished all in old style, and with real old furniture. On each side of the high mantelpiece stood two antique chairs of oak, solid as sylvan thrones, and in one of these sat a lady. But if this were Miss Keeldar, she must have come of age at least some twenty years ago: she was of matronly form, and though she wore no cap, and possessed hair of quite an undimmed auburn, shading small and naturally young-looking features, she had no youthful aspect, nor apparently the wish to assume it. You could have wished her attire of a newer fashion: in a well-cut, well-made gown, hers would have been no uncomely presence. It puzzled you to guess why a garment of handsome materials should be arranged in such scanty folds, and devised after such an obsolete mode: you felt disposed to set down the wearer as somewhat eccentric at once.

This lady received the visitors with a mixture of ceremony and diffidence quite English: no middle-aged matron who was not an Englishwoman could evince precisely the same manner; a manner so uncertain of herself, of her own merits, of her power to please; and yet so anxious to be proper, and if possible, rather agreeable than otherwise. In the present instance, however, more embarrassment was shown than is usual even with diffident Englishwomen: Miss Helstone felt this, sympathised with the stranger, and knowing by experience what was good for the timid, took a seat quietly near her, and began to talk to her with a gentle ease, communicated for the moment by the presence of one less self-possessed than herself.

She and this lady would, if alone, have at once got on extremely well together. The lady had the clearest voice imaginable: infinitely softer and more tuneful than could have been reasonably expected from

forty years, and a form decidedly inclined to embonpoint. This voice Caroline liked: it atoned for the formal, if correct, accent and language: the lady would soon have discovered she liked it and her, and in ten minutes they would have been friends. But Mr Helstone stood on the rug looking at them both; looking especially at the strange lady with his sarcastic, keen eye, that clearly expressed impatience of her chilly ceremony, and annoyance at her want of aplomb. His hard gaze and rasping voice discomfited the lady more and more; she tried, however, to get up little speeches about the weather, the aspect of the country, etc., but the impracticable Mr Helstone presently found himself somewhat deaf: whatever she said, he affected not to hear distinctly, and she was obliged to go over each elaborately constructed nothing twice. The effort soon became too much for her; she was just rising in a perplexed flutter, nervously murmuring that she knew not what detained Miss Keeldar - that she would go and look for her, when Miss Keeldar saved her the trouble by appearing: it was to be presumed at least that she who now came in through a glass-door from the garden owned that name.

There is real grace in ease of manner, and so old Helstone her left when an erect, slight girl walked up to him, retaining with her left hand her little silk apron full of flowers, and giving him her right hand said pleasantly: 'I knew you would come to see me, though you do think Mr Yorke has made me a Jacobin. Good-morning.'

'But we'll not have you a Jacobin,' returned he. 'No, Miss Shirley, they shall not steal the flower of my parish from me: now that you are amongst us, you shall be my pupil in politics and religion: I'll teach you sound doctrine on both points.'

'Mrs Pryor has anticipated you,' she replied, turning to the elder lady. 'Mrs Pryor, you know, was my governess, and is still my friend; and of all the high and rigid Tories, she is queen; of all the stanch churchwomen, she is chief. I have been well drilled both in theology and history, I assure you, Mr Helstone.'

The Rector immediately bowed very low to Mrs Pryor, and expressed himself obliged to her.

The ex-governess disclaimed skill either in political or religious controversy, explained that she thought such matters little adapted for female minds, but avowed herself in general terms the advocate of order and loyalty, and, of course, truly attached to the Establishment. She added, she was ever averse to change under any circumstances; and something scarcely audible about the extreme danger of being too ready to take up new ideas, closed her sentence.

'Miss Keeldar thinks as you think, I hope, madam.'

'Difference of age and difference of temperament occasion difference of sentiment,' was the reply. 'It can scarcely he expected that the eager and young should hold the opinions of the cool and middle-aged.'

'Oh! oh! we are independent: we think for ourselves!' cried Mr Helstone. 'We are a little Jacobin, for anything I know: a little free-thinker, in good earnest. Let us have a confession of faith on the spot.'

And he took the heiress's two hands - causing her to let fall her whole cargo of flowers - and seated her by him on the sofa.

'Say your creed,' he ordered.

'The Apostles' creed?'

'Yes.'

She said it like a child.

'Now for St. Athanasius's: that's the test!'

'Let me gather up my flowers: here is Tartar coming, he will tread upon them.'

Tartar was a rather large, strong, and fierce-looking dog, very ugly, being of a breed between mastiff and bull-dog, who at this moment entered through the glass-door, and posting directly to the rug, snuffed the fresh flowers scattered there. He seemed to scorn them as food; but probably thinking their velvety petals might be convenient as litter, he was turning round preparatory to depositing his tawny bulk upon them, when Miss Helstone and Miss Keeldar simultaneously stooped to the rescue.

'Thank you,' said the heiress, as she again held out her little apron for Caroline to heap the blossoms into it, 'Is this your daughter, Mr Helstone? ' she asked.

'My niece, Caroline.'

Miss Keeldar shook hands with her, and then looked at her. Caroline also looked at her hostess.

Shirley Keeldar (she had no Christian name but Shirley: her parents, who had wished to have a son, finding that, after eight years of marriage, Providence had granted them only a daughter, bestowed on her the same masculine family cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy, if with a boy they had been blessed) - Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress: she was agreeable to the eye. Her height and shape were

not unlike Miss Helstone's: perhaps in stature she might have the advantage by an inch or two; she was gracefully made, and her face, too, possessed a charm as well described by the word grace as any other. It was pale naturally, but intelligent, and of varied expression. She was not a blonde, like Caroline: clear and dark were the characteristics of her aspect as to colour: her face and brow were clear, her eyes of the darkest grey: no green lights in them, - transparent, pure, neutral grey: and her hair of the darkest brown. Her features were distinguished: by which I do not mean that they were high, bony, and Roman, being indeed rather small and slightly marked than otherwise; but only that they were, to use a few French words, 'fins, gracieux, spirituels': mobile they were and speaking; but their changes were not to be understood, nor their language interpreted all at once. She examined Caroline seriously, inclining her head a little to one side, with a thoughtful air.

'You see she is only a feeble chick,' observed Mr Helstone.

'She looks young - younger than I. How old are you?' she inquired, in a manner that would have been patronising if it had not been extremely solemn and simple.

'Eighteen years and six months.'

'And I am twenty-one.'

She said no more; she had now placed her flowers on the table, and was busied in arranging them.

'And St. Athanasius's creed?' urged the Rector; 'you believe it all - don't you?'

'I can't remember it quite all. I will give you a nosegay, Mr Helstone, when I have given your niece one.'

She had selected a little bouquet of one brilliant and two or three delicate flowers, relieved by a spray of dark verdure: she tied it with silk from her work-box, and placed it on Caroline's lap; and then she put her hands behind her, and stood bending slightly towards her guest, still regarding her, in the attitude and with something of the aspect of a grave but gallant little cavalier. This temporary expression of face was aided by the style in which she wore her hair, parted on one temple, and brushed in a glossy sweep above the forehead, whence it fell in curls that looked natural, so free were their wavy undulations.

'Are you tired with your walk?' she inquired.

'No - not in the least; it is but a short distance - but a mile.'

'You look pale. Is she always so pale?' she asked, turning to the Rector.

'She used to be as rosy as the reddest of your flowers.

'Why is she altered? What has made her pale? Has she been ill?'

'She tells me she wants a change.'

'She ought to have one: you ought to give her one: you should send her to the sea-coast.'

'I will, ere summer is over. Meantime, I intend her to make acquaintance with you, if you have no objection.'

'I am sure Miss Keeldar will have no objection,' here observed Mrs Pryor. 'I think I may take it upon me to say that Miss Helstone's frequent presence at Fieldhead will be esteemed a favour.'

'You speak my sentiments precisely, ma'am,' said Shirley, 'and I thank you for anticipating me. Let me tell you,' she continued, turning again to Caroline, 'that you also ought to thank my governess; it is not every one she would welcome as she has welcomed you: you are distinguished more than you think. This morning, as soon as you are gone, I shall ask Mrs Pryor's opinion of you. I am apt to rely on her judgment of character, for hitherto I have found it wondrous accurate. Already I foresee a favourable answer to my inquiries: do I not guess rightly, Mrs Pryor?'

'My dear - you said but now you would ask my opinion when Miss Helstone was gone; I am scarcely likely to give it in her presence.'

'No - and perhaps it will be long enough before I obtain it. I am sometimes sadly tantalised, Mr Helstone, by Mrs Pryor's extreme caution: her judgments ought to be correct when they come, for they are often as tardy of delivery as a Lord Chancellor's: on some people's characters I cannot get her to pronounce sentence, entreat as I may.'

Mrs Pryor here smiled.

'Yes,' said her pupil, 'I know what that smile means: you are thinking of my gentleman-tenant. Do you know Mr Moore of the Hollow?' she asked Mr Helstone.

'Ay! ay! your tenant - so he is: you have seen a good deal of him, no doubt, since you came?'

'I have been obliged to see him: there was business to transact. Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more. I am an esquire! Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood, and when I see such people as that stately Anglo-Belgian - that Gérard Moore before me, gravely talking to me of business, really I feel quite gentleman-like. You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr Helstone, the next time you elect new ones: they ought to make me a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry Tony Lumpkin's mother was a colonel, and his aunt a justice of the peace - why shouldn't I be?'

'With all my heart. If you choose to get up a requisition on the subject, I promise to head the list of signatures with my name. But you were speaking of Moore?'

'Ah! yes. I find it a little difficult to understand Mr Moore - to know what to think of him: whether to like him or not. He seems a tenant of whom any proprietor might be proud - and proud of him I am, in that sense - but as a neighbour, what is he? Again and again I have entreated Mrs Pryor to say what she thinks of him, but she still evades returning a direct answer. I hope you will be less oracular, Mr Helstone, and pronounce at once: do you like him?'

'Not at all, just now: his name is entirely blotted from my good books.'

'What is the matter? What has he done?'

'My uncle and he disagree on politics,' interposed the low voice of Caroline. She had better not have spoken just then: having scarcely joined in the conversation before, it was not apropos to do it now: she felt this with nervous acuteness as soon as she had spoken, and coloured to the eyes.

'What are Moore's politics?' inquired Shirley.

'Those of a tradesman,' returned the Rector; 'narrow, selfish, and unpatriotic. The man is eternally writing and speaking against the continuance of the war: I have no patience with him.'

'The war hurts his trade. I remember he remarked that only yesterday. But what other objection have you to him?'

'That is enough.'

'He looks the gentleman, in my sense of the term,' pursued Shirley, 'and it pleases me to think he is such.'

Caroline rent the Tyrian petals of the one brilliant flower in her bouquet, and answered in distinct tones - 'Decidedly he is.' Shirley, hearing this courageous affirmation, flashed an arch, searching glance at the speaker from her deep, expressive eyes.

'You are his friend, at any rate,' she said; 'you defend him in his absence.'

'I am both his friend and his relative,' was the prompt reply. 'Robert Moore is my cousin.'

'Oh, then, you can tell me all about him. Just give me a sketch of his character.'

Insuperable embarrassment seized Caroline when this demand was made: she could not, and did not attempt to comply with it. Her silence was immediately covered by Mrs Pryor, who proceeded to address sundry questions to Mr Helstone regarding a family or two in the neighbourhood, with whose connections in the south she said she was acquainted. Shirley soon withdrew her gaze from Miss Helstone's face. She did not renew her interrogations, but returning to her flowers, proceeded to choose a nosegay for the Rector. She presented it to him as he took leave, and received the homage of a salute on the hand in return.

'Be sure you wear it for my sake,' said she.

'Next my heart, of course,' responded Helstone. 'Mrs Pryor, take care of this future magistrate, this churchwarden in perspective, this captain of yeomanry, this young squire of Briarfield, in a word: don't let him exert himself too much: don't let him break his neck in hunting: especially, let him mind how he rides down that dangerous hill near the Hollow.'

'I like a descent,' said Shirley - 'I like to clear it rapidly; and especially I like that romantic Hollow, with all my heart.'

'Romantic - with a mill in it?'

'Romantic with a mill in it. The old mill and the white cottage are each admirable in its way.'

'And the counting-house, Mr Keeldar?'

'The counting-house is better than my bloom-coloured drawing-room: I adore the counting-house.'

'And the trade? The cloth - the greasy wool - the polluting dyeing-vats?'

'The trade is to be thoroughly respected.'

'And the tradesman is a hero? Good!'

'I am glad to hear you say so: I thought the tradesman looked heroic.'

Mischief, spirit, and glee sparkled all over her face as she thus bandied words with the old Cossack, who almost equally enjoyed the tilt.

'Captain Keeldar, you have no mercantile blood in your veins: why are you so fond of trade?'

'Because I am a mill-owner, of course. Half my income comes from the works in that Hollow.'

'Don't enter into partnership, that's all.'

'You've put it into my head! you've put it into my head!' she exclaimed, with a joyous laugh. 'It will never get out: thank you.' And waving her hand, white as a lily and fine as a fairy's, she vanished within the porch, while the Rector and his niece passed out through the arched gateway.