

Chapter XII - Shirley and Caroline

Shirley showed she had been sincere in saying she should be glad of Caroline's society, by frequently seeking it: and, indeed, if she had not sought it, she would not have had it; for Miss Helstone was slow to make fresh acquaintance. She was always held back by the idea that people could not want her, - that she could not amuse them; and a brilliant, happy, youthful creature, like the heiress of Fieldhead, seemed to her too completely independent of society so uninteresting as hers, ever to find it really welcome.

Shirley might be brilliant, and probably happy likewise, but no one is independent of genial society; and though in about a month she had made the acquaintance of most of the families round, and was on quite free and easy terms with all the Misses Sykes, and all the Misses Pearson, and the two superlative Misses Wynne of Walden Hall; yet, it appeared, she found none amongst them very genial: she fraternised with none of them, to use her own words. If she had had the bliss to be really Shirley Keeldar, Esq., Lord of the Manor of Briarfield, there was not a single fair one in this and the two neighbouring parishes, whom she should have felt disposed to request to become Mrs Keeldar, lady of the manor. This declaration she made to Mrs Pryor, who received it very quietly, as she did most of her pupil's off-hand speeches, responding - 'My dear, do not allow that habit of alluding to yourself as a gentleman to be confirmed: it is a strange one. Those who do not know you, hearing you speak thus, would think you affected masculine manners.'

Shirley never laughed at her former governess: even the little formalities and harmless peculiarities of that lady were respectable in her eyes: had it been otherwise, she would have proved herself a weak character at once: for it is only the weak who make a butt of quiet worth; therefore she took her remonstrance in silence. She stood quietly near the window, looking at the grand cedar on her lawn, watching a bird on one of its lower boughs. Presently she began to chirrup to the bird: soon her chirrup grew clearer; ere long she was whistling; the whistle struck into a tune, and very sweetly and deftly it was executed.

'My dear!' expostulated Mrs Pryor.

'Was I whistling?' said Shirley; 'I forgot. I beg your pardon, ma'am. I had resolved to take care not to whistle before you.'

'But, Miss Keeldar, where did you learn to whistle? You must have got the habit since you came down into Yorkshire. I never knew you guilty of it before.'

'Oh! I learned to whistle a long while ago.'

'Who taught you?'

'No one: I took it up by listening, and I had laid it down again; but lately, yesterday evening, as I was coming up our lane, I heard a gentleman whistling that very tune in the field on the other side of the hedge, and that reminded me.'

'What gentleman was it?'

'We have only one gentleman in this region, ma'am, and that is Mr Moore: at least he is the only gentleman who is not grey-haired: my two venerable favourites, Mr Helstone and Mr Yorke, it is true, are fine old beaux; infinitely better than any of the stupid young ones.'

Mrs Pryor was silent.

'You do not like Mr Helstone, ma'am?'

'My dear, Mr Helstone's office secures him from criticism.'

'You generally contrive to leave the room when he is announced.'

'Do you walk out this morning, my dear?'

'Yes, I shall go to the Rectory, and seek and find Caroline Helstone, and make her take some exercise: she shall have a breezy walk over Nunnely Common.'

'If you go in that direction, my dear, have the goodness to remind Miss Helstone to wrap up well, as there is a fresh wind, and she appears to me to require care.'

'You shall be minutely obeyed, Mrs Pryor: meantime, will you not accompany us yourself?'

'No, my love; I should be a restraint upon you: I am stout, and cannot walk so quickly as you would wish to do.'

Shirley easily persuaded Caroline to go with her: and when they were fairly out on the quiet road, traversing the extensive and solitary sweep of Nunnely Common, she as easily drew her into conversation. The first feelings of diffidence overcome, Caroline soon felt glad to talk with Miss Keeldar. The very first interchange of slight observations sufficed to give each an idea of what the other was. Shirley said she liked the green sweep of the common turf, and, better still, the heath on its ridges, for the heath reminded her of moors: she had seen

moors when she was travelling on the borders near Scotland. She remembered particularly a district traversed one long afternoon, on a sultry but sunless day in summer: they journeyed from noon till sunset, over what seemed a boundless waste of deep heath, and nothing had they seen but wild sheep; nothing heard but the cries of wild birds.

'I know how the heath would look on such a day,' said Caroline; 'purple- black: a deeper shade of the sky-tint, and that would be livid.'

'Yes - quite livid, with brassy edges to the clouds, and here and there a white gleam, more ghastly than the lurid tinge, which, as you looked at it, you momentarily expected would kindle into blinding lightning.'

'Did it thunder?'

'It muttered distant peals, but the storm did not break till evening, after we had reached our inn: that inn being an isolated house at the foot of a range of mountains.'

'Did you watch the clouds come down over the mountains?'

'I did: I stood at the window an hour watching them. The hills seemed rolled in a sullen mist, and when the rain fell in whitening sheets, suddenly they were blotted from the prospect: they were washed from the world.'

'I have seen such storms in hilly districts in Yorkshire; and at their riotous climax, while the sky was all cataract, the earth all flood, I have remembered the Deluge.'

'It is singularly reviving after such hurricanes to feel calm return, and from the opening clouds to receive a consolatory gleam, softly testifying that the sun is not quenched.'

'Miss Keeldar, just stand still now, and look down at Nunnely dale and wood.'

They both halted on the green brow of the Common: they looked down on the deep valley robed in May raiment; on varied meads, some pearled with daisies, and some golden with king-cups: to-day all this young verdure smiled clear in sunlight; transparent emerald and amber gleams played over it. On Nunnwood - the sole remnant of antique British forest in a region whose lowlands were once all sylvan chase, as its highlands were breast-deep heather - slept the shadow of a cloud; the distant hills were dappled, the horizon was shaded and tinted like mother-of-pearl; silvery blues, soft purples, evanescent greens and rose-shades, all melting into fleeces of white cloud, pure as

azury snow, allured the eye as with a remote glimpse of heaven's foundations. The air blowing on the brow was fresh, and sweet, and bracing.

'Our England is a bonnie island,' said Shirley, 'and Yorkshire is one of her bonniest nooks.'

'You are a Yorkshire girl too?'

'I am - Yorkshire in blood and birth. Five generations of my race sleep under the aisles of Briarfield Church: I drew my first breath in the old black hall behind us.'

Hereupon Caroline presented her hand, which was accordingly taken and shaken. 'We are compatriots,' said she.

'Yes,' agreed Shirley, with a grave nod.

'And that,' asked Miss Keeldar, pointing to the forest - 'that is Nunnwood?'

'It is.'

'Were you ever there? '

'Many a time.'

'In the heart of it?'

'Yes.'

'What is it like?'

'It is like an encampment of forest sons of Anak. The trees are huge and old. When you stand at their roots, the summits seem in another region: the trunks remain still and firm as pillars, while the boughs sway to every breeze. In the deepest calm their leaves are never quite hushed, and in high wind a flood rushes - a sea thunders above you.'

'Was it not one of Robin Hood's haunts?'

'Yes, and there are mementoes of him still existing. To penetrate into Nunnwood, Miss Keeldar, is to go far back into the dim days of old. Can you see a break in the forest, about the centre?'

'Yes, distinctly.'

'That break is a dell; a deep, hollow cup, lined with turf as green and short as the sod of this common: the very oldest of the trees, gnarled mighty oaks, crowd about the brink of this dell: in the bottom lie the ruins of a nunnery.'

'We will go - you and I alone, Caroline - to that wood, early some fine summer morning, and spend a long day there. We can take pencils and sketch-books, and any interesting reading-book we like; and of course we shall take something to eat. I have two little baskets, in which Mrs Gill, my housekeeper, might pack our provisions, and we could each carry our own. It would not tire you too much to walk so far?'

'Oh, no; especially if we rested the whole day in the wood, and I know all the pleasantest spots: I know where we could get nuts in nutting time; I know where wild strawberries abound: I know certain lonely, quite untrodden glades, carpeted with strange mosses, some yellow as if gilded, some a sober grey, some gem-green. I know groups of trees that ravish the eye with their perfect, picture-like effects: rude oak, delicate birch, glossy beech, clustered in contrast; and ash trees stately as Saul, standing isolated, and superannuated wood-giants clad in bright shrouds of ivy. Miss Keeldar, I could guide you.'

'You would be dull with me alone?'

'I should not. I think we should suit: and what third person is there whose presence would not spoil our pleasure?'

'Indeed, I know of none about our own ages - no lady at least, and as to gentlemen' - -

'An excursion becomes quite a different thing when there are gentlemen of the party,' interrupted Caroline.

'I agree with you - quite a different thing to what we were proposing.'

'We were going simply to see the old trees, the old ruins; to pass a day in old times, surrounded by olden silence, and above all by quietude.'

'You are right; and the presence of gentlemen dispels the last charm, I think. If they are of the wrong sort, like your Malones, and your young Sykes, and Wynnes, irritation takes the place of serenity. If they are of the right sort, there is still a change - I can hardly tell what change, one easy to feel, difficult to describe.'

'We forget Nature, imprimis.'

'And then Nature forgets us; covers her vast calm brow with a dim veil, conceals her face, and withdraws the peaceful joy with which, if we had been content to worship her only, she would have filled our hearts.'

'What does she give us instead?'

'More elation and more anxiety: an excitement that steals the hours away fast, and a trouble that ruffles their course.'

'Our power of being happy lies a good deal in ourselves, I believe,' remarked Caroline sagely. 'I have gone to Nunnwood with a large party, all the curates and some other gentry of these parts, together with sundry ladies; and I found the affair insufferably tedious and absurd: and I have gone quite alone, or accompanied but by Fanny, who sat in the woodman's hut and sewed, or talked to the good wife, while I roamed about and made sketches, or read; and I have enjoyed much happiness of a quiet kind all day long. But that was when I was young - two years ago.'

'Did you ever go with your cousin, Robert Moore?'

'Yes; once.'

'What sort of a companion is he on these occasions?'

'A cousin, you know, is different to a stranger.'

'I am aware of that; but cousins, if they are stupid, are still more insupportable than strangers, because you cannot so easily keep them at a distance. But your cousin is not stupid?'

'No; but - -'

'Well?'

'If the company of fools irritates, as you say, the society of clever men leaves its own peculiar pain also. Where the goodness or talent of your friend is beyond and above all doubt, your own worthiness to be his associate often becomes a matter of question.'

'Oh! there I cannot follow you: that crotchet is not one I should choose to entertain for an instant. I consider myself not unworthy to be the associate of the best of them - of gentlemen, I mean: though that is saying a great deal. Where they are good, they are very good, I believe. Your uncle, by-the-bye, is not a bad specimen of the elderly gentleman: I am always glad to see his brown, keen, sensible old face,

either in my own house or any other. Are you fond of him? Is he kind to you? Now speak the truth.'

He has brought me up from childhood, I doubt not, precisely as he would have brought up his own daughter, if he had had one; and that is kindness; but I am not fond of him: I would rather be out of his presence than in it.'

'Strange! when he has the art of making himself so agreeable.'

'Yes, in company; but he is stern and silent at home. As he puts away his cane and shovel-hat in the Rectory-hall, so he locks his liveliness in his book- case and study-desk: the knitted brow and brief word for the fire-side; the smile, the jest, the witty sally, for society.'

'Is he tyrannical?'

'Not in the least: he is neither tyrannical nor hypocritical: he is simply a man who is rather liberal than good-natured, rather brilliant than genial, rather scrupulously equitable than truly just, - if you can understand such superfine distinctions?'

'Oh! yes: good-nature implies indulgence, which he has not; geniality, warmth of heart, which he does not own; and genuine justice is the offspring of sympathy and considerateness, of which, I can well conceive, my bronzed old friend is quite innocent.'

'I often wonder, Shirley, whether most men resemble my uncle in their domestic relations; whether it is necessary to be new and unfamiliar to them, in order to seem agreeable or estimable in their eyes; and whether it is impossible to their natures to retain a constant interest and affection for those they see every day.'

'I don't know: I can't clear up your doubts. I ponder over similar ones myself sometimes. But, to tell you a secret, if I were convinced that they are necessarily and universally different from us - fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathising - I would never marry. I should not like to find out that what I loved did not love me, that it was weary of me, and that whatever effort I might make to please would hereafter be worse than useless, since it was inevitably in its nature to change and become indifferent. That discovery once made, what should I long for? To go away - to remove from a presence where my society gave no pleasure.'

'But you could not, if you were married.'

'No, I could not, - there it is. I could never be my own mistress more. A terrible thought! - it suffocates me! Nothing irks me like the idea of

being a burden and a bore, - an inevitable burden, - a ceaseless bore! Now, when I feel my company superfluous, I can comfortably fold my independence round me like a mantle, and drop my pride like a veil, and withdraw to solitude. If married, that could not be.'

'I wonder we don't all make up our minds to remain single,' said Caroline: 'we should if we listened to the wisdom of experience. My uncle always speaks of marriage as a burden; and I believe whenever he hears of a man being married, he invariably regards him as a fool, or at any rate, as doing a foolish thing.'

'But, Caroline, men are not all like your uncle: surely not - I hope not.'

She paused and mused.

'I suppose we each find an exception in the one we love, till we are married,' suggested Caroline.

'I suppose so: and this exception we believe to be of sterling materials; we fancy it like ourselves; we imagine a sense of harmony. We think his voice gives the softest, truest promise of a heart that will never harden against us: we read in his eyes that faithful feeling - affection. I don't think we should trust to what they call passion at all, Caroline. I believe it is a mere fire of dry sticks, blazing up and vanishing: but we watch him, and see him kind to animals, to little children, to poor people. He is kind to us likewise - good - considerate: he does not flatter women, but he is patient with them, and he seems to be easy in their presence, and to find their company genial. He likes them not only for vain and selfish reasons, but as we like him - because we like him. Then we observe that he is just - that he always speaks the truth - that he is conscientious. We feel joy and peace when he comes into a room: we feel sadness and trouble when he leaves it. We know that this man has been a kind son, that he is a kind brother: will any one dare to tell me that he will not be a kind husband?'

'My uncle would affirm it unhesitatingly. He will be sick of you in a month,' he would say.'

'Mrs Pryor would seriously intimate the same.'

'Miss Yorke and Miss Mann would darkly suggest ditto.'

'If they are true oracles, it is good never to fall in love.'

'Very good, if you can avoid it.'

'I choose to doubt their truth.'

'I am afraid that proves you are already caught.'

'Not I: but if I were, do you know what soothsayers I would consult?'

'Let me hear.'

'Neither man nor woman, elderly nor young : - the little Irish beggar that comes barefoot to my door; the mouse that steals out of the cranny in the wainscot; the bird that in frost and snow pecks at my window for a crumb; the dog that licks my hand and sits beside my knee.'

'Did you ever see any one who was kind to such things?'

'Did you ever see any one whom such things seemed instinctively to follow, like, rely on?'

'We have a black cat and an old dog at the Rectory. I know somebody to whose knee that black cat loves to climb; against whose shoulder and cheek it likes to purr. The old dog always comes out of his kennel and wags his tail, and whines affectionately when somebody passes.'

'And what does that somebody do?'

'He quietly strokes the cat, and lets her sit while he conveniently can, and when he must disturb her by rising, he puts her softly down, and never flings her from him roughly; he always whistles to the dog and gives him a caress.'

'Does he? It is not Robert?'

'But it is Robert.'

'Handsome fellow!' said Shirley, with enthusiasm: her eyes sparkled.

'Is he not handsome? Has he not fine eyes and well-cut features, and a clear, princely forehead?'

'He has all that, Caroline. Bless him! he is both graceful and good.'

'I was sure you would see that he was: when I first looked at your face I knew you would.'

'I was well inclined to him before I saw him. I liked him when I did see him: I admire him now. There is charm in beauty for itself, Caroline; when it is blent with goodness, there is a powerful charm.'

'When mind is added, Shirley?'

'Who can resist it?'

'Remember my uncle, Mesdames Pryor, Yorke, and Mann.'

'Remember the croaking of the frogs of Egypt! He is a noble being. I tell you when they are good, they are the lords of the creation, - they are the sons of God. Moulded in their Maker's image, the minutest spark of His spirit lifts them almost above mortality. Indisputably, a great, good, handsome man is the first of created things.'

'Above us?'

'I would scorn to contend for empire with him, - I would scorn it. Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right? - shall my heart quarrel with my pulse? - shall my veins be jealous of the blood which fills them?'

'Men and women, husbands and wives quarrel horribly, Shirley.'

'Poor things! - poor, fallen, degenerate things! God made them for another lot - for other feelings.'

'But are we men's equals, or are we not?'

'Nothing ever charms me more than when I meet my superior - one who makes me sincerely feel that he is my superior.'

'Did you ever meet him?'

'I should be glad to see him any day: the higher above me, so much the better: it degrades to stoop - it is glorious to look up. What frets me is, that when I try to esteem, I am baffled: when religiously inclined, there are but false gods to adore. I disdain to be a Pagan.'

'Miss Keeldar, will you come in? We are here at the Rectory gates.'

'Not to-day; but to-morrow I shall fetch you to spend the evening with me. Caroline Helstone - if you really are what at present to me you seem - you and I will suit. I have never in my whole life been able to talk to a young lady as I have talked to you this morning. Kiss me - and good-bye.'

.....

Mrs Pryor seemed as well-disposed to cultivate Caroline's acquaintance as Shirley. She, who went nowhere else, called on an early day at the Rectory. She came in the afternoon, when the Rector happened to be out. It was rather a close day; the heat of the weather

had flushed her, and she seemed fluttered, too, by the circumstance of entering a strange house; for it appeared her habits were most retiring and secluded. When Miss Helstone went to her in the dining-room she found her seated on the sofa, trembling, fanning herself with her handkerchief, and seeming to contend with a nervous discomposure that threatened to become hysterical.

Caroline marvelled somewhat at this unusual want of self-command in a lady of her years, and also at the lack of real strength in one who appeared almost robust: for Mrs Pryor hastened to allege the fatigue of her walk, the heat of the sun, etc., as reasons for her temporary indisposition; and still as, with more hurry than coherence, she again and again enumerated these causes of exhaustion, Caroline gently sought to relieve her by opening her shawl and removing her bonnet. Attentions of this sort, Mrs Pryor would not have accepted from everyone: in general, she recoiled from touch or close approach, with a mixture of embarrassment and coldness far from flattering to those who offered her aid: to Miss Helstone's little light hand, however, she yielded tractably, and seemed soothed by its contact. In a few minutes she ceased to tremble, and grew quiet and tranquil.

Her usual manner being resumed, she proceeded to talk of ordinary topics. In a miscellaneous company, Mrs Pryor rarely opened her lips; or, if obliged to speak, she spoke under restraint, and consequently not well; in dialogue, she was a good converser: her language, always a little formal, was well chosen; her sentiments were just; her information was varied and correct. Caroline felt it pleasant to listen to her: more pleasant than she could have anticipated.

On the wall opposite the sofa where they sat, hung three pictures: the centre one, above the mantel-piece, that of a lady; the two others, male portraits.

'That is a beautiful face,' said Mrs Pryor, interrupting a brief pause which had followed half-an-hour's animated conversation: 'the features may be termed perfect; no statuary's chisel could improve them: it is a portrait from the life, I presume?'

'It is a portrait of Mrs Helstone.'

'Of Mrs Matthewson Helstone? Of your uncle's wife?'

'It is, and is said to be a good likeness: before her marriage, she was accounted the beauty of the district.'

'I should say she merited the distinction: what accuracy in all the lineaments! It is, however, a passive face: the original could not have been what is generally termed 'a woman of spirit.'"

'I believe she was a remarkably still, silent person.'

'One would scarcely have expected, my dear, that your uncle's choice should have fallen on a partner of that description. Is he not fond of being amused by lively chat?'

'In company he is; but he always says he could never do with a talking wife: he must have quiet at home. You go out to gossip, he affirms; you come home to read and reflect.'

'Mrs Matthewson lived but a few years after her marriage, I think I have heard?'

'About five years.'

'Well, my dear,' pursued Mrs Pryor, rising to go, 'I trust it is understood that you will frequently come to Fieldhead: I hope you will. You must feel lonely here, having no female relative in the house: you must necessarily pass much of your time in solitude.'

'I am inured to it: I have grown up by myself. May I arrange your shawl for you?'

Mrs Pryor submitted to be assisted.

'Should you chance to require help in your studies,' she said, 'you may command me.'

Caroline expressed her sense of such kindness.

'I hope to have frequent conversations with you. I should wish to be of use to you.'

Again Miss Helstone returned thanks. She thought what a kind heart was hidden under her visitor's seeming chilliness. Observing that Mrs Pryor again glanced with an air of interest towards the portraits, as she walked down the room, Caroline casually explained - 'The likeness that hangs near the window, you will see, is my uncle, taken twenty years ago; the other, to the left of the mantelpiece, is his brother James, my father.'

'They resemble each other in some measure,' said Mrs Pryor; 'yet a difference of character may be traced in the different mould of the brow and mouth.'

'What difference?' inquired Caroline, accompanying her to the door. 'James Helstone - that is, my father - is generally considered the best-

looking of the two: strangers, I remark, always exclaim, 'What a handsome man!' Do you think his picture handsome, Mrs Pryor?'

'It is much softer or finer featured than that of your uncle.'

'But where or what is the difference of character to which you alluded? Tell me: I wish to see if you guess right.'

'My dear, your uncle is a man of principle: his forehead and his lips are firm, and his eye is steady.'

'Well, and the other? Do not be afraid of offending me: I always like the truth.'

'Do you like the truth? It is well for you: adhere to that preference - never swerve thence. The other, my dear, if he had been living now, would probably have furnished little support to his daughter. It is, however, a graceful head - taken in youth, I should think. My dear' (turning abruptly), 'you acknowledge an inestimable value in principle?'

'I am sure no character can have true worth without it.'

'You feel what you say? You have considered the subject?'

'Often. Circumstances early forced it upon my attention.'

'The lesson was not lost, then, though it came so prematurely. I suppose the soil is not light nor stony, otherwise seed falling in that season never would have borne fruit. My dear, do not stand in the air of the door, you will take cold: good afternoon.'

Miss Helstone's new acquaintance soon became of value to her: their society was acknowledged a privilege. She found she would have been in error indeed to have let slip this chance of relief - to have neglected to avail herself of this happy change: a turn was thereby given to her thoughts; a new channel was opened for them, which, diverting a few of them at least from the one direction in which all had hitherto tended, abated the impetuosity of their rush, and lessened the force of their pressure on one worn-down point.

Soon she was content to spend whole days at Fieldhead, doing by turns whatever Shirley or Mrs Pryor wished her to do: and now one would claim her, now the other. Nothing could be less demonstrative than the friendship of the elder lady; but also nothing could be more vigilant, assiduous, untiring. I have intimated that she was a peculiar personage; and in nothing was her peculiarity more shown than in the nature of the interest she evinced for Caroline. She watched all her movements: she seemed as if she would have guarded all her steps: it

gave her pleasure to be applied to by Miss Helstone for advice and assistance; she yielded her aid, when asked, with such quiet yet obvious enjoyment, that Caroline ere long took delight in depending on her.

Shirley Keeldar's complete docility with Mrs Pryor had at first surprised Miss Helstone, and not less the fact of the reserved ex-governess being so much at home and at ease in the residence of her young pupil, where she filled with such quiet independency a very dependent post; but she soon found that it needed but to know both ladies to comprehend fully the enigma. Every one, it seemed to her, must like, must love, must prize Mrs Pryor when they knew her. No matter that she perseveringly wore old-fashioned gowns; that her speech was formal, and her manner cool; that she had twenty little ways such as nobody else had - she was still such a stay, such a counsellor, so truthful, so kind in her way, that, in Caroline's idea, none once accustomed to her presence could easily afford to dispense with it.

As to dependency or humiliation, Caroline did not feel it in her intercourse with Shirley, and why should Mrs Pryor? The heiress was rich - very rich - compared with her new friend: one possessed a clear thousand a year - the other not a penny; and yet there was a safe sense of equality experienced in her society, never known in that of the ordinary Briarfield and Whinbury gentry.

The reason was, Shirley's head ran on other things than money and position. She was glad to be independent as to property: by fits she was even elated at the notion of being lady of the manor, and having tenants and an estate: she was especially tickled with an agreeable complacency when reminded of 'all that property' down in the Hollow, 'comprising an excellent cloth-mill, dyehouse, warehouse, together with the messuage, gardens, and outbuildings, termed Hollow's Cottage'; but her exultation being quite undisguised was singularly inoffensive; and, for her serious thoughts, they tended elsewhere. To admire the great, reverence the good, and be joyous with the genial, was very much the bent of Shirley's soul: she mused therefore on the means of following this bent far oftener than she pondered on her social superiority.

In Caroline, Miss Keeldar had first taken an interest because she was quiet, retiring, looked delicate, and seemed as if she needed some one to take care of her. Her predilection increased greatly when she discovered that her own way of thinking and talking was understood and responded to by this new acquaintance. She had hardly expected it. Miss Helstone, she fancied, had too pretty a face, manners and voice too soft, to be anything out of the common way in mind and attainments; and she very much wondered to see the gentle features

light up archly to the reveillé of a dry sally or two risked by herself; and more did she wonder to discover the self-won knowledge treasured, and the untaught speculations working in that girlish, curl-veiled head. Caroline's instinct of taste, too, was like her own: such books as Miss Keeldar had read with the most pleasure, were Miss Helstone's delight also. They held many aversions too in common, and could have the comfort of laughing together over works of false sentimentality and pompous pretension.

Few, Shirley conceived, men or women have the right taste in poetry: the right sense for discriminating between what is real and what is false. She had again and again heard very clever people pronounce this or that passage, in this or that versifier, altogether admirable, which, when she read, her soul refused to acknowledge as anything but cant, flourish, and tinsel, or at the best, elaborate wordiness; curious, clever, learned perhaps; haply even tinged with the fascinating hues of fancy, but, God knows, as different from real poetry as the gorgeous and massy vase of mosaic is from the little cup of pure metal; or, to give the reader a choice of similes, as the milliner's artificial wreath is from the fresh-gathered lily of the field.

Caroline, she found, felt the value of the true ore, and knew the deception of the flashy dross. The minds of the two girls being toned in harmony, often chimed very sweetly together.

One evening, they chanced to be alone in the oak-parlour. They had passed a long wet day together without ennui; it was now on the edge of dark; candles were not yet brought in; both, as twilight deepened, grew meditative and silent. A western wind roared high round the hall, driving wild clouds and stormy rain up from the far-remote ocean: all was tempest outside the antique lattices, all deep peace within. Shirley sat at the window, watching the rack in heaven, the mist on earth, listening to certain notes of the gale that plained like restless spirits - notes which, had she not been so young, gay, and healthy, would have swept her trembling nerves like some omen, some anticipatory dirge: in this her prime of existence and bloom of beauty, they but subdued vivacity to pensiveness. Snatches of sweet ballads haunted her ear; now and then she sang a stanza: her accents obeyed the fitful impulse of the wind; they swelled as its gusts rushed on, and died as they wandered away. Caroline, withdrawn to the farthest and darkest end of the room, her figure just discernible by the ruby shine of the flameless fire, was pacing to and fro, murmuring to herself fragments of well-remembered poetry. She spoke very low, but Shirley heard her; and while singing softly, she listened. This was the strain:

Obscurest night involved the sky,
The Atlantic billows roar'd,
When such a destined wretch as I,
Washed headlong from on board,
Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
His floating home for ever left.

Here the fragment stopped; because Shirley's song, erewhile somewhat full and thrilling, had become delicately faint.

'Go on,' said she.

'Then you go on, too. I was only repeating The Castaway.'

'I know: if you can remember it all, say it all.'

And as it was nearly dark, and, after all, Miss Keeldar was no formidable auditor, Caroline went through it. She went through it as she should have gone through it. The wild sea, the drowning mariner, the reluctant ship swept on in the storm, you heard were realised by her; and more vividly was realised the heart of the poet, who did not weep for The Castaway, but who, in an hour of tearless anguish, traced a semblance to his own God-abandoned misery in the fate of that man-forsaken sailor, and cried from the depths where he struggled:

No voice divine the storm allayed,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd - each alone!
But I - beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.

'I hope William Cowper is safe and calm in heaven now,' said Caroline.

'Do you pity what he suffered on earth?' asked Miss Keeldar.

'Pity him, Shirley? What can I do else? He was nearly broken-hearted when he wrote that poem, and it almost breaks one's heart to read it. But he found relief in writing it - I know he did; and that gift of poetry - the most divine bestowed on man - was, I believe, granted to allay emotions when their strength threatens harm. It seems to me, Shirley, that nobody should write poetry to exhibit intellect or attainment. Who cares for that sort of poetry? Who cares for learning - who cares for fine words in poetry? And who does not care for feeling - real feeling - however simply, even rudely expressed?'

'It seems you care for it, at all events: and certainly, in hearing that poem, one discovers that Cowper was under an impulse strong as that of the wind which drove the ship - an impulse which, while it would not suffer him to stop to add ornament to a single stanza, filled him with force to achieve the whole with consummate perfection. You managed to recite it with a steady voice, Caroline: I wonder thereat.'

'Cowper's hand did not tremble in writing the lines; why should my voice falter in repeating them? Depend on it, Shirley, no tear blistered the manuscript of *The Castaway*, I hear in it no sob of sorrow, only the cry of despair; but, that cry uttered, I believe the deadly spasm passed from his heart; that he wept abundantly, and was comforted.'

Shirley resumed her ballad minstrelsy. Stopping short, she remarked ere long - 'One could have loved Cowper, if it were only for the sake of having the privilege of comforting him.'

'You never would have loved Cowper,' rejoined Caroline promptly: 'he was not made to be loved by woman.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. I know there is a kind of natures in the world - and very noble, elevated natures, too - whom love never comes near. You might have sought Cowper with the intention of loving him; and you would have looked at him, pitied him, and left him: forced away by a sense of the impossible, the incongruous, as the crew were borne from their drowning comrade by "the furious blast."

'You may be right. Who told you this?'

'And what I say of Cowper, I should say of Rousseau. Was Rousseau ever loved? He loved passionately; but was his passion ever returned? I am certain, never. And if there were any female Cowpers and Rousseaus, I should assert the same of them.'

'Who told you this, I ask? Did Moore?'

'Why should anybody have told me? Have I not an instinct? Can I not divine by analogy? Moore never talked to me either about Cowper, or Rousseau, or love. The voice we hear in solitude told me all I know on these subjects.'

'Do you like characters of the Rousseau order, Caroline?'

'Not at all, as a whole. I sympathise intensely with certain qualities they possess: certain divine sparks in their nature dazzle my eyes, and make my soul glow. Then, again, I scorn them. They are made of clay and gold. The refuse and the ore make a mass of weakness: taken altogether, I feel them unnatural, unhealthy, repulsive.'

'I dare say I should be more tolerant of a Rousseau than you would, Cary: submissive and contemplative yourself, you like the stern and the practical. By the way, you must miss that Cousin Robert of yours very much, now that you and he never meet.'

'I do.'

'And he must miss you?'

'That he does not.'

'I cannot imagine,' pursued Shirley, who had lately got a habit of introducing Moore's name into the conversation, even when it seemed to have no business there, - 'I cannot imagine but that he was fond of you, since he took so much notice of you, talked to you, and taught you so much.'

'He never was fond of me: he never professed to be fond of me. He took pains to prove that he only just tolerated me.'

Caroline, determined not to err on the flattering side in estimating her cousin's regard for her, always now habitually thought of it and mentioned it in the most scanty measure. She had her own reasons for being less sanguine than ever in hopeful views of the future: less indulgent to pleasurable retrospections of the past.

'Of course, then,' observed Miss Keeldar, 'you only just tolerated him, in return?'

'Shirley, men and women are so different: they are in such a different position. Women have so few things to think about - men so many: you may have a friendship for a man, while he is almost indifferent to you. Much of what cheers your life may be dependent on him, while not a feeling or interest of moment in his eyes may have reference to you. Robert used to be in the habit of going to London, sometimes for a week or a fortnight together; well, while he was away, I found his absence a void: there was something wanting; Briarfield was duller. Of course, I had my usual occupations; still I missed him. As I sat by myself in the evenings, I used to feel a strange certainty of conviction I cannot describe: that if a magician or a genius had, at that moment, offered me Prince Ali's tube (you remember it in the Arabian Nights?), and if, with its aid, I had been enabled to take a view of Robert - to see where he was, how occupied - I should have learned, in a startling manner, the width of the chasm which gaped between such as he and such as I. I knew that, however my thoughts might adhere to him, his were effectually sundered from me.'

'Caroline,' demanded Miss Keeldar abruptly, 'don't you wish you had a profession - a trade?'

'I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.'

'Can labour alone make a human being happy?'

'No; but it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture. Besides, successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none.'

'But hard labour and learned professions, they say, make women masculine, coarse, unwomanly.'

'And what does it signify, whether unmarried and never-to-be-married women are unattractive and inelegant, or not? - provided only they are decent, decorous, and neat, it is enough. The utmost which ought to be required of old maids, in the way of appearance, is that they should not absolutely offend men's eyes as they pass them in the street; for the rest, they should be allowed, without too much scorn, to be as absorbed, grave, plain-looking, and plain-dressed as they please.'

'You might be an old maid yourself, Caroline, you speak so earnestly.'

'I shall be one: it is my destiny. I will never marry a Malone or a Sykes - and no one else will ever marry me.'

Here fell a long pause. Shirley broke it. Again the name by which she seemed bewitched was almost the first on her lips.

'Lina - did not Moore call you Lina sometimes?'

'Yes: it is sometimes used as the abbreviation of Caroline in his native country.'

'Well, Lina, do you remember my one day noticing an inequality in your hair - a curl wanting on that right side - and your telling me that it was Robert's fault, as he had once cut therefrom a long lock?'

'Yes.'

'If he is, and always was, as indifferent to you as you say, why did he steal your hair?'

'I don't know - yes, I do: it was my doing, not his. Everything of that sort always was my doing. He was going from home, to London, as usual; and the night before he went, I had found in his sister's workbox a lock of black hair - a short, round curl: Hortense told me it was her brother's and a keepsake. He was sitting near the table; I looked at his head - he has plenty of hair; on the temples were many such round curls. I thought he could spare me one: I knew I should like to have it, and I asked for it. He said, on condition that he might have his choice of a tress from my head; so he got one of my long

locks of hair, and I got one of his short ones. I keep his, but, I dare say, he has lost mine. It was my doing, and one of those silly deeds it distresses the heart and sets the face on fire to think of: one of those small but sharp recollections that return, lacerating your self-respect like tiny penknives, and forcing from your lips, as you sit alone, sudden, insane-sounding interjections.'

'Caroline!'

'I do think myself a fool, Shirley, in some respects: I do despise myself. But I said I would not make you my confessor; for you cannot reciprocate foible for foible: you are not weak. How steadily you watch me now! Turn aside your clear, strong, she-eagle eye: it is an insult to fix it on me thus.'

'What a study of character you are! Weak, certainly; but not in the sense you think. - Come in!'

This was said in answer to a tap at the door. Miss Keeldar happened to be near it at the moment, Caroline at the other end of the room; she saw a note put into Shirley's hands, and heard the words - 'From Mr Moore, ma'am.'

'Bring candles,' said Miss Keeldar.

Caroline sat expectant.

'A communication on business,' said the heiress; but when candles were brought, she neither opened nor read it. The Rector's Fanny was presently announced, and the Rector's niece went home.