Chapter XIII - Further Communications on Business

In Shirley's nature prevailed at times an easy indolence: there were periods when she took delight in perfect vacancy of hand and eye - moments when her thoughts, her simple existence, the fact of the world being around - and heaven above her, seemed to yield her such fulness of happiness, that she did not need to lift a finger to increase the joy. Often, after an active morning, she would spend a sunny afternoon in lying stirless on the turf, at the foot of some tree of friendly umbrage: no society did she need but that of Caroline, and it sufficed if she were within call; no spectacle did she ask but that of the deep blue sky, and such cloudlets as sailed afar and aloft across its span; no sound but that of the bee's hum, the leaf's whisper. Her sole book in such hours was the dim chronicle of memory, or the sibyl page of anticipation: from her young eyes fell on each volume a glorious light to read by; round her lips at moments played a smile which revealed glimpses of the tale or prophecy: it was not sad, not dark. Fate had been benign to the blissful dreamer, and promised to favour her yet again. In her past were sweet passages; in her future rosy hopes.

Yet one day when Caroline drew near to rouse her, thinking she had lain long enough, behold, as she looked down, Shirley's cheek was wet as if with dew: those fine eyes of hers shone humid and brimming.

'Shirley, why do you cry?' asked Caroline, involuntarily laying stress on you.

Miss Keeldar smiled, and turned her picturesque head towards the questioner. 'Because it pleases me mightily to cry,' she said; 'my heart is both sad and glad: but why, you good, patient child - why do you not bear me company? I only weep tears, delightful and soon wiped away: you might weep gall, if you choose.'

'Why should I weep gall?'

'Mateless, solitary bird!' was the only answer.

'And are not you, too, mateless, Shirley?'

'At heart - no.'

'Oh! who nestles there, Shirley?'

But Shirley only laughed gaily at this question, and alertly started up.

I have dreamed,' she said: 'a mere day-dream; certainly bright, probably baseless!'

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Miss Helstone was by this time free enough from illusions: she took a sufficiently grave view of the future, and fancied she knew pretty well how her own destiny and that of some others were tending. Yet old associations retained their influence over her, and it was these, and the power of habit, which still frequently drew her of an evening to the field-stile and the old thorn overlooking the Hollow.

One night, the night after the incident of the note, she had been at her usual post, watching for her beacon - watching vainly; that evening no lamp was lit. She waited till the rising of certain constellations warned her of lateness, and signed her away. In passing Fieldhead, on her return, its moonlight beauty attracted her glance, and stayed her step an instant. Tree and hall rose peaceful under the night sky and clear full orb; pearly paleness gilded the building; mellow brown gloom bosomed it round; shadows of deep green brooded above its oak-wreathed roof. The broad pavement in front shone pale also; it gleamed as if some spell had transformed the dark granite to glistering Parian: on the silvery space slept two sable shadows, thrown sharply defined from two human figures. These figures when first seen were motionless and mute; presently they moved in harmonious step, and spoke low in harmonious key. Earnest was the gaze that scrutinised them as they emerged from behind the trunk of the cedar. ' Is it Mrs Pryor and Shirley?

Certainly it is Shirley. Who else has a shape so lithe, and proud, and graceful? And her face, too, is visible: her countenance careless and pensive, and musing and mirthful, and mocking and tender. Not fearing the dew, she has not covered her head; her curls are free: they veil her neck and caress her shoulder with their tendril rings. An ornament of gold gleams through the half- closed folds of the scarf she has wrapped across her bust, and a large bright gem glitters on the white hand which confines it. Yes, that is Shirley.

Her companion then is, of course, Mrs Pryor?

Yes, if Mrs Pryor owns six feet of stature, and if she has changed her decent widow's weeds for masculine disguise. The figure walking at Miss Keeldar's side is a man - a tall, young, stately man - it is her tenant, Robert Moore.

The pair speak softly, their words are not distinguishable: to remain a moment to gaze is not to be an eavesdropper; and as the moon shines so clearly and their countenances are so distinctly apparent, who can resist the attraction of such interest; Caroline it seems cannot, for she lingers.

There was a time when, on summer nights, Moore had been wont to walk with his cousin, as he was now walking with the heiress. Often had she gone up the Hollow with him after sunset, to scent the freshness of the earth, where a growth of fragrant herbage carpeted a certain narrow terrace, edging a deep ravine, from whose rifted gloom was heard a sound like the spirit of the lonely watercourse, moaning amongst its wet stones, and between its weedy banks, and under its dark bower of alders.

'But I used to be closer to him,' thought Caroline: 'he felt no obligation to treat me with homage; I needed only kindness. He used to hold my hand: he does not touch hers. And yet Shirley is not proud where she loves. There is no haughtiness in her aspect now, only a little in her port; what is natural to and inseparable from her; what she retains in her most careless as in her most guarded moments. Robert must think as I think, that he is at this instant looking down on a fine face; and he must think it with a man's brain, not with mine. She has such generous, yet soft fire in her eyes. She smiles - what makes her smile so sweet? I saw that Robert felt its beauty, and he must have felt it with his man's heart, not with my dim woman's perceptions. They look to me like two great happy spirits; yonder silver pavement reminds me of that white shore we believe to be beyond the death-flood: they have reached it, they walk there united. And what am I - standing here in shadow, shrinking into concealment, my mind darker than my hiding-place? I am one of this world, no spirit - a poor, doomed mortal, who asks, in ignorance and hopelessness, wherefore she was born, to what end she lives; whose mind for ever runs on the question, how she shall at last encounter, and by whom be sustained through death?'

'This is the worst passage I have come to yet: still I was quite prepared for it. I gave Robert up, and gave him up to Shirley, the first day I heard she was come: the first moment I saw her - rich, youthful, and lovely. She has him now: he is her lover; she is his darling: she will be far more his darling yet when they are married: the more Robert knows of Shirley, the more his soul will cleave to her. They will both be happy, and I do not grudge them their bliss; but I groan under my own misery: some of my suffering is very acute. Truly, I ought not to have been born: they should have smothered me at the first cry.'

Here, Shirley stepping aside to gather a dewy flower, she and her companion turned into a path that lay nearer the gate: some of their conversation became audible. Caroline would not stay to listen: she passed away noiselessly, and the moonlight kissed the wall which her shadow had dimmed. The reader is privileged to remain, and try what he can make of the discourse.

'I cannot conceive why Nature did not give you a bulldog's head, for you have all a bulldog's tenacity,' said Shirley.

'Not a flattering idea: am I so ignoble?'

'And something also you have of the same animal's silent ways of going about its work: you give no warning; you come noiselessly behind, seize fast, and hold on.'

'This is guess-work; you have witnessed no such feat on my part: in your presence I have been no bulldog.'

'Your very silence indicates your race. How little you talk in general, yet how deeply you scheme! You are far-seeing; you are calculating.'

'I know the ways of these people. I have gathered information of their intentions. My note last night informed you that Barraclough's trial had ended in his conviction and sentence to transportation: his associates will plot vengeance. I shall lay my plans so as to counteract, or, at least, be prepared for theirs; that is all. Having now given you as clear an explanation as I can, am I to understand that for what I propose doing I have your approbation?'

'I shall stand by you so long as you remain on the defensive. Yes.'

'Good! Without any aid - even opposed or disapproved by you - I believe I should have acted precisely as I now intend to act; but in another spirit. I now feel satisfied. On the whole, I relish the position.'

'I dare say you do; that is evident: you relish the work which lies before you still better than you would relish the execution of a government order for army-cloth.'

'I certainly feel it congenial.'

'So would old Helstone. It is true there is a shade of difference in your motives: many shades, perhaps. Shall I speak to Mr Helstone? I will, if you like.'

'Act as you please: your judgment, Miss Keeldar, will guide you accurately. I could rely on it myself, in a more difficult crisis; but I should inform you, Mr Helstone is somewhat prejudiced against me at present.'

'I am aware, I have heard all about your differences: depend upon it they will melt away: he cannot resist the temptation of an alliance under present circumstances.'

'I should be glad to have him: he is of true metal.'

'I think so also.'

'An old blade, and rusted somewhat; but the edge and temper still excellent.'

'Well, you shall have him, Mr Moore; that is, if I can win him.'

'Whom can you not win?'

'Perhaps not the Rector; but I will make the effort.'

'Effort! He will yield for a word - a smile.'

'By no means. It will cost me several cups of tea, some toast and cake, and an ample measure of remonstrances, expostulations, and persuasions. It grows rather chill.'

'I perceive you shiver. Am I acting wrongly to detain you here? Yet it is so calm: I even feel it warm; and society such as yours is a pleasure to me so rare. - If you were wrapped in a thicker shawl - - '

'I might stay longer, and forget how late it is, which would chagrin Mrs Pryor. We keep early and regular hours at Fieldhead, Mr Moore; and so, I am sure, does your sister at the cottage.'

'Yes; but Hortense and I have an understanding the most convenient in the world, that we shall each do as we please.'

'How do you please to do?'

'Three nights in the week I sleep in the mill: but I require little rest; and when it is moonlight and mild, I often haunt the Hollow till daybreak.'

'When I was a very little girl, Mr Moore, my nurse used to tell me tales of fairies being seen in that Hollow. That was before my father built the mill, when it was a perfectly solitary ravine: you will be falling under enchantment.'

'I fear it is done,' said Moore, in a low voice.

'But there are worse things than fairies to be guarded against,' pursued Miss Keeldar.

'Things more perilous,' he subjoined.

'Far more so. For instance, how would you like to meet Michael Hartley, that mad Calvinist and Jacobin weaver? They say he is addicted to poaching, and often goes abroad at night with his gun.'

'I have already had the luck to meet him. We held a long argument together one night. A strange little incident it was: I liked it.'

'Liked it? I admire your taste! Michael is not sane. Where did you meet him?'

'In the deepest, shadiest spot in the glen, where the water runs low, under brushwood. We sat down near that plank bridge. It was moonlight, but clouded, and very windy. We had a talk.'

'On politics?'

'And religion. I think the moon was at the full, and Michael was as near crazed as possible: he uttered strange blasphemy in his Antinomian fashion.'

'Excuse me, but I think you must have been nearly as mad as he, to sit listening to him.'

'There is a wild interest in his ravings. The man would be half a poet, if he were not wholly a maniac; and perhaps a prophet, if he were not a profligate. He solemnly informed me that hell was foreordained my inevitable portion; that he read the mark of the beast on my brow; that I had been an outcast from the beginning. God's vengeance, he said, was preparing for me, and affirmed that in a vision of the night he had beheld the manner and the instrument of my doom. I wanted to know further, but he left me with these words, 'The end is not yet.'

'Have you ever seen him since?'

'About a month afterwards, in returning from market, I encountered him and Moses Barraclough both in an advanced stage of inebriation: they were praying in frantic sort at the roadside. They accosted me as Satan, bid me avaunt, and clamoured to be delivered from temptation. Again, but a few days ago, Michael took the trouble of appearing at the counting-house door, hatless, in his shirt- sleeves, - his coat and castor having been detained at the public-house in pledge; he delivered himself of the comfortable message that he could wish Mr Moore to set his house in order, as his soul was likely shortly to be required of him.'

'Do you make light of these things?'

'The poor man had been drinking for weeks, and was in a state bordering on delirium tremens.'

'What then? He is the more likely to attempt the fulfilment of his own prophecies.'

'It would not do to permit incidents of this sort to affect one's nerves.'

'Mr Moore, go home!'

'So soon?'

'Pass straight down the fields, not round by the lane and plantations.'

'It is early yet.'

'It is late: for my part I am going in. Will you promise me not to wander in the Hollow to-night?'

'If you wish it.'

'I do wish it. May I ask whether you consider life valueless?'

'By no means: on the contrary, of late I regard my life as invaluable.'

'Of late?'

'Existence is neither aimless nor hopeless to me now; and it was both three months ago. I was then drowning, and rather wished the operation over. All at once a hand was stretched to me, - such a delicate hand, I scarcely dared trust it: - its strength, however, has rescued me from ruin.'

'Are you really rescued?'

'For the time your assistance has given me another chance.'

'Live to make the best of it. Don't offer yourself as a target to Michael Hartley, and good-night!'

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Miss Helstone was under a promise to spend the evening of the next day at Fieldhead: she kept her promise. Some gloomy hours had she spent in the interval. Most of the time had been passed shut up in her own apartment; only issuing from it, indeed, to join her uncle at meals, and anticipating inquires from Fanny by telling her that she

was busy altering a dress, and preferred sewing upstairs, to avoid interruption.

She did sew: she plied her needle continuously, ceaselessly; but her brain worked faster than her fingers. Again, and more intensely than ever, she desired a fixed occupation, - no matter how onerous, how irksome. Her uncle must be once more entreated, but first she would consult Mrs Pryor. Her head laboured to frame projects as diligently as her hands to plait and stitch the thin texture of the muslin summer dress spread on the little white couch at the foot of which she sat. Now and then, while thus doubly occupied, a tear would fill her eyes and fall on her busy hands; but this sign of emotion was rare and quickly effaced: the sharp pang passed, the dimness cleared from her vision; she would re-thread her needle, rearrange tuck and trimming, and work on.

Late in the afternoon she dressed herself: she reached Fieldhead, and appeared in the oak parlour just as tea was brought in. Shirley asked her why she came so late.

'Because I have been making my dress,' said she. 'These fine sunny days began to make me ashamed of my winter merino; so I have furbished up a lighter garment.'

'In which you look as I like to see you,' said Shirley. 'You are a lady-like little person, Caroline: is she not, Mrs Pryor?'

Mrs Pryor never paid compliments, and seldom indulged in remarks, favourable or otherwise, on personal appearance. On the present occasion she only swept Caroline's curls from her cheek as she took a seat near her, caressed the oval outline, and observed - 'You get somewhat thin, my love, and somewhat pale. Do you sleep well? Your eyes have a languid look'; and she gazed at her anxiously.

'I sometimes dream melancholy dreams,' answered Caroline; 'and if I lie awake for an hour or two in the night, I am continually thinking of the Rectory as a dreary old place. You know it is very near the churchyard: the back part of the house is extremely ancient, and it is said that the out-kitchens there were once enclosed in the churchyard, and that there are graves under them. I rather long to leave the Rectory.'

'My dear! You are surely not superstitious?'

'No, Mrs Pryor; but I think I grow what is called nervous. I see things under a darker aspect than I used to do. I have fears I never used to have - not of ghosts, but of omens and disastrous events; and I have

an inexpressible weight on my mind which I would give the world to shake off, and I cannot do it.'

'Strange!' cried Shirley. 'I never feel so.' Mrs Pryor said nothing.

'Fine weather, pleasant days, pleasant scenes are powerless to give me pleasure,' continued Caroline. 'Calm evenings are not calm to me: moonlight, which I used to think mild, now only looks mournful. Is this weakness of mind, Mrs Pryor, or what is it? I cannot help it: I often struggle against it: I reason: but reason and effort make no difference.'

'You should take more exercise,' said Mrs Pryor.

'Exercise! I exercise sufficiently: I exercise till I am ready to drop.'

'My dear, you should go from home.'

'Mrs Pryor, I should like to go from home, but not on any purposeless excursion or visit. I wish to be a governess as you have been. It would oblige me greatly if you would speak to my uncle on the subject.'

'Nonsense!' broke in Shirley. 'What an idea! Be a governess! Better be a slave at once. Where is the necessity of it? Why should you dream of such a painful step?'

'My dear,' said Mrs Pryor, 'you are very young to be a governess, and not sufficiently robust: the duties a governess undertakes are often severe.'

'And I believe I want severe duties to occupy me.'

'Occupy you!' cried Shirley. 'When are you idle? I never saw a more industrious girl than you you are always at work. Come,' she continued - 'come and sit by my side, and take some tea to refresh you. You don't care much for my friendship, then, that you wish to leave me?'

'Indeed, I do, Shirley; and I don't wish to leave you. I shall never find another friend so dear.'

At which words Miss Keeldar put her hand into Caroline's with an impulsively affectionate movement, which was well seconded by the expression of her face.

'If you think so, you had better make much of me,' she said, 'and not run away from me. I hate to part with those to whom I am become attached. Mrs Pryor there sometimes talks of leaving me, and says I

might make a more advantageous connection than herself. I should as soon think of exchanging an old-fashioned mother for something modish and stylish. As for you - why, I began to flatter myself we were thoroughly friends; that you liked Shirley almost as well as Shirley likes you: and she does not stint her regard.'

'I do like Shirley: I like her more and more every day; but that does not make me strong or happy.'

'And would it make you strong or happy to go and live as a dependent amongst utter strangers? It would not; and the experiment must not be tried. I tell you it would fail: it is not in your nature to bear the desolate life governesses generally lead: you would fall ill: I won't hear of it.'

And Miss Keeldar paused, having uttered this prohibition very decidedly. Soon she recommenced, still looking somewhat courroucée - 'Why, it is my daily pleasure now to look out for the little cottage bonnet and the silk scarf glancing through the trees in the lane, and to know that my quiet, shrewd, thoughtful companion and monitress is coming back to me: that I shall have her sitting in the room to look at, to talk to, or to let alone, as she and I please. This may be a selfish sort of language - I know it is; but it is the language which naturally rises to my lips; therefore I utter it.'

'I would write to you, Shirley.'

'And what are letters? Only a sort of pis-aller. Drink some tea, Caroline: eat something - you eat nothing; laugh and be cheerful, and stay at home.'

Miss Helstone shook her head and sighed. She felt what difficulty she would have to persuade any one to assist or sanction her in making that change in her life which she believed desirable. Might she only follow her own judgment, she thought she should be able to find, perhaps a harsh, but an effectual cure for her sufferings. But this judgment, founded on circumstances she could fully explain to none, least of all to Shirley, seemed, in all eyes but her own, incomprehensible and fantastic, and was opposed accordingly.

There really was no present pecuniary need for her to leave a comfortable home and 'take a situation'; and there was every probability that her uncle might in some way permanently provide for her. So her friends thought, and, as far as their lights enabled them to see, they reasoned correctly: but of Caroline's strange sufferings, which she desired so eagerly to overcome or escape, they had no idea, - of her racked nights and dismal days, no suspicion. It was at once impossible and hopeless to explain: to wait and endure was her only

plan. Many that want food and clothing have cheerier lives and brighter prospects than she had; many, harassed by poverty, are in a strait less afflictive.

'Now, is your mind quieted?' inquired Shirley. 'Will you consent to stay at home?'

'I shall not leave it against the approbation of my friends,' was the reply; 'but I think in time they will be obliged to think as I do.'

During this conversation Mrs Pryor looked far from easy. Her extreme habitual reserve would rarely permit her to talk freely, or to interrogate others closely. She could think a multitude of questions she never ventured to put; give advice in her mind which her tongue never delivered. Had she been alone with Caroline, she might possibly have said something to the point: Miss Keeldar's presence, accustomed as she was to it, sealed her lips. Now, as on a thousand other occasions, inexplicable nervous scruples kept her back from interfering. She merely showed her concern for Miss Helstone in an indirect way, by asking her if the fire made her too warm, placing a screen between her chair and the hearth, closing a window whence she imagined a draught proceeded, and often and restlessly glancing at her. Shirley resumed - 'Having destroyed your plan,' she said, 'which I hope I have done, I shall construct a new one of my own. Every summer I make an excursion. This season I propose spending two months either at the Scotch lochs or the English lakes: that is, I shall go there, provided you consent to accompany me: if you refuse, I shall not stir a foot.'

'You are very good, Shirley.'

'I would be very good if you would let me: I have every disposition to be good. It is my misfortune and habit, I know, to think of myself paramount to anybody else: but who is not like me in that respect? However, when Captain Keeldar is made comfortable, accommodated with all he wants, including a sensible genial comrade, it gives him a thorough pleasure to devote his spare efforts to making that comrade happy. And should we not be happy, Caroline, in the Highlands? We will go to the Highlands. We will, if you can bear a sea- voyage, go to the Isles, - the Hebrides, the Shetland, the Orkney Islands. Would you not like that? I see you would: Mrs Pryor, I call you to witness; her face is all sunshine at the bare mention of it.'

'I should like it much,' returned Caroline; to whom, indeed, the notion of such a tour was not only pleasant, but gloriously reviving. Shirley rubbed her hands.

'Come, I can bestow a benefit,' she exclaimed. 'I can do a good deed with my cash. My thousand a year is not merely a matter of dirty bank-notes and jaundiced guineas (let me speak respectfully of both though, for I adore them); but, it may be, health to the drooping, strength to the weak, consolation to the sad. I was determined to make something of it better than a fine old house to live in, than satin gowns to wear; better than deference from acquaintance, and homage from the poor. Here is to begin. This summer - Caroline, Mrs Pryor, and I go out into the North Atlantic, beyond the Shetland - perhaps to the Faroe Isles. We will see seals in Suderoe, and, doubtless, mermaids in Stromoe. Caroline is laughing, Mrs Pryor: I made her laugh; I have done her good.'

'I shall like to go, Shirley,' again said Miss Helstone. 'I long to hear the sound of waves - ocean-waves, and to see them as I have imagined them in dreams, like tossing banks of green light, strewed with vanishing and re-appearing wreaths of foam, whiter than lilies. I shall delight to pass the shores of those lone rock-islets where the sea-birds live and breed unmolested. We shall be on the track of the old Scandinavians - of the Norsemen; we shall almost see the shores of Norway. This is a very vague delight that I feel, communicated by your proposal, but it is a delight.'

'Will you think of Fitful Head now, when you lie awake at night; of gulls shrieking round it, and waves tumbling in upon it rather than of the graves under the Rectory hack-kitchen?'

'I will try; and instead of musing about remnants of shrouds, and fragments of coffins, and human bones and mould, I will fancy seals lying in the sunshine on solitary shores, where neither fisherman nor hunter ever come: of rock- crevices full of pearly eggs bedded in sea-weed; of unscared birds covering white sands in happy flocks.'

'And what will become of that inexpressible weight you said you had on your mind?'

'I will try to forget it in speculation on the sway of the whole Great Deep above a herd of whales rushing through the livid and liquid thunder down from the frozen zone: a hundred of them, perhaps, wallowing, flashing, rolling in the wake of a patriarch bull, huge enough to have been spawned before the Flood: such a creature as poor Smart had in his mind when he said:

Strong against tides, the enormous whale Emerges as he goes.'

'I hope our bark will meet with no such shoal, or herd, as you term it, Caroline. (I suppose you fancy the sea-mammoths pasturing about the bases of the 'everlasting hills,' devouring strange provender in the vast

valleys through and above which sea-billows roll.) I should not like to be capsized by the patriarch bull.'

'I suppose you expect to see mermaids, Shirley?'

'One of them at any rate: I do not bargain for less: and she is to appear in some such fashion as this. I am to be walking by myself on deck, rather late of an August evening, watching and being watched by a full harvest-moon: something is to rise white on the surface of the sea, over which that moon mounts silent, and hangs glorious: the object glitters and sinks. It rises again. I think I hear it cry with an articulate voice: I call you up from the cabin: I show you an image, fair as alabaster, emerging from the dim wave. We both see the long hair, the lifted and foam-white arm, the oval mirror brilliant as a star. It glides nearer: a human face is plainly visible; a face in the style of yours, whose straight, pure (excuse the word, it is appropriate), - whose straight, pure lineaments, paleness does not disfigure. It looks at us, but not with your eyes. I see a preternatural lure in its wily glance: it beckons. Were we men, we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress; being women, we stand safe, though not dreadless. She comprehends our unmoved gaze; she feels herself powerless; anger crosses her front; she cannot charm, but she will appal us: she rises high, and glides all revealed, on the dark wave-ridge. Tempt-ress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! Are you not glad, Caroline, when at last, and with a wild shriek, she dives?'

'But, Shirley, she is not like us: we are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters.'

'Some of our kind, it is said, are all three. There are men who ascribe to 'woman,' in general, such attributes.'

'My dears,' here interrupted Mrs Pryor, 'does it not strike you that your conversation for the last ten minutes has been rather fanciful?'

'But there is no harm in our fancies is there, ma'am?'

'We are aware that mermaids do not exist: why speak of them as if they did? How can you find interest in speaking of a nonentity?'

'I don't know,' said Shirley.

'My dear, I think there is an arrival. I heard a step in the lane, while you were talking; and is not that the garden-gate which creaks?'

Shirley stepped to the window.

'Yes, there is some one,' said she, turning quietly away; and, as she resumed her seat, a sensitive flush animated her face, while a trembling ray at once kindled and softened her eye. She raised her hand to her chin, cast her gaze down, and seemed to think as she waited.

The servant announced Mr Moore, and Shirley turned round when Mr Moore appeared at the door. His figure seemed very tall as he entered, and stood in contrast with the three ladies, none of whom could boast a stature much beyond the average. He was looking well, better than he had been known to look for the past twelve months: a sort of renewed youth glowed in his eye and colour, and an invigorated hope and settled purpose sustained his bearing: firmness his countenance still indicated, but not austerity: it looked as cheerful as it was earnest.

'I am just returned from Stilbro',' he said to Miss Keeldar, as he greeted her; 'and I thought I would call to impart to you the result of my mission.'

'You did right not to keep me in suspense,' she said; 'and your visit is well-timed. Sit down: we have not finished tea. Are you English enough to relish tea; or do you faithfully adhere to coffee?'

Moore accepted tea.

'I am learning to be a naturalised Englishman,' said he; my foreign habits are leaving me one by one.'

And now he paid his respects to Mrs Pryor, and paid them well, with a grave modesty that became his age, compared with hers. Then he looked at Caroline - not, however, for the first time - his glance had fallen upon her before: he bent towards her as she sat, gave her his hand, and asked her how she was. The light from the window did not fall upon Miss Helstone, her back was turned towards it: a quiet though rather low reply, a still demeanour, and the friendly protection of early twilight, kept out of view each traitorous symptom. None could affirm that she had trembled or blushed, that her heart had quaked, or her nerves thrilled: none could prove emotion: a greeting showing less effusion was never interchanged. Moore took the empty chair near her, opposite Miss Keeldar. He had placed himself well: his neighbour, screened by the very closeness of his vicinage from his scrutiny, and sheltered further by the dusk which deepened each moment, soon regained not merely seeming, but real mastery of the feelings which had started into insurrection at the first announcement of his name.

He addressed his conversation to Miss Keeldar.

'I went to the barracks,' he said, 'and had an interview with Colonel Ryde: he approved my plans, and promised the aid I wanted: indeed, he offered a more numerous force than I require - half-a-dozen will suffice. I don't intend to be swamped by redcoats: they are needed for appearance rather than anything else: my main reliance is on my own civilians.'

'And on their Captain,' interposed Shirley.

'What, Captain Keeldar?' inquired Moore, slightly smiling, and not lifting his eyes: the tone of raillery in which he said this was very respectful and suppressed.

'No,' returned Shirley, answering the smile; 'Captain Gérard Moore, who trusts much to the prowess of his own right arm, I believe.'

'Furnished with his counting-house ruler,' added Moore. Resuming his usual gravity, he went on: 'I received by this evening's post a note from the Home Secretary in answer to mine: it appears they are uneasy at the state of matters here in the north; they especially condemn the supineness and pusillanimity of the mill-owners; they say, as I have always said, that inaction, under present circumstances, is criminal, and that cowardice is cruelty, since both can only encourage disorder, and lead finally to sanguinary outbreaks. There is the note: I brought it for your perusal; and there is a batch of newspapers, containing further accounts of proceedings in Nottingham, Manchester, and elsewhere.'

He produced letters and journals, and laid them before Miss Keeldar. While she perused them, he took his tea quietly; but, though his tongue was still, his observant faculties seemed by no means off duty. Mrs Pryor, sitting in the background, did not come within the range of his glance, but the two younger ladies had the full benefit thereof.

Miss Keeldar, placed directly opposite, was seen without effort: she was the object his eyes, when lifted, naturally met first; and, as what remained of daylight - the gilding of the west - was upon her, her shape rose in relief from the dark panelling behind. Shirley's clear cheek was tinted yet with the colour which had risen into it a few minutes since: the dark lashes of her eyes looking down as she read, the dusk yet delicate line of her eyebrows, the almost sable gloss of her curls, made her heightened complexion look fine as the bloom of a red wild-flower by contrast. There was natural grace in her attitude, and there was artistic effect in the ample and shining folds of her silk dress - an attire simply fashioned, but almost splendid from the shifting brightness of its dye, warp and woof being of tints deep and changing as the hue on a pheasant's neck. A glancing bracelet on her arm produced the contrast of gold and ivory: there was something

brilliant in the whole picture. It is to be supposed that Moore thought so, as his eye dwelt long on it, but he seldom permitted his feelings or his opinions to exhibit themselves in his face: his temperament boasted a certain amount of phlegm, and he preferred an undemonstrative, not ungentle, but serious aspect, to any other.

He could not, by looking straight before him, see Caroline, as she was close at his side; it was necessary, therefore, to manoeuvre a little to get her well within the range of his observation: he leaned back in his chair, and looked down on her. In Miss Helstone, neither he nor any one else could discover brilliancy. Sitting in the shade, without flowers or ornaments, her attire the modest muslin dress, colourless but for its narrow stripe of pale azure, her complexion unflushed, unexcited, the very brownness of her hair and eyes invisible by this faint light, she was, compared with the heiress, as a graceful pencil-sketch compared with a vivid painting. Since Robert had seen her last, a great change had been wrought in her; whether he perceived it, might not be ascertained: he said nothing to that effect.

'How is Hortense?' asked Caroline softly.

'Very well; but she complains of being unemployed; she misses you.'

'Tell her that I miss her, and that I write and read a portion of French every day.'

'She will ask if you sent your love: she is always particular on that point. You know she likes attention.'

'My best love - my very best; and say to her, that whenever she has time to write me a little note, I shall be glad to hear from her.'

'What if I forget? I am not the surest messenger of compliments.'

'No, don't forget, Robert: it is no compliment - it is in good earnest.'

'And must therefore be delivered punctually?'

'If you please.'

'Hortense will be ready to shed tears. She is tender-hearted on the subject of her pupil; yet she reproaches you sometimes for obeying your uncle's injunctions too literally. Affection, like love, will be unjust now and then.'

And Caroline made no answer to this observation; for indeed her heart was troubled, and to her eyes she would have raised her handkerchief, if she had dared. If she had dared, too, she would have

declared how the very flowers in the garden of Hollow's Cottage were dear to her; how the little parlour of that house was her earthly paradise; how she longed to return to it, as much almost as the First Woman, in her exile, must have longed to revisit Eden. Not daring, however, to say these things, she held her peace: she sat quiet at Robert's side, waiting for him to say something more. It was long since this proximity had been hers - long since his voice had addressed her; could she, with any show of probability, even of possibility, have imagined that the meeting gave him pleasure, to her it would have given deep bliss. Yet, even in doubt that it pleased - in dread that it might annoy him - she received the boon of the meeting as an imprisoned bird would the admission of sunshine to its cage: it is of no use arguing - contending against the sense of present happiness: to be near Robert was to be revived.

Miss Keeldar laid down the papers.

'And are you glad or sad for all these menacing tidings?' she inquired of her tenant.

'Not precisely either; but I certainly am instructed. I see that our only plan is to be firm. I see that efficient preparation and a resolute attitude are the best means of averting bloodshed.'

He then inquired if she had observed some particular paragraph, to which she replied in the negative, and he rose to show it to her: he continued the conversation standing before her. From the tenor of what he said, it appeared evident that they both apprehended disturbances in the neighbourhood of Briarfield, though in what form they expected them to break out was not specified. Neither Caroline nor Mrs Pryor asked questions: the subject did not appear to be regarded as one ripe for free discussion; therefore the lady and her tenant were suffered to keep details to themselves, unimportuned by the curiosity of their listeners.

Miss Keeldar, in speaking to Mr Moore, took a tone at once animated and dignified, confidential and self-respecting. When, however, the candles were brought in, and the fire was stirred up, and the fulness of light thus produced rendered the expression of her countenance legible, you could see that she was all interest, life, and earnestness: there was nothing coquettish in her demeanour: whatever she felt for Moore, she felt it seriously. And serious, too, were his feelings, and settled were his views, apparently; for he made no petty effort to attract, dazzle, or impress. He contrived, notwithstanding, to command a little; because the deeper voice, however mildly modulated, the somewhat harder mind, now and then, though involuntarily and unintentionally, bore down by some peremptory phrase or tone the mellow accents and susceptible, if high, nature of

Shirley. Miss Keeldar looked happy in conversing with him, and her joy seemed twofold, - a joy of the past and present, of memory and of hope.

What I have just said are Caroline's ideas of the pair: she felt what has just been described. In thus feeling, she tried not to suffer; but suffered sharply, nevertheless. She suffered, indeed, miserably: a few minutes before, her famished heart had tasted a drop and crumb of nourishment, that, if freely given, would have brought back abundance of life where life was failing; but the generous feast was snatched from her, spread before another, and she remained but a bystander at the banquet.

The clock struck nine: it was Caroline's time for going home: she gathered up her work, put the embroidery, the scissors, the thimble into her bag: she bade Mrs Pryor a quiet goodnight, receiving from that lady a warmer pressure of the hand than usual: she stepped up to Miss Keeldar.

'Good-night, Shirley!'

Shirley started up. 'What! - so soon? Are you going already?'

'It is past nine.'

'I never heard the clock. You will come again to-morrow, and you will be happy to-night, will you not? Remember our plans.'

'Yes,' said Caroline: 'I have not forgotten.'

Her mind misgave her that neither those plans nor any other could permanently restore her mental tranquillity. She turned to Robert, who stood close behind her: as he looked up, the light of the candles on the mantelpiece fell full on her face: all its paleness, all its change, all its forlorn meaning were clearly revealed. Robert had good eyes, and might have seen it, if he would: whether he did see it, nothing indicated.

'Good-night!' she said, shaking like a leaf, offering her thin hand hastily, anxious to part from him quickly.

'You are going home?' he asked, not touching her hand.

'Yes.'

'Is Fanny come for you?'

'Yes.'

'I may as well accompany you a step of the way: not up to the Rectory, though, lest my old friend, Helstone, should shoot me from the window.'

He laughed and took his hat. Caroline spoke of unnecessary trouble: he told her to put on her bonnet and shawl. She was quickly ready, and they were soon both in the open air. Moore drew her hand under his arm, just in his old manner, - that manner which she ever felt to be so kind.

'You may run on, Fanny,' he said to the house-maid: 'we shall overtake you': and when the girl had got a little in advance, he enclosed Caroline's hand in his, and said he was glad to find she was a familiar guest at Fieldhead: he hoped her intimacy with Miss Keeldar would continue; such society would be both pleasant and improving.

Caroline replied that she liked Shirley.

'And there is no doubt the liking is mutual,' said Moore: 'if she professes friendship, be certain she is sincere: she cannot feign; she scorns hypocrisy. And, Caroline, are we never to see you at Hollow's Cottage again?'

'I suppose not, unless my uncle should change his mind.'

'Are you much alone now?'

'Yes; a good deal. I have little pleasure in any society but Miss Keeldar's.'

'Have you been quite well lately?'

'Quite.'

'You must take care of yourself. Be sure not to neglect exercise. Do you know I fancied you somewhat altered; - a little fallen away, and pale. Is your uncle kind to you?'

'Yes; he is just as he always is.'

'Not too tender, that is to say; not too protective and attentive. And what ails you, then? - tell me, Lina.'

'Nothing, Robert'; but her voice faltered.

'That is to say, nothing that you will tell me: I am not to be taken into confidence. Separation is then quite to estrange us, is it?'

'I do not know: sometimes I almost fear it is.'

'But it ought not to have that effect. 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and days o' lang syne?''

'Robert, I don't forget.'

'It is two months, I should think, Caroline, since you were at the cottage.'

'Since I was within it - yes.'

'Have you ever passed that way in your walk?'

'I have come to the top of the fields sometimes of an evening, and looked down. Once I saw Hortense in the garden watering her flowers, and I know at what time you light your lamp in the counting-house: I have waited for it to shine out now and then; and I have seen you bend between it and the window: I knew it was you - I could almost trace the outline of your form.'

'I wonder I never encountered you: I occasionally walk to the top of the Hollow's fields after sunset.'

'I know you do: I had almost spoken to you one night, you passed so near me.'

'Did I? I passed near you, and did not see you Was I alone?'

'I saw you twice, and neither time were you alone.'

'Who was my companion? Probably nothing but Joe Scott, or my own shadow by moonlight.'

'No; neither Joe Scott nor your shadow, Robert. The first time you were with Mr Yorke; and the second time what you call your shadow was a shape with a white forehead and dark curls, and a sparkling necklace round its neck; but I only just got a glimpse of you and that fairy shadow: I did not wait to hear you converse.'

'It appears you walk invisible. I noticed a ring on your hand this evening; can it be the ring of Gyges? Henceforth, when sitting in the counting-house by myself, perhaps at dead of night, I shall permit myself to imagine that Caroline may be leaning over my shoulder reading with me from the same book, or sitting at my side engaged in her own particular task, and now and then raising her unseen eyes to my face to read there my thoughts.'

'You need fear no such infliction: I do not come near you: I only stand afar off, watching what may become of you.'

'When I walk out along the hedgerows in the evening after the mill is shut - or at night, when I take the watchman's place - I shall fancy the flutter of every little bird over its nest, the rustle of every leaf, a movement made by you; tree-shadows will take your shape: in the white sprays of hawthorn, I shall imagine glimpses of you. Lina, you will haunt me.'

'I will never be where you would not wish me to he, nor see nor hear what you would wish unseen and unheard.'

'I shall see you in my very mill in broad daylight: indeed, I have seen you there once. But a week ago, I was standing at the top of one of my long rooms, girls were working at the other end, and amongst half-a-dozen of them, moving to and fro, I seemed to see a figure resembling yours. It was some effect of doubtful light or shade, or of dazzling sunbeam. I walked up to this group; what I sought had glided away: I found myself between two buxom lasses in pinafores.'

'I shall not follow you into your mill, Robert, unless you call me there.'

'Nor is that the only occasion on which imagination has played me a trick. One night, when I came home late from market, I walked into the cottage parlour thinking to find Hortense; but instead of her, I thought I found you. There was no candle in the room: my sister had taken the light upstairs with her; the window-blind was not drawn, and broad moonbeams poured through the panes: there you were, Lina, at the casement, shrinking a little to one side in an attitude not unusual with you. You were dressed in white, as I have seen you dressed at an evening party. For half a second, your fresh, living face seemed turned towards me, looking at me; for half a second, my idea was to go and take your our hand, to chide you for your long absence, and welcome your present visit. Two steps forward broke the spell: the drapery of the dress changed outline; the tints of the complexion dissolved, and were formless: positively, as I reached the spot, there was nothing left but the sweep of a white muslin curtain, and a balsam plant in a flower-pot, covered with a flush of bloom - 'sic transit,' et cetera.'

'It was not my wraith, then? I almost thought it was.'

'No; only gauze, crockery, and pink blossom: a sample of earthly illusions.'

'I wonder you have time for such illusions, occupied as your mind must be.'

'So do I. But I find in myself, Lina, two natures; one for the world and business, and one for home and leisure. Gérard Moore is a hard dog, brought up to mill and market: the person you call your cousin Robert is sometimes a dreamer, who lives elsewhere than in Cloth-hall and counting- house.'

'Your two natures agree with you: I think you are looking in good spirits and health: you have quite lost the harassed air which it often pained one to see in your face a few months ago.'

'Do you observe that? Certainly, I am disentangled of some difficulties: I have got clear of some shoals, and have more sea-room.'

'And, with a fair wind, you may now hope to make a prosperous voyage?'

'I may hope it - yes - but hope is deceptive: there is no controlling wind or wave: gusts and swells perpetually trouble the mariner's course; he dare not dismiss from his mind the expectation of tempest.'

'But you are ready for a breeze - you are a good seaman - an able commander: you are a skilful pilot, Robert; you will weather the storm.'

'My kinswoman always thinks the best of me, but I will take her words for a propitious omen; I will consider that in meeting her to-night, I have met with one of those birds whose appearance is to the sailor the harbinger of good- luck.'

'A poor harbinger of good-luck is she who can do nothing - who has no power. I feel my incapacity: it is of no use saying I have the will to serve you, when I cannot prove it; yet I have the will. I wish you success; I wish you high fortune and true happiness.'

'When did you ever wish me anything else? What is Fanny waiting for - I told her to walk on? Oh! we have reached the churchyard: then, we are to part here, I suppose: we might have sat a few minutes in the church-porch, if the girl had not been with us. It is so fine a night, so summer-mild and still, I have no particular wish to return yet to the Hollow.'

'But we cannot sit in the porch now, Robert.' Caroline said this because Moore was turning her round towards it.

'Perhaps not, but tell Fanny to go in; say we are coming, a few minutes will make no difference.'

The church-clock struck ten.

'My uncle will be coming out to take his usual sentinel round, and he always surveys the church and churchyard.'

'And if he does? If it were not for Fanny, who knows we are here, I should find pleasure in dodging and eluding him. We could be under the east window when he is at the porch; as he came round to the north side we could wheel off to the south; we might at a pinch hide behind some of the monuments: that tall erection of the Wynnes would screen us completely.'

'Robert, what good spirits you have! Go - go!' added Caroline hastily, 'I hear the front door - - '

'I don't want to go; on the contrary, I want to stay.'

'You know my uncle will be terribly angry: he forbade me to see you because you are a Jacobin.'

'A queer Jacobin!'

'Go, Robert, he is coming; I hear him cough.'

'Diable! It is strange - what a pertinacious wish I feel to stay!'

'You remember what he did to Fanny's - - ' began Caroline, and stopped abruptly short. Sweetheart was the word that ought to have followed, but she could not utter it; it seemed calculated to suggest ideas she had no intention to suggest; ideas delusive and disturbing. Moore was less scrupulous; 'Fanny's sweetheart?' he said at once. 'He gave him a shower-bath under the pump - did he not? He'd do as much for me, I daresay, with pleasure. I should like to provoke the old Turk - not however against you: but he would make a distinction between a cousin and a lover, would he not?'

'Oh! he would not think of you in that way, of course not; his quarrel with you is entirely political; yet I should not like the breach to be widened, and he is so testy. Here he is at the garden gate - for your own sake and mine, Robert, go!'

The beseeching words were aided by a beseeching gesture and a more beseeching look. Moore covered her clasped hands an instant with his, answered her upward by a downward gaze, said 'Good-night!' and went.

Caroline was in a moment at the kitchen-door behind Fanny; the shadow of the shovel-hat at that very instant fell on a moonlit tomb; the Rector emerged erect as a cane, from his garden, and proceeded in slow march, his hands behind him, down the cemetery. Moore was

almost caught: he had to 'dodge' after all, to coast round the church, and finally to bend his tall form behind the Wynnes' ambitious monument. There he was forced to hide full ten minutes, kneeling with one knee on the turf, his hat off, his curls bare to the dew, his dark eye shining, and his lips parted with inward laughter at his position; for the Rector meantime stood coolly star-gazing, and taking snuff within three feet of him.

It happened, however, that Mr Helstone had no suspicion whatever on his mind; for being usually but vaguely informed of his niece's movements, not thinking it worth while to follow them closely, he was not aware that she had been out at all that day, and imagined her then occupied with book or work in her chamber: where, indeed, she was by this time; though not absorbed in the tranquil employment he ascribed to her, but standing at her window with fast- throbbing heart, peeping anxiously from behind the blind, watching for her uncle to re-enter and her cousin to escape; and at last she was gratified; she heard Mr Helstone come in; she saw Robert stride the tombs and vault the wall; she then went down to prayers. When she returned to her chamber, it was to meet the memory of Robert. Slumber's visitation was long averted: long she sat at her lattice, long gazed down on the old garden and older church, on the tombs laid out all grey and calm, and clear in moonlight. She followed the steps of the night, on its pathway of stars, far into the 'wee sma' hours ayont the twal':' she was with Moore, in spirit, the whole time: she was at his side: she heard his voice: she gave her hand into his hand; it rested warm in his fingers. When the church-clock struck, when any other sound stirred, when a little mouse familiar to her chamber, an intruder for which she would never permit Fanny to lay a trap, came rattling amongst the links of her locket chain, her one ring, and another trinket or two on the toilet-table, to nibble a bit of biscuit laid ready for it, she looked up, recalled momentarily to the real. Then she said half aloud, as if deprecating the accusation of some unseen and unheard monitor, 'I am not cherishing love-dreams: I am only thinking because I cannot sleep; of course, I know he will marry Shirley.'

With returning silence, with the lull of the chime, and the retreat of her small untamed and unknown protégé, she still resumed the dream, nestling to the vision's side, - listening to, conversing with it. It paled at last: as dawn approached, the setting stars and breaking day dimmed the creation of Fancy: the wakened song of birds hushed her whispers. The tale full of fire, quick with interest, borne away by the morning wind, became a vague murmur. The shape that, seen in a moonbeam, lived, had a pulse, had movement, wore health's glow and youth's freshness, turned cold and ghostly grey, confronted with the red of sunrise. It wasted. She was left solitary at last: she crept to her couch, chill and dejected.