Chapter XVII - The School-Feast

Not on combat bent, nor of foemen in search, was this priest-led and women- officered company: yet their music played martial tunes, and - to judge by the eyes and carriage of some, Miss Keeldar, for instance - these sounds awoke, if not a martial, yet a longing spirit. Old Helstone, turning by chance, looked into her face, and he laughed, and she laughed at him.

'There is no battle in prospect,' he said; 'our country does not want us to fight for it: no foe or tyrant is questioning or threatening our liberty: there is nothing to be done: we are only taking a walk. Keep your hand on the reins, Captain, and slack the fire of that spirit: it is not wanted; the more's the pity.'

'Take your own advice, Doctor,' was Shirley's response. To Caroline she murmured, 'I'll borrow of imagination what reality will not give me. We are not soldiers-bloodshed is not my desire; or, if we are, we are soldiers of the Cross. Time has rolled back some hundreds of years, and we are bound on a pilgrimage to Palestine. But no, - that is too visionary. I need a sterner dream: we are Lowlanders of Scotland, following a covenanting captain up into the hills to hold a meeting out of the reach of persecuting troopers. We know that battle may follow prayer; and, as we believe that in the worst issue of battle, heaven must be our reward, we are ready and willing to redden the peat-moss with our blood. That music stirs my soul; it wakens all my life; it makes my heart beat: not with its temperate daily pulse, but with a new, thrilling vigour. I almost long for danger; for a faith - a land - or, at least, a lover to defend.'

'Look, Shirley!' interrupted Caroline. 'What is that red speck above Stilbro' Brow? You have keener sight than I; just turn your eagle eye to it.'

Miss Keeldar looked. 'I see,' she said: then added presently, 'there is a line of red. They are soldiers - cavalry soldiers,' she subjoined quickly: 'they ride fast: there are six of them: they will pass us: no - they have turned off to the right: they saw our procession, and avoid it by making a circuit. Where are they going?'

'Perhaps they are only exercising their horses'

'Perhaps so. We see them no more now.'

Mr Helstone here spoke.

'We shall pass through Royd-lane, to reach Nunnely Common by a short cut,' said he.

And into the straits of Royd Lane they accordingly defiled. It was very narrow, - so narrow that only two could walk abreast without falling into the ditch which ran along each side. They had gained the middle of it, when excitement became obvious in the clerical commanders: Boultby's spectacles and Helstone's Rehoboam were agitated: the curates nudged each other: Mr Hall turned to the ladies and smiled.

'What is the matter?' was the demand.

He pointed with his staff to the end of the lane before them. Lo and behold! another, - an opposition procession was there entering, headed also by men in black, and followed also, as they could now hear, by music.

'Is it our double?' asked Shirley: 'our manifold wraith? Here is a card turned up.'

'If you wanted a battle, you are likely to get one, - at least of looks,' whispered Caroline, laughing.

'They shall not pass us!' cried the curates unanimously: 'we'll not give way!'

'Give way!' retorted Helstone sternly, turning round; 'who talks of giving way? You, boys, mind what you are about: the ladies, I know, will be firm; I can trust them. There is not a churchwoman here but will stand her ground against these folks, for the honour of the Establishment. What does Miss Keeldar say?'

'She asks what is it?'

'The Dissenting and Methodist schools, the Baptists, Independents, and Wesleyans, joined in unholy alliance, and turning purposely into this lane with the intention of obstructing our march and driving us back.'

'Bad manners!' said Shirley; 'and I hate bad manners. Of course, they must have a lesson.'

'A lesson in politeness,' suggested Mr Hall, who was ever for peace: 'not an example of rudeness.'

Old Helstone moved on. Quickening his step, he marched some yards in advance of his company. He had nearly reached the other sable leaders, when he who appeared to act as the hostile commander-in-chief - a large, greasy man, with black hair combed flat on his forehead - called a halt. The procession paused: he drew forth a

hymn-book, gave out a verse, set a tune, and they all struck up the most dolorous of canticles.

Helstone signed to his bands: they clashed out with all the power of brass. He desired them to play 'Rule, Britannia,' and ordered the children to join in vocally, which they did with enthusiastic spirit. The enemy was sung and stormed down; his psalm quelled: as far as noise went, he was conquered.

'Now, follow me!' exclaimed Helstone; 'not at a run, but at a firm, smart pace. Be steady, every child and woman of you: - keep together - hold on by each other's skirts, if necessary.'

And he strode on with such a determined and deliberate gait, and was, besides, so well seconded by his scholars and teachers - who did exactly as he told them, neither running nor faltering, but marching with cool, solid impetus: the curates, too, being compelled to do the same, as they were between two fires, - Helstone and Miss Keeldar, both of whom watched any deviation with lynx-eyed vigilance, and were ready, the one with his cane, the other with her parasol, to rebuke the slightest breach of orders, the least independent or irregular demonstration, - that the body of Dissenters were first amazed, then alarmed, then borne down and pressed back, and at last forced to turn tail and leave the outlet from Royd Lane free. Boultby suffered in the onslaught, but Helstone and Malone, between them, held him up, and brought him through the business, whole in limb, though sorely tried in wind.

The fat Dissenter who had given out the hymn was left sitting in the ditch. He was a spirit merchant by trade, a leader of the Nonconformists, and, it was said, drank more water in that one afternoon than he had swallowed for a twelvemonth before. Mr Hall had taken care of Caroline, and Caroline of him: he and Miss Ainley made their own quiet comments to each other afterwards on the incident. Miss Keeldar and Mr Helstone shook hands heartily when they had fairly got the whole party through the lane. The curates began to exult, but Mr Helstone presently put the curb on their innocent spirits: he remarked that they never had sense to know what to say, and had better hold their tongues; and he reminded them that the business was none of their managing.

About half-past three the procession turned back, and at four once more regained the starting-place. Long lines of benches were arranged in the close- shorn fields round the school: there the children were seated, and huge baskets, covered up with white cloths, and great smoking tin vessels were brought out. Ere the distribution of good things commenced, a brief grace was pronounced by Mr Hall, and sung by the children: their young voices sounded melodious, even

touching, in the open air. Large currant buns, and hot, well-sweetened tea, were then administered in the proper spirit of liberality: no stinting was permitted on this day, at least; the rule for each child's allowance being that it was to have about twice as much as it could possibly eat, thus leaving a reserve to be carried home for such as age, sickness, or other impediment, prevented from coming to the feast. Buns and beer circulated, meantime, amongst the musicians and church-singers: afterwards the benches were removed, and they were left to unbend their spirits in licensed play.

A bell summoned the teachers, patrons, and patronesses to the schoolroom; Miss Keeldar, Miss Helstone, and many other ladies were already there, glancing over the arrangement of their separate trays and tables. Most of the female servants of the neighbourhood, together with the clerks', the singers', and the musicians' wives, had been pressed into the service of the day as waiters: each vied with the other in smartness and daintiness of dress, and many handsome forms were seen amongst the younger ones. About half a score were cutting bread and butter; another half-score supplying hot water, brought from the coppers of the Rector's kitchen. The profusion of flowers and evergreens decorating the white walls, the show of silver teapots and bright porcelain on the tables, the active figures, blithe faces, gay dresses flitting about everywhere, formed altogether a refreshing and lively spectacle. Everybody talked, not very loudly, but merrily, and the canary birds sang shrill in their high-hung cages.

Caroline, as the Rector's niece, took her place at one of the three first tables; Mrs Boultby and Margaret Hall officiated at the others. At these tables the élite of the company were to be entertained; strict rules of equality not being more in fashion at Briarfield than elsewhere. Miss Helstone removed her bonnet and scarf, that she might be less oppressed with the heat; her long curls, falling on her neck, served almost in place of a veil, and for the rest, her muslin dress was fashioned modestly as a nun's robe, enabling her thus to dispense with the encumbrance of a shawl.

The room was filling: Mr Hall had taken his post beside Caroline, who now, as she re-arranged the cups and spoons before her, whispered to him in a low voice remarks on the events of the day. He looked a little grave about what had taken place in Royd Lane, and she tried to smile him out of his seriousness. Miss Keeldar sat near; for a wonder, neither laughing nor talking; on the contrary, very still, and gazing round her vigilantly: she seemed afraid lest some intruder should take a seat she apparently wished to reserve next her own: ever and anon she spread her satin dress over an undue portion of the bench, or laid her gloves or her embroidered handkerchief upon it. Caroline noticed this manège at last, and asked her what friend she expected. Shirley bent towards her, almost touched her ear with her rosy lips, and

whispered with a musical softness that often characterised her tones, when what she said tended even remotely to stir some sweet secret source of feeling in her heart - 'I expect Mr Moore: I saw him last night, and I made him promise to come with his sister, and to sit at our table: he won't fail me, I feel certain, but I apprehend his coming too late, and being separated from us. Here is a fresh batch arriving; every place will be taken: provoking!'

In fact Mr Wynne the magistrate, his wife, his son, and his two daughters, now entered in high state. They were Briarfield gentry: of course their place was at the first table, and being conducted thither, they filled up the whole remaining space. For Miss Keeldar's comfort, Mr Sam Wynne inducted himself into the very vacancy she had kept for Moore, planting himself solidly on her gown, her gloves, and her handkerchief. Mr Sam was one of the objects of her aversion; and the more so because he showed serious symptoms of an aim at her hand. The old gentleman, too, had publicly declared that the Fieldhead estate and the De Walden estate were delightfully contagious - a malapropism which rumour had not failed to repeat to Shirley.

Caroline's ears yet rung with that thrilling whisper, 'I expect Mr Moore,' her heart yet beat and her cheek yet glowed with it, when a note from the organ pealed above the confused hum of the place. Dr. Boultby, Mr Helstone, and Mr Hall rose, so did all present, and grace was sung to the accompaniment of the music; and then tea began. She was kept too busy with her office for a while to have leisure for looking round, but the last cup being filled, she threw a restless glance over the room. There were some ladies and several gentlemen standing about yet unaccommodated with seats; amidst a group she recognised her spinster friend, Miss Mann, whom the fine weather had tempted, or some urgent friend had persuaded, to leave her drear solitude for one hour of social enjoyment. Miss Mann looked tired of standing: a lady in a yellow bonnet brought her a chair. Caroline knew well that 'chapeau en satin jaune'; she knew the black hair, and the kindly though rather opinionated and froward-looking face under it; she knew that 'robe de soie noire'; she knew even that 'schal gris de lin'; she knew, in short, Hortense Moore, and she wanted to jump up and run to her and kiss her - to give her one embrace for her own sake, and two for her brother's. She half rose, indeed, with a smothered exclamation, and perhaps - for the impulse was very strong - she would have run across the room, and actually saluted her, but a hand replaced her in her seat, and a voice behind her whispered - 'Wait till after tea, Lina, and then I'll bring her to you.'

And when she could look up she did, and there was Robert himself close behind, smiling at her eagerness, looking better than she had ever seen him look - looking, indeed, to her partial eyes, so very handsome, that she dared not trust herself to hazard a second glance;

for his image struck on her vision with painful brightness, and pictured itself on her memory as vividly as if there daguerreotyped by a pencil of keen lightning.

He moved on, and spoke to Miss Keeldar. Shirley, irritated by some unwelcome attentions from Sam Wynne, and by the fact of that gentleman being still seated on her gloves and handkerchief - and probably, also, by Moore's want of punctuality - was by no means in good humour. She first shrugged her shoulder at him, and then she said a bitter word or two about his 'insupportable tardiness.' Moore neither apologised nor retorted: he stood near her quietly, as if waiting to see whether she would recover her temper; which she did in little more than three minutes, indicating the change by offering him her hand. Moore took it with a smile, half corrective, half grateful: the slightest possible shake of the head delicately marked the former quality; it is probable a gentle pressure indicated the latter.

'You may sit where you can now, Mr Moore,' said Shirley, also smiling: 'you see there is not an inch of room for you here; but I discern plenty of space at Mrs Boultby's table, between Miss Armitage and Miss Birtwhistle; go: John Sykes will be your vis-ô-vis, and you will sit with your back towards us.'

Moore, however, preferred lingering about where he was: he now and then took a turn down the long room, pausing in his walk to interchange greetings with other gentlemen in his own placeless predicament: but still he came back to the magnet, Shirley, bringing with him, each time he returned, observations it was necessary to whisper in her ear.

Meantime, poor Sam Wynne looked far from comfortable; his fair neighbour, judging from her movements, appeared in a mood the most unquiet and unaccommodating: she would not sit still two seconds: she was hot; she fanned herself; complained of want of air and space. She remarked, that, in her opinion, when people had finished their tea they ought to leave the tables, and announced distinctly that she expected to faint if the present state of things continued. Mr Sam offered to accompany her into the open air; just the way to give her her death of cold, she alleged: in short, his post became untenable; and having swallowed his quantum of tea, he judged it expedient to evacuate.

Moore should have been at hand, whereas he was quite at the other extremity of the room, deep in conference with Christopher Sykes. A large corn-factor, Timothy Ramsden, Esq., happened to be nearer, and feeling himself tired of standing, he advanced to fill the vacant seat. Shirley's expedients did not fail her: a sweep of her scarf upset her teacup, its contents were shared between the bench and her own satin

dress. Of course, it became necessary to call a waiter to remedy the mischief: Mr Ramsden, a stout, puffy gentleman, as large in person as he was in property, held aloof from the consequent commotion. Shirley, usually almost culpably indifferent to slight accidents affecting dress, etc., now made a commotion that might have become the most delicate and nervous of her sex; Mr Ramsden opened his mouth, withdrew slowly, and, as Miss Keeldar again intimated her intention to 'give way' and swoon on the spot, he turned on his heel, and beat a heavy retreat.

Moore at last returned: calmly surveying the bustle, and somewhat quizzically scanning Shirley's enigmatical-looking countenance, he remarked, that in truth this was the hottest end of the room; that he found a climate there calculated to agree with none but cool temperaments like his own; and, putting the waiters, the napkins, the satin robe, the whole turmoil, in short, to one side, he installed himself where destiny evidently decreed he should sit. Shirley subsided; her features altered their lines: the raised knit brow and inexplicable curve of the mouth became straight again: wilfulness and roguery gave place to other expressions; and all the angular movements with which she had vexed the soul of Sam Wynne were conjured to rest as by a charm. Still, no gracious glance was cast on Moore: on the contrary, he was accused of giving her a world of trouble, and roundly charged with being the cause of depriving her of the esteem of Mr Ramsden, and the invaluable friendship of Mr Samuel Wynne.

'Wouldn't have offended either gentleman, for the world,' she averred: 'I have always been accustomed to treat both with the most respectful consideration, and there, owing to you, how they have been used! I shall not be happy till I have made it up: I never am happy till I am friends with my neighbours; so to-morrow I must make a pilgrimage to Royd corn-mill, soothe the miller, and praise the grain; and next day I must call at De Walden - where I hate to go - and carry in my reticule half an oat-cake to give to Mr Sam's favourite pointers.'

'You know the surest path to the heart of each swain, I doubt not,' said Moore quietly. He looked very content to have at last secured his present place; but he made no fine speech expressive of gratification, and offered no apology for the trouble he had given. His phlegm became him wonderfully: it made him look handsomer, he was so composed: it made his vicinage pleasant, it was so peace-restoring. You would not have thought, to look at him, that he was a poor, struggling man seated beside a rich woman; the calm of equality stilled his aspect: perhaps that calm, too, reigned in his soul. Now and then, from the way in which he looked down on Miss Keeldar as he addressed her, you would have fancied his station towered above hers as much as his stature did. Almost stern lights sometimes crossed his

brow and gleamed in his eyes: their conversation had become animated, though it was confined to a low key; she was urging him with questions - evidently he refused to her curiosity all the gratification it demanded. She sought his eye once with hers: you read, in its soft yet eager expression, that it solicited clearer replies. Moore smiled pleasantly, but his lips continued sealed. Then she was piqued and turned away, but he recalled her attention in two minutes: he seemed making promises, which he soothed her into accepting, in lieu of information.

It appeared that the heat of the room did not suit Miss Helstone: she grew paler and paler as the process of tea-making was protracted. The moment thanks were returned, she quitted the table, and hastened to follow her cousin Hortense, who, with Miss Mann, had already sought the open air. Robert Moore had risen when she did - perhaps he meant to speak to her; but there was yet a parting word to exchange with Miss Keeldar, and while it was being uttered, Caroline had vanished.

Hortense received her former pupil with a demeanour of more dignity than warmth: she had been seriously offended by Mr Helstone's proceedings, and had all along considered Caroline to blame in obeying her uncle too literally.

'You are a very great stranger,' she said austerely, as her pupil held and pressed her hand. The pupil knew her too well to remonstrate or complain of coldness; she let the punctilious whim pass, sure that her natural bonté (I use this French word, because it expresses just what I mean; neither goodness nor good-nature, but something between the two) would presently get the upper hand. It did: Hortense had no sooner examined her face well, and observed the change its somewhat wasted features betrayed, than her mien softened. Kissing her on both cheeks, she asked anxiously after her health: Caroline answered gaily. It would, however, have been her lot to undergo a long cross - examination, followed by an endless lecture on this head, had not Miss Mann called off the attention of the questioner, by requesting to be conducted home. The poor invalid was already fatigued: her weariness made her cross - too cross almost to speak to Caroline; and besides, that young person's white dress and lively look were displeasing in the eyes of Miss Mann: the everyday garb of brown stuff or grey gingham, and the everyday air of melancholy, suited the solitary spinster better: she would hardly know her young friend tonight, and quitted her with a cool nod. Hortense having promised to accompany her home, they departed together.

Caroline now looked round for Shirley. She saw the rainbow scarf and purple dress in the centre of a throng of ladies, all well known to herself, but all of the order whom she systematically avoided whenever

avoidance was possible. Shyer at some moments than at others, she felt just now no courage at all to join this company: she could not, however, stand alone where all others went in pairs or parties, so she approached a group of her own scholars, great girls, or rather young women, who were standing watching some hundreds of the younger children playing at blind-man's buff.

Miss Helstone knew these girls liked her, yet she was shy even with them out of school: they were not more in awe of her than she of them: she drew near them now, rather to find protection in their company than to patronise them with her presence. By some instinct they knew her weakness, and with natural politeness they respected it. Her knowledge commanded their esteem when she taught them; her gentleness attracted their regard; and because she was what they considered wise and good when on duty, they kindly overlooked her evident timidity when off: they did not take advantage of it. Peasant girls as they were, they had too much of her own English sensibility to be guilty of the coarse error: they stood round her still, civil, friendly, receiving her slight smiles, and rather hurried efforts to converse, with a good feeling and good breeding: the last quality being the result of the first, which soon set her at her ease.

Mr Sam Wynne coming up with great haste, to insist on the elder girls joining in the game as well as the younger ones, Caroline was again left alone. She was meditating a quiet retreat to the house, when Shirley, perceiving from afar her isolation, hastened to her side.

'Let us go to the top of the fields,' she said: 'I know you don't like crowds, Caroline.'

'But it will be depriving you of a pleasure, Shirley, to take you from all these fine people, who court your society so assiduously, and to whom you can, without art or effort, make yourself so pleasant.'

'Not quite without effort: I am already tired of the exertion: it is but insipid, barren work, talking and laughing with the good gentlefolks of Briarfield. I have been looking out for your white dress for the last ten minutes: I like to watch those I love in a crowd, and to compare them with others: I have thus compared you. You resemble none of the rest, Lina: there are some prettier faces than yours here; you are not a model-beauty like Harriet Sykes, for instance; beside her, your person appears almost insignificant; but you look agreeable - you look reflective - you look what I call interesting.'

'Hush, Shirley! You flatter me.'

'I don't wonder that your scholars like you.'

'Nonsense, Shirley: talk of something else.'

'We will talk of Moore, then, and we will watch him: I see him even now.'

'Where?' And as Caroline asked the question, she looked not over the fields, but into Miss Keeldar's eyes, as was her wont whenever Shirley mentioned any object she descried afar. Her friend had quicker vision than herself; and Caroline seemed to think that the secret of her eagle acuteness might be read in her dark grey irids: or rather, perhaps, she only sought guidance by the direction of those discriminating and brilliant spheres.

'There is Moore,' said Shirley, pointing right across the wide field where a thousand children were playing, and now nearly a thousand adult spectators walking about. 'There - can you miss the tall stature and straight port? He looks amidst the set that surround him like Eliab amongst humbler shepherds - like Saul in a war-council: and a war-council it is, if I am not mistaken.'

'Why so, Shirley?' asked Caroline, whose eye had at last caught the object it sought. 'Robert is just now speaking to my uncle, and they are shaking hands; they are then reconciled.'

'Reconciled not without good reason, depend on it: making common cause against some common foe. And why, think you, are Messrs. Wynne and Sykes, and Armitage and Ramsden, gathered in such a close circle round them? And why is Malone beckoned to join them? When he is summoned, be sure a strong arm is needed.'

Shirley, as she watched, grew restless: her eyes flashed.

'They won't trust me,' she said: 'that is always the way when it comes to the point.'

'What about?'

'Cannot you feel? There is some mystery afloat: some event is expected; some preparation is to be made, I am certain: I saw it all in Mr Moore's manner this evening: he was excited, yet hard.'

'Hard to you, Shirley!'

'Yes, to me. He often is hard to me. We seldom converse tête-à- tête, but I am made to feel that the basis of his character is not of eider-down.'

'Yet he seemed to talk to you softly.'

'Did he not? Very gentle tones and quiet manner; yet the man is peremptory and secret: his secrecy vexes me.'

'Yes - Robert is secret.'

'Which he has scarcely a right to be with me; especially as he commenced by giving me his confidence. Having done nothing to forfeit that confidence, it ought not to be withdrawn: but I suppose I am not considered iron-souled enough to be trusted in a crisis.'

'He fears, probably, to occasion you uneasiness.'

'An unnecessary precaution: I am of elastic materials, not soon crushed: he ought to know that: but the man is proud: he has his faults, say what you will, Lina. Observe how engaged that group appear: they do not know we are watching them.'

'If we keep on the alert, Shirley, we shall perhaps find the clue to their secret.'

'There will be some unusual movements ere long - perhaps to-morrow - possibly to-night. But my eyes and ears are wide open: Mr Moore, you shall be under surveillance. Be you vigilant also, Lina.'

'I will: Robert is going, I saw him turn - I believe he noticed us - they are shaking hands.'

'Shaking hands, with emphasis,' added Shirley; 'as if they were ratifying some solemn league and covenant.'

They saw Robert quit the group, pass through a gate, and disappear.

'And he has not bid us good-bye,' murmured Caroline.

Scarcely had the words escaped her lips, when she tried by a smile to deny the confession of disappointment they seemed to imply. An unbidden suffusion for one moment both softened and brightened her eyes.

'Oh, that is soon remedied!' exclaimed Shirley. 'We'll make him bid us good- bye.'

'Make him! that is not the same thing,' was the answer.

'It shall be the same thing.'

'But he is gone: you can't overtake him.'

'I know a shorter way than that he has taken: we will intercept him.'

'But, Shirley, I would rather not go.'

Caroline said this as Miss Keeldar seized her arm, and hurried her down the fields. It was vain to contend: nothing was so wilful as Shirley, when she took a whim into her head: Caroline found herself out of sight of the crowd almost before she was aware, and ushered into a narrow shady spot, embowered above with hawthorns, and enamelled under foot with daisies. She took no notice of the evening sun chequering the turf, nor was she sensible of the pure incense exhaling at this hour from tree and plant; she only heard the wicket opening at one end, and knew Robert was approaching. The long sprays of the hawthorns, shooting out before them, served as a screen; they saw him before he observed them. At a glance Caroline perceived that his social hilarity was gone: he had left it behind him in the joy-echoing fields round the school; what remained now was his dark, quiet, business countenance. As Shirley had said, a certain hardness characterised his air, while his eye was excited, but austere. So much the worse-timed was the present freak of Shirley's: if he had looked disposed for holiday mirth, it would not have mattered much, but now - -

'I told you not to come,' said Caroline, somewhat bitterly, to her friend. She seemed truly perturbed: to be intruded on Robert thus, against her will and his expectation, and when he evidently would rather not be delayed, keenly annoyed her. It did not annoy Miss Keeldar in the least: she stepped forward and faced her tenant, barring his way - 'You omitted to bid us good-bye,' she said.

'Omitted to bid you good-bye! Where did you come from? Are you fairies? I left two like you, one in purple and one in white, standing at the top of a bank, four fields off, but a minute ago.'

'You left us there and find us here. We have been watching you; and shall watch you still: you must be questioned one day, but not now: at present, all you have to do is to say good-night, and then pass.'

Moore glanced from one to the other, without unbending his aspect. 'Days of fete have their privileges, and so have days of hazard,' observed he gravely.

'Come - don't moralise: say good-night, and pass,' urged Shirley.

'Must I say good-night to you, Miss Keeldar?'

'Yes, and to Caroline likewise. It is nothing new, I hope: you have bid us both good-night before.'

He took her hand, held it in one of his, and covered it with the other: he looked down at her gravely, kindly, yet commandingly. The heiress could not make this man her subject: in his gaze on her bright face there was no servility, hardly homage; but there was interest and affection, heightened by another feeling: something in his tone when he spoke, as well as in his words, marked that last sentiment to be gratitude.

'Your debtor bids you good-night! - May you rest safely and serenely till morning!'

'And you, Mr Moore, - what are you going to do? What have you been saying to Mr Helstone, with whom I saw you shake hands? Why did all those gentlemen gather round you? Put away reserve for once: be frank with me.'

'Who can resist you? I will be frank: to-morrow, if there is anything to relate, you shall hear it.'

'Just now,' pleaded Shirley: 'don't procrastinate.'

'But I could only tell half a tale; and my time is limited, - I have not a moment to spare: hereafter I will make amends for delay by candour.'

'But are you going home?'

'Yes.'

'Not to leave it any more to-night?'

'Certainly not. At present, farewell to both of you!'

He would have taken Caroline's hand and joined it in the same clasp in which he held Shirley's, but somehow it was not ready for him; she had withdrawn a few steps apart: her answer to Moore's adieu was only a slight bend of the head, and a gentle, serious smile. He sought no more cordial token: again he said 'Farewell!' and quitted them both.

'There! - it is over!' said Shirley, when he was gone. 'We have made him bid us good-night, and yet not lost ground in his esteem, I think, Cary.'

'I hope not,' was the brief reply.

'I consider you very timid and undemonstrative,' remarked Miss Keeldar. 'Why did you not give Mr Moore your hand when he offered

you his? He is your cousin: you like him. Are you ashamed to let him perceive your affection?'

'He perceives all of it that interests him: no need to make a display of feeling.'

'You are laconic: you would be stoical if you could. Is love, in your eyes, a crime, Caroline?'

'Love a crime! No, Shirley: - love is a divine virtue; but why drag that word into the conversation? it is singularly irrelevant!'

'Good!' pronounced Shirley.

The two girls paced the green lane in silence. Caroline first resumed.

'Obtrusiveness is a crime; forwardness is a crime; and both disgust: but love! - no purest angel need blush to love! And when I see or hear either man or woman couple shame with love, I know their minds are coarse, their associations debased. Many who think themselves refined ladies and gentlemen, and on whose lips the word 'vulgarity' is for ever hovering, cannot mention 'love' without betraying their own innate and imbecile degradation: it is a low feeling in their estimation, connected only with low ideas for them.'

'You describe three-fourths of the world, Caroline.'

'They are cold - they are cowardly - they are stupid on the subject, Shirley! They never loved - they never were loved!'

'Thou art right, Lina! And in their dense ignorance they blaspheme living fire, seraph-brought from a divine altar.'

'They confound it with sparks mounting from Tophet!'

The sudden and joyous clash of bells here stopped the dialogue by summoning all to the church.