Chapter XXI - Mrs Pryor

While Shirley was talking with Moore, Caroline rejoined Mrs Pryor upstairs. She found that lady deeply depressed. She would not say that Miss Keeldar's hastiness had hurt her feelings; but it was evident an inward wound galled her. To any but a congenial nature, she would have seemed insensible to the quiet, tender attentions by which Miss Helstone sought to impart solace; but Caroline knew that, unmoved or slightly moved as she looked, she felt, valued, and was healed by them.

'I am deficient in self-confidence and decision,' she said at last. 'I always have been deficient in those qualities: yet I think Miss Keeldar should have known my character well enough by this time, to be aware that I always feel an even painful solicitude to do right, to act for the best. The unusual nature of the demand on my judgment puzzled me, especially following the alarms of the night. I could not venture to act promptly for another: but I trust no serious harm will result from my lapse of firmness.'

A gentle knock was here heard at the door: it was half-opened.

'Caroline, come here,' said a low voice.

Miss Helstone went out: there stood Shirley in the gallery, looking contrite, ashamed, sorry as any repentant child.

'How is Mrs Pryor?' she asked.

'Rather out of spirits,' said Caroline.

'I have behaved very shamefully, very ungenerously, very ungratefully to her,' said Shirley. 'How insolent in me to turn on her thus, for what after all was no fault, only an excess of conscientiousness on her part. But I regret my error most sincerely: tell her so, and ask if she will forgive me.'

Caroline discharged the errand with heartfelt pleasure. Mrs Pryor rose, came to the door: she did not like scenes; she dreaded them as all timid people do: she said falteringly - 'Come in, my dear.'

Shirley did come in with some impetuosity: she threw her arms round her governess, and while she kissed her heartily, she said - 'You know you must forgive me, Mrs Pryor. I could not get on at all if there was a misunderstanding between you and me.'

'I have nothing to forgive,' was the reply. 'We will pass it over now, if you please. The final result of the incident is that it proves more plainly than ever how unequal I am to certain crises.'

And that was the painful feeling which would remain on Mrs Pryor's mind: no effort of Shirley's or Caroline's could efface it thence: she could forgive her offending pupil, not her innocent self.

Miss Keeldar, doomed to be in constant request during the morning, was presently summoned downstairs again. The Rector called first: a lively welcome and livelier reprimand were at his service; he expected both, and, being in high spirits, took them in equally good part.

In the course of his brief visit, he quite forgot to ask after his niece: the riot, the rioters, the mill, the magistrates, the heiress, absorbed all his thoughts to the exclusion of family ties. He alluded to the part himself and curate had taken in the defence of the Hollow.

'The vials of pharisaical wrath will be emptied on our heads, for our share in this business,' he said; 'but I defy every calumniator. I was there only to support the law, to play my part as a man and a Briton; which characters I deem quite compatible with those of the priest and Levite, in their highest sense. Your tenant, Moore,' he went on, 'has won my approbation. A cooler commander I would not wish to see, nor a more determined. Besides, the man has shown sound judgment and good sense; first, in being thoroughly prepared for the event which has taken place, and subsequently, when his well-concerted plans had secured him success, in knowing how to use without abusing his victory. Some of the magistrates are now well frightened, and, like all cowards, show a tendency to be cruel; Moore restrains them with admirable prudence. He has hitherto been very unpopular in the neighbourhood; but, mark my words, the tide of opinion will now take a turn in his favour: people will find out that they have not appreciated him, and will hasten to remedy their error; and he, when he perceives the public disposed to acknowledge his merits, will show a more gracious mien than that with which he has hitherto favoured us.'

Mr Helstone was about to add to this speech some half-jesting, half-serious warnings to Miss Keeldar, on the subject of her rumoured partiality for her talented tenant, when a ring at the door, announcing another caller, checked his raillery; and as that other caller appeared in the form of a white-haired, elderly gentleman, with a rather truculent countenance and disdainful eye - in short, our old acquaintance, and the Rector's old enemy, Mr Yorke - the priest and Levite seized his hat, and with the briefest of adieux to Miss Keeldar, and the sternest of nods to her guest, took an abrupt leave.

Mr Yorke was in no mild mood, and in no measured terms did he express his opinion on the transaction of the night: Moore, the magistrates, the soldiers, the mob-leaders, each and all came in for a share of his invectives; but he reserved his strongest epithets - and real racy Yorkshire Doric adjectives they were - for the benefit of the fighting parsons, the 'sanguinary, demoniac' rector and curate. According to him, the cup of ecclesiastical guilt was now full indeed.

'The Church,' he said, 'was in a bonnie pickle now: it was time it came down when parsons took to swaggering among soldiers, blazing away wi' bullet and gunpowder, taking the lives of far honester men than themselves.'

'What would Moore have done, if nobody had helped him?' asked Shirley.

'Drunk as he'd brewed - eaten as he'd baked.'

'Which means, you would have left him by himself to face that mob. Good. He has plenty of courage; but the greatest amount of gallantry that ever garrisoned one human breast could scarce avail against two hundred.'

'He had the soldiers; those poor slaves who hire out their own blood and spill other folk's for money.'

'You abuse soldiers almost as much as you abuse clergymen. All who wear red coats are national refuse in your eyes, and all who wear black are national swindlers. Mr Moore, according to you, did wrong to get military aid, and he did still worse to accept of any other aid. Your way of talking amounts to this: - he should have abandoned his mill and his life to the rage of a set of misguided madmen, and Mr Helstone and every other gentleman in the parish should have looked on, and seen the building razed and its owner slaughtered, and never stirred a finger to save either.'

'If Moore had behaved to his men from the beginning as a master ought to behave, they never would have entertained their present feelings towards him.'

'Easy for you to talk,' exclaimed Miss Keeldar, who was beginning to wax warm in her tenant's cause: 'you, whose family have lived at Briarmains for six generations, to whose person the people have been accustomed for fifty years, who know all their ways, prejudices, and preferences. Easy, indeed, for you to act so as to avoid offending them; but Mr Moore came a stranger into the district: he came here poor and friendless, with nothing but his own energies to back him; nothing but his honour, his talent, and his industry to make his way for him. A

monstrous crime indeed that, under such circumstances, he could not popularise his naturally grave, quiet manners, all at once: could not be jocular, and free, and cordial with a strange peasantry, as you are with your fellow-townsmen! An unpardonable transgression, that when he introduced improvements he did not go about the business in quite the most politic way; did not graduate his changes as delicately as a rich capitalist might have done For errors of this sort is he to be the victim of mob-outrage? Is he to be denied even the privilege of defending himself? Are those who have the hearts of men in their breasts (and Mr Helstone - say what you will of him - has such a heart) to be reviled like malefactors because they stand by him - because they venture to espouse the cause of one against two hundred?'

'Come - come now - be cool,' said Mr Yorke, smiling at the earnestness with which Shirley multiplied her rapid questions.

'Cool! Must I listen coolly to downright nonsense - to dangerous nonsense? No. I like you very well, Mr Yorke, as you know; but I thoroughly dislike some of your principles. All that cant - excuse me, but I repeat the word - all that cant about soldiers and parsons is most offensive in my ears. All ridiculous, irrational crying up of one class, whether the same be aristocrat or democrat - all howling down of another class, whether clerical or military - all exacting injustice to individuals, whether monarch or mendicant - is really sickening to me: all arraying of ranks against ranks, all party hatreds, all tyrannies disguised as liberties, I reject and wash my hands of. You think you are a philanthropist; you think you are an advocate of liberty; but I will tell you this - Mr Hall, the parson of Nunnely, is a better friend both of man and freedom than Hiram Yorke, the Reformer of Briarfield.'

From a man, Mr Yorke would not have borne this language very patiently, nor would he have endured it from some women; but he accounted Shirley both honest and pretty, and her plainspoken ire amused him: besides, he took a secret pleasure in hearing her defend her tenant, for we have already intimated he had Robert Moore's interest very much at heart: moreover, if he wished to avenge himself for her severity, he knew the means lay in his power: a word, he believed, would suffice to tame and silence her, to cover her frank forehead with the rosy shadow of shame, and veil the glow of her eye under down-drooped lid and lash.

'What more hast thou to say?' he inquired, as she paused, rather it appeared to take breath, than because her subject or her zeal was exhausted.

'Say, Mr Yorke!' was the answer, the speaker meantime walking fast from wall to wall of the oak-parlour. 'Say? I have a great deal to say, if I could get it out in lucid order, which I never can do. I have to say that your views, and those of most extreme politicians, are such as none but men in an irresponsible position can advocate; that they are purely opposition views, meant only to be talked about, and never intended to be acted on. Make you Prime Minister of England to-morrow, and you would have to abandon them. You abuse Moore for defending his mill: had you been in Moore's place you could not with honour or sense have acted otherwise than he acted. You abuse Mr Helstone for everything he does: Mr Helstone has his faults: he sometimes does wrong, but oftener right. Were you ordained vicar of Briarfield, you would find it no easy task to sustain all the active schemes for the benefit of the parish planned and persevered in by your predecessor. I wonder people cannot judge more fairly of each other and themselves. When I hear Messrs. Malone and Donne chatter about the authority of the Church, the dignity and claims of the priesthood, the deference due to them as clergymen; when I hear the outbreaks of their small spite against Dissenters; when I witness their silly narrow jealousies and assumptions; when their palaver about forms, and traditions, and superstitions, is sounding in my ear; when I behold their insolent carriage to the poor, their often base servility to the rich, I think the Establishment is indeed in a poor way, and both she and her sons appear in the utmost need of reformation. Turning away distressed from minster-tower and village-spire - ay, as distressed as a churchwarden who feels the exigence of whitewash, and has not wherewithal to purchase lime - I recall your senseless sarcasms on the 'fat bishops,' the 'pampered parsons,' 'old mother church,' etc. I remember your strictures on all who differ from you, your sweeping condemnation of classes and individuals, without the slightest allowance made for circumstances or temptations; and then, Mr Yorke, doubt clutches my inmost heart as to whether men exist clement, reasonable, and just enough to be entrusted with the task of reform. I don't believe you are of the number.'

'You have an ill opinion of me, Miss Shirley: you never told me so much of your mind before.'

'I never had an opening; but I have sat on Jessy's stool by your chair in the back-parlour at Briarmains, for evenings together, listening excitedly to your talk, half-admiring what you said, and half-rebelling against it. I think you a fine old Yorkshireman, sir: I am proud to have been born in the same county and parish at yourself - truthful, upright, independent you are, as a rock based below seas; but also you are harsh, rude, narrow, and merciless.'

'Not to the poor, lass - nor to the meek of the earth - only to the proud and high-minded.'

'And what right have you, sir, to make such distinctions? A prouder - a higher-minded man than yourself does not exist. You find it easy to speak comfortably to your inferiors - you are too haughty, too ambitious, too jealous to be civil to those above you. But you are all alike. Helstone also is proud and prejudiced. Moore, though juster and more considerate than either you or the Rector, is still haughty, stern, and in a public sense, selfish. It is well there are such men as Mr Hall to be found occasionally: men of large and kind hearts, who can love their whole race, who can forgive others for being richer, more prosperous, or more powerful than they are. Such men may have less originality, less force of character than you, but they are better friends to mankind.'

'And when is it to be?' said Mr Yorke, now rising.

'When is what to be?'

'The wedding.'

'Whose wedding?'

'Only that of Robert Gérard Moore, Esq., of Hollow's Cottage, with Miss Keeldar, daughter and heiress of the late Charles Cave Keeldar of Fieldhead Hall.'

Shirley gazed at the questioner with rising colour; but the light in her eye was not faltering: it shone steadily - yes - it burned deeply.

'That is your revenge,' she said slowly: then added; 'Would it be a bad match, unworthy of the late Charles Cave Keeldar's representative?'

'My lass, Moore is a gentleman: his blood is pure and ancient as mine or thine.'

'And we too set store by ancient blood? We have family pride, though one of us at least is a Republican?'

Yorke bowed as he stood before her. His lips were mute; but his eye confessed the impeachment. Yes - he had family pride - you saw it in his whole bearing.

'Moore is a gentleman,' echoed Shirley, lifting her head with glad grace. She checked herself - words seemed crowding to her tongue, she would not give them utterance; but her look spoke much at the moment: what - - Yorke tried to read, but could not - the language was there - - visible, but untranslatable - a poem - a fervid lyric in an unknown tongue. It was not a plain story, however - no simple gush of feeling - no ordinary love-confession - that was obvious; it was

something other, deeper, more intricate than he guessed at: he felt his revenge had not struck home; he felt that Shirley triumphed - she held him at fault, baffled, puzzled; she enjoyed the moment - not he.

'And if Moore is a gentleman, you can be only a lady, therefore - - '

'Therefore there would be no inequality in our union?'

'None.'

'Thank you for your approbation. Will you give me away when I relinquish the name of Keeldar for that of Moore?'

Mr Yorke, instead of replying, gazed at her much puzzled. He could not divine what her look signified; whether she spoke in earnest or in jest: there was purpose and feeling, banter and scoff, playing, mingled, on her mobile lineaments.

'I don't understand thee,' he said, turning away.

She laughed: 'Take courage, sir; you are not singular in your ignorance: but I suppose if Moore understands me, that will do - will it not?'

'Moore may settle his own matters henceforward for me; I'll neither meddle nor make with them further.'

A new thought crossed her: her countenance changed magically; with a sudden darkening of the eye, and austere fixing of the features, she demanded - 'Have you been asked to interfere. Are you questioning me as another's proxy?'

'The Lord save us! Whoever weds thee must look about him! Keep all your questions for Robert; I'll answer no more on 'em. Good-day, lassie!'

. . . . . .

The day being fine, or at least fair - for soft clouds curtained the sun, and a dim but not chill or waterish haze slept blue on the hills - Caroline, while Shirley was engaged with her callers, had persuaded Mrs Pryor to assume her bonnet and summer shawl, and to take a walk with her up towards the narrow end of the Hollow.

Here, the opposing sides of the glen approaching each other, and becoming clothed with brushwood and stunted oaks, formed a wooded ravine; at the bottom of which ran the millstream, in broken unquiet course, struggling with many stones, chafing against rugged banks,

fretting with gnarled tree-roots, foaming, gurgling, battling as it went. Here, when you had wandered half-a-mile from the mill, you found a sense of deep solitude: found it in the shade of unmolested trees; received it in the singing of many birds, for which that shade made a home. This was no trodden way: the freshness of the wood-flowers attested that foot of man seldom pressed them: abounding wild-roses looked as if they budded, bloomed, and faded under the watch of solitude, as in a Sultan's harem. Here you saw the sweet azure of blue-bells, and recognised in pearl-white blossoms, spangling the grass, an humble type of some star-lit spot in space.

Mrs Pryor liked a quiet walk: she ever shunned highroads, and sought byways and lonely lanes: one companion she preferred to total solitude, for in solitude she was nervous; a vague fear of annoying encounters broke the enjoyment of quite lonely rambles; but she feared nothing with Caroline: when once she got away from human habitations, and entered the still demesne of nature accompanied by this one youthful friend, a propitious change seem to steal over her mind and beam in her countenance. When with Caroline - and Caroline only - her heart, you would have said, shook off a burden, her brow put aside a veil, her spirits too escaped from a restraint: with her she was cheerful; with her, at times, she was tender: to her she would impart her knowledge, reveal glimpses of her experience, give her opportunities for guessing what life she had lived, what cultivation her mind had received, of what calibre was her intelligence, how and where her feelings were vulnerable.

To-day, for instance, as they walked along, Mrs Pryor talked to her companion about the various birds singing in the trees, discriminated their species, and said something about their habits and peculiarities. English natural history seemed familiar to her. All the wild flowers round their path were recognised by her: tiny plants springing near stones and peeping out of chinks in old walls - plants such as Caroline had scarcely noticed before - received a name and an intimation of their properties: it appeared that she had minutely studied the botany of English fields and woods. Having reached the head of the ravine, they sat down together on a ledge of grey and mossy rock jutting from the base of a steep green hill, which towered above them: she looked round her, and spoke of the neighbourhood as she had once before seen it long ago. She alluded to its changes, and compared its aspect with that of other parts of England; revealing in quiet, unconscious touches of description, a sense of the picturesque, an appreciation of the beautiful or commonplace, a power of comparing the wild with the cultured, the grand with the tame, that gave to her discourse a graphic charm as pleasant as it was unpretending.

The sort of reverent pleasure with which Caroline listened - so sincere, so quiet, yet so evident, stirred the elder lady's faculties to a gentle animation. Rarely, probably, had she, with her chill, repellent outside - her diffident mien and incommunicative habits, known what it was to excite in one whom she herself could love, feelings of earnest affection and admiring esteem. Delightful, doubtless, was the consciousness that a young girl towards whom it seemed - judging by the moved expression of her eyes and features - her heart turned with almost a fond impulse, looked up to her as an instructor, and clung to her as a friend. With a somewhat more marked accent of interest than she often permitted herself to use, she said, as she bent towards her youthful companion, and put aside from her forehead a pale brown curl which had strayed from the confining comb - 'I do hope this sweet air blowing from the hill will do you good, my dear Caroline: I wish I could see something more of colour in these cheeks - but perhaps you were never florid?'

'I had red cheeks once,' returned Miss Helstone, smiling. 'I remember a year - two years ago, when I used to look in the glass, I saw a different face there to what I see now - rounder and rosier. But when we are young,' added the girl of eighteen, 'our minds are careless and our lives easy.'

'Do you' - continued Mrs Pryor, mastering by an effort that tyrant timidity which made it difficult for her, even under present circumstances, to attempt the scrutiny of another's heart - 'Do you, at your age, fret yourself with cares for the future? Believe me, you had better not: let the morrow take thought for the things of itself.'

'True, dear madam: it is not over the future I pine. The evil of the day is sometimes oppressive - too oppressive, and I long to escape it.'

'That is - the evil of the day - that is - your uncle perhaps is not - you find it difficult to understand - he does not appreciate - - '

Mrs Pryor could not complete her broken sentences: she could not manage to put the question whether Mr Helstone was too harsh with his niece, but Caroline comprehended.

'Oh, that is nothing,' she replied; 'my uncle and I get on very well: we never quarrel - I don't call him harsh - he never scolds me. Sometimes I wish somebody in the world loved me; but I cannot say that I particularly wish him to have more affection for me than he has. As a child, I should perhaps have felt the want of attention, only the servants were very kind to me; but when people are long indifferent to us, we grow indifferent to their indifference. It is my uncle's way not to care for women and girls - unless they be ladies that he meets in company: he could not alter, and I have no wish that he should alter,

as far as I am concerned. I believe it would merely annoy and frighten me were he to be affectionate towards me now. But you know, Mrs Pryor, it is scarcely living to measure time as I do at the Rectory. The hours pass, and I get them over somehow, but I do not live. I endure existence, but I rarely enjoy it. Since Miss Keeldar and you came, I have been - I was going to say - happier, but that would be untrue.' She paused.

'How, untrue? You are fond of Miss Keeldar, are you not, my dear?'

'Very fond of Shirley: I both like and admire her: but I am painfully circumstanced: for a reason I cannot explain, I want to go away from this place, and to forget it.'

'You told me before you wished to be a governess; but, my dear, if you remember, I did not encourage the idea. I have been a governess myself great part of my life. In Miss Keeldar's acquaintance, I esteem myself most fortunate: her talents and her really sweet disposition have rendered my office easy to me; but when I was young, before I married, my trials were severe, poignant I should not like a - - I should not like you to endure similar ones. It was my lot to enter a family of considerable pretensions to good birth and mental superiority, and the members of which also believed that 'on them was perceptible' an usual endowment of the 'Christian graces'; that all their hearts were regenerate, and their spirits in a peculiar state of discipline. I was early given to understand that 'as I was not their equal,' so I could not expect 'to have their sympathy.' It was in no sort concealed from me that I was held a 'burden and a restraint in society.' The gentlemen, I found, regarded me as a 'tabooed woman,' to whom 'they were interdicted from granting the usual privileges of the sex,' and yet who 'annoyed them by frequently crossing their path.' The ladies too made it plain that they thought me 'a bore.' The servants, it was signified, 'detested me'; why, I could never clearly comprehend. My pupils, I was told, 'however much they might love me, and how deep soever the interest I might take in them, could not be my friends.' It was intimated that I must 'live alone, and never transgress the invisible but rigid line which established the difference between me and my employers.' My life in this house was sedentary, solitary, constrained, joyless, toilsome. The dreadful crushing of the animal spirits, the ever-prevailing sense of friendlessness and homelessness consequent on this state of things, began ere long to produce mortal effects on my constitution - I sickened. The lady of the house told me coolly I was the victim of 'wounded vanity.' She hinted, that if I did not make an effort to quell my 'ungodly discontent,' to cease 'murmuring against God's appointment,' and to cultivate the profound humility befitting my station, my mind would very likely 'go to pieces' on the rock that wrecked most of my sisterhood - morbid self-esteem; and that I should die an inmate of a lunatic asylum.

'I said nothing to Mrs Hardman; it would have been useless: but to her eldest daughter I one day dropped a few observations, which were answered thus: There were hardships, she allowed, in the position of a governess: 'doubtless they had their trials: but,' she averred, with a manner it makes me smile now to recall - 'but it must be so. She (Miss H.) had neither view, hope, nor wish to see these things remedied: for, in the inherent constitution of English habits, feelings, and prejudices, there was no possibility that they should be. Governesses,' she observed, 'must ever be kept in a sort of isolation: it is the only means of maintaining that distance which the reserve of English manners and the decorum of English families exact.'

'I remember I sighed as Miss Hardman quitted my bedside: she caught the sound, and turning, said severely - 'I fear, Miss Grey, you have inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature - the sin of pride. You are proud, and therefore you are ungrateful too. Mamma pays you a handsome salary; and, if you had average sense, you would thankfully put up with much that is fatiguing to do and irksome to bear, since it is so well made worth your while.'

'Miss Hardman, my love, was a very strong-minded young lady, of most distinguished talents: the aristocracy are decidedly a very superior class, you know - both physically, and morally, and mentally - as a high Tory I acknowledge that; - I could not describe the dignity of her voice and mien as she addressed me thus: still, I fear, she was selfish, my dear. I would never wish to speak ill of my superiors in rank; but I think she was a little selfish.'

'I remember,' continued Mrs Pryor, after a pause, 'another of Miss H.'s observations, which she would utter with quite a grand air. 'We,' she would say, - 'We need the imprudences, extravagances, mistakes, and crimes of a certain number of fathers to sow the seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses. The daughters of tradespeople, however well-educated, must necessarily be underbred, and as such unfit to be inmates of our dwellings, or guardians of our children's minds and persons. We shall ever prefer to place those about our offspring, who have been born and bred with somewhat of the same refinement as ourselves.'

'Miss Hardman must have thought herself something better than her fellow- creatures, ma'am, since she held that their calamities, and even crimes, were necessary to minister to her convenience. You say she was religious: her religion must have been that of the Pharisee, who thanked God that he was not as other men are, nor even as that publican.'

'My dear, we will not discuss the point: I should be the last person to wish to instil into your mind any feeling of dissatisfaction with your lot

in life, or any sentiment of envy or insubordination towards your superiors. Implicit submission to authorities, scrupulous deference to our betters (under which term I, of course, include the higher classes of society) are, in my opinion, indispensable to the well-being of every community. All I mean to say, my dear, is, that you had better not attempt to be a governess, as the duties of the position would be too severe for your constitution. Not one word of disrespect would I breathe towards either Mrs or Miss Hardman; only, recalling my own experience, I cannot but feel that, were you to fall under auspices such as theirs, you would contend a while courageously with your doom: then you would pine and grow too weak for your work; you would come home - if you still had a home - broken down. Those languishing years would follow, of which none but the invalid and her immediate friends feel the heart-sickness and know the burden: consumption or decline would close the chapter. Such is the history of many a life: I would not have it yours. My dear, we will now walk about a little, if you please.'

They both rose, and slowly paced a green natural terrace bordering the chasm.

'My dear,' erelong again began Mrs Pryor, a sort of timid, embarrassed abruptness marking her manner as she spoke, 'the young, especially those to whom nature has been favourable - often - frequently - anticipate - look forward to - to marriage as the end, the goal of their hopes.'

And she stopped. Caroline came to her relief with promptitude, showing a great deal more self-possession and courage than herself on the formidable topic now broached.

'They do; and naturally,' she replied, with a calm emphasis that startled Mrs Pryor. 'They look forward to marriage with some one they love as the brightest, - the only bright destiny that can await them. Are they wrong?'

'Oh, my dear!' exclaimed Mrs Pryor, clasping her hands: and again she paused. Caroline turned a searching, an eager eye on the face of her friend: that face was much agitated. 'My dear,' she murmured, 'life is an illusion.'

'But not love! Love is real: the most real, the most lasting - the sweetest and yet the bitterest thing we know.'

'My dear - it is very bitter. It is said to be strong - strong as death! Most of the cheats of existence are strong. As to their sweetness - nothing is so transitory: its date is a moment, - the twinkling of an

eye: the sting remains for ever: it may perish with the dawn of eternity, but it tortures through time into its deepest night.'

'Yes, it tortures through time,' agreed Caroline, 'except when it is mutual love.'

'Mutual love! My dear, romances are pernicious. You do not read them, I hope?'

'Sometimes - whenever I can get them, indeed; but romance-writers might know nothing of love, judging by the way in which they treat of it.'

'Nothing whatever, my dear!' assented Mrs Pryor eagerly; 'nor of marriage; and the false pictures they give of those subjects cannot be too strongly condemned. They are not like reality: they show you only the green tempting surface of the marsh, and give not one faithful or truthful hint of the slough underneath.'

'But it is not always slough,' objected Caroline: 'there are happy marriages. Where affection is reciprocal and sincere, and minds are harmonious, marriage must be happy.'

'It is never wholly happy. Two people can never literally be as one: there is, perhaps, a possibility of content under peculiar circumstances, such as are seldom combined; but it is as well not to run the risk: you may make fatal mistakes. Be satisfied, my dear: let all the single be satisfied with their freedom.'

'You echo my uncle's words!' exclaimed Caroline, in a tone of dismay: 'you speak like Mrs Yorke, in her most gloomy moments; - like Miss Mann, when she is most sourly and hypochondriacally disposed. This is terrible!'

'No, it is only true. Oh, child! you have only lived the pleasant morning time of life: the hot, weary noon, the sad evening, the sunless night, are yet to come for you! Mr Helstone, you say, talks as I talk; and I wonder how Mrs Matthewson Helstone would have talked had she been living. She died! She died!'

'And, alas! my own mother and father. . . .' exclaimed Caroline, struck by a sombre recollection.

'What of them?'

'Did I never tell you that they were separated?

'I have heard it.'

'They must then have been very miserable.'

'You see all facts go to prove what I say.'

'In this case there ought to be no such thing as marriage.'

'There ought, my dear, were it only to prove that this life is a mere state of probation, wherein neither rest nor recompense is to be vouchsafed.'

'But your own marriage, Mrs Pryor?'

Mrs Pryor shrunk and shuddered as if a rude finger had pressed a naked nerve: Caroline felt she had touched what would not bear the slightest contact.

'My marriage was unhappy,' said the lady, summoning courage at last; 'but yet - - ' she hesitated.

'But yet,' suggested Caroline, 'not immitigably wretched?'

'Not in its results, at least. No,' she added, in a softer tone; 'God mingles something of the balm of mercy even in vials of the most corrosive woe. He can so turn events, that from the very same blind, rash act whence sprang the curse of half our life, may flow the blessing of the remainder. Then, I am of a peculiar disposition, I own that: far from facile, without address, in some points eccentric. I ought never to have married: mine is not the nature easily to find a duplicate, or likely to assimilate with a contrast. I was quite aware of my own ineligibility; and if I had not been so miserable as a governess, I never should have married; and then - - '

Caroline's eyes asked her to proceed: they entreated her to break the thick cloud of despair which her previous words had seemed to spread over life.

'And then, my dear, Mr - - that is, the gentleman I married, was, perhaps, rather an exceptional than an average character. I hope, at least, the experience of few has been such as mine was, or that few have felt their sufferings as I felt mine. They nearly shook my mind: relief was so hopeless, redress so unattainable: but, my dear, I do not wish to dishearten, I only wish to warn you, and to prove that the single should not be too anxious to change their state, as they may change for the worse.'

'Thank you, my dear madam, I quite understand your kind intentions; but there is no fear of my falling into the error to which you allude. I,

at least, have no thoughts of marriage, and, for that reason, I want to make myself a position by some other means.'

'My dear, listen to me. On what I am going to say, I have carefully deliberated; having, indeed, revolved the subject in my thoughts ever since you first mentioned your wish to obtain a situation. You know I at present reside with Miss Keeldar in the capacity of companion: should she marry (and that she will marry ere long, many circumstances induce me to conclude), I shall cease to be necessary to her in that capacity. I must tell you that I possess a small independency, arising partly from my own savings, and partly from a legacy left me some years since; whenever I leave Fieldhead, I shall take a house of my own: I could not endure to live in solitude: I have no relations whom I care to invite to close intimacy; for, as you must have observed, and as I have already avowed, my habits and tastes have their peculiarities: to you, my dear, I need not say I am attached; with you I am happier than I have ever been with any living thing' (this was said with marked emphasis). 'Your society I should esteem a very dear privilege - an inestimable privilege, a comfort, a blessing. You shall come to me then. Caroline, do you refuse me? I hope you can love me?'

And with these two abrupt questions she stopped.

'Indeed, I do love you,' was the reply. 'I should like to live with you: but you are too kind.'

'All I have,' went on Mrs Pryor, 'I would leave to you: you should be provided for, but never again say I am too kind. You pierce my heart, child!'

'But, my dear madam - this generosity - I have no claim - '

'Hush! you must not talk about it: there are some things we cannot bear to hear. Oh! it is late to begin, but I may yet live a few years: I can never wipe out the past, but perhaps a brief space in the future may yet be mine!'

Mrs Pryor seemed deeply agitated: large tears trembled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Caroline kissed her, in her gentle caressing way, saying softly - 'I love you dearly. Don't cry.'

But the lady's whole frame seemed shaken: she sat down, bent her head to her knee, and wept aloud. Nothing could console her till the inward storm had had its way. At last the agony subsided of itself.

'Poor thing!' she murmured, returning Caroline's kiss: 'poor lonely lamb! But come,' she added abruptly: 'come, we must go home.'

For a short distance Mrs Pryor walked very fast: by degrees, however, she calmed down to her wonted manner, fell into her usual characteristic pace - a peculiar one, like all her movements - and by the time they reached Fieldhead, she had re-entered into herself: the outside was, as usual, still and shy.