Chapter XXVIII - Phoebe

Shirley probably got on pleasantly with Sir Philip that evening, for the next morning she came down in one of her best moods.

'Who will take a walk with me?' she asked, after breakfast. 'Isabella and Gertrude - will you?'

So rare was such an invitation from Miss Keeldar to her female cousins that they hesitated before they accepted it. Their mamma, however, signifying acquiescence in the project, they fetched their bonnets, and the trio set out.

It did not suit these three persons to be thrown much together: Miss Keeldar liked the society of few ladies: indeed, she had a cordial pleasure in that of none except Mrs Pryor and Caroline Helstone. She was civil, kind, attentive even to her cousins; but still she usually had little to say to them. In the sunny mood of this particular morning, she contrived to entertain even the Misses Sympson. Without deviating from her wonted rule of discussing with them only ordinary themes, she imparted to these themes an extraordinary interest: the sparkle of her spirit glanced along her phrases.

What made her so joyous? All the cause must have been in herself. The day was not bright; it was dim - a pale, waning autumn day: the walks through the dun woods were damp; the atmosphere was heavy, the sky overcast; and yet, it seemed that in Shirley's heart lived all the light and azure of Italy, as all its fervour laughed in her grey English eye.

Some directions necessary to be given to her foreman, John, delayed her behind her cousins as they neared Fieldhead on their return; perhaps an interval of twenty minutes elapsed between her separation from them and her re-entrance into the house: in the meantime she had spoken to John, and then she had lingered in the lane at the gate. A summons to luncheon called her in: she excused herself from the meal, and went upstairs.

'Is not Shirley coming to luncheon?' asked Isabella: 'she said she was not hungry.'

An hour after, as she did not quit her chamber, one of her cousins went to seek her there. She was found sitting at the foot of the bed, her head resting on her hand: she looked quite pale, very thoughtful, almost sad.

'You are not ill?' was the question put.

'A little sick,' replied Miss Keeldar.

Certainly she was not a little changed from what she had been two hours before.

This change, accounted for only by those three words, explained no otherwise; this change - whencesoever springing, effected in a brief ten minutes - passed like no light summer cloud. She talked when she joined her friends at dinner, talked as usual; she remained with them during the evening; when again questioned respecting her health, she declared herself perfectly recovered: it had been a mere passing faintness: a momentary sensation, not worth a thought: yet it was felt there was a difference in Shirley.

The next day - the day - the week - the fortnight after - this new and peculiar shadow lingered on the countenance, in the manner of Miss Keeldar. A strange quietude settled over her look, her movements, her very voice. The alteration was not so marked as to court or permit frequent questioning, yet it was there, and it would not pass away: it hung over her like a cloud which no breeze could stir or disperse. Soon it became evident that to notice this change was to annoy her. First she shrunk from remark; and, if persisted in, she, with her own peculiar hauteur, repelled it. 'Was she ill?' The reply came with decision.

'I am not.'

'Did anything weigh on her mind? Had anything happened to affect her spirits?'

She scornfully ridiculed the idea. 'What did they mean by spirits? She had no spirits, black or white, blue or grey, to affect.'

'Something must be the matter - she was so altered.'

'She supposed she had a right to alter at her ease. She knew she was plainer: if it suited her to grow ugly, why need others fret themselves on the subject.'

'There must be a cause for the change - what was it?'

She peremptorily requested to be let alone.

Then she would make every effort to appear quite gay, and she seemed indignant at herself that she could not perfectly succeed: brief, self-spurning epithets burst from her lips when alone. 'Fool! coward!' she would term herself. 'Poltroon!' she would say: 'if you must tremble - tremble in secret! Quail where no eye sees you!'

'How dare you' - she would ask herself - 'how dare you show your weakness and betray your imbecile anxieties? Shake them off: rise above them: if you cannot do this, hide them.'

And to hide them she did her best. She once more became resolutely lively in company. When weary of effort and forced to relax, she sought solitude: not the solitude of her chamber - she refused to mope, shut up between four walls - but that wilder solitude which lies out of doors, and which she could chase, mounted on Zoë, her mare. She took long rides of half a day. Her uncle disapproved, but he dared not remonstrate: it was never pleasant to face Shirley's anger, even when she was healthy and gay; but now that her face showed thin, and her large eye looked hollow, there was something in the darkening of that face and kindling of that eye which touched as well as alarmed.

To all comparative strangers who, unconscious of the alterations in her spirits, commented on the alteration in her looks, she had one reply -

'I am perfectly well: I have not an ailment.'

And health, indeed, she must have had, to be able to bear the exposure to the weather she now encountered. Wet or fair, calm or storm, she took her daily ride over Stilbro' Moor, Tartar keeping up at her side, with his wolf-like gallop, long and untiring.

Twice - three times, the eyes of gossips - those eyes which are everywhere: in the closet and on the hill-top - noticed that instead of turning on Rushedge, the top-ridge of Stilbro' Moor, she rode forwards all the way to the town. Scouts were not wanting to mark her destination there; it was ascertained that she alighted at the door of one Mr Pearson Hall, a solicitor, related to the Vicar of Nunnely: this gentleman and his ancestors had been the agents of the Keeldar family for generations back: some people affirmed that Miss Keeldar was become involved in business speculations connected with Hollow's Mill; that she had lost money, and was constrained to mortgage her land: others conjectured that she was going to be married, and that the settlements were preparing.

. . . . . .

Mr Moore and Henry Sympson were together in the schoolroom: the tutor was waiting for a lesson which the pupil seemed busy in preparing.

'Henry, make haste! the afternoon is getting on.'

'Is it, sir?'

'Certainly. Are you nearly ready with that lesson?'

'No.'

'Not nearly ready?'

'I have not construed a line.'

Mr Moore looked up: the boy's tone was rather peculiar.

'The task presents no difficulties, Henry; or, if it does, bring them to me: we will work together.'

'Mr Moore, I can do no work.'

'My boy, you are ill.'

'Sir, I am not worse in bodily health than usual, but my heart is full.'

'Shut the book. Come hither, Harry. Come to the fireside.'

Harry limped forward; his tutor placed him in a chair: his lips were quivering, his eyes brimming. He laid his crutch on the floor, bent down his head, and wept.

'This distress is not occasioned by physical pain, you say, Harry? You have a grief - tell it me.'

'Sir, I have such a grief as I never had before. I wish it could be relieved in some way: I can hardly bear it.'

'Who knows but, if we talk it over, we may relieve it? What is the cause? Whom does it concern?'

'The cause, sir, is Shirley: it concerns Shirley.'

'Does it? . . . You think her changed?'

'All who know her think her changed: you too, Mr Moore.'

'Not seriously, - no. I see no alteration but such as a favourable turn might repair in a few weeks: besides, her own word must go for something: she says she is well.'

'There it is, sir: as long as she maintained she was well, I believed her. When I was sad out of her sight, I soon recovered spirits in her presence. Now. . . .'

'Well, Harry, now. . .? Has she said anything to you? You and she were together in the garden two hours this morning: I saw her talking, and you listening. Now, my dear Harry! if Miss Keeldar has said she is ill, and enjoined you to keep her secret, do not obey her. For her life's sake, avow everything. Speak, my boy!'

'She say she is ill! I believe, sir, if she were dying, she would smile, and aver 'Nothing ails me."

'What have you learned, then? What new circumstance. . . ?'

'I have learned that she has just made her will.'

'Made her will?'

The tutor and pupil were silent.

'She told you that?' asked Moore, when some minutes had elapsed.

'She told me quite cheerfully: not as an ominous circumstance, which I felt it to be. She said I was the only person besides her solicitor, Pearson Hall, and Mr Helstone and Mr Yorke, who knew anything about it; and to me, she intimated, she wished specially to explain its provisions.'

'Go on, Harry.'

'Because,' she said, looking down on me with her beautiful eyes, - oh! they are beautiful, Mr Moore! I love them, - I love her! She is my star! Heaven must not claim her! She is lovely in this world, and fitted for this world. Shirley is not an angel; she is a woman, and she shall live with men. Seraphs shall not have her! Mr Moore - if one of the 'sons of God,' with wings wide and bright as the sky, blue and sounding as the sea, having seen that she was fair, descended to claim her, his claim should be withstood - withstood by me - boy and cripple as I am!'

'Henry Sympson, go on, when I tell you.'

'Because,' she said, 'if I made no will, and died before you, Harry, all my property would go to you; and I do not intend that it should be so, though your father would like it. But you,' she said, 'will have his whole estate, which is large - larger than Fieldhead; your sisters will have nothing, so I have left them some money: though I do not love them, both together, half so much as I love one lock of your fair hair.' She said these words, and she called me her 'darling,' and let me kiss her. She went on to tell me that she had left Caroline Helstone some money too; that this manor-house, with its furniture and books, she had bequeathed to me, as she did not choose to take the old family

place from her own blood; and that all the rest of her property, amounting to about twelve thousand pounds, exclusive of the legacies to my sisters and Miss Helstone, she had willed, not to me, seeing I was already rich, but to a good man, who would make the best use of it that any human being could do: a man, she said, that was both gentle and brave, strong and merciful; a man that might not profess to be pious, but she knew he had the secret of religion pure and undefiled before God. The spirit of love and peace was with him; he visited the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and kept himself unspotted from the world. Then she asked, 'Do you approve what I have done, Harry?' I could not answer, - my tears choked me, as they do now.'

Mr Moore allowed his pupil a moment to contend with and master his emotion: he then demanded - 'What else did she say?'

'When I had signified my full consent to the conditions of her will, she told me I was a generous boy, and she was proud of me: 'And now,' she added, 'in case anything should happen, you will know what to say to Malice when she comes whispering hard things in your ear, insinuating that Shirley has wronged you; that she did not love you. You will know that I did love you, Harry; that no sister could have loved you better, my own treasure.' Mr Moore, sir, when I remember her voice, and recall her look, my heart beats as if it would break its strings. She may go to heaven before me - if God commands it, she must; but the rest of my life - and my life will not be long - I am glad of that now - shall be a straight, quick, thoughtful journey in the path her step has pressed. I thought to enter the vault of the Keeldars before her: should it be otherwise, lay my coffin by Shirley's side.'

Moore answered him with a weighty calm, that offered a strange contrast to the boy's perturbed enthusiasm.

'You are wrong, both of you - you harm each other. If youth once falls under the influence of a shadowy terror, it imagines there will never be full sunlight again, its first calamity it fancies will last a lifetime. What more did she say? Anything more?'

'We settled one or two family points between ourselves.'

'I should rather like to know what - - '

'But, Mr Moore, you smile - I could not smile to see Shirley in such a mood.'

'My boy, I am neither nervous, nor poetic, nor inexperienced. I see things as they are: you don't as yet. Tell me these family points.'

'Only, sir, she asked me whether I considered myself most of a Keeldar or a Sympson; and I answered I was Keeldar to the core of the heart, and to the marrow of the bones. She said she was glad of it; for, besides her, I was the only Keeldar left in England: and then we agreed on some matters.'

'Well?'

'Well, sir, that if I lived to inherit my father's estate, and her house, I was to take the name of Keeldar, and to make Fieldhead my residence. Henry Shirley Keeldar I said I would be called: and I will. Her name and her manor- house are ages old, and Sympson and Sympson Grove are of yesterday.'

'Come, you are neither of you going to heaven yet. I have the best hopes of you both, with your proud distinctions - a pair of half-fledged eaglets. Now, what is your inference from all you have told me? Put it into words.'

'That Shirley thinks she is going to die.'

'She referred to her health?'

'Not once; but I assure you she is wasting: her hands are growing quite thin, and so is her cheek.'

'Does she ever complain to your mother or sisters?'

'Never. She laughs at them when they question her. Mr Moore, she is a strange being - so fair and girlish: not a manlike woman at all - not an Amazon, and yet lifting her head above both help and sympathy.'

'Do you know where she is now, Henry? Is she in the house, or riding out?'

'Surely not out, sir - it rains fast.'

'True: which, however, is no guarantee that she is not at this moment cantering over Rushedge. Of late she has never permitted weather to be a hindrance to her rides.'

'You remember, Mr Moore, how wet and stormy it was last Wednesday? so wild, indeed, that she would not permit Zoë to be saddled; yet the blast she thought too tempestuous for her mare, she herself faced on foot; that afternoon she walked nearly as far as Nunnely. I asked her, when she came in, if she was not afraid of taking cold. 'Not I,' she said, 'it would be too much good luck for me. I don't know, Harry; but the best thing that could happen to me would

be to take a good cold and fever, and so pass off like other Christians.' She is reckless, you see, sir.'

'Reckless indeed! Go and find out where she is; and if you can get an opportunity of speaking to her, without attracting attention, request her to come here a minute.'

'Yes, sir.'

He snatched his crutch, and started up to go.

'Harry!'

He returned.

'Do not deliver the message formally. Word it as, in former days, you would have worded an ordinary summons to the schoolroom.'

'I see, sir; she will be more likely to obey.'

'And Harry - - '

'Sir?'

'I will call you when I want you: till then, you are dispensed from lessons.'

He departed. Mr Moore, left alone, rose from his desk.

'I can be very cool and very supercilious with Henry,' he said. 'I can seem to make light of his apprehensions, and look down 'du haut de ma grandeur' on his youthful ardour. To him I can speak as if, in my eyes, they were both children. Let me see if I can keep up the same rôle with her. I have known the moment when I seemed about to forget it; when Confusion and Submission seemed about to crush me with their soft tyranny; when my tongue faltered, and I have almost let the mantle drop, and stood in her presence, not master - no - but something else. I trust I shall never so play the fool: it is well for a Sir Philip Nunnely to redden when he meets her eye: he may permit himself the indulgence of submission - he may even without disgrace suffer his hand to tremble when it touches hers; but if one of her farmers were to show himself susceptible and sentimental, he would merely prove his need of a strait waistcoat. So far I have always done very well. She has sat near me, and I have not shaken - more than my desk. I have encountered her looks and smiles like - why, like a tutor, as I am. Her hand I never yet touched - never underwent that test. Her farmer or her footman I am not - no serf nor servant of hers have I ever been: but I am poor, and it behoves me to look to my self-respect

- not to compromise an inch of it. What did she mean by that allusion to the cold people who petrify flesh to marble? It pleased me - I hardly know why - I would not permit myself to inquire - I never do indulge in scrutiny either of her language or countenance; for if I did, I should sometimes forget Common Sense and believe in Romance. A strange, secret ecstasy steals through my veins at moments: I'll not encourage - I'll not remember it. I am resolved, as long as may be, to retain the right to say with Paul - 'I am not mad, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.'

He paused - listening.

'Will she come, or will she not come?' he inquired. 'How will she take the message? naively or disdainfully? like a child or like a queen? Both characters are in her nature.

'If she comes, what shall I say to her? How account, firstly, for the freedom of the request? Shall I apologise to her? I could in all humility; but would an apology tend to place us in the positions we ought relatively to occupy in this matter? I must keep up the professor, otherwise - I hear a door - - ' He waited. Many minutes passed.

She will refuse me. Henry is entreating her to come: she declines. My petition is presumption in her eyes: let her only come, I can teach her to the contrary. I would rather she were a little perverse - it will steel me. I prefer her, cuirassed in pride, armed with a taunt. Her scorn startles me from my dreams - I stand up myself. A sarcasm from her eyes or lips puts strength into every nerve and sinew I have. Some step approaches, and not Henry's. . . .'

The door unclosed; Miss Keeldar came in. The message, it appeared, had found her at her needle: she brought her work in her hand. That day she had not been riding out: she had evidently passed it quietly. She wore her neat indoor dress and silk apron. This was no Thalestris from the fields, but a quiet domestic character from the fireside. Mr Moore had her at advantage; he should have addressed her at once in solemn accents, and with rigid mien; perhaps he would, had she looked saucy; but her air never showed less of crânerie; a soft kind of youthful shyness depressed her eyelid and mantled on her cheek. The tutor stood silent.

She made a full stop between the door and his desk.

'Did you want me, sir?' she asked.

'I ventured, Miss Keeldar, to send for you - that is, to ask an interview of a few minutes.'

She waited: she plied her needle.

'Well, sir' (not lifting her eyes) - 'what about?'

'Be seated first. The subject I would broach is one of some moment: perhaps I have hardly a right to approach it: it is possible I ought to frame an apology: it is possible no apology can excuse me. The liberty I have taken arises from a conversation with Henry. The boy is unhappy about your health: all your friends are unhappy on that subject. It is of your health I would speak.'

'I am quite well,' she said briefly.

' Yet changed.'

'That matters to none but myself. We all change.'

'Will you sit down? Formerly, Miss Keeldar, I had some influence with you - have I any now? May I feel that what I am saying is not accounted positive presumption?'

'Let me read some French, Mr Moore, or I will even take a spell at the Latin grammar, and let us proclaim a truce to all sanitary discussions.'

'No - no: it is time there were discussions.'

'Discuss away, then, but do not choose me for your text; I am a healthy subject.'

'Do you not think it wrong to affirm and reaffirm what is substantially untrue?'

'I say I am well: I have neither cough, pain, nor fever.'

'Is there no equivocation in that assertion? Is it the direct truth?'

'The direct truth.'

Louis Moore looked at her earnestly.

'I can myself,' he said, 'trace no indications of actual disease; but why, then, are you altered?'

'Am I altered?'

'We will try: we will seek a proof.'

'How?'

'I ask, in the first place, do you sleep as you used to?'

'I do not: but it is not because I am ill.'

'Have you the appetite you once had?'

'No: but it is not because I am ill.'

'You remember this little ring fastened to my watch-chain? It was my mother's, and is too small to pass the joint of my little finger. You have many a time sportively purloined it: it fitted your fore-finger. Try now.'

She permitted the test: the ring dropped from the wasted little hand. Louis picked it up, and re-attached it to the chain. An uneasy flush coloured his brow. Shirley again said - 'It is not because I am ill.'

'Not only have you lost sleep, appetite, and flesh,' proceeded Moore, 'but your spirits are always at ebb: besides, there is a nervous alarm in your eye - a nervous disquiet in your manner: these peculiarities were not formerly yours.'

'Mr Moore, we will pause here. You have exactly hit it: I am nervous. Now, talk of something else. What wet weather we have! Steady, pouring rain!'

'You nervous? Yes: and if Miss Keeldar is nervous, it is not without a cause. Let me reach it. Let me look nearer. The ailment is not physical: I have suspected that. It came in one moment. I know the day. I noticed the change. Your pain is mental.'

'Not at all: it is nothing so dignified - merely nervous. Oh! dismiss the topic.'

'When it is exhausted: not till then. Nervous alarms should always be communicated, that they may be dissipated. I wish I had the gift of persuasion, and could incline you to speak willingly. I believe confession, in your case, would be half equivalent to cure.'

'No,' said Shirley abruptly: 'I wish that were at all probable: but I am afraid it is not.'

She suspended her work a moment. She was now seated. Resting her elbow on the table, she leaned her head on her hand. Mr Moore looked as if he felt he had at last gained some footing in this difficult path. She was serious, and in her wish was implied an important

admission; after that, she could no longer affirm that nothing ailed her.

The tutor allowed her some minutes for repose and reflection, ere he returned to the charge: once, his lips moved to speak; but he thought better of it, and prolonged the pause. Shirley lifted her eye to his: had he betrayed injudicious emotion, perhaps obstinate persistence in silence would have been the result; but he looked calm, strong, trustworthy.

'I had better tell you than my aunt,' she said, 'or than my cousins, or my uncle: they would all make such a bustle - and it is that very bustle I dread; the alarm, the flurry, the éclat: in short, I never liked to be the centre of a small domestic whirlpool. You can bear a little shock - eh?'

'A great one, if necessary.'

Not a muscle of the man's frame moved, and yet his large heart beat fast in his deep chest. What was she going to tell him? Was irremediable mischief done?

'Had I thought it right to go to you, I would never have made a secret of the matter one moment,' she continued: 'I would have told you at once, and asked advice.'

'Why was it not right to come to me?'

'It might be right - I do not mean that; but I could not do it. I seemed to have no title to trouble you: the mishap concerned me only - I wanted to keep it to myself, and people will not let me. I tell you, I hate to be an object of worrying attention, or a theme for village gossip. Besides, it may pass away without result - God knows!'

Moore, though tortured with suspense, did not demand a quick explanation; he suffered neither gesture, glance, nor word, to betray impatience. His tranquillity tranquillised Shirley; his confidence reassured her.

'Great effects may spring from trivial causes,' she remarked, as she loosened a bracelet from her wrist; then, unfastening her sleeve, and partially turning it up - 'Look here, Mr Moore.'

She showed a mark on her white arm; rather a deep though healed-up indentation: something between a burn and a cut.

'I would not show that to any one in Briarfield but you, because you can take it quietly.'

'Certainly there is nothing in the little mark to shock: its history will explain.'

'Small as it is, it has taken my sleep away, and made me nervous, thin, and foolish; because, on account of that little mark, I am obliged to look forward to a possibility that has its terrors.'

The sleeve was readjusted; the bracelet replaced.

'Do you know that you try me?' he said, smiling. 'I am a patient sort of man, but my pulse is quickening.'

'Whatever happens, you will befriend me, Mr Moore. You will give me the benefit of your self-possession, and not leave me at the mercy of agitated cowards?'

'I make no promise now. Tell me the tale, and then exact what pledge you will.'

'It is a very short tale. I took a walk with Isabella and Gertrude one day, about three weeks ago. They reached home before me: I stayed behind to speak to John. After leaving him, I pleased myself with lingering in the lane, where all was very still and shady: I was tired of chattering to the girls, and in no hurry to rejoin them. As I stood leaning against the gate-pillar, thinking some very happy thoughts about my future life - for that morning I imagined that events were beginning to turn as I had long wished them to turn - - '

'Ah! Nunnely had been with her the evening before!' thought Moore parenthetically.

'I heard a panting sound; a dog came running up the lane. I know most of the dogs in this neighbourhood; it was Phoebe, one of Mr Sam Wynne's pointers. The poor creature ran with her head down, her tongue hanging out; she looked as if bruised and beaten all over. I called her; I meant to coax her into the house, and give her some water and dinner; I felt sure she had been ill-used: Mr Sam often flogs his pointers cruelly. She was too flurried to know me; and when I attempted to pat her head, she turned and snatched at my arm. She bit it so as to draw blood, then ran panting on. Directly after, Mr Wynne's keeper came up, carrying a gun. He asked if I had seen a dog; I told him I had seen Phoebe.

'You had better chain up Tartar, ma'am,' he said, 'and tell your people to keep within the house; I am after Phoebe to shoot her, and the groom is gone another way. She is raging mad.'

Mr Moore leaned back in his chair, and folded his arms across his chest; Miss Keeldar resumed her square of silk canvas, and continued the creation of a wreath of Parmese violets.

'And you told no one, sought no help, no cure: you would not come to me?'

'I got as far as the schoolroom door; there my courage failed: I preferred to cushion the matter.'

'Why! What can I demand better in this world than to be of use to you?'

'I had no claim.'

'Monstrous! And you did nothing?'

'Yes: I walked straight into the laundry, where they are ironing most of the week, now that I have so many guests in the house. While the maid was busy crimping or starching, I took an Italian iron from the fire, and applied the light scarlet glowing tip to my arm: I bored it well in: it cauterised the little wound. Then I went upstairs.'

'I dare say you never once groaned?'

'I am sure I don't know. I was very miserable. Not firm or tranquil at all, I think: there was no calm in my mind.'

'There was calm in your person. I remember listening the whole time we sat at luncheon, to hear if you moved in the room above: all was quiet.'

'I was sitting at the foot of the bed, wishing Phoebe had not bitten me.'

'And alone! You like solitude.'

'Pardon me.'

'You disdain sympathy.'

'Do I, Mr Moore?'

'With your powerful mind, you must feel independent of help, of advice, of society.'

'So be it - since it pleases you.'

She smiled. She pursued her embroidery carefully and quickly; but her eyelash twinkled, and then it glittered, and then a drop fell.

Mr Moore leaned forward on his desk, moved his chair, altered his attitude.

'If it is not so,' he asked, with a peculiar, mellow change in his voice, 'how is it, then?'

'I don't know.'

'You do know, but you won't speak: all must be locked up in yourself.'

'Because it is not worth sharing.'

'Because nobody can give the high price you require for your confidence. Nobody is rich enough to purchase it. Nobody has the honour, the intellect, the power you demand in your adviser. There is not a shoulder in England on which you would rest your hand for support - far less a bosom which you would permit to pillow your head. Of course you must live alone.'

'I can live alone, if need be. But the question is not how to live - but how to die alone. That strikes me in a more grisly light.'

'You apprehend the effects of the virus? You anticipate an indefinitely threatening, dreadful doom?'

She bowed.

'You are very nervous and womanish.'

'You complimented me two minutes since on my powerful mind.'

'You are very womanish. If the whole affair were coolly examined and discussed, I feel assured it would turn out that there is no danger of your dying at all.'

'Amen! I am very willing to live, if it please God. I have felt life sweet.'

'How can it be otherwise than sweet with your endowments and nature? Do you truly expect that you will be seized with hydrophobia, and die raving mad?'

'I expect it, and have feared it. Just now, I fear nothing.'

'Nor do I, on your account. I doubt whether the smallest particle of virus mingled with your blood: and if it did, let me assure you that -

young, healthy, faultlessly sound as you are - no harm will ensue. For the rest, I shall inquire whether the dog was really mad. I hold she was not mad.'

'Tell nobody that she bit me.'

'Why should I, when I believe the bite innocuous as a cut of this penknife? Make yourself easy: I am easy, though I value your life as much as I do my own chance of happiness in eternity. Look up.'

'Why, Mr Moore?'

'I wish to see if you are cheered. Put your work down, raise your head.'

'There - - '

'Look at me. Thank you! And is the cloud broken?'

'I fear nothing.'

'Is your mind restored to its own natural sunny clime?'

'I am very content: but I want your promise.'

'Dictate.'

'You know, in case the worst I have feared should happen, they will smother me. You need not smile: they will - they always do. My uncle will be full of horror, weakness, precipitation; and that is the only expedient which will suggest itself to him. Nobody in the house will be self-possessed but you: now promise to befriend me - to keep Mr Sympson away from me - not to let Henry come near, lest I should hurt him. Mind - mind that you take care of yourself, too: but I shall not injure you, I know I shall not. Lock the chamber-door against the surgeons - turn them out, if they get in. Let neither the young nor the old MacTurk lay a finger on me; nor Mr Greaves, their colleague; and, lastly, if I give trouble, with your own hand administer to me a strong narcotic: such a sure dose of laudanum as shall leave no mistake. Promise to do this.'

Moore left his desk, and permitted himself the recreation of one or two turns round the room. Stopping behind Shirley's chair, he bent over her, and said, in a low emphatic voice - 'I promise all you ask - without comment, without reservation.'

'If female help is needed, call in my housekeeper, Mrs Gill: let her lay me out, if I die. She is attached to me. She wronged me again and again, and again and again I forgave her. She now loves me, and

would not defraud me of a pin: confidence has made her honest; forbearance has made her kind-hearted. At this day, I can trust both her integrity, her courage, and her affection. Call her; but keep my good aunt and my timid cousins away. Once more, promise.'

'I promise.'

'That is good in you,' she said, looking up at him as he bent over her, and smiling.

'Is it good? Does it comfort?'

'Very much.'

'I will be with you - I and Mrs Gill only - in any, in every extremity where calm and fidelity are needed. No rash or coward hand shall meddle.'

'Yet you think me childish?'

'I do.'

'Ah! you despise me.'

'Do we despise children?'

'In fact, I am neither so strong, nor have I such pride in my strength, as people think, Mr Moore; nor am I so regardless of sympathy; but when I have any grief, I fear to impart it to those I love, lest it should pain them; and to those whom I view with indifference, I cannot condescend to complain. After all, you should not taunt me with being childish; for if you were as unhappy as I have been for the last three weeks, you too would want some friend.'

'We all want a friend, do we not?'

'All of us that have anything good in our natures.'

'Well, you have Caroline Helstone.'

'Yes. . . . And you have Mr Hall.'

'Yes. . . . Mrs Pryor is a wise, good woman: she can counsel you when you need counsel.'

'For your part, you have your brother Robert.'

'For any right-hand defections, there is the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, M.A., to lean upon; for any left-hand fallings off, there is Hiram Yorke, Esq. Both elders pay you homage.'

'I never saw Mrs Yorke so motherly to any young man as she is to you. I don't know how you have won her heart; but she is more tender to you than she is to her own sons, You have, besides, your sister, Hortense.'

'It appears we are both well provided.'

'It appears so.'

'How thankful we ought to be!'

'Yes.'

'How contented!'

'Yes.'

'For my part, I am almost contented just now, and very thankful. Gratitude is a divine emotion: it fills the heart, but not to bursting: it warms it, but not to fever. I like to taste leisurely of bliss: devoured in haste, I do not know its flavour.'

Still leaning on the back of Miss Keeldar's chair, Moore watched the rapid motion of her fingers, as the green and purple garland grew beneath them. After a prolonged pause, he again asked, 'Is the shadow quite gone?'

'Wholly. As I was two hours since, and as I am now, are two different states of existence. I believe, Mr Moore, griefs and fears nursed in silence grow like Titan infants.'

'You will cherish such feelings no more in silence?'

'Not if I dare speak.'

'In using the word 'dare,' to whom do you allude?'

'To you.'

'How is it applicable to me?'

'On account of your austerity and shyness.'

'Why am I austere and shy?'

'Because you are proud.'

'Why am I proud?'

'I should like to know; will you be good enough to tell me?'

'Perhaps, because I am poor, for one reason: poverty and pride often go together.'

'That is such a nice reason: I should be charmed to discover another that would pair with it. Mate that turtle, Mr Moore.'

'Immediately. What do you think of marrying to sober Poverty many-tinted Caprice?'

'Are you capricious?'

'You are.'

'A libel. I am steady as a rock: fixed as the Polar Star.'

'I look out at some early hour of the day, and see a fine, perfect rainbow, bright with promise, gloriously spanning the beclouded welkin of life. An hour afterwards I look again - half the arch is gone, and the rest is faded. Still later, the stern sky denies that it ever wore so benign a symbol of hope.'

'Well, Mr Moore, you should contend against these changeful humours: they are your besetting sin. One never knows where to have you.'

'Miss Keeldar, I had once - for two years - a pupil who grew very dear to me. Henry is dear, but she was dearer. Henry never gives me trouble; she - well - she did. I think she vexed me twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four - - '

'She was never with you above three hours, or at the most six at a time.'

'She sometimes spilled the draught from my cup, and stole the food from my plate; and when she had kept me unfed for a day (and that did not suit me, for I am a man accustomed to take my meals with reasonable relish, and to ascribe due importance to the rational enjoyment of creature comforts) - - '

'I know you do. I can tell what sort of dinners you like best - perfectly well. I know precisely the dishes you prefer - - '

'She robbed these dishes of flavour, and made a fool of me besides. I like to sleep well. In my quiet days, when I was my own man, I never quarrelled with the night for being long, nor cursed my bed for its thorns. She changed all this.'

'Mr Moore - - '

'And having taken from me peace of mind, and ease of life, she took from me herself; quite coolly - just as if, when she was gone, the world would be all the same to me. I knew I should see her again at some time. At the end of two years, it fell out that we encountered again under her own roof, where she was mistress. How do you think she bore herself towards me, Miss Keeldar?'

'Like one who had profited well by lessons learned from yourself.'

'She received me haughtily: she meted out a wide space between us, and kept me aloof by the reserved gesture, the rare and alienated glance, the word calmly civil.'

'She was an excellent pupil! Having seen you distant, she at once learned to withdraw. Pray, sir, admire in her hauteur a careful improvement on your own coolness.'

'Conscience, and honour, and the most despotic necessity, dragged me apart from her, and kept me sundered with ponderous fetters. She was free: she might have been clement.'

'Never free to compromise her self-respect: to seek where she had been shunned.'

'Then she was inconsistent: she tantalised as before. When I thought I had made up my mind to seeing in her only a lofty stranger, she would suddenly show me such a glimpse of loving simplicity - she would warm me with such a beam of reviving sympathy, she would gladden an hour with converse so gentle, gay, and kindly - that I could no more shut my heart on her image, than I could close that door against her presence. Explain why she distressed me so.'

'She could not bear to be quite outcast; and then she would sometimes get a notion into her head, on a cold, wet day, that the schoolroom was no cheerful place, and feel it incumbent on her to go and see if you and Henry kept up a good fire; and once there she liked to stay.'

'But she should not be changeful: if she came at all, she should come oftener.'

'There is such a thing as intrusion.'

'To-morrow, you will not be as you are to-day.'

'I don't know. Will you?'

'I am not mad, most noble Berenice! We may give one day to dreaming, but the next we must awake; and I shall awake to purpose the morning you are married to Sir Philip Nunnely. The fire shines on you and me, and shows us very clearly in the glass, Miss Keeldar; and I have been gazing on the picture all the time I have been talking. Look up! What a difference between your head and mine! - I look old for thirty!'

'You are so grave; you have such a square brow; and your face is sallow. I never regard you as a young man, nor as Robert's junior.'

'Don't you? I thought not. Imagine Robert's clear-cut, handsome face looking over my shoulder. Does not the apparition make vividly manifest the obtuse mould of my heavy traits? There!' (he started) 'I have been expecting that wire to vibrate this last half-hour.'

The dinner-bell rang, and Shirley rose.

'Mr Moore,' she said, as she gathered up her silks, 'have you heard from your brother lately? Do you know what he means by staying in town so long? Does he talk of returning?'

'He talks of returning; but what has caused his long absence I cannot tell. To speak the truth, I thought none in Yorkshire knew better than yourself why he was reluctant to come home.'

A crimson shadow passed across Miss Keeldar's cheek.

'Write to him and urge him to come,' she said. 'I know there has been no impolicy in protracting his absence thus far: it is good to let the mill stand, while trade is so bad; but he must not abandon the county.'

'I am aware,' said Louis, 'that he had an interview with you the evening before he left, and I saw him quit Fieldhead afterwards. I read his countenance, or tried to read it. He turned from me. I divined that he would be long away. Some fine, slight fingers have a wondrous knack at pulverising a man's brittle pride. I suppose Robert put too much trust in his manly beauty and native gentlemanhood. Those are better off who, being destitute of advantage, cannot cherish delusion. But I will write, and say you advise his return.'

'Do not say I advise his return, but that his return is advisable.'

The second bell rang, and Miss Keeldar obeyed its call.