CHAPTER VII.

THE sight that met Moody's view wrung him to the heart.

Isabel and the dog were at play together. Among the varied accomplishments possessed by Tommie, the capacity to take his part at a game of hide-and-seek was one. His playfellow for the time being put a shawl or a handkerchief over his head, so as to prevent him from seeing, and then hid among the furniture a pocketbook, or a cigar-case, or a purse, or anything else that happened to be at hand, leaving the dog to find it, with his keen sense of smell to guide him. Doubly relieved by the fit and the bleeding, Tommie's spirits had revived; and he and Isabel had just begun their game when Moody looked into the room, charged with his terrible errand. "You're burning, Tommie, you're burning!" cried the girl, laughing and clapping her hands. The next moment she happened to look round and saw Moody through the parted curtains. His face warned her instantly that something serious had happened. She advanced a few steps, her eyes resting on him in silent alarm. He was himself too painfully agitated to speak. Not a word was exchanged between Lady Lydiard and Mr. Troy in the next room. In the complete stillness that prevailed, the dog was heard sniffing and fidgeting about the furniture. Robert took Isabel by the hand and led her into the drawing-room. "For God's sake, spare her, my Lady!" he whispered. The lawyer heard him. "No," said Mr. Troy. "Be merciful, and tell her the truth!"

He spoke to a woman who stood in no need of his advice. The inherent nobility in Lady Lydiard's nature was aroused: her great heart offered itself patiently to any sorrow, to any sacrifice.

Putting her arm round Isabel--half caressing her, half supporting her--Lady Lydiard accepted the whole responsibility and told the whole truth.

Reeling under the first shock, the poor girl recovered herself with admirable courage. She raised her head, and eyed the lawyer without uttering a word. In its artless consciousness of innocence the look was nothing less than sublime. Addressing herself to Mr. Troy, Lady Lydiard pointed to Isabel. "Do you see guilt there?" she asked.

Mr. Troy made no answer. In the melancholy experience of humanity to which his profession condemned him, he had seen conscious guilt assume the face of innocence, and helpless innocence admit the disguise of guilt: the keenest observation, in either case, failing completely to detect the truth. Lady Lydiard misinterpreted his silence as expressing the sullen self-assertion of a heartless man. She turned from him, in contempt, and held out her hand to Isabel.

"Mr. Troy is not satisfied yet," she said bitterly. "My love, take my hand, and look me in the face as your equal; I know no difference of rank at such a time as this. Before God, who hears you, are you innocent of the theft of the bank-note?"

"Before God, who hears me," Isabel answered, "I am innocent."

Lady Lydiard looked once more at the lawyer, and waited to hear if he believed that.

Mr. Troy took refuge in dumb diplomacy--he made a low bow. It might have meant that he believed Isabel, or it might have meant that he modestly withdrew his own opinion into the background. Lady Lydiard did not condescend to inquire what it meant.

"The sooner we bring this painful scene to an end the better," she said. "I shall be glad to avail myself of your professional assistance, Mr. Troy, within certain limits. Outside of my house, I beg that you will spare no trouble in tracing the lost money to the person who has really stolen it. Inside of my house, I must positively request that the disappearance of the note may never be alluded to, in any way whatever, until your inquiries have been successful in discovering the thief. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Tollmidge and her family must not be sufferers by my loss: I shall pay the money again." She paused, and pressed Isabel's hand with affectionate fervor. "My child," she said, "one last word to you, and I have done. You remain here, with my trust in you, and my love for you, absolutely unshaken. When you think of what has been said here to-day, never forget that."

Isabel bent her head, and kissed the kind hand that still held hers. The

high spirit that was in her, inspired by Lady Lydiard's example, rose equal to the dreadful situation in which she was placed.

"No, my Lady," she said calmly and sadly; "it cannot be. What this gentleman has said of me is not to be denied--the appearances are against me. The letter was open, and I was alone in the room with it, and Mr. Moody told me that a valuable inclosure was inside it. Dear and kind mistress! I am not fit to be a member of your household, I am not worthy to live with the honest people who serve you, while my innocence is in doubt. It is enough for me now that you don't doubt it. I can wait patiently, after that, for the day that gives me back my good name. Oh, my Lady, don't cry about it! Pray, pray don't cry!"

Lady Lydiard's self-control failed her for the first time. Isabel's courage had made Isabel dearer to her than ever. She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her handkerchief. Mr. Troy turned aside abruptly, and examined a Japanese vase, without any idea in his mind of what he was looking at. Lady Lydiard had gravely misjudged him in believing him to be a heartless man.

Isabel followed the lawyer, and touched him gently on the arm to rouse his attention.

"I have one relation living, sir--an aunt--who will receive me if I go to her," she said simply. "Is there any harm in my going? Lady Lydiard will give you the address when you want me. Spare her Ladyship, sir, all

the pain and trouble that you can."

At last the heart that was in Mr. Troy asserted itself. "You are a fine creature!" he said, with a burst of enthusiasm. "I agree with Lady Lydiard--I believe you are innocent, too; and I will leave no effort untried to find the proof of it." He turned aside again, and had another look at the Japanese vase.

As the lawyer withdrew himself from observation, Moody approached Isabel.

Thus far he had stood apart, watching her and listening to her in silence. Not a look that had crossed her face, not a word that had fallen from her, had escaped him. Unconsciously on her side, unconsciously on his side, she now wrought on his nature with a purifying and ennobling influence which animated it with a new life. All that had been selfish and violent in his passion for her left him to return no more. The immeasurable devotion which he laid at her feet, in the days that were yet to come--the unyielding courage which cheerfully accepted the sacrifice of himself when events demanded it at a later period of his life--struck root in him now. Without attempting to conceal the tears that were falling fast over his cheeks--striving vainly to express those new thoughts in him that were beyond the reach of words--he stood before her the truest friend and servant that ever woman had.

"Oh, my dear! my heart is heavy for you. Take me to serve you and help you. Her Ladyship's kindness will permit it, I am sure."

He could say no more. In those simple words the cry of his heart reached her. "Forgive me, Robert," she answered, gratefully, "if I said anything to pain you when we spoke together a little while since. I didn't mean it." She gave him her hand, and looked timidly over her shoulder at Lady Lydiard. "Let me go!" she said, in low, broken tones, "Let me go!"

Mr. Troy heard her, and stepped forward to interfere before Lady Lydiard could speak. The man had recovered his self-control; the lawyer took his place again on the scene.

"You must not leave us, my dear," he said to Isabel, "until I have put a question to Mr. Moody in which you are interested. Do you happen to have the number of the lost bank-note?" he asked, turning to the steward.

Moody produced his slip of paper with the number on it. Mr. Troy made two copies of it before he returned the paper. One copy he put in his pocket, the other he handed to Isabel.

"Keep it carefully," he said. "Neither you nor I know how soon it may be of use to you."

Receiving the copy from him, she felt mechanically in her apron for her pocketbook. She had used it, in playing with the dog, as an object to

hide from him; but she had suffered, and was still suffering, too keenly to be capable of the effort of remembrance. Moody, eager to help her even in the most trifling thing, guessed what had happened. "You were playing with Tommie," he said; "is it in the next room?"

The dog heard his name pronounced through the open door. The next moment
he trotted into the drawing-room with Isabel's pocketbook in his mouth. He was a strong, well-grown Scotch terrier of the largest size, with bright, intelligent eyes, and a coat of thick curling white hair, diversified by two light brown patches on his back. As he reached the middle of the room, and looked from one to another of the persons present, the fine sympathy of his race told him that there was trouble among his human friends. His tail dropped; he whined softly as he approached Isabel, and laid her pocketbook at her feet.

She knelt as she picked up the pocketbook, and raised her playfellow of happier days to take her leave of him. As the dog put his paws on her shoulders, returning her caress, her first tears fell. "Foolish of me," she said, faintly, "to cry over a dog. I can't help it. Good-by, Tommie!"

Putting him away from her gently, she walked towards the door. The dog instantly followed. She put him away from her, for the second time, and left him. He was not to be denied; he followed her again, and took the skirt of her dress in his teeth, as if to hold her back. Robert forced

the dog, growling and resisting with all his might, to let go of the dress. "Don't be rough with him," said Isabel. "Put him on her ladyship's lap; he will be quieter there." Robert obeyed. He whispered to Lady Lydiard as she received the dog; she seemed to be still incapable of speaking--she bowed her head in silent assent. Robert hurried back to Isabel before she had passed the door. "Not alone!" he said entreatingly. "Her Ladyship permits it, Isabel. Let me see you safe to your aunt's house."

Isabel looked at him, felt for him, and yielded.

"Yes," she answered softly; "to make amends for what I said to you when I was thoughtless and happy!" She waited a little to compose herself before she spoke her farewell words to Lady Lydiard. "Good-by, my Lady. Your kindness has not been thrown away on an ungrateful girl. I love you, and thank you, with all my heart."

Lady Lydiard rose, placing the dog on the chair as she left it. She seemed to have grown older by years, instead of by minutes, in the short interval that had passed since she had hidden her face from view. "I can't bear it!" she cried, in husky, broken tones. "Isabel! Isabel! I forbid you to leave me!"

But one person could venture to resist her. That person was Mr. Troy--and Mr. Troy knew it.

"Control yourself," he said to her in a whisper. "The girl is doing what is best and most becoming in her position--and is doing it with a patience and courage wonderful to see. Sh e places herself under the protection of her nearest relative, until her character is vindicated and her position in your house is once more beyond a doubt. Is this a time to throw obstacles in her way? Be worthy of yourself, Lady Lydiard and think of the day when she will return to you without the breath of a suspicion to rest on her!"

There was no disputing with him--he was too plainly in the right. Lady Lydiard submitted; she concealed the torture that her own resolution inflicted on her with an endurance which was, indeed, worthy of herself. Taking Isabel in her arms she kissed her in a passion of sorrow and love. "My poor dear! My own sweet girl! don't suppose that this is a parting kiss! I shall see you again--often and often I shall see you again at your aunt's!" At a sign from Mr. Troy, Robert took Isabel's arm in his and led her away. Tommie, watching her from his chair, lifted his little white muzzle as his playfellow looked back on passing the doorway. The long, melancholy, farewell howl of the dog was the last sound Isabel Miller heard as she left the house.