

THE FIRST SCENE - COMBE-RAVEN, SOMERSETSHIRE.

CHAPTER I.

THE hands on the hall-clock pointed to half-past six in the morning. The house was a country residence in West Somersetshire, called Combe-Raven. The day was the fourth of March, and the year was eighteen hundred and forty-six.

No sounds but the steady ticking of the clock, and the lumpish snoring of a large dog stretched on a mat outside the dining-room door, disturbed the mysterious morning stillness of hall and staircase. Who were the sleepers hidden in the upper regions? Let the house reveal its own secrets; and, one by one, as they descend the stairs from their beds, let the sleepers disclose themselves.

As the clock pointed to a quarter to seven, the dog woke and shook himself. After waiting in vain for the footman, who was accustomed to let him out, the animal wandered restlessly from one closed door to another on the ground-floor; and, returning to his mat in great perplexity, appealed to the sleeping family with a long and melancholy howl.

Before the last notes of the dog's remonstrance had died away, the oaken stairs in the higher regions of the house creaked under slowly-descending footsteps. In a minute more the first of the female servants made her appearance, with a dingy woolen shawl over her shoulders--for the March morning was bleak; and rheumatism and the cook were old acquaintances.

Receiving the dog's first cordial advances with the worst possible grace, the cook slowly opened the hall door and let the animal out. It was a wild morning. Over a spacious lawn, and behind a black plantation of firs, the rising sun rent its way upward through piles of ragged gray cloud; heavy drops of rain fell few and far between; the March wind shuddered round the corners of the house, and the wet trees swayed wearily.

Seven o'clock struck; and the signs of domestic life began to show themselves in more rapid succession.

The housemaid came down--tall and slim, with the state of the spring temperature written redly on her nose. The lady's-maid followed--young, smart, plump, and sleepy. The kitchen-maid came next--afflicted with the face-ache, and making no secret of her sufferings. Last of all, the footman appeared, yawning disconsolately; the living picture of a man who felt that he had been defrauded of his fair night's rest.

The conversation of the servants, when they assembled before the slowly lighting kitchen fire, referred to a recent family event, and turned at starting on this question: Had Thomas, the footman, seen anything of the concert at Clifton, at which his master and the two young ladies had been present on the previous night? Yes; Thomas had heard the concert; he had been paid for to go in at the back; it was a loud concert; it was a hot concert; it was described at the top of the bills as Grand; whether it was worth traveling sixteen miles to hear by railway, with the additional hardship of going back nineteen miles by road, at half-past one in the morning--was a question which he would leave his master and the young ladies to decide; his own opinion, in the meantime, being unhesitatingly, No. Further inquiries, on the part of all the female servants in succession, elicited no additional information of any sort. Thomas could hum none of the songs, and could describe none of the ladies' dresses. His audience, accordingly, gave him up in despair; and the kitchen small-talk flowed back into its ordinary channels, until the clock struck eight and startled the assembled servants into separating for their morning's work.

A quarter past eight, and nothing happened. Half-past--and more signs of life appeared from the bedroom regions. The next member of the family who came downstairs was Mr. Andrew Vanstone, the master of the house.

Tall, stout, and upright--with bright blue eyes, and healthy, florid complexion--his brown plush shooting-jacket carelessly buttoned awry; his vixenish little Scotch terrier barking unrebuked at his heels; one hand thrust into his waistcoat pocket, and the other smacking the banisters cheerfully as he came downstairs humming a tune--Mr. Vanstone showed his character on the surface of him freely to all men. An easy, hearty, handsome, good-humored gentleman, who walked on the sunny side of the way of life, and who asked nothing better than to meet all his fellow-passengers in this world on the sunny side, too. Estimating him by years, he had turned fifty. Judging him by lightness of heart, strength of constitution, and capacity for enjoyment, he was no older than most men who have only turned thirty.

"Thomas!" cried Mr. Vanstone, taking up his old felt hat and his thick walking stick from the hall table. "Breakfast, this morning, at ten. The young ladies are not likely to be down earlier after the concert last night.-- By-the-by, how did you like the concert yourself, eh? You thought it was grand? Quite right; so it was. Nothing but crash-ban g, varied now and then by bang-crash; all the women dressed within an inch of their lives; smothering heat, blazing gas, and no room for anybody--yes, yes, Thomas; grand's the word for it, and comfortable isn't." With that expression of opinion, Mr. Vanstone whistled to his vixenish terrier; flourished his stick at the hall door in cheerful defiance of the rain; and set off through wind and weather for his morning walk.

The hands, stealing their steady way round the dial of the clock, pointed to ten minutes to nine. Another member of the family appeared on the stairs-- Miss Garth, the governess.

No observant eyes could have surveyed Miss Garth without seeing at once that she was a north-countrywoman. Her hard featured face; her masculine readiness and decision of movement; her obstinate honesty of look and manner, all proclaimed her border birth and border training. Though little more than forty years of age, her hair was quite gray; and she wore over it the plain cap of an old woman. Neither hair nor head-dress was out of harmony with her face--it looked older than her years: the hard handwriting of trouble had scored it heavily at some past time. The self-possession of her progress downstairs, and the air of habitual authority with which she looked about her, spoke well for her position in Mr. Vanstone's family. This was evidently not one of the forlorn, persecuted, pitiably dependent order of governesses. Here was a woman who lived on ascertained and honorable terms with her employers--a woman who looked capable of sending any parents in England to the right-about, if they failed to rate her at her proper value.

"Breakfast at ten?" repeated Miss Garth, when the footman had answered the bell, and had mentioned his master's orders. "Ha! I thought what would come of that concert last night. When people who live in the country patronize public amusements, public amusements return the compliment by upsetting the family afterward for days together. You're upset, Thomas, I can see your eyes are as red as a ferret's, and your cravat looks as if you had slept in it. Bring the kettle at a quarter to ten--and if you don't get better in the course of the day, come to me, and I'll give you a dose of physic. That's a well-meaning lad, if you only let him alone," continued Miss Garth, in soliloquy, when Thomas had retired; "but he's not strong enough for concerts twenty miles off. They wanted me to go with them last night.

Yes: catch me!"

Nine o'clock struck; and the minute-hand stole on to twenty minutes past the hour, before any more footsteps were heard on the stairs. At the end of that time, two ladies appeared, descending to the breakfast-room together--Mrs. Vanstone and her eldest daughter.

If the personal attractions of Mrs. Vanstone, at an earlier period of life, had depended solely on her native English charms of complexion and freshness, she must have long since lost the last relics of her fairer self. But her beauty as a young woman had passed beyond the average national limits; and she still preserved the advantage of her more exceptional personal gifts. Although she was now in her forty-fourth year; although she had been tried, in bygone times, by the premature loss of more than one of her children, and by long attacks of illness which had followed those bereavements of former years--she still preserved the fair proportion and subtle delicacy of feature, once associated with the all-adorning brightness and freshness of beauty, which had left her never to return. Her eldest child, now descending the stairs by her side, was the mirror in which she could look back and see again the reflection of her own youth. There, folded thick on the daughter's head, lay the massive dark hair, which, on the mother's, was fast turning gray. There, in the daughter's cheek, glowed the lovely dusky red which had faded from the mother's to bloom again no more. Miss Vanstone had already reached the first maturity of womanhood; she had completed her six-and-twentieth year. Inheriting the dark majestic character of her mother's beauty, she had yet hardly inherited all its charms. Though the shape of her face was the same, the features were scarcely so delicate, their proportion was scarcely so true. She was not so tall. She had the dark-brown eyes of her mother--full and soft, with the steady luster in them which Mrs. Vanstone's eyes had lost--and yet there was less interest, less refinement and depth of feeling in her expression: it was gentle and feminine, but clouded by a certain quiet reserve, from which her mother's face was free. If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe that the moral force of character and the higher intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children? In these days of insidious nervous exhaustion and subtly-spreading nervous malady, is it not possible that the same rule may apply, less rarely than we are willing to admit, to the bodily gifts as well?

The mother and daughter slowly descended the stairs together--the first dressed in dark brown, with an Indian shawl thrown over her shoulders; the second more simply attired in black, with a plain collar and cuffs, and a dark orange-colored ribbon over the bosom of her dress. As they crossed the

hall and entered the breakfast-room, Miss Vanstone was full of the all-absorbing subject of the last night's concert.

"I am so sorry, mamma, you were not with us," she said. "You have been so strong and so well ever since last summer--you have felt so many years younger, as you said yourself--that I am sure the exertion would not have been too much for you."

"Perhaps not, my love--but it was as well to keep on the safe side."

"Quite as well," remarked Miss Garth, appearing at the breakfast-room door. "Look at Norah (good-morning, my dear)--look, I say, at Norah. A perfect wreck; a living proof of your wisdom and mine in staying at home. The vile gas, the foul air, the late hours--what can you expect? She's not made of iron, and she suffers accordingly. No, my dear, you needn't deny it. I see you've got a headache."

Norah's dark, handsome face brightened into a smile--then lightly clouded again with its accustomed quiet reserve.

"A very little headache; not half enough to make me regret the concert," she said, and walked away by herself to the window.

On the far side of a garden and paddock the view overlooked a stream, some farm buildings which lay beyond, and the opening of a wooded, rocky pass (called, in Somersetshire, a Combe), which here cleft its way through the hills that closed the prospect. A winding strip of road was visible, at no great distance, amid the undulations of the open ground; and along this strip the stalwart figure of Mr. Vanstone was now easily recognizable, returning to the house from his morning walk. He flourished his stick gayly, as he observed his eldest daughter at the window. She nodded and waved her hand in return, very gracefully and prettily--but with something of old-fashioned formality in her manner, which looked strangely in so young a woman, and which seemed out of harmony with a salutation addressed to her father.

The hall-clock struck the adjourned breakfast-hour. When the minute hand had recorded the lapse of five minutes more a door banged in the bedroom regions--a clear young voice was heard singing blithely--light, rapid footsteps pattered on the upper stairs, descended with a jump to the landing, and pattered again, faster than ever, down the lower flight. In another moment the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's two daughters (and two only surviving children) dashed into view on the dingy old oaken stairs, with the suddenness of a flash of light; and clearing the last three steps into the

hall at a jump, presented herself breathless in the breakfast-room to make the family circle complete.

By one of those strange caprices of Nature, which science leaves still unexplained, the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's children presented no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents. How had she come by her hair? how had she come by her eyes? Even her father and mother had asked themselves those questions, as she grew up to girlhood, and had been sorely perplexed to answer them. Her hair was of that purely light-brown hue, unmixed with flaxen, or yellow, or red--which is oftener seen on the plumage of a bird than on the head of a human being. It was soft and plentiful, and waved downward from her low forehead in regular folds--but, to some tastes, it was dull and dead, in its absolute want of glossiness, in its monotonous purity of plain light color. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just a shade darker than her hair, and seemed made expressly for those violet-blue eyes, which assert their most irresistible charm when associated with a fair complexion. But it was here exactly that the promise of her face failed of performance in the most startling manner. The eyes, which should have been dark, were incomprehensibly and discordantly light; they were of that nearly colorless gray which, though little attractive in itself, possesses the rare compensating merit of interpreting the finest gradations of thought, the gentlest changes of feeling, the deepest trouble of passion, with a subtle transparency of expression which no darker eyes can rival. Thus quaintly self-contradictory in the upper part of her face, she was hardly less at variance with established ideas of harmony in the lower. Her lips had the true feminine delicacy of form, her cheeks the lovely roundness and smoothness of youth--but the mouth was too large and firm, the chin too square and massive for her sex and age. Her complexion partook of the pure monotony of tint which characterized her hair--it was of the same soft, warm, creamy fairness all over, without a tinge of color in the cheeks, except on occasions of unusual bodily exertion or sudden mental disturbance. The whole countenance--so remarkable in its strongly opposed characteristics--was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. The large, electric, light-gray eyes were hardly ever in repose; all varieties of expression followed each other over the plastic, ever-changing face, with a giddy rapidity which left sober analysis far behind in the race. The girl's exuberant vitality asserted itself all over her, from head to foot. Her figure--taller than her sister's, taller than the average of woman's height; instinct with such a seductive, serpentine suppleness, so lightly and playfully graceful, that its movements suggested, not unnaturally, the movements of a young cat--her figure was so perfectly developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. She bloomed in the full physical maturity of twenty years or more--bloomed naturally and irresistibly, in

right of her matchless health and strength. Here, in truth, lay the mainspring of this strangely-constituted organization. Her headlong course down the house stairs; the brisk activity of all her movements; the incessant sparkle of expression in her face; the enticing gayety which took the hearts of the quietest people by storm--even the reckless delight in bright colors which showed itself in her brilliantly-striped morning dress, in her fluttering ribbons, in the large scarlet rosettes on her smart little shoes--all sprang alike from the same source; from the overflowing physical health which strengthened every muscle, braced every nerve, and set the warm young blood tingling through her veins, like the blood of a growing child.

On her entry into the breakfast-room, she was saluted with the customary remonstrance which her flighty disregard of all punctuality habitually provoked from the long-suffering household authorities. In Miss Garth's favorite phrase, "Magdalen was born with all the senses--except a sense of order."

Magdalen! It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed; and yet, chosen under no extraordinary circumstances. The name had been borne by one of Mr. Vanstone's sisters, who had died in early youth; and, in affectionate remembrance of her, he had called his second daughter by it--just as he had called his eldest daughter Norah, for his wife's sake. Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name--suggestive of a sad and somber dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion--had been here, as events had turned out, inappropriately bestowed? Surely, this self-contradictory girl had perversely accomplished one contradiction more, by developing into a character which was out of all harmony with her own Christian name!

"Late again!" said Mrs. Vanstone, as Magdalen breathlessly kissed her.

"Late again!" chimed in Miss Garth, when Magdalen came her way next. "Well?" she went on, taking the girl's chin familiarly in her hand, with a half-satirical, half-fond attention which betrayed that the youngest daughter, with all her faults, was the governess's favorite--"Well? and what has the concert done for you? What form of suffering has dissipation inflicted on your system this morning?"

"Suffering!" repeated Magdalen, recovering her breath, and the use of her tongue with it. "I don't know the meaning of the word: if there's anything the matter with me, I'm too well. Suffering! I'm ready for another concert to-night, and a ball to-morrow, and a play the day after. Oh," cried Magdalen, dropping into a chair and crossing her hands rapturously on the table, "how

I do like pleasure!"

"Come! that's explicit at any rate," said Miss Garth. "I think Pope must have had you in his mind when he wrote his famous lines:

"Men some to business, some to pleasure take, But every woman is at heart a rake."

"The deuce she is!" cried Mr. Vanstone, entering the room while Miss Garth was making her quotation, with the dogs at his heels. "Well; live and learn. If you're all rakes, Miss Garth, the sexes are turned topsy-turvy with a vengeance; and the men will have nothing left for it but to stop at home and darn the stockings.--Let's have some breakfast."

"How-d'ye-do, papa?" said Magdalen, taking Mr. Vanstone as boisterously round the neck as if he belonged to some larger order of Newfoundland dog, and was made to be romped with at his daughter's convenience. "I'm the rake Miss Garth means; and I want to go to another concert--or a play, if you like--or a ball, if you prefer it--or anything else in the way of amusement that puts me into a new dress, and plunges me into a crowd of people, and illuminates me with plenty of light, and sets me in a tingle of excitement all over, from head to foot. Anything will do, as long as it doesn't send us to bed at eleven o'clock."

Mr. Vanstone sat down composedly under his daughter's flow of language, like a man who was well used to verbal inundation from that quarter. "If I am to be allowed my choice of amusements next time," said the worthy gentleman, "I think a play will suit me better than a concert. The girls enjoyed themselves amazingly, my dear," he continued, addressing his wife. "More than I did, I must say. It was altogether above my mark. They played one piece of music which lasted forty minutes. It stopped three times, by-the-way; and we all thought it was done each time, and clapped our hands, rejoiced to be rid of it. But on it went again, to our great surprise and mortification, till we gave it up in despair, and all wished ourselves at Jericho. Norah, my dear! when we had crash-bang for forty minutes, with three stoppages by-the-way, what did they call it?"

"A symphony, papa," replied Norah.

"Yes, you darling old Goth, a symphony by the great Beethoven!" added Magdalen. "How can you say you were not amused? Have you forgotten the yellow-looking foreign woman, with the unpronounceable name? Don't you remember the faces she made when she sang? and the way she courtesied

and courtesied, till she cheated the foolish people into crying encore? Look here, mamma--look here, Miss Garth!"

She snatched up an empty plate from the table, to represent a sheet of music, held it before her in the established concert-room position, and produced an imitation of the unfortunate singer's grimaces and courtesying, so accurately and quaintly true to the original, that her father roared with laughter; and even the footman (who came in at that moment with the post-bag) rushed out of the room again, and committed the indecorum of echoing his master audibly on the other side of the door.

"Letters, papa. I want the key," said Magdalen, passing from the imitation at the breakfast-table to the post-bag on the sideboard with the easy abruptness which characterized all her actions.

Mr. Vanstone searched his pockets and shook his head. Though his youngest daughter might resemble him in nothing else, it was easy to see where Magdalen's unmethodical habits came from.

"I dare say I have left it in the library, along with my other keys," said Mr. Vanstone. "Go and look for it, my dear."

"You really should check Magdalen," pleaded Mrs. Vanstone, addressing her husband when her daughter had left the room. "Those habits of mimicry are growing on her; and she speaks to you with a levity which it is positively shocking to hear."

"Exactly what I have said myself, till I am tired of repeating it," remarked Miss Garth. "She treats Mr. Vanstone as if he was a kind of younger brother of hers."

"You are kind to us in everything else, papa; and you make kind allowances for Magdalen's high spirits--don't you?" said the quiet Norah, taking her father's part and her sister's with so little show of resolution on the surface that few observers would have been sharp enough to detect the genuine substance beneath it.

"Thank you, my dear," said good-natured Mr. Vanstone. "Thank you for a very pretty speech. As for Magdalen," he continued, addressing his wife and Miss Garth, "she's an unbroken filly. Let her caper and kick in the paddock to her heart's content. Time enough to break her to harness when she gets a little older."

The door opened, and Magdalen returned with the key. She unlocked the post-bag at the sideboard and poured out the letters in a heap. Sorting them gayly in less than a minute, she approached the breakfast-table with both hands full, and delivered the letters all round with the business-like rapidity of a London postman.

"Two for Norah," she announced, beginning with her sister. "Three for Miss Garth. None for mamma. One for me. And the other six all for papa. You lazy old darling, you hate answering letters, don't you?" pursued Magdalen, dropping the postman's character and assuming the daughter's. "How you will grumble and fidget in the study! and how you will wish there were no such things as letters in the world! and how red your nice old bald head will get at the top with the worry of writing the answers; and how many of the answers you will leave until tomorrow after all! The Bristol Theater's open, papa," she whispered, slyly and suddenly, in her father's ear; "I saw it in the newspaper when I went to the library to get the key. Let's go to-morrow night!"

While his daughter was chattering, Mr. Vanstone was mechanically sorting his letters. He turned over the first four in succession and looked carelessly at the addresses. When he came to the fifth his attention, which had hitherto wandered toward Magdalen, suddenly became fixed on the post-mark of the letter.

Stooping over him, with her head on his shoulder, Magdalen could see the post-mark as plainly as her father saw it--NEW ORLEANS.

"An American letter, papa!" she said. "Who do you know at New Orleans?"

Mrs. Vanstone started, and looked eagerly at her husband the moment Magdalen spoke those words.

Mr. Vanstone said nothing. He quietly removed his daughter's arm from his neck, as if he wished to be free from all interruption. She returned, accordingly, to her place at the breakfast-table. Her father, with the letter in his hand, waited a little before he opened it; her mother looking at him, the while, with an eager, expectant attention which attracted Miss Garth's notice, and Norah's, as well as Magdalen's.

After a minute or more of hesitation Mr. Vanstone opened the letter.

His face changed color the instant he read the first lines; his cheeks fading to a dull, yellow-brown hue, which would have been ashy paleness in a less

florid man; and his expression becoming saddened and overclouded in a moment. Norah and Magdalen, watching anxiously, saw nothing but the change that passed over their father. Miss Garth alone observed the effect which that change produced on the attentive mistress of the house.

It was not the effect which she, or any one, could have anticipated. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited rather than alarmed. A faint flush rose on her cheeks--her eyes brightened--she stirred the tea round and round in her cup in a restless, impatient manner which was not natural to her.

Magdalen, in her capacity of spoiled child, was, as usual, the first to break the silence.

"What is the matter, papa?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Mr. Vanstone, sharply, without looking up at her.

"I'm sure there must be something," persisted Magdalen. "I'm sure there is bad news, papa, in that American letter."

"There is nothing in the letter that concerns you," said Mr. Vanstone.

It was the first direct rebuff that Magdalen had ever received from her father. She looked at him with an incredulous surprise, which would have been irresistibly absurd under less serious circumstances.

Nothing more was said. For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, the family sat round the breakfast-table in painful silence. Mr. Vanstone's hearty morning appetite, like his hearty morning spirits, was gone. He absently broke off some morsels of dry toast from the rack near him, absently finished his first cup of tea--then asked for a second, which he left before him untouched.

"Norah," he said, after an interval, "you needn't wait for me. Magdalen, my dear, you can go when you like."

His daughters rose immediately; and Miss Garth considerately followed their example. When an easy-tempered man does assert himself in his family, the rarity of the demonstration invariably has its effect; and the will of that easy-tempered man is Law.

"What can have happened?" whispered Norah, as they closed the breakfast-room door and crossed the hall.

"What does papa mean by being cross with Me?" exclaimed Magdalen, chafing under a sense of her own injuries.

"May I ask--what right you had to pry into your father's private affairs?" retorted Miss Garth.

"Right?" repeated Magdalen. "I have no secrets from papa--what business has papa to have secrets from me! I consider myself insulted."

"If you considered yourself properly reprov'd for not minding your own business," said the plain-spoken Miss Garth, "you would be a trifle nearer the truth. Ah! you are like all the rest of the girls in the present day. Not one in a hundred of you knows which end of her's uppermost."

The three ladies entered the morning-room; and Magdalen acknowledged Miss Garth's reproof by banging the door.

Half an hour passed, and neither Mr. Vanstone nor his wife left the breakfast-room. The servant, ignorant of what had happened, went in to clear the table--found his master and mistress seated close together in deep consultation--and immediately went out again. Another quarter of an hour elapsed before the breakfast-room door was opened, and the private conference of the husband and wife came to an end.

"I hear mamma in the hall," said Norah. "Perhaps she is coming to tell us something."

Mrs. Vanstone entered the morning-room as her daughter spoke. The color was deeper on her cheeks, and the brightness of half-dried tears glistened in her eyes; her step was more hasty, all her movements were quicker than usual.

"I bring news, my dears, which will surprise you," she said, addressing her daughters. "Your father and I are going to London to-morrow."

Magdalen caught her mother by the arm in speechless astonishment. Miss Garth dropped her work on her lap; even the sedate Norah started to her feet, and amazedly repeated the words, "Going to London!"

"Without us?" added Magdalen.

"Your father and I are going alone," said Mrs. Vanstone. "Perhaps, for as

long as three weeks--but not longer. We are going"--she hesitated--"we are going on important family business. Don't hold me, Magdalen. This is a sudden necessity--I have a great deal to do to-day--many things to set in order before tomorrow. There, there, my love, let me go."

She drew her arm away; hastily kissed her youngest daughter on the forehead; and at once left the room again. Even Magdalen saw that her mother was not to be coaxed into hearing or answering any more questions.

The morning wore on, and nothing was seen of Mr. Vanstone. With the reckless curiosity of her age and character, Magdalen, in defiance of Miss Garth's prohibition and her sister's remonstrances, determined to go to the study and look for her father there. When she tried the door, it was locked on the inside. She said, "It's only me, papa;" and waited for the answer. "I'm busy now, my dear," was the answer. "Don't disturb me."

Mrs. Vanstone was, in another way, equally inaccessible. She remained in her own room, with the female servants about her, immersed in endless preparations for the approaching departure. The servants, little used in that family to sudden resolutions and unexpected orders, were awkward and confused in obeying directions. They ran from room to room unnecessarily, and lost time and patience in jostling each other on the stairs. If a stranger had entered the house that day, he might have imagined that an unexpected disaster had happened in it, instead of an unexpected necessity for a journey to London. Nothing proceeded in its ordinary routine. Magdalen, who was accustomed to pass the morning at the piano, wandered restlessly about the staircases and passages, and in and out of doors when there were glimpses of fine weather. Norah, whose fondness for reading had passed into a family proverb, took up book after book from table and shelf, and laid them down again, in despair of fixing her attention. Even Miss Garth felt the all-pervading influence of the household disorganization, and sat alone by the morning-room fire, with her head shaking ominously, and her work laid aside.

"Family affairs?" thought Miss Garth, pondering over Mrs. Vanstone's vague explanatory words. "I have lived twelve years at Combe-Raven; and these are the first family affairs which have got between the parents and the children, in all my experience. What does it mean? Change? I suppose I'm getting old. I don't like change."

CHAPTER II.

AT ten o'clock the next morning Norah and Magdalen stood alone in the hall at Combe-Raven watching the departure of the carriage which took their father and mother to the London train.

Up to the last moment, both the sisters had hoped for some explanation of that mysterious "family business" to which Mrs. Vanstone had so briefly alluded on the previous day. No such explanation had been offered. Even the agitation of the leave-taking, under circumstances entirely new in the home experience of the parents and children, had not shaken the resolute discretion of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone. They had gone--with the warmest testimonies of affection, with farewell embraces fervently reiterated again and again--but without dropping one word, from first to last, of the nature of their errand.

As the grating sound of the carriage-wheels ceased suddenly at a turn in the road, the sisters looked one another in the face; each feeling, and each betraying in her own way, the dreary sense that she was openly excluded, for the first time, from the confidence of her parents. Norah's customary reserve strengthened into sullen silence--she sat down in one of the hall chairs and looked out frowningly through the open house door. Magdalen, as usual when her temper was ruffled, expressed her dissatisfaction in the plainest terms. "I don't care who knows it--I think we are both of us shamefully ill-used!" With those words, the young lady followed her sister's example by seating herself on a hall chair and looking aimlessly out through the open house door.

Almost at the same moment Miss Garth entered the hall from the morning-room. Her quick observation showed her the necessity for interfering to some practical purpose; and her ready good sense at once pointed the way.

"Look up, both of you, if you please, and listen to me," said Miss Garth. "If we are all three to be comfortable and happy together, now we are alone, we must stick to our usual habits and go on in our regular way. There is the state of things in plain words. Accept the situation--as the French say. Here am I to set you the example. I have just ordered an excellent dinner at the customary hour. I am going to the medicine-chest next, to physic the kitchen-maid--an unwholesome girl, whose face-ache is all stomach. In the meantime, Norah, my dear, you will find your work and your books, as usual, in the library. Magdalen, suppose you leave off tying your handkerchief into knots and use your fingers on the keys of the piano instead? We'll lunch at one, and take the dogs out afterward. Be as brisk

and cheerful both of you as I am. Come, rouse up directly. If I see those gloomy faces any longer, as sure as my name's Garth, I'll give your mother written warning and go back to my friends by the mixed train at twelve forty."

Concluding her address of expostulation in those terms, Miss Garth led Norah to the library door, pushed Magdalen into the morning-room, and went on her own way sternly to the regions of the medicine-chest.

In this half-jesting, half-earnest manner she was accustomed to maintain a sort of friendly authority over Mr. Vanstone's daughters, after her proper functions as governess had necessarily come to an end. Norah, it is needless to say, had long since ceased to be her pupil; and Magdalen had, by this time, completed her education. But Miss Garth had lived too long and too intimately under Mr. Vanstone's roof to be parted with for any purely formal considerations; and the first hint at going away which she had thought it her duty to drop was dismissed with such affectionate warmth of protest that she never repeated it again, except in jest. The entire management of the household was, from that time forth, left in her hands; and to those duties she was free to add what companionable assistance she could render to Norah's reading, and what friendly superintendence she could still exercise over Magdalen's music. Such were the terms on which Miss Garth was now a resident in Mr. Vanstone's family.

Toward the afternoon the weather improved. At half-past one the sun was shining brightly; and the ladies left the house, accompanied by the dogs, to set forth on their walk.

They crossed the stream, and ascended by the little rocky pass to the hills beyond; then diverged to the left, and returned by a cross-road which led through the village of Combe-Raven.

As they came in sight of the first cottages, they passed a man, hanging about the road, who looked attentively, first at Magdalen, then at Norah. They merely observed that he was short, that he was dressed in black, and that he was a total stranger to them--and continued their homeward walk, without thinking more about the loitering foot-passenger whom they had met on their way back.

After they had left the village, and had entered the road which led straight to the house, Magdalen surprised Miss Garth by announcing that the stranger in black had turned, after they had passed him, and was now following them. "He keeps on Norah's side of the road," she said, mischievously. "I'm

not the attraction--don't blame me."

Whether the man was really following them, or not, made little difference, for they were now close to the house. As they passed through the lodge-gates, Miss Garth looked round, and saw that the stranger was quickening his pace, apparently with the purpose of entering into conversation. Seeing this, she at once directed the young ladies to go on to the house with the dogs, while she herself waited for events at the gate.

There was just time to complete this discreet arrangement, before the stranger reached the lodge. He took off his hat to Miss Garth politely, as she turned round. What did he look like, on the face of him? He looked like a clergyman in difficulties.

Taking his portrait, from top to toe, the picture of him began with a tall hat, broadly encircled by a mourning band of crumpled crape. Below the hat was a lean, long, sallow face, deeply pitted with the smallpox, and characterized, very remarkably, by eyes of two different colors--one bilious green, one bilious brown, both sharply intelligent. His hair was iron-gray, carefully brushed round at the temples. His cheeks and chin were in the bluest bloom of smooth shaving; his nose was short Roman; his lips long, thin, and supple, curled up at the corners with a mildly-humorous smile. His white cravat was high, stiff, and dingy; the collar, higher, stiffer, and dingier, projected its rigid points on either side beyond his chin. Lower down, the lithe little figure of the man was arrayed throughout in sober-shabby black. His frock-coat was buttoned tight round the waist, and left to bulge open majestically at the chest. His hands were covered with black cotton gloves neatly darned at the fingers; his umbrella, worn down at the ferule to the last quarter of an inch, was carefully preserved, nevertheless, in an oilskin case. The front view of him was the view in which he looked oldest; meeting him face to face, he might have been estimated at fifty or more. Walking behind him, his back and shoulders were almost young enough to have passed for five-and-thirty. His manners were distinguished by a grave serenity. When he opened his lips, he spoke in a rich bass voice, with an easy flow of language, and a strict attention to the elocutionary claims of words in more than one syllable. Persuasion distilled from his mildly-curling lips; and, shabby as he was, perennial flowers of courtesy bloomed all over him from head to foot.

"This is the residence of Mr. Vanstone, I believe?" he began, with a circular wave of his hand in the direction of the house. "Have I the honor of addressing a member of Mr. Vanstone's family?"

"Yes," said the plain-spoken Miss Garth. "You are addressing Mr. Vanstone's governess."

The persuasive man fell back a step--admired Mr. Vanstone's governess--advanced a step again--and continued the conversation.

"And the two young ladies," he went on, "the two young ladies who were walking with you are doubtless Mr. Vanstone's daughters? I recognized the darker of the two, and the elder as I apprehend, by her likeness to her handsome mother. The younger lady--"

"You are acquainted with Mrs. Vanstone, I suppose?" said Miss Garth, interrupting the stranger's flow of language, which, all things considered, was beginning, in her opinion, to flow rather freely. The stranger acknowledged the interruption by one of his polite bows, and submerged Miss Garth in his next sentence as if nothing had happened.

"The younger lady," he proceeded, "takes after her father, I presume? I assure you, her face struck me. Looking at it with my friendly interest in the family, I thought it very remarkable. I said to myself--Charming, Characteristic, Memorable. Not like her sister, not like her mother. No doubt, the image of her father?"

Once more Miss Garth attempted to stem the man's flow of words. It was plain that he did not know Mr. Vanstone, even by sight--otherwise he would never have committed the error of supposing that Magdalen took after her father. Did he know Mrs. Vanstone any better? He had left Miss Garth's question on that point unanswered. In the name of wonder, who was he? Powers of impudence! what did he want?

"You may be a friend of the family, though I don't remember your face," said Miss Garth. "What may your commands be, if you please? Did you come here to pay Mrs. Vanstone a visit?"

"I had anticipated the pleasure of communicating with Mrs. Vanstone," answered this inveterately evasive and inveterately civil man. "How is she?"

"Much as usual," said Miss Garth, feeling her resources of politeness fast failing her.

"Is she at home?"

"No."

"Out for long?"

"Gone to London with Mr. Vanstone."

The man's long face suddenly grew longer. His bilious brown eye looked disconcerted, and his bilious green eye followed its example. His manner became palpably anxious; and his choice of words was more carefully selected than ever.

"Is Mrs. Vanstone's absence likely to extend over any very lengthened period?" he inquired.

"It will extend over three weeks," replied Miss Garth. "I think you have now asked me questions enough," she went on, beginning to let her temper get the better of her at last. "Be so good, if you please, as to mention your business and your name. If you have any message to leave for Mrs. Vanstone, I shall be writing to her by to-night's post, and I can take charge of it."

"A thousand thanks! A most valuable suggestion. Permit me to take advantage of it immediately."

He was not in the least affected by the severity of Miss Garth's looks and language--he was simply relieved by her proposal, and he showed it with the most engaging sincerity. This time his bilious green eye took the initiative, and set his bilious brown eye the example of recovered serenity. His curling lips took a new twist upward; he tucked his umbrella briskly under his arm; and produced from the breast of his coat a large old-fashioned black pocketbook. From this he took a pencil and a card--hesitated and considered for a moment--wrote rapidly on the card--and placed it, with the politest alacrity, in Miss Garth's hand.

"I shall feel personally obliged if you will honor me by inclosing that card in your letter," he said. "There is no necessity for my troubling you additionally with a message. My name will be quite sufficient to recall a little family matter to Mrs. Vanstone, which has no doubt escaped her memory. Accept my best thanks. This has been a day of agreeable surprises to me. I have found the country hereabouts remarkably pretty; I have seen Mrs. Vanstone's two charming daughters; I have become acquainted with an honored preceptress in Mr. Vanstone's family. I congratulate myself--I apologize for occupying your valuable time--I beg my renewed acknowledgments--I wish you good-morning."

He raised his tall hat. His brown eye twinkled, his green eye twinkled, his curly lips smiled sweetly. In a moment he turned on his heel. His youthful back appeared to the best advantage; his active little legs took him away trippingly in the direction of the village. One, two, three--and he reached the turn in the road. Four, five, six--and he was gone.

Miss Garth looked down at the card in her hand, and looked up again in blank astonishment. The name and address of the clerical-looking stranger (both written in pencil) ran as follows:

Captain Wragge. Post-office, Bristol.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN she returned to the house, Miss Garth made no attempt to conceal her unfavorable opinion of the stranger in black. His object was, no doubt, to obtain pecuniary assistance from Mrs. Vanstone. What the nature of his claim on her might be seemed less intelligible--unless it was the claim of a poor relation. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever mentioned, in the presence of her daughters, the name of Captain Wragge? Neither of them recollected to have heard it before. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever referred to any poor relations who were dependent on her? On the contrary she had mentioned of late years that she doubted having any relations at all who were still living. And yet Captain Wragge had plainly declared that the name on his card would recall "a family matter" to Mrs. Vanstone's memory. What did it mean? A false statement, on the stranger's part, without any intelligible reason for making it? Or a second mystery, following close on the heels of the mysterious journey to London?

All the probabilities seemed to point to some hidden connection between the "family affairs" which had taken Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone so suddenly from home and the "family matter" associated with the name of Captain Wragge. Miss Garth's doubts thronged back irresistibly on her mind as she sealed her letter to Mrs. Vanstone, with the captain's card added by way of inclosure.

By return of post the answer arrived.

Always the earliest riser among the ladies of the house, Miss Garth was alone in the breakfast-room when the letter was brought in. Her first glance at its contents convinced her of the necessity of reading it carefully through in retirement, before any embarrassing questions could be put to her. Leaving a message with the servant requesting Norah to make the tea that morning, she went upstairs at once to the solitude and security of her own room.

Mrs. Vanstone's letter extended to some length. The first part of it referred to Captain Wragge, and entered unreservedly into all necessary explanations relating to the man himself and to the motive which had brought him to Combe-Raven.

It appeared from Mrs. Vanstone's statement that her mother had been twice married. Her mother's first husband had been a certain Doctor Wragge--a widower with young children; and one of those children was now the

unmilitary-looking captain, whose address was "Post-office, Bristol." Mrs. Wragge had left no family by her first husband; and had afterward married Mrs. Vanstone's father. Of that second marriage Mrs. Vanstone herself was the only issue. She had lost both her parents while she was still a young woman; and, in course of years, her mother's family connections (who were then her nearest surviving relatives) had been one after another removed by death. She was left, at the present writing, without a relation in the world--excepting, perhaps, certain cousins whom she had never seen, and of whose existence even, at the present moment, she possessed no positive knowledge.

Under these circumstances, what family claim had Captain Wragge on Mrs. Vanstone?

None whatever. As the son of her mother's first husband, by that husband's first wife, not even the widest stretch of courtesy could have included him at any time in the list of Mrs. Vanstone's most distant relations. Well knowing this (the letter proceeded to say), he had nevertheless persisted in forcing himself upon her as a species of family connection: and she had weakly sanctioned the intrusion, solely from the dread that he would otherwise introduce himself to Mr. Vanstone's notice, and take unblushing advantage of Mr. Vanstone's generosity. Shrinking, naturally, from allowing her husband to be annoyed, and probably cheated as well, by any person who claimed, however preposterously, a family connection with herself, it had been her practice, for many years past, to assist the captain from her own purse, on the condition that he should never come near the house, and that he should not presume to make any application whatever to Mr. Vanstone.

Readily admitting the imprudence of this course, Mrs. Vanstone further explained that she had perhaps been the more inclined to adopt it through having been always accustomed, in her early days, to see the captain living now upon one member, and now upon another, of her mother's family. Possessed of abilities which might have raised him to distinction in almost any career that he could have chosen, he had nevertheless, from his youth upward, been a disgrace to all his relatives. He had been expelled the militia regiment in which he once held a commission. He had tried one employment after another, and had discredibly failed in all. He had lived on his wits, in the lowest and basest meaning of the phrase. He had married a poor ignorant woman, who had served as a waitress at some low eating-house, who had unexpectedly come into a little money, and whose small inheritance he had mercilessly squandered to the last farthing. In plain terms, he was an incorrigible scoundrel; and he had now added one more to the list of his many misdemeanors by impudently breaking the conditions

on which Mrs. Vanstone had hitherto assisted him. She had written at once to the address indicated on his card, in such terms and to such purpose as would prevent him, she hoped and believed, from ever venturing near the house again. Such were the terms in which Mrs. Vanstone concluded that first part of her letter which referred exclusively to Captain Wragge.

Although the statement thus presented implied a weakness in Mrs. Vanstone's character which Miss Garth, after many years of intimate experience, had never detected, she accepted the explanation as a matter of course; receiving it all the more readily inasmuch as it might, without impropriety, be communicated in substance to appease the irritated curiosity of the two young ladies. For this reason especially she perused the first half of the letter with an agreeable sense of relief. Far different was the impression produced on her when she advanced to the second half, and when she had read it to the end.

The second part of the letter was devoted to the subject of the journey to London.

Mrs. Vanstone began by referring to the long and intimate friendship which had existed between Miss Garth and herself. She now felt it due to that friendship to explain confidentially the motive which had induced her to leave home with her husband. Miss Garth had delicately refrained from showing it, but she must naturally have felt, and must still be feeling, great surprise at the mystery in which their departure had been involved; and she must doubtless have asked herself why Mrs. Vanstone should have been associated with family affairs which (in her independent position as to relatives) must necessarily concern Mr. Vanstone alone.

Without touching on those affairs, which it was neither desirable nor necessary to do, Mrs. Vanstone then proceeded to say that she would at once set all Miss Garth's doubts at rest, so far as they related to herself, by one plain acknowledgment. Her object in accompanying her husband to London was to see a certain celebrated physician, and to consult him privately on a very delicate and anxious matter connected with the state of her health. In plainer terms still, this anxious matter meant nothing less than the possibility that she might again become a mother.

When the doubt had first suggested itself she had treated it as a mere delusion. The long interval that had elapsed since the birth of her last child; the serious illness which had afflicted her after the death of that child in infancy; the time of life at which she had now arrived--all inclined her to dismiss the idea as soon as it arose in her mind. It had returned again and

again in spite of her. She had felt the necessity of consulting the highest medical authority; and had shrunk, at the same time, from alarming her daughters by summoning a London physician to the house. The medical opinion, sought under the circumstances already mentioned, had now been obtained. Her doubt was confirmed as a certainty; and the result, which might be expected to take place toward the end of the summer, was, at her age and with her constitutional peculiarities, a subject for serious future anxiety, to say the least of it. The physician had done his best to encourage her; but she had understood the drift of his questions more clearly than he supposed, and she knew that he looked to the future with more than ordinary doubt.

Having disclosed these particulars, Mrs. Vanstone requested that they might be kept a secret between her correspondent and herself. She had felt unwilling to mention her suspicions to Miss Garth, until those suspicions had been confirmed--and she now recoiled, with even greater reluctance, from allowing her daughters to be in any way alarmed about her. It would be best to dismiss the subject for the present, and to wait hopefully till the summer came. In the meantime they would all, she trusted, be happily reunited on the twenty-third of the month, which Mr. Vanstone had fixed on as the day for their return. With this intimation, and with the customary messages, the letter, abruptly and confusedly, came to an end.

For the first few minutes, a natural sympathy for Mrs. Vanstone was the only feeling of which Miss Garth was conscious after she had laid the letter down. Ere long, however, there rose obscurely on her mind a doubt which perplexed and distressed her. Was the explanation which she had just read really as satisfactory and as complete as it professed to be? Testing it plainly by facts, surely not.

On the morning of her departure, Mrs. Vanstone had unquestionably left the house in good spirits. At her age, and in her state of health, were good spirits compatible with such an errand to a physician as the errand on which she was bent? Then, again, had that letter from New Orleans, which had necessitated Mr. Vanstone's departure, no share in occasioning his wife's departure as well? Why, otherwise, had she looked up so eagerly the moment her daughter mentioned the postmark. Granting the avowed motive for her journey--did not her manner, on the morning when the letter was opened, and again on the morning of departure, suggest the existence of some other motive which her letter kept concealed?

If it was so, the conclusion that followed was a very distressing one. Mrs. Vanstone, feeling what was due to her long friendship with Miss Garth, had

apparently placed the fullest confidence in her, on one subject, by way of unsuspectingly maintaining the strictest reserve toward her on another. Naturally frank and straightforward in all her own dealings, Miss Garth shrank from plainly pursuing her doubts to this result: a want of loyalty toward her tried and valued friend seemed implied in the mere dawning of it on her mind.

She locked up the letter in her desk; roused herself resolutely to attend to the passing interests of the day; and went downstairs again to the breakfast-room. Amid many uncertainties, this at least was clear, Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone were coming back on the twenty-third of the month. Who could say what new revelations might not come back with them?

CHAPTER IV.

No new revelations came back with them: no anticipations associated with their return were realized. On the one forbidden subject of their errand in London, there was no moving either the master or the mistress of the house. Whatever their object might have been, they had to all appearance successfully accomplished it--for they both returned in perfect possession of their every-day looks and manners. Mrs. Vanstone's spirits had subsided to their natural quiet level; Mr. Vanstone's imperturbable cheerfulness sat as easily and indolently on him as usual. This was the one noticeable result of their journey--this, and no more. Had the household revolution run its course already? Was the secret thus far hidden impenetrably, hidden forever?

Nothing in this world is hidden forever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has been drowned. Fire itself leaves the confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it. Hate breaks its prison-secrecy in the thoughts, through the doorway of the eyes; and Love finds the Judas who betrays it by a kiss. Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen.

How was the secret now hidden in the household at Combe-Raven doomed to disclose itself? Through what coming event in the daily lives of the father, the mother, and the daughters, was the law of revelation destined to break the fatal way to discovery? The way opened (unseen by the parents, and unsuspected by the children) through the first event that happened after Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone's return--an event which presented, on the surface of it, no interest of greater importance than the trivial social ceremony of a morning call.

Three days after the master and mistress of Combe-Raven had come back, the female members of the family happened to be assembled together in the morning-room. The view from the windows looked over the flower-garden and shrubbery; this last being protected at its outward extremity by a fence, and approached from the lane beyond by a wicket-gate. During an interval in the conversation, the attention of the ladies was suddenly attracted to this gate, by the sharp sound of the iron latch falling in its socket. Some one had entered the shrubbery from the lane; and Magdalen at once placed

herself at the window to catch the first sight of the visitor through the trees.

After a few minutes, the figure of a gentleman became visible, at the point where the shrubbery path joined the winding garden-walk which led to the house. Magdalen looked at him attentively, without appearing, at first, to know who he was. As he came nearer, however, she started in astonishment; and, turning quickly to her mother and sister, proclaimed the gentleman in the garden to be no other than "Mr. Francis Clare."

The visitor thus announced was the son of Mr. Vanstone's oldest associate and nearest neighbor.

Mr. Clare the elder inhabited an unpretending little cottage, situated just outside the shrubbery fence which marked the limit of the Combe-Raven grounds. Belonging to the younger branch of a family of great antiquity, the one inheritance of importance that he had derived from his ancestors was the possession of a magnificent library, which not only filled all the rooms in his modest little dwelling, but lined the staircases and passages as well. Mr. Clare's books represented the one important interest of Mr. Clare's life. He had been a widower for many years past, and made no secret of his philosophical resignation to the loss of his wife. As a father, he regarded his family of three sons in the light of a necessary domestic evil, which perpetually threatened the sanctity of his study and the safety of his books. When the boys went to school, Mr. Clare said "good-by" to them--and "thank God" to himself. As for his small income, and his still smaller domestic establishment, he looked at them both from the same satirically indifferent point of view. He called himself a pauper with a pedigree. He abandoned the entire direction of his household to the slatternly old woman who was his only servant, on the condition that she was never to venture near his books, with a duster in her hand, from one year's end to the other. His favorite poets were Horace and Pope; his chosen philosophers, Hobbes and Voltaire. He took his exercise and his fresh air under protest; and always walked the same distance to a yard, on the ugliest high-road in the neighborhood. He was crooked of back, and quick of temper. He could digest radishes, and sleep after green tea. His views of human nature were the views of Diogenes, tempered by Rochefoucauld; his personal habits were slovenly in the last degree; and his favorite boast was that he had outlived all human prejudices.

Such was this singular man, in his more superficial aspects. What nobler qualities he might possess below the surface, no one had ever discovered. Mr. Vanstone, it is true, stoutly asserted that "Mr. Clare's worst side was his outside"--but in this expression of opinion he stood alone among his

neighbors. The association between these two widely-dissimilar men had lasted for many years, and was almost close enough to be called a friendship. They had acquired a habit of meeting to smoke together on certain evenings in the week, in the cynic-philosopher's study, and of there disputing on every imaginable subject--Mr. Vanstone flourishing the stout cudgels of assertion, and Mr. Clare meeting him with the keen edged-tools of sophistry. They generally quarreled at night, and met on the neutral ground of the shrubbery to be reconciled together the next morning. The bond of intercourse thus curiously established between them was strengthened on Mr. Vanstone's side by a hearty interest in his neighbor's three sons--an interest by which those sons benefited all the more importantly, seeing that one of the prejudices which their father had outlived was a prejudice in favor of his own children.

"I look at those boys," the philosopher was accustomed to say, "with a perfectly impartial eye; I dismiss the unimportant accident of their birth from all consideration; and I find them below the average in every respect. The only excuse which a poor gentleman has for presuming to exist in the nineteenth century, is the excuse of extraordinary ability. My boys have been addle-headed from infancy. If I had any capital to give them, I should make Frank a butcher, Cecil a baker, and Arthur a grocer--those being the only human vocations I know of which are certain to be always in request. As it is, I have no money to help them with; and they have no brains to help themselves. They appear to me to be three human superfluities in dirty jackets and noisy boots; and, unless they clear themselves off the community by running away, I don't myself profess to see what is to be done with them."

Fortunately for the boys, Mr. Vanstone's views were still fast imprisoned in the ordinary prejudices. At his intercession, and through his influence, Frank, Cecil, and Arthur were received on the foundation of a well-reputed grammar-school. In holiday-time they were mercifully allowed the run of Mr. Vanstone's paddock; and were humanized and refined by association, indoors, with Mrs. Vanstone and her daughters. On these occasions, Mr. Clare used sometimes to walk across from his cottage (in his dressing-gown and slippers), and look at the boys disparagingly, through the window or over the fence, as if they were three wild animals whom his neighbor was attempting to tame. "You and your wife are excellent people," he used to say to Mr. Vanstone. "I respect your honest prejudices in favor of those boys of mine with all my heart. But you are so wrong about them--you are indeed! I wish to give no offense; I speak quite impartially--but mark my words, Vanstone: they'll all three turn out ill, in spite of everything you can do to prevent it."

In later years, when Frank had reached the age of seventeen, the same curious shifting of the relative positions of parent and friend between the two neighbors was exemplified more absurdly than ever. A civil engineer in the north of England, who owed certain obligations to Mr. Vanstone, expressed his willingness to take Frank under superintendence, on terms of the most favorable kind. When this proposal was received, Mr. Clare, as usual, first shifted his own character as Frank's father on Mr. Vanstone's shoulders--and then moderated his neighbor's parental enthusiasm from the point of view of an impartial spectator.

"It's the finest chance for Frank that could possibly have happened," cried Mr. Vanstone, in a glow of fatherly enthusiasm.

"My good fellow, he won't take it," retorted Mr. Clare, with the icy composure of a disinterested friend.

"But he shall take it," persisted Mr. Vanstone.

"Say he shall have a mathematical head," rejoined Mr. Clare; "say he shall possess industry, ambition, and firmness of purpose. Pooh! pooh! you don't look at him with my impartial eyes. I say, No mathematics, no industry, no ambition, no firmness of purpose. Frank is a compound of negatives--and there they are."

"Hang your negatives!" shouted Mr. Vanstone. "I don't care a rush for negatives, or affirmatives either. Frank shall have this splendid chance; and I'll lay you any wager you like he makes the best of it."

"I am not rich enough to lay wagers, usually," replied Mr. Clare; "but I think I have got a guinea about the house somewhere; and I'll lay you that guinea Frank comes back on our hands like a bad shilling."

"Done!" said Mr. Vanstone. "No: stop a minute! I won't do the lad's character the injustice of backing it at even money. I'll lay you five to one Frank turns up trumps in this business! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking of him as you do. What sort of hocus-pocus you bring it about by, I don't pretend to know; but you always end in making me take his part, as if I was his father instead of you. Ah yes! give you time, and you'll defend yourself. I won't give you time; I won't have any of your special pleading. Black's white according to you. I don't care: it's black for all that. You may talk nineteen to the dozen--I shall write to my friend and say Yes, in Frank's interests, by to-day's post."

Such were the circumstances under which Mr. Francis Clare departed for the north of England, at the age of seventeen, to start in life as a civil engineer.

From time to time, Mr. Vanstone's friend communicated with him on the subject of the new pupil. Frank was praised, as a quiet, gentleman-like, interesting lad--but he was also reported to be rather slow at acquiring the rudiments of engineering science. Other letters, later in date, described him as a little too ready to despond about himself; as having been sent away, on that account, to some new railway works, to see if change of scene would rouse him; and as having benefited in every respect by the experiment--except perhaps in regard to his professional studies, which still advanced but slowly. Subsequent communications announced his departure, under care of a trustworthy foreman, for some public works in Belgium; touched on the general benefit he appeared to derive from this new change; praised his excellent manners and address, which were of great assistance in facilitating business communications with the foreigners--and passed over in ominous silence the main question of his actual progress in the acquirement of knowledge. These reports, and many others which resembled them, were all conscientiously presented by Frank's friend to the attention of Frank's father. On each occasion, Mr. Clare exulted over Mr. Vanstone, and Mr. Vanstone quarreled with Mr. Clare. "One of these days you'll wish you hadn't laid that wager," said the cynic philosopher. "One of these days I shall have the blessed satisfaction of pocketing your guinea," cried the sanguine friend. Two years had then passed since Frank's departure. In one year more results asserted themselves, and settled the question.

Two days after Mr. Vanstone's return from London, he was called away from the breakfast-table before he had found time enough to look over his letters, delivered by the morning's post. Thrusting them into one of the pockets of his shooting-jacket, he took the letters out again, at one grasp, to read them when occasion served, later in the day. The grasp included the whole correspondence, with one exception--that exception being a final report from the civil engineer, which notified the termination of the connection between his pupil and himself, and the immediate return of Frank to his father's house.

While this important announcement lay unsuspected in Mr. Vanstone's pocket, the object of it was traveling home, as fast as railways could take him. At half-past ten at night, while Mr. Clare was sitting in studious solitude over his books and his green tea, with his favorite black cat to keep him company, he heard footsteps in the passage--the door opened--and

Frank stood before him.

Ordinary men would have been astonished. But the philosopher's composure was not to be shaken by any such trifle as the unexpected return of his eldest son. He could not have looked up more calmly from his learned volume if Frank had been absent for three minutes instead of three years.

"Exactly what I predicted," said Mr. Clare. "Don't interrupt me by making explanations; and don't frighten the cat. If there is anything to eat in the kitchen, get it and go to bed. You can walk over to Combe-Raven tomorrow and give this message from me to Mr. Vanstone: 'Father's compliments, sir, and I have come back upon your hands like a bad shilling, as he always said I should. He keeps his own guinea, and takes your five; and he hopes you'll mind what he says to you another time.' That is the message. Shut the door after you. Good-night."

Under these unfavorable auspices, Mr. Francis Clare made his appearance the next morning in the grounds at Combe-Raven; and, something doubtful of the reception that might await him, slowly approached the precincts of the house.

It was not wonderful that Magdalen should have failed to recognize him when he first appeared in view. He had gone away a backward lad of seventeen; he returned a young man of twenty. His slim figure had now acquired strength and grace, and had increased in stature to the medium height. The small regular features, which he was supposed to have inherited from his mother, were rounded and filled out, without having lost their remarkable delicacy of form. His beard was still in its infancy; and nascent lines of whisker traced their modest way sparsely down his cheeks. His gentle, wandering brown eyes would have looked to better advantage in a woman's face--they wanted spirit and firmness to fit them for the face of a man. His hands had the same wandering habit as his eyes; they were constantly changing from one position to another, constantly twisting and turning any little stray thing they could pick up. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, well-bred--but no close observer could look at him without suspecting that the stout old family stock had begun to wear out in the later generations, and that Mr. Francis Clare had more in him of the shadow of his ancestors than of the substance.

When the astonishment caused by his appearance had partially subsided, a search was instituted for the missing report. It was found in the remotest recesses of Mr. Vanstone's capacious pocket, and was read by that gentleman on the spot.

The plain facts, as stated by the engineer, were briefly these: Frank was not possessed of the necessary abilities to fit him for his new calling; and it was useless to waste time by keeping him any longer in an employment for which he had no vocation. This, after three years' trial, being the conviction on both sides, the master had thought it the most straightforward course for the pupil to go home and candidly place results before his father and his friends. In some other pursuit, for which he was more fit, and in which he could feel an interest, he would no doubt display the industry and perseverance which he had been too much discouraged to practice in the profession that he had now abandoned. Personally, he was liked by all who knew him; and his future prosperity was heartily desired by the many friends whom he had made in the North. Such was the substance of the report, and so it came to an end.

Many men would have thought the engineer's statement rather too carefully worded; and, suspecting him of trying to make the best of a bad case, would have entertained serious doubts on the subject of Frank's future. Mr. Vanstone was too easy-tempered and sanguine--and too anxious, as well, not to yield his old antagonist an inch more ground than he could help--to look at the letter from any such unfavorable point of view. Was it Frank's fault if he had not got the stuff in him that engineers were made of? Did no other young men ever begin life with a false start? Plenty began in that way, and got over it, and did wonders afterward. With these commentaries on the letter, the kind-hearted gentleman patted Frank on the shoulder. "Cheer up, my lad!" said Mr. Vanstone. "We will be even with your father one of these days, though he has won the wager this time!"

The example thus set by the master of the house was followed at once by the family--with the solitary exception of Norah, whose incurable formality and reserve expressed themselves, not too graciously, in her distant manner toward the visitor. The rest, led by Magdalen (who had been Frank's favorite playfellow in past times) glided back into their old easy habits with him without an effort. He was "Frank" with all of them but Norah, who persisted in addressing him as "Mr. Clare." Even the account he was now encouraged to give of the reception accorded to him by his father, on the previous night, failed to disturb Norah's gravity. She sat with her dark, handsome face steadily averted, her eyes cast down, and the rich color in her cheeks warmer and deeper than usual. All the rest, Miss Garth included, found old Mr. Clare's speech of welcome to his son quite irresistible. The noise and merriment were at their height when the servant came in, and struck the whole party dumb by the announcement of visitors in the drawing-room. "Mr. Marrable, Mrs. Marrable, and Miss Marrable; Evergreen Lodge, Clifton."

Norah rose as readily as if the new arrivals had been a relief to her mind. Mrs. Vanstone was the next to leave her chair. These two went away first, to receive the visitors. Magdalen, who preferred the society of her father and Frank, pleaded hard to be left behind; but Miss Garth, after granting five minutes' grace, took her into custody and marched her out of the room. Frank rose to take his leave.

"No, no," said Mr. Vanstone, detaining him. "Don't go. These people won't stop long. Mr. Marrable's a merchant at Bristol. I've met him once or twice, when the girls forced me to take them to parties at Clifton. Mere acquaintances, nothing more. Come and smoke a cigar in the greenhouse. Hang all visitors--they worry one's life out. I'll appear at the last moment with an apology; and you shall follow me at a safe distance, and be a proof that I was really engaged."

Proposing this ingenious stratagem in a confidential whisper, Mr. Vanstone took Frank's arm and led him round the house by the back way. The first ten minutes of seclusion in the conservatory passed without events of any kind. At the end of that time, a flying figure in bright garments flashed upon the two gentlemen through the glass--the door was flung open--flower-pots fell in homage to passing petticoats--and Mr. Vanstone's youngest daughter ran up to him at headlong speed, with every external appearance of having suddenly taken leave of her senses.

"Papa! the dream of my whole life is realized," she said, as soon as she could speak. "I shall fly through the roof of the greenhouse if somebody doesn't hold me down. The Marrables have come here with an invitation. Guess, you darling--guess what they're going to give at Evergreen Lodge!"

"A ball!" said Mr. Vanstone, without a moment's hesitation.

"Private Theatricals!!!" cried Magdalen, her clear young voice ringing through the conservatory like a bell; her loose sleeves falling back and showing her round white arms to the dimpled elbows, as she clapped her hands ecstatically in the air. "'The Rivals' is the play, papa--'The Rivals,' by the famous what's-his-name--and they want ME to act! The one thing in the whole universe that I long to do most. It all depends on you. Mamma shakes her head; and Miss Garth looks daggers; and Norah's as sulky as usual--but if you say Yes, they must all three give way and let me do as I like. Say Yes," she pleaded, nestling softly up to her father, and pressing her lips with a fond gentleness to his ear, as she whispered the next words. "Say Yes, and I'll be a good girl for the rest of my life."

"A good girl?" repeated Mr. Vanstone--"a mad girl, I think you must mean. Hang these people and their theatricals! I shall have to go indoors and see about this matter. You needn't throw away your cigar, Frank. You're well out of the business, and you can stop here."

"No, he can't," said Magdalen. "He's in the business, too."

Mr. Francis Clare had hitherto remained modestly in the background. He now came forward with a face expressive of speechless amazement.

"Yes," continued Magdalen, answering his blank look of inquiry with perfect composure. "You are to act. Miss Marrable and I have a turn for business, and we settled it all in five minutes. There are two parts in the play left to be filled. One is Lucy, the waiting-maid; which is the character I have undertaken--with papa's permission," she added, slyly pinching her father's arm; "and he won't say No, will he? First, because he's a darling; secondly, because I love him, and he loves me; thirdly, because there is never any difference of opinion between us (is there?); fourthly, because I give him a kiss, which naturally stops his mouth and settles the whole question. Dear me, I'm wandering. Where was I just now? Oh yes! explaining myself to Frank--"

"I beg your pardon," began Frank, attempting, at this point, to enter his protest.

"The second character in the play," pursued Magdalen, without taking the smallest notice of the protest, "is Falkland--a jealous lover, with a fine flow of language. Miss Marrable and I discussed Falkland privately on the window-seat while the rest were talking. She is a delightful girl--so impulsive, so sensible, so entirely unaffected. She confided in me. She said: 'One of our miseries is that we can't find a gentleman who will grapple with the hideous difficulties of Falkland.' Of course I soothed her. Of course I said: 'I've got the gentleman, and he shall grapple immediately.'--'Oh heavens! who is he?'--'Mr. Francis Clare.'--'And where is he?'--'In the house at this moment.'--'Will you be so very charming, Miss Vanstone, as to fetch him?'--'I'll fetch him, Miss Marrable, with the greatest pleasure.' I left the window-seat--I rushed into the morning-room--I smelled cigars--I followed the smell--and here I am."

"It's a compliment, I know, to be asked to act," said Frank, in great embarrassment. "But I hope you and Miss Marrable will excuse me--"

"Certainly not. Miss Marrable and I are both remarkable for the firmness of our characters. When we say Mr. So-and-So is positively to act the part of Falkland, we positively mean it. Come in and be introduced."

"But I never tried to act. I don't know how."

"Not of the slightest consequence. If you don't know how, come to me and I'll teach you."

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Vanstone. "What do you know about it?"

"Pray, papa, be serious! I have the strongest internal conviction that I could act every character in the play--Falkland included. Don't let me have to speak a second time, Frank. Come and be introduced."

She took her father's arm, and moved on with him to the door of the greenhouse. At the steps, she turned and looked round to see if Frank was following her. It was only the action of a moment; but in that moment her natural firmness of will rallied all its resources--strengthened itself with the influence of her beauty --commanded--and conquered. She looked lovely: the flush was tenderly bright in her cheeks; the radiant pleasure shone and sparkled in her eyes; the position of her figure, turned suddenly from the waist upward, disclosed its delicate strength, its supple firmness, its seductive, serpentine grace. "Come!" she said, with a coquettish beckoning action of her head. "Come, Frank!"

Few men of forty would have resisted her at that moment. Frank was twenty last birthday. In other words, he threw aside his cigar, and followed her out of the greenhouse.

As he turned and closed the door--in the instant when he lost sight of her--his disinclination to be associated with the private theatricals revived. At the foot of the house-steps he stopped again; plucked a twig from a plant near him; broke it in his hand; and looked about him uneasily, on this side and on that. The path to the left led back to his father's cottage--the way of escape lay open. Why not take it?

While he still hesitated, Mr. Vanstone and his daughter reached the top of the steps. Once more, Magdalen looked round--looked with her resistless beauty, with her all-conquering smile. She beckoned again; and again he followed her--up the steps, and over the threshold. The door closed on them.

So, with a trifling gesture of invitation on one side, with a trifling act of

compliance on the other: so--with no knowledge in his mind, with no thought in hers, of the secret still hidden under the journey to London--they took the way which led to that secret's discovery, through many a darker winding that was yet to come.

CHAPTER V.

MR. VANSTONE'S inquiries into the proposed theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge were answered by a narrative of dramatic disasters; of which Miss Marrable impersonated the innocent cause, and in which her father and mother played the parts of chief victims.

Miss Marrable was that hardest of all born tyrants--an only child. She had never granted a constitutional privilege to her oppressed father and mother since the time when she cut her first tooth. Her seventeenth birthday was now near at hand; she had decided on celebrating it by acting a play; had issued her orders accordingly; and had been obeyed by her docile parents as implicitly as usual. Mrs. Marrable gave up the drawing-room to be laid waste for a stage and a theater. Mr. Marrable secured the services of a respectable professional person to drill the young ladies and gentlemen, and to accept all the other responsibilities incidental to creating a dramatic world out of a domestic chaos. Having further accustomed themselves to the breaking of furniture and the staining of walls--to thumping, tumbling, hammering, and screaming; to doors always banging, and to footsteps perpetually running up and down stairs--the nominal master and mistress of the house fondly believed that their chief troubles were over. Innocent and fatal delusion! It is one thing in private society to set up the stage and choose the play--it is another thing altogether to find the actors. Hitherto, only the small preliminary annoyances proper to the occasion had shown themselves at Evergreen Lodge. The sound and serious troubles were all to come.

"The Rivals" having been chosen as the play, Miss Marrable, as a matter of course, appropriated to herself the part of "Lydia Languish." One of her favored swains next secured "Captain Absolute," and another laid violent hands on "Sir Lucius O'Trigger." These two were followed by an accommodating spinster relative, who accepted the heavy dramatic responsibility of "Mrs. Malaprop"--and there the theatrical proceedings came to a pause. Nine more speaking characters were left to be fitted with representatives; and with that unavoidable necessity the serious troubles began.

All the friends of the family suddenly became unreliable people, for the first time in their lives. After encouraging the idea of the play, they declined the personal sacrifice of acting in it--or, they accepted characters, and then broke down in the effort to study them--or they volunteered to take the parts

which they knew were already engaged, and declined the parts which were waiting to be acted--or they were afflicted with weak constitutions, and mischievously fell ill when they were wanted at rehearsal--or they had Puritan relatives in the background, and, after slipping into their parts cheerfully at the week's beginning, oozed out of them penitently, under serious family pressure, at the week's end. Meanwhile, the carpenters hammered and the scenes rose. Miss Marrable, whose temperament was sensitive, became hysterical under the strain of perpetual anxiety; the family doctor declined to answer for the nervous consequences if something was not done. Renewed efforts were made in every direction. Actors and actresses were sought with a desperate disregard of all considerations of personal fitness. Necessity, which knows no law, either in the drama or out of it, accepted a lad of eighteen as the representative of "Sir Anthony Absolute"; the stage-manager undertaking to supply the necessary wrinkles from the illimitable resources of theatrical art. A lady whose age was unknown, and whose personal appearance was stout--but whose heart was in the right place--volunteered to act the part of the sentimental "Julia," and brought with her the dramatic qualification of habitually wearing a wig in private life. Thanks to these vigorous measures, the play was at last supplied with representatives--always excepting the two unmanageable characters of "Lucy" the waiting-maid, and "Falkland," Julia's jealous lover. Gentlemen came; saw Julia at rehearsal; observed her stoutness and her wig; omitted to notice that her heart was in the right place; quailed at the prospect, apologized, and retired. Ladies read the part of "Lucy"; remarked that she appeared to great advantage in the first half of the play, and faded out of it altogether in the latter half; objected to pass from the notice of the audience in that manner, when all the rest had a chance of distinguishing themselves to the end; shut up the book, apologized, and retired. In eight days more the night of performance would arrive; a phalanx of social martyrs two hundred strong had been convened to witness it; three full rehearsals were absolutely necessary; and two characters in the play were not filled yet. With this lamentable story, and with the humblest apologies for presuming on a slight acquaintance, the Marrables appeared at Combe-Raven, to appeal to the young ladies for a "Lucy," and to the universe for a "Falkland," with the mendicant pertinacity of a family in despair.

This statement of circumstances--addressed to an audience which included a father of Mr. Vanstone's disposition, and a daughter of Magdalen's temperament--produced the result which might have been anticipated from the first.

Either misinterpreting, or disregarding, the ominous silence preserved by his wife and Miss Garth, Mr. Vanstone not only gave Magdalen permission

to assist the forlorn dramatic company, but accepted an invitation to witness the performance for Norah and himself. Mrs. Vanstone declined accompanying them on account of her health; and Miss Garth only engaged to make one among the audience conditionally on not being wanted at home. The "parts" of "Lucy" and "Falkland" (which the distressed family carried about with them everywhere, like incidental maladies) were handed to their representatives on the spot. Frank's faint remonstrances were rejected without a hearing; the days and hours of rehearsal were carefully noted down on the covers of the parts; and the Marrables took their leave, with a perfect explosion of thanks--father, mother, and daughter sowing their expressions of gratitude broadcast, from the drawing-room door to the garden-gates.

As soon as the carriage had driven away, Magdalen presented herself to the general observation under an entirely new aspect.

"If any more visitors call to-day," she said, with the profoundest gravity of look and manner, "I am not at home. This is a far more serious matter than any of you suppose. Go somewhere by yourself, Frank, and read over your part, and don't let your attention wander if you can possibly help it. I shall not be accessible before the evening. If you will come here--with papa's permission--after tea, my views on the subject of Falkland will be at your disposal. Thomas! whatever else the gardener does, he is not to make any floricultural noises under my window. For the rest of the afternoon I shall be immersed in study--and the quieter the house is, the more obliged I shall feel to everybody."

Before Miss Garth's battery of reproof could open fire, before the first outburst of Mr. Vanstone's hearty laughter could escape his lips, she bowed to them with imperturbable gravity; ascended the house-steps, for the first time in her life, at a walk instead of a run, and retired then and there to the bedroom regions. Frank's helpless astonishment at her disappearance added a new element of absurdity to the scene. He stood first on one leg and then on the other; rolling and unrolling his part, and looking piteously in the faces of the friends about him. "I know I can't do it," he said. "May I come in after tea, and hear Magdalen's views? Thank you--I'll look in about eight. Don't tell my father about this acting, please; I should never hear the last of it." Those were the only words he had spirit enough to utter. He drifted away aimlessly in the direction of the shrubbery, with the part hanging open in his hand--the most incapable of Falklands, and the most helpless of mankind.

Frank's departure left the family by themselves, and was the signal

accordingly for an attack on Mr. Vanstone's inveterate carelessness in the exercise of his paternal authority.

"What could you possibly be thinking of, Andrew, when you gave your consent?" said Mrs. Vanstone. "Surely my silence was a sufficient warning to you to say No?"

"A mistake, Mr. Vanstone," chimed in Miss Garth. "Made with the best intentions--but a mistake for all that."

"It may be a mistake," said Norah, taking her father's part, as usual. "But I really don't see how papa, or any one else, could have declined, under the circumstances."

"Quite right, my dear," observed Mr. Vanstone. "The circumstances, as you say, were dead against me. Here were these unfortunate people in a scrape on one side; and Magdalen, on the other, mad to act. I couldn't say I had methodistical objections--I've nothing methodistical about me. What other excuse could I make? The Marrables are respectable people, and keep the best company in Clifton. What harm can she get in their house? If you come to prudence and that sort of thing--why shouldn't Magdalen do what Miss Marrable does? There! there! let the poor things act, and amuse themselves. We were their age once--and it's no use making a fuss--and that's all I've got to say about it."

With that characteristic defense of his own conduct, Mr. Vanstone sauntered back to the greenhouse to smoke another cigar.

"I didn't say so to papa," said Norah, taking her mother's arm on the way back to the house, "but the bad result of the acting, in my opinion, will be the familiarity it is sure to encourage between Magdalen and Francis Clare."

"You are prejudiced against Frank, my love," said Mrs. Vanstone.

Norah's soft, secret, hazel eyes sank to the ground; she said no more. Her opinions were unchangeable--but she never disputed with anybody. She had the great failing of a reserved nature--the failing of obstinacy; and the great merit--the merit of silence. "What is your head running on now?" thought Miss Garth, casting a sharp look at Norah's dark, downcast face. "You're one of the impenetrable sort. Give me Magdalen, with all her perversities; I can see daylight through her. You're as dark as night."

The hours of the afternoon passed away, and still Magdalen remained shut

up in her own room. No restless footsteps pattered on the stairs; no nimble tongue was heard chattering here, there, and everywhere, from the garret to the kitchen--the house seemed hardly like itself, with the one ever-disturbing element in the family serenity suddenly withdrawn from it. Anxious to witness with her own eyes the reality of a transformation in which past experience still inclined her to disbelieve, Miss Garth ascended to Magdalen's room, knocked twice at the door, received no answer, opened it and looked in.

There sat Magdalen, in an arm-chair before the long looking-glass, with all her hair let down over her shoulders; absorbed in the study of her part and comfortably arrayed in her morning wrapper, until it was time to dress for dinner. And there behind her sat the lady's-maid, slowly combing out the long heavy locks of her young mistress's hair, with the sleepy resignation of a woman who had been engaged in that employment for some hours past. The sun was shining; and the green shutters outside the window were closed. The dim light fell tenderly on the two quiet seated figures; on the little white bed, with the knots of rose-colored ribbon which looped up its curtains, and the bright dress for dinner laid ready across it; on the gayly painted bath, with its pure lining of white enamel; on the toilet-table with its sparkling trinkets, its crystal bottles, its silver bell with Cupid for a handle, its litter of little luxuries that adorn the shrine of a woman's bed-chamber. The luxurious tranquillity of the scene; the cool fragrance of flowers and perfumes in the atmosphere; the rapt attitude of Magdalen, absorbed over her reading; the monotonous regularity of movement in the maid's hand and arm, as she drew the comb smoothly through and through her mistress's hair--all conveyed the same soothing impression of drowsy, delicious quiet. On one side of the door were the broad daylight and the familiar realities of life. On the other was the dream-land of Elysian serenity--the sanctuary of unruffled repose.

Miss Garth paused on the threshold, and looked into the room in silence.

Magdalen's curious fancy for having her hair combed at all times and seasons was among the peculiarities of her character which were notorious to everybody in the house. It was one of her father's favorite jokes that she reminded him, on such occasions, of a cat having her back stroked, and that he always expected, if the combing were only continued long enough, to hear her purr. Extravagant as it may seem, the comparison was not altogether inappropriate. The girl's fervid temperament intensified the essentially feminine pleasure that most women feel in the passage of the comb through their hair, to a luxury of sensation which absorbed her in enjoyment, so serenely self-demonstrative, so drowsily deep that it did

irresistibly suggest a pet cat's enjoyment under a caressing hand. Intimately as Miss Garth was acquainted with this peculiarity in her pupil, she now saw it asserting itself for the first time, in association with mental exertion of any kind on Magdalen's part. Feeling, therefore, some curiosity to know how long the combing and the studying had gone on together, she ventured on putting the question, first to the mistress; and (receiving no answer in that quarter) secondly to the maid.

"All the afternoon, miss, off and on," was the weary answer. "Miss Magdalen says it soothes her feelings and clears her mind."

Knowing by experience that interference would be hopeless, under these circumstances, Miss Garth turned sharply and left the room. She smiled when she was outside on the landing. The female mind does occasionally--though not often--project itself into the future. Miss Garth was prophetically pitying Magdalen's unfortunate husband.

Dinner-time presented the fair student to the family eye in the same mentally absorbed aspect. On all ordinary occasions Magdalen's appetite would have terrified those feeble sentimentalists who affect to ignore the all-important influence which female feeding exerts in the production of female beauty. On this occasion she refused one dish after another with a resolution which implied the rarest of all modern martyrdoms--gastric martyrdom. "I have conceived the part of Lucy," she observed, with the demurest gravity. "The next difficulty is to make Frank conceive the part of Falkland. I see nothing to laugh at--you would all be serious enough if you had my responsibilities. No, papa--no wine to-day, thank you. I must keep my intelligence clear. Water, Thomas--and a little more jelly, I think, before you take it away."

When Frank presented himself in the evening, ignorant of the first elements of his part, she took him in hand, as a middle-aged schoolmistress might have taken in hand a backward little boy. The few attempts he made to vary the sternly practical nature of the evening's occupation by slipping in compliments sidelong she put away from her with the contemptuous self-possession of a woman of twice her age. She literally forced him into his part. Her father fell asleep in his chair. Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth lost their interest in the proceedings, retired to the further end of the room, and spoke together in whispers. It grew later and later; and still Magdalen never flinched from her task--still, with equal perseverance, Norah, who had been on the watch all through the evening, kept on the watch to the end. The distrust darkened and darkened on her face as she looked at her sister and Frank; as she saw how close they sat together, devoted to the same interest

and working to the same end. The clock on the mantel-piece pointed to half-past eleven before Lucy the resolute permitted Falkland the helpless to shut up his task-book for the night. "She's wonderfully clever, isn't she?" said Frank, taking leave of Mr. Vanstone at the hall door. "I'm to come to-morrow, and hear more of her views--if you have no objection. I shall never do it; don't tell her I said so. As fast as she teaches me one speech, the other goes out of my head. Discouraging, isn't it? Goodnight."

The next day but one was the day of the first full rehearsal. On the previous evening Mrs. Vanstone's spirits had been sadly depressed. At a private interview with Miss Garth she had referred again, of her own accord, to the subject of her letter from London--had spoken self-reproachfully of her weakness in admitting Captain Wragge's impudent claim to a family connection with her--and had then reverted to the state of her health and to the doubtful prospect that awaited her in the coming summer in a tone of despondency which it was very distressing to hear. Anxious to cheer her spirits, Miss Garth had changed the conversation as soon as possible--had referred to the approaching theatrical performance--and had relieved Mrs. Vanstone's mind of all anxiety in that direction, by announcing her intention of accompanying Magdalen to each rehearsal, and of not losing sight of her until she was safely back again in her father's house. Accordingly, when Frank presented himself at Combe-Raven on the eventful morning, there stood Miss Garth, prepared--in the interpolated character of Argus--to accompany Lucy and Falkland to the scene of trial. The railway conveyed the three, in excellent time, to Evergreen Lodge; and at one o'clock the rehearsal began.

CHAPTER VI.

"I HOPE Miss Vanstone knows her part?" whispered Mrs. Marrable, anxiously addressing herself to Miss Garth, in a corner of the theater.

"If airs and graces make an actress, ma'am, Magdalen's performance will astonish us all." With that reply, Miss Garth took out her work, and seated herself, on guard, in the center of the pit.

The manager perched himself, book in hand, on a stool close in front of the stage. He was an active little man, of a sweet and cheerful temper; and he gave the signal to begin with as patient an interest in the proceedings as if they had caused him no trouble in the past and promised him no difficulty in the future. The two characters which opened the comedy of *The Rivals*, "Fag" and "The Coachman," appeared on the scene--looked many sizes too tall for their canvas background, which represented a "Street in Bath"--exhibited the customary inability to manage their own arms, legs, and voices--went out severally at the wrong exits--and expressed their perfect approval of results, so far, by laughing heartily behind the scenes. "Silence, gentlemen, if you please," remonstrated the cheerful manager. "As loud as you like on the stage, but the audience mustn't hear you off it. Miss Marrable ready? Miss Vanstone ready? Easy there with the 'Street in Bath'; it's going up crooked! Face this way, Miss Marrable; full face, if you please. Miss Vanstone--" he checked himself suddenly. "Curious," he said, under his breath--"she fronts the audience of her own accord!" Lucy opened the scene in these words: "Indeed, ma'am, I traversed half the town in search of it: I don't believe there's a circulating library in Bath I haven't been at." The manager started in his chair. "My heart alive! she speaks out without telling!" The dialogue went on. Lucy produced the novels for Miss Lydia Languish's private reading from under her cloak. The manager rose excitably to his feet. Marvelous! No hurry with the books; no dropping them. She looked at the titles before she announced them to her mistress; she set down "Humphrey Clinker" on "The Tears of Sensibility" with a smart little smack which pointed the antithesis. One moment--and she announced Julia's visit; another--and she dropped the brisk waiting-maid's courtesy; a third--and she was off the stage on the side set down for her in the book. The manager wheeled round on his stool, and looked hard at Miss Garth. "I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said. "Miss Marrable told me, before we began, that this was the young lady's first attempt. It can't be, surely!"

"It is," replied Miss Garth, reflecting the manager's look of amazement on

her own face. Was it possible that Magdalen's unintelligible industry in the study of her part really sprang from a serious interest in her occupation--an interest which implied a natural fitness for it.

The rehearsal went on. The stout lady with the wig (and the excellent heart) personated the sentimental Julia from an inveterately tragic point of view, and used her handkerchief distractedly in the first scene. The spinster relative felt Mrs. Malaprop's mistakes in language so seriously, and took such extraordinary pains with her blunders, that they sounded more like exercises in elocution than anything else. The unhappy lad who led the forlorn hope of the company, in the person of "Sir Anthony Absolute," expressed the age and irascibility of his character by tottering incessantly at the knees, and thumping the stage perpetually with his stick. Slowly and clumsily, with constant interruptions and interminable mistakes, the first act dragged on, until Lucy appeared again to end it in soliloquy, with the confession of her assumed simplicity and the praise of her own cunning.

Here the stage artifice of the situation presented difficulties which Magdalen had not encountered in the first scene--and here, her total want of experience led her into more than one palpable mistake. The stage-manager, with an eagerness which he had not shown in the case of any other member of the company, interfered immediately, and set her right. At one point she was to pause, and take a turn on the stage--she did it. At another, she was to stop, toss her head, and look pertly at the audience--she did it. When she took out the paper to read the list of the presents she had received, could she give it a tap with her finger (Yes)? And lead off with a little laugh (Yes--after twice trying)? Could she read the different items with a sly look at the end of each sentence, straight at the pit (Yes, straight at the pit, and as sly as you please)? The manager's cheerful face beamed with approval. He tucked the play under his arm, and clapped his hands gayly; the gentlemen, clustered together behind the scenes, followed his example; the ladies looked at each other with dawning doubts whether they had not better have left the new recruit in the retirement of private life. Too deeply absorbed in the business of the stage to heed any of them, Magdalen asked leave to repeat the soliloquy, and make quite sure of her own improvement. She went all through it again without a mistake, this time, from beginning to end; the manager celebrating her attention to his directions by an outburst of professional approbation, which escaped him in spite of himself. "She can take a hint!" cried the little man, with a hearty smack of his hand on the prompt-book. "She's a born actress, if ever there was one yet!"

"I hope not," said Miss Garth to herself, taking up the work which had dropped into her lap, and looking down at it in some perplexity. Her worst

apprehension of results in connection with the theatrical enterprise had foreboded levity of conduct with some of the gentlemen--she had not bargained for this. Magdalen, in the capacity of a thoughtless girl, was comparatively easy to deal with. Magdalen, in the character of a born actress, threatened serious future difficulties.

The rehearsal proceeded. Lucy returned to the stage for her scenes in the second act (the last in which she appears) with Sir Lucius and Fag. Here, again, Magdalen's inexperience betrayed itself--and here once more her resolution in attacking and conquering her own mistakes astonished everybody. "Bravo!" cried the gentlemen behind the scenes, as she steadily trampled down one blunder after another. "Ridiculous!" said the ladies, "with such a small part as hers." "Heaven forgive me!" thought Miss. Garth, coming round unwillingly to the general opinion. "I almost wish we were Papists, and I had a convent to put her in to-morrow." One of Mr. Marrable's servants entered the theater as that desperate aspiration escaped the governess. She instantly sent the man behind the scene with a message: "Miss Vanstone has done her part in the rehearsal; request her to come here and sit by me." The servant returned with a polite apology: "Miss Vanstone's kind love, and she begs to be excused--she's prompting Mr. Clare." She prompted him to such purpose that he actually got through his part. The performances of the other gentlemen were obtrusively imbecile. Frank was just one degree better--he was modestly incapable; and he gained by comparison. "Thanks to Miss Vanstone," observed the manager, who had heard the prompting. "She pulled him through. We shall be flat enough at night, when the drop falls on the second act, and the audience have seen the last of her. It's a thousand pities she hasn't got a better part!"

"It's a thousand mercies she's no more to do than she has," muttered Miss Garth, overhearing him. "As things are, the people can't well turn her head with applause. She's out of the play in the second act--that's one comfort!"

No well-regulated mind ever draws its inferences in a hurry; Miss Garth's mind was well regulated; therefore, logically speaking, Miss Garth ought to have been superior to the weakness of rushing at conclusions. She had committed that error, nevertheless, under present circumstances. In plainer terms, the consoling reflection which had just occurred to her assumed that the play had by this time survived all its disasters, and entered on its long-deferred career of success. The play had done nothing of the sort. Misfortune and the Marrable family had not parted company yet.

When the rehearsal was over, nobody observed that the stout lady with the wig privately withdrew herself from the company; and when she was

afterward missed from the table of refreshments, which Mr. Marrable's hospitality kept ready spread in a room near the theater, nobody imagined that there was any serious reason for her absence. It was not till the ladies and gentlemen assembled for the next rehearsal that the true state of the case was impressed on the minds of the company. At the appointed hour no Julia appeared. In her stead, Mrs. Marrable portentously approached the stage, with an open letter in her hand. She was naturally a lady of the mildest good breeding: she was mistress of every bland conventionality in the English language--but disasters and dramatic influences combined, threw even this harmless matron off her balance at last. For the first time in her life Mrs. Marrable indulged in vehement gesture, and used strong language. She handed the letter sternly, at arms-length, to her daughter. "My dear," she said, with an aspect of awful composure, "we are under a Curse." Before the amazed dramatic company could petition for an explanation, she turned and left the room. The manager's professional eye followed her out respectfully--he looked as if he approved of the exit, from a theatrical point of view.

What new misfortune had befallen the play? The last and worst of all misfortunes had assailed it. The stout lady had resigned her part.

Not maliciously. Her heart, which had been in the right place throughout, remained inflexibly in the right place still. Her explanation of the circumstances proved this, if nothing else did. The letter began with a statement: She had overheard, at the last rehearsal (quite unintentionally), personal remarks of which she was the subject. They might, or might not, have had reference to her--Hair; and her--Figure. She would not distress Mrs. Marrable by repeating them. Neither would she mention names, because it was foreign to her nature to make bad worse. The only course at all consistent with her own self-respect was to resign her part. She inclosed it, accordingly, to Mrs. Marrable, with many apologies for her presumption in undertaking a youthful character, at--what a gentleman was pleased to term--her Age; and with what two ladies were rude enough to characterize as her disadvantages of--Hair, and--Figure. A younger and more attractive representative of Julia would no doubt be easily found. In the meantime, all persons concerned had her full forgiveness, to which she would only beg leave to add her best and kindest wishes for the success of the play.

In four nights more the play was to be performed. If ever any human enterprise stood in need of good wishes to help it, that enterprise was unquestionably the theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge!

One arm-chair was allowed on the stage; and into that arm-chair Miss

Marrable sank, preparatory to a fit of hysterics. Magdalen stepped forward at the first convulsion; snatched the letter from Miss Marrable's hand; and stopped the threatened catastrophe.

"She's an ugly, bald-headed, malicious, middle-aged wretch!" said Magdalen, tearing the letter into fragments, and tossing them over the heads of the company. "But I can tell her one thing--she shan't spoil the play. I'll act Julia."

"Bravo!" cried the chorus of gentlemen--the anonymous gentleman who had helped to do the mischief (otherwise Mr. Francis Clare) loudest of all.

"If you want the truth, I don't shrink from owning it," continued Magdalen. "I'm one of the ladies she means. I said she had a head like a mop, and a waist like a bolster. So she has."

"I am the other lady," added the spinster relative. "But I only said she was too stout for the part."

"I am the gentleman," chimed in Frank, stimulated by the force of example. "I said nothing--I only agreed with the ladies."

Here Miss Garth seized her opportunity, and addressed the stage loudly from the pit.

"Stop! Stop!" she said. "You can't settle the difficulty that way. If Magdalen plays Julia, who is to play Lucy?"

Miss Marrable sank back in the arm-chair, and gave way to the second convulsion.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Magdalen, "the thing's simple enough, I'll act Julia and Lucy both together."

The manager was consulted on the spot. Suppressing Lucy's first entrance, and turning the short dialogue about the novels into a soliloquy for Lydia Languish, appeared to be the only changes of importance necessary to the accomplishment of Magdalen's project. Lucy's two telling scenes, at the end of the first and second acts, were sufficiently removed from the scenes in which Julia appeared to give time for the necessary transformations in dress. Even Miss Garth, though she tried hard to find them, could put no fresh obstacles in the way. The question was settled in five minutes, and the rehearsal went on; Magdalen learning Julia's stage situations with the book

in her hand, and announcing afterward, on the journey home, that she proposed sitting up all night to study the new part. Frank thereupon expressed his fears that she would have no time left to help him through his theatrical difficulties. She tapped him on the shoulder coquettishly with her part. "You foolish fellow, how am I to do without you? You're Julia's jealous lover; you're always making Julia cry. Come to-night, and make me cry at tea-time. You haven't got a venomous old woman in a wig to act with now. It's my heart you're to break--and of course I shall teach you how to do it."

The four days' interval passed busily in perpetual rehearsals, public and private. The night of performance arrived; the guests assembled; the great dramatic experiment stood on its trial. Magdalen had made the most of her opportunities; she had learned all that the manager could teach her in the time. Miss Garth left her when the overture began, sitting apart in a corner behind the scenes, serious and silent, with her smelling-bottle in one hand, and her book in the other, resolutely training herself for the coming ordeal, to the very last.

The play began, with all the proper accompaniments of a theatrical performance in private life; with a crowded audience, an African temperature, a bursting of heated lamp-glasses, and a difficulty in drawing up the curtain. "Fag" and "the Coachman," who opened the scene, took leave of their memories as soon as they stepped on the stage; left half their dialogue unspoken; came to a dead pause; were audibly entreated by the invisible manager to "come off"; and went off accordingly, in every respect sadder and wiser men than when they went on. The next scene disclosed Miss Marrable as "Lydia Languish," gracefully seated, very pretty, beautifully dressed, accurately mistress of the smallest words in her part; possessed, in short, of every personal resource--except her voice. The ladies admired, the gentlemen applauded. Nobody heard anything but the words "Speak up, miss," whispered by the same voice which had already entreated "Fag" and "the Coachman" to "come off." A responsive titter rose among the younger spectators; checked immediately by magnanimous applause. The temperature of the audience was rising to Blood Heat--but the national sense of fair play was not boiled out of them yet.

In the midst of the demonstration, Magdalen quietly made her first entrance, as "Julia." She was dressed very plainly in dark colors, and wore her own hair; all stage adjuncts and alterations (excepting the slightest possible touch of rouge on her cheeks) having been kept in reserve to disguise her the more effectually in her second part. The grace and simplicity of her costume, the steady self-possession with which she looked out over the eager rows of faces before her, raised a low hum of approval and

expectation. She spoke--after suppressing a momentary tremor--with a quiet distinctness of utterance which reached all ears, and which at once confirmed the favorable impression that her appearance had produced. The one member of the audience who looked at her and listened to her coldly, was her elder sister. Before the actress of the evening had been five minutes on the stage, Norah detected, to her own indescribable astonishment, that Magdalen had audaciously individualized the feeble amiability of "Julia's" character, by seizing no less a person than herself as the model to act it by. She saw all her own little formal peculiarities of manner and movement unblushingly reproduced--and even the very tone of her voice so accurately mimicked from time to time, that the accents startled her as if she was speaking herself, with an echo on the stage. The effect of this cool appropriation of Norah's identity to theatrical purposes on the audience--who only saw results--asserted itself in a storm of applause on Magdalen's exit. She had won two incontestable triumphs in her first scene. By a dexterous piece of mimicry, she had made a living reality of one of the most insipid characters in the English drama; and she had roused to enthusiasm an audience of two hundred exiles from the blessings of ventilation, all simmering together in their own animal heat. Under the circumstances, where is the actress by profession who could have done much more?

But the event of the evening was still to come. Magdalen's disguised re-appearance at the end of the act, in the character of "Lucy"--with false hair and false eyebrows, with a bright-red complexion and patches on her cheeks, with the gayest colors flaunting in her dress, and the shrillest vivacity of voice and manner--fairly staggered the audience. They looked down at their programmes, in which the representative of Lucy figured under an assumed name; looked up again at the stage; penetrated the disguise; and vented their astonishment in another round of applause, louder and heartier even than the last. Norah herself could not deny this time that the tribute of approbation had been well deserved. There, forcing its way steadily through all the faults of inexperience--there, plainly visible to the dullest of the spectators, was the rare faculty of dramatic impersonation, expressing itself in every look and action of this girl of eighteen, who now stood on a stage for the first time in her life. Failing in many minor requisites of the double task which she had undertaken, she succeeded in the one important necessity of keeping the main distinctions of the two characters thoroughly apart. Everybody felt that the difficulty lay here--everybody saw the difficulty conquered--everybody echoed the manager's enthusiasm at rehearsal, which had hailed her as a born actress.

When the drop-scene descended for the first time, Magdalen had concentrated in herself the whole interest and attraction of the play. The

audience politely applauded Miss Marrable, as became the guests assembled in her father's house: and good-humoredly encouraged the remainder of the company, to help them through a task for which they were all, more or less, palpably unfit. But, as the play proceeded, nothing roused them to any genuine expression of interest when Magdalen was absent from the scene. There was no disguising it: Miss Marrable and her bosom friends had been all hopelessly cast in the shade by the new recruit whom they had summoned to assist them, in the capacity of forlorn hope. And this on Miss Marrable's own birthday! and this in her father's house! and this after the unutterable sacrifices of six weeks past! Of all the domestic disasters which the thankless theatrical enterprise had inflicted on the Marrable family, the crowning misfortune was now consummated by Magdalen's success.

Leaving Mr. Vanstone and Norah, on the conclusion of the play, among the guests in the supper-room, Miss Garth went behind the scenes; ostensibly anxious to see if she could be of any use; really bent on ascertaining whether Magdalen's head had been turned by the triumphs of the evening. It would not have surprised Miss Garth if she had discovered her pupil in the act of making terms with the manager for her forthcoming appearance in a public theater. As events really turned out, she found Magdalen on the stage, receiving, with gracious smiles, a card which the manager presented to her with a professional bow. Noticing Miss Garth's mute look of inquiry, the civil little man hastened to explain that the card was his own, and that he was merely asking the favor of Miss Vanstone's recommendation at any future opportunity.

"This is not the last time the young lady will be concerned in private theatricals, I'll answer for it," said the manager. "And if a superintendent is wanted on the next occasion, she has kindly promised to say a good word for me. I am always to be heard of, miss, at that address." Saying those words, he bowed again, and discreetly disappeared.

Vague suspicions beset the mind of Miss Garth, and urged her to insist on looking at the card. No more harmless morsel of pasteboard was ever passed from one hand to another. The card contained nothing but the manager's name, and, under it, the name and address of a theatrical agent in London.

"It is not worth the trouble of keeping," said Miss Garth.

Magdalen caught her hand before she could throw the card away--possessed herself of it the next instant--and put it in her pocket.

"I promised to recommend him," she said--"and that's one reason for

keeping his card. If it does nothing else, it will remind me of the happiest evening of my life--and that's another. Come!" she cried, throwing her arms round Miss Garth with a feverish gayety--"congratulate me on my success!"

"I will congratulate you when you have got over it," said Miss Garth.

In half an hour more Magdalen had changed her dress; had joined the guests; and had soared into an atmosphere of congratulation high above the reach of any controlling influence that Miss Garth could exercise. Frank, dilatory in all his proceedings, was the last of the dramatic company who left the precincts of the stage. He made no attempt to join Magdalen in the supper-room--but he was ready in the hall with her cloak when the carriages were called and the party broke up.

"Oh, Frank!" she said, looking round at him as he put the cloak on her shoulders, "I am so sorry it's all over! Come to-morrow morning, and let's talk about it by ourselves."

"In the shrubbery at ten?" asked Frank, in a whisper.

She drew up the hood of her cloak and nodded to him gayly. Miss Garth, standing near, noticed the looks that passed between them, though the disturbance made by the parting guests prevented her from hearing the words. There was a soft, underlying tenderness in Magdalen's assumed gayety of manner--there was a sudden thoughtfulness in her face, a confidential readiness in her hand, as she took Frank's arm and went out to the carriage. What did it mean? Had her passing interest in him as her stage-pupil treacherously sown the seeds of any deeper interest in him, as a man? Had the idle theatrical scheme, now that it was all over, graver results to answer for than a mischievous waste of time?

The lines on Miss Garth's face deepened and hardened: she stood lost among the fluttering crowd around her. Norah's warning words, addressed to Mrs. Vanstone in the garden, recurred to her memory--and now, for the first time, the idea dawned on her that Norah had seen the consequences in their true light.

CHAPTER VII.

EARLY the next morning Miss Garth and Norah met in the garden and spoke together privately. The only noticeable result of the interview, when they presented themselves at the breakfast-table, appeared in the marked silence which they both maintained on the topic of the theatrical performance. Mrs. Vanstone was entirely indebted to her husband and to her youngest daughter for all that she heard of the evening's entertainment. The governess and the elder daughter had evidently determined on letting the subject drop.

After breakfast was over Magdalen proved to be missing, when the ladies assembled as usual in the morning-room. Her habits were so little regular that Mrs. Vanstone felt neither surprise nor uneasiness at her absence. Miss Garth and Norah looked at one another significantly, and waited in silence. Two hours passed--and there were no signs of Magdalen. Norah rose, as the clock struck twelve, and quietly left the room to look for her.

She was not upstairs dusting her jewelry and disarranging her dresses. She was not in the conservatory, not in the flower-garden; not in the kitchen teasing the cook; not in the yard playing with the dogs. Had she, by any chance, gone out with her father? Mr. Vanstone had announced his intention, at the breakfast-table, of paying a morning visit to his old ally, Mr. Clare, and of rousing the philosopher's sarcastic indignation by an account of the dramatic performance. None of the other ladies at Combe-Raven ever ventured themselves inside the cottage. But Magdalen was reckless enough for anything--and Magdalen might have gone there. As the idea occurred to her, Norah entered the shrubbery.

At the second turning, where the path among the trees wound away out of sight of the house, she came suddenly face to face with Magdalen and Frank: they were sauntering toward her, arm in arm, their heads close together, their conversation apparently proceeding in whispers. They looked suspiciously handsome and happy. At the sight of Norah both started, and both stopped. Frank confusedly raised his hat, and turned back in the direction of his father's cottage. Magdalen advanced to meet her sister, carelessly swinging her closed parasol from side to side, carelessly humming an air from the overture which had preceded the rising of the curtain on the previous night.

"Luncheon-time already!" she said, looking at her watch. "Surely not?"

"Have you and Mr. Francis Clare been alone in the shrubbery since ten o'clock?" asked Norah.

"Mr. Francis Clare! How ridiculously formal you are. Why don't you call him Frank?"

"I asked you a question, Magdalen."

"Dear me, how black you look this morning! I'm in disgrace, I suppose. Haven't you forgiven me yet for my acting last night? I couldn't help it, love; I should have made nothing of Julia, if I hadn't taken you for my model. It's quite a question of Art. In your place, I should have felt flattered by the selection."

"In your place, Magdalen, I should have thought twice before I mimicked my sister to an audience of strangers."

"That's exactly why I did it--an audience of strangers. How were they to know? Come! come! don't be angry. You are eight years older than I am--you ought to set me an example of good-humor."

"I will set you an example of plain-speaking. I am more sorry than I can say, Magdalen, to meet you as I met you here just now!"

"What next, I wonder? You meet me in the shrubbery at home, talking over the private theatricals with my old playfellow, whom I knew when I was no taller than this parasol. And that is a glaring impropriety, is it? 'Honi soit qui mal y pense.' You wanted an answer a minute ago--there it is for you, my dear, in the choicest Norman-French."

"I am in earnest about this, Magdalen--"

"Not a doubt of it. Nobody can accuse you of ever making jokes."

"I am seriously sorry--"

"Oh, dear!"

"It is quite useless to interrupt me. I have it on my conscience to tell you--and I will tell you--that I am sorry to see how this intimacy is growing. I am sorry to see a secret understanding established already between you and Mr. Francis Clare."

"Poor Frank! How you do hate him, to be sure. What on earth has he done to offend you?"

Norah's self-control began to show signs of failing her. Her dark cheeks glowed, her delicate lips trembled, before she spoke again. Magdalen paid more attention to her parasol than to her sister. She tossed it high in the air and caught it. "Once!" she said--and tossed it up again. "Twice!"--and she tossed it higher. "Thrice--" Before she could catch it for the third time, Norah seized her passionately by the arm, and the parasol dropped to the ground between them.

"You are treating me heartlessly," she said. "For shame, Magdalen--for shame!"

The irrepressible outburst of a reserved nature, forced into open self-assertion in its own despite, is of all moral forces the hardest to resist. Magdalen was startled into silence. For a moment, the two sisters--so strangely dissimilar in person and character--faced one another, without a word passing between them. For a moment the deep brown eyes of the elder and the light gray eyes of the younger looked into each other with steady, unyielding scrutiny on either side. Norah's face was the first to change; Norah's head was the first to turn away. She dropped her sister's arm in silence. Magdalen stooped and picked up her parasol.

"I try to keep my temper," she said, "and you call me heartless for doing it. You always were hard on me, and you always will be."

Norah clasped her trembling hands fast in each other. "Hard on you!" she said, in low, mournful tones--and sighed bitterly.

Magdalen drew back a little, and mechanically dusted the parasol with the end of her garden cloak.

"Yes!" she resumed, doggedly. "Hard on me and hard on Frank."

"Frank!" repeated Norah, advancing on her sister and turning pale as suddenly as she had turned red. "Do you talk of yourself and Frank as if your interests were One already? Magdalen! if I hurt you, do I hurt him? Is he so near and so dear to you as that?"

Magdalen drew further and further back. A twig from a tree near caught her cloak; she turned petulantly, broke it off, and threw it on the ground. "What

right have you to question me?" she broke out on a sudden. "Whether I like Frank, or whether I don't, what interest is it of yours?" As she said the words, she abruptly stepped forward to pass her sister and return to the house.

Norah, turning paler and paler, barred the way to her. "If I hold you by main force," she said, "you shall stop and hear me. I have watched this Francis Clare; I know him better than you do. He is unworthy of a moment's serious feeling on your part; he is unworthy of our dear, good, kind-hearted father's interest in him. A man with any principle, any honor, any gratitude, would not have come back as he has come back, disgraced--yes! disgraced by his spiritless neglect of his own duty. I watched his face while the friend who has been better than a father to him was comforting and forgiving him with a kindness he had not deserved: I watched his face, and I saw no shame and no distress in it--I saw nothing but a look of thankless, heartless relief. He is selfish, he is ungrateful, he is ungenerous--he is only twenty, and he has the worst failings of a mean old age already. And this is the man I find you meeting in secret--the man who has taken such a place in your favor that you are deaf to the truth about him, even from my lips! Magdalen! this will end ill. For God's sake, think of what I have said to you, and control yourself before it is too late!" She stopped, vehement and breathless, and caught her sister anxiously by the hand.

Magdalen looked at her in unconcealed astonishment.

"You are so violent," she said, "and so unlike yourself, that I hardly know you. The more patient I am, the more hard words I get for my pains. You have taken a perverse hatred to Frank; and you are unreasonably angry with me because I won't hate him, too. Don't, Norah! you hurt my hand."

Norah pushed the hand from her contemptuously. "I shall never hurt your heart," she said; and suddenly turned her back on Magdalen as she spoke the words.

There was a momentary pause. Norah kept her position. Magdalen looked at her perplexedly--hesitated--then walked away by herself toward the house.

At the turn in the shrubbery path she stopped and looked back uneasily. "Oh, dear, dear!" she thought to herself, "why didn't Frank go when I told him?" She hesitated, and went back a few steps. "There's Norah standing on her dignity, as obstinate as ever." She stopped again. "What had I better do? I hate quarreling; I think I'll make up." She ventured close to her sister and touched her on the shoulder. Norah never moved. "It's not often she flies

into a passion," thought Magdalen, touching her again; "but when she does, what a time it lasts her!--Come!" she said, "give me a kiss, Norah, and make it up. Won't you let me get at any part of you, my dear, but the back of your neck? Well, it's a very nice neck--it's better worth kissing than mine--and there the kiss is, in spite of you!"

She caught fast hold of Norah from behind, and suited the action to the word, with a total disregard of all that had just passed, which her sister was far from emulating. Hardly a minute since the warm outpouring of Norah's heart had burst through all obstacles. Had the icy reserve frozen her up again already! It was hard to say. She never spoke; she never changed her position--she only searched hurriedly for her handkerchief. As she drew it out, there was a sound of approaching footsteps in the inner recesses of the shrubbery. A Scotch terrier scampered into view; and a cheerful voice sang the first lines of the glee in "As You Like It." "It's papa!" cried Magdalen. "Come, Norah--come and meet him."

Instead of following her sister, Norah pulled down the veil of her garden hat, turned in the opposite direction, and hurried back to the house. She ran up to her own room and locked herself in. She was crying bitterly.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Magdalen and her father met in the shrubbery Mr. Vanstone's face showed plainly that something had happened to please him since he had left home in the morning. He answered the question which his daughter's curiosity at once addressed to him by informing her that he had just come from Mr. Clare's cottage; and that he had picked up, in that unpromising locality, a startling piece of news for the family at Combe-Raven.

On entering the philosopher's study that morning, Mr. Vanstone had found him still dawdling over his late breakfast, with an open letter by his side, in place of the book which, on other occasions, lay ready to his hand at meal-times. He held up the letter the moment his visitor came into the room, and abruptly opened the conversation by asking Mr. Vanstone if his nerves were in good order, and if he felt himself strong enough for the shock of an overwhelming surprise.

"Nerves!" repeated Mr. Vanstone. "Thank God, I know nothing about my nerves. If you have got anything to tell me, shock or no shock, out with it on the spot."

Mr. Clare held the letter a little higher, and frowned at his visitor across the breakfast-table. "What have I always told you?" he asked, with his sourest solemnity of look and manner.

"A great deal more than I could ever keep in my head," answered Mr. Vanstone.

"In your presence and out of it," continued Mr. Clare, "I have always maintained that the one important phenomenon presented by modern society is--the enormous prosperity of Fools. Show me an individual Fool, and I will show you an aggregate Society which gives that highly-favored personage nine chances out of ten--and grudges the tenth to the wisest man in existence. Look where you will, in every high place there sits an Ass, settled beyond the reach of all the greatest intellects in this world to pull him down. Over our whole social system, complacent Imbecility rules supreme--snuffs out the searching light of Intelligence with total impunity--and hoots, owl-like, in answer to every form of protest, See how well we all do in the dark! One of these days that audacious assertion will be practically contradicted, and the whole rotten system of modern society will come down with a crash."

"God forbid!" cried Mr. Vanstone, looking about him as if the crash was coming already.

"With a crash!" repeated Mr. Clare. "There is my theory, in few words. Now for the remarkable application of it which this letter suggests. Here is my lout of a boy--"

"You don't mean that Frank has got another chance?" exclaimed Mr. Vanstone.

"Here is this perfectly hopeless booby, Frank," pursued the philosopher. "He has never done anything in his life to help himself, and, as a necessary consequence, Society is in a conspiracy to carry him to the top of the tree. He has hardly had time to throw away that chance you gave him before this letter comes, and puts the ball at his foot for the second time. My rich cousin (who is intellectually fit to be at the tail of the family, and who is, therefore, as a matter of course, at the head of it) has been good enough to remember my existence; and has offered his influence to serve my eldest boy. Read his letter, and then observe the sequence of events. My rich cousin is a booby who thrives on landed property; he has done something for another booby who thrives on Politics, who knows a third booby who thrives on Commerce, who can do something for a fourth booby, thriving at present on nothing, whose name is Frank. So the mill goes. So the cream of all human rewards is sipped in endless succession by the Fools. I shall pack Frank off to-morrow. In course of time he'll come back again on our hands, like a bad shilling; more chances will fall in his way, as a necessary consequence of his meritorious imbecility. Years will go on--I may not live to see it, no more may you--it doesn't matter; Frank's future is equally certain either way--put him into the army, the Church, politics, what you please, and let him drift: he'll end in being a general, a bishop, or a minister of State, by dint of the great modern qualification of doing nothing whatever to deserve his place." With this summary of his son's worldly prospects, Mr. Clare tossed the letter contemptuously across the table and poured himself out another cup of tea.

Mr. Vanstone read the letter with eager interest and pleasure. It was written in a tone of somewhat elaborate cordiality; but the practical advantages which it placed at Frank's disposal were beyond all doubt. The writer had the means of using a friend's interest--interest of no ordinary kind--with a great Mercantile Firm in the City; and he had at once exerted this influence in favor of Mr. Clare's eldest boy. Frank would be received in the office on a very different footing from the footing of an ordinary clerk; he would be

"pushed on" at every available opportunity; and the first "good thing" the House had to offer, either at home or abroad, would be placed at his disposal. If he possessed fair abilities and showed common diligence in exercising them, his fortune was made; and the sooner he was sent to London to begin the better for his own interests it would be.

"Wonderful news!" cried Mr. Vanstone, returning the letter. "I'm delighted--I must go back and tell them at home. This is fifty times the chance that mine was. What the deuce do you mean by abusing Society? Society has behaved uncommonly well, in my opinion. Where's Frank?"

"Lurking," said Mr. Clare. "It is one of the intolerable peculiarities of louts that they always lurk. I haven't seen my lout this morning. If you meet with him anywhere, give him a kick, and say I want him."

Mr. Clare's opinion of his son's habits might have been expressed more politely as to form; but, as to substance, it happened, on that particular morning, to be perfectly correct. After leaving Magdalen, Frank had waited in the shrubbery, at a safe distance, on the chance that she might detach herself from her sister's company, and join him again. Mr. Vanstone's appearance immediately on Norah's departure, instead of encouraging him to show himself, had determined him on returning to the cottage. He walked back discontentedly; and so fell into his father's clutches, totally unprepared for the pending announcement, in that formidable quarter, of his departure for London.

In the meantime, Mr. Vanstone had communicated his news--in the first place, to Magdalen, and afterward, on getting back to the house, to his wife and Miss Garth. He was too unobservant a man to notice that Magdalen looked unaccountably startled, and Miss Garth unaccountably relieved, by his announcement of Frank's good fortune. He talked on about it, quite unsuspectingly, until the luncheon-bell rang--and then, for the first time, he noticed Norah's absence. She sent a message downstairs, after they had assembled at the table, to say that a headache was keeping her in her own room. When Miss Garth went up shortly afterward to communicate the news about Frank, Norah appeared, strangely enough, to feel very little relieved by hearing it. Mr. Francis Clare had gone away on a former occasion (she remarked), and had come back. He might come back again, and sooner than they any of them thought for. She said no more on the subject than this: she made no reference to what had taken place in the shrubbery. Her unconquerable reserve seemed to have strengthened its hold on her since the outburst of the morning. She met Magdalen, later in the day, as if nothing had happened: no formal reconciliation took place between them. It

was one of Norah's peculiarities to shrink from all reconciliations that were openly ratified, and to take her shy refuge in reconciliations that were silently implied. Magdalen saw plainly, in her look and manner, that she had made her first and last protest. Whether the motive was pride, or sullenness, or distrust of herself, or despair of doing good, the result was not to be mistaken--Norah had resolved on remaining passive for the future.

Later in the afternoon, Mr. Vanstone suggested a drive to his eldest daughter, as the best remedy for her headache. She readily consented to accompany her father; who thereupon proposed, as usual, that Magdalen should join them. Magdalen was nowhere to be found. For the second time that day she had wandered into the grounds by herself. On this occasion, Miss Garth--who, after adopting Norah's opinions, had passed from the one extreme of over-looking Frank altogether, to the other extreme of believing him capable of planning an elopement at five minutes' notice--volunteered to set forth immediately, and do her best to find the missing young lady. After a prolonged absence, she returned unsuccessful--with the strongest persuasion in her own mind that Magdalen and Frank had secretly met one another somewhere, but without having discovered the smallest fragment of evidence to confirm her suspicions. By this time the carriage was at the door, and Mr. Vanstone was unwilling to wait any longer. He and Norah drove away together; and Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth sat at home over their work.

In half an hour more, Magdalen composedly walked into the room. She was pale and depressed. She received Miss Garth's remonstrances with a weary inattention; explained carelessly that she had been wandering in the wood; took up some books, and put them down again; sighed impatiently, and went away upstairs to her own room.

"I think Magdalen is feeling the reaction, after yesterday," said Mrs. Vanstone, quietly. "It is just as we thought. Now the theatrical amusements are all over, she is fretting for more."

Here was an opportunity of letting in the light of truth on Mrs. Vanstone's mind, which was too favorable to be missed. Miss Garth questioned her conscience, saw her chance, and took it on the spot.

"You forget," she rejoined, "that a certain neighbor of ours is going away tomorrow. Shall I tell you the truth? Magdalen is fretting over the departure of Francis Clare."

Mrs. Vanstone looked up from her work with a gentle, smiling surprise.

"Surely not?" she said. "It is natural enough that Frank should be attracted by Magdalen; but I can't think that Magdalen returns the feeling. Frank is so very unlike her; so quiet and undemonstrative; so dull and helpless, poor fellow, in some things. He is handsome, I know, but he is so singularly unlike Magdalen, that I can't think it possible--I can't indeed."

"My dear good lady!" cried Miss Garth, in great amazement; "do you really suppose that people fall in love with each other on account of similarities in their characters? In the vast majority of cases, they do just the reverse. Men marry the very last women, and women the very last men, whom their friends would think it possible they could care about. Is there any phrase that is oftener on all our lips than 'What can have made Mr. So-and-So marry that woman?'--or 'How could Mrs. So-and-So throw herself away on that man?' Has all your experience of the world never yet shown you that girls take perverse fancies for men who are totally unworthy of them?"

"Very true," said Mrs. Vanstone, composedly. "I forgot that. Still it seems unaccountable, doesn't it?"

"Unaccountable, because it happens every day!" retorted Miss Garth, good-humoredly. "I know a great many excellent people who reason against plain experience in the same way--who read the newspapers in the morning, and deny in the evening that there is any romance for writers or painters to work upon in modern life. Seriously, Mrs. Vanstone, you may take my word for it--thanks to those wretched theatricals, Magdalen is going the way with Frank that a great many young ladies have gone before her. He is quite unworthy of her; he is, in almost every respect, her exact opposite--and, without knowing it herself, she has fallen in love with him on that very account. She is resolute and impetuous, clever and domineering; she is not one of those model women who want a man to look up to, and to protect them--her beau-ideal (though she may not think it herself) is a man she can henpeck. Well! one comfort is, there are far better men, even of that sort, to be had than Frank. It's a mercy he is going away, before we have more trouble with them, and before any serious mischief is done."

"Poor Frank!" said Mrs. Vanstone, smiling compassionately. "We have known him since he was in jackets, and Magdalen in short frocks. Don't let us give him up yet. He may do better this second time."

Miss Garth looked up in astonishment.

"And suppose he does better?" she asked. "What then?"

Mrs. Vanstone cut off a loose thread in her work, and laughed outright.

"My good friend," she said, "there is an old farmyard proverb which warns us not to count our chickens before they are hatched. Let us wait a little before we count ours."

It was not easy to silence Miss Garth, when she was speaking under the influence of a strong conviction; but this reply closed her lips. She resumed her work, and looked, and thought, unutterable things.

Mrs. Vanstone's behavior was certainly remarkable under the circumstances. Here, on one side, was a girl--with great personal attractions, with rare pecuniary prospects, with a social position which might have justified the best gentleman in the neighborhood in making her an offer of marriage--perversely casting herself away on a penniless idle young fellow, who had failed at his first start in life, and who even if he succeeded in his second attempt, must be for years to come in no position to marry a young lady of fortune on equal terms. And there, on the other side, was that girl's mother, by no means dismayed at the prospect of a connection which was, to say the least of it, far from desirable; by no means certain, judging her by her own words and looks, that a marriage between Mr. Vanstone's daughter and Mr. Clare's son might not prove to be as satisfactory a result of the intimacy between the two young people as the parents on both sides could possibly wish for!

It was perplexing in the extreme. It was almost as unintelligible as that past mystery--that forgotten mystery now--of the journey to London.

In the evening, Frank made his appearance, and announced that his father had mercilessly sentenced him to leave Combe-Raven by the parliamentary train the next morning. He mentioned this circumstance with an air of sentimental resignation; and listened to Mr. Vanstone's boisterous rejoicings over his new prospects with a mild and mute surprise. His gentle melancholy of look and manner greatly assisted his personal advantages. In his own effeminate way he was more handsome than ever that evening. His soft brown eyes wandered about the room with a melting tenderness; his hair was beautifully brushed; his delicate hands hung over the arms of his chair with a languid grace. He looked like a convalescent Apollo. Never, on any previous occasion, had he practiced more successfully the social art which he habitually cultivated--the art of casting himself on society in the character of a well-bred Incubus, and conferring an obligation on his fellow-creatures by allowing them to sit under him. It was undeniably a dull

evening. All the talking fell to the share of Mr. Vanstone and Miss Garth. Mrs. Vanstone was habitually silent; Norah kept herself obstinately in the background; Magdalen was quiet and undemonstrative beyond all former precedent. From first to last, she kept rigidly on her guard. The few meaning looks that she cast on Frank flashed at him like lightning, and were gone before any one else could see them. Even when she brought him his tea; and when, in doing so, her self-control gave way under the temptation which no woman can resist--the temptation of touching the man she loves--even then, she held the saucer so dexterously that it screened her hand. Frank's self-possession was far less steadily disciplined: it only lasted as long as he remained passive. When he rose to go; when he felt the warm, clinging pressure of Magdalen's fingers round his hand, and the lock of her hair which she slipped into it at the same moment, he became awkward and confused. He might have betrayed Magdalen and betrayed himself, but for Mr. Vanstone, who innocently covered his retreat by following him out, and patting him on the shoulder all the way. "God bless you, Frank!" cried the friendly voice that never had a harsh note in it for anybody. "Your fortune's waiting for you. Go in, my boy--go in and win."

"Yes," said Frank. "Thank you. It will be rather difficult to go in and win, at first. Of course, as you have always told me, a man's business is to conquer his difficulties, and not to talk about them. At the same time, I wish I didn't feel quite so loose as I do in my figures. It's discouraging to feel loose in one's figures.--Oh, yes; I'll write and tell you how I get on. I'm very much obliged by your kindness, and very sorry I couldn't succeed with the engineering. I think I should have liked engineering better than trade. It can't be helped now, can it? Thank you, again. Good-by."

So he drifted away into the misty commercial future--as aimless, as helpless, as gentleman-like as ever.

CHAPTER IX.

THREE months passed. During that time Frank remained in London; pursuing his new duties, and writing occasionally to report himself to Mr. Vanstone, as he had promised.

His letters were not enthusiastic on the subject of mercantile occupations. He described himself as being still painfully loose in his figures. He was also more firmly persuaded than ever--now when it was unfortunately too late--that he preferred engineering to trade. In spite of this conviction; in spite of headaches caused by sitting on a high stool and stooping over ledgers in unwholesome air; in spite of want of society, and hasty breakfasts, and bad dinners at chop-houses, his attendance at the office was regular, and his diligence at the desk unremitting. The head of the department in which he was working might be referred to if any corroboration of this statement was desired. Such was the general tenor of the letters; and Frank's correspondent and Frank's father differed over them as widely as usual. Mr. Vanstone accepted them as proofs of the steady development of industrious principles in the writer. Mr. Clare took his own characteristically opposite view. "These London men," said the philosopher, "are not to be trifled with by louts. They have got Frank by the scruff of the neck--he can't wriggle himself free--and he makes a merit of yielding to sheer necessity."

The three months' interval of Frank's probation in London passed less cheerfully than usual in the household at Combe-Raven.

As the summer came nearer and nearer, Mrs. Vanstone's spirits, in spite of her resolute efforts to control them, became more and more depressed.

"I do my best," she said to Miss Garth; "I set an example of cheerfulness to my husband and my children--but I dread July." Norah's secret misgivings on her sister's account rendered her more than usually serious and uncommunicative, as the year advanced. Even Mr. Vanstone, when July drew nearer, lost something of his elasticity of spirit. He kept up appearances in his wife's presence--but on all other occasions there was now a perceptible shade of sadness in his look and manner. Magdalen was so changed since Frank's departure that she helped the general depression, instead of relieving it. All her movements had grown languid; all her usual occupations were pursued with the same weary indifference; she spent hours alone in her own room; she lost her interest in being brightly and prettily dressed; her eyes were heavy, her nerves were irritable, her

complexion was altered visibly for the worse--in one word, she had become an oppression and a weariness to herself and to all about her. Stoutly as Miss Garth contended with these growing domestic difficulties, her own spirits suffered in the effort. Her memory reverted, oftener and oftener, to the March morning when the master and mistress of the house had departed for London, and then the first serious change, for many a year past, had stolen over the family atmosphere. When was that atmosphere to be clear again? When were the clouds of change to pass off before the returning sunshine of past and happier times?

The spring and the early summer wore away. The dreaded month of July came, with its airless nights, its cloudless mornings, and its sultry days.

On the fifteenth of the month, an event happened which took every one but Norah by surprise. For the second time, without the slightest apparent reason--for the second time, without a word of warning beforehand--Frank suddenly re-appeared at his father's cottage.

Mr. Clare's lips opened to hail his son's return, in the old character of the "bad shilling"; and closed again without uttering a word. There was a portentous composure in Frank's manner which showed that he had other news to communicate than the news of his dismissal. He answered his father's sardonic look of inquiry by at once explaining that a very important proposal for his future benefit had been made to him, that morning, at the office. His first idea had been to communicate the details in writing; but the partners had, on reflection, thought that the necessary decision might be more readily obtained by a personal interview with his father and his friends. He had laid aside the pen accordingly, and had resigned himself to the railway on the spot.

After this preliminary statement, Frank proceeded to describe the proposal which his employers had addressed to him, with every external appearance of viewing it in the light of an intolerable hardship.

The great firm in the City had obviously made a discovery in relation to their clerk, exactly similar to the discovery which had formerly forced itself on the engineer in relation to his pupil. The young man, as they politely phrased it, stood in need of some special stimulant to stir him up. His employers (acting under a sense of their obligation to the gentleman by whom Frank had been recommended) had considered the question carefully, and had decided that the one promising use to which they could put Mr. Francis Clare was to send him forthwith into another quarter of the globe.

As a consequence of this decision, it was now, therefore, proposed that he should enter the house of their correspondents in China; that he should remain there, familiarizing himself thoroughly on the spot with the tea trade and the silk trade for five years; and that he should return, at the expiration of this period, to the central establishment in London. If he made a fair use of his opportunities in China, he would come back, while still a young man, fit for a position of trust and emolument, and justified in looking forward, at no distant date, to a time when the House would assist him to start in business for himself. Such were the new prospects which--to adopt Mr. Clare's theory--now forced themselves on the ever-reluctant, ever-helpless and ever-ungrateful Frank. There was no time to be lost. The final answer was to be at the office on "Monday, the twentieth": the correspondents in China were to be written to by the mail on that day; and Frank was to follow the letter by the next opportunity, or to resign his chance in favor of some more enterprising young man.

Mr. Clare's reception of this extraordinary news was startling in the extreme. The glorious prospect of his son's banishment to China appeared to turn his brain. The firm pedestal of his philosophy sank under him; the prejudices of society recovered their hold on his mind. He seized Frank by the arm, and actually accompanied him to Combe-Raven, in the amazing character of visitor to the house!

"Here I am with my lout," said Mr. Clare, before a word could be uttered by the astonished family. "Hear his story, all of you. It has reconciled me, for the first time in my life, to the anomaly of his existence." Frank ruefully narrated the Chinese proposal for the second time, and attempted to attach to it his own supplementary statement of objections and difficulties. His father stopped him at the first word, pointed peremptorily southeastward (from Somersetshire to China); and said, without an instant's hesitation: "Go!" Mr. Vanstone, basking in golden visions of his young friend's future, echoed that monosyllabic decision with all his heart. Mrs. Vanstone, Miss Garth, even Norah herself, spoke to the same purpose. Frank was petrified by an absolute unanimity of opinion which he had not anticipated; and Magdalen was caught, for once in her life, at the end of all her resources.

So far as practical results were concerned, the sitting of the family council began and ended with the general opinion that Frank must go. Mr. Vanstone's faculties were so bewildered by the son's sudden arrival, the father's unexpected visit, and the news they both brought with them, that he petitioned for an adjournment before the necessary arrangements connected with his young friend's departure were considered in detail. "Suppose we all sleep upon it?" he said. "Tomorrow our heads will feel a little

steadier; and to-morrow will be time enough to decide all uncertainties." This suggestion was readily adopted; and all further proceedings stood adjourned until the next day.

That next day was destined to decide more uncertainties than Mr. Vanstone dreamed of.

Early in the morning, after making tea by herself as usual, Miss Garth took her parasol and strolled into the garden. She had slept ill; and ten minutes in the open air before the family assembled at breakfast might help to compensate her, as she thought, for the loss of her night's rest.

She wandered to the outermost boundary of the flower-garden, and then returned by another path, which led back, past the side of an ornamental summer-house commanding a view over the fields from a corner of the lawn. A slight noise--like, and yet not like, the chirruping of a bird--caught her ear as she approached the summer-house. She stepped round to the entrance; looked in; and discovered Magdalen and Frank seated close together. To Miss Garth's horror, Magdalen's arm was unmistakably round Frank's neck; and, worse still, the position of her face, at the moment of discovery, showed beyond all doubt that she had just been offering to the victim of Chinese commerce the first and foremost of all the consolations which a woman can bestow on a man. In plainer words, she had just given Frank a kiss.

In the presence of such an emergency as now confronted her, Miss Garth felt instinctively that all ordinary phrases of reproof would be phrases thrown away.

"I presume," she remarked, addressing Magdalen with the merciless self-possession of a middle-aged lady, unprovided for the occasion with any kissing remembrances of her own--"I presume (whatever excuses your effrontery may suggest) you will not deny that my duty compels me to mention what I have just seen to your father?"

"I will save you the trouble," replied Magdalen, composedly. "I will mention it to him myself."

With those words, she looked round at Frank, standing trebly helpless in a corner of the summer-house. "You shall hear what happens," she said, with her bright smile. "And so shall you," she added for Miss Garth's especial benefit, as she sauntered past the governess on her way back to the breakfast-table. The eyes of Miss Garth followed her indignantly; and Frank slipped out on his side at that favorable opportunity.

Under these circumstances, there was but one course that any respectable woman could take--she could only shudder. Miss Garth registered her protest in that form, and returned to the house.

When breakfast was over, and when Mr. Vanstone's hand descended to his pocket in search of his cigar-case, Magdalen rose; looked significantly at Miss Garth; and followed her father into the hall.

"Papa," she said, "I want to speak to you this morning--in private."

"Ay! ay!" returned Mr. Vanstone. "What about, my dear!"

"About--" Magdalen hesitated, searching for a satisfactory form of expression, and found it. "About business, papa," she said.

Mr. Vanstone took his garden hat from the hall table--opened his eyes in mute perplexity--attempted to associate in his mind the two extravagantly dissimilar ideas of Magdalen and "business"--failed--and led the way resignedly into the garden.

His daughter took his arm, and walked with him to a shady seat at a convenient distance from the house. She dusted the seat with her smart silk apron before her father occupied it. Mr. Vanstone was not accustomed to such an extraordinary act of attention as this. He sat down, looking more puzzled than ever. Magdalen immediately placed herself on his knee, and rested her head comfortably on his shoulder.

"Am I heavy, papa?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear, you are," said Mr. Vanstone--"but not too heavy for me. Stop on your perch, if you like it. Well? And what may this business happen to be?"

"It begins with a question."

"Ah, indeed? That doesn't surprise me. Business with your sex, my dear, always begins with questions. Go on."

"Papa! do you ever intend allowing me to be married?"

Mr. Vanstone's eyes opened wider and wider. The question, to use his own phrase, completely staggered him.

"This is business with a vengeance!" he said. "Why, Magdalen! what have you got in that harum-scarum head of yours now?"

"I don't exactly know, papa. Will you answer my question?"

"I will if I can, my dear; you rather stagger me. Well, I don't know. Yes; I suppose I must let you be married one of these days--if we can find a good husband for you. How hot your face is! Lift it up, and let the air blow over it. You won't? Well--have your own way. If talking of business means tickling your cheek against my whisker I've nothing to say against it. Go on, my dear. What's the next question? Come to the point."

She was far too genuine a woman to do anything of the sort. She skirted round the point and calculated her distance to the nicety of a hair-breadth.

"We were all very much surprised yesterday--were we not, papa? Frank is wonderfully lucky, isn't he?"

"He's the luckiest dog I ever came across," said Mr. Vanstone "But what has that got to do with this business of yours? I dare say you see your way, Magdalen. Hang me if I can see mine!"

She skirted a little nearer.

"I suppose he will make his fortune in China?" she said. "It's a long way off, isn't it? Did you observe, papa, that Frank looked sadly out of spirits yesterday?"

"I was so surprised by the news," said Mr. Vanstone, "and so staggered by the sight of old Clare's sharp nose in my house, that I didn't much notice. Now you remind me of it--yes. I don't think Frank took kindly to his own good luck; not kindly at all."

"Do you wonder at that, papa?"

"Yes, my dear; I do, rather."

"Don't you think it's hard to be sent away for five years, to make your fortune among hateful savages, and lose sight of your friends at home for all that long time? Don't you think Frank will miss us sadly? Don't you, papa?--don't you?"

"Gently, Magdalen! I'm a little too old for those long arms of yours to throttle me in fun.--You're right, my love. Nothing in this world without a drawback. Frank will miss his friends in England: there's no denying that."

"You always liked Frank. And Frank always liked you."

"Yes, yes--a good fellow; a quiet, good fellow. Frank and I have always got on smoothly together."

"You have got on like father and son, haven't you?"

"Certainly, my dear."

"Perhaps you will think it harder on him when he has gone than you think it now?"

"Likely enough, Magdalen; I don't say no."

"Perhaps you will wish he had stopped in England? Why shouldn't he stop in England, and do as well as if he went to China?"

"My dear! he has no prospects in England. I wish he had, for his own sake. I wish the lad well, with all my heart."

"May I wish him well too, papa--with all my heart?"

"Certainly, my love--your old playfellow--why not? What's the matter? God bless my soul, what is the girl crying about? One would think Frank was transported for life. You goose! You know, as well as I do, he is going to China to make his fortune."

"He doesn't want to make his fortune--he might do much better."

"The deuce he might! How, I should like to know?"

"I'm afraid to tell you. I'm afraid you'll laugh at me. Will you promise not to laugh at me?"

"Anything to please you, my dear. Yes: I promise. Now, then, out with it! How might Frank do better?"

"He might marry Me."

If the summer scene which then spread before Mr. Vanstone's eyes had suddenly changed to a dreary winter view--if the trees had lost all their leaves, and the green fields had turned white with snow in an instant--his face could hardly have expressed greater amazement than it displayed when his daughter's faltering voice spoke those four last words. He tried to look at her--but she steadily refused him the opportunity: she kept her face hidden over his shoulder. Was she in earnest? His cheek, still wet with her tears, answered for her. There was a long pause of silence; she waited--with unaccustomed patience, she waited for him to speak. He roused himself, and spoke these words only: "You surprise me, Magdalen; you surprise me more than I can say."

At the altered tone of his voice--altered to a quiet, fatherly seriousness--Magdalen's arms clung round him closer than before.

"Have I disappointed you, papa?" she asked, faintly. "Don't say I have disappointed you! Who am I to tell my secret to, if not to you? Don't let him go--don't! don't! You will break his heart. He is afraid to tell his father; he is even afraid you might be angry with him. There is nobody to speak for us, except--except me. Oh, don't let him go! Don't for his sake--" she whispered the next words in a kiss--"Don't for Mine!"

Her father's kind face saddened; he sighed, and patted her fair head tenderly. "Hush, my love," he said, almost in a whisper; "hush!" She little knew what a revelation every word, every action that escaped her, now opened before him. She had made him her grown-up playfellow, from her childhood to that day. She had romped with him in her frocks, she had gone on romping with him in her gowns. He had never been long enough separated from her to have the external changes in his daughter forced on his attention. His artless, fatherly experience of her had taught him that she was a taller child in later years--and had taught him little more. And now, in one breathless instant, the conviction that she was a woman rushed over his mind. He felt it in the trouble of her bosom pressed against his; in the nervous thrill of her arms clasped around his neck. The Magdalen of his innocent experience, a woman--with the master-passion of her sex in possession of her heart already!

"Have you thought long of this, my dear?" he asked, as soon as he could speak composedly. "Are you sure--?"

She answered the question before he could finish it.

"Sure I love him?" she said. "Oh, what words can say Yes for me, as I want

to say it? I love him--!" Her voice faltered softly; and her answer ended in a sigh.

"You are very young. You and Frank, my love, are both very young."

She raised her head from his shoulder for the first time. The thought and its expression flashed from her at the same moment.

"Are we much younger than you and mamma were?" she asked, smiling through her tears.

She tried to lay her head back in its old position; but as she spoke those words, her father caught her round the waist, forced her, before she was aware of it, to look him in the face--and kissed her, with a sudden outburst of tenderness which brought the tears thronging back thickly into her eyes. "Not much younger, my child," he said, in low, broken tones--"not much younger than your mother and I were." He put her away from him, and rose from the seat, and turned his head aside quickly. "Wait here, and compose yourself; I will go indoors and speak to your mother." His voice trembled over those parting words; and he left her without once looking round again.

She waited--waited a weary time; and he never came back. At last her growing anxiety urged her to follow him into the house. A new timidity throbbed in her heart as she doubtfully approached the door. Never had she seen the depths of her father's simple nature stirred as they had been stirred by her confession. She almost dreaded her next meeting with him. She wandered softly to and fro in the hall, with a shyness unaccountable to herself; with a terror of being discovered and spoken to by her sister or Miss Garth, which made her nervously susceptible to the slightest noises in the house. The door of the morning-room opened while her back was turned toward it. She started violently, as she looked round and saw her father in the hall: her heart beat faster and faster, and she felt herself turning pale. A second look at him, as he came nearer, re-assured her. He was composed again, though not so cheerful as usual. She noticed that he advanced and spoke to her with a forbearing gentleness, which was more like his manner to her mother than his ordinary manner to herself.

"Go in, my love," he said, opening the door for her which he had just closed. "Tell your mother all you have told me--and more, if you have more to say. She is better prepared for you than I was. We will take to-day to think of it, Magdalen; and to-morrow you shall know, and Frank shall know, what we decide."

Her eyes brightened, as they looked into his face and saw the decision there already, with the double penetration of her womanhood and her love. Happy, and beautiful in her happiness, she put his hand to her lips, and went, without hesitation, into the morning-room. There, her father's words had smoothed the way for her; there, the first shock of the surprise was past and over, and only the pleasure of it remained. Her mother had been her age once; her mother would know how fond she was of Frank. So the coming interview was anticipated in her thoughts; and--except that there was an unaccountable appearance of restraint in Mrs. Vanstone's first reception of her--was anticipated aright. After a little, the mother's questions came more and more unreservedly from the sweet, unforgotten experience of the mother's heart. She lived again through her own young days of hope and love in Magdalen's replies.

The next morning the all-important decision was announced in words. Mr. Vanstone took his daughter upstairs into her mother's room, and there placed before her the result of the yesterday's consultation, and of the night's reflection which had followed it. He spoke with perfect kindness and self-possession of manner--but in fewer and more serious words than usual; and he held his wife's hand tenderly in his own all through the interview.

He informed Magdalen that neither he nor her mother felt themselves justified in blaming her attachment to Frank. It had been in part, perhaps, the natural consequence of her childish familiarity with him; in part, also, the result of the closer intimacy between them which the theatrical entertainment had necessarily produced. At the same time, it was now the duty of her parents to put that attachment, on both sides, to a proper test--for her sake, because her happy future was their dearest care; for Frank's sake, because they were bound to give him the opportunity of showing himself worthy of the trust confided in him. They were both conscious of being strongly prejudiced in Frank's favor. His father's eccentric conduct had made the lad the object of their compassion and their care from his earliest years. He (and his younger brothers) had almost filled the places to them of those other children of their own whom they had lost. Although they firmly believed their good opinion of Frank to be well founded--still, in the interest of their daughter's happiness, it was necessary to put that opinion firmly to the proof, by fixing certain conditions, and by interposing a year of delay between the contemplated marriage and the present time.

During that year, Frank was to remain at the office in London; his employers being informed beforehand that family circumstances prevented his accepting their offer of employment in China. He was to consider this concession as a recognition of the attachment between Magdalen and

himself, on certain terms only. If, during the year of probation, he failed to justify the confidence placed in him--a confidence which had led Mr. Vanstone to take unreservedly upon himself the whole responsibility of Frank's future prospects--the marriage scheme was to be considered, from that moment, as at an end. If, on the other hand, the result to which Mr. Vanstone confidently looked forward really occurred--if Frank's probationary year proved his claim to the most precious trust that could be placed in his hands--then Magdalen herself should reward him with all that a woman can bestow; and the future, which his present employers had placed before him as the result of a five years' residence in China, should be realized in one year's time, by the dowry of his young wife.

As her father drew that picture of the future, the outburst of Magdalen's gratitude could no longer be restrained. She was deeply touched--she spoke from her inmost heart. Mr. Vanstone waited until his daughter and his wife were composed again; and then added the last words of explanation which were now left for him to speak.

"You understand, my love," he said, "that I am not anticipating Frank's living in idleness on his wife's means? My plan for him is that he should still profit by the interest which his present employers take in him. Their knowledge of affairs in the City will soon place a good partnership at his disposal, and you will give him the money to buy it out of hand. I shall limit the sum, my dear, to half your fortune; and the other half I shall have settled upon yourself. We shall all be alive and hearty, I hope"--he looked tenderly at his wife as he said those words--"all alive and hearty at the year's end. But if I am gone, Magdalen, it will make no difference. My will--made long before I ever thought of having a son-in-law divides my fortune into two equal parts. One part goes to your mother; and the other part is fairly divided between my children. You will have your share on your wedding-day (and Norah will have hers when she marries) from my own hand, if I live; and under my will if I die. There! there! no gloomy faces," he said, with a momentary return of his every-day good spirits. "Your mother and I mean to live and see Frank a great merchant. I shall leave you, my dear, to enlighten the son on our new projects, while I walk over to the cottage--"

He stopped; his eyebrows contracted a little; and he looked aside hesitatingly at Mrs. Vanstone.

"What must you do at the cottage, papa?" asked Magdalen, after having vainly waited for him to finish the sentence of his own accord.

"I must consult Frank's father," he replied. "We must not forget that Mr.

Clare's consent is still wanting to settle this matter. And as time presses, and we don't know what difficulties he may not raise, the sooner I see him the better."

He gave that answer in low, altered tones; and rose from his chair in a half-reluctant, half-resigned manner, which Magdalen observed with secret alarm.

She glanced inquiringly at her mother. To all appearance, Mrs. Vanstone had been alarmed by the change in him also. She looked anxious and uneasy; she turned her face away on the sofa pillow--turned it suddenly, as if she was in pain.

"Are you not well, mamma?" asked Magdalen.

"Quite well, my love," said Mrs. Vanstone, shortly and sharply, without turning round. "Leave me a little--I only want rest."

Magdalen went out with her father.

"Papa!" she whispered anxiously, as they descended the stairs; "you don't think Mr. Clare will say No?"

"I can't tell beforehand," answered Mr. Vanstone. "I hope he will say Yes."

"There is no reason why he should say anything else--is there?"

She put the question faintly, while he was getting his hat and stick; and he did not appear to hear her. Doubting whether she should repeat it or not, she accompanied him as far as the garden, on his way to Mr. Clare's cottage. He stopped her on the lawn, and sent her back to the house.

"You have nothing on your head, my dear," he said. "If you want to be in the garden, don't forget how hot the sun is--don't come out without your hat."

He walked on toward the cottage.

She waited a moment, and looked after him. She missed the customary flourish of his stick; she saw his little Scotch terrier, who had run out at his heels, barking and capering about him unnoticed. He was out of spirits: he was strangely out of spirits. What did it mean?

CHAPTER X.

ON returning to the house, Magdalen felt her shoulder suddenly touched from behind as she crossed the hall. She turned and confronted her sister. Before she could ask any questions, Norah confusedly addressed her, in these words: "I beg your pardon; I beg you to forgive me."

Magdalen looked at her sister in astonishment. All memory, on her side, of the sharp words which had passed between them in the shrubbery was lost in the new interests that now absorbed her; lost as completely as if the angry interview had never taken place. "Forgive you!" she repeated, amazedly. "What for?"

"I have heard of your new prospects," pursued Norah, speaking with a mechanical submissiveness of manner which seemed almost ungracious; "I wished to set things right between us; I wished to say I was sorry for what happened. Will you forget it? Will you forget and forgive what happened in the shrubbery?" She tried to proceed; but her inveterate reserve--or, perhaps, her obstinate reliance on her own opinions--silenced her at those last words. Her face clouded over on a sudden. Before her sister could answer her, she turned away abruptly and ran upstairs.

The door of the library opened, before Magdalen could follow her; and Miss Garth advanced to express the sentiments proper to the occasion.

They were not the mechanically-submissive sentiments which Magdalen had just heard. Norah had struggled against her rooted distrust of Frank, in deference to the unanswerable decision of both her parents in his favor; and had suppressed the open expression of her antipathy, though the feeling itself remained unconquered. Miss Garth had made no such concession to the master and mistress of the house. She had hitherto held the position of a high authority on all domestic questions; and she flatly declined to get off her pedestal in deference to any change in the family circumstances, no matter how amazing or how unexpected that change might be.

"Pray accept my congratulations," said Miss Garth, bristling all over with implied objections to Frank--"my congratulations, and my apologies. When I caught you kissing Mr. Francis Clare in the summer-house, I had no idea you were engaged in carrying out the intentions of your parents. I offer no opinion on the subject. I merely regret my own accidental appearance in the character of an Obstacle to the course of true-love--which appears to run

smooth in summer-houses, whatever Shakespeare may say to the contrary. Consider me for the future, if you please, as an Obstacle removed. May you be happy!" Miss Garth's lips closed on that last sentence like a trap, and Miss Garth's eyes looked ominously prophetic into the matrimonial future.

If Magdalen's anxieties had not been far too serious to allow her the customary free use of her tongue, she would have been ready on the instant with an appropriately satirical answer. As it was, Miss Garth simply irritated her. "Pooh!" she said--and ran upstairs to her sister's room.

She knocked at the door, and there was no answer. She tried the door, and it resisted her from the inside. The sullen, unmanageable Norah was locked in.

Under other circumstances, Magdalen would not have been satisfied with knocking--she would have called through the door loudly and more loudly, till the house was disturbed and she had carried her point. But the doubts and fears of the morning had unnerved her already. She went downstairs again softly, and took her hat from the stand in the hall. "He told me to put my hat on," she said to herself, with a meek filial docility which was totally out of her character.

She went into the garden, on the shrubbery side; and waited there to catch the first sight of her father on his return. Half an hour passed; forty minutes passed--and then his voice reached her from among the distant trees. "Come in to heel!" she heard him call out loudly to the dog. Her face turned pale. "He's angry with Snap!" she exclaimed to herself in a whisper. The next minute he appeared in view; walking rapidly, with his head down and Snap at his heels in disgrace. The sudden excess of her alarm as she observed those ominous signs of something wrong rallied her natural energy, and determined her desperately on knowing the worst. She walked straight forward to meet her father.

"Your face tells your news," she said faintly. "Mr. Clare has been as heartless as usual--Mr. Clare has said No?"

Her father turned on her with a sudden severity, so entirely unparalleled in her experience of him that she started back in downright terror.

"Magdalen!" he said; "whenever you speak of my old friend and neighbor again, bear this in mind: Mr. Clare has just laid me under an obligation which I shall remember gratefully to the end of my life."

He stopped suddenly after saying those remarkable words. Seeing that he had startled her, his natural kindness prompted him instantly to soften the reproof, and to end the suspense from which she was plainly suffering. "Give me a kiss, my love," he resumed; "and I'll tell you in return that Mr. Clare has said-YES."

She attempted to thank him; but the sudden luxury of relief was too much for her. She could only cling round his neck in silence. He felt her trembling from head to foot, and said a few words to calm her. At the altered tones of his master's voice, Snap's meek tail re-appeared fiercely from between his legs; and Snap's lungs modestly tested his position with a brief, experimental bark. The dog's quaintly appropriate assertion of himself on his old footing was the interruption of all others which was best fitted to restore Magdalen to herself. She caught the shaggy little terrier up in her arms and kissed him next. "You darling," she exclaimed, "you're almost as glad as I am!" She turned again to her father, with a look of tender reproach. "You frightened me, papa," she said. "You were so unlike yourself."

"I shall be right again to-morrow, my dear. I am a little upset to-day."

"Not by me?"

"No, no."

"By something you have heard at Mr. Clare's?"

"Yes--nothing you need alarm yourself about; nothing that won't wear off by to-morrow. Let me go now, my dear; I have a letter to write; and I want to speak to your mother."

He left her and went on to the house. Magdalen lingered a little on the lawn, to feel all the happiness of her new sensations--then turned away toward the shrubbery to enjoy the higher luxury of communicating them. The dog followed her. She whistled, and clapped her hands. "Find him!" she said, with beaming eyes. "Find Frank!" Snap scampered into the shrubbery, with a bloodthirsty snarl at starting. Perhaps he had mistaken his young mistress and considered himself her emissary in search of a rat?

Meanwhile, Mr. Vanstone entered the house. He met his wife slowly descending the stairs, and advanced to give her his arm. "How has it ended?" she asked, anxiously, as he led her to the sofa.

"Happily--as we hoped it would," answered her husband. "My old friend has

justified my opinion of him."

"Thank God!" said Mrs. Vanstone, fervently. "Did you feel it, love?" she asked, as her husband arranged the sofa pillows--"did you feel it as painfully as I feared you would?"

"I had a duty to do, my dear--and I did it."

After replying in those terms, he hesitated. Apparently, he had something more to say--something, perhaps, on the subject of that passing uneasiness of mind which had been produced by his interview with Mr. Clare, and which Magdalen's questions had obliged him to acknowledge. A look at his wife decided his doubts in the negative. He only asked if she felt comfortable; and then turned away to leave the room.

"Must you go?" she asked.

"I have a letter to write, my dear."

"Anything about Frank?"

"No: to-morrow will do for that. A letter to Mr. Pendril. I want him here immediately."

"Business, I suppose?"

"Yes, my dear--business."

He went out, and shut himself into the little front room, close to the hall door, which was called his study. By nature and habit the most procrastinating of letter-writers, he now inconsistently opened his desk and took up the pen without a moment's delay. His letter was long enough to occupy three pages of note-paper; it was written with a readiness of expression and a rapidity of hand which seldom characterized his proceedings when engaged over his ordinary correspondence. He wrote the address as follows: "Immediate--William Pendril, Esq., Serle Street, Lincoln's Inn, London"--then pushed the letter away from him, and sat at the table, drawing lines on the blotting-paper with his pen, lost in thought. "No," he said to himself; "I can do nothing more till Pendril comes." He rose; his face brightened as he put the stamp on the envelope. The writing of the letter had sensibly relieved him, and his whole bearing showed it as he left the room.

On the doorstep he found Norah and Miss Garth, setting forth together for a walk.

"Which way are you going?" he asked. "Anywhere near the post-office? I wish you would post this letter for me, Norah. It is very important--so important that I hardly like to trust it to Thomas, as usual."

Norah at once took charge of the letter.

"If you look, my dear," continued her father, "you will see that I am writing to Mr. Pendril. I expect him here to-morrow afternoon. Will you give the necessary directions, Miss Garth? Mr. Pendril will sleep here to-morrow night, and stay over Sunday.--Wait a minute! Today is Friday. Surely I had an engagement for Saturday afternoon?" He consulted his pocketbook and read over one of the entries, with a look of annoyance. "Grailsea Mill, three o'clock, Saturday. Just the time when Pendril will be here; and I must be at home to see him. How can I manage it? Monday will be too late for my business at Grailsea. I'll go to-day, instead; and take my chance of catching the miller at his dinner-time." He looked at his watch. "No time for driving; I must do it by railway. If I go at once, I shall catch the down train at our station, and get on to Grailsea. Take care of the letter, Norah. I won't keep dinner waiting; if the return train doesn't suit, I'll borrow a gig and get back in that way."

As he took up his hat, Magdalen appeared at the door, returning from her interview with Frank. The hurry of her father's movements attracted her attention; and she asked him where he was going.

"To Grailsea," replied Mr. Vanstone. "Your business, Miss Magdalen, has got in the way of mine--and mine must give way to it."

He spoke those parting words in his old hearty manner; and left them, with the old characteristic flourish of his trusty stick.

"My business!" said Magdalen. "I thought my business was done."

Miss Garth pointed significantly to the letter in Norah's hand. "Your business, beyond all doubt," she said. "Mr. Pendril is coming tomorrow; and Mr. Vanstone seems remarkably anxious about it. Law, and its attendant troubles already! Governesses who look in at summer-house doors are not the only obstacles to the course of true-love. Parchment is sometimes an obstacle. I hope you may find Parchment as pliable as I am--I wish you well through it. Now, Norah!"

Miss Garth's second shaft struck as harmless as the first. Magdalen had returned to the house, a little vexed; her interview with Frank having been interrupted by a messenger from Mr. Clare, sent to summon the son into the father's presence. Although it had been agreed at the private interview between Mr. Vanstone and Mr. Clare that the questions discussed that morning should not be communicated to the children until the year of probation was at an end---and although under these circumstances Mr. Clare had nothing to tell Frank which Magdalen could not communicate to him much more agreeably--the philosopher was not the less resolved on personally informing his son of the parental concession which rescued him from Chinese exile. The result was a sudden summons to the cottage, which startled Magdalen, but which did not appear to take Frank by surprise. His filial experience penetrated the mystery of Mr. Clare's motives easily enough. "When my father's in spirits," he said, sulkily, "he likes to bully me about my good luck. This message means that he's going to bully me now."

"Don't go," suggested Magdalen.

"I must," rejoined Frank. "I shall never hear the last of it if I don't. He's primed and loaded, and he means to go off. He went off, once, when the engineer took me; he went off, twice, when the office in the City took me; and he's going off, thrice, now you've taken me. If it wasn't for you, I should wish I had never been born. Yes; your father's been kind to me, I know--and I should have gone to China, if it hadn't been for him. I'm sure I'm very much obliged. Of course, we have no right to expect anything else--still it's discouraging to keep us waiting a year, isn't it?"

Magdalen stopped his mouth by a summary process, to which even Frank submitted gratefully. At the same time, she did not forget to set down his discontent to the right side. "How fond he is of me!" she thought. "A year's waiting is quite a hardship to him." She returned to the house, secretly regretting that she had not heard more of Frank's complimentary complaints. Miss Garth's elaborate satire, addressed to her while she was in this frame of mind, was a purely gratuitous waste of Miss Garth's breath. What did Magdalen care for satire? What do Youth and Love ever care for except themselves? She never even said as much as "Pooh!" this time. She laid aside her hat in serene silence, and sauntered languidly into the morning-room to keep her mother company. She lunched on dire forebodings of a quarrel between Frank and his father, with accidental interruptions in the shape of cold chicken and cheese-cakes. She trifled away half an hour at the piano; and played, in that time, selections from the Songs of Mendelssohn, the Mazurkas of Chopin, the Operas of Verdi, and

the Sonatas of Mozart--all of whom had combined together on this occasion and produced one immortal work, entitled "Frank." She closed the piano and went up to her room, to dream away the hours luxuriously in visions of her married future. The green shutters were closed, the easy-chair was pushed in front of the glass, the maid was summoned as usual; and the comb assisted the mistress's reflections, through the medium of the mistress's hair, till heat and idleness asserted their narcotic influences together, and Magdalen fell asleep.

It was past three o'clock when she woke. On going downstairs again she found her mother, Norah and Miss Garth all sitting together enjoying the shade and the coolness under the open portico in front of the house.

Norah had the railway time-table in her hand. They had been discussing the chances of Mr. Vanstone's catching the return train and getting back in good time. That topic had led them, next, to his business errand at Grailsea--an errand of kindness, as usual; undertaken for the benefit of the miller, who had been his old farm-servant, and who was now hard pressed by serious pecuniary difficulties. From this they had glided insensibly into a subject often repeated among them, and never exhausted by repetition--the praise of Mr. Vanstone himself. Each one of the three had some experience of her own to relate of his simple, generous nature. The conversation seemed to be almost painfully interesting to his wife. She was too near the time of her trial now not to feel nervously sensitive to the one subject which always held the foremost place in her heart. Her eyes overflowed as Magdalen joined the little group under the portico; her frail hand trembled as it signed to her youngest daughter to take the vacant chair by her side. "We were talking of your father," she said, softly. "Oh, my love, if your married life is only as happy--" Her voice failed her; she put her handkerchief hurriedly over her face and rested her head on Magdalen's shoulder. Norah looked appealingly to Miss Garth, who at once led the conversation back to the more trivial subject of Mr. Vanstone's return. "We have all been wondering," she said, with a significant look at Magdalen, "whether your father will leave Grailsea in time to catch the train--or whether he will miss it and be obliged to drive back. What do you say?"

"I say, papa will miss the train," replied Magdalen, taking Miss Garth's hint with her customary quickness. "The last thing he attends to at Grailsea will be the business that brings him there. Whenever he has business to do, he always puts it off to the last moment, doesn't he, mamma?"

The question roused her mother exactly as Magdalen had intended it should. "Not when his errand is an errand of kindness," said Mrs. Vanstone.

"He has gone to help the miller in a very pressing difficulty--"

"And don't you know what he'll do?" persisted Magdalen. "He'll romp with the miller's children, and gossip with the mother, and hob-and-nob with the father. At the last moment when he has got five minutes left to catch the train, he'll say: 'Let's go into the counting-house and look at the books.' He'll find the books dreadfully complicated; he'll suggest sending for an accountant; he'll settle the business off hand, by lending the money in the meantime; he'll jog back comfortably in the miller's gig; and he'll tell us all how pleasant the lanes were in the cool of the evening."

The little character-sketch which these words drew was too faithful a likeness not to be recognized. Mrs. Vanstone showed her appreciation of it by a smile. "When your father returns," she said, "we will put your account of his proceedings to the test. I think," she continued, rising languidly from her chair, "I had better go indoors again now and rest on the sofa till he comes back."

The little group under the portico broke up. Magdalen slipped away into the garden to hear Frank's account of the interview with his father. The other three ladies entered the house together. When Mrs. Vanstone was comfortably established on the sofa, Norah and Miss Garth left her to repose, and withdrew to the library to look over the last parcel of books from London.

It was a quiet, cloudless summer's day. The heat was tempered by a light western breeze; the voices of laborers at work in a field near reached the house cheerfully; the clock-bell of the village church as it struck the quarters floated down the wind with a clearer ring, a louder melody than usual. Sweet odors from field and flower-garden, stealing in at the open windows, filled the house with their fragrance; and the birds in Norah's aviary upstairs sang the song of their happiness exultingly in the sun.

As the church clock struck the quarter past four, the morning-room door opened; and Mrs. Vanstone crossed the hall alone. She had tried vainly to compose herself. She was too restless to lie still and sleep. For a moment she directed her steps toward the portico--then turned, and looked about her, doubtful where to go, or what to do next. While she was still hesitating, the half-open door of her husband's study attracted her attention. The room seemed to be in sad confusion. Drawers were left open; coats and hats, account-books and papers, pipes and fishing-rods were all scattered about together. She went in, and pushed the door to--but so gently that she still left it ajar. "It will amuse me to put his room to rights," she thought to

herself. "I should like to do something for him before I am down on my bed, helpless." She began to arrange his drawers, and found his banker's book lying open in one of them. "My poor dear, how careless he is! The servants might have seen all his affairs, if I had not happened to have looked in." She set the drawers right; and then turned to the multifarious litter on a side-table. A little old-fashioned music-book appeared among the scattered papers, with her name written in it, in faded ink. She blushed like a young girl in the first happiness of the discovery. "How good he is to me! He remembers my poor old music-book, and keeps it for my sake." As she sat down by the table and opened the book, the bygone time came back to her in all its tenderness. The clock struck the half-hour, struck the three-quarters--and still she sat there, with the music-book on her lap, dreaming happily over the old songs; thinking gratefully of the golden days when his hand had turned the pages for her, when his voice had whispered the words which no woman's memory ever forgets.

Norah roused herself from the volume she was reading, and glanced at the clock on the library mantel-piece.

"If papa comes back by the railway," she said, "he will be here in ten minutes."

Miss Garth started, and looked up drowsily from the book which was just dropping out of her hand.

"I don't think he will come by train," she replied. "He will jog back--as Magdalen flippantly expressed it--in the miller's gig."

As she said the words, there was a knock at the library door. The footman appeared, and addressed himself to Miss Garth.

"A person wishes to see you, ma'am."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, ma'am. A stranger to me--a respectable-looking man--and he said he particularly wished to see you."

Miss Garth went out into the hall. The footman closed the library door after her, and withdrew down the kitchen stairs.

The man stood just inside the door, on the mat. His eyes wandered, his face was pale--he looked ill; he looked frightened. He trifled nervously with his

cap, and shifted it backward and forward, from one hand to the other.

"You wanted to see me?" said Miss Garth.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am.--You are not Mrs. Vanstone, are you?"

"Certainly not. I am Miss Garth. Why do you ask the question?"

"I am employed in the clerk's office at Grailsea Station--"

"Yes?"

"I am sent here--"

He stopped again. His wandering eyes looked down at the mat, and his restless hands wrung his cap harder and harder. He moistened his dry lips, and tried once more.

"I am sent here on a very serious errand."

"Serious to me?"

"Serious to all in this house."

Miss Garth took one step nearer to him--took one steady look at his face. She turned cold in the summer heat. "Stop!" she said, with a sudden distrust, and glanced aside anxiously at the door of the morning-room. It was safely closed. "Tell me the worst; and don't speak loud. There has been an accident. Where?"

"On the railway. Close to Grailsea Station."

"The up-train to London?"

"No: the down-train at one-fifty--"

"God Almighty help us! The train Mr. Vanstone traveled by to Grailsea?"

"The same. I was sent here by the up-train; the line was just cleared in time for it. They wouldn't write--they said I must see 'Miss Garth,' and tell her. There are seven passengers badly hurt; and two--"

The next word failed on his lips; he raised his hand in the dead silence. With

eyes that opened wide in horror, he raised his hand and pointed over Miss Garth's shoulder.

She turned a little, and looked back.

Face to face with her, on the threshold of the study door, stood the mistress of the house. She held her old music-book clutched fast mechanically in both hands. She stood, the specter of herself. With a dreadful vacancy in her eyes, with a dreadful stillness in her voice, she repeated the man's last words:

"Seven passengers badly hurt; and two--"

Her tortured fingers relaxed their hold; the book dropped from them; she sank forward heavily. Miss Garth caught her before she fell--caught her, and turned upon the man, with the wife's swooning body in her arms, to hear the husband's fate.

"The harm is done," she said; "you may speak out. Is he wounded, or dead?"

"Dead."

CHAPTER XI.

THE sun sank lower; the western breeze floated cool and fresh into the house. As the evening advanced, the cheerful ring of the village clock came nearer and nearer. Field and flower-garden felt the influence of the hour, and shed their sweetest fragrance. The birds in Norah's aviary sunned themselves in the evening stillness, and sang their farewell gratitude to the dying day.

Staggered in its progress for a time only, the pitiless routine of the house went horribly on its daily way. The panic-stricken servants took their blind refuge in the duties proper to the hour. The footman softly laid the table for dinner. The maid sat waiting in senseless doubt, with the hot-water jugs for the bedrooms ranged near her in their customary row. The gardener, who had been ordered to come to his master, with vouchers for money that he had paid in excess of his instructions, said his character was dear to him, and left the vouchers at his appointed time. Custom that never yields, and Death that never spares, met on the wreck of human happiness--and Death gave way.

Heavily the thunder-clouds of Affliction had gathered over the house--heavily, but not at their darkest yet. At five, that evening, the shock of the calamity had struck its blow. Before another hour had passed, the disclosure of the husband's sudden death was followed by the suspense of the wife's mortal peril. She lay helpless on her widowed bed; her own life, and the life of her unborn child, trembling in the balance.

But one mind still held possession of its resources--but one guiding spirit now moved helpfully in the house of mourning.

If Miss Garth's early days had been passed as calmly and as happily as her later life at Combe-Raven, she might have sunk under the cruel necessities of the time. But the governess's youth had been tried in the ordeal of family affliction; and she met her terrible duties with the steady courage of a woman who had learned to suffer. Alone, she had faced the trial of telling the daughters that they were fatherless. Alone, she now struggled to sustain them, when the dreadful certainty of their bereavement was at last impressed on their minds.

Her least anxiety was for the elder sister. The agony of Norah's grief had forced its way outward to the natural relief of tears. It was not so with

Magdalen. Tearless and speechless, she sat in the room where the revelation of her father's death had first reached her; her face, unnaturally petrified by the sterile sorrow of old age--a white, changeless blank, fearful to look at. Nothing roused, nothing melted her. She only said, "Don't speak to me; don't touch me. Let me bear it by myself"--and fell silent again. The first great grief which had darkened the sisters' lives had, as it seemed, changed their everyday characters already.

The twilight fell, and faded; and the summer night came brightly. As the first carefully shaded light was kindled in the sick-room, the physician, who had been summoned from Bristol, arrived to consult with the medical attendant of the family. He could give no comfort: he could only say, "We must try, and hope. The shock which struck her, when she overheard the news of her husband's death, has prostrated her strength at the time when she needed it most. No effort to preserve her shall be neglected. I will stay here for the night."

He opened one of the windows to admit more air as he spoke. The view overlooked the drive in front of the house and the road outside. Little groups of people were standing before the lodge-gates, looking in. "If those persons make any noise," said the doctor, "they must be warned away." There was no need to warn them: they were only the laborers who had worked on the dead man's property, and here and there some women and children from the village. They were all thinking of him--some talking of him--and it quickened their sluggish minds to look at his house. The gentlefolks thereabouts were mostly kind to them (the men said), but none like him. The women whispered to each other of his comforting ways when he came into their cottages. "He was a cheerful man, poor soul; and thoughtful of us, too: he never came in and stared at meal-times; the rest of 'em help us, and scold us--all he ever said was, better luck next time." So they stood and talked of him, and looked at his house and grounds and moved off clumsily by twos and threes, with the dim sense that the sight of his pleasant face would never comfort them again. The dullest head among them knew, that night, that the hard ways of poverty would be all the harder to walk on, now he was gone.

A little later, news was brought to the bed-chamber door that old Mr. Clare had come alone to the house, and was waiting in the hall below, to hear what the physician said. Miss Garth was not able to go down to him herself: she sent a message. He said to the servant, "I'll come and ask again, in two hours' time"--and went out slowly. Unlike other men in all things else, the sudden death of his old friend had produced no discernible change in him. The feeling implied in the errand of inquiry that had brought him to the

house was the one betrayal of human sympathy which escaped the rugged, impenetrable old man.

He came again, when the two hours had expired; and this time Miss Garth saw him.

They shook hands in silence. She waited; she nerved herself to hear him speak of his lost friend. No: he never mentioned the dreadful accident, he never alluded to the dreadful death. He said these words, "Is she better, or worse?" and said no more. Was the tribute of his grief for the husband sternly suppressed under the expression of his anxiety for the wife? The nature of the man, unliably antagonistic to the world and the world's customs, might justify some such interpretation of his conduct as this. He repeated his question, "Is she better, or worse?"

Miss Garth answered him:

"No better; if there is any change, it is a change for the worse."

They spoke those words at the window of the morning-room which opened on the garden. Mr. Clare paused, after hearing the reply to his inquiry, stepped out on to the walk, then turned on a sudden, and spoke again:

"Has the doctor given her up?" he asked.

"He has not concealed from us that she is in danger. We can only pray for her."

The old man laid his hand on Miss Garth's arm as she answered him, and looked her attentively in the face.

"You believe in prayer?" he said.

Miss Garth drew sorrowfully back from him.

"You might have spared me that question sir, at such a time as this."

He took no notice of her answer; his eyes were still fastened on her face.

"Pray!" he said. "Pray as you never prayed before, for the preservation of Mrs. Vanstone's life."

He left her. His voice and manner implied some unutterable dread of the

future, which his words had not confessed. Miss Garth followed him into the garden, and called to him. He heard her, but he never turned back: he quickened his pace, as if he desired to avoid her. She watched him across the lawn in the warm summer moonlight. She saw his white, withered hands, saw them suddenly against the black background of the shrubbery, raised and wrung above his head. They dropped--the trees shrouded him in darkness--he was gone.

Miss Garth went back to the suffering woman, with the burden on her mind of one anxiety more.

It was then past eleven o'clock. Some little time had elapsed since she had seen the sisters and spoken to them. The inquiries she addressed to one of the female servants only elicited the information that they were both in their rooms. She delayed her return to the mother's bedside to say her parting words of comfort to the daughters, before she left them for the night. Norah's room was the nearest. She softly opened the door and looked in. The kneeling figure by the bedside told her that God's help had found the fatherless daughter in her affliction. Grateful tears gathered in her eyes as she looked: she softly closed the door, and went on to Magdalen's room. There doubt stayed her feet at the threshold, and she waited for a moment before going in.

A sound in the room caught her ear--the monotonous rustling of a woman's dress, now distant, now near; passing without cessation from end to end over the floor--a sound which told her that Magdalen was pacing to and fro in the secrecy of her own chamber. Miss Garth knocked. The rustling ceased; the door was opened, and the sad young face confronted her, locked in its cold despair; the large light eyes looked mechanically into hers, as vacant and as tearless as ever.

That look wrung the heart of the faithful woman, who had trained her and loved her from a child. She took Magdalen tenderly in her arms.

"Oh, my love," she said, "no tears yet! Oh, if I could see you as I have seen Norah! Speak to me, Magdalen--try if you can speak to me."

She tried, and spoke:

"Norah," she said, "feels no remorse. He was not serving Norah's interests when he went to his death: he was serving mine."

With that terrible answer, she put her cold lips to Miss Garth's cheek.

"Let me bear it by myself," she said, and gently closed the door.

Again Miss Garth waited at the threshold, and again the sound of the rustling dress passed to and fro--now far, now near--to and fro with a cruel, mechanical regularity, that chilled the warmest sympathy, and daunted the boldest hope.

The night passed. It had been agreed, if no change for the better showed itself by the morning, that the London physician whom Mrs. Vanstone had consulted some months since should be summoned to the house on the next day. No change for the better appeared, and the physician was sent for.

As the morning advanced, Frank came to make inquiries from the cottage. Had Mr. Clare intrusted to his son the duty which he had personally performed on the previous day through reluctance to meet Miss Garth again after what he had said to her? It might be so. Frank could throw no light on the subject; he was not in his father's confidence. He looked pale and bewildered. His first inquiries after Magdalen showed how his weak nature had been shaken by the catastrophe. He was not capable of framing his own questions: the words faltered on his lips, and the ready tears came into his eyes. Miss Garth's heart warmed to him for the first time. Grief has this that is noble in it--it accepts all sympathy, come whence it may. She encouraged the lad by a few kind words, and took his hand at parting.

Before noon Frank returned with a second message. His father desired to know whether Mr. Pendril was not expected at Combe-Raven on that day. If the lawyer's arrival was looked for, Frank was directed to be in attendance at the station, and to take him to the cottage, where a bed would be placed at his disposal. This message took Miss Garth by surprise. It showed that Mr. Clare had been made acquainted with his dead friend's purpose of sending for Mr. Pendril. Was the old man's thoughtful offer of hospitality another indirect expression of the natural human distress which he perversely concealed? or was he aware of some secret necessity for Mr. Pendril's presence, of which the bereaved family had been kept in total ignorance? Miss Garth was too heart-sick and hopeless to dwell on either question. She told Frank that Mr. Pendril had been expected at three o'clock, and sent him back with her thanks.

Shortly after his departure, such anxieties on Magdalen's account as her mind was now able to feel were relieved by better news than her last night's experience had inclined her to hope for. Norah's influence had been exerted to rouse her sister; and Norah's patient sympathy had set the prisoned grief

free. Magdalen had suffered severely--suffered inevitably, with such a nature as hers--in the effort that relieved her. The healing tears had not come gently; they had burst from her with a torturing, passionate vehemence--but Norah had never left her till the struggle was over, and the calm had come. These better tidings encouraged Miss Garth to withdraw to her own room, and to take the rest which she needed sorely. Worn out in body and mind, she slept from sheer exhaustion--slept heavily and dreamless for some hours. It was between three and four in the afternoon when she was roused by one of the female servants. The woman had a note in her hand--a note left by Mr. Clare the younger, with a message desiring that it might be delivered to Miss Garth immediately. The name written in the lower corner of the envelope was "William Pendril." The lawyer had arrived.

Miss Garth opened the note. After a few first sentences of sympathy and condolence, the writer announced his arrival at Mr. Clare's; and then proceeded, apparently in his professional capacity, to make a very startling request.

"If," he wrote, "any change for the better in Mrs. Vanstone should take place--whether it is only an improvement for the time, or whether it is the permanent improvement for which we all hope--in either case I entreat you to let me know of it immediately. It is of the last importance that I should see her, in the event of her gaining strength enough to give me her attention for five minutes, and of her being able at the expiration of that time to sign her name. May I beg that you will communicate my request, in the strictest confidence, to the medical men in attendance? They will understand, and you will understand, the vital importance I attach to this interview when I tell you that I have arranged to defer to it all other business claims on me; and that I hold myself in readiness to obey your summons at any hour of the day or night."

In those terms the letter ended. Miss Garth read it twice over. At the second reading the request which the lawyer now addressed to her, and the farewell words which had escaped Mr. Clare's lips the day before, connected themselves vaguely in her mind. There was some other serious interest in suspense, known to Mr. Pendril and known to Mr. Clare, besides the first and foremost interest of Mrs. Vanstone's recovery. Whom did it affect? The children? Were they threatened by some new calamity which their mother's signature might avert? What did it mean? Did it mean that Mr. Vanstone had died without leaving a will?

In her distress and confusion of mind Miss Garth was incapable of reasoning with herself, as she might have reasoned at a happier time. She

hastened to the antechamber of Mrs. Vanstone's room; and, after explaining Mr. Pendril's position toward the family, placed his letter in the hands of the medical men. They both answered, without hesitation, to the same purpose. Mrs. Vanstone's condition rendered any such interview as the lawyer desired a total impossibility. If she rallied from her present prostration, Miss Garth should be at once informed of the improvement. In the meantime, the answer to Mr. Pendril might be conveyed in one word--Impossible.

"You see what importance Mr. Pendril attaches to the interview?" said Miss Garth.

Yes: both the doctors saw it.

"My mind is lost and confused, gentlemen, in this dreadful suspense. Can you either of you guess why the signature is wanted? or what the object of the interview may be? I have only seen Mr. Pendril when he has come here on former visits: I have no claim to justify me in questioning him. Will you look at the letter again? Do you think it implies that Mr. Vanstone has never made a will?"

"I think it can hardly imply that," said one of the doctors. "But, even supposing Mr. Vanstone to have died intestate, the law takes due care of the interests of his widow and his children--"

"Would it do so," interposed the other medical man, "if the property happened to be in land?"

"I am not sure in that case. Do you happen to know, Miss Garth, whether Mr. Vanstone's property was in money or in land?"

"In money," replied Miss Garth. "I have heard him say so on more than one occasion."

"Then I can relieve your mind by speaking from my own experience. The law, if he has died intestate, gives a third of his property to his widow, and divides the rest equally among his children."

"But if Mrs. Vanstone--"

"If Mrs. Vanstone should die," pursued the doctor, completing the question which Miss Garth had not the heart to conclude for herself, "I believe I am right in telling you that the property would, as a matter of legal course, go to the children. Whatever necessity there may be for the interview which Mr.

Pendril requests, I can see no reason for connecting it with the question of Mr. Vanstone's presumed intestacy. But, by all means, put the question, for the satisfaction of your own mind, to Mr. Pendril himself."

Miss Garth withdrew to take the course which the doctor advised. After communicating to Mr. Pendril the medical decision which, thus far, refused him the interview that he sought, she added a brief statement of the legal question she had put to the doctors; and hinted delicately at her natural anxiety to be informed of the motives which had led the lawyer to make his request. The answer she received was guarded in the extreme: it did not impress her with a favorable opinion of Mr. Pendril. He confirmed the doctors' interpretation of the law in general terms only; expressed his intention of waiting at the cottage in the hope that a change for the better might yet enable Mrs. Vanstone to see him; and closed his letter without the slightest explanation of his motives, and without a word of reference to the question of the existence, or the non-existence, of Mr. Vanstone's will.

The marked caution of the lawyer's reply dwelt uneasily on Miss Garth's mind, until the long-expected event of the day recalled all her thoughts to her one absorbing anxiety on Mrs. Vanstone's account.

Early in the evening the physician from London arrived. He watched long by the bedside of the suffering woman; he remained longer still in consultation with his medical brethren; he went back again to the sick-room, before Miss Garth could prevail on him to communicate to her the opinion at which he had arrived.

When he called out into the antechamber for the second time, he silently took a chair by her side. She looked in his face; and the last faint hope died in her before he opened his lips.

"I must speak the hard truth," he said, gently. "All that can be done has been done. The next four-and-twenty hours, at most, will end your suspense. If Nature makes no effort in that time--I grieve to say it--you must prepare yourself for the worst."

Those words said all: they were prophetic of the end.

The night passed; and she lived through it. The next day came; and she lingered on till the clock pointed to five. At that hour the tidings of her husband's death had dealt the mortal blow. When the hour came round again, the mercy of God let her go to him in the better world. Her daughters were kneeling at the bedside as her spirit passed away. She left them

unconscious of their presence; mercifully and happily insensible to the pang of the last farewell.

Her child survived her till the evening was on the wane and the sunset was dim in the quiet western heaven. As the darkness came, the light of the frail little life--faint and feeble from the first--flickered and went out. All that was earthly of mother and child lay, that night, on the same bed. The Angel of Death had done his awful bidding; and the two Sisters were left alone in the world.

CHAPTER XII.

EARLIER than usual on the morning of Thursday, the twenty-third of July, Mr. Clare appeared at the door of his cottage, and stepped out into the little strip of garden attached to his residence.

After he had taken a few turns backward and forward, alone, he was joined by a spare, quiet, gray-haired man, whose personal appearance was totally devoid of marked character of any kind; whose inexpressive face and conventionally-quiet manner presented nothing that attracted approval and nothing that inspired dislike. This was Mr. Pendril--this was the man on whose lips hung the future of the orphans at Combe-Raven.

"The time is getting on," he said, looking toward the shrubbery, as he joined Mr. Clare.

"My appointment with Miss Garth is for eleven o'clock: it only wants ten minutes of the hour."

"Are you to see her alone?" asked Mr. Clare.

"I left Miss Garth to decide--after warning her, first of all, that the circumstances I am compelled to disclose are of a very serious nature."

"And has she decided?"

"She writes me word that she mentioned my appointment, and repeated the warning I had given her to both the daughters. The elder of the two shrinks--and who can wonder at it?--from any discussion connected with the future which requires her presence so soon as the day after the funeral. The younger one appears to have expressed no opinion on the subject. As I understand it, she suffers herself to be passively guided by her sister's example. My interview, therefore, will take place with Miss Garth alone--and it is a very great relief to me to know it."

He spoke the last words with more emphasis and energy than seemed habitual to him. Mr. Clare stopped, and looked at his guest attentively.

"You are almost as old as I am, sir," he said. "Has all your long experience as a lawyer not hardened you yet?"

"I never knew how little it had hardened me," replied Mr. Pendril, quietly, "until I returned from London yesterday to attend the funeral. I was not warned that the daughters had resolved on following their parents to the grave. I think their presence made the closing scene of this dreadful calamity doubly painful, and doubly touching. You saw how the great concourse of people were moved by it--and they were in ignorance of the truth; they knew nothing of the cruel necessity which takes me to the house this morning. The sense of that necessity--and the sight of those poor girls at the time when I felt my hard duty toward them most painfully--shook me, as a man of my years and my way of life is not often shaken by any distress in the present or any suspense in the future. I have not recovered it this morning: I hardly feel sure of myself yet."

"A man's composure--when he is a man like you--comes with the necessity for it," said Mr. Clare. "You must have had duties to perform as trying in their way as the duty that lies before you this morning."

Mr. Pendril shook his head. "Many duties as serious; many stories more romantic. No duty so trying, no story so hopeless, as this."

With those words they parted. Mr. Pendril left the garden for the shrubbery path which led to Combe-Raven. Mr. Clare returned to the cottage.

On reaching the passage, he looked through the open door of his little parlor and saw Frank sitting there in idle wretchedness, with his head resting wearily on his hand.

"I have had an answer from your employers in London," said Mr. Clare. "In consideration of what has happened, they will allow the offer they made you to stand over for another month."

Frank changed color, and rose nervously from his chair.

"Are my prospects altered?" he asked. "Are Mr. Vanstone's plans for me not to be carried out? He told Magdalen his will had provided for her. She repeated his words to me; she said I ought to know all that his goodness and generosity had done for both of us. How can his death make a change? Has anything happened?"

"Wait till Mr. Pendril comes back from Combe-Raven," said his father. "Question him--don't question me."

The ready tears rose in Frank's eyes.

"You won't be hard on me?" he pleaded, faintly. "You won't expect me to go back to London without seeing Magdalen first?"

Mr. Clare looked thoughtfully at his son, and considered a little before he replied.

"You may dry your eyes," he said. "You shall see Magdalen before you go back."

He left the room, after making that reply, and withdrew to his study. The books lay ready to his hand as usual. He opened one of them and set himself to read in the customary manner. But his attention wandered; and his eyes strayed away, from time to time, to the empty chair opposite--the chair in which his old friend and gossip had sat and wrangled with him good-humoredly for many and many a year past. After a struggle with himself he closed the book. "D--n the chair!" he said: "it will talk of him; and I must listen." He reached down his pipe from the wall and mechanically filled it with tobacco. His hand shook, his eyes wandered back to the old place; and a heavy sigh came from him unwillingly. That empty chair was the only earthly argument for which he had no answer: his heart owned its defeat and moistened his eyes in spite of him. "He has got the better of me at last," said the rugged old man. "There is one weak place left in me still--and he has found it."

Meanwhile, Mr. Pendril entered the shrubbery, and followed the path which led to the lonely garden and the desolate house. He was met at the door by the man-servant, who was apparently waiting in expectation of his arrival.

"I have an appointment with Miss Garth. Is she ready to see me?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Is she alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"In the room which was Mr. Vanstone's study?"

"In that room, sir."

The servant opened the door and Mr. Pendril went in.

The governess stood alone at the study window. The morning was oppressively hot, and she threw up the lower sash to admit more air into the room, as Mr. Pendril entered it.

They bowed to each other with a formal politeness, which betrayed on either side an uneasy sense of restraint. Mr. Pendril was one of the many men who appear superficially to the worst advantage, under the influence of strong mental agitation which it is necessary for them to control. Miss Garth, on her side, had not forgotten the ungraciously guarded terms in which the lawyer had replied to her letter; and the natural anxiety which she had felt on the subject of the interview was not relieved by any favorable opinion of the man who sought it. As they confronted each other in the silence of the summer's morning--both dressed in black; Miss Garth's hard features, gaunt and haggard with grief; the lawyer's cold, colorless face, void of all marked expression, suggestive of a business embarrassment and of nothing more--it would have been hard to find two persons less attractive externally to any ordinary sympathies than the two who had now met together, the one to tell, the other to hear, the secrets of the dead.

"I am sincerely sorry, Miss Garth, to intrude on you at such a time as this. But circumstances, as I have already explained, leave me no other choice."

"Will you take a seat, Mr. Pendril? You wished to see me in this room, I believe?"

"Only in this room, because Mr. Vanstone's papers are kept here, and I may find it necessary to refer to some of them."

After that formal interchange of question and answer, they sat down on either side of a table placed close under the window. One waited to speak, the other waited to bear. There was a momentary silence. Mr. Pendril broke it by referring to the young ladies, with the customary expressions of sympathy. Miss Garth answered him with the same ceremony, in the same conventional tone. There was a second pause of silence. The humming of flies among the evergreen shrubs under the window penetrated drowsily into the room; and the tramp of a heavy-footed cart-horse, plodding along the high-road beyond the garden, was as plainly audible in the stillness as if it had been night.

The lawyer roused his flagging resolution, and spoke to the purpose when he spoke next.

"You have some reason, Miss Garth," he began, "to feel not quite satisfied

with my past conduct toward you, in one particular. During Mrs. Vanstone's fatal illness, you addressed a letter to me, making certain inquiries; which, while she lived, it was impossible for me to answer. Her deplorable death releases me from the restraint which I had imposed on myself, and permits--or, more properly, obliges me to speak. You shall know what serious reasons I had for waiting day and night in the hope of obtaining that interview which unhappily never took place; and in justice to Mr. Vanstone's memory, your own eyes shall inform you that he made his will."

He rose; unlocked a little iron safe in the corner of the room; and returned to the table with some folded sheets of paper, which he spread open under Miss Garth's eyes. When she had read the first words, "In the name of God, Amen," he turned the sheet, and pointed to the end of the next page. She saw the well-known signature: "Andrew Vanstone." She saw the customary attestations of the two witnesses; and the date of the document, reverting to a period of more than five years since. Having thus convinced her of the formality of the will, the lawyer interposed before she could question him, and addressed her in these words:

"I must not deceive you," he said. "I have my own reasons for producing this document."

"What reasons, sir?"

"You shall hear them. When you are in possession of the truth, these pages may help to preserve your respect for Mr. Vanstone's memory--"

Miss Garth started back in her chair.

"What do you mean?" she asked, with a stern straightforwardness.

He took no heed of the question; he went on as if she had not interrupted him.

"I have a second reason," he continued, "for showing you the will. If I can prevail on you to read certain clauses in it, under my superintendence, you will make your own discovery of the circumstances which I am here to disclose--circumstances so painful that I hardly know how to communicate them to you with my own lips."

Miss Garth looked him steadfastly in the face.

"Circumstances, sir, which affect the dead parents, or the living children?"

"Which affect the dead and the living both," answered the lawyer.
"Circumstances, I grieve to say, which involve the future of Mr. Vanstone's unhappy daughters."

"Wait," said Miss Garth, "wait a little." She pushed her gray hair back from her temples, and struggled with the sickness of heart, the dreadful faintness of terror, which would have overpowered a younger or a less resolute woman. Her eyes, dim with watching, weary with grief, searched the lawyer's unfathomable face. "His unhappy daughters?" she repeated to herself, vacantly. "He talks as if there was some worse calamity than the calamity which has made them orphans." She paused once more; and rallied her sinking courage. "I will not make your hard duty, sir, more painful to you than I can help," she resumed. "Show me the place in the will. Let me read it, and know the worst."

Mr. Pendril turned back to the first page, and pointed to a certain place in the cramped lines of writing. "Begin here," he said.

She tried to begin; she tried to follow his finger, as she had followed it already to the signatures and the dates. But her senses seemed to share the confusion of her mind--the words mingled together, and the lines swam before her eyes.

"I can't follow you," she said. "You must tell it, or read it to me." She pushed her chair back from the table, and tried to collect herself. "Stop!" she exclaimed, as the lawyer, with visible hesitation and reluctance, took the papers in his own hand. "One question, first. Does his will provide for his children?"

"His will provided for them, when he made it."

"When he made it!" (Something of her natural bluntness broke out in her manner as she repeated the answer.) "Does it provide for them now?"

"It does not."

She snatched the will from his hand, and threw it into a corner of the room. "You mean well," she said; "you wish to spare me--but you are wasting your time, and my strength. If the will is useless, there let it lie. Tell me the truth, Mr. Pendril--tell it plainly, tell it instantly, in your own words!"

He felt that it would be useless cruelty to resist that appeal. There was no

merciful alternative but to answer it on the spot.

"I must refer you to the spring of the present year, Miss Garth. Do you remember the fourth of March?"

Her attention wandered again; a thought seemed to have struck her at the moment when he spoke. Instead of answering his inquiry, she put a question of her own.

"Let me break the news to myself," she said--"let me anticipate you, if I can. His useless will, the terms in which you speak of his daughters, the doubt you seem to feel of my continued respect for his memory, have opened a new view to me. Mr. Vanstone has died a ruined man--is that what you had to tell me?"

"Far from it. Mr. Vanstone has died, leaving a fortune of more than eighty thousand pounds--a fortune invested in excellent securities. He lived up to his income, but never beyond it; and all his debts added together would not reach two hundred pounds. If he had died a ruined man, I should have felt deeply for his children: but I should not have hesitated to tell you the truth, as I am hesitating now. Let me repeat a question which escaped you, I think, when I first put it. Carry your mind back to the spring of this year. Do you remember the fourth of March?"

Miss Garth shook her head. "My memory for dates is bad at the best of times," she said. "I am too confused to exert it at a moment's notice. Can you put your question in no other form?"

He put it in this form:

"Do you remember any domestic event in the spring of the present year which appeared to affect Mr. Vanstone more seriously than usual?"

Miss Garth leaned forward in her chair, and looked eagerly at Mr. Pendril across the table. "The journey to London!" she exclaimed. "I distrusted the journey to London from the first! Yes! I remember Mr. Vanstone receiving a letter--I remember his reading it, and looking so altered from himself that he startled us all."

"Did you notice any apparent understanding between Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone on the subject of that letter?"

"Yes: I did. One of the girls--it was Magdalen--mentioned the post-mark;

some place in America. It all comes back to me, Mr. Pendril. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited and anxious, the moment she heard the place named. They went to London together the next day; they explained nothing to their daughters, nothing to me. Mrs. Vanstone said the journey was for family affairs. I suspected something wrong; I couldn't tell what. Mrs. Vanstone wrote to me from London, saying that her object was to consult a physician on the state of her health, and not to alarm her daughters by telling them. Something in the letter rather hurt me at the time. I thought there might be some other motive that she was keeping from me. Did I do her wrong?"

"You did her no wrong. There was a motive which she was keeping from you. In revealing that motive, I reveal the painful secret which brings me to this house. All that I could do to prepare you, I have done. Let me now tell the truth in the plainest and fewest words. When Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone left Combe-Raven, in the March of the present year--"

Before he could complete the sentence, a sudden movement of Miss Garth's interrupted him. She started violently, and looked round toward the window. "Only the wind among the leaves," she said, faintly. "My nerves are so shaken, the least thing startles me. Speak out, for God's sake! When Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone left this house, tell me in plain words, why did they go to London?"

In plain words, Mr. Pendril told her:

"They went to London to be married."

With that answer he placed a slip of paper on the table. It was the marriage certificate of the dead parents, and the date it bore was March the twentieth, eighteen hundred and forty-six.

Miss Garth neither moved nor spoke. The certificate lay beneath her unnoticed. She sat with her eyes rooted on the lawyer's face; her mind stunned, her senses helpless. He saw that all his efforts to break the shock of the discovery had been efforts made in vain; he felt the vital importance of rousing her, and firmly and distinctly repeated the fatal words.

"They went to London to be married," he said. "Try to rouse yourself: try to realize the plain fact first: the explanation shall come afterward. Miss Garth, I speak the miserable truth! In the spring of this year they left home; they lived in London for a fortnight, in the strictest retirement; they were married by license at the end of that time. There is a copy of the certificate, which I myself obtained on Monday last. Read the date of the marriage for yourself.

It is Friday, the twentieth of March--the March of this present year."

As he pointed to the certificate, that faint breath of air among the shrubs beneath the window, which had startled Miss Garth, stirred the leaves once more. He heard it himself this time, and turned his face, so as to let the breeze play upon it. No breeze came; no breath of air that was strong enough for him to feel, floated into the room.

Miss Garth roused herself mechanically, and read the certificate. It seemed to produce no distinct impression on her: she laid it on one side in a lost, bewildered manner. "Twelve years," she said, in low, hopeless tones--"twelve quiet, happy years I lived with this family. Mrs. Vanstone was my friend; my dear, valued friend--my sister, I might almost say. I can't believe it. Bear with me a little, sir, I can't believe it yet."

"I shall help you to believe it when I tell you more," said Mr. Pendril--"you will understand me better when I take you back to the time of Mr. Vanstone's early life. I won't ask for your attention just yet. Let us wait a little, until you recover yourself."

They waited a few minutes. The lawyer took some letters from his pocket, referred to them attentively, and put them back again. "Can you listen to me, now?" he asked, kindly. She bowed her head in answer. Mr. Pendril considered with himself for a moment, "I must caution you on one point," he said. "If the aspect of Mr. Vanstone's character which I am now about to present to you seems in some respects at variance with your later experience, bear in mind that, when you first knew him twelve years since, he was a man of forty; and that, when I first knew him, he was a lad of nineteen."

His next words raised the veil, and showed the irrevocable Past.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE fortune which Mr. Vanstone possessed when you knew him" (the lawyer began) "was part, and part only, of the inheritance which fell to him on his father's death. Mr. Vanstone the elder was a manufacturer in the North of England. He married early in life; and the children of the marriage were either six or seven in number--I am not certain which. First, Michael, the eldest son, still living, and now an old man turned seventy. Secondly, Selina, the eldest daughter, who married in after-life, and who died ten or eleven years ago. After those two came other sons and daughters, whose early deaths make it unnecessary to mention them particularly. The last and by many years the youngest of the children was Andrew, whom I first knew, as I told you, at the age of nineteen. My father was then on the point of retiring from the active pursuit of his profession; and in succeeding to his business, I also succeeded to his connection with the Vanstones as the family solicitor.

"At that time, Andrew had just started in life by entering the army. After little more than a year of home-service, he was ordered out with his regiment to Canada. When he quitted England, he left his father and his elder brother Michael seriously at variance. I need not detain you by entering into the cause of the quarrel. I need only tell you that the elder Mr. Vanstone, with many excellent qualities, was a man of fierce and intractable temper. His eldest son had set him at defiance, under circumstances which might have justly irritated a father of far milder character; and he declared, in the most positive terms, that he would never see Michael's face again. In defiance of my entreaties, and of the entreaties of his wife, he tore up, in our presence, the will which provided for Michael's share in the paternal inheritance. Such was the family position, when the younger son left home for Canada.

"Some months after Andrew's arrival with his regiment at Quebec, he became acquainted with a woman of great personal attractions, who came, or said she came, from one of the Southern States of America. She obtained an immediate influence over him; and she used it to the basest purpose. You knew the easy, affectionate, trusting nature of the man in later life--you can imagine how thoughtlessly he acted on the impulse of his youth. It is useless to dwell on this lamentable part of the story. He was just twenty-one: he was blindly devoted to a worthless woman; and she led him on, with merciless cunning, till it was too late to draw back. In one word, he committed the fatal error of his life: he married her.

"She had been wise enough in her own interests to dread the influence of his brother-officers, and to persuade him, up to the period of the marriage ceremony, to keep the proposed union between them a secret. She could do this; but she could not provide against the results of accident. Hardly three months had passed, when a chance disclosure exposed the life she had led before her marriage. But one alternative was left to her husband--the alternative of instantly separating from her.

"The effect of the discovery on the unhappy boy--for a boy in disposition he still was--may be judged by the event which followed the exposure. One of Andrew's superior officers--a certain Major Kirke, if I remember right--found him in his quarters, writing to his father a confession of the disgraceful truth, with a loaded pistol by his side. That officer saved the lad's life from his own hand, and hushed up the scandalous affair by a compromise. The marriage being a perfectly legal one, and the wife's misconduct prior to the ceremony giving her husband no claim to his release from her by divorce, it was only possible to appeal to her sense of her own interests. A handsome annual allowance was secured to her, on condition that she returned to the place from which she had come; that she never appeared in England; and that she ceased to use her husband's name. Other stipulations were added to these. She accepted them all; and measures were privately taken to have her well looked after in the place of her retreat. What life she led there, and whether she performed all the conditions imposed on her, I cannot say. I can only tell you that she never, to my knowledge, came to England; that she never annoyed Mr. Vanstone; and that the annual allowance was paid her, through a local agent in America, to the day of her death. All that she wanted in marrying him was money; and money she got.

"In the meantime, Andrew had left the regiment. Nothing would induce him to face his brother-officers after what had happened. He sold out and returned to England. The first intelligence which reached him on his return was the intelligence of his father's death. He came to my office in London, before going home, and there learned from my lips how the family quarrel had ended.

"The will which Mr. Vanstone the elder had destroyed in my presence had not been, so far as I know, replaced by another. When I was sent for, in the usual course, on his death, I fully expected that the law would be left to make the customary division among his widow and his children. To my surprise, a will appeared among his papers, correctly drawn and executed, and dated about a week after the period when the first will had been destroyed. He had maintained his vindictive purpose against his eldest son,

and had applied to a stranger for the professional assistance which I honestly believe he was ashamed to ask for at my hands.

"It is needless to trouble you with the provisions of the will in detail. There were the widow and three surviving children to be provided for. The widow received a life-interest only in a portion of the testator's property. The remaining portion was divided between Andrew and Selina--two-thirds to the brother; one-third to the sister. On the mother's death, the money from which her income had been derived was to go to Andrew and Selina, in the same relative proportions as before--five thousand pounds having been first deducted from the sum and paid to Michael, as the sole legacy left by the implacable father to his eldest son.

"Speaking in round numbers, the division of property, as settled by the will, stood thus. Before the mother's death, Andrew had seventy thousand pounds; Selina had thirty-five thousand pounds; Michael--had nothing. After the mother's death, Michael had five thousand pounds, to set against Andrew's inheritance augmented to one hundred thousand, and Selina's inheritance increased to fifty thousand.--Do not suppose that I am dwelling unnecessarily on this part of the subject. Every word I now speak bears on interests still in suspense, which vitally concern Mr. Vanstone's daughters. As we get on from past to present, keep in mind the terrible inequality of Michael's inheritance and Andrew's inheritance. The harm done by that vindictive will is, I greatly fear, not over yet.

"Andrew's first impulse, when he heard the news which I had to tell him, was worthy of the open, generous nature of the man. He at once proposed to divide his inheritance with his elder brother. But there was one serious obstacle in the way. A letter from Michael was waiting for him at my office when he came there, and that letter charged him with being the original cause of estrangement between his father and his elder brother. The efforts which he had made--bluntly and incautiously, I own, but with the purest and kindest intentions, as I know--to compose the quarrel before leaving home, were perverted, by the vilest misconstruction, to support an accusation of treachery and falsehood which would have stung any man to the quick. Andrew felt, what I felt, that if these imputations were not withdrawn before his generous intentions toward his brother took effect, the mere fact of their execution would amount to a practical acknowledgment of the justice of Michael's charge against him. He wrote to his brother in the most forbearing terms. The answer received was as offensive as words could make it. Michael had inherited his father's temper, unredeemed by his father's better qualities: his second letter reiterated the charges contained in the first, and declared that he would only accept the offered division as an

act of atonement and restitution on Andrew's part. I next wrote to the mother to use her influence. She was herself aggrieved at being left with nothing more than a life interest in her husband's property; she sided resolutely with Michael; and she stigmatized Andrew's proposal as an attempt to bribe her eldest son into withdrawing a charge against his brother which that brother knew to be true. After this last repulse, nothing more could be done. Michael withdrew to the Continent; and his mother followed him there. She lived long enough, and saved money enough out of her income, to add considerably, at her death, to her elder son's five thousand pounds. He had previously still further improved his pecuniary position by an advantageous marriage; and he is now passing the close of his days either in France or Switzerland--a widower, with one son. We shall return to him shortly. In the meantime, I need only tell you that Andrew and Michael never again met--never again communicated, even by writing. To all intents and purposes they were dead to each other, from those early days to the present time.

"You can now estimate what Andrew's position was when he left his profession and returned to England. Possessed of a fortune, he was alone in the world; his future destroyed at the fair outset of life; his mother and brother estranged from him; his sister lately married, with interests and hopes in which he had no share. Men of firmer mental caliber might have found refuge from such a situation as this in an absorbing intellectual pursuit. He was not capable of the effort; all the strength of his character lay in the affections he had wasted. His place in the world was that quiet place at home, with wife and children to make his life happy, which he had lost forever. To look back was more than he dare. To look forward was more than he could. In sheer despair, he let his own impetuous youth drive him on; and cast himself into the lowest dissipations of a London life.

"A woman's falsehood had driven him to his ruin. A woman's love saved him at the outset of his downward career. Let us not speak of her harshly--for we laid her with him yesterday in the grave.

"You, who only knew Mrs. Vanstone in later life, when illness and sorrow and secret care had altered and saddened her, can form no adequate idea of her attractions of person and character when she was a girl of seventeen. I was with Andrew when he first met her. I had tried to rescue him, for one night at least, from degrading associates and degrading pleasures, by persuading him to go with me to a ball given by one of the great City Companies. There they met. She produced a strong impression on him the moment he saw her. To me, as to him, she was a total stranger. An introduction to her, obtained in the customary manner, informed him that

she was the daughter of one Mr. Blake. The rest he discovered from herself. They were partners in the dance (unobserved in that crowded ball-room) all through the evening.

"Circumstances were against her from the first. She was unhappy at home. Her family and friends occupied no recognized station in life: they were mean, underhand people, in every way unworthy of her. It was her first ball--it was the first time she had ever met with a man who had the breeding, the manners and the conversation of a gentleman. Are these excuses for her, which I have no right to make? If we have any human feeling for human weakness, surely not!

"The meeting of that night decided their future. When other meetings had followed, when the confession of her love had escaped her, he took the one course of all others (took it innocently and unconsciously), which was most dangerous to them both. His frankness and his sense of honor forbade him to deceive her: he opened his heart and told her the truth. She was a generous, impulsive girl; she had no home ties strong enough to plead with her; she was passionately fond of him--and he had made that appeal to her pity which, to the eternal honor of women, is the hardest of all appeals for them to resist. She saw, and saw truly, that she alone stood between him and his ruin. The last chance of his rescue hung on her decision. She decided; and saved him.

"Let me not be misunderstood; let me not be accused of trifling with the serious social question on which my narrative forces me to touch. I will defend her memory by no false reasoning--I will only speak the truth. It is the truth that she snatched him from mad excesses which must have ended in his early death. It is the truth that she restored him to that happy home existence which you remember so tenderly--which he remembered so gratefully that, on the day when he was free, he made her his wife. Let strict morality claim its right, and condemn her early fault. I have read my New Testament to little purpose, indeed, if Christian mercy may not soften the hard sentence against her--if Christian charity may not find a plea for her memory in the love and fidelity, the suffering and the sacrifice, of her whole life.

"A few words more will bring us to a later time, and to events which have happened within your own experience.

"I need not remind you that the position in which Mr. Vanstone was now placed could lead in the end to but one result--to a disclosure, more or less inevitable, of the truth. Attempts were made to keep the hopeless misfortune

of his life a secret from Miss Blake's family; and, as a matter of course, those attempts failed before the relentless scrutiny of her father and her friends. What might have happened if her relatives had been what is termed 'respectable' I cannot pretend to say. As it was, they were people who could (in the common phrase) be conveniently treated with. The only survivor of the family at the present time is a scoundrel calling himself Captain Wragge. When I tell you that he privately extorted the price of his silence from Mrs. Vanstone to the last; and when I add that his conduct presents no extraordinary exception to the conduct, in their lifetime, of the other relatives--you will understand what sort of people I had to deal with in my client's interests, and how their assumed indignation was appeased.

"Having, in the first instance, left England for Ireland, Mr. Vanstone and Miss Blake remained there afterward for some years. Girl as she was, she faced her position and its necessities without flinching. Having once resolved to sacrifice her life to the man she loved; having quieted her conscience by persuading herself that his marriage was a legal mockery, and that she was 'his wife in the sight of Heaven,' she set herself from the first to accomplish the one foremost purpose of so living with him, in the world's eye, as never to raise the suspicion that she was not his lawful wife. The women are few, indeed, who cannot resolve firmly, scheme patiently, and act promptly where the dearest interests of their lives are concerned. Mrs. Vanstone--she has a right now, remember, to that name--Mrs. Vanstone had more than the average share of a woman's tenacity and a woman's tact; and she took all the needful precautions, in those early days, which her husband's less ready capacity had not the art to devise--precautions to which they were largely indebted for the preservation of their secret in later times.

"Thanks to these safeguards, not a shadow of suspicion followed them when they returned to England. They first settled in Devonshire, merely because they were far removed there from that northern county in which Mr. Vanstone's family and connections had been known. On the part of his surviving relatives, they had no curious investigations to dread. He was totally estranged from his mother and his elder brother. His married sister had been forbidden by her husband (who was a clergyman) to hold any communication with him, from the period when he had fallen into the deplorable way of life which I have described as following his return from Canada. Other relations he had none. When he and Miss Blake left Devonshire, their next change of residence was to this house. Neither courting nor avoiding notice; simply happy in themselves, in their children, and in their quiet rural life; unsuspected by the few neighbors who formed their modest circle of acquaintance to be other than what they seemed--the truth in their case, as in the cases of many others, remained undiscovered

until accident forced it into the light of day.

"If, in your close intimacy with them, it seems strange that they should never have betrayed themselves, let me ask you to consider the circumstances and you will understand the apparent anomaly. Remember that they had been living as husband and wife, to all intents and purposes (except that the marriage-service had not been read over them), for fifteen years before you came into the house; and bear in mind, at the same time, that no event occurred to disturb Mr. Vanstone's happiness in the present, to remind him of the past, or to warn him of the future, until the announcement of his wife's death reached him, in that letter from America which you saw placed in his hand. From that day forth--when a past which he abhorred was forced back to his memory; when a future which she had never dared to anticipate was placed within her reach--you will soon perceive, if you have not perceived already, that they both betrayed themselves, time after time; and that your innocence of all suspicion, and their children's innocence of all suspicion, alone prevented you from discovering the truth.

"The sad story of the past is now as well known to you as to me. I have had hard words to speak. God knows I have spoken them with true sympathy for the living, with true tenderness for the memory of the dead."

He paused, turned his face a little away, and rested his head on his hand, in the quiet, undemonstrative manner which was natural to him. Thus far, Miss Garth had only interrupted his narrative by an occasional word or by a mute token of her attention. She made no effort to conceal her tears; they fell fast and silently over her wasted cheeks, as she looked up and spoke to him. "I have done you some injury, sir, in my thoughts," she said, with a noble simplicity. "I know you better now. Let me ask your forgiveness; let me take your hand."

Those words, and the action which accompanied them, touched him deeply. He took her hand in silence. She was the first to speak, the first to set the example of self-control. It is one of the noble instincts of women that nothing more powerfully rouses them to struggle with their own sorrow than the sight of a man's distress. She quietly dried her tears; she quietly drew her chair round the table, so as to sit nearer to him when she spoke again.

"I have been sadly broken, Mr. Pendril, by what has happened in this house," she said, "or I should have borne what you have told me better than I have borne it to-day. Will you let me ask one question before you go on? My heart aches for the children of my love--more than ever my children now.

Is there no hope for their future? Are they left with no prospect but poverty before them?"

The lawyer hesitated before he answered the question.

"They are left dependent," he said, at last, "on the justice and the mercy of a stranger."

"Through the misfortune of their birth?"

"Through the misfortunes which have followed the marriage of their parents."

With that startling answer he rose, took up the will from the floor, and restored it to its former position on the table between them.

"I can only place the truth before you," he resumed, "in one plain form of words. The marriage has destroyed this will, and has left Mr. Vanstone's daughters dependent on their uncle."

As he spoke, the breeze stirred again among the shrubs under the window.

"On their uncle?" repeated Miss Garth. She considered for a moment, and laid her hand suddenly on Mr. Pendril's arm. "Not on Michael Vanstone!"

"Yes: on Michael Vanstone."

Miss Garth's hand still mechanically grasped the lawyer's arm. Her whole mind was absorbed in the effort to realize the discovery which had now burst on her.

"Dependent on Michael Vanstone!" she said to herself. "Dependent on their father's bitterest enemy? How can it be?"

"Give me your attention for a few minutes more," said Mr. Pendril, "and you shall hear. The sooner we can bring this painful interview to a close, the sooner I can open communications with Mr. Michael Vanstone, and the sooner you will know what he decides on doing for his brother's orphan daughters. I repeat to you that they are absolutely dependent on him. You will most readily understand how and why, if we take up the chain of events where we last left it--at the period of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone's marriage."

"One moment, sir," said Miss Garth. "Were you in the secret of that marriage

at the time when it took place?"

"Unhappily, I was not. I was away from London--away from England at the time. If Mr. Vanstone had been able to communicate with me when the letter from America announced the death of his wife, the fortunes of his daughters would not have been now at stake."

He paused, and, before proceeding further, looked once more at the letters which he had consulted at an earlier period of the interview. He took one letter from the rest, and put it on the table by his side.

"At the beginning of the present year," he resumed, "a very serious business necessity, in connection with some West Indian property possessed by an old client and friend of mine, required the presence either of myself, or of one of my two partners, in Jamaica. One of the two could not be spared; the other was not in health to undertake the voyage. There was no choice left but for me to go. I wrote to Mr. Vanstone, telling him that I should leave England at the end of February, and that the nature of the business which took me away afforded little hope of my getting back from the West Indies before June. My letter was not written with any special motive. I merely thought it right--seeing that my partners were not admitted to my knowledge of Mr. Vanstone's private affairs--to warn him of my absence, as a measure of formal precaution which it was right to take. At the end of February I left England, without having heard from him. I was on the sea when the news of his wife's death reached him, on the fourth of March: and I did not return until the middle of last June."

"You warned him of your departure," interposed Miss Garth. "Did you not warn him of your return?"

"Not personally. My head-clerk sent him one of the circulars which were dispatched from my office, in various directions, to announce my return. It was the first substitute I thought of for the personal letter which the pressure of innumerable occupations, all crowding on me together after my long absence, did not allow me leisure to write. Barely a month later, the first information of his marriage reached me in a letter from himself, written on the day of the fatal accident. The circumstances which induced him to write arose out of an event in which you must have taken some interest--I mean the attachment between Mr. Clare's son and Mr. Vanstone's youngest daughter."

"I cannot say that I was favorably disposed toward that attachment at the time," replied Miss Garth. "I was ignorant then of the family secret: I know

better now."

"Exactly. The motive which you can now appreciate is the motive that leads us to the point. The young lady herself (as I have heard from the elder Mr. Clare, to whom I am indebted for my knowledge of the circumstances in detail) confessed her attachment to her father, and innocently touched him to the quick by a chance reference to his own early life. He had a long conversation with Mrs. Vanstone, at which they both agreed that Mr. Clare must be privately informed of the truth, before the attachment between the two young people was allowed to proceed further. It was painful in the last degree, both to husband and wife, to be reduced to this alternative. But they were resolute, honorably resolute, in making the sacrifice of their own feelings; and Mr. Vanstone betook himself on the spot to Mr. Clare's cottage.--You no doubt observed a remarkable change in Mr. Vanstone's manner on that day; and you can now account for it?"

Miss Garth bowed her head, and Mr. Pendril went on.

"You are sufficiently acquainted with Mr. Clare's contempt for all social prejudices," he continued, "to anticipate his reception of the confession which his neighbor addressed to him. Five minutes after the interview had begun, the two old friends were as easy and unrestrained together as usual. In the course of conversation, Mr. Vanstone mentioned the pecuniary arrangement which he had made for the benefit of his daughter and of her future husband--and, in doing so, he naturally referred to his will here, on the table between us. Mr. Clare, remembering that his friend had been married in the March of that year, at once asked when the will had been executed: receiving the reply that it had been made five years since; and, thereupon, astounded Mr. Vanstone by telling him bluntly that the document was waste paper in the eye of the law. Up to that moment he, like many other persons, had been absolutely ignorant that a man's marriage is, legally as well as socially, considered to be the most important event in his life; that it destroys the validity of any will which he may have made as a single man; and that it renders absolutely necessary the entire re-assertion of his testamentary intentions in the character of a husband. The statement of this plain fact appeared to overwhelm Mr. Vanstone. Declaring that his friend had laid him under an obligation which he should remember to his dying day, he at once left the cottage, at once returned home, and wrote me this letter."

He handed the letter open to Miss Garth. In tearless, speechless grief, she read these words:

"MY DEAR PENDRIL--Since we last wrote to each other an extraordinary change has taken place in my life. About a week after you went away, I received news from America which told me that I was free. Need I say what use I made of that freedom? Need I say that the mother of my children is now my Wife?

"If you are surprised at not having heard from me the moment you got back, attribute my silence, in great part--if not altogether--to my own total ignorance of the legal necessity for making another will. Not half an hour since, I was enlightened for the first time (under circumstances which I will mention when we meet) by my old friend, Mr. Clare. Family anxieties have had something to do with my silence as well. My wife's confinement is close at hand; and, besides this serious anxiety, my second daughter is just engaged to be married. Until I saw Mr. Clare to-day, these matters so filled my mind that I never thought of writing to you during the one short month which is all that has passed since I got news of your return. Now I know that my will must be made again, I write instantly. For God's sake, come on the day when you receive this--come and relieve me from the dreadful thought that my two darling girls are at this moment unprovided for. If anything happened to me, and if my desire to do their mother justice, ended (through my miserable ignorance of the law) in leaving Norah and Magdalen disinherited, I should not rest in my grave! Come at any cost, to yours ever,

"A. V."

"On the Saturday morning," Mr. Pendril resumed, "those lines reached me. I instantly set aside all other business, and drove to the railway. At the London terminus, I heard the first news of the Friday's accident; heard it, with conflicting accounts of the numbers and names of the passengers killed. At Bristol, they were better informed; and the dreadful truth about Mr. Vanstone was confirmed. I had time to recover myself before I reached your station here, and found Mr. Clare's son waiting for me. He took me to his father's cottage; and there, without losing a moment, I drew out Mrs. Vanstone's will. My object was to secure the only provision for her daughters which it was now possible to make. Mr. Vanstone having died intestate, a third of his fortune would go to his widow; and the rest would be divided among his next of kin. As children born out of wedlock, Mr. Vanstone's daughters, under the circumstances of their father's death, had no more claim to a share in his property than the daughters of one of his laborers in the village. The one chance left was that their mother might sufficiently recover to leave her third share to them, by will, in the event of her decease. Now you know why I wrote to you to ask for that interview--why I waited day and night, in the hope of receiving a summons to the house. I was sincerely

sorry to send back such an answer to your note of inquiry as I was compelled to write. But while there was a chance of the preservation of Mrs. Vanstone's life, the secret of the marriage was hers, not mine; and every consideration of delicacy forbade me to disclose it."

"You did right, sir," said Miss Garth; "I understand your motives, and respect them."

"My last attempt to provide for the daughters," continued Mr. Pendril, "was, as you know, rendered unavailing by the dangerous nature of Mrs. Vanstone's illness. Her death left the infant who survived her by a few hours (the infant born, you will remember, in lawful wedlock) possessed, in due legal course, of the whole of Mr. Vanstone's fortune. On the child's death--if it had only outlived the mother by a few seconds, instead of a few hours, the result would have been the same--the next of kin to the legitimate offspring took the money; and that next of kin is the infant's paternal uncle, Michael Vanstone. The whole fortune of eighty thousand pounds has virtually passed into his possession already."

"Are there no other relations?" asked Miss Garth. "Is there no hope from any one else?"

"There are no other relations with Michael Vanstone's claim," said the lawyer. "There are no grandfathers or grandmothers of the dead child (on the side of either of the parents) now alive. It was not likely there should be, considering the ages of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone when they died. But it is a misfortune to be reasonably lamented that no other uncles or aunts survive. There are cousins alive; a son and two daughters of that elder sister of Mr. Vanstone's, who married Archdeacon Bartram, and who died, as I told you, some years since. But their interest is superseded by the interest of the nearer blood. No, Miss Garth, we must look facts as they are resolutely in the face. Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children; and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy."

"A cruel law, Mr. Pendril--a cruel law in a Christian country."

"Cruel as it is, Miss Garth, it stands excused by a shocking peculiarity in this case. I am far from defending the law of England as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion. But it has no extraordinary oppression to

answer for in the case of these unhappy girls. The more merciful and Christian law of other countries, which allows the marriage of the parents to make the children legitimate, has no mercy on these children. The accident of their father having been married, when he first met with their mother, has made them the outcasts of the whole social community; it has placed them out of the pale of the Civil Law of Europe. I tell you the hard truth--it is useless to disguise it. There is no hope, if we look back at the past: there may be hope, if we look on to the future. The best service which I can now render you is to shorten the period of your suspense. In less than an hour I shall be on my way back to London. Immediately on my arrival, I will ascertain the speediest means of communicating with Mr. Michael Vanstone; and will let you know the result. Sad as the position of the two sisters now is, we must look at it on its best side; we must not lose hope."

"Hope?" repeated Miss Garth. "Hope from Michael Vanstone!"

"Yes; hope from the influence on him of time, if not from the influence of mercy. As I have already told you, he is now an old man; he cannot, in the course of nature, expect to live much longer. If he looks back to the period when he and his brother were first at variance, he must look back through thirty years. Surely, these are softening influences which must affect any man? Surely, his own knowledge of the shocking circumstances under which he has become possessed of this money will plead with him, if nothing else does?"

"I will try to think as you do, Mr. Pendril--I will try to hope for the best. Shall we be left long in suspense before the decision reaches us?"

"I trust not. The only delay on my side will be caused by the necessity of discovering the place of Michael Vanstone's residence on the Continent. I think I have the means of meeting this difficulty successfully; and the moment I reach London, those means shall be tried."

He took up his hat; and then returned to the table on which the father's last letter, and the father's useless will, were lying side by side. After a moment's consideration, he placed them both in Miss Garth's hands.

"It may help you in breaking the hard truth to the orphan sisters," he said, in his quiet, self-repressed way, "if they can see how their father refers to them in his will--if they can read his letter to me, the last he ever wrote. Let these tokens tell them that the one idea of their father's life was the idea of making atonement to his children. 'They may think bitterly of their birth,' he said to me, at the time when I drew this useless will; 'but they shall never

think bitterly of me. I will cross them in nothing: they shall never know a sorrow that I can spare them, or a want which I will not satisfy.' He made me put those words in his will, to plead for him when the truth which he had concealed from his children in his lifetime was revealed to them after his death. No law can deprive his daughters of the legacy of his repentance and his love. I leave the will and the letter to help you: I give them both into your care."

He saw how his parting kindness touched her and thoughtfully hastened the farewell. She took his hand in both her own and murmured a few broken words of gratitude. "Trust me to do my best," he said--and, turning away with a merciful abruptness, left her. In the broad, cheerful sunshine he had come in to reveal the fatal truth. In the broad, cheerful sunshine--that truth disclosed--he went out.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was nearly an hour past noon when Mr. Pendril left the house. Miss Garth sat down again at the table alone, and tried to face the necessity which the event of the morning now forced on her.

Her mind was not equal to the effort. She tried to lessen the strain on it--to lose the sense of her own position--to escape from her thoughts for a few minutes only. After a little, she opened Mr. Vanstone's letter, and mechanically set herself to read it through once more.

One by one, the last words of the dead man fastened themselves more and more firmly on her attention. The unrelieved solitude, the unbroken silence, helped their influence on her mind and opened it to those very impressions of past and present which she was most anxious to shun. As she reached the melancholy lines which closed the letter, she found herself--insensibly, almost unconsciously, at first--tracing the fatal chain of events, link by link backward, until she reached its beginning in the contemplated marriage between Magdalen and Francis Clare.

That marriage had taken Mr. Vanstone to his old friend, with the confession on his lips which would otherwise never have escaped them. Thence came the discovery which had sent him home to summon the lawyer to the house. That summons, again, had produced the inevitable acceleration of the Saturday's journey to Friday; the Friday of the fatal accident, the Friday when he went to his death. From his death followed the second bereavement which had made the house desolate; the helpless position of the daughters whose prosperous future had been his dearest care; the revelation of the secret which had overwhelmed her that morning; the disclosure, more terrible still, which she now stood committed to make to the orphan sisters. For the first time she saw the whole sequence of events--saw it as plainly as the cloudless blue of the sky and the green glow of the trees in the sunlight outside.

How--when could she tell them? Who could approach them with the disclosure of their own illegitimacy before their father and mother had been dead a week? Who could speak the dreadful words, while the first tears were wet on their cheeks, while the first pang of separation was at its keenest in their hearts, while the memory of the funeral was not a day old yet? Not their last friend left; not the faithful woman whose heart bled for them. No! silence for the present time, at all risks--merciful silence, for many days to

come!

She left the room, with the will and the letter in her hand--with the natural, human pity at her heart which sealed her lips and shut her eyes resolutely to the future. In the hall she stopped and listened. Not a sound was audible. She softly ascended the stairs, on her way to her own room, and passed the door of Norah's bed-chamber. Voices inside, the voices of the two sisters, caught her ear. After a moment's consideration, she checked herself, turned back, and quickly descended the stairs again. Both Norah and Magdalen knew of the interview between Mr. Pendril and herself; she had felt it her duty to show them his letter making the appointment. Could she excite their suspicion by locking herself up from them in her room as soon as the lawyer had left the house? Her hand trembled on the banister; she felt that her face might betray her. The self-forgetful fortitude, which had never failed her until that day, had been tried once too often--had been tasked beyond its powers at last.

At the hall door she reflected for a moment again, and went into the garden; directing her steps to a rustic bench and table placed out of sight of the house among the trees. In past times she had often sat there, with Mrs. Vanstone on one side, with Norah on the other, with Magdalen and the dogs romping on the grass. Alone she sat there now--the will and the letter which she dared not trust out of her own possession, laid on the table--her head bowed over them; her face hidden in her hands. Alone she sat there and tried to rouse her sinking courage.

Doubts thronged on her of the dark days to come; dread beset her of the hidden danger which her own silence toward Norah and Magdalen might store up in the near future. The accident of a moment might suddenly reveal the truth. Mr. Pendril might write, might personally address himself to the sisters, in the natural conviction that she had enlightened them. Complications might gather round them at a moment's notice; unforeseen necessities might arise for immediately leaving the house. She saw all these perils--and still the cruel courage to face the worst, and speak, was as far from her as ever. Ere long the thickening conflict of her thoughts forced its way outward for relief, in words and actions. She raised her head and beat her hand helplessly on the table.

"God help me, what am I to do?" she broke out. "How am I to tell them?"

"There is no need to tell them," said a voice behind her. "They know it already."

She started to her feet and looked round. It was Magdalen who stood before her--Magdalen who had spoken those words.

Yes, there was the graceful figure, in its mourning garments, standing out tall and black and motionless against the leafy background. There was Magdalen herself, with a changeless stillness on her white face; with an icy resignation in her steady gray eyes.

"We know it already," she repeated, in clear, measured tones. "Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children; and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy."

So, without a tear on her cheeks, without a faltering tone in her voice, she repeated the lawyer's own words, exactly as he had spoken them. Miss Garth staggered back a step and caught at the bench to support herself. Her head swam; she closed her eyes in a momentary faintness. When they opened again, Magdalen's arm was supporting her, Magdalen's breath fanned her cheek, Magdalen's cold lips kissed her. She drew back from the kiss; the touch of the girl's lips thrilled her with terror.

As soon as she could speak she put the inevitable question. "You heard us," she said. "Where?"

"Under the open window."

"All the time?"

"From beginning to end."

She had listened--this girl of eighteen, in the first week of her orphanage, had listened to the whole terrible revelation, word by word, as it fell from the lawyer's lips; and had never once betrayed herself! From first to last, the only movements which had escaped her had been movements guarded enough and slight enough to be mistaken for the passage of the summer breeze through the leaves!

"Don't try to speak yet," she said, in softer and gentler tones. "Don't look at me with those doubting eyes. What wrong have I done? When Mr. Pendril wished to speak to you about Norah and me, his letter gave us our choice to be present at the interview, or to keep away. If my elder sister decided to keep away, how could I come? How could I hear my own story except as I did? My listening has done no harm. It has done good--it has saved you the distress of speaking to us. You have suffered enough for us already; it is

time we learned to suffer for ourselves. I have learned. And Norah is learning."

"Norah!"

"Yes. I have done all I could to spare you. I have told Norah."

She had told Norah! Was this girl, whose courage had faced the terrible necessity from which a woman old enough to be her mother had recoiled, the girl Miss Garth had brought up? the girl whose nature she had believed to be as well known to her as her own?

"Magdalen!" she cried out, passionately, "you frighten me!"

Magdalen only sighed, and turned wearily away.

"Try not to think worse of me than I deserve," she said. "I can't cry. My heart is numbed."

She moved away slowly over the grass. Miss Garth watched the tall black figure gliding away alone until it was lost among the trees. While it was in sight she could think of nothing else. The moment it was gone, she thought of Norah. For the first time in her experience of the sisters her heart led her instinctively to the elder of the two.

Norah was still in her own room. She was sitting on the couch by the window, with her mother's old music-book--the keepsake which Mrs. Vanstone had found in her husband's study on the day of her husband's death--spread open on her lap. She looked up from it with such quiet sorrow, and pointed with such ready kindness to the vacant place at her side, that Miss Garth doubted for the moment whether Magdalen had spoken the truth. "See," said Norah, simply, turning to the first leaf in the music-book--"my mother's name written in it, and some verses to my father on the next page. We may keep this for ourselves, if we keep nothing else." She put her arm round Miss Garth's neck, and a faint tinge of color stole over her cheeks. "I see anxious thoughts in your face," she whispered. "Are you anxious about me? Are you doubting whether I have heard it? I have heard the whole truth. I might have felt it bitterly, later; it is too soon to feel it now. You have seen Magdalen? She went out to find you--where did you leave her?"

"In the garden. I couldn't speak to her; I couldn't look at her. Magdalen has frightened me."

Norah rose hurriedly; rose, startled and distressed by Miss Garth's reply.

"Don't think ill of Magdalen," she said. "Magdalen suffers in secret more than I do. Try not to grieve over what you have heard about us this morning. Does it matter who we are, or what we keep or lose? What loss is there for us after the loss of our father and mother? Oh, Miss Garth, there is the only bitterness! What did we remember of them when we laid them in the grave yesterday? Nothing but the love they gave us--the love we must never hope for again. What else can we remember to-day? What change can the world, and the world's cruel laws make in our memory of the kindest father, the kindest mother, that children ever had!" She stopped: struggled with her rising grief; and quietly, resolutely, kept it down. "Will you wait here," she said, "while I go and bring Magdalen back? Magdalen was always your favorite: I want her to be your favorite still." She laid the music-book gently on Miss Garth's lap--and left the room.

"Magdalen was always your favorite."

Tenderly as they had been spoken, those words fell reproachfully on Miss Garth's ear. For the first time in the long companionship of her pupils and herself a doubt whether she, and all those about her, had not been fatally mistaken in their relative estimate of the sisters, now forced itself on her mind.

She had studied the natures of her two pupils in the daily intimacy of twelve years. Those natures, which she believed herself to have sounded through all their depths, had been suddenly tried in the sharp ordeal of affliction. How had they come out from the test? As her previous experience had prepared her to see them? No: in flat contradiction to it.

What did such a result as this imply?

Thoughts came to her, as she asked herself that question, which have startled and saddened us all.

Does there exist in every human being, beneath that outward and visible character which is shaped into form by the social influences surrounding us, an inward, invisible disposition, which is part of ourselves, which education may indirectly modify, but can never hope to change? Is the philosophy which denies this and asserts that we are born with dispositions like blank sheets of paper a philosophy which has failed to remark that we are not born with blank faces--a philosophy which has never compared

together two infants of a few days old, and has never observed that those infants are not born with blank tempers for mothers and nurses to fill up at will? Are there, infinitely varying with each individual, inbred forces of Good and Evil in all of us, deep down below the reach of mortal encouragement and mortal repression--hidden Good and hidden Evil, both alike at the mercy of the liberating opportunity and the sufficient temptation? Within these earthly limits, is earthly Circumstance ever the key; and can no human vigilance warn us beforehand of the forces imprisoned in ourselves which that key may unlock?

For the first time, thoughts such as these rose darkly--as shadowy and terrible possibilities--in Miss Garth's mind. For the first time, she associated those possibilities with the past conduct and characters, with the future lives and fortunes of the orphan sisters.

Searching, as in a glass darkly, into the two natures, she felt her way, doubt by doubt, from one possible truth to another. It might be that the upper surface of their characters was all that she had, thus far, plainly seen in Norah and Magdalen. It might be that the unalluring secrecy and reserve of one sister, the all-attractive openness and high spirits of the other, were more or less referable, in each case, to those physical causes which work toward the production of moral results. It might be, that under the surface so formed--a surface which there had been nothing, hitherto, in the happy, prosperous, uneventful lives of the sisters to disturb--forces of inborn and inbred disposition had remained concealed, which the shock of the first serious calamity in their lives had now thrown up into view. Was this so? Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah's reserve, and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits? If the life of the elder sister was destined henceforth to be the ripening ground of the undeveloped Good that was in her--was the life of the younger doomed to be the battle-field of mortal conflict with the roused forces of Evil in herself?

On the brink of that terrible conclusion, Miss Garth shrank back in dismay. Her heart was the heart of a true woman. It accepted the conviction which raised Norah higher in her love: it rejected the doubt which threatened to place Magdalen lower. She rose and paced the room impatiently; she recoiled with an angry suddenness from the whole train of thought in which her mind had been engaged but the moment before. What if there were dangerous elements in the strength of Magdalen's character--was it not her duty to help the girl against herself? How had she performed that duty? She had let herself be governed by first fears and first impressions; she had never waited to consider whether Magdalen's openly acknowledged action of

that morning might not imply a self-sacrificing fortitude, which promised, in after-life, the noblest and the most enduring results. She had let Norah go and speak those words of tender remonstrance, which she should first have spoken herself. "Oh!" she thought, bitterly, "how long I have lived in the world, and how little I have known of my own weakness and wickedness until to-day!"

The door of the room opened. Norah came in, as she had gone out, alone.

"Do you remember leaving anything on the little table by the garden-seat?" she asked, quietly.

Before Miss Garth could answer the question, she held out her father's will and her father's letter.

"Magdalen came back after you went away," she said, "and found these last relics. She heard Mr. Pendril say they were her legacy and mine. When I went into the garden she was reading the letter. There was no need for me to speak to her; our father had spoken to her from his grave. See how she has listened to him!"

She pointed to the letter. The traces of heavy tear-drops lay thick over the last lines of the dead man's writing.

"Her tears," said Norah, softly.

Miss Garth's head drooped low over the mute revelation of Magdalen's return to her better self.

"Oh, never doubt her again!" pleaded Norah. "We are alone now--we have our hard way through the world to walk on as patiently as we can. If Magdalen ever falters and turns back, help her for the love of old times; help her against herself."

"With all my heart and strength--as God shall judge me, with the devotion of my whole life!" In those fervent words Miss Garth answered. She took the hand which Norah held out to her, and put it, in sorrow and humility, to her lips. "Oh, my love, forgive me! I have been miserably blind--I have never valued you as I ought!"

Norah gently checked her before she could say more; gently whispered,

"Come with me into the garden--come, and help Magdalen to look patiently to the future."

The future! Who could see the faintest glimmer of it? Who could see anything but the ill-omened figure of Michael Vanstone, posted darkly on the verge of the present time--and closing all the prospect that lay beyond him?

CHAPTER XV.

ON the next morning but one, news was received from Mr. Pendril. The place of Michael Vanstone's residence on the Continent had been discovered. He was living at Zurich; and a letter had been dispatched to him, at that place, on the day when the information was obtained. In the course of the coming week an answer might be expected, and the purport of it should be communicated forthwith to the ladies at Combe-Raven.

Short as it was, the interval of delay passed wearily. Ten days elapsed before the expected answer was received; and when it came at last, it proved to be, strictly speaking, no answer at all. Mr. Pendril had been merely referred to an agent in London who was in possession of Michael Vanstone's instructions. Certain difficulties had been discovered in connection with those instructions, which had produced the necessity of once more writing to Zurich. And there "the negotiations" rested again for the present.

A second paragraph in Mr. Pendril's letter contained another piece of intelligence entirely new. Mr. Michael Vanstone's son (and only child), Mr. Noel Vanstone, had recently arrived in London, and was then staying in lodgings occupied by his cousin, Mr. George Bartram. Professional considerations had induced Mr. Pendril to pay a visit to the lodgings. He had been very kindly received by Mr. Bartram; but had been informed by that gentleman that his cousin was not then in a condition to receive visitors. Mr. Noel Vanstone had been suffering, for some years past, from a wearing and obstinate malady; he had come to England expressly to obtain the best medical advice, and he still felt the fatigue of the journey so severely as to be confined to his bed. Under these circumstances, Mr. Pendril had no alternative but to take his leave. An interview with Mr. Noel Vanstone might have cleared up some of the difficulties in connection with his father's instructions. As events had turned out, there was no help for it but to wait for a few days more.

The days passed, the empty days of solitude and suspense. At last, a third letter from the lawyer announced the long delayed conclusion of the correspondence. The final answer had been received from Zurich, and Mr. Pendril would personally communicate it at Combe-Raven on the afternoon of the next day.

That next day was Wednesday, the twelfth of August. The weather had changed in the night; and the sun rose watery through mist and cloud. By

noon the sky was overcast at all points; the temperature was sensibly colder; and the rain poured down, straight and soft and steady, on the thirsty earth. Toward three o'clock, Miss Garth and Norah entered the morning-room, to await Mr. Pendril's arrival. They were joined shortly afterward by Magdalen. In half an hour more the familiar fall of the iron latch in the socket reached their ears from the fence beyond the shrubbery. Mr. Pendril and Mr. Clare advanced into view along the garden-path, walking arm-in-arm through the rain, sheltered by the same umbrella. The lawyer bowed as they passed the windows; Mr. Clare walked straight on, deep in his own thoughts--noticing nothing.

After a delay which seemed interminable; after a weary scraping of wet feet on the hall mat; after a mysterious, muttered interchange of question and answer outside the door, the two came in--Mr. Clare leading the way. The old man walked straight up to the table, without any preliminary greeting, and looked across it at the three women, with a stern pity for them in his ragged, wrinkled face.

"Bad news," he said. "I am an enemy to all unnecessary suspense. Plainness is kindness in such a case as this. I mean to be kind--and I tell you plainly--bad news."

Mr. Pendril followed him. He shook hands, in silence, with Miss Garth and the two sisters, and took a seat near them. Mr. Clare placed himself apart on a chair by the window. The gray rainy light fell soft and sad on the faces of Norah and Magdalen, who sat together opposite to him. Miss Garth had placed herself a little behind them, in partial shadow; and the lawyer's quiet face was seen in profile, close beside her. So the four occupants of the room appeared to Mr. Clare, as he sat apart in his corner; his long claw-like fingers interlaced on his knee; his dark vigilant eyes fixed searchingly now on one face, now on another. The dripping rustle of the rain among the leaves, and the clear, ceaseless tick of the clock on the mantel-piece, made the minute of silence which followed the settling of the persons present in their places indescribably oppressive. It was a relief to every one when Mr. Pendril spoke.

"Mr. Clare has told you already," he began, "that I am the bearer of bad news. I am grieved to say, Miss Garth, that your doubts, when I last saw you, were better founded than my hopes. What that heartless elder brother was in his youth, he is still in his old age. In all my unhappy experience of the worst side of human nature, I have never met with a man so utterly dead to every consideration of mercy as Michael Vanstone."

"Do you mean that he takes the whole of his brother's fortune, and makes no provision whatever for his brother's children?" asked Miss Garth.

"He offers a sum of money for present emergencies," replied Mr. Pendril, "so meanly and disgracefully insufficient that I am ashamed to mention it."

"And nothing for the future?"

"Absolutely nothing."

As that answer was given, the same thought passed, at the same moment, through Miss Garth's mind and through Norah's. The decision, which deprived both the sisters alike of the resources of fortune, did not end there for the younger of the two. Michael Vanstone's merciless resolution had virtually pronounced the sentence which dismissed Frank to China, and which destroyed all present hope of Magdalen's marriage. As the words passed the lawyer's lips, Miss Garth and Norah looked at Magdalen anxiously. Her face turned a shade paler--but not a feature of it moved; not a word escaped her. Norah, who held her sister's hand in her own, felt it tremble for a moment, and then turn cold--and that was all.

"Let me mention plainly what I have done," resumed Mr. Pendril; "I am very desirous you should not think that I have left any effort untried. When I wrote to Michael Vanstone, in the first instance, I did not confine myself to the usual formal statement. I put before him, plainly and earnestly, every one of the circumstances under which he has become possessed of his brother's fortune. When I received the answer, referring me to his written instructions to his lawyer in London--and when a copy of those instructions was placed in my hands--I positively declined, on becoming acquainted with them, to receive the writer's decision as final. I induced the solicitor, on the other side, to accord us a further term of delay; I attempted to see Mr. Noel Vanstone in London for the purpose of obtaining his intercession; and, failing in that, I myself wrote to his father for the second time. The answer referred me, in insolently curt terms, to the instructions already communicated; declared those instructions to be final; and declined any further correspondence with me. There is the beginning and the end of the negotiation. If I have overlooked any means of touching this heartless man--tell me, and those means shall be tried."

He looked at Norah. She pressed her sister's hand encouragingly, and answered for both of them.

"I speak for my sister, as well as for myself," she said, with her color a little

heightened, with her natural gentleness of manner just touched by a quiet, uncomplaining sadness. "You have done all that could be done, Mr. Pendril. We have tried to restrain ourselves from hoping too confidently; and we are deeply grateful for your kindness, at a time when kindness is sorely needed by both of us."

Magdalen's hand returned the pressure of her sister's--withdrew itself--trifled for a moment impatiently with the arrangement of her dress--then suddenly moved the chair closer to the table. Leaning one arm on it (with the hand fast clinched), she looked across at Mr. Pendril. Her face, always remarkable for its want of color, was now startling to contemplate, in its blank, bloodless pallor. But the light in her large gray eyes was bright and steady as ever; and her voice, though low in tone, was clear and resolute in accent as she addressed the lawyer in these terms:

"I understood you to say, Mr. Pendril, that my father's brother had sent his written orders to London, and that you had a copy. Have you preserved it?"

"Certainly."

"Have you got it about you?"

"I have."

"May I see it?"

Mr. Pendril hesitated, and looked uneasily from Magdalen to Miss Garth, and from Miss Garth back again to Magdalen.

"Pray oblige me by not pressing your request," he said. "It is surely enough that you know the result of the instructions. Why should you agitate yourself to no purpose by reading them? They are expressed so cruelly; they show such abominable want of feeling, that I really cannot prevail upon myself to let you see them."

"I am sensible of your kindness, Mr. Pendril, in wishing to spare me pain. But I can bear pain; I promise to distress nobody. Will you excuse me if I repeat my request?"

She held out her hand--the soft, white, virgin hand that had touched nothing to soil it or harden it yet.

"Oh, Magdalen, think again!" said Norah.

"You distress Mr. Pendril," added Miss Garth; "you distress us all."

"There can be no end gained," pleaded the lawyer--"forgive me for saying so--there can really be no useful end gained by my showing you the instructions."

("Fools!" said Mr. Clare to himself. "Have they no eyes to see that she means to have her own way?")

"Something tells me there is an end to be gained," persisted Magdalen. "This decision is a very serious one. It is more serious to me--" She looked round at Mr. Clare, who sat closely watching her, and instantly looked back again, with the first outward betrayal of emotion which had escaped her yet. "It is even more serious to me," she resumed, "for private reasons--than it is to my sister. I know nothing yet but that our father's brother has taken our fortunes from us. He must have some motives of his own for such conduct as that. It is not fair to him, or fair to us, to keep those motives concealed. He has deliberately robbed Norah, and robbed me; and I think we have a right, if we wish it, to know why?"

"I don't wish it," said Norah.

"I do," said Magdalen; and once more she held out her hand.

At this point Mr. Clare roused himself and interfered for the first time.

"You have relieved your conscience," he said, addressing the lawyer. "Give her the right she claims. It is her right--if she will have it."

Mr. Pendril quietly took the written instructions from his pocket. "I have warned you," he said--and handed the papers across the table without another word. One of the pages of writing--was folded down at the corner; and at that folded page the manuscript opened, when Magdalen first turned the leaves. "Is this the place which refers to my sister and myself?" she inquired. Mr. Pendril bowed; and Magdalen smoothed out the manuscript before her on the table.

"Will you decide, Norah?" she asked, turning to her sister. "Shall I read this aloud, or shall I read it to myself?"

"To yourself," said Miss Garth; answering for Norah, who looked at her in mute perplexity and distress.

"It shall be as you wish," said Magdalen. With that reply, she turned again to the manuscript and read these lines:

"... You are now in possession of my wishes in relation to the property in money, and to the sale of the furniture, carriages, horses, and so forth. The last point left on which it is necessary for me to instruct you refers to the persons inhabiting the house, and to certain preposterous claims on their behalf set up by a solicitor named Pendril; who has, no doubt, interested reasons of his own for making application to me.

"I understand that my late brother has left two illegitimate children; both of them young women, who are of an age to earn their own livelihood. Various considerations, all equally irregular, have been urged in respect to these persons by the solicitor representing them. Be so good as to tell him that neither you nor I have anything to do with questions of mere sentiment; and then state plainly, for his better information, what the motives are which regulate my conduct, and what the provision is which I feel myself justified in making for the two young women. Your instructions on both these points you will find detailed in the next paragraph.

"I wish the persons concerned to know, once for all, how I regard the circumstances which have placed my late brother's property at my disposal. Let them understand that I consider those circumstances to be a Providential interposition which has restored to me the inheritance that ought always to have been mine. I receive the money, not only as my right, but also as a proper compensation for the injustice which I suffered from my father, and a proper penalty paid by my younger brother for the vile intrigue by which he succeeded in disinheriting me. His conduct, when a young man, was uniformly discreditable in all the relations of life; and what it then was it continued to be (on the showing of his own legal representative) after the time when I ceased to hold any communication with him. He appears to have systematically imposed a woman on Society as his wife who was not his wife, and to have completed the outrage on morality by afterward marrying her. Such conduct as this has called down a Judgment on himself and his children. I will not invite retribution on my own head by assisting those children to continue the imposition which their parents practiced, and by helping them to take a place in the world to which they are not entitled. Let them, as becomes their birth, gain their bread in situations. If they show themselves disposed to accept their proper position I will assist them to start virtuously in life by a present of one hundred pounds each. This sum I authorize you to pay them, on their personal application, with the necessary acknowledgment of receipt; and on the express understanding that the

transaction, so completed, is to be the beginning and the end of my connection with them. The arrangements under which they quit the house I leave to your discretion; and I have only to add that my decision on this matter, as on all other matters, is positive and final."

Line by line--without once looking up from the pages before her --Magdalen read those atrocious sentences through, from beginning to end. The other persons assembled in the room, all eagerly looking at her together, saw the dress rising and falling faster and faster over her bosom--saw the hand in which she lightly held the manuscript at the outset close unconsciously on the paper and crush it, as she advanced nearer and nearer to the end--but detected no other outward signs of what was passing within her. As soon as she had done, she silently pushed the manuscript away, and put her hands on a sudden over her face. When she withdrew them, all the four persons in the room noticed a change in her. Something in her expression had altered, subtly and silently; something which made the familiar features suddenly look strange, even to her sister and Miss Garth; something, through all after years, never to be forgotten in connection with that day--and never to be described.

The first words she spoke were addressed to Mr. Pendril.

"May I ask one more favor," she said, "before you enter on your business arrangements?"

Mr. Pendril replied ceremoniously by a gesture of assent. Magdalen's resolution to possess herself of the Instructions did not appear to have produced a favorable impression on the lawyer's mind.

"You mentioned what you were so kind as to do, in our interests, when you first wrote to Mr. Michael Vanstone," she continued. "You said you had told him all the circumstances. I want--if you will allow me--to be made quite sure of what he really knew about us--when he sent these orders to his lawyer. Did he know that my father had made a will, and that he had left our fortunes to my sister and myself?"

"He did know it," said Mr. Pendril.

"Did you tell him how it happened that we are left in this helpless position?"

"I told him that your father was entirely unaware, when he married, of the necessity for making another will."

"And that another will would have been made, after he saw Mr. Clare, but for the dreadful misfortune of his death?"

"He knew that also."

"Did he know that my father's untiring goodness and kindness to both of us--"

Her voice faltered for the first time: she sighed, and put her hand to her head wearily. Norah spoke entreatingly to her; Miss Garth spoke entreatingly to her; Mr. Clare sat silent, watching her more and more earnestly. She answered her sister's remonstrance with a faint smile. "I will keep my promise," she said; "I will distress nobody." With that reply, she turned again to Mr. Pendril; and steadily reiterated the question--but in another form of words.

"Did Mr. Michael Vanstone know that my father's great anxiety was to make sure of providing for my sister and myself?"

"He knew it in your father's own words. I sent him an extract from your father's last letter to me."

"The letter which asked you to come for God's sake, and relieve him from the dreadful thought that his daughters were unprovided for? The letter which said he should not rest in his grave if he left us disinherited?"

"That letter and those words."

She paused, still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on the lawyer's face.

"I want to fasten it all in my mind," she said "before I go on. Mr. Michael Vanstone knew of the first will; he knew what prevented the making of the second will; he knew of the letter and he read the words. What did he know of besides? Did you tell him of my mother's last illness? Did you say that her share in the money would have been left to us, if she could have lifted her dying hand in your presence? Did you try to make him ashamed of the cruel law which calls girls in our situation Nobody's Children, and which allows him to use us as he is using us now?"

"I put all those considerations to him. I left none of them doubtful; I left none of them out."

She slowly reached her hand to the copy of the Instructions, and slowly

folded it up again, in the shape in which it had been presented to her. "I am much obliged to you, Mr. Pendril." With those words, she bowed, and gently pushed the manuscript back across the table; then turned to her sister.

"Norah," she said, "if we both of us live to grow old, and if you ever forget all that we owe to Michael Vanstone--come to me, and I will remind you."

She rose and walked across the room by herself to the window. As she passed Mr. Clare, the old man stretched out his claw-like fingers and caught her fast by the arm before she was aware of him.

"What is this mask of yours hiding?" he asked, forcing her to bend to him, and looking close into her face. "Which of the extremes of human temperature does your courage start from--the dead cold or the white hot?"

She shrank back from him and turned away her head in silence. She would have resented that unscrupulous intrusion on her own thoughts from any man alive but Frank's father. He dropped her arm as suddenly as he had taken it, and let her go on to the window. "No," he said to himself, "not the cold extreme, whatever else it may be. So much the worse for her, and for all belonging to her."

There was a momentary pause. Once more the dripping rustle of the rain and the steady ticking of the clock filled up the gap of silence. Mr. Pendril put the Instructions back in his pocket, considered a little, and, turning toward Norah and Miss Garth, recalled their attention to the present and pressing necessities of the time.

"Our consultation has been needlessly prolonged," he said, "by painful references to the past. We shall be better employed in settling our arrangements for the future. I am obliged to return to town this evening. Pray let me hear how I can best assist you; pray tell me what trouble and what responsibility I can take off your hands."

For the moment, neither Norah nor Miss Garth seemed to be capable of answering him. Magdalen's reception of the news which annihilated the marriage prospect that her father's own lips had placed before her not a month since, had bewildered and dismayed them alike. They had summoned their courage to meet the shock of her passionate grief, or to face the harder trial of witnessing her speechless despair. But they were not prepared for her invincible resolution to read the Instructions; for the terrible questions which she had put to the lawyer; for her immovable determination to fix all the circumstances in her mind, under which Michael

Vanstone's decision had been pronounced. There she stood at the window, an unfathomable mystery to the sister who had never been parted from her, to the governess who had trained her from a child. Miss Garth remembered the dark doubts which had crossed her mind on the day when she and Magdalen had met in the garden. Norah looked forward to the coming time, with the first serious dread of it on her sister's account which she had felt yet. Both had hitherto remained passive, in despair of knowing what to do. Both were now silent, in despair of knowing what to say.

Mr. Pendril patiently and kindly helped them, by returning to the subject of their future plans for the second time.

"I am sorry to press any business matters on your attention," he said, "when you are necessarily unfitted to deal with them. But I must take my instructions back to London with me to night. With reference, in the first place, to the disgraceful pecuniary offer, to which I have already alluded. The younger Miss Vanstone having read the Instructions, needs no further information from my lips. The elder will, I hope, excuse me if I tell her (what I should be ashamed to tell her, but that it is a matter of necessity), that Mr. Michael Vanstone's provision for his brother's children begins and ends with an offer to each of them of one hundred pounds."

Norah's face crimsoned with indignation. She started to her feet, as if Michael Vanstone had been present in the room, and had personally insulted her.

"I see," said the lawyer, wishing to spare her; "I may tell Mr. Michael Vanstone you refuse the money."

"Tell him," she broke out passionately, "if I was starving by the roadside, I wouldn't touch a farthing of it!"

"Shall I notify your refusal also?" asked Mr. Pendril, speaking to Magdalen next.

She turned round from the window--but kept her face in shadow, by standing close against it with her back to the light.

"Tell him, on my part," she said, "to think again before he starts me in life with a hundred pounds. I will give him time to think." She spoke those strange words with a marked emphasis; and turning back quickly to the window, hid her face from the observation of every one in the room.

"You both refuse the offer," said Mr. Pendril, taking out his pencil, and making his professional note of the decision. As he shut up his pocketbook, he glanced toward Magdalen doubtfully. She had roused in him the latent distrust which is a lawyer's second nature: he had his suspicions of her looks; he had his suspicions of her language. Her sister seemed to have mere influence over her than Miss Garth. He resolved to speak privately to her sister before he went away.

While the idea was passing through his mind, his attention was claimed by another question from Magdalen.

"Is he an old man?" she asked, suddenly, without turning round from the window.

"If you mean Mr. Michael Vanstone, he is seventy-five or seventy-six years of age."

"You spoke of his son a little while since. Has he any other sons--or daughters?"

"None."

"Do you know anything of his wife?"

"She has been dead for many years."

There was a pause. "Why do you ask these questions?" said Norah.

"I beg your pardon," replied Magdalen, quietly; "I won't ask any more."

For the third time, Mr. Pendril returned to the business of the interview.

"The servants must not be forgotten," he said. "They must be settled with and discharged: I will give them the necessary explanation before I leave. As for the house, no questions connected with it need trouble you. The carriages and horses, the furniture and plate, and so on, must simply be left on the premises to await Mr. Michael Vanstone's further orders. But any possessions, Miss Vanstone, personally belonging to you or to your sister--jewelry and dresses, and any little presents which may have been made to you--are entirely at your disposal. With regard to the time of your departure, I understand that a month or more will elapse before Mr. Michael Vanstone can leave Zurich; and I am sure I only do his solicitor justice in saying--"

"Excuse me, Mr. Pendril," interposed Norah; "I think I understand, from what you have just said, that our house and everything in it belongs to--?" She stopped, as if the mere utterance of the man's name was abhorrent to her.

"To Michael Vanstone," said Mr. Pendril. "The house goes to him with the rest of the property."

"Then I, for one, am ready to leave it tomorrow!"

Magdalen started at the window, as her sister spoke, and looked at Mr. Clare, with the first open signs of anxiety and alarm which she had shown yet.

"Don't be angry with me," she whispered, stooping over the old man with a sudden humility of look, and a sudden nervousness of manner. "I can't go without seeing Frank first!"

"You shall see him," replied Mr. Clare. "I am here to speak to you about it, when the business is done."

"It is quite unnecessary to hurry your departure, as you propose," continued Mr. Pendril, addressing Norah. "I can safely assure you that a week hence will be time enough."

"If this is Mr. Michael Vanstone's house," repeated Norah; "I am ready to leave it tomorrow."

She impatiently quitted her chair and seated herself further away on the sofa. As she laid her hand on the back of it, her face changed. There, at the head of the sofa, were the cushions which had supported her mother when she lay down for the last time to repose. There, at the foot of the sofa, was the clumsy, old-fashioned arm-chair, which had been her father's favorite seat on rainy days, when she and her sister used to amuse him at the piano opposite, by playing his favorite tunes. A heavy sigh, which she tried vainly to repress, burst from her lips. "Oh," she thought, "I had forgotten these old friends! How shall we part from them when the time comes!"

"May I inquire, Miss Vanstone, whether you and your sister have formed any definite plans for the future?" asked Mr. Pendril. "Have you thought of any place of residence?"

"I may take it on myself, sir," said Miss Garth, "to answer your question for

them. When they leave this house, they leave it with me. My home is their home, and my bread is their bread. Their parents honored me, trusted me, and loved me. For twelve happy years they never let me remember that I was their governess; they only let me know myself as their companion and their friend. My memory of them is the memory of unvarying gentleness and generosity; and my life shall pay the debt of my gratitude to their orphan children."

Norah rose hastily from the sofa; Magdalen impetuously left the window. For once, there was no contrast in the conduct of the sisters. For once, the same impulse moved their hearts, the same earnest feeling inspired their words. Miss Garth waited until the first outburst of emotion had passed away; then rose, and, taking Norah and Magdalen each by the hand, addressed herself to Mr. Pendril and Mr. Clare. She spoke with perfect self-possession; strong in her artless unconsciousness of her own good action.

"Even such a trifle as my own story," she said, "is of some importance at such a moment as this. I wish you both, gentlemen, to understand that I am not promising more to the daughters of your old friend than I can perform. When I first came to this house, I entered it under such independent circumstances as are not common in the lives of governesses. In my younger days, I was associated in teaching with my elder sister: we established a school in London, which grew to be a large and prosperous one. I only left it, and became a private governess, because the heavy responsibility of the school was more than my strength could bear. I left my share in the profits untouched, and I possess a pecuniary interest in our establishment to this day. That is my story, in few words. When we leave this house, I propose that we shall go back to the school in London, which is still prosperously directed by my elder sister. We can live there as quietly as we please, until time has helped us to bear our affliction better than we can bear it now. If Norah's and Magdalen's altered prospects oblige them to earn their own independence, I can help them to earn it, as a gentleman's daughters should. The best families in this land are glad to ask my sister's advice where the interests of their children's home-training are concerned; and I answer, beforehand, for her hearty desire to serve Mr. Vanstone's daughters, as I answer for my own. That is the future which my gratitude to their father and mother, and my love for themselves, now offers to them. If you think my proposal, gentlemen, a fit and fair proposal--and I see in your faces that you do--let us not make the hard necessities of our position harder still, by any useless delay in meeting them at once. Let us do what we must do; let us act on Norah's decision, and leave this house to-morrow. You mentioned the servants just now, Mr. Pendril: I am ready to call them together in the next room, and to assist you in the settlement of their claims, whenever you

please."

Without waiting for the lawyer's answer, without leaving the sisters time to realize their own terrible situation, she moved at once toward the door. It was her wise resolution to meet the coming trial by doing much and saying little. Before she could leave the room, Mr. Clare followed, and stopped her on the threshold.

"I never envied a woman's feelings before," said the old man. "It may surprise you to hear it; but I envy yours. Wait! I have something more to say. There is an obstacle still left--the everlasting obstacle of Frank. Help me to sweep him off. Take the elder sister along with you and the lawyer, and leave me here to have it out with the younger. I want to see what metal she's really made of."

While Mr. Clare was addressing these words to Miss Garth, Mr. Pendril had taken the opportunity of speaking to Norah. "Before I go back to town," he said, "I should like to have a word with you in private. From what has passed today, Miss Vanstone, I have formed a very high opinion of your discretion; and, as an old friend of your father's, I want to take the freedom of speaking to you about your sister."

Before Norah could answer, she was summoned, in compliance with Mr. Clare's request, to the conference with the servants. Mr. Pendril followed Miss Garth, as a matter of course. When the three were out in the hall, Mr. Clare re-entered the room, closed the door, and signed peremptorily to Magdalen to take a chair.

She obeyed him in silence. He took a turn up and down the room, with his hands in the side-pockets of the long, loose, shapeless coat which he habitually wore.

"How old are you?" he said, stopping suddenly, and speaking to her with the whole breadth of the room between them.

"I was eighteen last birthday," she answered, humbly, without looking up at him.

"You have shown extraordinary courage for a girl of eighteen. Have you got any of that courage left?"

She clasped her hands together, and wrung them hard. A few tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled slowly over her cheeks.

"I can't give Frank up," she said, faintly. "You don't care for me, I know; but you used to care for my father. Will you try to be kind to me for my father's sake?"

The last words died away in a whisper; she could say no more. Never had she felt the illimitable power which a woman's love possesses of absorbing into itself every other event, every other joy or sorrow of her life, as she felt it then. Never had she so tenderly associated Frank with the memory of her lost parents, as at that moment. Never had the impenetrable atmosphere of illusion through which women behold the man of their choice--the atmosphere which had blinded her to all that was weak, selfish, and mean in Frank's nature--surrounded him with a brighter halo than now, when she was pleading with the father for the possession of the son. "Oh, don't ask me to give him up!" she said, trying to take courage, and shuddering from head to foot. In the next instant, she flew to the opposite extreme, with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. "I won't give him up!" she burst out violently. "No! not if a thousand fathers ask me!"

"I am one father," said Mr. Clare. "And I don't ask you."

In the first astonishment and delight of hearing those unexpected words, she started to her feet, crossed the room, and tried to throw her arms round his neck. She might as well have attempted to move the house from its foundations. He took her by the shoulders and put her back in her chair. His inexorable eyes looked her into submission; and his lean forefinger shook at her warningly, as if he was quieting a fractious child.

"Hug Frank," he said; "don't hug me. I haven't done with you yet; when I have, you may shake hands with me, if you like. Wait, and compose yourself."

He left her. His hands went back into his pockets, and his monotonous march up and down the room began again.

"Ready?" he asked, stopping short after a while. She tried to answer. "Take two minutes more," he said, and resumed his walk with the regularity of clock-work. "These are the creatures," he thought to himself, "into whose keeping men otherwise sensible give the happiness of their lives. Is there any other object in creation, I wonder, which answers its end as badly as a woman does?"

He stopped before her once more. Her breathing was easier; the dark flush

on her face was dying out again.

"Ready?" he repeated. "Yes; ready at last. Listen to me; and let's get it over. I don't ask you to give Frank up. I ask you to wait."

"I will wait," she said. "Patiently, willingly."

"Will you make Frank wait?"

"Yes."

"Will you send him to China?"

Her head drooped upon her bosom, and she clasped her hands again, in silence. Mr. Clare saw where the difficulty lay, and marched straight up to it on the spot.

"I don't pretend to enter into your feelings for Frank, or Frank's for you," he said. "The subject doesn't interest me. But I do pretend to state two plain truths. It is one plain truth that you can't be married till you have money enough to pay for the roof that shelters you, the clothes that cover you, and the victuals you eat. It is another plain truth that you can't find the money; that I can't find the money; and that Frank's only chance of finding it, is going to China. If I tell him to go, he'll sit in a corner and cry. If I insist, he'll say Yes, and deceive me. If I go a step further, and see him on board ship with my own eyes, he'll slip off in the pilot's boat, and sneak back secretly to you. That's his disposition."

"No!" said Magdalen. "It's not his disposition; it's his love for Me."

"Call it what you like," retorted Mr. Clare. "Sneak or Sweetheart --he's too slippery, in either capacity, for my fingers to hold him. My shutting the door won't keep him from coming back. Your shutting the door will. Have you the courage to shut it? Are you fond enough of him not to stand in his light?"

"Fond! I would die for him!"

"Will you send him to China?"

She sighed bitterly.

"Have a little pity for me," she said. "I have lost my father; I have lost my mother; I have lost my fortune--and now I am to lose Frank. You don't like

women, I know; but try to help me with a little pity. I don't say it's not for his own interests to send him to China; I only say it's hard--very, very hard on me."

Mr. Clare had been deaf to her violence, insensible to her caresses, blind to her tears; but under the tough integument of his philosophy he had a heart--and it answered that hopeless appeal; it felt those touching words.

"I don't deny that your case is a hard one," he said. "I don't want to make it harder. I only ask you to do in Frank's interests what Frank is too weak to do for himself. It's no fault of yours; it's no fault of mine--but it's not the less true that the fortune you were to have brought him has changed owners."

She suddenly looked up, with a furtive light in her eyes, with a threatening smile on her lips.

"It may change owners again," she said.

Mr. Clare saw the alteration in her expression, and heard the tones of her voice. But the words were spoken low; spoken as if to herself--they failed to reach him across the breadth of the room. He stopped instantly in his walk and asked what she had said.

"Nothing," she answered, turning her head away toward the window, and looking out mechanically at the falling rain. "Only my own thoughts."

Mr. Clare resumed his walk, and returned to his subject.

"It's your interest," he went on, "as well as Frank's interest, that he should go. He may make money enough to marry you in China; he can't make it here. If he stops at home, he'll be the ruin of both of you. He'll shut his eyes to every consideration of prudence, and pester you to marry him; and when he has carried his point, he will be the first to turn round afterward and complain that you're a burden on him. Hear me out! You're in love with Frank--I'm not, and I know him. Put you two together often enough; give him time enough to hug, cry, pester, and plead; and I'll tell you what the end will be--you'll marry him."

He had touched the right string at last. It rung back in answer before he could add another word.

"You don't know me," she said, firmly. "You don't know what I can suffer for Frank's sake. He shall never marry me till I can be what my father said I

should be--the making of his fortune. He shall take no burden, when he takes me; I promise you that! I'll be the good angel of Frank's life; I'll not go a penniless girl to him, and drag him down." She abruptly left her seat, advanced a few steps toward Mr. Clare, and stopped in the middle of the room. Her arms fell helpless on either side of her, and she burst into tears. "He shall go," she said. "If my heart breaks in doing it, I'll tell him to-morrow that we must say Good-by!"

Mr. Clare at once advanced to meet her, and held out his hand.

"I'll help you," he said. "Frank shall hear every word that has passed between us. When he comes to-morrow he shall know, beforehand, that he comes to say Good-by."

She took his hand in both her own--hesitated--looked at him--and pressed it to her bosom. "May I ask a favor of you, before you go?" she said, timidly. He tried to take his hand from her; but she knew her advantage, and held it fast. "Suppose there should be some change for the better?" she went on. "Suppose I could come to Frank, as my father said I should come to him--?"

Before she could complete the question, Mr. Clare made a second effort and withdrew his hand. "As your father said you should come to him?" he repeated, looking at her attentively.

"Yes," she replied. "Strange things happen sometimes. If strange things happen to me will you let Frank come back before the five years are out?"

What did she mean? Was she clinging desperately to the hope of melting Michael Vanstone's heart? Mr. Clare could draw no other conclusion from what she had just said to him. At the beginning of the interview he would have roughly dispelled her delusion. At the end of the interview he left her compassionately in possession of it.

"You are hoping against all hope," he said; "but if it gives you courage, hope on. If this impossible good fortune of yours ever happens, tell me, and Frank shall come back. In the meantime--"

"In the meantime," she interposed sadly, "you have my promise."

Once more Mr. Clare's sharp eyes searched her face attentively.

"I will trust your promise," he said. "You shall see Frank to-morrow."

She went back thoughtfully to her chair, and sat down again in silence. Mr. Clare made for the door before any formal leave-taking could pass between them. "Deep!" he thought to himself, as he looked back at her before he went out; "only eighteen; and too deep for my sounding!"

In the hall he found Norah, waiting anxiously to hear what had happened.

"Is it all over?" she asked. "Does Frank go to China?"

"Be careful how you manage that sister of yours," said Mr. Clare, without noticing the question. "She has one great misfortune to contend with: she's not made for the ordinary jog-trot of a woman's life. I don't say I can see straight to the end of the good or evil in her--I only warn you, her future will be no common one."

An hour later, Mr. Pendril left the house; and, by that night's post, Miss Garth dispatched a letter to her sister in London.

THE END OF THE FIRST SCENE.