CHAPTER VII.

The library at Fairfield Gardens possessed two special attractions, besides the books. It opened into a large conservatory; and it was adorned by an admirable portrait of Mrs. Gallilee, painted by her brother.

Waiting the appearance of the fair original, Mr. Mool looked at the portrait, and then mentally reviewed the history of Mrs. Gallilee's family. What he did next, no person acquainted with the habits of lawyers will be weak enough to believe. Mr. Mool blushed.

Is this the language of exaggeration, describing a human anomaly on the roll of attorneys? The fact shall be left to answer the question. Mr. Mool had made a mistake in his choice of a profession. The result of the mistake was--a shy lawyer.

Attended by such circumstances as these, the history of the family assumes, for the moment, a certain importance. It is connected with a blushing attorney. It will explain what happened on the reading of the Will. And it is sure beforehand of a favourable reception--for it is all about money.

Old Robert Graywell began life as the son of a small farmer. He was generally considered to be rather an eccentric man; but prospered, nevertheless, as a merchant in the city of London. When he retired from business, he possessed a house and estate in the country, and a handsome fortune safely invested in the Funds.

His children were three in number:--his son Robert, and his daughters Maria and Susan.

The death of his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached, was the first serious calamity of his life. He retired to his estate a soured and broken man. Loving husbands are not always, as a necessary consequence, tender fathers. Old Robert's daughters afforded him no consolation on their mother's death. Their anxiety about their mourning dresses so disgusted him that he kept out of their way. No extraordinary interest was connected with their prospects in life: they would be married--and there would be an end of them. As for the son, he had long since placed himself beyond the narrow range of his father's sympathies. In the first place, his refusal to qualify himself for a mercantile career had made it necessary to dispose of the business to strangers. In the second place, young Robert Graywell

proved--without any hereditary influence, and in the face of the strongest discouragement--to be a born painter! One of the greatest artists of that day saw the boy's first efforts, and pronounced judgment in these plain words: "What a pity he has not got his bread to earn by his brush!"

On the death of old Robert, his daughters found themselves (to use their own expression) reduced to a trumpery legacy of ten thousand pounds each. Their brother inherited the estate, and the bulk of the property--not because his father cared about founding a family, but because the boy had always been his mother's favourite.

The first of the three children to marry was the eldest sister.

Maria considered herself fortunate in captivating Mr. Vere--a man of old family, with a high sense of what he owed to his name. He had a sufficient income, and he wanted no more. His wife's dowry was settled on herself. When he died, he left her a life-interest in his property amounting to six hundred a year. This, added to the annual proceeds of her own little fortune, made an income of one thousand pounds. The remainder of Mr. Vere's property was left to his only surviving child, Ovid.

With a thousand a year for herself, and with two thousand a year for her son, on his coming of age, the widowed Maria might possibly have been satisfied--but for the extraordinary presumption of her younger sister.

Susan, ranking second in age, ranked second also in beauty; and yet, in the race for a husband, Susan won the prize!

Soon after her sister's marriage, she made a conquest of a Scotch nobleman, possessed of a palace in London, and a palace in Scotland, and a rent-roll of forty thousand pounds. Maria, to use her own expression, never recovered it. From the horrid day when Susan became Lady Northlake, Maria became a serious woman. All her earthly interests centred now in the cultivation of her intellect. She started on that glorious career, which associated her with the march of science. In only a year afterwards--as an example of the progress which a resolute woman can make--she was familiar with zoophyte fossils, and had succeeded in dissecting the nervous system of a bee.

Was there no counter-attraction in her married life?

Very little. Mr. Vere felt no sympathy with his wife's scientific pursuits.

On her husband's death, did she find no consolation in her son? Let her

speak for herself. "My son fills my heart. But the school, the university, and the hospital have all in turn taken his education out of my hands. My mind must be filled, as well as my heart." She seized her exquisite instruments, and returned to the nervous system of the bee.

In course of time, Mr. John Gallilee--"drifting about," as he said of himself--drifted across the path of science.

The widowed Mrs. Vere (as exhibited in public) was still a fine woman. Mr. Gallilee admired "that style"; and Mr. Gallilee had fifty thousand pounds. Only a little more, to my lord and my lady, than one year's income. But, invested at four percent, it added an annual two thousand pounds to Mrs. Vere's annual one thousand. Result, three thousand a year, encumbered with Mr. Gallilee. On reflection, Mrs. Vere accepted the encumbrance--and reaped her reward. Susan was no longer distinguished as the sister who had her dresses made in Paris; and Mrs. Gallilee was not now subjected to the indignity of getting a lift in Lady Northlake's carriage.

What was the history of Robert, during this interval of time? In two words, Robert disgraced himself.

Taking possession of his country house, the new squire was invited to contribute towards the expense of a pack of hounds kept by subscription in the neighbourhood, and was advised to make acquaintance with his fellow-sportsmen by giving a hunt-breakfast. He answered very politely; but the fact was not to be concealed--the new man refused to encourage hunting: he thought that noble amusement stupid and cruel. For the same reason, he refused to preserve game. A last mistake was left to make, and he made it. After returning the rector's visit, he failed to appear at church. No person with the smallest knowledge of the English character, as exhibited in an English county, will fail to foresee that Robert's residence on his estate was destined to come, sooner or later, to an untimely end. When he had finished his sketches of the picturesque aspects of his landed property, he disappeared. The estate was not entailed. Old Robert--who had insisted on the minutest formalities and details in providing for his dearly-loved wife--was impenetrably careless about the future of his children. "My fortune has no value now in my eyes," he said to judicious friends; "let them run through it all, if they please. It would do them a deal of good if they were obliged to earn their own living, like better people than themselves." Left free to take his own way, Robert sold the estate merely to get rid of it. With no expensive tastes, except the taste for buying pictures, he became a richer man than ever.

When their brother next communicated with them, Lady Northlake and Mrs. Gallilee heard of him as a voluntary exile in Italy. He was building a studio and a gallery; he was contemplating a series of pictures; and he was a happy man for the first time in his life.

Another interval passed--and the sisters heard of Robert again.

Having already outraged the sense of propriety among his English neighbours, he now degraded himself in the estimation of his family, by marrying a "model." The letter announcing this event declared, with perfect truth, that he had chosen a virtuous woman for his wife. She sat to artists, as any lady might sit to any artist, "for the head only." Her parents gained a bare subsistence by farming their own little morsel of land; they were honest people--and what did brother Robert care for rank? His own grandfather had been a farmer.

Lady Northlake and Mrs. Gallilee felt it due to themselves to hold a consultation, on the subject of their sister-in-law. Was it desirable, in their own social interests, to cast Robert off from that moment?

Susan (previously advised by her kind-hearted husband) leaned to the side of mercy. Robert's letter informed them that he proposed to live, and die, in Italy. If he held to this resolution, his marriage would surely be an endurable misfortune to his relatives in London. "Suppose we write to him," Susan concluded, "and say we are surprised, but we have no doubt he knows best. We offer our congratulations to Mrs. Robert, and our sincere wishes for his happiness."

To Lady Northlake's astonishment, Mrs. Gallilee adopted this indulgent point of view, without a word of protest. She had her reasons--but they were not producible to a relative whose husband had forty thousand a year. Robert had paid her debts.

An income of three thousand pounds, even in these days, represents a handsome competence--provided you don't "owe a duty to society." In Mrs. Gallilee's position, an income of three thousand pounds represented genteel poverty. She was getting into debt again; and she was meditating future designs on her brother's purse. A charming letter to Robert was the result. It ended with, "Do send me a photograph of your lovely wife!" When the poor "model" died, not many years afterwards, leaving one little daughter, Mrs. Gallilee implored her brother to return to England. "Come, dearest Robert, and find consolation and a home, under the roof of your affectionate Maria."

But Robert remained in Italy, and was buried in Italy. At the date of his death, he had three times paid his elder sister's debts. On every occasion when he helped her in this liberal way, she proved her gratitude by anticipating a larger, and a larger, and a larger legacy if she outlived him.

Knowing (as the family lawyer) what sums of money Mrs. Gallilee had extracted from her brother, Mr. Mool also knew that the advances thus made had been considered as representing the legacy, to which she might otherwise have had some sisterly claim. It was his duty to have warned her of this, when she questioned him generally on the subject of the Will; and he had said nothing about it, acting under a most unbecoming motive--in plain words, the motive of fear. From the self-reproachful feeling that now disturbed him, had risen that wonderful blush which made its appearance on Mr. Mool's countenance. He was actually ashamed of himself. After all, is it too much to have suggested that he was a human anomaly on the roll of attorneys?