Basil

By

Wilkie Collins

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Contents

LETTER OF DEDICATION TO CHARLES JAMES WARD, ESQ.

IT has long been one of my pleasantest anticipations to look forward to the time when I might offer to you, my old and dear friend, some such acknowledgment of the value I place on your affection for me, and of my grateful sense of the many acts of kindness by which that affection has been proved, as I now gladly offer in this place. In dedicating the present work to you, I fulfil therefore a purpose which, for some time past, I have sincerely desired to achieve; and, more than that, I gain for myself the satisfaction of knowing that there is one page, at least, of my book, on which I shall always look with unalloyed pleasure--the page that bears your name.

I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have guided it, as often as I could, where I knew by my own experience, or by experience related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress. My idea was, that the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it. Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards heaven by taking root in earth. Is not the noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth?

Directing my characters and my story, then, towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it, I have not hesitated to violate some of the conventionalities of sentimental fiction. For instance, the first love-meeting of two of the personages in this book, occurs (where the real love-meeting from which it is drawn, occurred) in the very last place and under the very last circumstances which the artifices of sentimental writing would sanction. Will my lovers excite ridicule instead of interest, because I have truly represented them as seeing each other where hundreds of other lovers have first seen each other, as hundreds of people will readily admit when they read the passage to which I refer? I am sanguine enough to think not.

So again, in certain parts of this book where I have attempted to excite the suspense or pity of the reader, I have admitted as perfectly fit accessories to the scene the most ordinary street-sounds that could be heard, and the most ordinary street-events that could occur, at the time and in the place represented--believing that by adding to truth, they were adding to tragedy--adding by all the force of fair contrast--adding as no artifices of mere writing possibly could add, let them be ever so cunningly introduced by ever so crafty a hand.

Allow me to dwell a moment longer on the story which these pages contain.

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader's belief in the probability of my story, by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith. Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men, seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with--when there was a good object in using them--as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all. By appealing to genuine sources of interest within the reader's own experience, I could certainly gain his attention to begin with; but it would be only by appealing to other sources (as genuine in their way) beyond his own experience, that I could hope to fix his interest and excite his suspense, to occupy his deeper feelings, or to stir his nobler thoughts.

In writing thus--briefly and very generally--(for I must not delay you too long from the story), I can but repeat, though I hope almost unnecessarily, that I am now only speaking of what I have tried to do. Between the purpose hinted at here, and the execution of that purpose contained in the succeeding pages, lies the broad line of separation which distinguishes between the will and the deed. How far I may fall short of another man's standard, remains to be discovered. How far I have fallen short of my own, I know painfully well.

One word more on the manner in which the purpose of the following pages is worked out--and I have done.

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition. Nobody can assert that such scenes are unproductive of useful results, when they are turned to a plainly and purely moral purpose. If I am asked why I have written certain scenes in this book, my answer is to be found in the universally-accepted truth which the preceding words express. I have a right to appeal to that truth; for I guided myself by it throughout. In deriving the lesson which the following pages contain, from those examples of error and crime which would most strikingly and naturally teach it, I determined to do justice to the honesty of my object by speaking out. In drawing the two characters,

whose actions bring about the darker scenes of my story, I did not forget that it was my duty, while striving to portray them naturally, to put them to a good moral use; and at some sacrifice, in certain places, of dramatic effect (though I trust with no sacrifice of truth to Nature), I have shown the conduct of the vile, as always, in a greater or less degree, associated with something that is selfish, contemptible, or cruel in motive. Whether any of my better characters may succeed in endearing themselves to the reader, I know not: but this I do certainly know:--that I shall in no instance cheat him out of his sympathies in favour of the bad.

To those persons who dissent from the broad principles here adverted to; who deny that it is the novelist's vocation to do more than merely amuse them; who shrink from all honest and serious reference, in books, to subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere; who see covert implications where nothing is implied, and improper allusions where nothing improper is alluded to; whose innocence is in the word, and not in the thought; whose morality stops at the tongue, and never gets on to the heart--to those persons, I should consider it loss of time, and worse, to offer any further explanation of my motives, than the sufficient explanation which I have given already. I do not address myself to them in this book, and shall never think of addressing myself to them in any other.

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Those words formed part of the original introduction to this novel. I wrote them nearly ten years since; and what I said then, I say now.

"Basil" was the second work of fiction which I produced. On its appearance, it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written, my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy, as distinguished from false--I allowed the prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt. I knew that "Basil" had nothing to fear from pure-minded readers; and I left these pages to stand or fall on such merits as they possessed. Slowly and surely, my story forced its way through all adverse criticism, to a place in the public favour which it has never lost since. Some of the most valued friends I now possess, were made for me by "Basil." Some of the most gratifying recognitions of my labours which I have received, from readers personally strangers to me, have been recognitions of the purity of this story, from the first page to the last. All the indulgence I need now ask for "Basil," is indulgence for literary defects,

which are the result of inexperience; which no correction can wholly remove; and which no one sees more plainly, after a lapse of ten years, than the writer himself.

I have only to add, that the present edition of this book is the first which has had the benefit of my careful revision. While the incidents of the story remain exactly what they were, the language in which they are told has been, I hope, in many cases greatly altered for the better.

WILKIE COLLINS.

Harley Street, London, July, 1862.

PART I.

I.

WHAT am I now about to write?

The history of little more than the events of one year, out of the twenty-four years of my life.

Why do I undertake such an employment as this?

Perhaps, because I think that my narrative may do good; because I hope that, one day, it may be put to some warning use. I am now about to relate the story of an error, innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results; and I would fain hope that my plain and true record will show that this error was not committed altogether without excuse. When these pages are found after my death, they will perhaps be calmly read and gently judged, as relics solemnized by the atoning shadows of the grave. Then, the hard sentence against me may be repented of; the children of the next generation of our house may be taught to speak charitably of my memory, and may often, of their own accord, think of me kindly in the thoughtful watches of the night.

Prompted by these motives, and by others which I feel, but cannot analyse, I now begin my self-imposed occupation. Hidden amid the far hills of the far West of England, surrounded only by the few simple inhabitants of a fishing hamlet on the Cornish coast, there is little fear that my attention will be distracted from my task; and as little chance that any indolence on my part will delay its speedy accomplishment. I live under a threat of impending hostility, which may descend and overwhelm me, I know not how soon, or in what manner. An enemy, determined and deadly, patient alike to wait days or years for his opportunity, is ever lurking after me in the dark. In entering on my new employment, I cannot say of my time, that it may be mine for another hour; of my life, that it may last till evening.

Thus it is as no leisure work that I begin my narrative--and begin it, too, on my birthday! On this day I complete my twenty-fourth year; the first new year of my life which has not been greeted by a single kind word, or a single loving wish. But one look of welcome can still find me in my solitude--the

lovely morning look of nature, as I now see it from the casement of my room. Brighter and brighter shines out the lusty sun from banks of purple, rainy cloud; fishermen are spreading their nets to dry on the lower declivities of the rocks; children are playing round the boats drawn up on the beach; the sea-breeze blows fresh and pure towards the shore----all objects are brilliant to look on, all sounds are pleasant to hear, as my pen traces the first lines which open the story of my life.

II.

I am the second son of an English gentleman of large fortune. Our family is, I believe, one of the most ancient in this country. On my father's side, it dates back beyond the Conquest; on my mother's, it is not so old, but the pedigree is nobler. Besides my elder brother, I have one sister, younger than myself. My mother died shortly after giving birth to her last child.

Circumstances which will appear hereafter, have forced me to abandon my father's name. I have been obliged in honour to resign it; and in honour I abstain from mentioning it here. Accordingly, at the head of these pages, I have only placed my Christian name--not considering it of any importance to add the surname which I have assumed; and which I may, perhaps, be obliged to change for some other, at no very distant period. It will now, I hope, be understood from the outset, why I never mention my brother and sister but by their Christian names; why a blank occurs wherever my father's name should appear; why my own is kept concealed in this narrative, as it is kept concealed in the world.

The story of my boyhood and youth has little to interest--nothing that is new. My education was the education of hundreds of others in my rank of life. I was first taught at a public school, and then went to college to complete what is termed "a liberal education."

My life at college has not left me a single pleasant recollection. I found sycophancy established there, as a principle of action; flaunting on the lord's gold tassel in the street; enthroned on the lord's dais in the dining-room. The most learned student in my college--the man whose life was most exemplary, whose acquirements were most admirable--was shown me sitting, as a commoner, in the lowest place. The heir to an Earldom, who had failed at the last examination, was pointed out a few minutes afterwards, dining in solitary grandeur at a raised table, above the reverend scholars who had turned him back as a dunce. I had just arrived at the University, and had just been congratulated on entering "a venerable seminary of learning and religion."

Trite and common-place though it be, I mention this circumstance attending my introduction to college, because it formed the first cause which tended to diminish my faith in the institution to which I was attached. I soon grew to regard my university training as a sort of necessary evil, to be patiently submitted to. I read for no honours, and joined no particular set of men. I

studied the literature of France, Italy, and Germany; just kept up my classical knowledge sufficiently to take my degree; and left college with no other reputation than a reputation for indolence and reserve.

When I returned home, it was thought necessary, as I was a younger son, and could inherit none of the landed property of the family, except in the case of my brother's dying without children, that I should belong to a profession. My father had the patronage of some valuable "livings," and good interest with more than one member of the government. The church, the army, the navy, and, in the last instance, the bar, were offered me to choose from. I selected the last.

My father appeared to be a little astonished at my choice; but he made no remark on it, except simply telling me not to forget that the bar was a good stepping-stone to parliament. My real ambition, however, was, not to make a name in parliament, but a name in literature. I had already engaged myself in the hard, but glorious service of the pen; and I was determined to persevere. The profession which offered me the greatest facilities for pursuing my project, was the profession which I was ready to prefer. So I chose the bar.

Thus, I entered life under the fairest auspices. Though a younger son, I knew that my father's wealth, exclusive of his landed property, secured me an independent income far beyond my wants. I had no extravagant habits; no tastes that I could not gratify as soon as formed; no cares or responsibilities of any kind. I might practise my profession or not, just as I chose. I could devote myself wholly and unreservedly to literature, knowing that, in my case, the struggle for fame could never be identical--terribly, though gloriously identical--with the struggle for bread. For me, the morning sunshine of life was sunshine without a cloud!

I might attempt, in this place, to sketch my own character as it was at that time. But what man can say--I will sound the depth of my own vices, and measure the height of my own virtues; and be as good as his word? We can neither know nor judge ourselves; others may judge, but cannot know us: God alone judges and knows too. Let my character appear--as far as any human character can appear in its integrity, in this world--in my actions, when I describe the one eventful passage in my life which forms the basis of this narrative. In the mean time, it is first necessary that I should say more about the members of my family. Two of them, at least, will be found important to the progress of events in these pages. I make no attempt to judge their characters: I only describe them--whether rightly or wrongly, I know not--as they appeared to me.

III.

I always considered my father--I speak of him in the past tense, because we are now separated for ever; because he is henceforth as dead to me as if the grave had closed over him--I always considered my father to be the proudest man I ever knew; the proudest man I ever heard of. His was not that conventional pride, which the popular notions are fond of characterising by a stiff, stately carriage; by a rigid expression of features; by a hard, severe intonation of voice; by set speeches of contempt for poverty and rags, and rhapsodical braggadocio about rank and breeding. My father's pride had nothing of this about it. It was that quiet, negative, courteous, inbred pride, which only the closest observation could detect; which no ordinary observers ever detected at all.

Who that observed him in communication with any of the farmers on any of his estates--who that saw the manner in which he lifted his hat, when he accidentally met any of those farmers' wives--who that noticed his hearty welcome to the man of the people, when that man happened to be a man of genius--would have thought him proud? On such occasions as these, if he had any pride, it was impossible to detect it. But seeing him when, for instance, an author and a new-made peer of no ancestry entered his house together--observing merely the entirely different manner in which he shook hands with each--remarking that the polite cordiality was all for the man of letters, who did not contest his family rank with him, and the polite formality all for the man of title, who did--you discovered where and how he was proud in an instant. Here lay his fretful point. The aristocracy of rank, as separate from the aristocracy of ancestry, was no aristocracy for him. He was jealous of it; he hated it. Commoner though he was, he considered himself the social superior of any man, from a baronet up to a duke, whose family was less ancient than his own.

Among a host of instances of this peculiar pride of his which I could cite, I remember one, characteristic enough to be taken as a sample of all the rest. It happened when I was quite a child, and was told me by one of my uncles now dead--who witnessed the circumstance himself, and always made a good story of it to the end of his life.

A merchant of enormous wealth, who had recently been raised to the peerage, was staying at one of our country houses. His daughter, my uncle, and an Italian Abbe were the only guests besides. The merchant was a portly, purple-faced man, who bore his new honours with a curious mixture

of assumed pomposity and natural good-humour. The Abbe was dwarfish and deformed, lean, sallow, sharp-featured, with bright bird-like eyes, and a low, liquid voice. He was a political refugee, dependent for the bread he ate, on the money he received for teaching languages. He might have been a beggar from the streets; and still my father would have treated him as the principal guest in the house, for this all-sufficient reason--he was a direct descendant of one of the oldest of those famous Roman families whose names are part of the history of the Civil Wars in Italy.

On the first day, the party assembled for dinner comprised the merchant's daughter, my mother, an old lady who had once been her governess, and had always lived with her since her marriage, the new Lord, the Abbe, my father, and my uncle. When dinner was announced, the peer advanced in new-blown dignity, to offer his arm as a matter of course to my mother. My father's pale face flushed crimson in a moment. He touched the magnificent merchant-lord on the arm, and pointed significantly, with a low bow, towards the decrepit old lady who had once been my mother's governess. Then walking to the other end of the room, where the penniless Abbe was looking over a book in a corner, he gravely and courteously led the little, deformed, limping language-master, clad in a long, threadbare, black coat, up to my mother (whose shoulder the Abbe's head hardly reached), held the door open for them to pass out first, with his own hand; politely invited the new nobleman, who stood half-paralysed between confusion and astonishment, to follow with the tottering old lady on his arm; and then returned to lead the peer's daughter down to dinner himself. He only resumed his wonted expression and manner, when he had seen the little Abbe--the squalid, half-starved representative of mighty barons of the olden time--seated at the highest place of the table by my mother's side.

It was by such accidental circumstances as these that you discovered how far he was proud. He never boasted of his ancestors; he never even spoke of them, except when he was questioned on the subject; but he never forgot them. They were the very breath of his life; the deities of his social worship: the family treasures to be held precious beyond all lands and all wealth, all ambitions and all glories, by his children and his children's children to the end of their race.

In home-life he performed his duties towards his family honourably, delicately, and kindly. I believe in his own way he loved us all; but we, his descendants, had to share his heart with his ancestors--we were his household property as well as his children. Every fair liberty was given to us; every fair indulgence was granted to us. He never displayed any suspicion, or any undue severity. We were taught by his direction, that to

disgrace our family, either by word or action, was the one fatal crime which could never be forgotten and never be pardoned. We were formed, under his superintendence, in principles of religion, honour, and industry; and the rest was left to our own moral sense, to our own comprehension of the duties and privileges of our station. There was no one point in his conduct towards any of us that we could complain of; and yet there was something always incomplete in our domestic relations.

It may seem incomprehensible, even ridiculous, to some persons, but it is nevertheless true, that we were none of us ever on intimate terms with him. I mean by this, that he was a father to us, but never a companion. There was something in his manner, his quiet and unchanging manner, which kept us almost unconsciously restrained. I never in my life felt less at my ease--I knew not why at the time--than when I occasionally dined alone with him. I never confided to him my schemes for amusement as a boy, or mentioned more than generally my ambitious hopes, as a young man. It was not that he would have received such confidences with ridicule or severity, he was incapable of it; but that he seemed above them, unfitted to enter into them, too far removed by his own thoughts from such thoughts as ours. Thus, all holiday councils were held with old servants; thus, my first pages of manuscript, when I first tried authorship, were read by my sister, and never penetrated into my father's study.

Again, his mode of testifying displeasure towards my brother or myself, had something terrible in its calmness, something that we never forgot, and always dreaded as the worst calamity that could befall us.

Whenever, as boys, we committed some boyish fault, he never displayed outwardly any irritation--he simply altered his manner towards us altogether. We were not soundly lectured, or vehemently threatened, or positively punished in anyway; but, when we came in contact with him, we were treated with a cold, contemptuous politeness (especially if our fault showed a tendency to anything mean or ungentlemanlike) which cut us to the heart. On these occasions, we were not addressed by our Christian names; if we accidentally met him out of doors, he was sure to turn aside and avoid us; if we asked a question, it was answered in the briefest possible manner, as if we had been strangers. His whole course of conduct said, as though in so many words--You have rendered yourselves unfit to associate with your father; and he is now making you feel that unfitness as deeply as he does. We were left in this domestic purgatory for days, sometimes for weeks together. To our boyish feelings (to mine especially) there was no ignominy like it, while it lasted.

I know not on what terms my father lived with my mother. Towards my sister, his demeanour always exhibited something of the old-fashioned, affectionate gallantry of a former age. He paid her the same attention that he would have paid to the highest lady in the land. He led her into the dining-room, when we were alone, exactly as he would have led a duchess into a banqueting-hall. He would allow us, as boys, to quit the breakfast-table before he had risen himself; but never before she had left it. If a servant failed in duty towards him, the servant was often forgiven; if towards her, the servant was sent away on the spot. His daughter was in his eyes the representative of her mother: the mistress of his house, as well as his child. It was curious to see the mixture of high-bred courtesy and fatherly love in his manner, as he just gently touched her forehead with his lips, when he first saw her in the morning.

In person, my father was of not more than middle height. He was very slenderly and delicately made; his head small, and well set on his shoulders--his forehead more broad than lofty--his complexion singularly pale, except in moments of agitation, when I have already noticed its tendency to flush all over in an instant. His eyes, large and gray, had something commanding in their look; they gave a certain unchanging firmness and dignity to his expression, not often met with. They betrayed his birth and breeding, his old ancestral prejudices, his chivalrous sense of honour, in every glance. It required, indeed, all the masculine energy of look about the upper part of his face, to redeem the lower part from an appearance of effeminacy, so delicately was it moulded in its fine Norman outline. His smile was remarkable for its sweetness--it was almost like a woman's smile. In speaking, too, his lips often trembled as women's do. If he ever laughed, as a young man, his laugh must have been very clear and musical; but since I can recollect him, I never heard it. In his happiest moments, in the gayest society, I have only seen him smile.

There were other characteristics of my father's disposition and manner, which I might mention; but they will appear to greater advantage, perhaps, hereafter, connected with circumstances which especially called them forth.

IV.

When a family is possessed of large landed property, the individual of that family who shows least interest in its welfare; who is least fond of home, least connected by his own sympathies with his relatives, least ready to learn his duties or admit his responsibilities, is often that very individual who is to succeed to the family inheritance--the eldest son.

My brother Ralph was no exception to this remark. We were educated together. After our education was completed, I never saw him, except for short periods. He was almost always on the continent, for some years after he left college. And when he returned definitely to England, he did not return to live under our roof. Both in town and country he was our visitor, not our inmate.

I recollect him at school--stronger, taller, handsomer than I was; far beyond me in popularity among the little community we lived with; the first to lead a daring exploit, the last to abandon it; now at the bottom of the class, now at the top--just that sort of gay, boisterous, fine-looking, dare-devil boy, whom old people would instinctively turn round and smile after, as they passed him by in a morning walk.

Then, at college, he became illustrious among rowers and cricketers, renowned as a pistol shot, dreaded as a singlestick player. No wine parties in the university were such wine parties as his; tradesmen gave him the first choice of everything that was new; young ladies in the town fell in love with him by dozens; young tutors with a tendency to dandyism, copied the cut of his coat and the tie of his cravat; even the awful heads of houses looked leniently on his delinquencies. The gay, hearty, handsome young English gentleman carried a charm about him that subdued everybody. Though I was his favourite butt, both at school and college, I never quarrelled with him in my life. I always let him ridicule my dress, manners, and habits in his own reckless, boisterous way, as if it had been a part of his birthright privilege to laugh at me as much as he chose.

Thus far, my father had no worse anxieties about him than those occasioned by his high spirits and his heavy debts. But when he returned home--when the debts had been paid, and it was next thought necessary to drill the free, careless energies into something like useful discipline--then my father's trials and difficulties began in earnest.

It was impossible to make Ralph comprehend and appreciate his position, as he was desired to comprehend and appreciate it. The steward gave up in despair all attempts to enlighten him about the extent, value, and management of the estates he was to inherit. A vigorous effort was made to inspire him with ambition; to get him to go into parliament. He laughed at the idea. A commission in the Guards was next offered to him. He refused it, because he would never be buttoned up in a red coat; because he would submit to no restraints, fashionable or military; because in short, he was determined to be his own master. My father talked to him by the hour together, about his duties and his prospects, the cultivation of his mind, and the example of his ancestors; and talked in vain. He yawned and fidgetted over the emblazoned pages of his own family pedigree, whenever they were opened before him.

In the country, he cared for nothing but hunting and shooting--it was as difficult to make him go to a grand county dinner-party, as to make him go to church. In town, he haunted the theatres, behind the scenes as well as before; entertained actors and actresses at Richmond; ascended in balloons at Vauxhall; went about with detective policemen, seeing life among pickpockets and housebreakers; belonged to a whist club, a supper club, a catch club, a boxing club, a picnic club, an amateur theatrical club; and, in short, lived such a careless, convivial life, that my father, outraged in every one of his family prejudices and family refinements, almost ceased to speak to him, and saw him as rarely as possible. Occasionally, my sister's interference reconciled them again for a short time; her influence, gentle as it was, was always powerfully felt for good, but she could not change my brother's nature. Persuade and entreat as anxiously as she might, he was always sure to forfeit the paternal favour again, a few days after he had been restored to it.

At last, matters were brought to their climax by an awkward love adventure of Ralph's with one of our tenants' daughters. My father acted with his usual decision on the occasion. He determined to apply a desperate remedy: to let the refractory eldest son run through his career in freedom, abroad, until he had well wearied himself, and could return home a sobered man. Accordingly, he procured for my brother an attache's place in a foreign embassy, and insisted on his leaving England forthwith. For once in a way, Ralph was docile. He knew and cared nothing about diplomacy; but he liked the idea of living on the continent, so he took his leave of home with his best grace. My father saw him depart, with ill-concealed agitation and apprehension; although he affected to feel satisfied that, flighty and idle as Ralph was, he was incapable of voluntarily dishonouring his family, even in his most reckless moods.

After this, we heard little from my brother. His letters were few and short, and generally ended with petitions for money. The only important news of him that reached us, reached us through public channels.

He was making quite a continental reputation--a reputation, the bare mention of which made my father wince. He had fought a duel; he had imported a new dance from Hungary; he had contrived to get the smallest groom that ever was seen behind a cabriolet; he had carried off the reigning beauty among the opera-dancers of the day from all competitors; a great French cook had composed a great French dish, and christened it by his name; he was understood to be the "unknown friend," to whom a literary Polish countess had dedicated her "Letters against the restraint of the Marriage Tie;" a female German metaphysician, sixty years old, had fallen (Platonically) in love with him, and had taken to writing erotic romances in her old age. Such were some of the rumours that reached my father's ears on the subject of his son and heir!

After a long absence, he came home on a visit. How well I remember the astonishment he produced in the whole household! He had become a foreigner in manners and appearance. His mustachios were magnificent; miniature toys in gold and jewellery hung in clusters from his watch-chain; his shirt-front was a perfect filigree of lace and cambric. He brought with him his own boxes of choice liqueurs and perfumes; his own smart, impudent, French valet; his own travelling bookcase of French novels, which he opened with his own golden key. He drank nothing but chocolate in the morning; he had long interviews with the cook, and revolutionized our dinner table. All the French newspapers were sent to him by a London agent. He altered the arrangements of his bed-room; no servant but his own valet was permitted to enter it. Family portraits that hung there, were turned to the walls, and portraits of French actresses and Italian singers were stuck to the back of the canvasses. Then he displaced a beautiful little ebony cabinet which had been in the family three hundred years; and set up in its stead a Cyprian temple of his own, in miniature, with crystal doors, behind which hung locks of hair, rings, notes written on blush-coloured paper, and other love-tokens kept as sentimental relics. His influence became all-pervading among us. He seemed to communicate to the house the change that had taken place in himself, from the reckless, racketty young Englishman to the super-exquisite foreign dandy. It was as if the fiery, effervescent atmosphere of the Boulevards of Paris had insolently penetrated into the old English mansion, and ruffled and infected its quiet native air, to the remotest corners of the place.

My father was even more dismayed than displeased by the alteration in my brother's habits and manners--the eldest son was now farther from his ideal of what an eldest son should be, than ever. As for friends and neighbours, Ralph was heartily feared and disliked by them, before he had been in the house a week. He had an ironically patient way of listening to their conversation; an ironically respectful manner of demolishing their old-fashioned opinions, and correcting their slightest mistakes, which secretly aggravated them beyond endurance. It was worse still, when my father, in despair, tried to tempt him into marriage, as the one final chance of working his reform; and invited half the marriageable young ladies of our acquaintance to the house, for his especial benefit.

Ralph had never shown much fondness at home, for the refinements of good female society. Abroad, he had lived as exclusively as he possibly could, among women whose characters ranged downwards by infinitesimal degrees, from the mysteriously doubtful to the notoriously bad. The highly-bred, highly-refined, highly-accomplished young English beauties had no charm for him. He detected at once the domestic conspiracy of which he was destined to become the victim. He often came up-stairs, at night, into my bed-room; and while he was amusing himself by derisively kicking about my simple clothes and simple toilette apparatus; while he was laughing in his old careless way at my quiet habits and monotonous life, used to slip in, parenthetically, all sorts of sarcasms about our young lady guests. To him, their manners were horribly inanimate; their innocence, hypocrisy of education. Pure complexions and regular features were very well, he said, as far as they went; but when a girl could not walk properly, when she shook hands with you with cold fingers, when having good eyes she could not make a stimulating use of them, then it was time to sentence the regular features and pure complexions to be taken back forthwith to the nursery from which they came. For his part, he missed the conversation of his witty Polish Countess, and longed for another pancake-supper with his favourite grisettes.

The failure of my father's last experiment with Ralph soon became apparent. Watchful and experienced mothers began to suspect that my brother's method of flirtation was dangerous, and his style of waltzing improper. One or two ultra-cautious parents, alarmed by the laxity of his manners and opinions, removed their daughters out of harm's way, by shortening their visits. The rest were spared any such necessity. My father suddenly discovered that Ralph was devoting himself rather too significantly to a young married woman who was staying in the house. The same day he had a long private interview with my brother. What passed between them, I know not; but it must have been something serious. Ralph came out of my father's

private study, very pale and very silent; ordered his luggage to be packed directly; and the next morning departed, with his French valet, and his multifarious French goods and chattels, for the continent.

Another interval passed; and then we had another short visit from him. He was still unaltered. My father's temper suffered under this second disappointment. He became more fretful and silent; more apt to take offence than had been his wont. I particularly mention the change thus produced in his disposition, because that change was destined, at no very distant period, to act fatally upon me.

On this last occasion, also, there was another serious disagreement between father and son; and Ralph left England again in much the same way that he had left it before.

Shortly after that second departure, we heard that he had altered his manner of life. He had contracted, what would be termed in the continental code of morals, a reformatory attachment to a woman older than himself, who was living separated from her husband, when he met with her. It was this lady's lofty ambition to be Mentor and mistress, both together! And she soon proved herself to be well qualified for her courageous undertaking. To the astonishment of everyone who knew him, Ralph suddenly turned economical; and, soon afterwards, actually resigned his post at the embassy, to be out of the way of temptation! Since that, he has returned to England; has devoted himself to collecting snuff-boxes and learning the violin; and is now living quietly in the suburbs of London, still under the inspection of the resolute female missionary who first worked his reform.

Whether he will ever become the high-minded, high-principled country gentleman, that my father has always desired to see him, it is useless for me to guess. On the domains which he is to inherit, I shall never perhaps set foot again: in the halls where he will one day preside as master, I shall never more be sheltered. Let me now quit the subject of my elder brother, and turn to a theme which is nearer to my heart; dear to me as the last remembrance left that I can love; precious beyond all treasures in my solitude and my exile from home.

My sister!--well may I linger over your beloved name in such a record as this. A little farther on, and the darkness of crime and grief will encompass me; here, my recollections of you kindle like a pure light before my eyes--doubly pure by contrast with what lies beyond. May your kind eyes, love, be the first that fall on these pages, when the writer has parted from them for ever! May your tender hand be the first that touches these leaves, when

mine is cold! Backward in my narrative, Clara, wherever I have but casually mentioned my sister, the pen has trembled and stood still. At this place, where all my remembrances of you throng upon me unrestrained, the tears gather fast and thick beyond control; and for the first time since I began my task, my courage and my calmness fail me.

It is useless to persevere longer. My hand trembles; my eyes grow dimmer and dimmer. I must close my labours for the day, and go forth to gather strength and resolution for to-morrow on the hill-tops that overlook the sea.

V.

My sister Clara is four years younger than I am. In form of face, in complexion, and--except the eyes--in features, she bears a striking resemblance to my father. Her expressions however, must be very like what my mother's was. Whenever I have looked at her in her silent and thoughtful moments, she has always appeared to freshen, and even to increase, my vague, childish recollections of our lost mother. Her eyes have that slight tinge of melancholy in their tenderness, and that peculiar softness in their repose, which is only seen in blue eyes. Her complexion, pale as my father's when she is neither speaking nor moving, has in a far greater degree than his the tendency to flush, not merely in moments of agitation, but even when she is walking, or talking on any subject that interests her. Without this peculiarity her paleness would be a defect. With it, the absence of any colour in her complexion but the fugitive uncertain colour which I have described, would to some eyes debar her from any claims to beauty. And a beauty perhaps she is not--at least, in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

The lower part of her face is rather too small for the upper, her figure is too slight, the sensitiveness of her nervous organization is too constantly visible in her actions and her looks. She would not fix attention and admiration in a box at the opera; very few men passing her in the street would turn round to look after her; very few women would regard her with that slightingly attentive stare, that steady depreciating scrutiny, which a dashing decided beauty so often receives (and so often triumphs in receiving) from her personal inferiors among her own sex. The greatest charms that my sister has on the surface, come from beneath it.

When you really knew her, when she spoke to you freely, as to a friend--then, the attraction of her voice, her smile her manner, impressed you indescribably. Her slightest words and her commonest actions interested and delighted you, you knew not why. There was a beauty about her unassuming simplicity, her natural--exquisitely natural--kindness of heart, and word, and manner, which preserved its own unobtrusive influence over you, in spite of all other rival influences, be they what they might. You missed and thought of her, when you were fresh from the society of the most beautiful and the most brilliant women. You remembered a few kind, pleasant words of hers when you forgot the wit of the wittiest ladies, the learning of the most learned. The influence thus possessed, and unconsciously possessed, by my sister over every one with whom she came in contact--over men especially--may, I think be very simply accounted for,

in very few sentences.

We live in an age when too many women appear to be ambitious of morally unsexing themselves before society, by aping the language and the manners of men--especially in reference to that miserable modern dandyism of demeanour, which aims at repressing all betrayal of warmth of feeling; which abstains from displaying any enthusiasm on any subject whatever; which, in short, labours to make the fashionable imperturbability of the face the faithful reflection of the fashionable imperturbability of the mind. Women of this exclusively modern order, like to use slang expressions in their conversation; assume a bastard-masculine abruptness in their manners, a bastard-masculine licence in their opinions; affect to ridicule those outward developments of feeling which pass under the general appellation of "sentiment." Nothing impresses, agitates, amuses, or delights them in a hearty, natural, womanly way. Sympathy looks ironical, if they ever show it: love seems to be an affair of calculation, or mockery, or contemptuous sufferance, if they ever feel it.

To women such as these, my sister Clara presented as complete a contrast as could well be conceived. In this contrast lay the secret of her influence, of the voluntary tribute of love and admiration which followed her wherever she went.

Few men have not their secret moments of deep feeling--moments when, amid the wretched trivialities and hypocrisies of modern society, the image will present itself to their minds of some woman, fresh, innocent, gentle, sincere; some woman whose emotions are still warm and impressible, whose affections and sympathies can still appear in her actions, and give the colour to her thoughts; some woman in whom we could put as perfect faith and trust, as if we were children; whom we despair of finding near the hardening influences of the world; whom we could scarcely venture to look for, except in solitary places far away in the country; in little rural shrines, shut up from society, among woods and fields, and lonesome boundary-hills. When any women happen to realise, or nearly to realise, such an image as this, they possess that universal influence which no rivalry can ever approach. On them really depends, and by then is really preserved, that claim upon the sincere respect and admiration of men, on which the power of the whole sex is based--the power so often assumed by the many, so rarely possessed but by the few.

It was thus with my sister. Thus, wherever she went, though without either the inclination, or the ambition to shine, she eclipsed women who were her superiors in beauty, in accomplishments, in brilliancy of manners and

conversation--conquering by no other weapon than the purely feminine charm of everything she said, and everything she did.

But it was not amid the gaiety and grandeur of a London season that her character was displayed to the greatest advantage. It was when she was living where she loved to live, in the old country-house, among the old friends and old servants who would every one of them have died a hundred deaths for her sake, that you could study and love her best. Then, the charm there was in the mere presence of the kind, gentle, happy young English girl, who could enter into everybody's interests, and be grateful for everybody's love, possessed its best and brightest influence. At picnics, lawn-parties, little country gatherings of all sorts, she was, in her own quiet, natural manner, always the presiding spirit of general comfort and general friendship. Even the rigid laws of country punctilio relaxed before her unaffected cheerfulness and irresistible good-nature. She always contrived--nobody ever knew how--to lure the most formal people into forgetting their formality, and becoming natural for the rest of the day. Even a heavy-headed, lumbering, silent country squire was not too much for her. She managed to make him feel at his ease, when no one else would undertake the task; she could listen patiently to his confused speeches about dogs, horses, and the state of the crops, when other conversations were proceeding in which she was really interested; she could receive any little grateful attention that he wished to pay her--no matter how awkward or ill-timed--as she received attentions from any one else, with a manner which showed she considered it as a favour granted to her sex, not as a right accorded to it.

So, again, she always succeeded in diminishing the long list of those pitiful affronts and offences, which play such important parts in the social drama of country society. She was a perfect Apostle-errant of the order of Reconciliation; and wherever she went, cast out the devil Sulkiness from all his strongholds--the lofty and the lowly alike. Our good rector used to call her his Volunteer Curate; and declare that she preached by a timely word, or a persuasive look, the best practical sermons on the blessings of peace-making that were ever composed.

With all this untiring good-nature, with all this resolute industry in the task of making every one happy whom she approached, there was mingled some indescribable influence, which invariably preserved her from the presumption, even of the most presuming people. I never knew anybody venturesome enough--either by word or look--to take a liberty with her. There was something about her which inspired respect as well as love. My father, following the bent of his peculiar and favourite ideas, always thought

it was the look of her race in her eyes, the ascendancy of her race in her manners. I believe it to have proceeded from a simpler and a better cause. There is a goodness of heart, which carries the shield of its purity over the open hand of its kindness: and that goodness was hers.

To my father, she was more, I believe, than he himself ever imagined--or will ever know, unless he should lose her. He was often, in his intercourse with the world, wounded severely enough in his peculiar prejudices and peculiar refinements--he was always sure to find the first respected, and the last partaken by her. He could trust in her implicitly, he could feel assured that she was not only willing, but able, to share and relieve his domestic troubles and anxieties. If he had been less fretfully anxious about his eldest son; if he had wisely distrusted from the first his own powers of persuading and reforming, and had allowed Clara to exercise her influence over Ralph more constantly and more completely than he really did, I am persuaded that the long-expected epoch of my brother's transformation would have really arrived by this time, or even before it.

The strong and deep feelings of my sister's nature lay far below the surface--for a woman, too far below it. Suffering was, for her, silent, secret, long enduring; often almost entirely void of outward vent or development. I never remember seeing her in tears, except on rare and very serious occasions. Unless you looked at her narrowly, you would judge her to be little sensitive to ordinary griefs and troubles. At such times, her eyes only grew dimmer and less animated than usual; the paleness of her complexion became rather more marked; her lips closed and trembled involuntarily--but this was all: there was no sighing, no weeping, no speaking even. And yet she suffered acutely. The very strength of her emotions was in their silence and their secresy. I, of all others--I, guilty of infecting with my anguish the pure heart that loved me--ought to know this best!

How long I might linger over all that she has done for me! As I now approach nearer and nearer to the pages which are to reveal my fatal story, so I am more and more tempted to delay over those better and purer remembrances of my sister which now occupy my mind. The first little presents--innocent girlish presents--which she secretly sent to me at school; the first sweet days of our uninterrupted intercourse, when the close of my college life restored me to home; her first inestimable sympathies with my first fugitive vanities of embryo authorship, are thronging back fast and fondly on my thoughts, while I now write.

But these memories must be calmed and disciplined. I must be collected and impartial over my narrative--if it be only to make that narrative show

fairly and truly, without suppression or exaggeration, all that I have owed to her.

Not merely all that I have owed to her; but all that I owe to her now. Though I may never see her again, but in my thoughts; still she influences, comforts, cheers me on to hope, as if she were already the guardian spirit of the cottage where I live. Even in my worst moments of despair, I can still remember that Clara is thinking of me and sorrowing for me: I can still feel that remembrance, as an invisible hand of mercy which supports me, sinking; which raises me, fallen; which may yet lead me safely and tenderly to my hard journey's end.

VI.

I have now completed all the preliminary notices of my near relatives, which it is necessary to present in these pages; and may proceed at once to the more immediate subject of my narrative.

Imagine to yourself that my father and my sister have been living for some months at our London residence; and that I have recently joined them, after having enjoyed a short tour on the continent.

My father is engaged in his parliamentary duties. We see very little of him. Committees absorb his mornings--debates his evenings. When he has a day of leisure occasionally, he passes it in his study, devoted to his own affairs. He goes very little into society--a political dinner, or a scientific meeting are the only social relaxations that tempt him.

My sister leads a life which is not much in accordance with her simple tastes. She is wearied of balls, operas, flower-shows, and all other London gaieties besides; and heartily longs to be driving about the green lanes again in her own little poney-chaise, and distributing plum-cake prizes to the good children at the Rector's Infant School. But the female friend who happens to be staying with her, is fond of excitement; my father expects her to accept the invitations which he is obliged to decline; so she gives up her own tastes and inclinations as usual, and goes into hot rooms among crowds of fine people, hearing the same glib compliments, and the same polite inquiries, night after night, until, patient as she is, she heartily wishes that her fashionable friends all lived in some opposite quarter of the globe, the farther away the better.

My arrival from the continent is the most welcome of events to her. It gives a new object and a new impulse to her London life.

I am engaged in writing a historical romance--indeed, it is principally to examine the localities in the country where my story is laid, that I have been abroad. Clara has read the first half-dozen finished chapters, in manuscript, and augurs wonderful success for my fiction when it is published. She is determined to arrange my study with her own hands; to dust my books, and sort my papers herself. She knows that I am already as fretful and precise about my literary goods and chattels, as indignant at any interference of housemaids and dusters with my library treasures, as if I were a veteran author of twenty years' standing; and she is resolved to spare me every

apprehension on this score, by taking all the arrangements of my study on herself, and keeping the key of the door when I am not in need of it.

We have our London amusements, too, as well as our London employments. But the pleasantest of our relaxations are, after all, procured for us by our horses. We ride every day--sometimes with friends, sometimes alone together. On these latter occasions, we generally turn our horses' heads away from the parks, and seek what country sights we can get in the neighbourhood of London. The northern roads are generally our favourite ride.

Sometimes we penetrate so far that we can bait our horses at a little inn which reminds me of the inns near our country home. I see the same sanded parlour, decorated with the same old sporting prints, furnished with the same battered, deep-coloured mahogany table, and polished elm tree chairs, that I remember in our own village inn. Clara, also, finds bits of common, out of doors, that look like our common; and trees that might have been transplanted expressly for her, from our park.

These excursions we keep a secret, we like to enjoy them entirely by ourselves. Besides, if my father knew that his daughter was drinking the landlady's fresh milk, and his son the landlord's old ale, in the parlour of a suburban roadside inn, he would, I believe, be apt to suspect that both his children had fairly taken leave of their senses.

Evening parties I frequent almost as rarely as my father. Clara's good nature is called into requisition to do duty for me, as well as for him. She has little respite in the task. Old lady relatives and friends, always ready to take care of her, leave her no excuse for staying at home. Sometimes I am shamed into accompanying her a little more frequently than usual; but my old indolence in these matters soon possesses me again. I have contracted a bad habit of writing at night--I read almost incessantly in the day time. It is only because I am fond of riding, that I am ever willing to interrupt my studies, and ever ready to go out at all.

Such were my domestic habits, such my regular occupations and amusements, when a mere accident changed every purpose of my life, and altered me irretrievably from what I was then, to what I am now.

It happened thus:

VII.

I had just received my quarter's allowance of pocket-money, and had gone into the city to cash the cheque at my father's bankers.

The money paid, I debated for a moment how I should return homewards. First I thought of walking: then of taking a cab. While I was considering this frivolous point, an omnibus passed me, going westward. In the idle impulse of the moment, I hailed it, and got in.

It was something more than an idle impulse though. If I had at that time no other qualification for the literary career on which I was entering, I certainly had this one--an aptitude for discovering points of character in others: and its natural result, an unfailing delight in studying characters of all kinds, wherever I could meet with them.

I had often before ridden in omnibuses to amuse myself by observing the passengers. An omnibus has always appeared to me, to be a perambulatory exhibition-room of the eccentricities of human nature. I know not any other sphere in which persons of all classes and all temperaments are so oddly collected together, and so immediately contrasted and confronted with each other. To watch merely the different methods of getting into the vehicle, and taking their seats, adopted by different people, is to study no incomplete commentary on the infinitesimal varieties of human character--as various even as the varieties of the human face.

Thus, in addition to the idle impulse, there was the idea of amusement in my thoughts, as I stopped the public vehicle, and added one to the number of the conductor's passengers.

There were five persons in the omnibus when I entered it. Two middle-aged ladies, dressed with amazing splendour in silks and satins, wearing straw-coloured kid gloves, and carrying highly-scented pocket handkerchiefs, sat apart at the end of the vehicle; trying to look as if they occupied it under protest, and preserving the most stately gravity and silence. They evidently felt that their magnificent outward adornments were exhibited in a very unworthy locality, and among a very uncongenial company.

One side, close to the door, was occupied by a lean, withered old man, very shabbily dressed in black, who sat eternally mumbling something between his toothless jaws. Occasionally, to the evident disgust of the genteel ladies,

he wiped his bald head and wrinkled forehead with a ragged blue cotton handkerchief, which he kept in the crown of his hat.

Opposite to this ancient sat a dignified gentleman and a sickly vacant-looking little girl. Every event of that day is so indelibly marked on my memory, that I remember, not only this man's pompous look and manner, but even the words he addressed to the poor squalid little creature by his side. When I entered the omnibus, he was telling her in a loud voice how she ought to dispose of her frock and her feet when people got into the vehicle, and when they got out. He then impressed on her the necessity in future life, when she grew up, of always having the price of her fare ready before it was wanted, to prevent unnecessary delay. Having delivered himself of this good advice, he began to hum, keeping time by drumming with his thick Malacca cane. He was still proceeding with this amusement--producing some of the most acutely unmusical sounds I ever heard--when the omnibus stopped to give admission to two ladies. The first who got in was an elderly person--pale and depressed--evidently in delicate health. The second was a young girl.

Among the workings of the hidden life within us which we may experience but cannot explain, are there any more remarkable than those mysterious moral influences constantly exercised, either for attraction or repulsion, by one human being over another? In the simplest, as in the most important affairs of life, how startling, how irresistible is their power! How often we feel and know, either pleasurably or painfully, that another is looking on us, before we have ascertained the fact with our own eyes! How often we prophesy truly to ourselves the approach of a friend or enemy, just before either have really appeared! How strangely and abruptly we become convinced, at a first introduction, that we shall secretly love this person and loathe that, before experience has guided us with a single fact in relation to their characters!

I have said that the two additional passengers who entered the vehicle in which I was riding, were, one of them, an elderly lady; the other, a young girl. As soon as the latter had seated herself nearly opposite to me, by her companion's side, I felt her influence on me directly--an influence that I cannot describe--an influence which I had never experienced in my life before, which I shall never experience again.

I had helped to hand her in, as she passed me; merely touching her arm for a moment. But how the sense of that touch was prolonged! I felt it thrilling through me--thrilling in every nerve, in every pulsation of my fast-throbbing heart.

Had I the same influence over her? Or was it I that received, and she that conferred, only? I was yet destined to discover; but not then--not for a long, long time.

Her veil was down when I first saw her. Her features and her expression were but indistinctly visible to me. I could just vaguely perceive that she was young and beautiful; but, beyond this, though I might imagine much, I could see little.

From the time when she entered the omnibus, I have no recollection of anything more that occurred in it. I neither remember what passengers got out, or what passengers got in. My powers of observation, hitherto active enough, had now wholly deserted me. Strange! that the capricious rule of chance should sway the action of our faculties that a trifle should set in motion the whole complicated machinery of their exercise, and a trifle suspend it.

We had been moving onward for some little time, when the girl's companion addressed an observation to her. She heard it imperfectly, and lifted her veil while it was being repeated. How painfully my heart beat! I could almost hear it--as her face was, for the first time, freely and fairly disclosed!

She was dark. Her hair, eyes, and complexion were darker than usual in English women. The form, the look altogether, of her face, coupled with what I could see of her figure, made me guess her age to be about twenty. There was the appearance of maturity already in the shape of her features; but their expression still remained girlish, unformed, unsettled. The fire in her large dark eyes, when she spoke, was latent. Their languor, when she was silent--that voluptuous languor of black eyes--was still fugitive and unsteady. The smile about her full lips (to other eyes, they might have looked too full) struggled to be eloquent, yet dared not. Among women, there always seems something left incomplete--a moral creation to be superinduced on the physical--which love alone can develop, and which maternity perfects still further, when developed. I thought, as I looked on her, how the passing colour would fix itself brilliantly on her round, olive cheek; how the expression that still hesitated to declare itself, would speak out at last, would shine forth in the full luxury of its beauty, when she heard the first words, received the first kiss, from the man she loved!

While I still looked at her, as she sat opposite speaking to her companion, our eyes met. It was only for a moment--but the sensation of a moment often makes the thought of a life; and that one little instant made the new

life of my heart. She put down her veil again immediately; her lips moved involuntarily as she lowered it: I thought I could discern, through the lace, that the slight movement ripened to a smile.

Still there was enough left to see--enough to charm. There was the little rim of delicate white lace, encircling the lovely, dusky throat; there was the figure visible, where the shawl had fallen open, slender, but already well developed in its slenderness, and exquisitely supple; there was the waist, naturally low, and left to its natural place and natural size; there were the little millinery and jewellery ornaments that she wore--simple and common-place enough in themselves--yet each a beauty, each a treasure, on her. There was all this to behold, all this to dwell on, in spite of the veil. The veil! how little of the woman does it hide, when the man really loves her!

We had nearly arrived at the last point to which the omnibus would take us, when she and her companion got out. I followed them, cautiously and at some distance.

She was tall--tall at least for a woman. There were not many people in the road along which we were proceeding; but even if there had been, far behind as I was walking, I should never have lost her--never have mistaken any one else for her. Already, strangers though we were, I felt that I should know her, almost at any distance, only by her walk.

They went on, until we reached a suburb of new houses, intermingled with wretched patches of waste land, half built over. Unfinished streets, unfinished crescents, unfinished squares, unfinished shops, unfinished gardens, surrounded us. At last they stopped at a new square, and rang the bell at one of the newest of the new houses. The door was opened, and she and her companion disappeared. The house was partly detached. It bore no number; but was distinguished as North Villa. The square--unfinished like everything else in the neighbourhood--was called Hollyoake Square.

I noticed nothing else about the place at that time. Its newness and desolateness of appearance revolted me, just then. I had satisfied myself about the locality of the house, and I knew that it was her home; for I had approached sufficiently near, when the door was opened, to hear her inquire if anybody had called in her absence. For the present, this was enough. My sensations wanted repose; my thoughts wanted collecting. I left Hollyoake Square at once, and walked into the Regent's Park, the northern portion of which was close at hand.

Was I in love?--in love with a girl whom I had accidentally met in an

omnibus? Or, was I merely indulging a momentary caprice--merely feeling a young man's hot, hasty admiration for a beautiful face? These were questions which I could not then decide. My ideas were in utter confusion, all my thoughts ran astray. I walked on, dreaming in full day--I had no distinct impressions, except of the stranger beauty whom I had just seen. The more I tried to collect myself, to resume the easy, equable feelings with which I had set forth in the morning, the less self-possessed I became. There are two emergencies in which the wisest man may try to reason himself back from impulse to principle; and try in vain:--the one when a woman has attracted him for the first time; the other, when, for the first time, also, she has happened to offend him.

I know not how long I had been walking in the park, thus absorbed yet not thinking, when the clock of a neighbouring church struck three, and roused me to the remembrance that I had engaged to ride out with my sister at two o'clock. It would be nearly half-an-hour more before I could reach home. Never had any former appointment of mine with Clara been thus forgotten! Love had not yet turned me selfish, as it turns all men, and even all women, more or less. I felt both sorrow and shame at the neglect of which I had been guilty; and hastened homeward.

The groom, looking unutterably weary and discontented, was still leading my horse up and down before the house. My sister's horse had been sent back to the stables. I went in; and heard that, after waiting for me an hour, Clara had gone out with some friends, and would not be back before dinner.

No one was in the house but the servants. The place looked dull, empty, inexpressibly miserable to me; the distant roll of carriages along the surrounding streets had a heavy boding sound; the opening and shutting of doors in the domestic offices below, startled and irritated me; the London air seemed denser to breathe than it had ever seemed before. I walked up and down one of the rooms, fretful and irresolute. Once I directed my steps towards my study; but retraced them before I had entered it. Reading or writing was out of the question at that moment.

I felt the secret inclination strengthening within me to return to Hollyoake Square; to try to see the girl again, or at least to ascertain who she was. I strove--yes, I can honestly say, strove to repress the desire. I tried to laugh it off, as idle and ridiculous; to think of my sister, of the book I was writing, of anything but the one subject that pressed stronger and stronger on me, the harder I struggled against it. The spell of the syren was over me. I went out, hypocritically persuading myself, that I was only animated by a capricious curiosity to know the girl's name, which once satisfied, would leave me at

rest on the matter, and free to laugh at my own idleness and folly as soon as I got home again.

I arrived at the house. The blinds were all drawn down over the front windows, to keep out the sun. The little slip of garden was left solitary--baking and cracking in the heat. The square was silent; desolately silent, as only a suburban square can be. I walked up and down the glaring pavement, resolved to find out her name before I quitted the place. While still undecided how to act, a shrill whistling--sounding doubly shrill in the silence around--made me look up.

A tradesman's boy--one of those town Pucks of the highway; one of those incarnations of precocious cunning, inveterate mischief, and impudent humour, which great cities only can produce--was approaching me with his empty tray under his arm. I called to him to come and speak to me. He evidently belonged to the neighbourhood, and might be made of some use.

His first answer to my inquiries, showed that his master served the household at North Villa. A present of a shilling secured his attention at once to the few questions of any importance which I desired to put to him. I learned from his replies, that the name of the master of the house was "Sherwin:" and that the family only consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin, and the young lady, their daughter.

My last inquiry addressed to the boy was the most important of all. Did he know what Mr. Sherwin's profession or employment was?

His answer startled me into perfect silence. Mr. Sherwin kept a large linen-draper's shop in one of the great London thoroughfares! The boy mentioned the number, and the side of the way on which the house stood--then asked me if I wanted to know anything more. I could only tell him by a sign that he might leave me, and that I had heard enough.

Enough? If he had spoken the truth, I had heard too much.

A linen-draper's shop--a linen-draper's daughter! Was I still in love?--I thought of my father; I thought of the name I bore; and this time, though I might have answered the question, I dared not.

But the boy might be wrong. Perhaps, in mere mischief, he had been deceiving me throughout. I determined to seek the address he had mentioned, and ascertain the truth for myself.

I reached the place: there was the shop, and there the name "Sherwin" over the door. One chance still remained. This Sherwin and the Sherwin of Hollyoake Square might not be the same.

I went in and purchased something. While the man was tying up the parcel, I asked him whether his master lived in Hollyoake Square. Looking a little astonished at the question, he answered in the affirmative.

"There was a Mr. Sherwin I once knew," I said, forging in those words the first link in the long chain of deceit which was afterwards to fetter and degrade me--"a Mr. Sherwin who is now, as I have heard, living somewhere in the Hollyoake Square neighbourhood. He was a bachelor--I don't know whether my friend and your master are the same?"

"Oh dear no, Sir! My master is a married man, and has one daughter--Miss Margaret--who is reckoned a very fine young lady, Sir!" And the man grinned as he spoke--a grin that sickened and shocked me.

I was answered at last: I had discovered all. Margaret!--I had heard her name, too. Margaret!--it had never hitherto been a favourite name with me. Now I felt a sort of terror as I detected myself repeating it, and finding a new, unimagined poetry in the sound.

Could this be love?--pure, first love for a shopkeeper's daughter, whom I had seen for a quarter of an hour in an omnibus, and followed home for another quarter of an hour? The thing was impossible. And yet, I felt a strange unwillingness to go back to our house, and see my father and sister, just at that moment.

I was still walking onward slowly, but not in the direction of home, when I met an old college friend of my brother's, and an acquaintance of mine--a reckless, good-humoured, convivial fellow. He greeted me at once, with uproarious cordiality; and insisted on my accompanying him to dine at his club.

If the thoughts that still hung heavy on my mind were only the morbid, fanciful thoughts of the hour, here was a man whose society would dissipate them. I resolved to try the experiment, and accepted his invitation.

At dinner, I tried hard to rival him in jest and joviality; I drank much more than my usual quantity of wine--but it was useless. The gay words came fainting from my heart, and fell dead on my lips. The wine fevered, but did not exhilarate me. Still, the image of the dark beauty of the morning was the

one reigning image of my thoughts--still, the influence of the morning, at once sinister and seductive, kept its hold on my heart.

I gave up the struggle. I longed to be alone again. My friend soon found that my forced spirits were flagging; he tried to rouse me, tried to talk for two, ordered more wine, but everything failed. Yawning at last, in undisguised despair, he suggested a visit to the theatre.

I excused myself--professed illness--hinted that the wine had been too much for me. He laughed, with something of contempt as well as good-nature in the laugh; and went away to the play by himself evidently feeling that I was still as bad a companion as he had found me at college, years ago.

As soon as we parted I felt a sense of relief. I hesitated, walked backwards and forwards a few paces in the street; and then, silencing all doubts, leaving my inclinations to guide me as they would--I turned my steps for the third time in that one day to Hollyoake Square.

The fair summer evening was tending towards twilight; the sun stood fiery and low in a cloudless horizon; the last loveliness of the last quietest daylight hour was fading on the violet sky, as I entered the square.

I approached the house. She was at the window--it was thrown wide open. A bird-cage hung rather high up, against the shutter-panel. She was standing opposite to it, making a plaything for the poor captive canary of a piece of sugar, which she rapidly offered and drew back again, now at one bar of the cage, and now at another. The bird hopped and fluttered up and down in his prison after the sugar, chirping as if he enjoyed playing his part of the game with his mistress. How lovely she looked! Her dark hair, drawn back over each cheek so as just to leave the lower part of the ear visible, was gathered up into a thick simple knot behind, without ornament of any sort. She wore a plain white dress fastening round the neck, and descending over the bosom in numberless little wavy plaits. The cage hung just high enough to oblige her to look up to it. She was laughing with all the glee of a child; darting the piece of sugar about incessantly from place to place. Every moment, her head and neck assumed some new and lovely turn--every moment her figure naturally fell into the position which showed its pliant symmetry best. The last-left glow of the evening atmosphere was shining on her--the farewell pause of daylight over the kindred daylight of beauty and youth.

I kept myself concealed behind a pillar of the garden-gate; I looked, hardly daring either to move or breathe; for I feared that if she saw or heard me,

she would leave the window. After a lapse of some minutes, the canary touched the sugar with his beak.

"There, Minnie!" she cried laughingly, "you have caught the runaway sugar, and now you shall keep it!"

For a moment more, she stood quietly looking at the cage; then raising herself on tip-toe, pouted her lips caressingly to the bird, and disappeared in the interior of the room.

The sun went down; the twilight shadows fell over the dreary square; the gas lamps were lighted far and near; people who had been out for a breath of fresh air in the fields, came straggling past me by ones and twos, on their way home--and still I lingered near the house, hoping she might come to the window again; but she did not re-appear. At last, a servant brought candles into the room, and drew down the Venetian blinds. Knowing it would be useless to stay longer, I left the square.

I walked homeward joyfully. That second sight of her completed what the first meeting had begun. The impressions left by it made me insensible for the time to all boding reflections, careless of exercising the smallest self-restraint. I gave myself up to the charm that was at work on me. Prudence, duty, memories and prejudices of home, were all absorbed and forgotten in love--love that I encouraged, that I dwelt over in the first reckless luxury of a new sensation.

I entered our house, thinking of nothing but how to see her, how to speak to her, on the morrow; murmuring her name to myself; even while my hand was on the lock of my study door. The instant I was in the room, I involuntarily shuddered and stopped speechless. Clara was there! I was not merely startled; a cold, faint sensation came over me. My first look at my sister made me feel as if I had been detected in a crime.

She was standing at my writing-table, and had just finished stringing together the loose pages of my manuscript, which had hitherto laid disconnectedly in a drawer. There was a grand ball somewhere, to which she was going that night. The dress she wore was of pale blue crape (my father's favourite colour, on her). One white flower was placed in her light brown hair. She stood within the soft steady light of my lamp, looking up towards the door from the leaves she had just tied together. Her slight figure appeared slighter than usual, in the delicate material that now clothed it. Her complexion was at its palest: her face looked almost statue-like in its purity and repose. What a contrast to the other living picture which I had

seen at sunset!

The remembrance of the engagement that I had broken came back on me avengingly, as she smiled, and held my manuscript up before me to look at. With that remembrance there returned, too--darker than ever--the ominous doubts which had depressed me but a few hours since. I tried to steady my voice, and felt how I failed in the effort, as I spoke to her:

"Will you forgive me, Clara, for having deprived you of your ride to-day? I am afraid I have but a bad excuse--"

"Then don't make it, Basil; or wait till papa can arrange it for you, in a proper parliamentary way, when he comes back from the House of Commons to-night. See how I have been meddling with your papers; but they were in such confusion I was really afraid some of these leaves might have been lost."

"Neither the leaves nor the writer deserve half the pains you have taken with them; but I am really sorry for breaking our engagement. I met an old college friend--there was business too, in the morning--we dined together--he would take no denial."

"Basil, how pale you look! Are you ill?"

"No; the heat has been a little too much for me--nothing more."

"Has anything happened? I only ask, because if I can be of any use--if you want me to stay at home--"

"Certainly not, love. I wish you all success and pleasure at the ball."

For a moment she did not speak; but fixed her clear, kind eyes on me more gravely and anxiously than usual. Was she searching my heart, and discovering the new love rising, an usurper already, in the place where the love of her had reigned before?

Love! love for a shopkeeper's daughter! That thought came again, as she looked at me! and, strangely mingled with it, a maxim I had often heard my father repeat to Ralph--"Never forget that your station is not yours, to do as you like with. It belongs to us, and belongs to your children. You must keep it for them, as I have kept it for you."

"I thought," resumed Clara, in rather lower tones than before, "that I would

just look into your room before I went to the ball, and see that everything was properly arranged for you, in case you had any idea of writing tonight; I had just time to do this while my aunt, who is going with me, was upstairs altering her toilette. But perhaps you don't feel inclined to write?"

"I will try at least."

"Can I do anything more? Would you like my nosegay left in the room?--the flowers smell so fresh! I can easily get another. Look at the roses, my favourite white roses, that always remind me of my own garden at the dear old Park!"

"Thank you, Clara; but I think the nosegay is fitter for your hand than my table."

"Good night, Basil."

"Good night."

She walked to the door, then turned round, and smiled as if she were about to speak again; but checked herself, and merely looked at me for an instant. In that instant, however, the smile left her face, and the grave, anxious expression came again. She went out softly. A few minutes afterwards the roll of the carriage which took her and her companion to the ball, died away heavily on my ear. I was left alone in the house--alone for the night.

VIII.

My manuscript lay before me, set in order by Clara's careful hand. I slowly turned over the leaves one by one; but my eye only fell mechanically on the writing. Yet one day since, and how much ambition, how much hope, how many of my heart's dearest sensations and my mind's highest thoughts dwelt in those poor paper leaves, in those little crabbed marks of pen and ink! Now I could look on them indifferently--almost as a stranger would have looked. The days of calm study, of steady toil of thought, seemed departed for ever. Stirring ideas; store of knowledge patiently heaped up; visions of better sights than this world can show, falling freshly and sunnily over the pages of my first book; all these were past and gone--withered up by the hot breath of the senses--doomed by a paltry fate, whose germ was the accident of an idle day!

I hastily put the manuscript aside. My unexpected interview with Clara had calmed the turbulent sensations of the evening: but the fatal influence of the dark beauty remained with me still. How could I write?

I sat down at the open window. It was at the back of the house, and looked out on a strip of garden--London garden--a close-shut dungeon for nature, where stunted trees and drooping flowers seemed visibly pining for the free air and sunlight of the country, in their sooty atmosphere, amid their prison of high brick walls. But the place gave room for the air to blow in it, and distanced the tumult of the busy streets. The moon was up, shined round tenderly by a little border-work of pale yellow light. Elsewhere, the awful void of night was starless; the dark lustre of space shone without a cloud.

A presentiment arose within me, that in this still and solitary hour would occur my decisive, my final struggle with myself. I felt that my heart's life or death was set on the hazard of the night.

This new love that was in me; this giant sensation of a day's growth, was first love. Hitherto, I had been heart-whole. I had known nothing of the passion, which is the absorbing passion of humanity. No woman had ever before stood between me and my ambitions, my occupations, my amusements. No woman had ever before inspired me with the sensations which I now felt.

In trying to realise my position, there was this one question to consider; was I still strong enough to resist the temptation which accident had thrown in

my way? I had this one incentive to resistance: the conviction that, if I succumbed, as far as my family prospects were concerned, I should be a ruined man.

I knew my father's character well: I knew how far his affections and his sympathies might prevail over his prejudices--even over his principles--in some peculiar cases; and this very knowledge convinced me that the consequences of a degrading marriage contracted by his son (degrading in regard to rank), would be terrible: fatal to one, perhaps to both. Every other irregularity--every other offence even--he might sooner or later forgive. This irregularity, this offence, never--never, though his heart broke in the struggle. I was as sure of it, as I was of my own existence at that moment.

I loved her! All that I felt, all that I knew, was summed up in those few words! Deteriorating as my passion was in its effect on the exercise of my mental powers, and on my candour and sense of duty in my intercourse with home, it was a pure feeling towards her. This is truth. If I lay on my death-bed, at the present moment, and knew that, at the Judgment Day, I should be tried by the truth or falsehood of the lines just written, I could say with my last breath: So be it; let them remain.

But what mattered my love for her? However worthy of it she might be, I had misplaced it, because chance--the same chance which might have given her station and family--had placed her in a rank of life far--too far--below mine. As the daughter of a "gentleman," my father's welcome, my father's affection, would have been bestowed on her, when I took her home as my wife. As the daughter of a tradesman, my father's anger, my father's misery, my own ruin perhaps besides, would be the fatal dower that a marriage would confer on her. What made all this difference? A social prejudice. Yes: but a prejudice which had been a principle--nay, more, a religion--in our house, since my birth; and for centuries before it.

(How strange that foresight of love which precipitates the future into the present! Here was I thinking of her as my wife, before, perhaps, she had a suspicion of the passion with which she had inspired me--vexing my heart, wearying my thoughts, before I had even spoken to her, as if the perilous discovery of our marriage were already at hand! I have thought since how unnatural I should have considered this, if I had read it in a book.)

How could I best crush the desire to see her, to speak to her, on the morrow? Should I leave London, leave England, fly from the temptation, no matter where, or at what sacrifice? Or should I take refuge in my books--the calm, changeless old friends of my earliest fireside hours? Had I resolution

enough to wear my heart out by hard, serious, slaving study? If I left London on the morrow, could I feel secure, in my own conscience, that I should not return the day after!

While, throughout the hours of the night, I was thus vainly striving to hold calm counsel with myself; the base thought never occurred to me, which might have occurred to some other men, in my position: Why marry the girl, because I love her? Why, with my money, my station, my opportunities, obstinately connect love and marriage as one idea; and make a dilemma and a danger where neither need exist? Had such a thought as this, in the faintest, the most shadowy form, crossed my mind, I should have shrunk from it, have shrunk from my self; with horror. Whatever fresh degradations may be yet in store for me, this one consoling and sanctifying remembrance must still be mine. My love for Margaret Sherwin was worthy to be offered to the purest and perfectest woman that ever God created.

The night advanced--the noises faintly reaching me from the streets, sank and ceased--my lamp flickered and went out--I heard the carriage return with Clara from the ball--the first cold clouds of day rose and hid the waning orb of the moon--the air was cooled with its morning freshness: the earth was purified with its morning dew--and still I sat by my open window, striving with my burning love-thoughts of Margaret; striving to think collectedly and usefully--abandoned to a struggle ever renewing, yet never changing; and always hour after hour, a struggle in vain.

At last I began to think less and less distinctly--a few moments more, and I sank into a restless, feverish slumber. Then began another, and a more perilous ordeal for me--the ordeal of dreams. Thoughts and sensations which had been more and more weakly restrained with each succeeding hour of wakefulness, now rioted within me in perfect liberation from all control.

This is what I dreamed:

I stood on a wide plain. On one side, it was bounded by thick woods, whose dark secret depths looked unfathomable to the eye: on the other, by hills, ever rising higher and higher yet, until they were lost in bright, beautifully white clouds, gleaming in refulgent sunlight. On the side above the woods, the sky was dark and vaporous. It seemed as if some thick exhalation had arisen from beneath the trees, and overspread the clear firmament throughout this portion of the scene.

As I still stood on the plain and looked around, I saw a woman coming

towards me from the wood. Her stature was tall; her black hair flowed about her unconfined; her robe was of the dun hue of the vapour and mist which hung above the trees, and fell to her feet in dark thick folds. She came on towards me swiftly and softly, passing over the ground like cloud-shadows over the ripe corn-field or the calm water.

I looked to the other side, towards the hills; and there was another woman descending from their bright summits; and her robe was white, and pure, and glistening. Her face was illumined with a light, like the light of the harvest-moon; and her footsteps, as she descended the hills, left a long track of brightness, that sparkled far behind her, like the track of the stars when the winter night is clear and cold. She came to the place where the hills and the plain were joined together. Then she stopped, and I knew that she was watching me from afar off.

Meanwhile, the woman from the dark wood still approached; never pausing on her path, like the woman from the fair hills. And now I could see her face plainly. Her eyes were lustrous and fascinating, as the eyes of a serpent--large, dark and soft, as the eyes of the wild doe. Her lips were parted with a languid smile; and she drew back the long hair, which lay over her cheeks, her neck, her bosom, while I was gazing on her.

Then, I felt as if a light were shining on me from the other side. I turned to look, and there was the woman from the hills beckoning me away to ascend with her towards the bright clouds above. Her arm, as she held it forth, shone fair, even against the fair hills; and from her outstretched hand came long thin rays of trembling light, which penetrated to where I stood, cooling and calming wherever they touched me.

But the woman from the woods still came nearer and nearer, until I could feel her hot breath on my face. Her eyes looked into mine, and fascinated them, as she held out her arms to embrace me. I touched her hand, and in an instant the touch ran through me like fire, from head to foot. Then, still looking intently on me with her wild bright eyes, she clasped her supple arms round my neck, and drew me a few paces away with her towards the wood.

I felt the rays of light that had touched me from the beckoning hand, depart; and yet once more I looked towards the woman from the hills. She was ascending again towards the bright clouds, and ever and anon she stopped and turned round, wringing her hands and letting her head droop, as if in bitter grief. The last time I saw her look towards me, she was near the clouds. She covered her face with her robe, and knelt down where she stood.

After this I discerned no more of her. For now the woman from the woods clasped me more closely than before, pressing her warm lips on mine; and it was as if her long hair fell round us both, spreading over my eyes like a veil, to hide from them the fair hill-tops, and the woman who was walking onward to the bright clouds above.

I was drawn along in the arms of the dark woman, with my blood burning and my breath failing me, until we entered the secret recesses that lay amid the unfathomable depths of trees. There, she encircled me in the folds of her dusky robe, and laid her cheek close to mine, and murmured a mysterious music in my ear, amid the midnight silence and darkness of all around us. And I had no thought of returning to the plain again; for I had forgotten the woman from the fair hills, and had given myself up, heart, and soul, and body, to the woman from the dark woods.

Here the dream ended, and I awoke.

It was broad daylight. The sun shone brilliantly, the sky was cloudless. I looked at my watch; it had stopped. Shortly afterwards I heard the hall clock strike six.

My dream was vividly impressed on my memory, especially the latter part of it. Was it a warning of coming events, foreshadowed in the wild visions of sleep? But to what purpose could this dream, or indeed any dream, tend? Why had it remained incomplete, failing to show me the visionary consequences of my visionary actions? What superstition to ask! What a waste of attention to bestow it on such a trifle as a dream!

Still, this trifle had produced one abiding result. I knew it not then; but I know it now. As I looked out on the reviving, re-assuring sunlight, it was easy enough for me to dismiss as ridiculous from my mind, or rather from my conscience, the tendency to see in the two shadowy forms of my dream, the types of two real living beings, whose names almost trembled into utterance on my lips; but I could not also dismiss from my heart the love-images which that dream had set up there for the worship of the senses. Those results of the night still remained within me, growing and strengthening with every minute.

If I had been told beforehand how the mere sight of the morning would reanimate and embolden me, I should have scouted the prediction as too outrageous for consideration; yet so it was. The moody and boding reflections, the fear and struggle of the hours of darkness were gone with the daylight. The love-thoughts of Margaret alone remained, and now remained

unquestioned and unopposed. Were my convictions of a few hours since, like the night-mists that fade before returning sunshine? I knew not. But I was young; and each new morning is as much the new life of youth, as the new life of Nature.

So I left my study and went out. Consequences might come how they would, and when they would; I thought of them no more. It seemed as if I had cast off every melancholy thought, in leaving my room; as if my heart had sprung up more elastic than ever, after the burden that had been laid on it during the night. Enjoyment for the present, hope for the future, and chance and fortune to trust in to the very last! This was my creed, as I walked into the street, determined to see Margaret again, and to tell her of my love before the day was out. In the exhilaration of the fresh air and the gay sunshine, I turned my steps towards Hollyoake Square, almost as light-hearted as a boy let loose from school, joyously repeating Shakespeare's lines as I went:

"Hope is a lover's staff; walk hence with that, And manage it against despairing thoughts."

IX.

London was rousing everywhere into morning activity, as I passed through the streets. The shutters were being removed from the windows of public-houses: the drink-vampyres that suck the life of London, were opening their eyes betimes to look abroad for the new day's prey! Small tobacco and provision-shops in poor neighbourhoods; dirty little eating-houses, exhaling greasy-smelling steam, and displaying a leaf of yesterday's paper, stained and fly-blown, hanging in the windows--were already plying, or making ready to ply, their daily trade. Here, a labouring man, late for his work, hurried by; there, a hale old gentleman started for his early walk before breakfast. Now a market-cart, already unloaded, passed me on its way back to the country; now, a cab, laden with luggage and carrying pale, sleepy-looking people, rattled by, bound for the morning train or the morning steamboat. I saw the mighty vitality of the great city renewing itself in every direction; and I felt an unwonted interest in the sight. It was as if all things, on all sides, were reflecting before me the aspect of my own heart.

But the quiet and torpor of the night still hung over Hollyoake Square. That dreary neighbourhood seemed to vindicate its dreariness by being the last to awaken even to a semblance of activity and life. Nothing was stirring as yet at North Villa. I walked on, beyond the last houses, into the sooty London fields; and tried to think of the course I ought to pursue in order to see Margaret, and speak to her, before I turned homeward again. After the lapse of more than half an hour, I returned to the square, without plan or project; but resolved, nevertheless, to carry my point.

The garden-gate of North Villa was now open. One of the female servants of the house was standing at it, to breathe the fresh air, and look about her, before the duties of the day began. I advanced; determined, if money and persuasion could do it, to secure her services.

She was young (that was one chance in my favour!)--plump, florid, and evidently not by any means careless about her personal appearance (that gave me another!) As she saw me approaching her, she smiled; and passed her apron hurriedly over her face--carefully polishing it for my inspection, much as a broker polishes a piece of furniture when you stop to look at it.

"Are you in Mr. Sherwin's service?"--I asked, as I got to the garden gate.

"As plain cook, Sir," answered the girl, administering to her face a final and

furious rub of the apron.

"Should you be very much surprised if I asked you to do me a great favour?"

"Well--really, Sir--you're quite a stranger to me--I'm sure I don't know!" She stopped, and transferred the apron-rubbing to her arms.

"I hope we shall not be strangers long. Suppose I begin our acquaintance, by telling you that you would look prettier in brighter cap-ribbons, and asking you to buy some, just to see whether I am not right?"

"It's very kind of you to say so, Sir; and thank you. But cap and ribbons are the last things I can buy while I'm in this place. Master's master and missus too, here; and drives us half wild with the fuss he makes about our caps and ribbons. He's such an austerious man, that he will have our caps as he likes 'em. It's bad enough when a missus meddles with a poor servant's ribbons; but to have master come down into the kitchen, and--Well, it's no use telling you of it, Sir--and--and thank you, Sir, for what you've given me, all the same!"

"I hope this is not the last time I shall make you a present. And now I must come to the favour I want to ask of you: can you keep a secret?"

"That I can, Sir! I've kep' a many secrets since I've been out at service."

"Well: I want you to find me an opportunity of speaking to your young lady--
"

"To Miss Margaret, Sir?"

"Yes. I want an opportunity of seeing Miss Margaret, and speaking to her in private--and not a word must be said to her about it, beforehand."

"Oh Lord, Sir! I couldn't dare to do it!"

"Come! come! Can't you guess why I want to see your young lady, and what I want to say to her?"

The girl smiled, and shook her head archly. "Perhaps you're in love with Miss Margaret, Sir!--But I couldn't do it! I couldn't dare to do it!"

"Very well; but you can tell me at least, whether Miss Margaret ever goes out to take a walk?"

"Oh, yes, Sir; mostly every day."

"Do you ever go out with her?--just to take care of her when no one else can be spared?"

"Don't ask me--please, Sir, don't!" She crumpled her apron between her fingers, with a very piteous and perplexed air. "I don't know you; and Miss Margaret don't know you, I'm sure--I couldn't, Sir, I really couldn't!"

"Take a good look at me! Do you think I am likely to do you or your young lady any harm? Am I too dangerous a man to be trusted? Would you believe me on my promise?"

"Yes, Sir, I'm sure I would!--being so kind and so civil to me, too!" (a fresh arrangement of the cap followed this speech.)

"Then suppose I promised, in the first place, not to tell Miss Margaret that I had spoken to you about her at all. And suppose I promised, in the second place, that, if you told me when you and Miss Margaret go out together, I would only speak to her while she was in your sight, and would leave her the moment you wished me to go away. Don't you think you could venture to help me, if I promised all that?"

"Well, Sir, that would make a difference, to be sure. But then, it's master I'm so afraid of--couldn't you speak to master first, Sir?"

"Suppose you were in Miss Margaret's place, would you like to be made love to, by your father's authority, without your own wishes being consulted first? would you like an offer of marriage, delivered like a message, by means of your father? Come, tell me honestly, would you?"

She laughed, and shook her head very expressively. I knew the strength of my last argument, and repeated it: "Suppose you were in Miss Margaret's place?"

"Hush! don't speak so loud," resumed the girl in a confidential whisper. "I'm sure you're a gentleman. I should like to help you--if I could only dare to do it, I should indeed!"

"That's a good girl," I said. "Now tell me, when does Miss Margaret go out to-day; and who goes with her?"

"Dear! dear!--it's very wrong to say it; but I must. She'll go out with me to market, this morning, at eleven o'clock. She's done it for the last week. Master don't like it; but Missus begged and prayed she might; for Missus says she won't be fit to be married, if she knows nothing about housekeeping, and prices, and what's good meat, and what isn't, and all that, you know."

"Thank you a thousand times! you have given me all the help I want. I'll be here before eleven, waiting for you to come out."

"Oh, please don't, Sir--I wish I hadn't told you--I oughtn't, indeed I oughtn't!"

"No fear--you shall not lose by what you have told me--I promise all I said I would promise--good bye. And mind, not a word to Miss Margaret till I see her!"

As I hurried away, I heard the girl run a few paces after me--then stop--then return, and close the garden gate, softly. She had evidently put herself once more in Miss Margaret's place; and had given up all idea of further resistance as she did so.

How should I occupy the hours until eleven o'clock? Deceit whispered:--Go home; avoid even the chance of exciting suspicion, by breakfasting with your family as usual. And as deceit counselled, so I acted.

I never remember Clara more kind, more ready with all those trifling little cares and attentions which have so exquisite a grace, when offered by a woman to a man, and especially by a sister to a brother, as when she and I and my father assembled together at the breakfast-table. I now recollect with shame how little I thought about her, or spoke to her on that morning; with how little hesitation or self-reproach I excused myself from accepting an engagement which she wished to make with me for that day. My father was absorbed in some matter of business; to him she could not speak. It was to me that she addressed all her wonted questions and remarks of the morning. I hardly listened to them; I answered them carelessly and briefly. The moment breakfast was over, without a word of explanation I hastily left the house again.

As I descended the steps, I glanced by accident at the dining-room window. Clara was looking after me from it. There was the same anxious expression on her face which it had worn when she left me the evening before. She smiled as our eyes met--a sad, faint smile that made her look unlike herself. But it produced no impression on me then: I had no attention for anything

but my approaching interview with Margaret. My life throbbed and burned within me, in that direction: it was all coldness, torpor, insensibility, in every other.

I reached Hollyoake Square nearly an hour before the appointed time. In the suspense and impatience of that long interval, it was impossible to be a moment in repose. I walked incessantly up and down the square, and round and round the neighbourhood, hearing each quarter chimed from a church clock near, and mechanically quickening my pace the nearer the time came for the hour to strike. At last, I heard the first peal of the eventful eleven. Before the clock was silent, I had taken up my position within view of the gate of North Villa.

Five minutes passed--ten--and no one appeared. In my impatience, I could almost have rung the bell and entered the house, no matter who might be there, or what might be the result. The first quarter struck; and at that very moment I heard the door open, and saw Margaret, and the servant with whom I had spoken, descending the steps.

They passed out slowly through the garden gate, and walked down the square, away from where I was standing. The servant noticed me by one significant look, as they went on. Her young mistress did not appear to see me. At first, my agitation was so violent that I was perfectly incapable of following them a single step. In a few moments I recovered myself; and hastened to overtake them, before they arrived at a more frequented part of the neighbourhood.

As I approached her side, Margaret turned suddenly and looked at me, with an expression of anger and astonishment in her eyes. The next instant, her lovely face became tinged all over with a deep, burning blush; her head drooped a little; she hesitated for a moment; and then abruptly quickened her pace. Did she remember me? The mere chance that she did, gave me confidence: I--

--No! I cannot write down the words that I said to her. Recollecting the end to which our fatal interview led, I recoil at the very thought of exposing to others, or of preserving in any permanent form, the words in which I first confessed my love. It may be pride--miserable, useless pride--which animates me with this feeling: but I cannot overcome it. Remembering what I do, I am ashamed to write, ashamed to recall, what I said at my first interview with Margaret Sherwin. I can give no good reason for the sensations which now influence me; I cannot analyse them; and I would not if I could.

Let it be enough to say that I risked everything, and spoke to her. My words, confused as they were, came hotly, eagerly, and eloquently from my heart. In the space of a few minutes, I confessed to her all, and more than all, that I have here painfully related in many pages. I made use of my name and my rank in life--even now, my cheeks burn while I think of it--to dazzle her girl's pride, to make her listen to me for the sake of my station, if she would not for the sake of my suit, however honourably urged. Never before had I committed the meanness of trusting to my social advantages, what I feared to trust to myself. It is true that love soars higher than the other passions; but it can stoop lower as well.

Her answers to all that I urged were confused, commonplace, and chilling enough. I had surprised her--frightened her--it was impossible she could listen to such addresses from a total stranger--it was very wrong of me to speak, and of her to stop and hear me--I should remember what became me as a gentleman, and should not make such advances to her again--I knew nothing of her--it was impossible I could really care about her in so short a time--she must beg that I would allow her to proceed unhindered.

Thus she spoke; sometimes standing still, sometimes moving hurriedly a few steps forward. She might have expressed herself severely, even angrily; but nothing she could have said would have counteracted the fascination that her presence exercised over me. I saw her face, lovelier than ever in its confusion, in its rapid changes of expression; I saw her eloquent eyes once or twice raised to mine, then instantly withdrawn again--and so long as I could look at her, I cared not what I listened to. She was only speaking what she had been educated to speak; it was not in her words that I sought the clue to her thoughts and sensations; but in the tone of her voice, in the language of her eyes, in the whole expression of her face. All these contained indications which reassured me. I tried everything that respect, that the persuasion of love could urge, to win her consent to our meeting again; but she only answered with repetitions of what she had said before, walking onward rapidly while she spoke. The servant, who had hitherto lingered a few paces behind, now advanced to her young mistress's side, with a significant look, as if to remind me of my promise. Saying a few parting words, I let them proceed: at this first interview, to have delayed them longer would have been risking too much.

As they walked away, the servant turned round, nodding her head and smiling, as if to assure me that I had lost nothing by the forbearance which I had exercised. Margaret neither lingered nor looked back. This last proof of modesty and reserve, so far from discouraging, attracted me to her more

powerfully than ever. After a first interview, it was the most becoming virtue she could have shown. All my love for her before, seemed as nothing compared with my love for her now that she had left me, and left me without a parting look.

What course should I next pursue? Could I expect that Margaret, after what she had said, would go out again at the same hour on the morrow? No: she would not so soon abandon the modesty and restraint that she had shown at our first interview. How communicate with her? how manage most skilfully to make good the first favourable impression which vanity whispered I had already produced? I determined to write to her.

How different was the writing of that letter, to the writing of those once-treasured pages of my romance, which I had now abandoned for ever! How slowly I worked; how cautiously and diffidently I built up sentence after sentence, and doubtingly set a stop here, and laboriously rounded off a paragraph there, when I toiled in the service of ambition! Now, when I had given myself up to the service of love, how rapidly the pen ran over the paper; how much more freely and smoothly the desires of the heart flowed into words, than the thoughts of the mind! Composition was an instinct now, an art no longer. I could write eloquently, and yet write without pausing for an expression or blotting a word--It was the slow progress up the hill, in the service of ambition; it was the swift (too swift) career down it, in the service of love!

There is no need to describe the contents of my letter to Margaret; they comprised a mere recapitulation of what I had already said to her. I insisted often and strongly on the honourable purpose of my suit; and ended by entreating her to write an answer, and consent to allow me another interview.

The letter was delivered by the servant. Another present, a little more timely persuasion, and above all, the regard I had shown to my promise, won the girl with all her heart to my interests. She was ready to help me in every way, as long as her interference could be kept a secret from her master.

I waited a day for the reply to my letter; but none came. The servant could give me no explanation of this silence. Her young mistress had not said one word to her about me, since the morning when we had met. Still not discouraged, I wrote again. The letter contained some lover's threats this time, as well as lover's entreaties; and it produced its effect--an answer came.

It was very short--rather hurriedly and tremblingly written--and simply said that the difference between my rank and hers made it her duty to request of me, that neither by word nor by letter should I ever address her again.

"Difference in rank,"--that was the only objection then! "Her duty"--it was not from inclination that she refused me! So young a creature; and yet so noble in self-sacrifice, so firm in her integrity! I resolved to disobey her injunction, and see her again. My rank! What was my rank? Something to cast at Margaret's feet, for Margaret to trample on!

Once more I sought the aid of my faithful ally, the servant. After delays which half maddened me with impatience, insignificant though they were, she contrived to fulfil my wishes. One afternoon, while Mr. Sherwin was away at business, and while his wife had gone out, I succeeded in gaining admission to the garden at the back of the house, where Margaret was then occupied in watering some flowers.

She started as she saw me, and attempted to return to the house. I took her hand to detain her. She withdrew it, but neither abruptly nor angrily. I seized the opportunity, while she hesitated whether to persist or not in retiring; and repeated what I had already said to her at our first interview (what is the language of love but a language of repetitions?). She answered, as she had answered me in her letter: the difference in our rank made it her duty to discourage me.

"But if this difference did not exist," I said: "if we were both living in the same rank, Margaret--"

She looked up quickly; then moved away a step or two, as I addressed her by her Christian name.

"Are you offended with me for calling you Margaret so soon? I do not think of you as Miss Sherwin, but as Margaret--are you offended with me for speaking as I think?"

No: she ought not to be offended with me, or with anybody, for doing that.

"Suppose this difference in rank, which you so cruelly insist on, did not exist, would you tell me not to hope, not to speak then, as coldly as you tell me now?"

I must not ask her that--it was no use--the difference in rank did exist.

"Perhaps I have met you too late?--perhaps you are already--"

"No! oh, no!"--she stopped abruptly, as the words passed her lips. The same lovely blush which I had before seen spreading over her face, rose on it now. She evidently felt that she had unguardedly said too much: that she had given me an answer in a case where, according to every established love-law of the female code, I had no right to expect one. Her next words accused me--but in very low and broken tones--of having committed an intrusion which she should hardly have expected from a gentleman in my position.

"I will regain your better opinion," I said, eagerly catching at the most favourable interpretation of her last words, "by seeing you for the next time, and for all times after, with your father's full permission. I will write to-day, and ask for a private interview with him. I will tell him all I have told you: I will tell him that you take a rank in beauty and goodness, which is the highest rank in the land--a far higher rank than mine--the only rank I desire." (A smile, which she vainly strove to repress, stole charmingly to her lips.) "Yes, I will do this; I will never leave him till his answer is favourable--and then what would be yours? One word, Margaret; one word before I go--"

I attempted to take her hand a second time; but she broke from me, and hurried into the house.

What more could I desire? What more could the modesty and timidity of a young girl concede to me?

The moment I reached home, I wrote to Mr. Sherwin. The letter was superscribed "Private;" and simply requested an interview with him on a subject of importance, at any hour he might mention. Unwilling to trust what I had written to the post, I sent my note by a messenger--not one of our own servants, caution forbade that--and instructed the man to wait for an answer: if Mr. Sherwin was out, to wait till he came home.

After a long delay--long to me; for my impatience would fain have turned hours into minutes--I received a reply. It was written on gilt-edged letter-paper, in a handwriting vulgarised by innumerable flourishes. Mr. Sherwin presented his respectful compliments, and would be happy to have the honour of seeing me at North Villa, if quite convenient, at five o'clock to-morrow afternoon.

I folded up the letter carefully: it was almost as precious as a letter from Margaret herself. That night I passed sleeplessly, revolving in my mind every possible course that I could take at the interview of the morrow. It would be

a difficult and a delicate business. I knew nothing of Mr. Sherwin's character; yet I must trust him with a secret which I dared not trust to my own father. Any proposals for paying addresses to his daughter, coming from one in my position, might appear open to suspicion. What could I say about marriage? A public, acknowledged marriage was impossible: a private marriage might be a bold, if not fatal proposal. I could come to no other conclusion, reflect as anxiously as I might, than that it was best for me to speak candidly at all hazards. I could be candid enough when it suited my purpose!

It was not till the next day, when the time approached for my interview with Mr. Sherwin, that I thoroughly roused myself to face the plain necessities of my position. Determined to try what impression appearances could make on him, I took unusual pains with my dress; and more, I applied to a friend whom I could rely on as likely to ask no questions--I write this in shame and sorrow: I tell truth here, where it is hard penance to tell it--I applied, I say, to a friend for the loan of one of his carriages to take me to North Villa; fearing the risk of borrowing my father's carriage, or my sister's--knowing the common weakness of rank-worship and wealth-worship in men of Mr. Sherwin's order, and meanly determining to profit by it to the utmost. My friend's carriage was willingly lent me. By my directions, it took me up at the appointed hour, at a shop where I was a regular customer.

X.

On my arrival at North Villa, I was shown into what I presumed was the drawing-room.

Everything was oppressively new. The brilliantly-varnished door cracked with a report like a pistol when it was opened; the paper on the walls, with its gaudy pattern of birds, trellis-work, and flowers, in gold, red, and green on a white ground, looked hardly dry yet; the showy window-curtains of white and sky-blue, and the still showier carpet of red and yellow, seemed as if they had come out of the shop yesterday; the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought; not one leaf even of the music on the piano was dogs-eared or worn. Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this--the eye ached at looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen, hanging lonely on the wall, in its heavy gilt frame, with a large crown at the top, glared on you: the paper, the curtains, the carpet glared on you: the books, the wax-flowers in glass-cases, the chairs in flaring chintz-covers, the china plates on the door, the blue and pink glass vases and cups ranged on the chimney-piece, the over-ornamented chiffoniers with Tonbridge toys and long-necked smelling bottles on their upper shelves--all glared on you. There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. All surrounding objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were. The room would have given a nervous man the headache, before he had been in it a quarter of an hour.

I was not kept waiting long. Another violent crack from the new door, announced the entrance of Mr. Sherwin himself.

He was a tall, thin man: rather round-shouldered; weak at the knees, and trying to conceal the weakness in the breadth of his trowsers. He wore a white cravat, and an absurdly high shirt collar. His complexion was sallow; his eyes were small, black, bright, and incessantly in motion--indeed, all his features were singularly mobile: they were affected by nervous contractions and spasms which were constantly drawing up and down in all directions the brow, the mouth, and the muscles of the cheek. His hair had been black, but was now turning to a sort of iron-grey; it was very dry, wiry, and plentiful, and part of it projected almost horizontally over his forehead. He had a habit of stretching it in this direction, by irritably combing it out, from

time to time, with his fingers. His lips were thin and colourless, the lines about them being numerous and strongly marked. Had I seen him under ordinary circumstances, I should have set him down as a little-minded man; a small tyrant in his own way over those dependent on him; a pompous parasite to those above him--a great stickler for the conventional respectabilities of life, and a great believer in his own infallibility. But he was Margaret's father; and I was determined to be pleased with him.

He made me a low and rather a cringing bow--then looked to the window, and seeing the carriage waiting for me at his door, made another bow, and insisted on relieving me of my hat with his own hand. This done, he coughed, and begged to know what he could do for me.

I felt some difficulty in opening my business to him. It was necessary to speak, however, at once--I began with an apology.

"I am afraid, Mr. Sherwin, that this intrusion on the part of a perfect stranger--"

"Not entirely a stranger, Sir, if I may be allowed to say so."

"Indeed!"

"I had the great pleasure, Sir, and profit, and--and, indeed, advantage--of being shown over your town residence last year, when the family were absent from London. A very beautiful house--I happen to be acquainted with the steward of your respected father: he was kind enough to allow me to walk through the rooms. A treat; quite an intellectual treat--the furniture and hangings, and so on, arranged in such a chaste style--and the pictures, some of the finest pieces I ever saw--I was delighted--quite delighted, indeed."

He spoke in under-tones, laying great stress upon particular words that were evidently favourites with him--such as, "indeed." Not only his eyes, but his whole face, seemed to be nervously blinking and winking all the time he was addressing me, In the embarrassment and anxiety which I then felt, this peculiarity fidgetted and bewildered me more than I can describe. I would have given the world to have had his back turned, before I spoke to him again.

"I am delighted to hear that my family and my name are not unknown to you, Mr. Sherwin," I resumed. "Under those circumstances, I shall feel less hesitation and difficulty in making you acquainted with the object of my

visit."

"Just so. May I offer you anything?--a glass of sherry, a--"

"Nothing, thank you. In the first place, Mr. Sherwin, I have reasons for wishing that this interview, whatever results it may lead to, may be considered strictly confidential. I am sure I can depend on your favouring me thus far?"

"Certainly--most certainly--the strictest secrecy of course--pray go on."

He drew his chair a little nearer to me. Through all his blinking and winking, I could see a latent expression of cunning and curiosity in his eyes. My card was in his hand: he was nervously rolling and unrolling it, without a moment's cessation, in his anxiety to hear what I had to say.

"I must also beg you to suspend your judgment until you have heard me to the end. You may be disposed to view--to view, I say, unfavourably at first--in short, Mr. Sherwin, without further preface, the object of my visit is connected with your daughter, with Miss Margaret Sherwin--"

"My daughter! Bless my soul--God bless my soul, I really can't imagine--"

He stopped, half-breathless, bending forward towards me, and crumpling my card between his fingers into the smallest possible dimensions.

"Rather more than a week ago," I continued, "I accidentally met Miss Sherwin in an omnibus, accompanied by a lady older than herself--"

"My wife; Mrs. Sherwin," he said, impatiently motioning with his hand, as if "Mrs. Sherwin" were some insignificant obstacle to the conversation, which he wished to clear out of the way as fast as possible.

"You will not probably be surprised to hear that I was struck by Miss Sherwin's extreme beauty. The impression she made on me was something more, however, than a mere momentary feeling of admiration. To speak candidly, I felt--You have heard of such a thing as love at first sight, Mr. Sherwin?"

"In books, Sir." He tapped one of the morocco-bound volumes on the table, and smiled--a curious smile, partly deferential and partly sarcastic.

"You would be inclined to laugh, I dare say, if I asked you to believe that

there is such a thing as love at first sight, out of books. But, without dwelling further on that, it is my duty to confess to you, in all candour and honesty, that the impression Miss Sherwin produced on me was such as to make me desire the privilege of becoming acquainted with her. In plain words, I discovered her place of residence by following her to this house."

"Upon my soul this is the most extraordinary proceeding----!"

"Pray hear me out, Mr. Sherwin: you will not condemn my conduct, I think, if you hear all I have to say."

He muttered something unintelligible; his complexion turned yellower; he dropped my card, which he had by this time crushed into fragments; and ran his hand rapidly through his hair until he had stretched it out like a penthouse over his forehead--blinking all the time, and regarding me with a lowering, sinister expression of countenance. I saw that it was useless to treat him as I should have treated a gentleman. He had evidently put the meanest and the foulest construction upon my delicacy and hesitation in speaking to him: so I altered my plan, and came to the point abruptly--"came to business," as he would have called it.

"I ought to have been plainer, Mr. Sherwin; I ought perhaps to have told you at the outset, in so many words, that I came to--" (I was about to say, "to ask your daughter's hand in marriage;" but a thought of my father moved darkly over my mind at that moment, and the words would not pass my lips).

"Well, Sir! to what?"

The tone in which he said this was harsh enough to rouse me. It gave me back my self-possession immediately.

"To ask your permission to pay my addresses to Miss Sherwin--or, to be plainer still, if you like, to ask of you her hand in marriage."

The words were spoken. Even if I could have done so, I would not have recalled what I had just said; but still, I trembled in spite of myself as I expressed in plain, blunt words what I had only rapturously thought over, or delicately hinted at to Margaret, up to this time.

"God bless me!" cried Mr. Sherwin, suddenly sitting back bolt upright in his chair, and staring at me in such surprise, that his restless features were actually struck with immobility for the moment--"God bless me, this is quite

another story. Most gratifying, most astonishing--highly flattered I am sure; highly indeed, my dear Sir! Don't suppose, for one moment, I ever doubted your honourable feeling. Young gentlemen in your station of life do sometimes fail in respect towards the wives and daughters of their--in short, of those who are not in their rank exactly. But that's not the question--quite a misunderstanding--extremely stupid of me, to be sure. Pray let me offer you a glass of wine!"

"No wine, thank you, Mr. Sherwin. I must beg your attention a little longer, while I state to you, in confidence, how I am situated with regard to the proposals I have made. There are certain circumstances--"

"Yes--yes?"

He bent forward again eagerly towards me, as he spoke; looking more inquisitive and more cunning than ever.

"I have acknowledged to you, Mr. Sherwin, that I have found means to speak to your daughter--to speak to her twice. I made my advances honourably. She received them with a modesty and a reluctance worthy of herself, worthy of any lady, the highest lady in the land." (Mr. Sherwin looked round reverentially to his print of the Queen; then looked back at me, and bowed solemnly.) "Now, although in so many words she directly discouraged me--it is her due that I should say this--still, I think I may without vanity venture to hope that she did so as a matter of duty, more than as a matter of inclination."

"Ah--yes, yes! I understand. She would do nothing without my authority, of course?"

"No doubt that was one reason why she received me as she did; but she had another, which she communicated to me in the plainest terms--the difference in our rank of life."

"Ah! she said that, did she? Exactly so--she saw a difficulty there? Yes--yes! high principles, Sir--high principles, thank God!"

"I need hardly tell you, Mr. Sherwin, how deeply I feel the delicate sense of honour which this objection shows on your daughter's part. You will easily imagine that it is no objection to me, personally. The happiness of my whole life depends on Miss Sherwin; I desire no higher honour, as I can conceive no greater happiness, than to be your daughter's husband. I told her this: I also told her that I would explain myself on the subject to you. She made no

objection; and I am, therefore, I think, justified in considering that if you authorised the removal of scruples which do her honour at present, she would not feel the delicacy she does now at sanctioning my addresses."

"Very proper--a very proper way of putting it. Practical, if I may be allowed to say so. And now, my dear Sir, the next point is: how about your own honoured family--eh?"

"It is exactly there that the difficulty lies. My father, on whom I am dependent as the younger son, has very strong prejudices--convictions I ought perhaps to call them--on the subject of social inequalities."

"Quite so--most natural; most becoming, indeed, on the part of your respected father. I honour his convictions, sir. Such estates, such houses, such a family as his--connected, I believe, with the nobility, especially on your late lamented mother's side. My dear Sir, I emphatically repeat it, your father's convictions do him honour; I respect them as much as I respect him; I do, indeed."

"I am glad you can view my father's ideas on social subjects in so favourable a light, Mr. Sherwin. You will be less surprised to hear how they are likely to affect me in the step I am now taking."

"He disapproves of it, of course--strongly, perhaps. Well, though my dear girl is worthy of any station; and a man like me, devoted to mercantile interests, may hold his head up anywhere as one of the props of this commercial country," (he ran his fingers rapidly through his hair, and tried to look independent), "still I am prepared to admit, under all the circumstances--I say under all the circumstances--that his disapproval is very natural, and was very much to be expected--very much indeed."

"He has expressed no disapproval, Mr. Sherwin."

"You don't say so!"

"I have not given him an opportunity. My meeting with your daughter has been kept a profound secret from him, and from every member of my family; and a secret it must remain. I speak from my intimate knowledge of my father, when I say that I hardly know of any means that he would not be capable of employing to frustrate the purpose of this visit, if I had mentioned it to him. He has been the kindest and best of fathers to me; but I firmly believe, that if I waited for his consent, no entreaties of mine, or of any one belonging to me, would induce him to give his sanction to the marriage I

have come to you to propose."

"Bless my soul! this is carrying things rather far, though--dependent as you are on him, and all that. Why, what on earth can we do--eh?"

"We must keep both the courtship and the marriage secret."

"Secret! Good gracious, I don't at all see my way--"

"Yes, secret--a profound secret among ourselves, until I can divulge my marriage to my father, with the best chance of--"

"But I tell you, Sir, I can't see my way through it at all. Chance! what chance would there be, after what you have told me?"

"There might be many chances. For instance, when the marriage was solemnised, I might introduce your daughter to my father's notice--without disclosing who she was--and leave her, gradually and unsuspectedly, to win his affection and respect (as with her beauty, elegance, and amiability, she could not fail to do), while I waited until the occasion was ripe for confessing everything. Then if I said to him, 'This young lady, who has so interested and delighted you, is my wife;' do you think, with that powerful argument in my favour, he could fail to give us his pardon? If, on the other hand, I could only say, 'This young lady is about to become my wife,' his prejudices would assuredly induce him to recall his most favourable impressions, and refuse his consent. In short, Mr. Sherwin, before marriage, it would be impossible to move him--after marriage, when opposition could no longer be of any avail, it would be quite a different thing: we might be sure of producing, sooner or later, the most favourable results. This is why it would be absolutely necessary to keep our union secret at first."

I wondered then--I have since wondered more--how it was that I contrived to speak thus, so smoothly and so unhesitatingly, when my conscience was giving the lie all the while to every word I uttered.

"Yes, yes; I see--oh, yes, I see!" said Mr. Sherwin, rattling a bunch of keys in his pocket, with an expression of considerable perplexity; "but this is a ticklish business, you know--a very queer and ticklish business indeed. To have a gentleman of your birth and breeding for a son-in-law, is of course--but then there is the money question. Suppose you failed with your father after all--my money is out in my speculations--I can do nothing. Upon my word, you have placed me in a position that I never was placed in before."

"I have influential friends, Mr. Sherwin, in many directions--there are appointments, good appointments, which would be open to me, if I pushed my interests. I might provide in this way against the chance of failure."

"Ah!--well--yes. There's something in that, certainly."

"I can only assure you that my attachment to Miss Sherwin is not of a nature to be overcome by any pecuniary considerations. I speak in all our interests, when I say that a private marriage gives us a chance for the future, as opportunities arise of gradually disclosing it. My offer to you may be made under some disadvantages and difficulties, perhaps; for, with the exception of a very small independence, left me by my mother, I have no certain prospects. But I really think my proposals have some compensating advantages to recommend them--"

"Certainly! most decidedly so! I am not insensible, my dear Sir, to the great advantage, and honour, and so forth. But there is something so unusual about the whole affair. What would be my feelings, if your father should not come round, and my dear girl was disowned by the family? Well, well! that could hardly happen, I think, with her accomplishments and education, and manners too, so distinguished--though perhaps I ought not to say so. Her schooling alone was a hundred a-year, Sir, without including extras--"

"I am sure, Mr. Sherwin--"

"--A school, Sir, where it was a rule to take in no thing lower than the daughter of a professional man--they only waived the rule in my case--the most genteel school, perhaps, in all London! A drawing-room-deportment day once every week--the girls taught how to enter a room and leave a room with dignity and ease--a model of a carriage door and steps, in the back drawing-room, to practise the girls (with the footman of the establishment in attendance) in getting into a carriage and getting out again, in a lady-like manner! No duchess has had a better education than my Margaret!--"

"Permit me to assure you, Mr. Sherwin--"

"And then, her knowledge of languages--her French, and Italian, and German, not discontinued in holidays, or after she left school (she has only just left it); but all kept up and improved every evening, by the kind attention of Mr. Mannion--"

"May I ask who Mr. Mannion is?" The tone in which I put this question, cooled his enthusiasm about his daughter's education immediately. He

answered in his former tones, and with one of his former bows:

"Mr. Mannion is my confidential clerk, Sir--a most superior person, most highly talented, and well read, and all that."

"Is he a young man?"

"Young! Oh, dear no! Mr. Mannion is forty, or a year or two more, if he's a day--an admirable man of business, as well as a great scholar. He's at Lyons now, buying silks for me. When he comes back I shall be delighted to introduce---"

"I beg your pardon, but I think we are wandering away from the point, a little."

"I beg yours--so we are. Well, my dear Sir, I must be allowed a day or two--say two days--to ascertain what my daughter's feelings are, and to consider your proposals, which have taken me very much by surprise, as you may in fact see. But I assure you I am most flattered, most honoured, most anxious--".

"I hope you will consider my anxieties, Mr. Sherwin, and let me know the result of your deliberations as soon as possible."

"Without fail, depend upon it. Let me see: shall we say the second day from this, at the same time, if you can favour me with a visit?"

"Certainly."

"And between that time and this, you will engage not to hold any communication with my daughter?"

"I promise not, Mr. Sherwin--because I believe that your answer will be favourable."

"Ah, well--well! lovers, they say, should never despair. A little consideration, and a little talk with my dear girl--really now, won't you change your mind and have a glass of sherry? (No again?) Very well, then, the day after tomorrow, at five o'clock."

With a louder crack than ever, the brand-new drawing-room door was opened to let me out. The noise was instantly succeeded by the rustling of a silk dress, and the banging of another door, at the opposite end of the

passage. Had anybody been listening? Where was Margaret?

Mr. Sherwin stood at the garden-gate to watch my departure, and to make his farewell bow. Thick as was the atmosphere of illusion in which I now lived, I shuddered involuntarily as I returned his parting salute, and thought of him as my father-in-law!

XI.

The nearer I approached to our own door, the more reluctance I felt to pass the short interval between my first and second interview with Mr. Sherwin, at home. When I entered the house, this reluctance increased to something almost like dread. I felt unwilling and unfit to meet the eyes of my nearest and dearest relatives. It was a relief to me to hear that my father was not at home. My sister was in the house: the servant said she had just gone into the library, and inquired whether he should tell her that I had come in. I desired him not to disturb her, as it was my intention to go out again immediately.

I went into my study, and wrote a short note there to Clara; merely telling her that I should be absent in the country for two days. I had sealed and laid it on the table for the servant to deliver, and was about to leave the room, when I heard the library door open. I instantly drew back, and half-closed my own door again. Clara had got the book she wanted, and was taking it up to her own sitting-room. I waited till she was out of sight, and then left the house. It was the first time I had ever avoided my sister--my sister, who had never in her life asked a question, or uttered a word that could annoy me; my sister, who had confided all her own little secrets to my keeping, ever since we had been children. As I thought on what I had done, I felt a sense of humiliation which was almost punishment enough for the meanness of which I had been guilty.

I went round to the stables, and had my horse saddled immediately. No idea of proceeding in any particular direction occurred to me. I simply felt resolved to pass my two days' ordeal of suspense away from home--far enough away to keep me faithful to my promise not to see Margaret. Soon after I started, I left my horse to his own guidance, and gave myself up to my thoughts and recollections, as one by one they rose within me. The animal took the direction which he had been oftenest used to take during my residence in London--the northern road.

It was not until I had ridden half a mile beyond the suburbs that I looked round me, and discovered towards what part of the country I was proceeding. I drew the rein directly, and turned my horse's head back again, towards the south. To follow the favourite road which I had so often followed with Clara; to stop perhaps at some place where I had often stopped with her, was more than I had the courage or the insensibility to do at that moment.

I rode as far as Ewell, and stopped there: the darkness had overtaken me, and it was useless to tire my horse by going on any greater distance. The next morning, I was up almost with sunrise; and passed the greater part of the day in walking about among villages, lanes, and fields, just as chance led me. During the night, many thoughts that I had banished for the last week had returned--those thoughts of evil omen under which the mind seems to ache, just as the body aches under a dull, heavy pain, to which we can assign no particular place or cause. Absent from Margaret, I had no resource against the oppression that now overcame me. I could only endeavour to alleviate it by keeping incessantly in action; by walking or riding, hour after hour, in the vain attempt to quiet the mind by wearying out the body. Apprehension of the failure of my application to Mr. Sherwin had nothing to do with the vague gloom which now darkened my thoughts; they kept too near home for that. Besides, what I had observed of Margaret's father, especially during the latter part of my interview with him, showed me plainly enough that he was trying to conceal, under exaggerated surprise and assumed hesitation, his secret desire to profit at once by my offer; which, whatever conditions might clog it, was infinitely more advantageous in a social point of view, than any he could have hoped for. It was not his delay in accepting my proposals, but the burden of deceit, the fetters of concealment forced on me by the proposals themselves, which now hung heavy on my heart.

That evening I left Ewell, and rode towards home again, as far as Richmond, where I remained for the night and the forepart of the next day. I reached London in the afternoon; and got to North Villa--without going home first--about five o'clock.

The oppression was still on my spirits. Even the sight of the house where Margaret lived failed to invigorate or arouse me.

On this occasion, when I was shown into the drawing-room, both Mr. and Mrs. Sherwin were awaiting me there. On the table was the sherry which had been so perseveringly pressed on me at the last interview, and by it a new pound cake. Mrs. Sherwin was cutting the cake as I came in, while her husband watched the process with critical eyes. The poor woman's weak white fingers trembled as they moved the knife under conjugal inspection.

"Most happy to see you again--most happy indeed, my dear Sir," said Mr. Sherwin, advancing with hospitable smile and outstretched hand. "Allow me to introduce my better half, Mrs. S."

His wife rose in a hurry, and curtseyed, leaving the knife sticking in the cake; upon which Mr. Sherwin, with a stern look at her, ostentatiously pulled it out, and set it down rather violently on the dish.

Poor Mrs. Sherwin! I had hardly noticed her on the day when she got into the omnibus with her daughter--it was as if I now saw her for the first time. There is a natural communicativeness about women's emotions. A happy woman imperceptibly diffuses her happiness around her; she has an influence that is something akin to the influence of a sunshiny day. So, again, the melancholy of a melancholy woman is invariably, though silently, infectious; and Mrs. Sherwin was one of this latter order. Her pale, sickly, moist-looking skin; her large, mild, watery, light-blue eyes; the restless timidity of her expression; the mixture of useless hesitation and involuntary rapidity in every one of her actions--all furnished the same significant betrayal of a life of incessant fear and restraint; of a disposition full of modest generosities and meek sympathies, which had been crushed down past rousing to self-assertion, past ever seeing the light. There, in that mild, wan face of hers--in those painful startings and hurryings when she moved; in that tremulous, faint utterance when she spoke--there, I could see one of those ghastly heart-tragedies laid open before me, which are acted and re-acted, scene by scene, and year by year, in the secret theatre of home; tragedies which are ever shadowed by the slow falling of the black curtain that drops lower and lower every day--that drops, to hide all at last, from the hand of death.

"We have had very beautiful weather lately, Sir," said Mrs. Sherwin, almost inaudibly; looking as she spoke, with anxious eyes towards her husband, to see if she was justified in uttering even those piteously common-place words. "Very beautiful weather to be sure," continued the poor woman, as timidly as if she had become a little child again, and had been ordered to say her first lesson in a stranger's presence.

"Delightful weather, Mrs. Sherwin. I have been enjoying it for the last two days in the country--in a part of Surrey (the neighbourhood of Ewell) that I had not seen before."

There was a pause. Mr. Sherwin coughed; it was evidently a warning matrimonial peal that he had often rung before--for Mrs. Sherwin started, and looked up at him directly.

"As the lady of the house, Mrs. S., it strikes me that you might offer a visitor, like this gentleman, some cake and wine, without making any particular hole in your manners!"

"Oh dear me! I beg your pardon! I'm very sorry, I'm sure"--and she poured out a glass of wine, with such a trembling hand that the decanter tinkled all the while against the glass. Though I wanted nothing, I ate and drank something immediately, in common consideration for Mrs. Sherwin's embarrassment.

Mr. Sherwin filled himself a glass--held it up admiringly to the light--said, "Your good health, Sir, your very good health;" and drank the wine with the air of a connoisseur, and a most expressive smacking of the lips. His wife (to whom he offered nothing) looked at him all the time with the most reverential attention.

"You are taking nothing yourself, Mrs. Sherwin," I said.

"Mrs. Sherwin, Sir," interposed her husband, "never drinks wine, and can't digest cake. A bad stomach--a very bad stomach. Have another glass yourself. Won't you, indeed? This sherry stands me in six shillings a bottle--ought to be first-rate wine at that price: and so it is. Well, if you won't have any more, we will proceed to business. Ha! ha! business as I call it; pleasure I hope it will be to you."

Mrs. Sherwin coughed--a very weak, small cough, half-stifled in its birth.

"There you are again!" he said, turning fiercely towards her--"Coughing again! Six months of the doctor--a six months' bill to come out of my pocket--and no good done--no good, Mrs. S."

"Oh, I am much better, thank you--it was only a little--"

"Well, Sir, the evening after you left me, I had what you may call an explanation with my dear girl. She was naturally a little confused and--and embarrassed, indeed. A very serious thing of course, to decide at her age, and at so short a notice, on a point involving the happiness of her whole life to come."

Here Mrs. Sherwin put her handkerchief to her eyes--quite noiselessly; for she had doubtless acquired by long practice the habit of weeping in silence. Her husband's quick glance turned on her, however, immediately, with anything but an expression of sympathy.

"Good God, Mrs. S.! what's the use of going on in that way?" he said, indignantly. "What is there to cry about? Margaret isn't ill, and isn't

unhappy--what on earth's the matter now? Upon my soul this is a most annoying circumstance: and before a visitor too! You had better leave me to discuss the matter alone--you always were in the way of business, and it's my opinion you always will be."

Mrs. Sherwin prepared, without a word of remonstrance, to leave the room. I sincerely felt for her; but could say nothing. In the impulse of the moment, I rose to open the door for her; and immediately repented having done so. The action added so much to her embarrassment that she kicked her foot against a chair, and uttered a suppressed exclamation of pain as she went out.

Mr. Sherwin helped himself to a second glass of wine, without taking the smallest notice of this.

"I hope Mrs. Sherwin has not hurt herself?" I said. "Oh dear no! not worth a moment's thought--awkwardness and nervousness, nothing else--she always was nervous--the doctors (all humbugs) can do nothing with her--it's very sad, very sad indeed; but there's no help for it."

By this time (in spite of all my efforts to preserve some respect for him, as Margaret's father) he had sunk to his proper place in my estimation.

"Well, my dear Sir," he resumed, "to go back to where I was interrupted by Mrs. S. Let me see: I was saying that my dear girl was a little confused, and so forth. As a matter of course, I put before her all the advantages which such a connection as yours promised--and at the same time, mentioned some of the little embarrassing circumstances--the private marriage, you know, and all that--besides telling her of certain restrictions in reference to the marriage, if it came off, which I should feel it my duty as a father to impose; and which I shall proceed, in short, to explain to you. As a man of the world, my dear Sir, you know as well as I do, that young ladies don't give very straightforward answers on the subject of their prepossessions in favour of young gentlemen. But I got enough out of her to show me that you had made pretty good use of your time--no occasion to despond, you know--I leave you to make her speak plain; it's more in your line than mine, more a good deal. And now let us come to the business part of the transaction. All I have to say is this:--if you agree to my proposals, then I agree to yours. I think that's fair enough--Eh?"

"Quite fair, Mr. Sherwin."

"Just so. Now, in the first place, my daughter is too young to be married yet.

She was only seventeen last birthday."

"You astonish me! I should have imagined her three years older at least."

"Everybody thinks her older than she is--everybody, my dear Sir--and she certainly looks it. She's more formed, more developed I may say, than most girls at her age. However, that's not the point. The plain fact is, she's too young to be married now--too young in a moral point of view; too young in an educational point of view; too young altogether. Well: the upshot of this is, that I could not give my consent to Margaret's marrying, until another year is out--say a year from this time. One year's courtship for the finishing off of her education, and the formation of her constitution--you understand me, for the formation of her constitution."

A year to wait! At first, this seemed a long trial to endure, a trial that ought not to be imposed on me. But the next moment, the delay appeared in a different light. Would it not be the dearest of privileges to be able to see Margaret, perhaps every day, perhaps for hours at a time? Would it not be happiness enough to observe each development of her character, to watch her first maiden love for me, advancing nearer and nearer towards confidence and maturity the oftener we met? As I thought on this, I answered Mr. Sherwin without further hesitation.

"It will be some trial," I said, "to my patience, though none to my constancy, none to the strength of my affection--I will wait the year."

"Exactly so," rejoined Mr. Sherwin; "such candour and such reasonableness were to be expected from one who is quite the gentleman. And now comes my grand difficulty in this business--in fact, the little stipulation I have to make."

He stopped, and ran his fingers through his hair, in all directions; his features fidgetting and distorting themselves ominously, while he looked at me.

"Pray explain yourself, Mr. Sherwin. Your silence gives me some uneasiness at this particular moment, I assure you."

"Quite so--I understand. Now, you must promise me not to be huffed--offended, I should say--at what I am going to propose."

"Certainly not."

"Well, then, it may seem odd; but under all the circumstances--that is to say, as far as the case concerns you personally--I want you and my dear girl to be married at once, and yet not to be married exactly, for another year. I don't know whether you understand me?"

"I must confess I do not."

He coughed rather uneasily; turned to the table, and poured out another glass of sherry--his hand trembling a little as he did so. He drank off the wine at a draught; cleared his throat three or four times after it; and then spoke again.

"Well, to be still plainer, this is how the matter stands: If you were a party in our rank of life, coming to court Margaret with your father's full approval and permission when once you had consented to the year's engagement, everything would be done and settled; the bargain would have been struck on both sides; and there would be an end of it. But, situated as you are, I can't stop here safely--I mean, I can't end the agreement exactly in this way."

He evidently felt that he got fluent on wine; and helped himself, at this juncture, to another glass.

"You will see what I am driving at, my dear Sir, directly," he continued. "Suppose now, you came courting my daughter for a year, as we settled; and suppose your father found it out--we should keep it a profound secret of course: but still, secrets are sometimes found out, nobody knows how. Suppose, I say, your father got scent of the thing, and the match was broken off; where do you think Margaret's reputation would be? If it happened with somebody in her own station, we might explain it all, and be believed: but happening with somebody in yours, what would the world say? Would the world believe you had ever intended to marry her? That's the point--that's the point precisely."

"But the case could not happen--I am astonished you can imagine it possible. I have told you already, I am of age."

"Properly urged--very properly, indeed. But you also told me, if you remember, when I first had the pleasure of seeing you, that your father, if he knew of this match, would stick at nothing to oppose it--at nothing--I recollect you said so. Now, knowing this, my dear Sir--though I have the most perfect confidence in your honour, and your resolution to fulfil your engagement--I can't have confidence in your being prepared beforehand to

oppose all your father might do if he found us out; because you can't tell yourself what he might be up to, or what influence he might set to work over you. This sort of mess is not very probable, you will say; but if it's at all possible--and there's a year for it to be possible in--by George, Sir, I must guard against accidents, for my daughter's sake--I must indeed!"

"In Heaven's name, Mr. Sherwin, pass over all these impossible difficulties of yours! and let me hear what you have finally to propose."

"Gently, my dear Sir! gently, gently, gently! I propose to begin with: that you should marry my daughter--privately marry her--in a week's time. Now, pray compose yourself!" (I was looking at him in speechless astonishment.) "Take it easy; pray take it easy! Supposing, then, you marry her in this way, I make one stipulation. I require you to give me your word of honour to leave her at the church door; and for the space of one year never to attempt to see her, except in the presence of a third party. At the end of that time, I will engage to give her to you, as your wife in fact, as well as in name. There! what do you say to that--eh?"

I was too astounded, too overwhelmed, to say anything at that moment; Mr. Sherwin went on:

"This plan of mine, you see, reconciles everything. If any accident does happen, and we are discovered, why your father can do nothing to stop the match, because the match will have been already made. And, at the same time, I secure a year's delay, for the formation of her constitution, and the finishing of her accomplishments, and so forth. Besides, what an opportunity this gives of sailing as near the wind as you choose, in breaking the thing, bit by bit, to your father, without fear of consequences, in case he should run rough after all. Upon my honour, my dear Sir, I think I deserve some credit for hitting on this plan--it makes everything so right and straight, and suits of course the wishes of all parties! I need hardly say that you shall have every facility for seeing Margaret, under the restrictions--under the restrictions, you understand. People may talk about your visits; but having got the certificate, and knowing it's all safe and settled, I shan't care for that. Well, what do you say? take time to think, if you wish it--only remember that I have the most perfect confidence in your honour, and that I act from a fatherly feeling for the interests of my dear girl!" He stopped, out of breath from the extraordinary volubility of his long harangue.

Some men more experienced in the world, less mastered by love than I was, would, in my position, have recognised this proposal an unfair trial of self-restraint--perhaps, something like an unfair humiliation as well. Others

have detected the selfish motives which suggested it: the mean distrust of my honour, integrity, and firmness of purpose which it implied; and the equally mean anxiety on Sherwin's part to clench his profitable bargain at once, for fear it might be repented of. I discerned nothing of this. As soon as I had recovered from the natural astonishment of the first few moments, I only saw in the strange plan proposed to me, a certainty of assuring--no matter with what sacrifice, what hazard, or what delay--the ultimate triumph of my love. When Mr. Sherwin had ceased speaking, I replied at once:

"I accept your conditions--I accept them with all my heart."

He was hardly prepared for so complete and so sudden an acquiescence in his proposal, and looked absolutely startled by it, at first. But soon resuming his self-possession--his wily, "business-like" self-possession--he started up, and shook me vehemently by the hand.

"Delighted--most delighted, my dear Sir, to find how soon we understand each other, and that we pull together so well. We must have another glass; hang it, we really must! a toast, you know; a toast you can't help drinking--your wife! Ha! ha!--I had you there!--my dear, dear Margaret, God bless her!"

"We may consider all difficulties finally settled then," I said, anxious to close my interview with Mr. Sherwin as speedily as possible.

"Decidedly so. Done, and double done, I may say. There will be a little insurance on your life, that I shall ask you to effect for dear Margaret's sake; and perhaps, a memorandum of agreement, engaging to settle a certain proportion of any property you may become possessed of, on her and her children. You see I am looking forward to my grandfather days already! But this can wait for a future occasion--say in a day or two."

"Then I presume there will be no objection to my seeing Miss Sherwin now?"

"None whatever---at once, if you like. This way, my dear Sir; this way," and he led me across the passage, into the dining-room.

This apartment was furnished with less luxury, but with more bad taste (if possible) than the room we had just left. Near the window sat Margaret--it was the same window at which I had seen her, on the evening when I wandered into the square, after our meeting in the omnibus. The cage with the canary-bird hung in the same place. I just noticed--with a momentary surprise--that Mrs. Sherwin was sitting far away from her daughter, at the

other end of the room; and then placed myself by Margaret's side. She was dressed in pale yellow--a colour which gave new splendour to her dark complexion and magnificently dark hair. Once more, all my doubts, all my self-upbraidings vanished, and gave place to the exquisite sense of happiness, the glow of joy and hope and love which seemed to rush over my heart, the moment I looked at her.

After staying in the room about five minutes, Mr. Sherwin whispered to his wife, and left us. Mrs. Sherwin still kept her place; but she said nothing, and hardly turned to look round at us more than once or twice. Perhaps she was occupied by her own thoughts; perhaps, from a motive of delicacy, she abstained even from an appearance of watching her daughter or watching me. Whatever feelings influenced her, I cared not to speculate on them. It was enough that I had the privilege of speaking to Margaret uninterruptedly; of declaring my love at last, without hesitation and without reserve.

How much I had to say to her, and how short a time seemed to be left me that evening to say it in! How short a time to tell her all the thoughts of the past which she had created in me; all the self-sacrifice to which I had cheerfully consented for her sake; all the anticipations of future happiness which were concentrated in her, which drew their very breath of life, only from the prospect of her rewarding love! She spoke but little; yet even that little it was a new delight to hear. She smiled now; she let me take her hand, and made no attempt to withdraw it. The evening had closed in; the darkness was stealing fast upon us; the still, dead-still figure of Mrs. Sherwin, always in the same place and the same attitude, grew fainter and fainter to the eye, across the distance of the room--but no thought of time, no thought of home ever once crossed my mind. I could have sat at the window with Margaret the long night through; without an idea of numbering the hours as they passed.

Ere long, however, Mr. Sherwin entered the room again, and effectually roused me by approaching and speaking to us. I saw that I had stayed long enough, and that we were not to be left together again, that night. So I rose and took my leave, having first fixed a time for seeing Margaret on the morrow. Mr. Sherwin accompanied me with great ceremony to the outer door. Just as I was leaving him, he touched me on the arm, and said in his most confidential tones:

"Come an hour earlier, to-morrow; and we'll go and get the licence together. No objection to that--eh? And the marriage, shall we say this day week? Just as you like, you know--don't let me seem to dictate. Ah! no objection to that, either, I see, and no objection on Margaret's side, I'll warrant! With respect

to consents, in the marrying part of the business, there's complete mutuality--isn't there? Good night: God bless you!"

XII.

That night I went home with none of the reluctance or the apprehension which I had felt on the last occasion, when I approached our own door. The assurance of success contained in the events of the afternoon, gave me a trust in my own self-possession--a confidence in my own capacity to parry all dangerous questions--which I had not experienced before. I cared not how soon, or for how long a time, I might find myself in company with Clara or my father. It was well for the preservation of my secret that I was in this frame of mind; for, on opening my study door, I was astonished to see both of them in my room.

Clara was measuring one of my over-crowded book-shelves, with a piece of string; and was apparently just about to compare the length of it with a vacant space on the wall close by, when I came in. Seeing me, she stopped; and looked round significantly at my father, who was standing near her, with a file of papers in his hand.

"You may well feel surprised, Basil, at this invasion of your territory," he said, with peculiar kindness of manner--"you must, however, apply there, to the prime minister of the household," pointing to Clara, "for an explanation. I am only the instrument of a domestic conspiracy on your sister's part."

Clara seemed doubtful whether she should speak. It was the first time I had ever seen such an expression in her face, when she looked into mine.

"We are discovered, papa," she said, after a momentary silence, "and we must explain: but you know I always leave as many explanations as I can to you."

"Very well," said my father smiling; "my task in this instance will be an easy one. I was intercepted, Basil, on my way to my own room by your sister, and taken in here to advise about a new set of bookcases for you, when I ought to have been attending to my own money matters. Clara's idea was to have had these new bookcases made in secret, and put up as a surprise, some day when you were not at home. However, as you have caught her in the act of measuring spaces, with all the skill of an experienced carpenter, and all the impetuosity of an arbitrary young lady who rules supreme over everybody, further concealment is out of the question. We must make a virtue of necessity, and confess everything."

Poor Clara! This was her only return for ten days' utter neglect--and she had been half afraid to tell me of it herself. I approached and thanked her; not very gratefully, I am afraid, for I felt too confused to speak freely. It seemed like a fatality. The more evil I was doing in secret, evil to family ties and family principles, the more good was unconsciously returned to me by my family, through my sister's hands.

"I made no objection, of course, to the bookcase plan," continued my father. "More room is really wanted for the volumes on volumes that you have collected about you; but I certainly suggested a little delay in the execution of the project. The bookcases will, at all events, not be required here for five months to come. This day week we return to the country."

I could not repress a start of astonishment and dismay. Here was a difficulty which I ought to have provided for; but which I had most unaccountably never once thought of, although it was now the period of the year at which on all former occasions we had been accustomed to leave London. This day week too! The very day fixed by Mr. Sherwin for my marriage!

"I am afraid, Sir, I shall not be able to go with you and Clara so soon as you propose. It was my wish to remain in London some time longer." I said this in a low voice, without venturing to look at my sister. But I could not help hearing her exclamation as I spoke, and the tone in which she uttered it.

My father moved nearer to me a step or two, and looked in my face intently, with the firm, penetrating expression which peculiarly characterized him.

"This seems an extraordinary resolution," he said, his tones and manner altering ominously while he spoke. "I thought your sudden absence for the last two days rather odd; but this plan of remaining in London by yourself is really incomprehensible. What can you have to do?"

An excuse--no! not an excuse; let me call things by their right names in these pages--a lie was rising to my lips; but my father checked the utterance of it. He detected my embarrassment immediately, anxiously as I strove to conceal it.

"Stop," he said coldly, while the red flush which meant so much when it rose on his cheek, began to appear there for the first time. "Stop! If you must make excuses, Basil, I must ask no questions. You have a secret which you wish to keep from me; and I beg you will keep it. I have never been accustomed to treat my sons as I would not treat any other gentlemen with whom I may happen to be associated. If they have private affairs, I cannot

interfere with those affairs. My trust in their honour is my only guarantee against their deceiving me; but in the intercourse of gentlemen that is guarantee enough. Remain here as long as you like: we shall be happy to see you in the country, when you are able to leave town."

He turned to Clara. "I suppose, my love, you want me no longer. While I settle my own matters of business, you can arrange about the bookcases with your brother. Whatever you wish, I shall be glad to do." And he left the room without speaking to me, or looking at me again. I sank into a chair, feeling disgraced in my own estimation by the last words he had spoken to me. His trust in my honour was his only guarantee against my deceiving him. As I thought over that declaration, every syllable of it seemed to sear my conscience; to brand Hypocrite on my heart.

I turned towards my sister. She was standing at a little distance from me, silent and pale, mechanically twisting the measuring-string, which she still held between her trembling fingers; and fixing her eyes upon me so lovingly, so mournfully, that my fortitude gave way when I looked at her. At that instant, I seemed to forget everything that had passed since the day when I first met Margaret, and to be restored once more to my old way of life and my old home-sympathies. My head drooped on my breast, and I felt the hot tears forcing themselves into my eyes.

Clara stepped quietly to my side; and sitting down by me in silence, put her arm round my neck.

When I was calmer, she said gently:

"I have been very anxious about you, Basil; and perhaps I have allowed that anxiety to appear more than I ought. Perhaps I have been accustomed to exact too much from you--you have been too ready to please me. But I have been used to it so long; and I have nobody else that I can speak to as I can to you. Papa is very kind; but he can't be what you are to me exactly; and Ralph does not live with us now, and cared little about me, I am afraid, when he did. I have friends, but friends are not--"

She stopped again; her voice was failing her. For a moment, she struggled to keep her self-possession--struggled as only women can--and succeeded in the effort. She pressed her arm closer round my neck; but her tones were steadier and clearer when she resumed:

"It will not be very easy for me to give up our country rides and walks together, and the evening talk that we always had at dusk in the old library

at the park. But I think I can resign all this, and go away alone with papa, for the first time, without making you melancholy by anything I say or do at parting, if you will only promise that when you are in any difficulty you will let me be of some use. I think I could always be of use, because I should always feel an interest in anything that concerned you. I don't want to intrude on your secret; but if that secret should ever bring you trouble or distress (which I hope and pray it may not), I want you to have confidence in my being able to help you, in some way, through any mischances. Let me go into the country, Basil, knowing that you can still put trust in me, even though a time should come when you can put trust in no one else--let me know this: do let me!"

I gave her the assurance she desired--gave it with my whole heart. She seemed to have recovered all her old influence over me by the few simple words she had spoken. The thought crossed my mind, whether I ought not in common gratitude to confide my secret to her at once, knowing as I did, that it would be safe in her keeping, however the disclosure might startle or pain her, I believe I should have told her all, in another minute, but for a mere accident--the trifling interruption caused by a knock at the door.

It came from one of the servants. My father desired to see Clara on some matter connected with their impending departure for the country. She was unfit enough to obey such a summons at such a time; but with her usual courage in disciplining her own feelings into subserviency to the wishes of any one whom she loved, she determined to obey immediately the message which had been delivered to her. A few moments of silence; a slight trembling soon repressed; a parting kiss for me; these few farewell words of encouragement at the door; "Don't grieve about what papa has said; you have made me feel happy about you, Basil; I will make him feel happy too," and Clara was gone.

With those few minutes of interruption, the time for the disclosure of my secret had passed by. As soon as my sister was out of the room, my former reluctance to trust it to home-keeping returned, and remained unchanged throughout the whole of the long year's probation which I had engaged to pass. But this mattered little. As events turned out, if I had told Clara all, the end would have come in the same way, the fatality would have been accomplished by the same means.

I went out shortly after my sister had left me. I could give myself to no occupation at home, for the rest of that night; and I knew that it would be useless to attempt to sleep just then. As I walked through the streets, bitter thoughts against my father rose in my mind--bitter thoughts against his

inexorable family pride, which imposed on me the concealment and secrecy, under the oppression of which I had already suffered so much--bitter thoughts against those social tyrannies, which take no account of human sympathy and human love, and which my father now impersonated, as it were, to my ideas. Gradually these reflections merged in others that were better. I thought of Clara again; consoling myself with the belief, that, however my father might receive the news of my marriage, I might count upon my sister as certain to love my wife and be kind to her, for my sake. This thought led my heart back to Margaret--led it gently and happily. I went home, calmed and reassured again--at least for the rest of the night.

The events of that week, so fraught with importance for the future of my life, passed with ominous rapidity.

The marriage license was procured; all remaining preliminaries with Mr. Sherwin were adjusted; I saw Margaret every day, and gave myself up more and more unreservedly to the charm that she exercised over me, at each succeeding interview. At home, the bustle of approaching departure; the farewell visitings; the multitudinous minor arrangements preceding a journey to the country, seemed to hurry the hours on faster and faster, as the parting day for Clara, and the marriage day for me, drew near. Incessant interruptions prevented any more lengthened or private conversations with my sister; and my father was hardly ever accessible for more than five minutes together, even to those who specially wished to speak with him. Nothing arose to embarrass or alarm me now, out of my intercourse with home.

The day came. I had not slept during the night that preceded it; so I rose early to look out on the morning.

It is strange how frequently that instinctive belief in omens and predestinations, which we flippantly term Superstition, asserts its natural prerogative even over minds trained to repel it, at the moment of some great event in our lives. I believe this has happened to many more men than ever confessed it; and it happened to me. At any former period of my life, I should have laughed at the bare imputation of a "superstitious" feeling ever having risen in my mind. But now, as I looked on the sky, and saw the black clouds that overspread the whole firmament, and the heavy rain that poured down from them, an irrepressible sinking of the heart came over me. For the last ten days the sun had shone almost uninterruptedly--with my marriage-day came the cloud, the mist and the rain. I tried to laugh myself out of the forebodings which this suggested, and tried in vain.

The departure for the country was to take place at an early hour. We all breakfasted together; the meal was hurried over comfortlessly and silently. My father was either writing notes, or examining the steward's accounts, almost the whole time; and Clara was evidently incapable of uttering a single word, without risking the loss of her self-possession. The silence was so complete, while we sat together at the table, that the fall of the rain outside (which had grown softer and thicker as the morning advanced), and the quick, quiet tread of the servants, as they moved about the room, were audible with a painful distinctness. The oppression of our last family breakfast in London, for that year, had an influence of wretchedness which I cannot describe--which I can never forget.

At last the hour of starting came. Clara seemed afraid to trust herself even to look at me now. She hurriedly drew down her veil the moment the carriage was announced. My father shook hands with me rather coldly. I had hoped he would have said something at parting; but he only bade me farewell in the simplest and shortest manner. I had rather he would have spoken to me in anger than restrained himself as he did, to what the commonest forms of courtesy required. There was but one more slight, after this, that he could cast on me; and he did not spare it. While my sister was taking leave of me, he waited at the door of the room to lead her down stairs, as if he knew by intuition that this was the last little parting attention which I had hoped to show her myself.

Clara whispered (in such low, trembling tones that I could hardly hear her):

"Think of what you promised in your study, Basil, whenever you think of me: I will write often."

As she raised her veil for a moment, and kissed me, I felt on my own cheek the tears that were falling fast over hers. I followed her and my father down stairs. When they reached the street, she gave me her hand--it was cold and powerless. I knew that the fortitude she had promised to show, was giving way, in spite of all her efforts to preserve it; so I let her hurry into the carriage without detaining her by any last words. The next instant she and my father were driven rapidly from the door.

When I re-entered the house, my watch showed me that I had still an hour to wait, before it was time to go to North Villa.

Between the different emotions produced by my impressions of the scene I had just passed through, and my anticipations of the scene that was yet to come, I suffered in that one hour as much mental conflict as most men

suffer in a life. It seemed as if I were living out all my feelings in this short interval of delay, and must die at heart when it was over. My restlessness was a torture to me; and yet I could not overcome it. I wandered through the house from room to room, stopping nowhere. I took down book after book from the library, opened them to read, and put them back on the shelves the next instant. Over and over again I walked to the window to occupy myself with what was passing in the street; and each time I could not stay there for one minute together. I went into the picture-gallery, looked along the walls, and yet knew not what I was looking at. At last I wandered into my father's study--the only room I had not yet visited.

A portrait of my mother hung over the fireplace: my eyes turned towards it, and for the first time I came to a long pause. The picture had an influence that quieted me; but what influence I hardly knew. Perhaps it led my spirit up to the spirit that had gone from us--perhaps those secret voices from the unknown world, which only the soul can listen to, were loosed at that moment, and spoke within me. While I sat looking up at the portrait, I grew strangely and suddenly calm before it. My memory flew back to a long illness that I had suffered from, as a child, when my little cradle-couch was placed by my mother's bedside, and she used to sit by me in the dull evenings and hush me to sleep. The remembrance of this brought with it a dread imagining that she might now be hushing my spirit, from her place among the angels of God. A stillness and awe crept over me; and I hid my face in my hands.

The striking of the hour from a clock in the room, startled me back to the outer world. I left the house and went at once to North Villa.

Margaret and her father and mother were in the drawing-room when I entered it. I saw immediately that neither of the two latter had passed the morning calmly. The impending event of the day had exercised its agitating influence over them, as well as over me. Mrs. Sherwin's face was pale to her very lips: not a word escaped her. Mr. Sherwin endeavoured to assume the self-possession which he was evidently far from feeling, by walking briskly up and down the room, and talking incessantly--asking the most common-place questions, and making the most common-place jokes. Margaret, to my surprise, showed fewer symptoms of agitation than either of her parents. Except when the colour came and went occasionally on her cheek, I could detect no outward evidences of emotion in her at all.

The church was near at hand. As we proceeded to it, the rain fell heavily, and the mist of the morning was thickening to a fog. We had to wait in the vestry for the officiating clergyman. All the gloom and dampness of the day

seemed to be collected in this room--a dark, cold, melancholy place, with one window which opened on a burial-ground steaming in the wet. The rain pattered monotonously on the pavement outside. While Mr. Sherwin exchanged remarks on the weather with the clerk, (a tall, lean man, arrayed in a black gown), I sat silent, near Mrs. Sherwin and Margaret, looking with mechanical attention at the white surplices which hung before me in a half-opened cupboard--at the bottle of water and tumbler, and the long-shaped books, bound in brown leather, which were on the table. I was incapable of speaking--incapable even of thinking--during that interval of expectation.

At length the clergyman arrived, and we went into the church--the church, with its desolate array of empty pews, and its chill, heavy, week-day atmosphere. As we ranged ourselves round the altar, a confusion overspread all my faculties. My sense of the place I was in, and even of the ceremony in which I took part, grew more and more vague and doubtful every minute. My attention wandered throughout the whole service. I stammered and made mistakes in uttering the responses. Once or twice I detected myself in feeling impatient at the slow progress of the ceremony--it seemed to be doubly, trebly longer than its usual length. Mixed up with this impression was another, wild and monstrous as if it had been produced by a dream--an impression that my father had discovered my secret, and was watching me from some hidden place in the church; watching through the service, to denounce and abandon me publicly at the end. This morbid fancy grew and grew on me until the termination of the ceremony, until we had left the church and returned to the vestry once more.

The fees were paid; we wrote our names in the books and on the certificate; the clergyman quietly wished me happiness; the clerk solemnly imitated him; the pew-opener smiled and curtseyed; Mr. Sherwin made congratulatory speeches, kissed his daughter, shook hands with me, frowned a private rebuke at his wife for shedding tears, and, finally, led the way with Margaret out of the vestry. The rain was still falling, as they got into the carriage. The fog was still thickening, as I stood alone under the portico of the church, and tried to realise to myself that I was married.

Married! The son of the proudest man in England, the inheritor of a name written on the roll of Battle Abbey, wedded to a linen-draper's daughter! And what a marriage! What a condition weighed on it! What a probation was now to follow it! Why had I consented so easily to Mr. Sherwin's proposals? Would he not have given way, if I had only been resolute enough to insist on my own conditions?

How useless to inquire! I had made the engagement and must abide by it--

abide by it cheerfully until the year was over, and she was mine for ever. This must be my all-sufficing thought for the future. No more reflections on consequences, no more forebodings about the effect of the disclosure of my secret on my family--the leap into a new life had been taken, and, lead where it might, it was a leap that could never be retraced!

Mr. Sherwin had insisted, with the immovable obstinacy which characterises all feeble-minded people in the management of their important affairs, that the first clause in our agreement (the leaving my wife at the church-door) should be performed to the letter. As a due compensation for this, I was to dine at North Villa that day. How should I employ the interval that was to elapse before the dinner-hour?

I went home, and had my horse saddled. I was in no mood for remaining in an empty house, in no mood for calling on any of my friends--I was fit for nothing but a gallop through the rain. All my wearing and depressing emotions of the morning, had now merged into a wild excitement of body and mind. When the horse was brought round, I saw with delight that the groom could hardly hold him. "Keep him well in hand, Sir," said the man, "he's not been out for three days." I was just in the humour for such a ride as the caution promised me.

And what a ride it was, when I fairly got out of London; and the afternoon brightening of the foggy atmosphere, showed the smooth, empty high road before me! The dashing through the rain that still fell; the feel of the long, powerful, regular stride of the horse under me; the thrill of that physical sympathy which establishes itself between the man and the steed; the whirling past carts and waggons, saluted by the frantic barking of dogs inside them; the flying by roadside alehouses, with the cheering of boys and half-drunken men sounding for an instant behind me, then lost in the distance--this was indeed to occupy, to hurry on, to annihilate the tardy hours of solitude on my wedding day, exactly as my heart desired!

I got home wet through; but with my body in a glow from the exercise, with my spirits boiling up at fever heat. When I arrived at North Villa, the change in my manner astonished every one. At dinner, I required no pressing now to partake of the sherry which Mr. Sherwin was so fond of extolling, nor of the port which he brought out afterwards, with a preliminary account of the vintage-date of the wine, and the price of each bottle. My spirits, factitious as they were, never flagged. Every time I looked at Margaret, the sight of her stimulated them afresh. She seemed pre-occupied, and was unusually silent during dinner; but her beauty was just that voluptuous beauty which is loveliest in repose. I had never felt its influence so powerful over me as I felt

it then.

In the drawing-room, Margaret's manner grew more familiar, more confident towards me than it had ever been before. She spoke to me in warmer tones, looked at me with warmer looks. A hundred little incidents marked our wedding-evening--trifles that love treasures up--which still remain in my memory. One among them, at least, will never depart from it: I first kissed her on that evening.

Mr. Sherwin had gone out of the room; Mrs. Sherwin was at the other end of it, watering some plants at the window; Margaret, by her father's desire, was showing me some rare prints. She handed me a magnifying glass, through which I was to look at a particular part of one of the engravings, that was considered a master-piece of delicate workmanship. Instead of applying the magnifying test to the print, for which I cared nothing, I laughingly applied it to Margaret's face. Her lovely lustrous black eye seemed to flash into mine through the glass; her warm, quick breathing played on my cheek--it was but for an instant, and in that instant I kissed her for the first time. What sensations the kiss gave me then!--what remembrances it has left me now!

It was one more proof how tenderly, how purely I loved her, that, before this time, I had feared to take the first love-privilege which I had longed to assert, and might well have asserted, before. Men may not understand this; women, I believe, will.

The hour of departure arrived; the inexorable hour which was to separate me from my wife on my wedding evening. Shall I confess what I felt, on the first performance of my ill-considered promise to Mr. Sherwin? No: I kept this a secret from Margaret; I will keep it a secret here.

I took leave of her as hurriedly and abruptly as possible--I could not trust myself to quit her in any other way. She had contrived to slip aside into the darkest part of the room, so that I only saw her face dimly at parting.

I went home at once. When I lay down to sleep--then the ordeal which I had been unconsciously preparing for myself throughout the day, began to try me. Every nerve in my body, strung up to the extremest point of tension since the morning, now at last gave way. I felt my limbs quivering, till the bed shook under me. I was possessed by a gloom and horror, caused by no thought, and producing no thought: the thinking faculty seemed paralysed within me, altogether. The physical and mental reaction, after the fever and agitation of the day, was so sudden and severe, that the faintest noise from the street now terrified--yes, literally terrified me. The whistling of the wind--

which had risen since sunset--made me start up in bed, with my heart throbbing, and my blood all chill. When no sounds were audible, then I listened for them to come--listened breathlessly, without daring to move. At last, the agony of nervous prostration grew more than I could bear--grew worse even than the child's horror of walking in the darkness, and sleeping alone on the bed-room floor, which had overcome me, almost from the first moment when I laid down. I groped my way to the table and lit the candle again; then wrapped my dressing-gown round me, and sat shuddering near the light, to watch the weary hours out till morning.

And this was my wedding-night! This was how the day ended which had begun by my marriage with Margaret Sherwin!