

BLIND LOVE

THE PROLOGUE

I

SOON after sunrise, on a cloudy morning in the year 1881, a special messenger disturbed the repose of Dennis Howmore, at his place of residence in the pleasant Irish town of Ardoon.

Well acquainted apparently with the way upstairs, the man thumped on a bed-room door, and shouted his message through it: "The master wants you, and mind you don't keep him waiting."

The person sending this peremptory message was Sir Giles Mountjoy of Ardoon, knight and banker. The person receiving the message was Sir Giles's head clerk. As a matter of course, Dennis Howmore dressed himself at full speed, and hastened to his employer's private house on the outskirts of the town.

He found Sir Giles in an irritable and anxious state of mind. A letter lay open on the banker's bed, his night-cap was crumpled crookedly on his head, he was in too great a hurry to remember the claims of politeness, when the clerk said "Good morning."

"Dennis, I have got something for you to do. It must be kept a secret, and it allows of no delay."

"Is it anything connected with business, sir?"

The banker lost his temper. "How can you be such an infernal fool as to suppose that anything connected with business could happen at this time in the morning? Do you know the first milestone on the road to Garvan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Go to the milestone, and take care that nobody sees you when you get there. Look at the back of the stone. If you discover an Object which appears to have been left in that situation on the ground, bring it to me; and

don't forget that the most impatient man in all Ireland is waiting for you."

Not a word of explanation followed these extraordinary instructions.

The head clerk set forth on his errand, with his mind dwelling on the national tendencies to conspiracy and assassination. His employer was not a popular person. Sir Giles had paid rent when he owed it; and, worse still, was disposed to remember in a friendly spirit what England had done for Ireland, in the course of the last fifty years. If anything appeared to justify distrust of the mysterious Object of which he was in search, Dennis resolved to be vigilantly on the look-out for a gun-barrel, whenever he passed a hedge on his return journey to the town.

Arrived at the milestone, he discovered on the ground behind it one Object only--a fragment of a broken tea-cup.

Naturally enough, Dennis hesitated. It seemed to be impossible that the earnest and careful instructions which he had received could relate to such a trifle as this. At the same time, he was acting under orders which were as positive as tone, manner, and language could make them. Passive obedience appeared to be the one safe course to take--at the risk of a reception, irritating to any man's self-respect, when he returned to his employer with a broken teacup in his hand.

The event entirely failed to justify his misgivings. There could be no doubt that Sir Giles attached serious importance to the contemptible discovery made at the milestone. After having examined and re-examined the fragment, he announced his intention of sending the clerk on a second errand--still without troubling himself to explain what his incomprehensible instructions meant.

"If I am not mistaken," he began, "the Reading Rooms, in our town, open as early as nine. Very well. Go to the Rooms this morning, on the stroke of the clock." He stopped, and consulted the letter which lay open on his bed. "Ask the librarian," he continued, "for the third volume of Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.' Open the book at pages seventy-eight and seventy-nine. If you find a piece of paper between those two leaves, take possession of it when nobody is looking at you, and bring it to me. That's all, Dennis. And bear in mind that I shall not recover the use of my patience till I see you again."

On ordinary occasions, the head clerk was not a man accustomed to insist on what was due to his dignity. At the same time he was a sensible human

being, conscious of the consideration to which his responsible place in the office entitled him. Sir Giles's irritating reserve, not even excused by a word of apology, reached the limits of his endurance. He respectfully protested.

"I regret to find, sir," he said, "that I have lost my place in my employer's estimation. The man to whom you confide the superintendence of your clerks and the transaction of your business has, I venture to think, some claim (under the present circumstances) to be trusted."

The banker was now offended on his side.

"I readily admit your claim," he answered, "when you are sitting at your desk in my office. But, even in these days of strikes, co-operations, and bank holidays, an employer has one privilege left--he has not ceased to be a Man, and he has not forfeited a man's right to keep his own secrets. I fail to see anything in my conduct which has given you just reason to complain."

Dennis, rebuked, made his bow in silence, and withdrew.

Did these acts of humility mean that he submitted? They meant exactly the contrary. He had made up his mind that Sir Giles Mountjoy's motives should, sooner or later, cease to be mysteries to Sir Giles Mountjoy's clerk.

II

CAREFULLY following his instructions, he consulted the third volume of Gibbon's great History, and found, between the seventy-eighth and seventy-ninth pages, something remarkable this time.

It was a sheet of delicately-made paper, pierced with a number of little holes, infinitely varied in size, and cut with the smoothest precision. Having secured this curious object, while the librarian's back was turned, Dennis Howmore reflected.

A page of paper, unintelligibly perforated for some purpose unknown, was in itself a suspicious thing. And what did suspicion suggest to the inquiring mind in South-Western Ireland, before the suppression of the Land League? Unquestionably---Police!

On the way back to his employer, the banker's clerk paid a visit to an old friend--a journalist by profession, and a man of varied learning and experience as well. Invited to inspect the remarkable morsel of paper, and to discover the object with which the perforations had been made, the authority consulted proved to be worthy of the trust reposed in him. Dennis left the newspaper office an enlightened man--with information at the disposal of Sir Giles, and with a sense of relief which expressed itself irreverently in these words: "Now I have got him!"

The bewildered banker looked backwards and forwards from the paper to the clerk, and from the clerk to the paper. "I don't understand it," he said. "Do you?"

Still preserving the appearance of humility, Dennis asked leave to venture on a guess. The perforated paper looked, as he thought, like a Puzzle. "If we wait for a day or two," he suggested, "the Key to it may possibly reach us."

On the next day, nothing happened. On the day after, a second letter made another audacious demand on the fast failing patience of Sir Giles Mountjoy.

Even the envelope proved to be a Puzzle on this occasion; the postmark was "Ardoon." In other words, the writer had used the postman as a messenger, while he or his accomplice was actually in the town, posting the letter within half-a-minute's walk of the bank! The contents presented an impenetrable

mystery, the writing looked worthy of a madman. Sentences appeared in the wildest state of confusion, and words were so mutilated as to be unintelligible. This time the force of circumstances was more than Sir Giles could resist. He took the clerk into his confidence at last.

"Let us begin at the beginning," he said. "There is the letter you saw on my bed, when I first sent for you. I found it waiting on my table when I woke; and I don't know who put it there. Read it."

Dennis read as follows:

"Sir Giles Mountjoy,--I have a disclosure to make, in which one of the members of your family is seriously interested. Before I can venture to explain myself, I must be assured that I can trust to your good faith. As a test of this, I require you to fulfil the two conditions that follow--and to do it without the slightest loss of time. I dare not trust you yet with my address, or my signature. Any act of carelessness, on my part, might end fatally for the true friend who writes these lines. If you neglect this warning, you will regret it to the end of your life."

To the conditions on which the letter insisted there is no need to allude. They had been complied with when the discoveries were made at the back of the milestone, and between the pages of Gibson's history. Sir Giles had already arrived at the conclusion that a conspiracy was in progress to assassinate him, and perhaps to rob the bank. The wiser head clerk pointed to the perforated paper and the incomprehensible writing received that morning. "If we can find out what these mean," he said, "you may be better able, sir, to form a correct opinion."

"And who is to do that?" the banker asked.

"I can but try, sir," was the modest reply, "if you see no objection to my making the attempt."

Sir Giles approved of the proposed experiment, silently and satirically, by a bend of his head.

Too discreet a man to make a suspiciously ready use of the information which he had privately obtained, Dennis took care that his first attempt should not be successful. After modestly asking permission to try again, he ventured on the second occasion to arrive at a happy discovery. Lifting the perforated paper, he placed it delicately over the page which contained the unintelligible writing. Words and sentences now appeared (through the holes

in the paper) in their right spelling and arrangement, and addressed Sir Giles in these terms:

"I beg to thank you, sir, for complying with my conditions. You have satisfied me of your good faith. At the same time, it is possible that you may hesitate to trust a man who is not yet able to admit you to his confidence. The perilous position in which I stand obliges me to ask for two or three days more of delay, before I can safely make an appointment with you. Pray be patient--and on no account apply for advice or protection to the police."

"Those last words," Sir Giles declared, "are conclusive! The sooner I am under the care of the law the better. Take my card to the police-office."

"May I say a word first, sir?"

"Do you mean that you don't agree with me?"

"I mean that."

"You were always an obstinate man Dennis; and it grows on you as you get older. Never mind! Let's have it out. Who do you say is the person pointed at in these rascally letters?"

The head clerk took up the first letter of the two and pointed to the opening sentence: "Sir Giles Mountjoy, I have a disclosure to make in which one of the members of your family is seriously interested." Dennis emphatically repeated the words: "one of the members of your family." His employer regarded him with a broad stare of astonishment.

"One of the members of my family?" Sir Giles repeated, on his side. "Why, man alive, what are you thinking of? I'm an old bachelor, and I haven't got a family."

"There is your brother, sir."

"My brother is in France--out of the way of the wretches who are threatening me. I wish I was with him!"

"There are your brother's two sons, Sir Giles."

"Well? And what is there to be afraid of? My nephew, Hugh, is in London--and, mind! not on a political errand. I hope, before long, to hear that he is going to be married--if the strangest and nicest girl in England will have

him. What's wrong now?"

Dennis explained. "I only wished to say, sir, that I was thinking of your other nephew."

Sir Giles laughed. "Arthur in danger!" he exclaimed. "As harmless a young man as ever lived. The worst one can say of him is that he is throwing away his money--farming in Kerry."

"Excuse me, Sir Giles; there's not much chance of his throwing away his money, where he is now. Nobody will venture to take his money. I met with one of Mr. Arthur's neighbours at the market yesterday. Your nephew is boycotted."

"So much the better," the obstinate banker declared. "He will be cured of his craze for farming; and he will come back to the place I am keeping for him in the office."

"God grant it!" the clerk said fervently.

For the moment, Sir Giles was staggered. "Have you heard something that you haven't told me yet?" he asked.

"No, sir. I am only bearing in mind something which--with all respect--I think you have forgotten. The last tenant on that bit of land in Kerry refused to pay his rent. Mr. Arthur has taken what they call an evicted farm. It's my firm belief," said the head clerk, rising and speaking earnestly, "that the person who has addressed those letters to you knows Mr. Arthur, and knows he is in danger--and is trying to save your nephew (by means of your influence), at the risk of his own life."

Sir Giles shook his head. "I call that a far-fetched interpretation, Dennis. If what you say is true, why didn't the writer of those anonymous letters address himself to Arthur, instead of to me?"

"I gave it as my opinion just now, sir, that the writer of the letter knew Mr. Arthur."

"So you did. And what of that?"

Dennis stood to his guns.

"Anybody who is acquainted with Mr. Arthur," he persisted, "knows that

(with all sorts of good qualities) the young gentleman is headstrong and rash. If a friend told him he was in danger on the farm, that would be enough of itself to make him stop where he is, and brave it out. Whereas you, sir, are known to be cautious and careful, and farseeing and discreet." He might have added: And cowardly and obstinate, and narrow-minded and inflated by stupid self-esteem. But respect for his employer had blindfolded the clerk's observation for many a long year past. If one man may be born with the heart of a lion, another man may be born with the mind of a mule. Dennis's master was one of the other men.

"Very well put," Sir Giles answered indulgently. "Time will show, if such an entirely unimportant person as my nephew Arthur is likely to be assassinated. That allusion to one of the members of my family is a mere equivocation, designed to throw me off my guard. Rank, money, social influence, unswerving principles, mark ME out as a public character. Go to the police-office, and let the best man who happens to be off duty come here directly."

Good Dennis Howmore approached the door very unwillingly. It was opened, from the outer side, before he had reached that end of the room. One of the bank porters announced a visitor.

"Miss Henley wishes to know, sir, if you can see her."

Sir Giles looked agreeably surprised. He rose with alacrity to receive the lady.

III

WHEN Iris Henley dies there will, in all probability, be friends left who remember her and talk of her--and there may be strangers present at the time (women for the most part), whose curiosity will put questions relating to her personal appearance. No replies will reward them with trustworthy information. Miss Henley's chief claim to admiration lay in a remarkable mobility of expression, which reflected every change of feeling peculiar to the nature of a sweet and sensitive woman. For this reason, probably, no descriptions of her will agree with each other. No existing likenesses will represent her. The one portrait that was painted of Iris is only recognisable by partial friends of the artist. In and out of London, photographic likenesses were taken of her. They have the honour of resembling the portraits of Shakespeare in this respect--compared with one another, it is not possible to discover that they present the same person. As for the evidence offered by the loving memory of her friends, it is sure to be contradictory in the last degree. She had a charming face, a commonplace face, an intelligent face--a poor complexion, a delicate complexion, no complexion at all--eyes that were expressive of a hot temper, of a bright intellect, of a firm character, of an affectionate disposition, of a truthful nature, of hysterical sensibility, of inveterate obstinacy--a figure too short; no, just the right height; no, neither one thing nor the other; elegant, if you like--dress shabby: oh, surely not; dress quiet and simple; no, something more than that; ostentatiously quiet, theatrically simple, worn with the object of looking unlike other people. In one last word, was this mass of contradictions generally popular, in the time when it was a living creature? Yes--among the men. No--not invariably. The man of all others who ought to have been fondest of her was the man who behaved cruelly to Iris--her own father. And, when the poor creature married (if she did marry), how many of you attended the wedding? Not one of us! And when she died, how many of you were sorry for her? All of us! What? no difference of opinion in that one particular? On the contrary, perfect concord, thank God.

Let the years roll back, and let Iris speak for herself, at the memorable time when she was in the prime of her life, and when a stormy career was before her.

IV

BEING Miss Henley's godfather, Sir Giles was a privileged person. He laid his hairy hands on her shoulders, and kissed her on either cheek. After that prefatory act of endearment, he made his inquiries. What extraordinary combination of events had led Iris to leave London, and had brought her to visit him in his banking-house at Ardoon?

"I wanted to get away from home," she answered; "and having nobody to go to but my godfather, I thought I should like to see You."

"Alone!" cried Sir Giles.

"No--with my maid to keep me company."

"Only your maid, Iris? Surely you have acquaintances among young ladies like yourself?"

"Acquaintances--yes. No friends."

"Does your father approve of what you have done?"

"Will you grant me a favour, godpapa?"

"Yes--if I can."

"Don't insist on my answering your last question."

The faint colour that had risen in her face, when she entered the room, left it. At the same time, the expression of her mouth altered. The lips closed firmly; revealing that strongest of all resolutions which is founded on a keen sense of wrong. She looked older than her age: what she might be ten years hence, she was now. Sir Giles understood her. He got up, and took a turn in the room. An old habit, of which he had cured himself with infinite difficulty when he was made a Knight, showed itself again. He put his hands in his pockets.

"You and your father have had another quarrel," he said, stopping opposite Iris.

"I don't deny it," she replied.

"Who is to blame?"

She smiled bitterly. "The woman is always to blame."

"Did your father tell you that?"

"My father reminded me that I was twenty-one years old, last birthday--and told me that I could do as I liked. I understood him, and I left the house."

"You will go back again, I suppose?"

"I don't know."

Sir Giles began pacing the room once more. His rugged face, telling its story of disaster and struggle in early life, showed signs of disappointment and distress.

"Hugh promised to write to me," he said, "and he has not written. I know what that means; I know what you have done to offend your father. My nephew has asked you to marry him for the second time. And for the second time you have refused."

Her face softened; its better and younger aspect revived. "Yes," she said, sadly and submissively; "I have refused him again."

Sir Giles lost his temper. "What the devil is your objection to Hugh?" he burst out.

"My father said the same thing to me," she replied, "almost in the same words. I made him angry when I tried to give my reason. I don't want to make you angry, too."

He took no notice of this. "Isn't Hugh a good fellow?" he went on. "Isn't he affectionate? and kindhearted? and honourable?--aye, and a handsome man too, if you come to that."

"Hugh is all that you say. I like him; I admire him; I owe to his kindness some of the happiest days of my sad life, and I am grateful--oh, with all my heart, I am grateful to Hugh!"

"If that's true, Iris----"

"Every word of it is true."

"I say, if that's true--there's no excuse for you. I hate perversity in a young woman! Why don't you marry him?"

"Try to feel for me," she said gently; "I can't love him."

Her tone said more to the banker than her words had expressed. The secret sorrow of her life, which was known to her father, was known also to Sir Giles.

"Now we have come to it at last!" he said. "You can't love my nephew Hugh. And you won't tell me the reason why, because your sweet temper shrinks from making me angry. Shall I mention the reason for you, my dear? I can do it in two words--Lord Harry."

She made no reply; she showed no sign of feeling at what he had just said. Her head sank a little; her hands clasped themselves on her lap; the obstinate resignation which can submit to anything hardened her face, stiffened her figure--and that was all.

The banker was determined not to spare her.

"It's easy to see," he resumed, "that you have not got over your infatuation for that vagabond yet. Go where he may, into the vilest places and among the lowest people, he carries your heart along with him. I wonder you are not ashamed of such an attachment as that."

He had stung her at last. She roused herself, and answered him.

"Harry has led a wild life," she said; "he has committed serious faults, and he may live to do worse than he has done yet. To what degradation, bad company, and a bad bringing-up may yet lead him, I leave his enemies to foresee. But I tell you this, he has redeeming qualities which you, and people like you, are not good Christians enough to discover. He has friends who can still appreciate him--your nephew, Arthur Mountjoy, is one of them. Oh, I know it by Arthur's letters to me! Blame Lord Harry as you may, I tell you he has the capacity for repentance in him, and one day--when it is too late, I dare say--he will show it. I can never be his wife. We are parted, never in all likelihood to meet again. Well, he is the only man whom I have ever loved; and he is the only man whom I ever shall love. If you think this state of mind proves that I am as bad as he is, I won't contradict you. Do we any of us know how bad we are----? Have you heard of Harry lately?"

The sudden transition, from an earnest and devoted defence of the man, to an easy and familiar inquiry about him, startled Sir Giles.

For the moment, he had nothing to say; Iris had made him think. She had shown a capacity for mastering her strongest feelings, at the moment when they threatened to overcome her, which is very rarely found in a young woman. How to manage her was a problem for patient resolution to solve. The banker's obstinacy, rather than his conviction, had encouraged him to hold to the hope of Hugh's marriage, even after his nephew had been refused for the second time. His headstrong goddaughter had come to visit him of her own accord. She had not forgotten the days of her childhood, when he had some influence over her--when she had found him kinder to her than her father had ever been. Sir Giles saw that he had taken the wrong tone with Iris. His anger had not alarmed her; his opinion had not influenced her. In Hugh's interests, he determined to try what consideration and indulgence would do towards cultivating the growth of her regard for him. Finding that she had left her maid and her luggage at the hotel, he hospitably insisted on their removal to his own house.

"While you are in Ardoon, Iris, you are my guest," he said.

She pleased him by readily accepting the invitation--and then annoyed him by asking again if he had heard anything of Lord Harry.

He answered shortly and sharply: "I have heard nothing. What is your last news of him?"

"News," she said, "which I sincerely hope is not true. An Irish paper has been sent to me, which reports that he has joined the secret society--nothing better than a society of assassins, I am afraid--which is known by the name of the Invincibles."

As she mentioned that formidable brotherhood, Dennis Howmore returned from the police-office. He announced that a Sergeant was then waiting to receive instructions from Sir Giles.

V

IRIS rose to go. Her godfather courteously stopped her.

"Wait here," he said, "until I have spoken to the Sergeant, and I will escort you to my house. My clerk will do what is necessary at the hotel. You don't look quite satisfied. Is the arrangement that I have proposed not agreeable to you?"

Iris assured him that she gratefully acceded to the arrangement. At the same time, she confessed to having been a little startled, on discovering that he was in consultation with the police. "I remember that we are in Ireland," she explained, "and I am foolish enough to fear that you may be in some danger. May I hope that it is only a trifle?"

Only a trifle! Among ether deficient sensibilities in the strange nature of Iris, Sir Giles had observed an imperfect appreciation of the dignity of his social position. Here was a new proof of it! The temptation to inspire sentiments of alarm--not unmingled with admiration--in the mind of his insensible goddaughter, by exhibiting himself as a public character threatened by a conspiracy, was more than the banker's vanity could resist. Before he left the room, he instructed Dennis to tell Miss Henley what had happened, and to let her judge for herself whether he had been needlessly alarmed by, what she was pleased to call, "a mere trifle."

Dennis Howmore must have been more than mortal, if he could have related his narrative of events without being influenced by his own point of view. On the first occasion when he mentioned Arthur Mountjoy's name, Iris showed a sudden interest in his strange story which took him by surprise.

"You know Mr. Arthur?" he said.

"Knew him!" Iris repeated. "He was my playfellow when we were both children. He is as dear to me as if he was my brother. Tell me at once--is he really in danger?"

Dennis honestly repeated what he had already said, on that subject, to his master. Miss Henley, entirely agreeing with him, was eager to warn Arthur of his position. There was no telegraphic communication with the village which was near his farm. She could only write to him, and she did write to him, by that day's post--having reasons of her own for anxiety, which forbade her to

show her letter to Dennis. Well aware of the devoted friendship which united Lord Harry and Arthur Mountjoy--and bearing in mind the newspaper report of the Irish lord's rash association with the Invincibles--her fears now identified the noble vagabond as the writer of the anonymous letters, which had so seriously excited her godfather's doubts of his own safety.

When Sir Giles returned, and took her with him to his house, he spoke of his consultation with the Sergeant in terms which increased her dread of what might happen in the future. She was a dull and silent guest, during the interval that elapsed before it would be possible to receive Arthur's reply. The day arrived--and the post brought no relief to her anxieties. The next day passed without a letter. On the morning of the fourth day, Sir Giles rose later than usual. His correspondence was sent to him from the office, at breakfast-time. After opening one of the letters, he dispatched a messenger in hot haste to the police.

"Look at that," he said, handing the letter to Iris. "Does the assassin take me for a fool?"

She read the lines that follow:

"Unforeseen events force me, Sir Giles, to run a serious risk. I must speak to you, and it must not be by daylight. My one hope of safety is in darkness. Meet me at the first milestone, on the road to Garvan, when the moon sets at ten o'clock to-night. No need to mention your name. The password is: Fidelity."

"Do you mean to go?" Iris asked.

"Do I mean to be murdered!" Sir Giles broke out. "My dear child, do pray try to think before you speak. The Sergeant will represent me, of course."

"And take the man prisoner?" Iris added.

"Certainly!"

With that startling reply, the banker hurried away to receive the police in another room. Iris dropped into the nearest chair. The turn that the affair had now taken filled her with unutterable dismay.

Sir Giles came back, after no very long absence, composed and smiling. The course of proceeding had been settled to his complete satisfaction.

Dressed in private clothes, the Sergeant was to go to the milestone at the appointed time, representing the banker in the darkness, and giving the password. He was to be followed by two of his men who would wait in concealment, within hearing of his whistle, if their services were required. "I want to see the ruffian when he is safely handcuffed," Sir Giles explained; "and I have arranged to wait for the police, to-night, at my office."

There was but one desperate way that Iris could now discern of saving the man who had confided in her godfather's honour, and whose trust had already been betrayed. Never had she loved the outlawed Irish lord--the man whom she was forbidden, and rightly forbidden, to marry--as she loved him at that moment. Let the risk be what it might, this resolute woman had determined that the Sergeant should not be the only person who arrived at the milestone, and gave the password. There was one devoted friend to Lord Harry, whom she could always trust--and that friend was herself.

Sir Giles withdrew, to look after his business at the bank. She waited until the clock had struck the servants' dinner hour, and then ascended the stairs to her godfather's dressing-room. Opening his wardrobe, she discovered in one part of it a large Spanish cloak, and, in another part, a high-crowned felt hat which he wore on his country excursions. In the dark, here was disguise enough for her purpose.

As she left the dressing-room, a measure of precaution occurred to her, which she put in action at once. Telling her maid that she had some purchases to make in the town, she went out, and asked her way to Garvan of the first respectable stranger whom she met in the street. Her object was to walk as far as the first milestone, in daylight, so as to be sure of finding it again by night. She had made herself familiar with the different objects on the road, when she returned to the banker's house.

As the time for the arrest drew nearer, Sir Giles became too restless to wait patiently at home. He went away to the police-office, eager to hear if any new counter-conspiracy had occurred to the authorities.

It was dark soon after eight o'clock, at that time of the year. At nine the servants assembled at the supper-table. They were all downstairs together, talking, and waiting for their meal.

Feeling the necessity of arriving at the place of meeting, in time to keep out of the Sergeant's way, Iris assumed her disguise as the clock struck nine. She left the house without a living creature to notice her, indoors or out. Clouds were gathering over the sky. The waning moon was only to be seen

at intervals, as she set forth on her way to the milestone.

VI

THE wind rose a little, and the rifts in the clouds began to grow broader as Iris gained the high road.

For a while, the glimmer of the misty moonlight lit the way before her. As well as she could guess, she had passed over more than half of the distance between the town and the milestone before the sky darkened again. Objects by the wayside grew shadowy and dim. A few drops of rain began to fall. The milestone, as she knew--thanks to the discovery of it made by daylight--was on the right-hand side of the road. But the dull-grey colour of the stone was not easy to see in the dark.

A doubt troubled her whether she might not have passed the milestone. She stopped and looked at the sky.

The threatening of rain had passed away: signs showed themselves which seemed to promise another break in the clouds. She waited. Low and faint, the sinking moonlight looked its last at the dull earth. In front of her, there was nothing to be seen but the road. She looked back--and discovered the milestone.

A rough stone wall protected the land on either side of the road. Nearly behind the milestone there was a gap in this fence, partially closed by a hurdle. A half-ruined culvert, arching a ditch that had run dry, formed a bridge leading from the road to the field. Had the field been already chosen as a place of concealment by the police? Nothing was to be seen but a footpath, and the dusky line of a plantation beyond it. As she made these discoveries, the rain began to fall again; the clouds gathered once more; the moonlight vanished.

At the same moment an obstacle presented itself to her mind, which Iris had thus far failed to foresee.

Lord Harry might approach the milestone by three different ways: that is to say--by the road from the town, or by the road from the open country, or by way of the field and the culvert. How could she so place herself as to be sure of warning him, before he fell into the hands of the police? To watch the three means of approach in the obscurity of the night, and at one and the same time, was impossible.

A man in this position, guided by reason, would in all probability have wasted precious time in trying to arrive at the right decision. A woman, aided by love, conquered the difficulty that confronted her in a moment.

Iris decided on returning to the milestone, and on waiting there to be discovered and taken prisoner by the police. Supposing Lord Harry to be punctual to his appointment, he would hear voices and movements, as a necessary consequence of the arrest, in time to make his escape. Supposing him on the other hand to be late, the police would be on the way back to the town with their prisoner: he would find no one at the milestone, and would leave it again in safety.

She was on the point of turning, to get back to the road, when something on the dark surface of the field, which looked like a darker shadow, became dimly visible. In another moment it seemed to be a shadow that moved. She ran towards it. It looked like a man as she drew nearer. The man stopped.

"The password," he said, in tones cautiously lowered.

"Fidelity," she answered in a whisper.

It was too dark for a recognition of his features; but Iris knew him by his tall stature--knew him by the accent in which he had asked for the password. Erroneously judging of her, on his side, as a man, he drew back again. Sir Giles Mountjoy was above the middle height; the stranger in a cloak, who had whispered to him, was below it. "You are not the person I expected to meet," he said. "Who are you?"

Her faithful heart was longing to tell him the truth. The temptation to reveal herself, and to make the sweet confession of her happiness at having saved him, would have overpowered her discretion, but for a sound that was audible on the road behind them. In the deep silence of the time and place mistake was impossible. It was the sound of footsteps.

There was just time to whisper to him: "Sir Giles has betrayed you. Save yourself."

"Thank you, whoever you are!"

With that reply, he suddenly and swiftly disappeared. Iris remembered the culvert, and turned towards it. There was a hiding-place under the arch, if she could only get down into the dry ditch in time. She was feeling her way to the slope of it with her feet, when a heavy hand seized her by the arm;

and a resolute voice said: "You are my prisoner."

She was led back into the road. The man who had got her blew a whistle. Two other men joined him.

"Show a light," he said; "and let's see who the fellow is."

The shade was slipped aside from a lantern: the light fell full on the prisoner's face. Amazement petrified the two attendant policemen. The pious Catholic Sergeant burst into speech: "Holy Mary! it's a woman!"

Did the secret societies of Ireland enrol women? Was this a modern Judith, expressing herself by anonymous letters, and bent on assassinating a financial Holofernes who kept a bank? What account had she to give of herself? How came she to be alone in a desolate field on a rainy night? Instead of answering these questions, the inscrutable stranger preferred a bold and brief request. "Take me to Sir Giles"--was all she said to the police.

The Sergeant had the handcuffs ready. After looking at the prisoner's delicate wrists by the lantern-light, he put his fetters back in his pocket. "A lady--and no doubt about it," he said to one of his assistants.

The two men waited, with a mischievous interest in seeing what he would do next. The list of their pious officer's virtues included a constitutional partiality for women, which exhibited the merciful side of justice when a criminal wore a petticoat. "We will take you to Sir Giles, Miss," he said--and offered his arm, instead of offering his handcuffs. Iris understood him, and took his arm.

She was silent--unaccountably silent as the men thought--on the way to the town. They heard her sigh: and, once, the sigh sounded more like a sob; little did they suspect what was in that silent woman's mind at the time.

The one object which had absorbed the attention of Iris had been the saving of Lord Harry. This accomplished, the free exercise of her memory had now reminded her of Arthur Mountjoy.

It was impossible to doubt that the object of the proposed meeting at the milestone had been to take measures for the preservation of the young man's life. A coward is always more or less cruel. The proceedings (equally treacherous and merciless) by which Sir Giles had provided for his own safety, had delayed--perhaps actually prevented--the execution of Lord Harry's humane design. It was possible, horribly possible, that a prompt

employment of time might have been necessary to the rescue of Arthur from impending death by murder. In the agitation that overpowered her, Iris actually hurried the police on their return to the town.

Sir Giles had arranged to wait for news in his private room at the office--and there he was, with Dennis Howmore in attendance to receive visitors.

The Sergeant went into the banker's room alone, to make his report. He left the door ajar; Iris could hear what passed.

"Have you got your prisoner?" Sir Giles began.

"Yes, your honour."

"Is the wretch securely handcuffed?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, it isn't a man."

"Nonsense, Sergeant; it can't be a boy."

The Sergeant confessed that it was not a boy. "It's a woman," he said.

"What!!!"

"A woman," the patient officer repeated--"and a young one. She asked for You."

"Bring her in."

Iris was not the sort of person who waits to be brought in. She walked in, of her own accord.

VII

"GOOD Heavens!" cried Sir Giles. "Iris! With my cloak on!! With my hat in her hand!!! Sergeant, there has been some dreadful mistake. This is my god-daughter--Miss Henley."

"We found her at the milestone, your honour. The young lady and nobody else."

Sir Giles appealed helplessly to his god-daughter. "What does this mean?" Instead of answering, she looked at the Sergeant. The Sergeant, conscious of responsibility, stood his ground and looked at Sir Giles. His face confessed that the Irish sense of humour was tickled: but he showed no intention of leaving the room. Sir Giles saw that Iris would enter into no explanation in the man's presence. "You needn't wait any longer," he said.

"What am I to do, if you please, with the prisoner?" the Sergeant inquired.

Sir Giles waived that unnecessary question away with his hand. He was trebly responsible--as knight, banker, and magistrate into the bargain. "I will be answerable," he replied, "for producing Miss Henley, if called upon. Good night."

The Sergeant's sense of duty was satisfied. He made the military salute. His gallantry added homage to the young lady under the form of a bow. Then, and then only, he walked with dignity out of the room.

"Now," Sir Giles resumed, "I presume I may expect to receive an explanation. What does this impropriety mean? What were you doing at the milestone?"

"I was saving the person who made the appointment with you," Iris said; "the poor fellow had no ill-will towards you--who had risked everything to save your nephew's life. Oh, sir, you committed a terrible mistake when you refused to trust that man!"

Sir Giles had anticipated the appearance of fear, and the reality of humble apologies. She had answered him indignantly, with a heightened colour, and with tears in her eyes. His sense of his own social importance was wounded to the quick. "Who is the man you are speaking of?" he asked loftily. "And what is your excuse for having gone to the milestone to save him--hidden under my cloak, disguised in my hat?"

"Don't waste precious time in asking questions!" was the desperate reply. "Undo the harm that you have done already. Your help--oh, I mean what I say!--may yet preserve Arthur's life. Go to the farm, and save him."

Sir Giles's anger assumed a new form, it indulged in an elaborate mockery of respect. He took his watch from his pocket, and consulted it satirically. "Must I make an excuse?" he asked with a clumsy assumption of humility.

"No! you must go."

"Permit me to inform you, Miss Henley, that the last train started more than two hours since."

"What does that matter? You are rich enough to hire a train."

Sir Giles, the actor, could endure it no longer; he dropped the mask, and revealed Sir Giles, the man. His clerk was summoned by a peremptory ring of the bell. "Attend Miss Henley to the house," he said. "You may come to your senses after a night's rest," he continued, turning sternly to Iris. "I will receive your excuses in the morning."

In the morning, the breakfast was ready as usual at nine o'clock. Sir Giles found himself alone at the table.

He sent an order to one of the women-servants to knock at Miss Henley's door. There was a long delay. The housekeeper presented herself in a state of alarm; she had gone upstairs to make the necessary investigation in her own person. Miss Henley was not in her room; the maid was not in her room; the beds had not been slept in; the heavy luggage was labelled--"To be called for from the hotel." And there was an end of the evidence which the absent Iris had left behind her.

Inquiries were made at the hotel. The young lady had called there, with her maid, early on that morning. They had their travelling-bags with them; and Miss Henley had left directions that the luggage was to be placed under care of the landlord until her return. To what destination she had betaken herself nobody knew.

Sir Giles was too angry to remember what she had said to him on the previous night, or he might have guessed at the motive which had led to her departure. "Her father has done with her already," he said; "and I have done with her now." The servants received orders not to admit Miss Henley, if her

audacity contemplated a return to her godfather's house.

VIII

ON the afternoon of the same day, Iris arrived at the village situated in the near neighbourhood of Arthur Mountjoy's farm.

The infection of political excitement (otherwise the hatred of England) had spread even to this remote place. On the steps of his little chapel, the priest, a peasant himself, was haranguing his brethren of the soil. An Irishman who paid his landlord was a traitor to his country; an Irishman who asserted his free birthright in the land that he walked on was an enlightened patriot. Such was the new law which the reverend gentleman expounded to his attentive audience. If his brethren there would like him to tell them how they might apply the law, this exemplary Christian would point to the faithless Irishman, Arthur Mountjoy. "Buy not of him, sell not to him; avoid him if he approaches you; starve him out of the place. I might say more, boys--you know what I mean."

To hear the latter part of this effort of oratory, without uttering a word of protest, was a trial of endurance under which Iris trembled. The secondary effect of the priest's address was to root the conviction of Arthur's danger with tenfold tenacity in her mind. After what she had just heard, even the slightest delay in securing his safety might be productive of deplorable results. She astonished a barefooted boy, on the outskirts of the crowd, by a gift of sixpence, and asked her way to the farm. The little Irishman ran on before her, eager to show the generous lady how useful he could be. In less than half an hour, Iris and her maid were at the door of the farm-house. No such civilised inventions appeared as a knocker or a bell. The boy used his knuckles instead--and ran away when he heard the lock of the door turned on the inner side. He was afraid to be seen speaking to any living creature who inhabited the "evicted farm."

A decent old woman appeared, and inquired suspiciously "what the ladies wanted." The accent in which she spoke was unmistakably English. When Iris asked for Mr. Arthur Mountjoy the reply was: "Not at home." The housekeeper inhospitably attempted to close the door. "Wait one moment," Iris said. "Years have changed you; but there is something in your face which is not quite strange to me. Are you Mrs. Lewson?"

The woman admitted that this was her name. "But how is it that you are a stranger to me?" she asked distrustfully.

"If you have been long in Mr. Mountjoy's service," Iris replied, "you may perhaps have heard him speak of Miss Henley?"

Mrs. Lewson's face brightened in an instant; she threw the door wide open with a glad cry of recognition.

"Come in, Miss, come in! Who would have thought of seeing you in this horrible place? Yes; I was the nurse who looked after you all three--when you and Mr. Arthur and Mr. Hugh were playfellows together." Her eyes rested longingly on her favourite of bygone days. The sensitive sympathies of Iris interpreted that look. She prettily touched her cheek, inviting the nurse to kiss her. At this act of kindness the poor old woman broke down; she apologised quaintly for her tears: "Think, Miss, how I must remember that happy time--when you have not forgotten it."

Shown into the parlour, the first object which the visitor noticed was the letter that she had written to Arthur lying unopened on the table.

"Then he is really out of the house?" she said with a feeling of relief.

He had been away from the farm for a week or more. Had he received a warning from some other quarter? and had he wisely sought refuge in flight? The amazement in the housekeeper's face, when she heard these questions, pleaded for a word of explanation. Iris acknowledged without reserve the motives which had suggested her journey, and asked eagerly if she had been mistaken in assuming that Arthur was in danger of assassination.

Mrs. Lewson shook her head. Beyond all doubt the young master was in danger. But Miss Iris ought to have known his nature better than to suppose that he would beat a retreat, if all the land-leaguers in Ireland threatened him together. No! It was his bold way to laugh at danger. He had left his farm to visit a friend in the next county; and it was shrewdly guessed that a young lady who was staying in the house was the attraction which had kept him so long away. "Anyhow, he means to come back to-morrow," Mrs. Lewson said. "I wish he would think better of it, and make his escape to England while he has the chance. If the savages in these parts must shoot somebody, I'm here--an old woman that can't last much longer. Let them shoot me."

Iris asked if Arthur's safety was assured in the next county, and in the house of his friend.

"I can't say, Miss; I have never been to the house. He is in danger if he

persists in coming back to the farm. There are chances of shooting him all along his road home. Oh, yes; he knows it, poor dear, as well as I do. But, there!--men like him are such perverse creatures. He takes his rides just as usual. No; he won't listen to an old woman like me; and, as for friends to advise him, the only one of them that has darkened our doors is a scamp who had better have kept away. You may have heard tell of him. The old Earl, his wicked father, used to be called by a bad name. And the wild young lord is his father's true son."

"Not Lord Harry?" Iris exclaimed.

The outbreak of agitation in her tone and manner was silently noticed by her maid. The housekeeper did not attempt to conceal the impression that had been produced upon her. "I hope you don't know such a vagabond as that?" she said very seriously. "Perhaps you are thinking of his brother--the eldest son--a respectable man, as I have been told?"

Miss Henley passed over these questions without notice. Urged by the interest in her lover, which was now more than ever an interest beyond her control, she said: "Is Lord Harry in danger, on account of his friend?"

"He has nothing to fear from the wretches who infest our part of the country," Mrs. Lewson replied. "Report says he's one of themselves. The police--there's what his young lordship has to be afraid of, if all's true that is said about him. Anyhow, when he paid his visit to my master, he came secretly like a thief in the night. And I heard Mr. Arthur, while they were together here in the parlour, loud in blaming him for something that he had done. No more, Miss, of Lord Harry! I have something particular to say to you. Suppose I promise to make you comfortable--will you please wait here till to-morrow, and see Mr. Arthur and speak to him? If there's a person living who can persuade him to take better care of himself, I do believe it will be you."

Iris readily consented to wait for Arthur Mountjoy's return. Left together, while Mrs. Lewson was attending to her domestic duties, the mistress noticed an appearance of pre-occupation in the maid's face.

"Are you beginning to wish, Rhoda," she said, "that I had not brought you to this strange place, among these wild people?"

The maid was a quiet amiable girl, evidently in delicate health. She smiled faintly. "I was thinking, Miss, of another nobleman besides the one Mrs. Lewson mentioned just now, who seems to have led a reckless life. It was

printed in a newspaper that I read before we left London."

"Was his name mentioned?" Iris asked.

"No, Miss; I suppose they were afraid of giving offence. He tried so many strange ways of getting a living--it was almost like reading a story-book."

The suppression of the name suggested a suspicion from which Iris recoiled. Was it possible that her maid could be ignorantly alluding to Lord Harry?

"Do you remember this hero's adventures?" she said.

"I can try, Miss, if you wish to hear about him."

The newspaper narrative appeared to have produced a vivid impression on Rhoda's mind. Making allowance for natural hesitations and mistakes, and difficulties in expressing herself correctly, she repeated with a singularly clear recollection the substance of what she had read.

IX

THE principal characters in the story were an old Irish nobleman, who was called the Earl, and the youngest of his two sons, mysteriously distinguished as "the wild lord."

It was said of the Earl that he had not been a good father; he had cruelly neglected both his sons. The younger one, badly treated at school, and left to himself in the holidays, began his adventurous career by running away. He got employment (under an assumed name) as a ship's boy. At the outset, he did well; learning his work, and being liked by the Captain and the crew. But the chief mate was a brutal man, and the young runaway's quick temper resented the disgraceful infliction of blows. He made up his mind to try his luck on shore, and attached himself to a company of strolling players. Being a handsome lad, with a good figure and a fine clear voice, he did very well for a while on the country stage. Hard times came; salaries were reduced; the adventurer wearied of the society of actors and actresses. His next change of life presented him in North Britain as a journalist, employed on a Scotch newspaper. An unfortunate love affair was the means of depriving him of this new occupation. He was recognised, soon afterwards, serving as assistant steward in one of the passenger steamers voyaging between Liverpool and New York. Arrived in this last city, he obtained notoriety, of no very respectable kind, as a "medium" claiming powers of supernatural communication with the world of spirits. When the imposture was ultimately discovered, he had gained money by his unworthy appeal to the meanly prosaic superstition of modern times. A long interval had then elapsed, and nothing had been heard of him, when a starving man was discovered by a traveller, lost on a Western prairie. The ill-fated Irish lord had associated himself with an Indian tribe--had committed some offence against their laws--and had been deliberately deserted and left to die. On his recovery, he wrote to his elder brother (who had inherited the title and estates on the death of the old Earl) to say that he was ashamed of the life that he had led, and eager to make amendment by accepting any honest employment that could be offered to him. The traveller who had saved his life, and whose opinion was to be trusted, declared that the letter represented a sincerely penitent state of mind. There were good qualities in the vagabond, which only wanted a little merciful encouragement to assert themselves. The reply that he received from England came from the lawyers employed by the new Earl. They had arranged with their agents in New York to pay to the younger brother a legacy of a thousand pounds, which represented all that had been left to him by his father's will. If he wrote

again his letters would not be answered; his brother had done with him. Treated in this inhuman manner, the wild lord became once more worthy of his name. He tried a new life as a betting man at races and trotting-matches. Fortune favoured him at the outset, and he considerably increased his legacy. With the customary infatuation of men who gain money by risking the loss of it, he presumed on his good luck. One pecuniary disaster followed another, and left him literally penniless. He was found again, in England, exhibiting an open boat in which he and a companion had made one of those foolhardy voyages across the Atlantic, which have now happily ceased to interest the public. To a friend who remonstrated with him, he answered that he reckoned on being lost at sea, and on so committing a suicide worthy of the desperate life that he had led. The last accounts of him, after this, were too vague and too contradictory to be depended on. At one time it was reported that he had returned to the United States. Not long afterwards unaccountable paragraphs appeared in newspapers declaring, at one and the same time, that he was living among bad company in Paris, and that he was hiding disreputably in an ill famed quarter of the city of Dublin, called "the Liberties." In any case there was good reason to fear that Irish-American desperadoes had entangled the wild lord in the network of political conspiracy.

The maid noticed a change in the mistress which surprised her, when she had reached the end of the newspaper story. Of Miss Henley's customary good spirits not a trace remained. "Few people, Rhoda, remember what they read as well as you do." She said it kindly and sadly--and she said no more.

There was a reason for this.

Now at one time, and now at another, Iris had heard of Lord Harry's faults and failings in fragments of family history. The complete record of his degraded life, presented in an uninterrupted succession of events, had now forced itself on her attention for the first time. It naturally shocked her. She felt, as she had never felt before, how entirely right her father had been in insisting on her resistance to an attachment which was unworthy of her. So far, but no farther, her conscience yielded to its own conviction of what was just. But the one unassailable vital force in this world is the force of love. It may submit to the hard necessities of life; it may acknowledge the imperative claims of duty; it may be silent under reproach, and submissive to privation--but, suffer what it may, it is the master-passion still; subject to no artificial influences, owning no supremacy but the law of its own being. Iris was above the reach of self-reproach, when her memory recalled the daring action which had saved Lord Harry at the milestone. Her better sense acknowledged Hugh Mountjoy's superiority over the other man--but her

heart, her perverse heart, remained true to its first choice in spite of her. She made an impatient excuse and went out alone to recover her composure in the farm-house garden.

The hours of the evening passed slowly.

There was a pack of cards in the house; the women tried to amuse themselves, and failed. Anxiety about Arthur preyed on the spirits of Miss Henley and Mrs. Lewson. Even the maid, who had only seen him during his last visit to London, said she wished to-morrow had come and gone. His sweet temper, his handsome face, his lively talk had made Arthur a favourite everywhere. Mrs. Lewson had left her comfortable English home to be his housekeeper, when he tried his rash experiment of farming in Ireland. And, more wonderful still, even wearisome Sir Giles became an agreeable person in his nephew's company.

Iris set the example of retiring at an early hour to her room.

There was something terrible in the pastoral silence of the place. It associated itself mysteriously with her fears for Arthur; it suggested armed treachery on tiptoe, taking its murderous stand in hiding; the whistling passage of bullets through the air; the piercing cry of a man mortally wounded, and that man, perhaps----? Iris shrank from her own horrid thought. A momentary faintness overcame her; she opened the window. As she put her head out to breathe the cool night-air, a man on horseback rode up to the house. Was it Arthur? No: the light-coloured groom's livery that he wore was just visible.

Before he could dismount to knock at the door, a tall man walked up to him out of the darkness.

"Is that Miles?" the tall man asked.

The groom knew the voice. Iris was even better acquainted with it. She, too, recognised Lord Harry.

X

THERE was the Irish lord at the very time when Iris was most patiently resigned never to see him more, never to think of him as her husband again--reminding her of the first days of their love, and of their mutual confession of it! Fear of herself kept her behind the curtain; while interest in Lord Harry detained her at the window in hiding.

"All well at Rathco?" he asked--mentioning the name of the house in which Arthur was one of the guests.

"Yes, my lord. Mr. Mountjoy leaves us to-morrow."

"Does he mean to return to the farm?"

"Sorry I am to say it; he does mean that."

"Has he fixed any time, Miles, for starting on his journey?"

Miles instituted a search through his pockets, and accompanied it by an explanation. Yes, indeed, Master Arthur had fixed a time; he had written a note to say so to Mistress Lewson, the housekeeper; he had said, "Drop the note at the farm, on your way to the village." And what might Miles want at the village, in the dark? Medicine, in a hurry, for one of his master's horses that was sick and sinking. And, speaking of that, here, thank God, was the note!

Iris, listening and watching alternately, saw to her surprise the note intended for Mrs. Lewson handed to Lord Harry. "Am I expected," he asked jocosely, "to read writing without a light?" Miles produced a small lantern which was strapped to his groom's belt. "There's parts of the road not over safe in the dark," he said as he raised the shade which guarded the light. The wild lord coolly opened the letter, and read the few careless words which it contained. "To Mrs. Lewson:--Dear old girl, expect me back to-morrow to dinner at three o'clock. Yours, ARTHUR."

There was a pause.

"Are there any strangers at Rathco?" Lord Harry asked.

"Two new men," Miles replied, "at work in the grounds."

There was another pause. "How can I protect him?" the young lord said, partly to himself, partly to Miles. He suspected the two new men---spies probably who knew of Arthur's proposed journey home, and who had already reported to their employers the hour at which he would set out.

Miles ventured to say a word: "I hope you won't be angry with me, my lord"--
--

"Stuff and nonsense! Was I ever angry with you, when I was rich enough to keep a servant, and when you were the man?"

The Irish groom answered in a voice that trembled with strong feeling. "You were the best and kindest master that ever lived on this earth. I can't see you putting your precious life in peril"----

"My precious life?" Lord Harry repeated lightly. "You're thinking of Mr. Mountjoy, when you say that. His life is worth saving. As for my life"---- He ended the sentence by a whistle, as the best way he could hit on of expressing his contempt for his own existence.

"My lord! my lord!" Miles persisted; "the Invincibles are beginning to doubt you. If any of them find you hanging about Mr. Mountjoy's farm, they'll try a shot at you first, and ask afterwards whether it was right to kill you or not."

To hear this said--and said seriously--after the saving of him at the milestone, was a trial of her firmness which Iris was unable to resist. Love got the better of prudence. She drew back the window-curtain. In another moment, she would have added her persuasion to the servant's warning, if Lord Harry himself had not accidentally checked her by a proceeding, on his part, for which she was not prepared.

"Show the light," he said; "I'll write a line to Mr. Mountjoy."

He tore off the blank page from the note to the housekeeper, and wrote to Arthur, entreating him to change the time of his departure from Rathco, and to tell no creature in the house, or out of the house, at what new hour he had arranged to go. "Saddle your horse yourself," the letter concluded. It was written in a feigned hand, without a signature.

"Give that to Mr. Mountjoy," Lord Harry said. "If he asks who wrote it, don't frighten him about me by telling the truth. Lie, Miles! Say you don't know." He next returned the note for Mrs. Lewson. "If she notices that it has been

opened," he resumed, "and asks who has done it, lie again. Good-night, Miles--and mind those dangerous places on your road home."

The groom darkened his lantern; and the wild lord was lost to view, round the side of the house.

Left by himself, Miles rapped at the door with the handle of his whip. "A letter from Mr. Arthur," he called out. Mrs. Lewson at once took the note, and examined it by the light of the candle on the hall-table. "Somebody has been reading this!" she exclaimed, stepping out to the groom, and showing him the torn envelope. Miles, promptly obeying his instructions, declared that he knew nothing about it, and rode away.

Iris descended the stairs, and joined Mrs. Lewson in the hall before she had closed the door. The housekeeper at once produced Arthur's letter.

"It's on my mind, Miss," she said, "to write an answer, and say something to Mr. Arthur which will persuade him to take care of himself, on his way back to the farm. The difficulty is, how am I to express it? You would be doing a kind thing if you would give me a word of advice."

Iris willingly complied. A second note, from the anxious housekeeper, might help the effect of the few lines which Lord Harry had written.

Arthur's letter informed Iris that he had arranged to return at three o'clock. Lord Harry's question to the groom, and the man's reply, instantly recurred to her memory: "Are there any strangers at Rathco?"--"Two new men at work in the grounds." Arriving at the same conclusion which had already occurred to Lord Harry, Iris advised the housekeeper, in writing to Arthur, to entreat him to change the hour, secretly, at which he left his friend's house on the next day. Warmly approving of this idea, Mrs. Lewson hurried into the parlour to write her letter. "Don't go to bed yet, Miss," she said; "I want you to read it before I send it away the first thing to-morrow morning."

Left alone in the hall, with the door open before her, Iris looked out on the night, thinking.

The lives of the two men in whom she was interested--in widely different ways--were now both threatened; and the imminent danger, at that moment, was the danger of Lord Harry. He was an outlaw whose character would not bear investigation; but, to give him his due, there was no risk which he was not ready to confront for Arthur's sake. If he was still recklessly lingering, on the watch for assassins in the dangerous neighbourhood of the farm, who

but herself possessed the influence which would prevail on him to leave the place? She had joined Mrs. Lewson at the door with that conviction in her mind. In another instant, she was out of the house, and beginning her search in the dark.

Iris made the round of the building; sometimes feeling her way in obscure places; sometimes calling to Lord Harry cautiously by his name. No living creature appeared; no sound of a movement disturbed the stillness of the night. The discovery of his absence, which she had not dared to hope for, was the cheering discovery which she had now made.

On her way back to the house, she became conscious of the rashness of the act into which her own generous impulse had betrayed her.

If she and Lord Harry had met, could she have denied the tender interest in him which her own conduct would then have revealed? Would he not have been justified in concluding that she had pardoned the errors and the vices of his life, and that he might without impropriety remind her of their engagement, and claim her hand in marriage? She trembled as she thought of the concessions which he might have wrung from her. "Never more," she determined, "shall my own folly be answerable for it, if he and I meet again."

She had returned to Mrs. Lewson, and had read over the letter to Arthur, when the farm clock, striking the hour, reminded them that it was time to retire. They slept badly that night.

At six in the morning, one of the two labourers who had remained faithful to Arthur was sent away on horseback with the housekeeper's reply, and with orders to wait for an answer. Allowing time for giving the horse a rest, the man might be expected to return before noon.

IX

IT was a fine sunshiny day; Mrs. Lewson's spirits began to improve. "I have always held the belief," the worthy old woman confessed, "that bright weather brings good luck--of course provided the day is not a Friday. This is Wednesday. Cheer up, Miss."

The messenger returned with good news. Mr. Arthur had been as merry as usual. He had made fun of another letter of good advice, received without a signature. "But Mrs. Lewson must have her way," he said. "My love to the old dear--I'll start two hours later, and be back to dinner at five."

"Where did Mr. Arthur give you that message?" Iris inquired.

"At the stables, Miss, while I was putting up the horse. The men about were all on the broad grin when they heard Mr. Arthur's message."

Still in a morbid state of mind, Iris silently regretted that the message had not been written, instead of being delivered by word of mouth. Here, again, she (like the wild lord) had been afraid of listeners.

The hours wore slowly on until it was past four o'clock. Iris could endure the suspense no longer. "It's a lovely afternoon," she said to Mrs. Lewson. "Let us take a walk along the road, and meet Arthur." To this proposal the housekeeper readily agreed.

It was nearly five o'clock when they reached a place at which a by-road branched off, through a wood, from the highway which they had hitherto followed. Mrs. Lewson found a seat on a felled tree. "We had better not go any farther," she said.

Iris asked if there was any reason for this.

There was an excellent reason. A few yards farther on, the high road had been diverted from the straight line (in the interest of a large agricultural village), and was then directed again into its former course. The by-road through the wood served as a short cut, for horsemen and pedestrians, from one divergent point to the other. It was next to a certainty that Arthur would return by the short cut. But if accident or caprice led to his preferring the highway, it was clearly necessary to wait for him within view of both the roads.

Too restless to submit to a state of passive expectation, Iris proposed to follow the bridle path through the wood for a little way, and to return if she failed to see anything of Arthur. "You are tired," she said kindly to her companion: "pray don't move."

Mrs. Lewson looked needlessly uneasy: "You might lose yourself, Miss. Mind you keep to the path!"

Iris followed the pleasant windings of the woodland track. In the hope of meeting Arthur she considerably extended the length of her walk. The white line of the high road, as it passed the farther end of the wood, showed itself through the trees. She turned at once to rejoin Mrs. Lewson.

On her way back she made a discovery. A ruin which she had not previously noticed showed itself among the trees on her left hand. Her curiosity was excited; she strayed aside to examine it more closely. The crumbling walls, as she approached them, looked like the remains of an ordinary dwelling-house. Age is essential to the picturesque effect of decay: a modern ruin is an unnatural and depressing object--and here the horrid thing was.

As she turned to retrace her steps to the road, a man walked out of the inner space enclosed by all that was left of the dismantled house. A cry of alarm escaped her. Was she the victim of destiny, or the sport of chance? There was the wild lord whom she had vowed never to see again: the master of her heart--perhaps the master of her fate!

Any other man would have been amazed to see her, and would have asked how it had happened that the English lady presented herself to him in an Irish wood. This man enjoyed the delight of seeing her, and accepted it as a blessing that was not to be questioned. "My angel has dropped from Heaven," he said. "May Heaven be praised!"

He approached her; his arms closed round her. She struggled to free herself from his embrace. At that moment they both heard the crackle of breaking underwood among the trees behind them. Lord Harry looked round. "This is a dangerous place," he whispered; "I'm waiting to see Arthur pass safely. Submit to be kissed, or I am a dead man." His eyes told her that he was truly and fearfully in earnest. Her head sank on his bosom. As he bent down and kissed her, three men approached from their hiding-place among the trees. They had no doubt been watching him, under orders from the murderous brotherhood to which they belonged. Their pistols were ready in their hands--and what discovery had they made? There was the brother who

had been denounced as having betrayed them, guilty of no worse treason than meeting his sweetheart in a wood! "We beg your pardon, my lord," they cried, with a thoroughly Irish enjoyment of their own discomfiture--and burst into a roar of laughter--and left the lovers together. For the second time, Iris had saved Lord Harry at a crisis in his life.

"Let me go!" she pleaded faintly, trembling with superstitious fear for the first time in her experience of herself.

He held her to him as if he would never let her go again. "Oh, my Sweet, give me a last chance. Help me to be a better man! You have only to will it, Iris, and to make me worthy of you."

His arms suddenly trembled round her, and dropped. The silence was broken by a distant sound, like the report of a shot. He looked towards the farther end of the wood. In a minute more, the thump of a horse's hoofs at a gallop was audible, where the bridlepath was hidden among the trees. It came nearer--nearer---the creature burst into view, wild with fright, and carrying an empty saddle. Lord Harry rushed into the path and seized the horse as it swerved at the sight of him. There was a leather pocket attached to the front of the saddle. "Search it!" he cried to Iris, forcing the terrified animal back on its haunches. She drew out a silver travelling-flask. One glance at the name engraved on it told him the terrible truth. His trembling hands lost their hold. The horse escaped; the words burst from his lips:

"Oh, God, they've killed him!"

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE