'This is indeed a surprise; I--am glad to see you!' Christopher stammered, with a wire-drawn, radically different smile from the one he had intended--a smile not without a tinge of ghastliness.

'Yes--I am home for the holidays,' said the blushing maiden; and, after a critical pause, she added, 'If you wish to speak to my sister, she is in the plantation with the children.'

'O no--no, thank you--not necessary at all,' said Christopher, in haste. 'I only wish for an interview with a lady called Mrs. Petherwin.'

'Yes; Mrs Petherwin--my sister,' said Picotee. 'She is in the plantation. That little path will take you to her in five minutes.'

The amazed Christopher persuaded himself that this discovery was very delightful, and went on persuading so long that at last he felt it to be so. Unable, like many other people, to enjoy being satirized in words because of the irritation it caused him as aimed-at victim, he sometimes had philosophy enough to appreciate a satire of circumstance, because nobody intended it. Pursuing the path indicated, he found himself in a thicket of scrubby undergrowth, which covered an area enclosed from the park proper by a decaying fence. The boughs were so tangled that he was obliged to screen his face with his hands, to escape the risk of having

his eyes filliped out by the twigs that impeded his progress. Thus slowly advancing, his ear caught, between the rustles, the tones of a voice in earnest declamation; and, pushing round in that direction, he beheld through some beech boughs an open space about ten yards in diameter, floored at the bottom with deep beds of curled old leaves, and cushions of furry moss. In the middle of this natural theatre was the stump of a tree that had been felled by a saw, and upon the flat stool thus formed stood Ethelberta, whom Christopher had not beheld since the ball at Wyndway House.

Round her, leaning against branches or prostrate on the ground, were five or six individuals. Two were young mechanics--one of them evidently a carpenter. Then there was a boy about thirteen, and two or three younger children. Ethelberta's appearance answered as fully as ever to that of an English lady skilfully perfected in manner, carriage, look, and accent; and the incongruity of her present position among lives which had had many of Nature's beauties stamped out of them, and few of the beauties of Art stamped in, brought him, as a second feeling, a pride in her that almost equalled his first sentiment of surprise. Christopher's attention was meanwhile attracted from the constitution of the group to the words of the speaker in the centre of it--words to which her auditors were listening with still attention.

It appeared to Christopher that Ethelberta had lately been undergoing some very extraordinary experiences. What the beginning of them had been he could not in the least understand, but the portion she was describing

came distinctly to his ears, and he wondered more and more.

'He came forward till he, like myself, was about twenty yards from the edge. I instinctively grasped my useless stiletto. How I longed for the assistance which a little earlier I had so much despised! Reaching the block or boulder upon which I had been sitting, he clasped his arms around from behind; his hands closed upon the empty seat, and he jumped up with an oath. This method of attack told me a new thing with wretched distinctness; he had, as I suppose, discovered my sex, male attire was to serve my turn no longer. The next instant, indeed, made it clear, for he exclaimed, "You don't escape me, masquerading madam," or some such words,
and came on. My only hope was that in his excitement he might forget to notice where the grass terminated near the edge of the cliff, though this could be easily felt by a careful walker: to make my own feeling more distinct on this point I hastily bared my feet.'

The listeners moistened their lips, Ethelberta took breath, and then went on to describe the scene that ensued, 'A dreadful variation on the game of Blindman's buff,' being the words by which she characterized it.

Ethelberta's manner had become so impassioned at this point that the lips of her audience parted, the children clung to their elders, and Christopher could control himself no longer. He thrust aside the boughs, and broke in upon the group.

'For Heaven's sake, Ethelberta,' he exclaimed with great excitement, 'where did you meet with such a terrible experience as that?'

The children shrieked, as if they thought that the interruption was in some way the catastrophe of the events in course of narration. Every one started up; the two young mechanics stared, and one of them inquired, in return, 'What's the matter, friend?'

Christopher had not yet made reply when Ethelberta stepped from her pedestal down upon the crackling carpet of deep leaves.

'Mr. Julian!' said she, in a serene voice, turning upon him eyes of such a disputable stage of colour, between brown and grey, as would have commended itself to a gallant duellist of the last century as a point on which it was absolutely necessary to take some friend's life or other. But the calmness was artificially done, and the astonishment that did not appear in Ethelberta's tones was expressed by her gaze. Christopher was not in a mood to draw fine distinctions between recognized and unrecognized organs of speech. He replied to the eyes.

'I own that your surprise is natural,' he said, with an anxious look into her face, as if he wished to get beyond this interpolated scene to something more congenial and understood. 'But my concern at such a history of yourself since I last saw you is even more natural than your surprise at my manner of breaking in.'

'That history would justify any conduct in one who hears it--'

'Yes, indeed.'

'If it were true,' added Ethelberta, smiling. 'But it is as false as--'
She could name nothing notoriously false without raising an image of what was disagreeable, and she continued in a better manner: 'The story I was telling is entirely a fiction, which I am getting up for a particular purpose--very different from what appears at present.'

'I am sorry there was such a misunderstanding,' Christopher stammered, looking upon the ground uncertain and ashamed. 'Yet I am not, either, for I am very glad you have not undergone such trials, of course. But the fact is, I--being in the neighbourhood--I ventured to call on a matter of business, relating to a poem which I had the pleasure of setting to music at the beginning of the year.'

Ethelberta was only a little less ill at ease than Christopher showed himself to be by this way of talking.

'Will you walk slowly on?' she said gently to the two young men, 'and take the children with you; this gentleman wishes to speak to me on business.'

The biggest young man caught up a little one under his arm, and plunged amid the boughs; another little one lingered behind for a few moments to

look shyly at Christopher, with an oblique manner of hiding her mouth against her shoulder and her eyes behind her pinafore. Then she vanished, the boy and the second young man followed, and Ethelberta and Christopher stood within the wood-bound circle alone.

'I hope I have caused no inconvenience by interrupting the proceedings,' said Christopher softly; 'but I so very much wished to see you!'

'Did you, indeed--really wish to see me?' she said gladly. 'Never mind inconvenience then; it is a word which seems shallow in meaning under the circumstances. I surely must say that a visit is to my advantage, must I not? I am not as I was, you see, and may receive as advantages what I used to consider as troubles.'

'Has your life really changed so much?'

'It has changed. But what I first meant was that an interesting visitor at a wrong time is better than a stupid one at a right time.'

'I had been behind the trees for some minutes, looking at you, and thinking of you; but what you were doing rather interrupted my first meditation. I had thought of a meeting in which we should continue our intercourse at the point at which it was broken off years ago, as if the omitted part had not existed at all; but something, I cannot tell what, has upset all that feeling, and--'

'I can soon tell you the meaning of my extraordinary performance,' Ethelberta broke in quickly, and with a little trepidation. 'My mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin, is dead; and she has left me nothing but her house and furniture in London--more than I deserve, but less than she had distinctly led me to expect; and so I am somewhat in a corner.'

'It is always so.'

'Not always, I think. But this is how it happened. Lady Petherwin was very capricious; when she was not foolishly kind she was unjustly harsh. A great many are like it, never thinking what a good thing it would be, instead of going on tacking from side to side between favour and cruelty, to keep to a mean line of common justice. And so we quarrelled, and she, being absolute mistress of all her wealth, destroyed her will that was in my favour, and made another, leaving me nothing but the fag-end of the lease of the town-house and the furniture in it. Then, when we were abroad, she turned to me again, forgave everything, and, becoming ill afterwards, wrote a letter to the brother, to whom she had left the bulk of her property, stating that I was to have twenty-thousand of the one-hundred-thousand pounds she had bequeathed to him--as in the original will--doing this by letter in case anything should happen to her before a new will could be considered, drawn, and signed, and trusting to his honour quite that he would obey her expressed wish should she die abroad. Well, she did die, in the full persuasion that I was provided for; but her brother (as I secretly expected all the time) refused to be morally bound by a document which had no legal value, and the result is that he

has everything, except, of course, the furniture and the lease. It would have been enough to break the heart of a person who had calculated upon getting a fortune, which I never did; for I felt always like an intruder and a bondswoman, and had wished myself out of the Petherwin family a hundred times, with my crust of bread and liberty. For one thing, I was always forbidden to see my relatives, and it pained me much. Now I am going to move for myself, and consider that I have a good chance of success in what I may undertake, because of an indifference I feel about succeeding which gives the necessary coolness that any great task requires.'

'I presume you mean to write more poems?'

'I cannot--that is, I can write no more that satisfy me. To blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life, you must be under the influence of those pleasures, and I am at present quite removed from them--surrounded by gaunt realities of a very different description.'

'Then try the mournful. Trade upon your sufferings: many do, and thrive.'

'It is no use to say that--no use at all. I cannot write a line of verse. And yet the others flowed from my heart like a stream. But nothing is so easy as to seem clever when you have money.'

'Except to seem stupid when you have none,' said Christopher, looking at

the dead leaves.

Ethelberta allowed herself to linger on that thought for a few seconds; and continued, 'Then the question arose, what was I to do? I felt that to write prose would be an uncongenial occupation, and altogether a poor prospect for a woman like me. Finally I have decided to appear in public.'

'Not on the stage?'

'Certainly not on the stage. There is no novelty in a poor lady turning actress, and novelty is what I want. Ordinary powers exhibited in a new way effect as much as extraordinary powers exhibited in an old way.'

'Yes--so they do. And extraordinary powers, and a new way too, would be irresistible.'

'I don't calculate upon both. I had written a prose story by request, when it was found that I had grown utterly inane over verse. It was written in the first person, and the style was modelled after De Foe's. The night before sending it off, when I had already packed it up, I was reading about the professional story-tellers of Eastern countries, who devoted their lives to the telling of tales. I unfastened the manuscript and retained it, convinced that I should do better by telling the story.'

'Well thought of!' exclaimed Christopher, looking into her face. 'There

is a way for everybody to live, if they can only find it out.'

'It occurred to me,' she continued, blushing slightly, 'that tales of the weird kind were made to be told, not written. The action of a teller is wanted to give due effect to all stories of incident; and I hope that a time will come when, as of old, instead of an unsocial reading of fiction at home alone, people will meet together cordially, and sit at the feet of a professed romancer. I am going to tell my tales before a London public. As a child, I had a considerable power in arresting the attention of other children by recounting adventures which had never happened; and men and women are but children enlarged a little. Look at this.'

She drew from her pocket a folded paper, shook it abroad, and disclosed a rough draft of an announcement to the effect that Mrs. Petherwin, Professed Story-teller, would devote an evening to that ancient form of the romancer's art, at a well-known fashionable hall in London. 'Now you see,' she continued, 'the meaning of what you observed going on here. That you heard was one of three tales I am preparing, with a view of selecting the best. As a reserved one, I have the tale of my own life--to be played as a last card. It was a private rehearsal before my brothers and sisters--not with any view of obtaining their criticism, but that I might become accustomed to my own voice in the presence of listeners.'

'If I only had had half your enterprise, what I might have done in the world!'

'Now did you ever consider what a power De Foe's manner would have if practised by word of mouth? Indeed, it is a style which suits itself infinitely better to telling than to writing, abounding as it does in colloquialisms that are somewhat out of place on paper in these days, but have a wonderful power in making a narrative seem real. And so, in short, I am going to talk De Foe on a subject of my own. Well?'

The last word had been given tenderly, with a long-drawn sweetness, and was caused by a look that Christopher was bending upon her at the moment,
in which he revealed that he was thinking less of the subject she was so eagerly and hopefully descanting upon than upon her aspect in explaining it. It is a fault of manner particularly common among men newly imported into the society of bright and beautiful women; and we will hope that, springing as it does from no unworthy source, it is as soon forgiven in the general world as it was here.

'I was only following a thought,' said Christopher:--'a thought of how I used to know you, and then lost sight of you, and then discovered you famous, and how we are here under these sad autumn trees, and nobody in sight.'

'I think it must be tea-time,' she said suddenly. 'Tea is a great meal with us here--you will join us, will you not?' And Ethelberta began to make for herself a passage through the boughs. Another rustle was heard

a little way off, and one of the children appeared.

'Emmeline wants to know, please, if the gentleman that come to see 'ee will stay to tea; because, if so, she's agoing to put in another spoonful for him and a bit of best green.'

'O Georgina--how candid! Yes, put in some best green.'

Before Christopher could say any more to her, they were emerging by the corner of the cottage, and one of the brothers drew near them. 'Mr. Julian, you'll bide and have a cup of tea wi' us?' he inquired of Christopher. 'An old friend of yours, is he not, Mrs. Petherwin? Dan and I be going back to Sandbourne to-night, and we can walk with 'ee as far as the station.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Christopher; and they all entered the cottage. The evening had grown clearer by this time; the sun was peeping out just previous to departure, and sent gold wires of light across the glades and into the windows, throwing a pattern of the diamond quarries, and outlines of the geraniums in pots, against the opposite wall. One end of the room was polygonal, such a shape being dictated by the exterior design; in this part the windows were placed, as at the east end of continental churches. Thus, from the combined effects of the ecclesiastical lancet lights and the apsidal shape of the room, it occurred to Christopher that the sisters were all a delightful set of pretty saints, exhibiting themselves in a lady chapel, and backed up by

unkempt major prophets, as represented by the forms of their big brothers.

Christopher sat down to tea as invited, squeezing himself in between two children whose names were almost as long as their persons, and whose tin cups discoursed primitive music by means of spoons rattled inside them until they were filled. The tea proceeded pleasantly, notwithstanding that the cake, being a little burnt, tasted on the outside like the latter plums in snapdragon. Christopher never could meet the eye of Picotee, who continued in a wild state of flushing all the time, fixing her looks upon the sugar-basin, except when she glanced out of the window to see how the evening was going on, and speaking no word at all unless it was to correct a small sister of somewhat crude manners as regards filling the mouth, which Picotee did in a whisper, and a gentle inclination of her mouth to the little one's ear, and a still deeper blush than before.

Their visitor next noticed that an additional cup-and-saucer and plate made their appearance occasionally at the table, were silently replenished, and then carried off by one of the children to an inner apartment.

'Our mother is bedridden,' said Ethelberta, noticing Christopher's look at the proceeding. 'Emmeline attends to the household, except when Picotee is at home, and Joey attends to the gate; but our mother's affliction is a very unfortunate thing for the poor children. We are

thinking of a plan of living which will, I hope, be more convenient than this is; but we have not yet decided what to do.' At this minute a carriage and pair of horses became visible through one of the angular windows of the apse, in the act of turning in from the highway towards the park gate. The boy who answered to the name of Joey sprang up from the table with the promptness of a Jack-in-the-box, and ran out at the door. Everybody turned as the carriage passed through the gate, which Joey held open, putting his other hand where the brim of his hat would have been if he had worn one, and lapsing into a careless boy again the instant that the vehicle had gone by.

'There's a tremendous large dinner-party at the House to-night,' said Emmeline methodically, looking at the equipage over the edge of her teacup, without leaving off sipping. 'That was Lord Mountclere. He's a wicked old man, they say.'

'Lord Mountclere?' said Ethelberta musingly. 'I used to know some friends of his. In what way is he wicked?'

'I don't know,' said Emmeline, with simplicity. 'I suppose it is because he breaks the commandments. But I wonder how a big rich lord can want to
steal anything.' Emmeline's thoughts of breaking commandments instinctively fell upon the eighth, as being in her ideas the only case wherein the gain could be considered as at all worth the hazard.

Ethelberta said nothing; but Christopher thought that a shade of depression passed over her.

'Hook back the gate, Joey,' shouted Emmeline, when the carriage had proceeded up the drive. 'There's more to come.'

Joey did as ordered, and by the time he got indoors another carriage turned in from the public road--a one-horse brougham this time.

'I know who that is: that's Mr. Ladywell,' said Emmeline, in the same matter-of-fact tone. 'He's been here afore: he's a distant relation of the squire's, and he once gave me sixpence for picking up his gloves.'

'What shall I live to see?' murmured the poetess, under her breath, nearly dropping her teacup in an involuntary trepidation, from which she made it a point of dignity to recover in a moment. Christopher's eyes, at that exhibition from Ethelberta, entered her own like a pair of lances. Picotee, seeing Christopher's quick look of jealousy, became involved in her turn, and grew pale as a lily in her endeavours to conceal the complications to which it gave birth in her poor little breast likewise.

'You judge me very wrongly,' said Ethelberta, in answer to Christopher's hasty look of resentment.

'In supposing Mr. Ladywell to be a great friend of yours?' said

Christopher, who had in some indescribable way suddenly assumed a right to Ethelberta as his old property.

'Yes: for I hardly know him, and certainly do not value him.'

After this there was something in the mutual look of the two, though their words had been private, which did not tend to remove the anguish of fragile Picotee. Christopher, assured that Ethelberta's embarrassment had been caused by nothing more than the sense of her odd social subsidence, recovered more bliss than he had lost, and regarded calmly the profile of young Ladywell between the two windows of his brougham as it passed the open cottage door, bearing him along unconscious as the dead of the nearness of his beloved one, and of the sad buffoonery that fate, fortune, and the guardian angels had been playing with Ethelberta of late. He recognized the face as that of the young man whom he had encountered when watching Ethelberta's window from Rookington Park.

'Perhaps you remember seeing him at the Christmas dance at Wyndway?' she
inquired. 'He is a good-natured fellow. Afterwards he sent me that portfolio of sketches you see in the corner. He might possibly do something in the world as a painter if he were obliged to work at the art for his bread, which he is not.' She added with bitter pleasantry: 'In bare mercy to his self-respect I must remain unseen here.'

It impressed Christopher to perceive how, under the estrangement which

arose from differences of education, surroundings, experience, and talent, the sympathies of close relationship were perceptible in Ethelberta's bearing towards her brothers and sisters. At a remark upon some simple pleasure wherein she had not participated because absent and occupied by far more comprehensive interests, a gloom as of banishment would cross her face and dim it for awhile, showing that the free habits and enthusiasms of country life had still their charm with her, in the face of the subtler gratifications of abridged bodices, candlelight, and no feelings in particular, which prevailed in town. Perhaps the one condition which could work up into a permanent feeling the passing revival of his fancy for a woman whose chief attribute he had supposed to be sprightliness was added now by the romantic ubiquity of station that attached to her. A discovery which might have grated on the senses of a man wedded to conventionality was a positive pleasure to one whose faith in society had departed with his own social ruin.

The room began to darken, whereupon Christopher arose to leave; and the brothers Sol and Dan offered to accompany him.