XII. THE EVENTS OF TEN MONTHS

1. DECEMBER TO APRIL

Week after week, month after month, the time had flown by. Christmas had passed; dreary winter with dark evenings had given place to more dreary winter with light evenings. Thaws had ended in rain, rain in wind, wind in dust. Showery days had come--the period of pink dawns and white sunsets; with the third week in April the cuckoo had appeared, with the fourth, the nightingale.

Edward Springrove was in London, attending to the duties of his new office, and it had become known throughout the neighbourhood of Carriford that the engagement between himself and Miss Adelaide Hinton would terminate in marriage at the end of the year.

The only occasion on which her lover of the idle delicious days at Budmouth watering-place had been seen by Cytherea after the time of the decisive correspondence, was once in church, when he sat in front of her, and beside Miss Hinton.

The rencounter was quite an accident. Springrove had come there in the full belief that Cytherea was away from home with Miss Aldclyffe; and he continued ignorant of her presence throughout the service.

It is at such moments as these, when a sensitive nature writhes under

the conception that its most cherished emotions have been treated with contumely, that the sphere-descended Maid, Music, friend of Pleasure at other times, becomes a positive enemy--racking, bewildering, unrelenting. The congregation sang the first Psalm and came to the verse--

'Like some fair tree which, fed by streams,
With timely fruit doth bend,
He still shall flourish, and success
All his designs attend.'

Cytherea's lips did not move, nor did any sound escape her; but could she help singing the words in the depths of her being, although the man to whom she applied them sat at her rival's side?

Perhaps the moral compensation for all a woman's petty cleverness under thriving conditions is the real nobility that lies in her extreme foolishness at these other times; her sheer inability to be simply just, her exercise of an illogical power entirely denied to men in general--the power not only of kissing, but of delighting to kiss the rod by a punctilious observance of the self-immolating doctrines in the Sermon on the Mount.

As for Edward--a little like other men of his temperament, to whom, it is somewhat humiliating to think, the aberrancy of a given love is in itself a recommendation--his sentiment, as he looked over his cousin's

book, was of a lower rank, Horatian rather than Psalmodic--

'O, what hast thou of her, of her
Whose every look did love inspire;
Whose every breathing fanned my fire,
And stole me from myself away!'

Then, without letting him see her, Cytherea slipt out of church early, and went home, the tones of the organ still lingering in her ears as she tried bravely to kill a jealous thought that would nevertheless live: 'My nature is one capable of more, far more, intense feeling than hers! She can't appreciate all the sides of him--she never will! He is more tangible to me even now, as a thought, than his presence itself is to her!' She was less noble then.

But she continually repressed her misery and bitterness of heart till the effort to do so showed signs of lessening. At length she even tried to hope that her lost lover and her rival would love one another very dearly.

The scene and the sentiment dropped into the past. Meanwhile, Manston continued visibly before her. He, though quiet and subdued in his bearing for a long time after the calamity of November, had not simulated a grief that he did not feel. At first his loss seemed so to absorb him--though as a startling change rather than as a heavy sorrow--that he paid Cytherea no attention whatever. His conduct was

uniformly kind and respectful, but little more. Then, as the date of the catastrophe grew remoter, he began to wear a different aspect towards her. He always contrived to obliterate by his manner all recollection on her side that she was comparatively more dependent than himself--making much of her womanhood, nothing of her situation. Prompt to aid her whenever occasion offered, and full of delightful petits soins at all times, he was not officious. In this way he irresistibly won for himself a position as her friend, and the more easily in that he allowed not the faintest symptom of the old love to be apparent.

Matters stood thus in the middle of the spring when the next move on his behalf was made by Miss Aldclyffe.

2. THE THIRD OF MAY

She led Cytherea to a summer-house called the Fane, built in the private grounds about the mansion in the form of a Grecian temple; it overlooked the lake, the island on it, the trees, and their undisturbed reflection in the smooth still water. Here the old and young maid halted; here they stood, side by side, mentally imbibing the scene.

The month was May--the time, morning. Cuckoos, thrushes, blackbirds, and sparrows gave forth a perfect confusion of song and twitter. The road was spotted white with the fallen leaves of apple-blossoms, and the sparkling grey dew still lingered on the grass and flowers. Two swans floated into view in front of the women, and then crossed the water

towards them.

'They seem to come to us without any will of their own--quite involuntarily--don't they?' said Cytherea, looking at the birds' graceful advance.

'Yes, but if you look narrowly you can see their hips just beneath the water, working with the greatest energy.'

'I'd rather not see that, it spoils the idea of proud indifference to direction which we associate with a swan.'

'It does; we'll have "involuntarily." Ah, now this reminds me of something.'

'Of what?'

'Of a human being who involuntarily comes towards yourself.'

Cytherea looked into Miss Aldclyffe's face; her eyes grew round as circles, and lines of wonderment came visibly upon her countenance. She had not once regarded Manston as a lover since his wife's sudden appearance and subsequent death. The death of a wife, and such a death, was an overwhelming matter in her ideas of things.

'Is it a man or woman?' she said, quite innocently.

'Mr. Manston,' said Miss Aldclyffe quietly.

'Mr. Manston attracted by me now?' said Cytherea, standing at gaze.

'Didn't you know it?'

'Certainly I did not. Why, his poor wife has only been dead six months.'

'Of course he knows that. But loving is not done by months, or method, or rule, or nobody would ever have invented such a phrase as "falling in love." He does not want his love to be observed just yet, on the very account you mention; but conceal it as he may from himself and us, it exists definitely--and very intensely, I assure you.'

'I suppose then, that if he can't help it, it is no harm of him,' said Cytherea naively, and beginning to ponder.

'Of course it isn't--you know that well enough. She was a great burden and trouble to him. This may become a great good to you both.'

A rush of feeling at remembering that the same woman, before Manston's arrival, had just as frankly advocated Edward's claims, checked Cytherea's utterance for awhile.

'There, don't look at me like that, for Heaven's sake!' said Miss

Aldclyffe. 'You could almost kill a person by the force of reproach you can put into those eyes of yours, I verily believe.'

Edward once in the young lady's thoughts, there was no getting rid of him. She wanted to be alone.

'Do you want me here?' she said.

'Now there, there; you want to be off, and have a good cry,' said Miss Aldclyffe, taking her hand. 'But you mustn't, my dear. There's nothing in the past for you to regret. Compare Mr. Manston's honourable conduct towards his wife and yourself, with Springrove towards his betrothed and yourself, and then see which appears the more worthy of your thoughts.'

3. FROM THE FOURTH OF MAY TO THE TWENTY-FIRST OF JUNE

The next stage in Manston's advances towards her hand was a clearly defined courtship. She was sadly perplexed, and some contrivance was necessary on his part in order to meet with her. But it is next to impossible for an appreciative woman to have a positive repugnance towards an unusually handsome and gifted man, even though she may not be inclined to love him. Hence Cytherea was not so alarmed at the sight of him as to render a meeting and conversation with her more than a matter of difficulty.

Coming and going from church was his grand opportunity. Manston was very

religious now. It is commonly said that no man was ever converted by argument, but there is a single one which will make any Laodicean in England, let him be once love-sick, wear prayer-books and become a zealous Episcopalian--the argument that his sweetheart can be seen from his pew.

Manston introduced into his method a system of bewitching flattery, everywhere pervasive, yet, too, so transitory and intangible, that, as in the case of the poet Wordsworth and the Wandering Voice, though she felt it present, she could never find it. As a foil to heighten its effect, he occasionally spoke philosophically of the evanescence of female beauty--the worthlessness of mere appearance. 'Handsome is that handsome does' he considered a proverb which should be written on the looking-glass of every woman in the land. 'Your form, your motions, your heart have won me,' he said, in a tone of playful sadness. 'They are beautiful. But I see these things, and it comes into my mind that they are doomed, they are gliding to nothing as I look. Poor eyes, poor mouth, poor face, poor maiden! "Where will her glories be in twenty years?" I say. "Where will all of her be in a hundred?" Then I think it is cruel that you should bloom a day, and fade for ever and ever. It seems hard and sad that you will die as ordinarily as I, and be buried; be food for roots and worms, be forgotten and come to earth, and grow up a mere blade of churchyard-grass and an ivy leaf. Then, Miss Graye, when I see you are a Lovely Nothing, I pity you, and the love I feel then

is better and sounder, larger and more lasting than that I felt at the beginning.' Again an ardent flash of his handsome eyes.

It was by this route that he ventured on an indirect declaration and offer of his hand.

She implied in the same indirect manner that she did not love him enough to accept it.

An actual refusal was more than he had expected. Cursing himself for what he called his egregious folly in making himself the slave of a mere lady's attendant, and for having given the parish, should they know of her refusal, a chance of sneering at him--certainly a ground for thinking less of his standing than before--he went home to the Old House, and walked indecisively up and down his back-yard. Turning aside, he leant his arms upon the edge of the rain-water-butt standing in the corner, and looked into it. The reflection from the smooth stagnant surface tinged his face with the greenish shades of Correggio's nudes. Staves of sunlight slanted down through the still pool, lighting it up with wonderful distinctness. Hundreds of thousands of minute living creatures sported and tumbled in its depth with every contortion that gaiety could suggest; perfectly happy, though consisting only of a head, or a tail, or at most a head and a tail, and all doomed to die within the twenty-four hours.

'Damn my position! Why shouldn't I be happy through my little day too?

Let the parish sneer at my repulses, let it. I'll get her, if I move heaven and earth to do it!'

Indeed, the inexperienced Cytherea had, towards Edward in the first place, and Manston afterwards, unconsciously adopted bearings that would have been the very tactics of a professional fisher of men who wished to have them each successively dangling at her heels. For if any rule at all can be laid down in a matter which, for men collectively, is notoriously beyond regulation, it is that to snub a petted man, and to pet a snubbed man, is the way to win in suits of both kinds. Manston with Springrove's encouragement would have become indifferent. Edward with Manston's repulses would have sheered off at the outset, as he did afterwards. Her supreme indifference added fuel to Manston's ardour--it completely disarmed his pride. The invulnerable Nobody seemed greater to him than a susceptible Princess.

4. FROM THE TWENTY-FIRST OF JUNE TO THE END OF JULY

Cytherea had in the meantime received the following letter from her brother. It was the first definite notification of the enlargement of that cloud no bigger than a man's hand which had for nearly a twelvemonth hung before them in the distance, and which was soon to give a colour to their whole sky from horizon to horizon.

'BUDMOUTH REGIS,

Saturday.

'DARLING SIS,--I have delayed telling you for a long time of a little matter which, though not one to be seriously alarmed about, is sufficiently vexing, and it would be unfair in me to keep it from you any longer. It is that for some time past I have again been distressed by that lameness which I first distinctly felt when we went to Lulstead Cove, and again when I left Knapwater that morning early. It is an unusual pain in my left leg, between the knee and the ankle. I had just found fresh symptoms of it when you were here for that half-hour about a month ago--when you said in fun that I began to move like an old man. I had a good mind to tell you then, but fancying it would go off in a few days, I thought it was not worth while. Since that time it has increased, but I am still able to work in the office, sitting on the stool. My great fear is that Mr. G. will have some out-door measuring work for me to do soon, and that I shall be obliged to decline it. However, we will hope for the best. How it came, what was its origin, or what it tends to, I cannot think. You shall hear again in a day or two, if it is no better...--Your loving brother, OWEN.'

This she answered, begging to know the worst, which she could bear, but suspense and anxiety never. In two days came another letter from him, of which the subjoined paragraph is a portion:--

'I had quite decided to let you know the worst, and to assure you that it was the worst, before you wrote to ask it. And again I give you my word that I will conceal nothing--so that there will be no excuse whatever for your wearing yourself out with fears that I am worse than I say. This morning then, for the first time, I have been obliged to stay away from the office. Don't be frightened at this, dear Cytherea. Rest is all that is wanted, and by nursing myself now for a week, I may avoid an illness of six months.'

After a visit from her he wrote again:--

'Dr. Chestman has seen me. He said that the ailment was some sort of rheumatism, and I am now undergoing proper treatment for its cure. My leg and foot have been placed in hot bran, liniments have been applied, and also severe friction with a pad. He says I shall be as right as ever in a very short time. Directly I am I shall run up by the train to see you. Don't trouble to come to me if Miss Aldclyffe grumbles again about your being away, for I am going on capitally.... You shall hear again at the end of the week.'

At the time mentioned came the following:--

'I am sorry to tell you, because I know it will be so disheartening after my last letter, that I am not so well as I was then, and that there has been a sort of hitch in the proceedings. After I had been treated for rheumatism a few days longer (in which treatment they pricked the place with a long needle several times,) I saw that Dr. Chestman was in doubt about something, and I requested that he would call in a brother professional man to see me as well. They consulted together and then told me that rheumatism was not the disease after all, but erysipelas. They then began treating it differently, as became a different matter. Blisters, flour, and starch, seem to be the order of the day now--medicine, of course, besides.

'Mr. Gradfield has been in to inquire about me. He says he has been obliged to get a designer in my place, which grieves me very much, though, of course, it could not be avoided.'

A month passed away; throughout this period, Cytherea visited him as often as the limited time at her command would allow, and wore as cheerful a countenance as the womanly determination to do nothing which might depress him could enable her to wear. Another letter from him then told her these additional facts:--

'The doctors find they are again on the wrong tack. They cannot make out

what the disease is. O Cytherea! how I wish they knew! This suspense is wearing me out. Could not Miss Aldclyffe spare you for a day? Do come to me. We will talk about the best course then. I am sorry to complain, but I am worn out.'

Cytherea went to Miss Aldclyffe, and told her of the melancholy turn her brother's illness had taken. Miss Aldclyffe at once said that Cytherea might go, and offered to do anything to assist her which lay in her power. Cytherea's eyes beamed gratitude as she turned to leave the room, and hasten to the station.

'O, Cytherea,' said Miss Aldclyffe, calling her back; 'just one word. Has Mr. Manston spoken to you lately?'

'Yes,' said Cytherea, blushing timorously.

'He proposed?'

'Yes.'

'And you refused him?'

'Yes.'

'Tut, tut! Now listen to my advice,' said Miss Aldclyffe emphatically,

'and accept him before he changes his mind. The chance which he offers you of settling in life is one that may possibly, probably, not occur again. His position is good and secure, and the life of his wife would be a happy one. You may not be sure that you love him madly; but suppose you are not sure? My father used to say to me as a child when he was teaching me whist, "When in doubt win the trick!" That advice is ten times as valuable to a woman on the subject of matrimony. In refusing a man there is always the risk that you may never get another offer.'

'Why didn't you win the trick when you were a girl?' said Cytherea.

'Come, my lady Pert; I'm not the text,' said Miss Aldclyffe, her face glowing like fire.

Cytherea laughed stealthily.

'I was about to say,' resumed Miss Aldclyffe severely, 'that here is Mr. Manston waiting with the tenderest solicitude for you, and you overlooking it, as if it were altogether beneath you. Think how you might benefit your sick brother if you were Mrs. Manston. You will please me very much by giving him some encouragement. You understand me, Cythie dear?'

Cytherea was silent.

'And,' said Miss Aldclyffe, still more emphatically, 'on your promising

that you will accept him some time this year, I will take especial care of your brother. You are listening, Cytherea?'

'Yes,' she whispered, leaving the room.

She went to Budmouth, passed the day with her brother, and returned to Knapwater wretched and full of foreboding. Owen had looked startlingly thin and pale--thinner and paler than ever she had seen him before. The brother and sister had that day decided that notwithstanding the drain upon their slender resources, another surgeon should see him. Time was everything.

Owen told her the result in his next letter:--

'The three practitioners between them have at last hit the nail on the head, I hope. They probed the place, and discovered that the secret lay in the bone. I underwent an operation for its removal three days ago (after taking chloroform)... Thank God it is over. Though I am so weak, my spirits are rather better. I wonder when I shall be at work again? I asked the surgeons how long it would be first. I said a month? They shook their heads. A year? I said. Not so long, they said. Six months? I inquired. They would not, or could not, tell me. But never mind.

'Run down, when you have half a day to spare, for the hours drag on so drearily. O Cytherea, you can't think how drearily!'

She went. Immediately on her departure Miss Aldclyffe sent a note to the Old House, to Manston. On the maiden's return, tired and sick at heart as usual, she found Manston at the station awaiting her. He asked politely if he might accompany her to Knapwater. She tacitly acquiesced. During their walk he inquired the particulars of her brother's illness, and with an irresistible desire to pour out her trouble to some one, she told him of the length of time which must elapse before he could be strong again, and of the lack of comfort in lodgings.

Manston was silent awhile. Then he said impetuously: 'Miss Graye, I will not mince matters--I love you--you know it. Stratagem they say is fair in love, and I am compelled to adopt it now. Forgive me, for I cannot help it. Consent to be my wife at any time that may suit you--any remote day you may name will satisfy me--and you shall find him well provided for.'

For the first time in her life she truly dreaded the handsome man at her side who pleaded thus selfishly, and shrank from the hot voluptuous nature of his passion for her, which, disguise it as he might under a quiet and polished exterior, at times radiated forth with a scorching white heat. She perceived how animal was the love which bargained.

'I do not love you, Mr. Manston,' she replied coldly.

5. FROM THE FIRST TO THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF AUGUST

The long sunny days of the later summer-time brought only the same dreary accounts from Budmouth, and saw Cytherea paying the same sad visits.

She grew perceptibly weaker, in body and mind. Manston still persisted in his suit, but with more of his former indirectness, now that he saw how unexpectedly well she stood an open attack. His was the system of Dares at the Sicilian games--

> 'He, like a captain who beleaguers round
> Some strong-built castle on a rising ground,
> Views all the approaches with observing eyes,
> This and that other part again he tries,
> And more on industry than force relies.'

Miss Aldclyffe made it appear more clearly than ever that aid to Owen from herself depended entirely upon Cytherea's acceptance of her steward. Hemmed in and distressed, Cytherea's answers to his importunities grew less uniform; they were firm, or wavering, as Owen's malady fluctuated. Had a register of her pitiful oscillations been kept, it would have rivalled in pathos the diary wherein De Quincey tabulates his combat with Opium--perhaps as noticeable an instance as any in which a thrilling dramatic power has been given to mere numerals. Thus she wearily and monotonously lived through the month, listening on Sundays

to the well-known round of chapters narrating the history of Elijah and Elisha in famine and drought; on week-days to buzzing flies in hot sunny rooms. 'So like, so very like, was day to day.' Extreme lassitude seemed all that the world could show her.

Her state was in this wise, when one afternoon, having been with her brother, she met the surgeon, and begged him to tell the actual truth concerning Owen's condition.

The reply was that he feared that the first operation had not been thorough; that although the wound had healed, another attempt might still be necessary, unless nature were left to effect her own cure. But the time such a self-healing proceeding would occupy might be ruinous.

'How long would it be?' she said.

'It is impossible to say. A year or two, more or less.'

'And suppose he submitted to another artificial extraction?'

'Then he might be well in four or six months.'

Now the remainder of his and her possessions, together with a sum he had borrowed, would not provide him with necessary comforts for half that time. To combat the misfortune, there were two courses open--her becoming betrothed to Manston, or the sending Owen to the County

Hospital.

Thus terrified, driven into a corner, panting and fluttering about for some loophole of escape, yet still shrinking from the idea of being Manston's wife, the poor little bird endeavoured to find out from Miss Aldclyffe whether it was likely Owen would be well treated in the hospital.

'County Hospital!' said Miss Aldclyffe; 'why, it is only another name for slaughter-house--in surgical cases at any rate. Certainly if anything about your body is snapt in two they do join you together in a fashion, but 'tis so askew and ugly, that you may as well be apart again.' Then she terrified the inquiring and anxious maiden by relating horrid stories of how the legs and arms of poor people were cut off at a moment's notice, especially in cases where the restorative treatment was likely to be long and tedious.

'You know how willing I am to help you, Cytherea,' she added reproachfully. 'You know it. Why are you so obstinate then? Why do you selfishly bar the clear, honourable, and only sisterly path which leads out of this difficulty? I cannot, on my conscience, countenance you; no, I cannot.'

Manston once more repeated his offer; and once more she refused, but this time weakly, and with signs of an internal struggle. Manston's eye sparkled; he saw for the hundredth time in his life, that perseverance,

if only systematic, was irresistible by womankind.

6. THE TWENTY-SEVENTH OF AUGUST

On going to Budmouth three days later, she found to her surprise that the steward had been there, had introduced himself, and had seen her brother. A few delicacies had been brought him also by the same hand. Owen spoke in warm terms of Manston and his free and unceremonious call,
as he could not have refrained from doing of any person, of any kind, whose presence had served to help away the tedious hours of a long day, and who had, moreover, shown that sort of consideration for him which the accompanying basket implied--antecedent consideration, so telling upon all invalids--and which he so seldom experienced except from the hands of his sister.

How should he perceive, amid this tithe-paying of mint, and anise, and cummin, the weightier matters which were left undone?

Again the steward met her at Carriford Road Station on her return journey. Instead of being frigid as at the former meeting at the same place, she was embarrassed by a strife of thought, and murmured brokenly her thanks for what he had done. The same request that he might see her home was made.

He had perceived his error in making his kindness to Owen a conditional

kindness, and had hastened to efface all recollection of it. 'Though I let my offer on her brother's--my friend's--behalf, seem dependent on my lady's graciousness to me,' he whispered wooingly in the course of their walk, 'I could not conscientiously adhere to my statement; it was said with all the impulsive selfishness of love. Whether you choose to have me, or whether you don't, I love you too devotedly to be anything but kind to your brother.... Miss Graye, Cytherea, I will do anything,' he continued earnestly, 'to give you pleasure--indeed I will.'

She saw on the one hand her poor and much-loved Owen recovering from his illness and troubles by the disinterested kindness of the man beside her, on the other she drew him dying, wholly by reason of her self-enforced poverty. To marry this man was obviously the course of common sense, to refuse him was impolitic temerity. There was reason in this. But there was more behind than a hundred reasons--a woman's gratitude and her impulse to be kind.

The wavering of her mind was visible in her tell-tale face. He noticed it, and caught at the opportunity.

They were standing by the ruinous foundations of an old mill in the midst of a meadow. Between grey and half-overgrown stonework--the only signs of masonry remaining--the water gurgled down from the old millpond to a lower level, under the cloak of rank broad leaves--the sensuous natures of the vegetable world. On the right hand the sun, resting on the horizon-line, streamed across the ground from below copper-coloured

and lilac clouds, stretched out in flats beneath a sky of pale soft green. All dark objects on the earth that lay towards the sun were overspread by a purple haze, against which a swarm of wailing gnats shone forth luminously, rising upward and floating away like sparks of fire.

The stillness oppressed and reduced her to mere passivity. The only wish the humidity of the place left in her was to stand motionless. The helpless flatness of the landscape gave her, as it gives all such temperaments, a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single entity under the sky.

He came so close that their clothes touched. 'Will you try to love me? Do try to love me!' he said, in a whisper, taking her hand. He had never taken it before. She could feel his hand trembling exceedingly as it held hers in its clasp.

Considering his kindness to her brother, his love for herself, and Edward's fickleness, ought she to forbid him to do this? How truly pitiful it was to feel his hand tremble so--all for her! Should she withdraw her hand? She would think whether she would. Thinking, and hesitating, she looked as far as the autumnal haze on the marshy ground would allow her to see distinctly. There was the fragment of a hedge--all that remained of a 'wet old garden'--standing in the middle of the mead, without a definite beginning or ending, purposeless and valueless. It was overgrown, and choked with mandrakes, and she could

almost fancy she heard their shrieks.... Should she withdraw her hand? No, she could not withdraw it now; it was too late, the act would not imply refusal. She felt as one in a boat without oars, drifting with closed eyes down a river--she knew not whither.

He gave her hand a gentle pressure, and relinquished it.

Then it seemed as if he were coming to the point again. No, he was not going to urge his suit that evening. Another respite.

7. THE EARLY PART OF SEPTEMBER

Saturday came, and she went on some trivial errand to the village post-office. It was a little grey cottage with a luxuriant jasmine encircling the doorway, and before going in Cytherea paused to admire this pleasing feature of the exterior. Hearing a step on the gravel behind the corner of the house, she resigned the jasmine and entered. Nobody was in the room. She could hear Mrs. Leat, the widow who acted as postmistress, walking about over her head. Cytherea was going to the foot of the stairs to call Mrs. Leat, but before she had accomplished her object, another form stood at the half-open door. Manston came in.

'Both on the same errand,' he said gracefully.

'I will call her,' said Cytherea, moving in haste to the foot of the stairs.

'One moment.' He glided to her side. 'Don't call her for a moment,' he repeated.

But she had said, 'Mrs. Leat!'

He seized Cytherea's hand, kissed it tenderly, and carefully replaced it by her side.

She had that morning determined to check his further advances, until she had thoroughly considered her position. The remonstrance was now on her tongue, but as accident would have it, before the word could be spoken Mrs. Leat was stepping from the last stair to the floor, and no remonstrance came.

With the subtlety which characterized him in all his dealings with her, he quickly concluded his own errand, bade her a good-bye, in the tones of which love was so garnished with pure politeness that it only showed its presence to herself, and left the house--putting it out of her power to refuse him her companionship homeward, or to object to his late action of kissing her hand.

The Friday of the next week brought another letter from her brother. In this he informed her that, in absolute grief lest he should distress her unnecessarily, he had some time earlier borrowed a few pounds. A week ago, he said, his creditor became importunate, but that on the day

on which he wrote, the creditor had told him there was no hurry for a settlement, that 'his sister's suitor had guaranteed the sum.' 'Is he Mr. Manston? tell me, Cytherea,' said Owen.

He also mentioned that a wheeled chair had been anonymously hired for his especial use, though as yet he was hardly far enough advanced towards convalescence to avail himself of the luxury. 'Is this Mr. Manston's doing?' he inquired.

She could dally with her perplexity, evade it, trust to time for guidance, no longer. The matter had come to a crisis: she must once and for all choose between the dictates of her understanding and those of her heart. She longed, till her soul seemed nigh to bursting, for her lost mother's return to earth, but for one minute, that she might have tender counsel to guide her through this, her great difficulty.

As for her heart, she half fancied that it was not Edward's to quite the extent that it once had been; she thought him cruel in conducting himself towards her as he did at Budmouth, cruel afterwards in making so light of her. She knew he had stifled his love for her--was utterly lost to her. But for all that she could not help indulging in a woman's pleasure of recreating defunct agonies, and lacerating herself with them now and then.

'If I were rich,' she thought, 'I would give way to the luxury of being morbidly faithful to him for ever without his knowledge.'

But she considered; in the first place she was a homeless dependent; and what did practical wisdom tell her to do under such desperate circumstances? To provide herself with some place of refuge from poverty, and with means to aid her brother Owen. This was to be Mr. Manston's wife.

She did not love him.

But what was love without a home? Misery. What was a home without love? Alas, not much; but still a kind of home.

'Yes,' she thought, 'I am urged by my common sense to marry Mr. Manston.'

Did anything nobler in her say so too?

With the death (to her) of Edward her heart's occupation was gone. Was it necessary or even right for her to tend it and take care of it as she used to in the old time, when it was still a capable minister?

By a slight sacrifice here she could give happiness to at least two hearts whose emotional activities were still unwounded. She would do good to two men whose lives were far more important than hers.

'Yes,' she said again, 'even Christianity urges me to marry Mr.

Manston.'

Directly Cytherea had persuaded herself that a kind of heroic self-abnegation had to do with the matter, she became much more content in the consideration of it. A wilful indifference to the future was what really prevailed in her, ill and worn out, as she was, by the perpetual harassments of her sad fortune, and she regarded this indifference, as gushing natures will do under such circumstances, as genuine resignation and devotedness.

Manston met her again the following day: indeed, there was no escaping him now. At the end of a short conversation between them, which took place in the hollow of the park by the waterfall, obscured on the outer side by the low hanging branches of the limes, she tacitly assented to his assumption of a privilege greater than any that had preceded it. He stooped and kissed her brow.

Before going to bed she wrote to Owen explaining the whole matter. It was too late in the evening for the postman's visit, and she placed the letter on the mantelpiece to send it the next day.

The morning (Sunday) brought a hurried postscript to Owen's letter of the day before:--

'September 9, 1865.

'DEAR CYTHEREA--I have received a frank and friendly letter from Mr. Manston explaining the position in which he stands now, and also that in which he hopes to stand towards you. Can't you love him? Why not? Try, for he is a good, and not only that, but a cultured man. Think of the weary and laborious future that awaits you if you continue for life in your present position, and do you see any way of escape from it except by marriage? I don't. Don't go against your heart, Cytherea, but be wise.--Ever affectionately yours, OWEN.'

She thought that probably he had replied to Mr. Manston in the same favouring mood. She had a conviction that that day would settle her doom. Yet

'So true a fool is love,'

that even now she nourished a half-hope that something would happen at the last moment to thwart her deliberately-formed intentions, and favour the old emotion she was using all her strength to thrust down.

8. THE TENTH OF SEPTEMBER

The Sunday was the thirteenth after Trinity, and the afternoon service at Carriford was nearly over. The people were singing the Evening Hymn.

Manston was at church as usual in his accustomed place two seats forward from the large square pew occupied by Miss Aldclyffe and Cytherea.

The ordinary sadness of an autumnal evening-service seemed, in Cytherea's eyes, to be doubled on this particular occasion. She looked at all the people as they stood and sang, waving backwards and forwards like a forest of pines swayed by a gentle breeze; then at the village children singing too, their heads inclined to one side, their eyes listlessly tracing some crack in the old walls, or following the movement of a distant bough or bird with features petrified almost to painfulness. Then she looked at Manston; he was already regarding her with some purpose in his glance.

'It is coming this evening,' she said in her mind. A minute later, at the end of the hymn, when the congregation began to move out, Manston came down the aisle. He was opposite the end of her seat as she stepped from it, the remainder of their progress to the door being in contact with each other. Miss Aldclyffe had lingered behind.

'Don't let's hurry,' he said, when Cytherea was about to enter the private path to the House as usual. 'Would you mind turning down this way for a minute till Miss Aldclyffe has passed?'

She could not very well refuse now. They turned into a secluded path on their left, leading round through a thicket of laurels to the other gate of the church-yard, walking very slowly. By the time the further gate

was reached, the church was closed. They met the sexton with the keys in his hand.

'We are going inside for a minute,' said Manston to him, taking the keys unceremoniously. 'I will bring them to you when we return.'

The sexton nodded his assent, and Cytherea and Manston walked into the porch, and up the nave.

They did not speak a word during their progress, or in any way interfere with the stillness and silence that prevailed everywhere around them. Everything in the place was the embodiment of decay: the fading red glare from the setting sun, which came in at the west window, emphasizing the end of the day and all its cheerful doings, the mildewed walls, the uneven paving-stones, the wormy pews, the sense of recent occupation, and the dank air of death which had gathered with the evening, would have made grave a lighter mood than Cytherea's was then.

'What sensations does the place impress you with?' she said at last, very sadly.

'I feel imperatively called upon to be honest, from very despair of achieving anything by stratagem in a world where the materials are such as these.' He, too, spoke in a depressed voice, purposely or otherwise.

'I feel as if I were almost ashamed to be seen walking such a world,'

she murmured; 'that's the effect it has upon me; but it does not induce me to be honest particularly.'

He took her hand in both his, and looked down upon the lids of her eyes.

'I pity you sometimes,' he said more emphatically.

'I am pitiable, perhaps; so are many people. Why do you pity me?'

'I think that you make yourself needlessly sad.'

'Not needlessly.'

'Yes, needlessly. Why should you be separated from your brother so much, when you might have him to stay with you till he is well?'

'That can't be,' she said, turning away.

He went on, 'I think the real and only good thing that can be done for him is to get him away from Budmouth awhile; and I have been wondering whether it could not be managed for him to come to my house to live for a few weeks. Only a quarter of a mile from you. How pleasant it would be!'

'It would.'

He moved himself round immediately to the front of her, and held her hand more firmly, as he continued, 'Cytherea, why do you say "It would," so entirely in the tone of abstract supposition? I want him there: I want him to be my brother, too. Then make him so, and be my wife! I cannot live without you. O Cytherea, my darling, my love, come and be my wife!'

His face bent closer and closer to hers, and the last words sank to a whisper as weak as the emotion inspiring it was strong.

She said firmly and distinctly, 'Yes, I will.'

'Next month?' he said on the instant, before taking breath.

'No; not next month.'

'The next?'

'No.'

'December? Christmas Day, say?'

'I don't mind.'

'O, you darling!' He was about to imprint a kiss upon her pale, cold mouth, but she hastily covered it with her hand.

'Don't kiss me--at least where we are now!' she whispered imploringly.

'Why?'

'We are too near God.'

He gave a sudden start, and his face flushed. She had spoken so emphatically that the words 'Near God' echoed back again through the hollow building from the far end of the chancel.

'What a thing to say!' he exclaimed; 'surely a pure kiss is not inappropriate to the place!'

'No,' she replied, with a swelling heart; 'I don't know why I burst out so--I can't tell what has come over me! Will you forgive me?'

'How shall I say "Yes" without judging you? How shall I say "No" without losing the pleasure of saying "Yes?"' He was himself again.

'I don't know,' she absently murmured.

'I'll say "Yes,"' he answered daintily. 'It is sweeter to fancy we are forgiven, than to think we have not sinned; and you shall have the sweetness without the need.'

She did not reply, and they moved away. The church was nearly dark now, and melancholy in the extreme. She stood beside him while he locked the door, then took the arm he gave her, and wound her way out of the churchyard with him. Then they walked to the house together, but the great matter having been set at rest, she persisted in talking only on indifferent subjects.

'Christmas Day, then,' he said, as they were parting at the end of the shrubbery.

'I meant Old Christmas Day,' she said evasively.

'H'm, people do not usually attach that meaning to the words.'

'No; but I should like it best if it could not be till then?' It seemed to be still her instinct to delay the marriage to the utmost.

'Very well, love,' he said gently. ''Tis a fortnight longer still; but never mind. Old Christmas Day.'

9. THE ELEVENTH OF SEPTEMBER

'There. It will be on a Friday!'

She sat upon a little footstool gazing intently into the fire. It was the afternoon of the day following that of the steward's successful

solicitation of her hand.

'I wonder if it would be proper in me to run across the park and tell him it is a Friday?' she said to herself, rising to her feet, looking at her hat lying near, and then out of the window towards the Old House. Proper or not, she felt that she must at all hazards remove the disagreeable, though, as she herself owned, unfounded impression the coincidence had occasioned. She left the house directly, and went to search for him.

Manston was in the timber-yard, looking at the sawyers as they worked. Cytherea came up to him hesitatingly. Till within a distance of a few yards she had hurried forward with alacrity--now that the practical expression of his face became visible she wished almost she had never sought him on such an errand; in his business-mood he was perhaps very stern.

'It will be on a Friday,' she said confusedly, and without any preface.

'Come this way!' said Manston, in the tone he used for workmen, not being able to alter at an instant's notice. He gave her his arm and led her back into the avenue, by which time he was lover again. 'On a Friday, will it, dearest? You do not mind Fridays, surely? That's nonsense.'

'Not seriously mind them, exactly--but if it could be any other day?'

'Well, let us say Old Christmas Eve, then. Shall it be Old Christmas Eve?'

'Yes, Old Christmas Eve.'

'Your word is solemn, and irrevocable now?'

'Certainly, I have solemnly pledged my word; I should not have promised to marry you if I had not meant it. Don't think I should.' She spoke the words with a dignified impressiveness.

'You must not be vexed at my remark, dearest. Can you think the worse of an ardent man, Cytherea, for showing some anxiety in love?'

'No, no.' She could not say more. She was always ill at ease when he spoke of himself as a piece of human nature in that analytical way, and wanted to be out of his presence. The time of day, and the proximity of the house, afforded her a means of escape. 'I must be with Miss Aldclyffe now--will you excuse my hasty coming and going?' she said prettily. Before he had replied she had parted from him.

'Cytherea, was it Mr. Manston I saw you scudding away from in the avenue just now?' said Miss Aldclyffe, when Cytherea joined her.

'Yes.'

'"Yes." Come, why don't you say more than that? I hate those taciturn "Yesses" of yours. I tell you everything, and yet you are as close as wax with me.'

'I parted from him because I wanted to come in.'

'What a novel and important announcement! Well, is the day fixed?'

'Yes.'

Miss Aldclyffe's face kindled into intense interest at once. 'Is it indeed? When is it to be?'

'On Old Christmas Eve.'

'Old Christmas Eve.' Miss Aldclyffe drew Cytherea round to her front, and took a hand in each of her own. 'And then you will be a bride!' she said slowly, looking with critical thoughtfulness upon the maiden's delicately rounded cheeks.

The normal area of the colour upon each of them decreased perceptibly after that slow and emphatic utterance by the elder lady.

Miss Aldclyffe continued impressively, 'You did not say "Old Christmas Eve" as a fiancee should have said the words: and you don't receive my

remark with the warm excitement that foreshadows a bright future.... How many weeks are there to the time?'

'I have not reckoned them.'

'Not? Fancy a girl not counting the weeks! I find I must take the lead in this matter--you are so childish, or frightened, or stupid, or something, about it. Bring me my diary, and we will count them at once.'

Cytherea silently fetched the book.

Miss Aldclyffe opened the diary at the page containing the almanac, and counted sixteen weeks, which brought her to the thirty-first of December--a Sunday. Cytherea stood by, looking on as if she had no appetite for the scene.

'Sixteen to the thirty-first. Then let me see, Monday will be the first of January, Tuesday the second, Wednesday third, Thursday fourth, Friday fifth--you have chosen a Friday, as I declare!'

'A Thursday, surely?' said Cytherea.

'No: Old Christmas Day comes on a Saturday.'

The perturbed little brain had reckoned wrong. 'Well, it must be a Friday,' she murmured in a reverie.

'No: have it altered, of course,' said Miss Aldclyffe cheerfully. 'There's nothing bad in Friday, but such a creature as you will be thinking about its being unlucky--in fact, I wouldn't choose a Friday myself to be married on, since all the other days are equally available.'

'I shall not have it altered,' said Cytherea firmly; 'it has been altered once already: I shall let it be.'

XIII. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. THE FIFTH OF JANUARY. BEFORE DAWN

We pass over the intervening weeks. The time of the story is thus advanced more than a quarter of a year.

On the midnight preceding the morning which would make her the wife of a man whose presence fascinated her into involuntariness of bearing, and whom in absence she almost dreaded, Cytherea lay in her little bed, vainly endeavouring to sleep.

She had been looking back amid the years of her short though varied