

Oliphant Margaret

The Sorceress. Volume 2 of

3



Маргарет Олифант

The Sorceress. Volume 2 of 3

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Margaret Oliphant

The Sorceress, v. 2 of 3

CHAPTER I

It was perhaps a very good thing for Bee at this distracting and distracted moment of her life, that her mother's illness came in to fill up every thought. Her own little fabric of happiness crumbled down about her ears like a house of cards, only as it was far more deeply founded and strongly built, the downfall was with a rumbling that shook the earth and a dust that rose up to the skies. Heaven was blurred out to her by the rising clouds, and all the earth was full of the noise, like an earthquake, of the falling walls. She could not get that sound out of her ears even in Mrs. Kingsward's sick room, where the quiet was preternatural, and everybody spoke in the lowest tone, and every step was hushed. Even then it went on roaring, the stones and the rafters flying, the storms of dust and ruin blackening the air, so that Bee could not but wonder that nobody saw them, that the atmosphere was not thick and stifling with those *debris* that were continually falling about her own ears. For everything was coming down; not only the idol and the shrine he abode in, but heaven and earth, in which she felt that no truth, no faith, could dwell any longer. Who was there to believe in? Not any man if not Aubrey; not any goodness, any truth, if not his – not anything! For it was without object, without warning, for nothing at all, that he had deserted her, as if it had been of no importance: with the ink not dry on his letter, with her name still upon his lips. A great infidelity, like a great faith, is always something. It is tragic, one of the awful events of life in which there is, or may be, fate; an evil destiny, a terrible chastisement prepared beforehand. In such a case one can at least feel one's self only a great victim, injured by God himself and the laws of the universe, though that was not the common fashion of thought then, as it is now-a-days. But Bee's downfall did not mean so much as that it was not intended by anyone – not even by the chief worker in it. He had meant to hold Bee fast with one hand while he amused himself with the other. Amused himself – oh, heaven! Bee's heart seemed to contract with a speechless spasm of anguish and rage. That she should be of no more account than that! Played with as if she were nobody – the slight creature of a moment. She, Bee! She, Colonel Kingsward's daughter!

At first the poor girl went on in a mist of self-absorption, through which everything else pierced but dully, wrapped up and hidden in it as in the storm which would have arisen had the house actually fallen about her ears, perceiving her mother through it, and the doctor, and all the accessories of the scene – but dimly, not as if they were real. When, however, there began to penetrate through this, strange words, with strange meanings in them: "Danger" – danger to whom? – "Strength failing" – but whose strength? – a dull wonder came in, bringing her back to other thoughts. By-and-by, Bee began to understand a little that it was of her mother of whom these things were being said. Her mother? But it was not her mother's house that had fallen; what did it mean? The doctor talked apart with Moulsey, and Moulsey turned her back, and her shoulders heaved, and her apron seemed to be put to her eyes. Bee, in her dream said, half aloud, "Danger?" and both the doctor and Moulsey turned upon her as if they would have killed her. Then she was beckoned out of the room, and found herself standing face to face with that grave yet kindly countenance which she had known all her life, in which she believed as in the greatest authority. She heard his voice speaking to her through all the rumbling and downfall.

"You must be very courageous," it said, "You are the eldest, and till your father comes home –"

What did it matter about her father coming home, or about her being the eldest? What had all these things to do with the earthquake, with the failure of truth, and meaning, and everything in life? She looked at him blankly, wondering if it were possible that he did not hear the sound of the

great falling, the rending of the walls, and the tearing of the roof, and the choking dust that filled all earth and heaven.

“My dear Beatrice,” he said, for he had known her all his life, “you don’t understand me, do you, my poor child?”

Bee shook her head, looking at him wistfully. Could he know anything more about it, she wondered – anything that had still to be said?

He took her hand, and her poor little hand was very cold with emotion and trouble. The good doctor, who knew nothing about any individual cause little Bee could have for agitation, thought he saw that her very being was arrested by a terror which as yet her intelligence had not grasped; something dreadful in the air which she did not understand. He drew her into the dining-room, the door of which stood open, and poured out a little wine for her. “Now, Bee,” he said, “no fainting, no weakness. You must prove what is in you now. It is a dreadful trial for you, my dear, but you can do a great deal for your dear mother’s sake, as she would for yours.”

“I have never said it was a trial,” cried Bee, with a gasp. “Why do you speak to me so? Has mamma told you? No one has anything to do with it but me.”

He looked at her with great surprise, but the doctor was a man of too much experience not to see that here was something into which it was better not to inquire. He said, very quietly, “You, as the eldest, have no doubt the chief part to play; but the little ones will all depend upon your strength and courage. Your mother does not herself know. She is very ill. It will require all that we can do – to pull her through.”

Bee repeated the last words after him with a scared look, but scarcely any understanding in her face – “To pull her – through?”

“Don’t you understand me now? Your mother – has been ill for a long time. Your father is aware of it. I suppose he thought you were too young to be told. But now that he is absent, and your brother, I have no alternative. Your mother is in great danger. I have telegraphed for Colonel Kingsward, but in the meantime, Bee – child, don’t lose your head! Do you understand me? She may be dying, and you are the only one to stand by her, to give her courage.”

Bee did not look as if she had courage for anyone at that dreadful moment. She fell a-trembling from head to foot and fell back against the wall where she was standing. Her eyes grew large, staring at him yet veiled as if they did not see – and she stammered forth at length, “Mother, mother!” with almost no meaning, in the excess of misery and surprise.

“Yes, your mother; whatever else you may have to think of, she is the first consideration now.”

He went on speaking, but Bee did not hear him; everything floated around her in a mist. The scenes at the Bath, the agitations, Mrs. Kingsward’s sudden pallors and flushings, her pretence, which they all laughed at, of not being able to walk; her laziness, lying on the sofa, the giddiness when she made that one turn with Charlie, she who had always been so fond of dancing; the hurry of bringing her to Kingswarden when Bee had felt they would have been so much better in London, and her strange, strange new fancy, mutely condemned by Bee, of finding the children too much for her. Half of these things had been silently remarked and disapproved of by the daughters. Mamma getting so idle – self-indulgent almost, so unlike herself! Had they not been too busily engaged in their own affairs, Bee and Betty would both have been angry with mamma. All these things seem to float about Bee in a mist while she leaned against the wall and the doctor stood opposite to her talking. It was only perhaps about a minute after all, but she saw waving round her, passing before her eyes, one scene melting into another, or rather all visible at once, innumerable episodes – the whole course of the three months past which had contained so much. She came out of this strange whirl very miserable but very quiet.

“I think it is chiefly my fault,” she said, faltering, interrupting the doctor who was talking, always talking; “but how could I know, for nobody told me? Doctor, tell me what to do now? You said we should – pull her through.”

She gave him a faint, eager, conciliatory smile, appealing to him to do it. Of course he could do it! "Tell me – tell me only what to do."

He patted her kindly upon the shoulder. "That is right," he said. "Now you understand me, and I know I can trust you. There is not much to do. Only to be quiet and steady – no crying or agitation. Moulsey knows everything. But you must be ready and steady, my dear. Sit by her and look happy and keep up her courage – that's the chief thing. If she gives in it is all over. She must not see that you are frightened or miserable. Come, it's a great thing to do for a little girl that has never known any trouble. But you are of a good sort, and you must rise to it for your mother's sake."

Look happy! That was all she had to do. "Can't I help Moulsey," she asked. "I could fetch her what she wants. I could – go errands for her. Oh, doctor, something a little easier," cried Bee, clasping her hands, "just at first!"

"All that's arranged," he said, hastily, "Come, we must go back to our patient. She will be wondering what I am talking to you about. She will perhaps take fright. No, nothing easier, my poor child – if you can do that you may help me a great deal; if you can't, go to bed, my dear, that will be best."

She gave him a look of great scorn, and moved towards her mother's room, leading the way.

Mrs. Kingsward was lying with her face towards the door, watching, in a blaze of excitement and fever. Her eyes had never been so bright nor her colour so brilliant. She was breathing quickly, panting, with her heart very audible to herself, pumping in her ears, and almost audible in the room, so evident was it that every pulse was at fever speed. "What have you been telling Bee, doctor? What have you been telling Bee? What – " When she had begun this phrase it did not seem as if she could stop repeating it again and again.

"I have been telling her that she may sit with you, my dear lady, on condition of being very quiet, very quiet," said the doctor. "It's a great promotion at her age. She has promised to sit very still, and talk very little, and hush her mamma to sleep. It is you who must be the baby to-night. If you can get a good long quiet sleep, it will do you all the good in the world. Yes, you may hold her hand if you like, my dear, and pat it, and smooth it – a little gentle mesmerism will do no harm. That, my dear lady, is what I have been telling Miss Bee."

"Oh, doctor," said Mrs. Kingsward, "don't you know she has had great trouble herself, poor child? Poor little Bee! At her age I was married and happy; and here is she, poor thing, plunged into trouble. Doctor, you know, there is a – gentleman – "

Mrs. Kingsward had raised herself upon her elbow, and the panting of her breath filled all the room.

"Another time – another time you shall tell me all about it. But I shall take Miss Bee away, and consign you to a dark room, and silence, if you say another word – "

"Oh, don't make my room dark! I like the light. I want my child. Let me keep her, let me keep her! Who should – comfort her – but her mother?"

"Yes, so long as you keep quiet. If you talk I will take her away. Not a word – not a word – till to-morrow." In spite of himself there was a change in the doctor's voice as he said that word – or Bee thought so – as if there might never be any to-morrow. The girl felt as if she must cry out, shriek aloud, to relieve her bursting brain, but did not, overborne by his presence and by the new sense of duty and self-restraint. "Come now," he went on, "I am very kind to let you have your little girl by you, holding your hand – don't you think so? Go to sleep, both of you. If you're quite, quite, quiet you'll both doze, and towards the morning I'll look in upon you again. Now, not another word. Good-night, good-night."

Bee, whose heart was beating almost as strongly as her mother's, heard his measured step withdraw on the soft carpets with a sense of wild despair, as if the last hope was going from her. Her inexperienced imagination had leaped from complete ignorance and calm to the last possibilities of calamity. She had never seen death, and what if that awful presence were to come while she was

alone, incapable of any struggle, of giving any help. She listened to the steps getting fainter in the distance with anguish and terror unspeakable. She clasped her mother's hand tightly without knowing it. That only aid, the only man who could do anything, was going away – deserting them – leaving her alone in her ignorance to stand between her mother and death. Death! Every pulse sprang up and fluttered in mortal terror. And she was put there to be quiet – ready and steady, he had said – to look happy! Bee kept silent; kept sitting upon her chair; kept down her shriek after him with a superhuman effort. She could do no more.

“Listen – he's talking to Moulsey now,” said Mrs. Kingsward, “about me; they're always – whispering, about me – telling the symptoms – and how I am. That is the worst of nurses – ”

“Mamma! Oh, don't talk, don't talk!” cried Bee; though she was more comforted than words can tell by the sound of her mother's voice.

“Whispering: can't you hear them? About temperature – and things. I can bear talking – but whispering. Bee – don't you hear 'em – whis – whispering – ”

“Oh, mamma,” cried Bee, “I love to hear you speak! But don't, don't, don't, or they'll make me go away.”

“My baby,” said the mother, diverted in her wandering and weakness to a new subject, “my little thing! He said we were to go to sleep. Put your head there – and I'll sing you – I'll sing you – to sleep – little Bee, little Bee, poor little Bee!”

CHAPTER II

This night was the strangest in Bee Kingsward's life. She had never known what it was to remain silent and awake in the darkness and warmth of a sick room, which of itself is a strange experience for a girl, and shows the young spirit its own weakness, its craving for rest and comfort, the difficulty of overcoming the instincts of nature – with such a sense of humiliation as nothing else could give. Could you not watch with me one hour? She believed that she had lain awake crying all night when her dream of happiness had so suddenly been broken in upon at Cologne; but now, while she sat by her mother's side, and the little soft crooning of the song, which Mrs. Kingsward supposed herself to be singing to put her child to sleep, sank into a soft murmur, and the poor lady succeeded in hushing herself into a doze by this characteristic method. Bee's head dropped too, and her eyelids closed. Then she woke, with a little shiver, to see the large figure of Moulsey like a ghost by the bed, and struggled dumbly back to her senses, only remembering that she must not start nor cry to disturb Mrs. Kingsward, whose quick breathing filled the room with a sensation of danger and dismay to which the girl was sensible as soon as the film of sleep that had enveloped her was broken. Mrs. Kingsward's head was thrown back on the pillow; now and then a faint note of the lullaby which she had been singing came from the parted lips, through which the hot, quick breath came so audibly. Now and then she stirred in her feverish sleep. Moulsey stood indistinguishable with her back to the light, a mass of solid shadow by the bedside. She shook her head. "Sleep's best," she said, in the whisper which the patient hated. "Sleep's better than the best of physic." Bee caught those solid skirts with a sensation of hope, to feel them so real and substantial in her hand. She did not care to speak, but lifted her face, pale with alarm and trouble, to the accustomed nurse. Moulsey shook her head again. It was all the communication that passed between them, and it crushed the hope that was beginning to rise in Bee's mind. She had thought when she heard the doctor go away that death might be coming as soon as his back was turned. She had felt when her mother fell asleep as if the danger must be past. Now she sank into that second stage of hopelessness, when there is no longer any immediate panic, when the unaccustomed intelligence dimly realises that the sufferer may be better, and may live through the night, or through many nights, and yet there may be no real change. Very dim as yet was this consciousness in Bee's heart, and yet the first dawning of it bowed her down.

In the middle of the night – after hours so long! – more like years, when Bee seemed to have sat there half her life, to have become used to it, to be uncertain about everything outside, but only that her mother lay there more ill than words could say – Mrs. Kingsward awoke. She opened her eyes without any change of position with the habit of a woman who has been long ill, without acknowledging her illness. It was Moulsey who saw a faint reflection of the faint light in the softly opening eyes, and detected that little change in the breathing which comes with returning consciousness. Bee, with her head leant back upon her chair and her eyes closed, was dozing again.

"You must take your cordial, ma'am, now you're awake. You've had such a nice sleep."

"Have I? I thought I was with the children and singing to baby. Who's this that has my hand – Bee?"

"Mamma," cried the girl, with a little start, and then, "Oh! I have waked her, Moulsey, I have waked her!"

"Is this her little hand? Poor little Bee! No, you have not waked me, love; but why, why is the child here?"

"The doctor said she might stay – to send for him if you wanted anything – and – and to satisfy her."

"To satisfy her, why so, why so? Am I so bad? Did he think I would die – in the night?"

"No, no, no," said Moulsey, standing by her, patting her shoulder, as if she had been a fretful child. "What a thing to fancy! As if he'd have sent the child here for that!"

“No,” said the poor lady, “he wouldn’t have sent the child, would he – not the child – for that – to frighten her! But Bee must go to bed. I’m so much better. Go to bed. Moulsey; poor Moulsey, never tires, she’s so good. But you must go to bed.”

“Oh, mother, let me stay. When you sleep, I sleep too; and I’m so much happier here.”

“Happier, are you? Well – but there was something wrong. Something had happened. What was it that happened? And your father away! It never does for anything to happen when – my husband is away. I’ve grown so silly. I never know what to do. What was it that happened, Bee?”

“There was – nothing,” said Bee, with a sudden chill of despair. She had forgotten everything but the dim bed-chamber, the faint light, the quick, quick breathing. And now there came a stab at her poor little heart. She scarcely knew what it was, but a cut like a knife going to the very centre of her being. Then there came the doctor’s words, as if they were written in light across the darkness of the room – “Ready, and steady.” She said in a stronger voice, “You have been dreaming. There was nothing, mamma.”

Mrs. Kingsward, who had raised herself on her elbow, sank back again on her pillow.

“Yes,” she said, “I must have been dreaming. I thought somebody came – and told us. Dreams are so strange. People say they’re things you’ve been – thinking of. But I was not thinking of that – the very last thing! Bee, it’s a pity – it’s a great pity – when a woman with so many children falls into this kind of silly, bad health.”

“Oh, mamma,” was all that poor Bee could say.

“Oh – let me alone, Moulsey – I want to talk a little. I’ve had such a good sleep, you said; sometimes – I want to talk, and Moulsey won’t let me – nor your father, and I have it all here,” she said, putting her hand to her heart, “or here,” laying it over her eyebrows, “and I never get it out. Let me talk, Moulsey – let me talk.”

Bee, leaning forward, and Moulsey standing over her by the bedside, there was a pause. Their eyes, accustomed to the faint light, saw her eyes shining from the pillow, and the flush of her cheeks against the whiteness of the bed. Then, after a while, there came a little faint laugh, and, “What was I saying?” Mrs. Kingsward asked. “You look so big, Moulsey, like the shadows I used to throw on the wall to please the children. You always liked the rabbit best, Bee. Look!” She put up her hands as if to make that familiar play upon the wall. “But Moulsey,” she added, “is so big. She shuts out all the light, and what is Bee doing here at this hour of the night? Moulsey, send Miss Bee to bed.”

“Oh, mother, let me stay. You were going to tell me something.”

“Miss Bee, you must not make her talk.”

“How like Moulsey!” said the invalid. “Make me talk! when I have wanted so much to talk. Bee, it’s horrid to go on in this silly ill way, when – when one has children to think of. Your father’s always good – but a man often doesn’t understand. About you, now – if I had been a little stronger, it might have been different. What was it we heard? I don’t think it was true what we heard.”

“Oh, mamma, don’t think of that, now.”

“It is *so* silly, always being ill! And there’s nothing really the matter. Ask the doctor. They all say there’s nothing really the matter. Your father – but then he doesn’t know how a woman feels. I feel as if I were sinking, sinking down through the bed and the floor and everything, away, I don’t know where. So silly, for nothing hurts me – I’ve no pain – except that I always want more air. If you were to open the window, Moulsey; and Bee, give me your hand and hold me fast, that I mayn’t sink away. It’s all quite silly, you know, to think so,” she added, with again a faint laugh.

Bee’s eyes sought those of Moulsey with a terrified question in them; the great shadow only slightly shook its head.

“Do you remember, Bee, the picture – we saw it in Italy, and I’ve got a photograph – where there is a saint lying so sweetly in the air, with angels holding her up? They’re flying with her through the blue sky – two at her head, and other two – and her mantle so wrapped round her, and she lying, oh! so easy, resting, though there’s nothing but the air and the angels. Do you remember, Bee?”

“Yes, mamma. Oh, mamma, mamma!”

“That’s what I should like,” said Mrs. Kingsward; “it’s strange, isn’t it? The bed’s solid, and the house is solid, and Moulsey there, she’s very solid too, and air isn’t solid at all. But there never was anybody that lay so easy and looked so safe as that woman in the air. Their arms must be so soft under her, and yet so strong, you know; stronger than your father’s. He’s so kind, but he hurries me sometimes; and soft – you’re soft, Bee, but you’re not strong. You’ve got a soft little hand, hasn’t she, Moulsey? Poor little thing! And to think one doesn’t know what she may have to do with it before she is like me.”

“She’ll have no more to do with it, ma’am, than a lady should, no more than you’ve had. But you must be quiet, dear lady, and try and go to sleep.”

“I might never have such a good chance of talking to her again. The middle of the night and nobody here – her father not even in the house. Bee, you must try never to begin being ill in any silly way, feeling not strong and that sort of foolish thing, and say out what you think. Don’t be frightened. It’s – it’s bad for him as well as for you. He gets to think you haven’t any opinion. And then all at once they find out – And, perhaps, it’s too late – .”

“Mamma, you’re not very ill? Oh, no; you’re looking so beautiful, and you talk just as you always did.”

“She says am I very ill, Moulsey? Poor little Bee! I feel a great deal better. I had surely a nice sleep. But why should the doctor be here, and you made to sit up, you poor little thing. Moulsey, why is the doctor here?”

“I never said, ma’am, as he was here. He’s coming round first thing in the morning. He’s anxious – because the Colonel’s away.”

“Ah! you think I don’t know. I’m not so very bad; but he thinks – he thinks – perhaps I might die, Bee.”

“Mamma, mamma!”

“Don’t be frightened,” said Mrs. Kingsward, drawing the girl close to her. “That’s a secret; he doesn’t think I know. It would be a curious, curious thing, when people think you are only ill to go and die. It would surprise them so. And so strange altogether – instead of worries, you know, every day, to be all by yourself, lying so easy and the angels carrying you. No trouble at all then to think whether he would be pleased – or anything; giving yourself to be carried like that, like a little child.”

“But mamma,” cried Bee, “you could not, would not leave us – you wouldn’t, would you, mamma? – all the children, and me; and I with nobody else, no one to care for me. You couldn’t, mother, leave us; you wouldn’t! Say you wouldn’t! Oh! Moulsey! Moulsey! look how far away she is looking, as if she didn’t see you and me!”

“You forget, Bee,” said Mrs. Kingsward, “How easy it looked for that saint in the picture. I always liked to watch the birds floating down on the wind, never moving their wings. That’s what seems no trouble, so easy; not too hot nor too cold, nor tiring, neither to the breath nor anything. I shouldn’t like to leave you. No – But then:” she added, with a smile, “I should not require to leave you. I’d – I’d – What was I saying? Moulsey, will you please give me some – more – ”

She held out her hand again for the glass which Moulsey had just put down.

“It makes me strong – it makes me speak. I’m – sinking away again, Bee. Hold me – hold me tight. If I was to slip away – down – down – down to the cellars or somewhere.” The feeble laugh was dreadful for the listeners to hear.

“Run,” cried Moulsey, in Bee’s ear, “the doctor – the doctor! in the library.”

And then there was a strange phantasmagoria that seemed to fill the night, one scene melting into another. The doctor rousing from his doze, his measured step coming back; the little struggle round the bed; Moulsey giving place to the still darker shadow; the glow of Mrs. Kingsward’s flushed and feverish countenance between; then the quiet, and then again sleep – sleep broken by feeble movements, by the quick panting of the breath.

“She’ll be easier now,” the doctor said. “You must go to bed, my dear young lady. Moulsey can manage for the rest of the night.”

“Doctor,” said Bee, with something in her throat that stopped the words, “doctor – will she – must she? Oh, doctor, say that is not what it means? One of us, it would not matter, but mother – mother!”

“It is not in our hands,” the doctor said. “It is not much we can do. Don’t look at me as if I were God. It is little, little I can do.”

“They say,” cried poor Bee, “that you can do anything. It is when there is no doctor, no nurse that people – Oh, my mother – my mother! Doctor, don’t let it be.”

“You are but a child,” said the doctor, patting her kindly on the shoulder, “you’ve not forgotten how to say your prayers. That’s the only thing for you to do. Those that say such things of doctors know very little. We stand and look on. Say your prayers, little girl – if they do her no good, they’ll do you good. And now she’ll have a little sleep.”

Bee caught him by the arm. “Sleep,” she said, looking at him suspiciously. “Sleep?”

“Yes, sleep – that may give her strength for another day. Oh, ask no more, child. Life is not mine to give.”

What a night! Out of doors it was moonlight as serene as heaven – the moon departing in the west, and another faint light that was day coming on the other side, and the first birds beginning to stir in the branches; but not even baby moving in the house. All fast asleep, safe as if trouble never was, as if death could not be. Bee went upstairs to her chill, white room, where the white bed, unoccupied, looked to her like death itself – all cold, dreadful, full of suggestion. Bee’s heart was more heavy than could be told. She had nothing to fall back upon, no secret strength to uphold her. She had forgotten how wretched she had been, but she felt it, nevertheless, behind the present anguish. Nevertheless, she was only nineteen, and when she flung herself down to cry upon her white pillow – only to cry, to get her passion out – beneficent nature took hold of the girl and made her sleep. She did not wake for hours. Was it beneficent? For when she was roused by the opening of the door and sat up in her bed, and found herself still dressed in her evening frock, with her little necklace round her throat, there pressed back upon Bee such a flood of misery and trouble as she thought did not exist in the world.

“Miss Bee, Miss Bee! Master’s come home. He’s been travelling all night – and I dare not disturb Mrs. Moulsey in Missis’s room; and he wants to see you this minit, please. Oh, come, come, quick, and don’t keep the Colonel waiting,” the woman said.

Half awakened, but wholly miserable, Bee sprang up and rushed downstairs to her father. He came forward to meet her at the door, frowning and pale.

“What is this I hear?” he said. “What have you been doing to upset your mother? She was well enough when I went away. What have you been doing to your mother? You children are the plague of our lives!”

CHAPTER III

The week passed in the sombre hurry yet tedium of a house lying under the shadow of death – that period during which when it is night we long for morning, and when it is morning we long for night, hoping always for the hope that never comes, trembling to mark the progress which does go on silently towards the end.

Colonel Kingsward was rough and angry with Bee that first morning, to her consternation and dismay. She had never been the object of her father's anger before, and this hasty and imperious questioning seemed to take all power of reply out of her. "What had she been doing to her mother?" She! to her mother! Bee was too much frightened by his threatening look, the cloud on his face, the fire in his eyes, to say anything. Her mind ran hurriedly over all that had happened, and that last terrible visit, which had changed the whole aspect of the earth to herself. But it was to herself that this stroke of misfortune had come, and not to her mother. A gleam of answering anger came into Bee's eyes, sombre with the unhappiness which had been pushed aside by more immediate suffering, yet was still there like a black background, to frame whatever other miseries might come after. As for Colonel Kingsward, it was to him, as to so many men, a relief to blame somebody for the trouble which was unbearable. The blow was approaching which he had never allowed himself to believe in. He had blamed his wife instinctively, involuntarily, at the first hearing of every inconvenience in life; and it had helped to accustom him to the annoyance to think that it was her fault. He had done so in what he called this unfortunate business of Bee's, concluding that but for Mrs. Kingsward's weakness, Mr. Aubrey Leigh and his affairs would never have become of any importance to the family. He had blamed her, too, and greatly, for that weakening of health which he had so persistently endeavoured to convince himself did not mean half so much as the doctors said. Women are so idiotic in these respects. They will insist on wearing muslin and lace when they ought to wear flannel. They will put on evening dresses when they ought to be clothed warmly to the throat, and shoes made of paper when they ought to be solidly and stoutly shod, quite indifferent to the trouble and anxiety they may cause to their family. And now that Mrs. Kingsward's state had got beyond the possibility of reproach, he turned upon his daughter. It must be her fault. Her mother had been better or he should not have left her. The quiet of the country was doing her good; if she had not been agitated all would have been well. But Bee, with all her declarations of devotion to her mother; Bee, the eldest, who ought to have had some sense; Bee had brought on this trumpery love business to upset the delicate equilibrium which he himself, a man with affairs so much more important in hand, had refrained from disturbing. It did him a little good, unhappy and anxious as he was, to pour out his wrath upon Bee. And she did not reply. She did not shed tears, as her mother had weakly done in similar circumstances, or attempt excuses. Even if he had been sufficiently at leisure to note it, an answering fire awoke in Bee's eyes. He had not leisure to note, but he perceived it all the same.

Presently, however, every faculty, every thought, became absorbed in that sick chamber; things had still to be thought of outside of it, but they seemed strange, artificial things, having no connection with life. Then Charlie was summoned from Oxford, and the younger boys from school, which increased the strange commotion of the house, adding that restless element of young life which had no place there, nothing to do with itself, and which roused an almost frenzied irritation in Colonel Kingsward when he saw any attempt on the part of the poor boys to amuse themselves, or resume their usual occupations. "Clods!" he said; "young brutes! They would play tennis if the world were falling to pieces." And again that glance of fire came into Bee's eyes, marked unconsciously, though he did not know he had seen it, by her father. The boys hung about her when she stole out for a little air, one at each arm. "How is mother, Bee? She's no worse? Don't you think we might go over to Hillside for that tournament? Don't you think Fred might play in the parish match with Siddemore? They're so badly off for bowlers. Don't you think – "

“Oh, I think it would be much better for you to be doing something, boys; but, then, papa might hear, and he would be angry. If we could but keep it from papa.”

“We’re doing mother no good,” said Fred.

“How could we do mother good? Why did the governor send for us, Bee, only to kick our heels here, and get into mischief? A fellow can’t help getting into mischief when he has nothing to do.”

“Yes,” repeated Fred, “what did he send for us for? I wish mother was better. I suppose as soon as she’s better we’ll be packed off again.”

They were big boys, but they did not understand the possibility of their mother not getting better, and, indeed, neither did Bee. When morning followed morning and nothing happened, it seemed to her that getting better was the only conclusion to be looked for. If it had been Death that was coming, surely it must have come by this time. Her hopes rose with every new day.

But Mrs. Kingsward had been greatly agitated by the sight of Charlie when he was allowed to see her. “Why has Charlie come home?” she said. “Was he sent for? Was it your father that brought him? Charlie, my dear, what are you doing here? Why have you come back? You should have been going on with – Did your father send for you? Why – why did your father send for you, my boy?”

“I thought,” said Charlie, quite unmanned by the sight of her, and by this unexpected question, and by all he had been told about her state, “I thought – you wanted to see me, mother.”

“I always like to see you – but not to take you away from – And why was he sent for, Moulsey? Does the doctor think? – does my husband think? – ”

Her feverish colour grew brighter and brighter. Her eyes shone with a burning eagerness. She put her hot hand upon that of her son. “Was it to say good-bye to me?” she said, with a strange flutter of a smile.

At the same time an argument on the same subject was going on between the doctor and the Colonel.

“What can the children do in a sick room? Keep them away. I should never have sent for them if you had consulted me. It is bad enough to have let her see Charlie, summoned express – do you want to frighten your wife to death?”

“There can be no question,” said the Colonel, “if what you tell me is true, of frightening her to death. I think, Benson, that a patient in such circumstances ought to know. She ought to be told – ”

“What?” the doctor said, sharply, with a harsh tone in his voice.

“What? Do you need to ask? Of her state – of what is imminent – that she is going to – ”

Colonel Kingsward loved his wife truly, and he could not say those last words.

“Yes,” said the doctor, “going to – ? Well, we hope it’s to One who has called her, that knows all about it, Kingsward. Doctors are not supposed to take that view much, but I do. I’d tell her nothing of the sort. I would not agitate her either with the sight of the children or those heathenish thoughts about dying. Well, I suppose you’ll take your own way, if you think she’s in danger of damnation; but you see I don’t. I think where she’s going she’ll find more consideration and more understanding than ever she got here.”

“You are all infidels – every one of you,” said Colonel Kingsward; “you would let a soul rush unprepared into the presence of – ”

“Her Father,” said Doctor Benson. “So I would; if he’s her Father he’ll take care of that. And if he’s only a Judge, you know, a Judge is an extraordinarily considerate person. He leaves no means untried of coming to a right decision. I would rather trust my case in the hands of the Bench than make up my own little plea any day. And, anyhow you can put it, the Supreme Judge must be better than the best Bench that ever was. Leave her alone. She’s safer with Him than either with you or me.”

“It’s an argument I never would pardon – in my own case. I shudder at the thought of being plunged into eternity without the time to – to think – to – to prepare – ”

“But if your preparations are all seen through from the beginning? If it’s just as well known then, or better, what you are thinking, or trying to think, to make yourself ready for that event? You

knew yourself, more or less, didn't you, when you were in active service, the excuses a wretched private would make when he was hauled up, and how he would try to make the worse appear the better cause. Were you moved by that, Colonel Kingsward? Didn't you know the man, and judge him by what you knew?"

"It seems to me a very undignified argument; there's no analogy between a wretched private and my – and my – and one of us – at the Judgment Seat."

"No – it's more like one of your boys making up the defence – when brought before you – and the poor boy would need it too," Dr. Benson added within himself. But naturally he made no impression with his argument, whether it was good or bad, upon his hearer. Colonel Kingsward was in reality a very unhappy man. He had nobody to blame for the dreadful misfortune which was threatening him except God, for whom he entertained only a great terror as of an overwhelming tyrannical Power ready to catch him at any moment when he neglected the observances or rites necessary to appease it. He was very particular in these observances – going to church, keeping up family prayers, contributing his proper and carefully calculated proportion to the charities, &c. Nobody could say of him that he was careless or negligent. And now how badly was his devotion repaid! – by the tearing away from him of the companion of his life. But he felt that there was still much more that the awful Master of the Universe might inflict, perhaps upon her if she was not prepared to meet her God. He was wretched till he had told her, warned her, till she had fulfilled everything that was necessary, seen a clergyman, and got herself into the state of mind becoming a dying person. He had collected all the children that she might take leave of them in a becoming way. He had, so far as he knew, thought of everything to make her exit from the world a right one in all the forms – and now to be told that he was not to agitate her, that the God whom he wished to prepare her to meet knew more of her and understood her better than he did! Agitate her! When the alternative might be unspeakable miseries of punishment, instead of the acquittal which would have to be given to a soul properly prepared. These arguments did not in the least change his purpose, but they fretted and irritated him beyond measure. At the bottom of all, the idea that anybody should know better than he what was the right thing for his own wife was an intolerable thought.

He went in and out of her room with that irritated, though self-controlled look, which she knew so well. He had never shown it to the world, and when he had demanded of her in his angry way why this was and that, and how on earth such and such things had happened, Mrs. Kingsward had till lately taken it so sweetly that he had not himself suspected how heavy it was upon her. And when she had begun to show signs of being unable to bear the responsibility of everything in earth and heaven, the Colonel had felt himself an injured man. There were signs that he might eventually throw that responsibility on Bee. But in the meantime he had nobody to blame, as has been said, and the burden of irritation and disturbance was heavy upon him.

The next morning after his talk with Dr. Brown he came in with that clouded brow to find Charlie by her bedside. The Colonel came up and stood looking at the face on the pillow, now wan in the reaction of the fever, and utterly weak, but still smiling at his approach.

"I have been telling Charlie," she said, in her faint voice, "that he must go back to his college. Why should he waste his time here?"

"He will not go back yet," said Colonel Kingsward; "are you feeling a little better this morning, my dear?"

"Oh, not to call ill at all," said the sufferer. "Weak – a sort of sinking, floating away. I take hold of somebody's hand to keep me from falling through. Isn't it ridiculous?" she said, after a little pause.

"Your weakness is very great," said the husband, almost sternly.

"Oh, no, Edward. It's more silly than anything – when I am not really ill, you know. I've got Charlie's hand here under the counterpane," she said again, with her faint little laugh.

"You won't always have Charlie's hand, or anyone's hand, Lucy."

She looked at him with a little anxiety.

“No, no. I’ll get stronger, perhaps, Edward.”

“Do you feel as if you were at all stronger, my dear?”

She loosed her son’s hand, giving him a little troubled smile. “Go away now, Charlie dear. I don’t believe you’ve had your breakfast. I want to speak to – papa.” Then she waited, looking wistfully in her husband’s face till the door had closed. “You have something to say to me, Edward. Oh, what is it? Nothing has happened to anyone?”

“No, nothing has happened,” he said. He turned away and walked to the window, then came back again, turning his head half-way from her as he spoke. “It is only that you are, my poor darling – weaker every day.”

“Does the doctor think so?” she said, with a little eagerness, with a faint suffusion of colour in her face.

He did not say anything – could not perhaps – but slightly moved his head.

“Weaker every day, and that means, Edward!” She put out her thin, hot hands. “That means – ”

The man could not say anything. He could do his duty grimly, but when the moment came he could not put it into words. He sank down on the chair Charlie had left, and put down his face on the pillow, his large frame shaken by sobs which he could not restrain.

These sobs made Mrs. Kingsward forget the meaning of this communication altogether. She put her hands upon him trying to raise his head. “Edward! Oh, don’t cry, don’t cry! I have never seen you cry in all my life. Edward, for goodness’ sake! You will kill me if you go on sobbing like that. Oh, Edward, Edward, I never saw you cry before.”

Moulsey had darted forward from some shadowy corner where she was and gripped him by the arm.

“Stop, sir – stop it,” she cried, in an authoritative whisper, “or you’ll kill her.”

He flung Moulsey off and raised his head a little from the pillow.

“You have never seen me with any such occasion before,” he said, taking her hands into his and kissing them repeatedly.

He was not a man of many caresses, and her heart was touched with a feeble sense of pleasure.

“Dear!” she said softly, “dear!” feebly drawing a little nearer to him to put her cheek against his.

Colonel Kingsward looked up as soon as he was able and saw her lying smiling at him, her hand in his, her eyes full of that wonderful liquid light which belongs to great weakness. The small worn face was all illuminated with smiles; it was like the face of a child – or perhaps an angel. He looked at first with awe, then with doubt and alarm. Had he failed after all in the commission which he had executed at so much cost to himself, and against the doctor’s orders? He had been afraid for the moment of the sight of her despair – and now he was frightened by her look of ease, the absence of all perturbations. Had she not understood him? Would it have to be told again, more severely, more distinctly, this dreadful news?

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Kingsward said nothing of the communication her husband had made to her. Did she understand it? He went about heavily all day, pondering the matter, going and coming to her room, trying in vain to make out what was in her mind. But he could not divine what was in that mind, hidden from him in those veils of individual existence which never seemed to him to have been so baffling before. In the afternoon she had heard, somehow, the voices of the elder boys, and had asked if they were there, and had sent for them. The two big fellows, with the mud on their boots and the scent of the fresh air about them, stood huddled together, speechless with awe and grief, by the bedside, when their father came in. They did not know what to say to their mother in such circumstances. They had never talked to her about herself, but always about themselves; and now they were entirely at a loss after they had said, "How are you, mamma? Are you very bad, mamma? Oh, I'm so sorry;" and "Oh, I wish you were better." What could boys of twelve and fourteen say? For the moment they felt as if their hearts were broken; but they did not want to stay there; they had nothing to say to her. Their pang of sudden trouble was confused with shyness and awkwardness, and their consciousness that she was altogether in another atmosphere and another world. Mrs. Kingsward was not a clever woman, but she understood miraculously what was in those inarticulate young souls. She kissed them both, drawing each close to her for a moment, and then bade them run away. "Were you having a good game?" she said, with that ineffable, feeble smile. "Go and finish it, my darlings." And they stumbled out very awkwardly, startled to meet their father's look as they turned round, and greatly disturbed and mystified altogether, though consoled somehow by their mother's look.

They said to each other after a while that she looked "jolly bad," but that she was in such good spirits it must be all right.

Their father was as much mystified as they; but he was troubled in conscience, as if he had not spoken plainly enough, had not made it clear enough what "her state" was. She had not asked for the clergyman – she had not asked for anything. Was it necessary that he should speak again? There was one thing she had near her, but that so fantastic a thing! – a photograph – one of the quantities of such rubbish the girls and she had brought home – a woman wrapped in a mantle floating in the air.

"Take that thing away," he said to Moulsey. It irritated him to see a frivolous thing like that – a twopenny-halfpenny photograph – so near his wife's bed.

"Don't take it away," she said, in the whisper to which her voice had sunk; "it gives me such pleasure."

"Pleasure!" he cried; even to speak of pleasure was wrong at such a moment. And then he added, "Would you like me to read to you? Would you like to see – anyone?"

"To see anyone? Whom should I wish to see but you, Edward, and the children?"

"We haven't been – so religious, my dear, as perhaps we ought," stammered the anxious man. "If I sent for – Mr. Baldwin perhaps, to read the prayers for the sick and – and talk to you a little?"

She looked at him with some wonder for a moment, and then she said, with a smile, "Yes, yes; by all means, Edward, if you like it."

"I shall certainly like it, my dearest; and it is right – it is what we should all wish to do at the – " He could not say at the last – he could not say when we are dying – it was too much for him; but certainly she must understand now. And he went away hurriedly to call the clergyman, that no more time might be lost.

"Moulsey," said Mrs. Kingsward, "have we come then quite – to the end now?"

"Oh, ma'am! Oh, my dear lady!" Moulsey said.

"My husband – seems to think so. It is a little hard – to leave them all. Where is Bee?"

"I am here, mamma," said a broken voice; and the mother's hand was caught and held tight, as she liked it to be. "May Betty come too?"

“Yes, let Betty come. It is you I want, not Mr. Baldwin.”

“Mr. Baldwin is a good man, ma’am. He’ll be a comfort to them and to the Colonel.”

“Yes, I suppose so; he will be a comfort to – your father. But I don’t want anyone. I haven’t done very much harm – ”

“No! oh, no, ma’am, none!” said Moulsey, while Betty, thrown on her knees by the bedside, tried to smother her sobs; and Bee, worn out and feeling as if she felt nothing, sat and held her mother’s hand.

“But, then,” she said, “I’ve never, never, done any good.”

“Oh! my dear lady, my dear lady! And all the poor people, and all the children.”

“Hush! Moulsey. I never gave anything – not a bit of bread, not a shilling – but because I liked to do it. Never! oh, never from any good motive. I always liked to do it. It was my pleasure. It never cost me anything. I have done no good in my life. I just liked the poor children, that was all, and thought if they were my own – Oh, Bee and Betty, try to be better women – different from me.”

Betty, who was so young, crept nearer and nearer on her knees, till she came to the head of the bed. She lifted up her tear-stained face, “Mother! oh, mother! are you frightened?” she cried.

Mrs. Kingsward put forth her other arm and put it freely round the weeping girl. “Perhaps I ought to be, perhaps I ought to be!” she said, with a little thrill and quaver.

“Mother,” said Betty, pushing closer and closer, almost pushing Bee away, “if I had been wicked, ever so wicked, I shouldn’t be frightened for you.”

A heavenly smile came over the woman’s face. “I should think not, indeed.”

And then Betty, in the silence of the room, put her hands together and said very softly, “Our Father, which art in Heaven – ”

“Oh, children, children,” cried Moulsey, “don’t break our hearts! She’s too weak to bear it. Leave her alone.”

“Yes, go away, children dear – go away. I have to rest – to see Mr. Baldwin.” Then she smiled, and said in gasps, “To tell the truth – I’m – I’m not afraid; look – ” She pointed to the picture by her bedside. “So easy – so easy! Just resting – and the Saviour will put out his hand and take me in.”

Mr. Baldwin came soon after – the good Rector, who was a good man, but who believed he had the keys, and that what he bound on earth was bound in Heaven – or, at least, he thought he believed so – with Colonel Kingsward, who felt that he was thus fulfilling all righteousness, and that this was the proper way in which to approach the everlasting doors. He put away the little picture in which Catherine of Siena lay in the hold of the angels, in the perfect peace of life accomplished, the rest that was so easy and so sweet – hastily with displeasure and contempt. He did not wish the Rector to see the childish thing in which his wife had taken pleasure, nor even that she had been taking pleasure at all at such a solemn moment; even that she should smile the same smile of welcome with which she would have greeted her kind neighbour had she been in her usual place in the drawing-room disturbed her husband. So near death and yet able to think of that! He watched her face as the Rector read the usual prayers. Did she enter into them – did she understand them? He could scarcely join in them himself in his anxiety to make sure that she felt and knew what was her “state,” and was preparing – preparing to meet her God. That God was awaiting severely the appearance of that soul before him, the Colonel could not but feel. He would not have said so in words, but the instinctive conviction in his heart was so. When she looked round for the little picture it hurt him like a sting. Oh, if she would but think of the things that concerned her peace – not of follies, childish distractions, amusements for the fancy. On her side, the poor lady was conscious more or less of all that was going on, understood here and there the prayers that were going over her head, prayers of others for her, rather than anything to be said by herself. In the midst of them, she felt herself already like St. Catherine, floating away into ineffable peace, then coming back again to hear the sacred words, to see the little circle round her on their knees, and to smile upon them in an utter calm of weakness without pain, feeling only that they were good to her, thinking of her, which was sweet, but knowing little more.

It was the most serene and cloudless night after that terrible day. A little after Colonel Kingsward had left the room finally and shut himself up in his study, Moulsey took the two girls out into the garden, through a window which opened upon it. "Children, go and breathe the sweet air. I'll not have you in a room to break your hearts. Look up yonder – yonder where she's gone," said the kind nurse who had done everything for their mother. And they stole out – the two little ghosts, overborne with the dreadful burden of humanity, the burden which none of us can shake off, and crept across the grass to the seat where she had been used to sit among the children. The night was peace itself – not a breath stirring, a young moon with something wistful in her light looking down, making the garden bright as with a softened ethereal day. A line of white cloud dimly detached from the softness of the blue lay far off towards the west amid the radiance, a long faint line as of something in the far distance. Bee and Betty stood and gazed at it with eyes and hearts over-charged, each leaning upon the other. Their young souls were touched with awe and an awful quiet. They were too near the departure to have fallen down as yet into the vacancy and emptiness of re-awakening life. "Oh," they said, "if that should be her!" And why should it not be? Unless perhaps there was a quicker way. They watched it with that sob in the throat which is of all sounds and sensations the most overwhelming. It seemed to them as if they were watching her a little further on her way, to the very horizon, till the soft distance closed over, and that speck like a sail upon the sea could be seen no more. And when it was gone they sank down together upon her seat, under the trees she loved, where the children had played and tumbled on the grass about her, and talked of her in broken words, a little phrase now and then, sometimes only "Mother," or "Oh, mamma, mamma," now from one, now from another – in that first extraordinary exaltation and anguish which is not yet grief.

They did not know how long they had been there when something stirred in the bushes, and the two big boys, Arthur and Fred, came heavily into sight, holding each other by the arm. The boys were bewildered, heavy and miserable, not knowing what to do with themselves nor where to go. But they came up with a purpose, which was a little ease in the trouble. It cost them a little convulsion of reluctant crying before they could get out what they had to say. Then it came out in broken words from both together. "Bee, there's someone wants to speak to you at the gate."

"Oh! who could want to speak to me – to-night? I cannot speak to anyone; you might have known."

"Bee," said Arthur, the eldest, "it isn't just – anyone; it's – we thought you would perhaps –"

"He told us," said Fred, "who he was; and begged so hard –"

Then there came back upon poor Bee all the other trouble that she had pushed away from her. Her heart seemed to grow hard and cold after all the softening and tenderness of this dreadful yet heavenly hour. "I will see no one – no one," she said.

"Bee," said the boys, "we shut the gate upon him; but he took hold of our hands, and – and cried, too." They had to stop and swallow the sob before either could say any more. "He said she was his best friend. He said he couldn't bear it no more than us. And if you would only speak to him."

Bee got up from her mother's seat; her poor little heart swelled in her bosom as if it would burst. Oh! how was she to bear all this – to bear it all – to have no one to help her! "No, no, I will not. I will not!" she said.

"Oh, Bee," cried Betty, "if it is Aubrey – poor Aubrey! She was fond of him. She would not like him to be left out. Oh, Bee, come; come and speak to him. Suppose one of us were alone, with nobody to say mother's name to!"

"No, I will not," said Bee. "Oh! Betty, mother knows why; she knows."

"What does she know?" cried Betty, pleading. "She was fond of him. I am fond of him, without thinking of you, for mother's sake."

"Oh, let me go! I am going in; I am going to her. I wish, I wish she had taken me with her! No, no, no! I will never see him more."

“I think,” said Betty to the boys, pushing them away, “that she is not quite herself. Tell him she’s not herself. Say she’s not able to speak to anyone, and we can’t move her. And – and give poor Aubrey – oh, poor Aubrey! – my love.”

The boys turned away on their mission, crossing the gravel path with a commotion of their heavy feet which seemed to fill the air with echoes.

Colonel Kingsward heard it from his study, though that was closed up from any influence outside. He opened his window and came out, standing a black figure surrounded by the moonlight. “Who is there?” he said. “Are there any of you so lost to all feeling as to be out in the garden, of all nights in the world on this night?”

CHAPTER V

Aubrey Leigh had been living a troubled life during the time which had elapsed since the swallowing up in the country of the family in which he had become so suddenly interest, of which, for a short time, he had felt himself a member, and from which, as he felt, he could never be separated, whatever arbitrary laws might be made by his head. When they disappeared from London, which was done so suddenly, he was much cast down for the moment, but, as he had the fullest faith in Bee, and was sustained by her independence of character and determined to stand by him whatever happened, he was, though anxious and full of agitation, neither despairing nor even in very low spirits. To be sure there were moments in which his heart sank, recalling the blank countenance of the father, and the too gentle and yielding disposition of the mother, and Bee's extreme youth and habits of obedience to both. He felt how much there was to be said against himself – a man who had been forced into circumstances of danger which nobody but himself could fully understand, and against which his whole being had revolted, though he could say but little on the subject. And, indeed, who was to understand that a man might yield to a sudden temptation which he despised and hated, and that he could not even explain that this was so, laying the blackest blame upon another – to a man, and still less to a woman; which last was impossible, and not even to be thought of. He might tell it, perhaps, to his mother, and there was a possibility of help there; though even there a hundred difficulties existed. But he was not wound up to that last appeal, and he felt, at first, but little fear of the eventual result. He was assured of Bee's faithfulness, and how could any parent stand out against Bee? Not even, he tried to persuade himself, the stern Colonel, who had so crushed himself. And she had received his first letters, and had answered them, professing her determination never to be coerced in this respect.

He was agitated, his life was full of excitement, and speculation, and trouble. But this is nothing dreadful in a young man's life. It was perhaps better, more enlivening, more vivid, than the delights of an undisturbed love-making, followed by a triumphant marriage. It is well sometimes that the course of true love should not run smooth. He thought himself unhappy in being separated from Bee; but the keen delight of her determination to stand by him for good or evil, her faith in him, her championship, and the conviction that this being so all must come right in the end, was like a stream of bright fresh water flowing through the somewhat sombre flat of his existence. It had been very sombre in the early days of what people thought his youthful happiness – very flat, monotonous, yet with ignoble contentions in it. Bee's sunshiny nature, full of lights and shadows, had changed the whole landscape, and now the excitement of this struggle for her, changed it still more. It might be a hard battle, but they would win in the end. Whether he, a somewhat unlucky fellow, would have done so was very doubtful – but for her the stars would fight in their courses. Everything would be overturned in the world, rather than that Bee should be made miserable, and since she had set her dear heart on him, on his behalf too the very elements would fight, for how otherwise could Bee be made happy? The argument was without a flaw.

This was his reasoning, never put, I need not say, into any formula of words, yet vaguely believed in, and forming a source of the brightest exhilaration in his life, rousing all combative influences by the power of that hope of success which was a certainty in such a case. This exhilaration was crossed by the blackest of disappointments, and threatened to become despair when for days he had no sign of existence from Bee: but that after all was only a keener excitement – the sting of anxiety which makes after satisfaction more sweet. And then he was consoled to hear of Mrs. Kingsward's illness, which explained everything. Not that Aubrey was selfish enough to rejoice in that poor lady's suffering. He would have been shocked and horrified by the thought. But then it was no unusual thing for Mrs. Kingsward to be ill; it is not unusual, a young man so easily thinks, for any middle-aged person to be ill – and in so many cases it does not seem to do them much harm; whereas it did him much good – for it explained the silence of Bee!

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