RHODA BROUGHTON

RED AS A ROSE IS SHE: A NOVEL

Rhoda Broughton

Red as a Rose is She: A Novel

Broughton R.

Red as a Rose is She: A Novel / R. Broughton — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Rhoda Broughton
Red as a Rose is She: A Novel

CHAPTER I

Have you ever been to Wales? I do not ask this question of any one in particular; I merely address it to the universal British public, or, rather, to such member or members of the same as shall be wise enough to sit down and read the ensuing true and moving love story – true as the loves of wicked Abelard and Heloise, moving as those of good Paul and Virginia. Probably those wise ones will be very few; numerable by tens, or even units: they will, I may very safely aver, not form the bulk of the nation. However high may be my estimate of my own powers of narration, however amply Providence may have gifted me with self-appreciation, I may be sure of that, seeing that the only books I know of which enjoy so wide a circulation are the Prayer-book and Bradshaw. I am not going to instruct any one in religion or trains, so I may as well make up my mind to a more limited audience, while I pipe my simple lay (rather squeakily and out of tune, perhaps), and may think myself very lucky if that same kind, limited audience do not hiss me down before I have got through half a dozen staves of the dull old ditty.

Have you ever been to Wales? If you have ever visited the pretty, dirty, green spot where Pat and his brogue, where potatoes and absenteeism and head-centres flourish, *alias* Ireland, you have no doubt passed through a part of it, rushing by, most likely, in the Irish mail; but in that case your eyes and nose and ears were all so very full of dust and cinders – you were so fully employed in blinking and coughing and enjoying the poetry of motion – as to be totally incapable of seeing, hearing, or smelling any of the beauties, agreeable noises, or good smells, which in happier circumstances might have offered themselves to your notice. Perhaps you are in the habit, every midsummer, of taking your half-dozen male and female olive shoots to have the roses restored to their twelve fat cheeks by blowy scrambles about the great frowning Orme's Head, or by excavations in the Rhyl Sands. Perhaps you have gone wedding-touring to Llanberis on the top of a heavy-laden coach, swinging unsafely round sharp corners, and nearly flinging your Angelina from your side on to the hard Welsh road below. Perhaps you have wept with Angelina at the spurious grave of the martyred Gelert, or eaten pink trout voraciously at Capel Curig, and found out what a startlingly good appetite Angelina had. But have you ever lived in the land of the Cymri? Have you ever seen how drunk the masculine Cymri can be on market days, or what grievous old hags the feminine Cymri become towards their thirtieth year? Have you ever, by bitter experience, discovered the truth of that couplet —

"Taffy was a Welshman,
Taffy was a thief?"

I *have* lived in Wales, so I speak with authority; and for my part I don't think that Taffy is much more given to the breaking of the eighth commandment than the *canaille* of any other country. He is not a bright fellow, is not Taffy; happiest, I think, when rather tipsy, or when yelling psalms in his conventicle or schism-shop – for Taffy is addicted to schism; he will tell you plenty of lies, too, and will not season them with the salt of a racy, devil-me-care wit, as Pat would. But he is very civil-spoken, and rather harmless; seldomer, I think, than his cleverer neighbour over the border does he hanker feloniously after his neighbour's spoons, or hammer his wife's head with the domestic poker.

But why am I drivelling on, like a sort of Murray and water, on the manners and character of this, to my thinking, not very interesting nation? I will waste no more "prave 'ords" upon them, as the few men and women whom I am going to tell you about, and whom I shall want you to like a

little, or dislike a little, as the case may be, are not Taffies, only they happen to have stuck up their tent-poles in Taffy-land when they first make their low bow to you. These men and women were nothing out of the way for goodness, or beauty, or talent; they did a hundred thousand naughty things, each one of them. Some of them did them with impunity, as far as this world goes; some of them, capricious Megæra and Tisyphone lashed with scorpions for their derelictions. This is going to be neither a "Life of Saints," nor a "History of Devils;" these are memoirs neither of a "Hedley Vicars," nor of a "Dame aux Camellias;" so, whoso expects and relishes either of those styles of composition may forthwith close this volume, and pitch it (if it be his own, and not the battered property of a circulating library) into the fire. Those who love a violent moral, or violent judgment for sins and follies – a man struck dead for saying "damn," or a woman for going to a ball, as the *Record* would charitably have us believe is the way of Providence – equally with those who enjoy the flavour of violent immorality, will be disappointed if they look this way for the gratification of their peculiar idiosyncracies. Of my friends presently to be made known to you, and criticised by you, "the more part remain unto this present, but some have fallen asleep."

Once upon a time – I like that old, time-honoured opening; it makes one so nobly free, gives one so much room to stretch one's wings in, ties one down to no king's reign, no hampering, clogging century – once upon a time there was a valley in Taffy-land; there is still, unless some very recent convulsion has upheaved it to the top of a mountain, or submerged it beneath the big Atlantic waves; a valley lovelier than that one in "Ida," where "beautiful Paris, evil-hearted Paris," pastured his sheep and his jet-black goats, and inaugurated his rakish course; a valley where there are no dangerous, good-looking Parises, only one or two red-headed Welsh squires, who have each married, or will in the fulness of time each marry, one lawful wife – red-headed, too, very likely; and have never made, will never make, love to any Enones or other ill-conducted young shepherdesses. In fact, in that Arcadia there are no such shepherdesses; the daughters of the Cymri do not "ply the homely shepherd's trade," nor would they shed much romance over it if they did; for with sorrow be it spoken, blowsy are they mostly, hard-featured, toothless; and, moreover, the little nimble, lean sheep that go scrambling and jumping and skurrying about the rough crags and steep hill-sides do not need any crook'd and melodious Dowsabellas or Neæras to look after them and guide them in the way they should go.

In that valley there are plenty of houses, squires' houses and peasants' houses, where the propagation of the Cambrian is conducted with much success; houses big and little, red-faced and white-faced and dirty-faced, old and new. But we have at present to do with only one of those houses, and it comes under the head of the littles and the olds. Halfway up a hill-side it stands, looking across the valley to other higher hills that swell out softly against the sky, and go sloping gently down to the sea twenty miles away. They always remind me – I don't know why – of the distant hills in Martin's picture of the "Plains of Heaven;" so mistily do they rise in their hazy blueness. It is a snug, unpretending little house enough, with its black and white cross-beamed front and unwalled kitchen-garden straggling steeply up the slope at the back. Many and many a day has it stood there, seeing generations and fashions come in and go out; has stood there since the far-away days when men wore curly wigs half-way down their backs, and sky-blue coats, and fought and died for prerogative and King Charles, or fought and lived for England and liberty: when most houses were black and white, like its little elderly self, before plate glass or stucco, or commodious villa residences, five minutes' walk from a station, were dreamed of. The name of the little house is Glan-yr-Afon.

CHAPTER II

"Jack and I got in our last hayload to-day, without a drop of rain; the first bit of good luck that has come to us, I don't know when. If we had any land, I should imagine that we must have a bit of consecrated ground among it, to account for our ill-fortune; but as we have not of our own enough to pasture a goose upon, that cannot be it. Such an odd thing happened to-day – Robert Brandon proposed to me: it is the first offer I ever had, though I was seventeen last month. If it is never a more pleasant process than it was to-day, I hope sincerely it may be the last. I said 'Yes,' too; at least, a species of Yes after half-a-dozen Noes; I cannot imagine why, for I certainly did not feel Yes. I suppose I must have been pleased at any one wishing for my company during the term of his natural life."

The name on the fly-leaf of this journal-book is Esther Craven, Glan-yr-Afon, and the date July 10, 186-. July is very often a rather wet month – not so this year; all through its one-and-thirty days the sky was like brass, as it looked to Elijah (the Seer's) eyes on the top of Carmel, when, by his faith, he brought up the tarrying rain from the sea's chambers. London is pouring out her noble army of haberdashers and greengrocers into Ramsgate and Margate, and Scarborough and Llandudno. The John Gilpins of to-day are not satisfied with a modest outing to the "Bell" at Edmonton, "all in a chaise and pair."

Armies of schoolboys are devouring arid sandwiches and prime old buns in railway refreshment rooms – schoolboys emptied out of every school and seminary and college all over the country. Highly paid instructors of youth are stretching their cramped legs up the steep sides of Helvellyn and Mont Blanc, and surveying the "frozen hurricane" of the glaciers through their academic spectacles. And young Craven's (of Glan-yr-Afon) last hayload is safely stacked, as you heard from his sister's diary. This morning the highest lying of the upland fields was hilly with haycocks: to-night it is as flat as Salisbury Plain. All day long the waggons have gone grinding and crunching up and down the rocky mountain road between field and rick-yard. All day long Evan and Hugh and Roppert (*sic*) with their waistcoats open and their brown arms bared, aided and abetted by various Cambrian matrons, with bonnets standing upright on their heads, and pitchforks in their lily hands, have been tossing the scented bundles – sweeter in death than in life, like a good man's fame – into the carts; loading them till of the shaft horse nought but ears and nose and forelegs appeared, save to the eye of faith. All day long Esther has been sitting under a haycock, as one might fancy Solomon's wise woman doing, "looking well to the ways of her household." The hay moulds itself pliably into a soft arm-chair for her young, slight figure, and the big hay-spiders walk up her back at their leisure, and explore the virgin forests of her thick dusk hair. She has had her luncheon brought out to her there – bread and milk in a white bowl. It is unsocial, surly work, eating alone; one feels reduced to the level of a dog, cracking bones, and lapping up gravy out of his trencher, all by himself, with tail well down, like a pump handle, and a growl and a snap for any brother dog who may approach to share his feast.

The haymakers were much cheerier – "couched at ease" under the nutty hedgerow; bringing slices of unnaturally fat bacon out of blue and white spotted pocket-handkerchiefs, gabbling to one another in the Welsh tongue, which, to one who occupies the room of the unlearned, has always a querulous, quarrelsome, interrogative sound; and digging their clasp knives into the ground to clean them, when their services were no longer required. Jack is out for the day, and the place feels stupid without him. There is not much melody in "I paddle my own canoe," but one misses it when one is accustomed to hear it echoing gaily over the crofts and through the farm-yard and orchard. It would be impossible to talk more dog-Welsh than Jack does to his workmen; but even the mellifluous tongue of the Cymri, with its three or four consonants standing together, undissevered by any vowel, is made harmonious, enunciated by a young, clear voice, that sounds as if it had never been the vehicle for sorrowful words.

"The village seems asleep or dead,
Now Lubin is away,"

and Esther, though she has entered upon her eighteenth year (an age which a century ago would have been rather overripe – Chloe and Cynthia and Phyllis being considered in their prime at fifteen, and toasted accordingly), has as yet no Lubin but her brother. Now and again, Gwen the cook, and Sarah the housemaid, came panting up the hill in lilac cotton gowns and trim white aprons, bearing beer in every jug and mug and tin pipkin that Glan-yr-Afon affords, as Evangeline brought the nut-brown ale to the reapers of the village of Grand Pré. And the haymakers drink insatiably, and wipe the thirsty mouth upon the convenient sleeve as artless Nature bids. By-and-by artless Nature makes them rather unsteady on their legs. As they lead the heavy-laden cart to the last remaining haycock, the one on which their mistress sits enthroned, I am not at all sure that they do not see two haycocks, two wide-leaved white hats, two Esthers. Perceiving their condition, though too old an inhabitant of Wales to be in any degree surprised at what is, after all, the normal condition of the Welsh, Miss Craven rises precipitately. Driven from her fortress, she picks up her needles and threads, and Jack's shirt, from which, as usual, the frequent button is missing, and runs lightly down the mountain path in her strong country boots, which bid defiance to the sharp stones that crop out at every step through the limestone soil. At the hall door – a little arched door like a church's, with a trellised porch and benches, such as one sees Dutch boors sitting on with their beer and schnapps, in Teniers' pictures – Sarah meets her. Sarah is an Englishwoman.

"Mr. Brandon is in the parlour, 'm."

"Parlour! My good Sarah, how many times shall I adjure you, by all you hold most sacred, to say drawing-room?"

"He has been there best part of half-an-hour, 'm."

"Poor man! how lively for him! why on earth didn't you come and call me?"

"He said as he wasn't in no partikler hurry, and he'd as lieve as not wait till you come in. Stop a bit, Miss Esther, you have got some hay on your frock behind."

"People of seventeen wear gowns, not frocks, Sarah. Oh! there, that will do. If I had a haystack disposed about my person, he would never be a bit the wiser."

Half-an-hour passes, and Mr. Brandon is still in the "parlour." It is seven o'clock, and dinner-time. Would you like to know what it is that Mr. Brandon takes so long in saying, and whether it is anything likely to reconcile Miss Craven to the loss of her dinner? A little room that looks towards the sun-setting; a little room full of evening sunshine and the smell of tea-roses; a light paper, with small, bright flower-bunches on the walls; white muslin curtains; a general air of crisp freshness, as of a room that there are no climbing, crawling, sticky-fingered children to crumple and rumple. A young woman, rather red in the face, standing in one corner. She has been driven thither apparently by a young man, who is standing before her, and who is still redder. At a rough calculation, you would say that the young man was seven feet high; but put him with his back against the wall, with his heels together, and his chin in, and you will find that he is exactly six feet four; that is, four inches taller than any man who wishes to do work in the world, and find horses to carry him, ought to be. His clothes are rather shabby, and he looks poor; but, from the crown of his close-clipped head to the sole of his big feet, a gentleman, every inch of him, though he has no "gude braid claith" to help to make him so. His features may be Apollo's or Apollyon's, for all you can see of them, so thickly are they planted out with a forest of yellow hair; but tears do not seem to be at any immense distance from eyes blue as the sky between storm clouds, fearless as a three-years' child's.

"Don't you think that we do very well as we are?" says the young woman, suggestively.

"I don't know about you, I'm sure. I know I've lost a stone and a half within the last year," replies the young man, very ruefully.

Esther laughs. "There is some little of you left still," she says, with rather a mischievous glance up at the two yards and a half of enamoured manhood before her.

This is what has been over-roasting the mutton. He has been asking her to take his heart, his large hand, and the half of one hundred and twenty pounds a year (the exorbitant pay of a lieutenant in Her Majesty's infantry), of an old hunting watch, and a curly retriever dog; and she has been declining these tempting offers, one and all. The minute hand of the gilt clock, on which Minerva sits in a helmet and a very tight gown, with her legs dangling down, has travelled from 6.30 to 7.5, and within these five-and-thirty minutes Miss Craven has refused three proposals, all made by the same person: the first, very stoutly and mercilessly, from Jack's arm-chair, where she had originally taken up her position; the second, decisively still, but with less cruelty, from the music-stool, to which she had next retired; and the third, in a hasty and wavering manner, from the corner, in which she has taken final refuge, in a strong, fortified entrenchment behind the writing-table.

"But – but – " says Esther, her rebellious mouth giving little twitches every now and then as at some lurking thought of the ridiculous – "it's – it's such a very *odd* idea! I don't think I ever was more surprised in my life. When Sarah told me that you were here, I thought that, of course, you had come to say something about that bone-dust. Why, you never said anything at all tending this way before."

"Didn't I?" answers the young giant, with a crestfallen look. "I tried several times, but I don't think that you could have understood what I meant, for you always began to laugh."

"I always do laugh at civil speeches," answers the girl simply. "I don't know how else to take them: I suppose it is because I have had so few addressed to me; they always sound to me so *niais*."

"I'm not a bit surprised at your not liking me," he says, with humility. "I don't see how any one could at first. I know that I'm ugly and awkward, and don't understand things quick – "

"I don't *dis*-like you," interrupts Esther, with magnanimity, quite affected by her lover's description of his own undesirability. "Why should I? There is nothing in you to dislike; you are very good-natured, I'm sure," damning with faint praise, in the laudable effort not to be unqualifiedly uncomplimentary.

"I know what an unequal exchange it is that I am offering," says Brandon, too humble to resent, and yet with a dim sense of mortification at the quantity and quality of praise bestowed upon him. "I know of how much more value you are than I!"

She does not contradict him; her own heart echoes his words. "I am of more value than he; I shall find it out practically some day."

"That was why I was in such a hurry to speak," he says eagerly. "I felt sure that if I did not, you would be snapped up directly by some one else."

She laughs rather grimly. "You might have laid aside your alarms on that head, I think. I don't know who there is about here to snap me up."

Silence for a few minutes: Esther takes up a penwiper, fashioned into a remote resemblance to a chimney sweep, and studies its anatomy attentively. "Shall I upset the writing-table and make a rush past him? No, the ink would spoil the carpet, and he would only come again to-morrow, and hunt me into the other corner. Poor fellow! I hope he is not going to cry, or go down on his knees!"

Whether mindful or not of the fate of Gibbon the historian, who, having thrown himself on his knees before his lady-love, was unable, through extreme fat, to get up again, Brandon does not indulge in either of the demonstrations that Esther apprehended. He stands quiet, cramming half a yard of yellow beard into his mouth, and says presently:

"Well, I suppose I must not worry you any more; it is not good manners, is it? A man ought to be satisfied with one No; I have given you the trouble of saying three."

"It's very disagreeable, I'm sure," says Esther, wrinkling up her forehead in an embarrassed fashion, "and I hate saying No to any one: I don't mean in this way, because nobody ever asked me before, but about anything; but what can I do?"

"Try me!" he says very eagerly, stretching out his hand across the narrow table (all but upsetting the standish *en route*). "I don't want to threaten you, saying that I should go to the dogs if you threw me over, for I should not; that always seemed to me a cowardly sort of thing to do; and, besides, I should have my mother left to live for if the worst came to the worst; but you must see that it is everything in the world to a fellow to have one great hope in it to keep him straight."

Soft music in the distance; some one whistling "I paddle my own canoe" somewhere about the house; Esther, in an agony between the fear of subversing the table, and the hundredfold worse fear of being discovered by Jack in an unequivocally sentimental position, of which she would never hear the last. "Very well, very well, I'll – I'll *think* about it; could you be so very kind as to loose my hand?"

He complies reluctantly, and she, that there may be no further discussion about it, hides it discreetly away in her jacket pocket. "I paddle my own canoe" dies away in the distance; apparently it was on its way to dress for dinner. Esther draws a sigh of relief. "I thought that some one was coming."

"And if they had?"

"Why, I did not relish the idea of being found driven into a corner, like a child at a dame's school, and you, like the dame, standing over me," answers she, abandoning the struggle with the corners of her mouth, and bubbling over with the facile laughter of seventeen. Utterly unable to join in her merriment, he stands leaning in awkward misery against the wall; all other griefs are at least respectable; love-sorrows, alone, are only ludicrous.

"It really is so silly," says Esther, presently, compassionate but impatient. "Do try and get the better of it!"

"Easier said than done," he answers ruefully. "I might as well advise you to get the better of your affection for Jack."

"I don't see the parallel," rejoined she, coldly, feeling as if there was sacrilege in the comparison. "My love for Jack is a natural instinct, built too upon the foundation of lifelong obligations, endless benefits, countless kindnesses. What kindness have I ever shown you? I sewed a button on your glove once, and once I pinned a rose on your coat."

"I have the rose still."

She says "Pshaw!" pettishly, and turns away her head.

"Perhaps you are afraid of marrying on small means?" suggests Brandon, diffidently, after a while.

The gentle clatter and click of dishes carried into the dining-room enters faintly through the shut door. Esther's heart sinks within her. Is he going to begin all over again? – round and round, like a thunderstorm among hills?

"I am afraid of marrying on *any* means," she says, comprehensively. "I particularly dislike the idea; marriage seems to me the end of everything, and I am at the beginning."

"But I don't want you to marry me *now*," cries Robert, stammering.

"Don't you? You told me just now that you did."

"For pity's sake, Esther, don't laugh! it may be play to you, but it is death to me."

"I'm not laughing."

"Perhaps some day you will feel what I am feeling now."

"Perhaps" (doubtfully).

"And you will find then that it is no laughing matter."

"Perhaps" (still more doubtfully).

The clamour of a fresh cohort of plates shaking noisily upon a tray warns Brandon that his time is short.

"Esther!" with a sort of despair in his voice, clashing the ridiculous with the pathetic – they are always twin sisters – "I could live upon such a little hope."

"What would you have me say?" she cries, standing with fluttering colour, tapping feet, and irritated eyes. "I have told you the plain truth, and it does not please you; must I dress up some pretty

falsehood, and tell you that I fell in love with you at first sight, or that after all I find that you are the only man in the world that can make me really happy?"

"Say nothing of the kind!" he answers, wincing under her irony. "I have not much to recommend me, we all know that, and I start with the disadvantage of your thinking me rather a bore than otherwise; but other men have overcome even greater obstacles; why should not I? Give me at least a trial!"

She is silent.

"Say that you will *try* to like me; there need be no untruth in that."

"But if I fail!" says Esther, wavering – partly in sheer weariness of the contest, partly in womanly pity for sufferings which owe their rise to the excess of her own charms.

"If you fail you will not have to tell me so; I shall find it out for myself, and – and I shall bear it, I suppose." He ends with a heavy sigh at that too probable possibility.

"And you will console yourself by telling all your friends what a flirt I am, and how ill I treated you." Apparently he does not think this suggestion worthy of refutation; at least he does not refute it. "Or, if you don't, your mother will."

"Not she" (indignantly).

"Or, if she does not, your sisters will."

"Not they" (less indignantly).

"And if – if – after a long while – a very long while – I succeed in liking you a little – mind, I don't say that I shall; on the contrary, I think it far more probable that I shall not – but if I do, you won't expect me to *marry* you?"

He smiles, despite himself. "I can hardly promise that."

"I mean not for many years, till Jack is married, and I am quite, *quite* old – five-and-twenty or so?"

"It shall be as you wish."

"And if, as is most likely, I continue not to care about you, and am obliged to tell you so, you will not think the worse of me."

"No."

"You are certain?"

"Certain. Whatever you do, I shall love you to-day, and to-morrow, and always," says the young fellow, very solemnly; and his eyes go away past her, through the window, and up to the blue sky overhead, as if calling on the great pale vault to be witness between him and her.

As for her, her prosaic soul has wandered back to the mutton; she takes the opportunity of his eyes being averted to steal a glance at the clock. Apparently, however, he has eyes in the back of his head, for he says hastily, with rather a pained smile: "You are longing for me to go."

"No – o."

"I ought not to have come at this time of night. I ought to have waited till to-morrow, I know."

"It is rather late."

"But to-morrow seemed such a long time off, that I thought I must know the worst or the best before the sun came up again. I don't quite know which it is now; which is it, Esther?"

"It's neither the one nor the other; it's the second best," she answers, all smiles again at seeing some prospect of her admirer's departure, and forgetting, with youthful heedlessness, the price at which that departure has been bought. "It is that I really am very much obliged, though, all the same I wish you would think better of it, and that I'll try; I will, really; don't look as if you did not believe me."

So with this half-loaf he goes, passes away through the little wooden porch, that is so low it looks as if it were going to knock his tall head, past the stables, and through the oak woods, home.

CHAPTER III

"It is the hour when from the boughs
The nightingale's high note is heard;
It is the hour when lovers' vows
Seem sweet in every whispered word – "

As saith that most delicious of love poems that makes us all feel immoral as we read it. It is the hour when chanticleer retires to his perch in the henhouse, lowers his proud tail, sinks his neck into his breast, and goes to sleep between his two fattest wives. It is the hour when animal life and wild humanity retire to bed; the hour when tamed humanity sits down to dinner. The more we advance in civilisation the farther back we push the boundaries of sleep and forgetfulness. When we reach our highest point of culture, I suppose we shall hustle the blessed, the divine Nepenthe, off the face of the earth altogether.

The dining-room at Glan-yr-Afon is, like the rest of the house, rather small and rather pleasant. It will not dine more than twelve comfortably; it is seldom asked to dine more than two; and these two, being young and void of gluttony, do not spend much of their time in it. In youth the dining-room is not our temple, our sanctuary, our holy of holies, as it often is in riper years. In youth our souls are great, and our bodies slender; in old age our bodies are often great and our souls slender. The one wide open window looks on the gay little garden – the window, all around and about which the climbing convolvulus is blowing great white trumpets. There are two or three pictures on the walls; good ones, though dim and dusty. Thomas Wentworth, Lord Strafford, very dark and haughty and saturnine, in blue grey armour, scowling at whosoever looks at him, as he might have scowled at Pym and Hollis. Erasmus, astute and lean, in a black skull cap: and Mary, Queen of Scots, very pale and peaky and indistinct, for time has washed and scrubbed all the carmine out of the cheeks and lips that sent Europe mad three centuries ago. An old sheep-dog is lying on the hearth-rug, with his wise old eyes fixed on his master, licking his chops every now and then when he sees some morsel more tempting than ordinary conveyed to another mouth than his.

This evening Lord Strafford is scowling, Mary Stuart simpering, down upon two people dining together, and on a third person whisking about in a clean cap and an aggressively well-starched print dress in attendance upon them. There is a great pot, full and brimming over with roses – a beanpot our forefathers would have called it – in the middle of the table. They were plucked but half an hour ago, and their faces were still wet with the dew-tears that they wept at being torn away from their brothers and sisters on the old gnarled rose trees up the kitchen-garden walk.

But the freshest, the sweetest, the largest of the roses is not in the beanpot with the others; it is on a chair by itself; there are no dew-tears on its cheeks, it has no prickles, and its name is Esther.

"Have some roast chips, Essie? I cannot offer you any roast mutton, because there isn't any; I dare say there was an hour ago, but there certainly isn't now."

This speech is made by Jack. Jack is a young person with not a single good feature in his face; with a baby moustache, which, like the daguerreotypes of fifteen or sixteen years ago, is only visible at rare intervals in one particular light; and with cheeks and nose and chin and throat all as brown as any berry that ever ripened under the mellow autumn sun.

"It's a fault on the right side, dear boy; it's better than quivering and being purple," says Esther, with a pout which a lover would have thought entrancing, but which a prosaic brother, if he perceived it at all, considered rather a distortion than otherwise.

"I wish that people would remember that there is a time to call and a time to dine, and that the two times are not the same," he grumbles, a little crossly.

A man may bear the untimely cutting off of his firstborn, the disposition evinced by the wife of his bosom to love his neighbour as himself, the sinking of his little all in the Agra Bank, with resignation and fortitude truly Christian; but what hero, what sage, what archbishop, can stand the over-roasting or under-boiling of his mutton, the burning of his soup, or the wateriness of his potatoes, and bear an *æquam mentem?*

Esther looks rather conscious, purses up her pink mouth into the shape of a noiseless "Hush!" and says "*Pas avant*," which idiomatic phrase is intended to convey to her brother the indiscreetness of making comments in Sarah's presence on Mr. Brandon's enormities.

From long familiarity with the sound, Sarah has become entirely acquainted with Esther's specimen of Parisian French, and always pricks up her ears when it appears on the scene.

Then they are silent for a little space. One is not apt to say very brilliant things in one's family circle; it requires the friction of mind with mind before bright sayings spring into being, as the flint and the steel must be married before the spark leaps into life.

"How long the days are now!" Jack says presently, as he looks out on the evening light lying like a great bright cloak all over the land.

The earth is so very fair, all pranked with "smalle flowres" and green leaves, that the sun is grievously loth to leave her. Fair-weather friend as he is, he cannot be in too great a hurry to desert her, when she lies poor and bare and faded in the dull November days.

"One always says that this time of year," Esther says, smiling. "It would be much more worthy remark if they didn't get longer; if one kept a journal of one's remarks for a year, what an awful tautology there would be in them! What a pity that one cannot say a thing once for all, and have done with it!"

"If you resolved never to say anything that anybody had said before, you would make mighty few observations, I take it," Jack answers, a little drily. "Most remarks have been pretty well aired in the course of the last six thousand years, I fancy."

So, with a little flagging talk, the dinner passes, and the modest dessert appears: scarlet pyramids of strawberries, great bag-shaped British Queens, and little racy, queer-tasted hautbois.

Sarah retires, and the embargo is taken off Esther's speech.

"Is she gone – finally gone?" she cries, very eagerly. "Heaven be praised for that! I thought she would never have done clattering those spoons. Oh, Jack, what a heavy weight a piece of news is to carry! How I sympathise with the woman who had to whisper to the rushes about Midas' ears! I have been dying all through dinner for some rushes to whisper to."

"To whisper *what* to?" asks the boy, his eyes opening very wide and round.

"Jack, do I look taller than usual to-night?"

"No."

"Broader?"

"Not that I perceive."

"More consequential?"

"Much as usual. You never are a woman with 'a presence.'"

"Is it possible that there's no difference at all in me?"

"None whatever; except that, now I look at you, your cheeks are, if possible, redder than usual. Why should there be any?"

"Because" (drawing herself up) "I have to-day passed a turning-point in my history. I have had – a proposal."

"Who from? – one of the haymakers?"

"No. That would not have surprised me much more, though. Let me get it out as quick as I can, now that the string of my tongue is loosed. Robert Brandon was here to-day."

"As I know to my cost," says Jack, with rather a rueful face at the recollection of his unpalatable dinner.

"And – and – how shall I word it prettiest? – asked me to be his."

"The devil he did!" exclaims Jack, surprised into strong, language.

"Yes, the devil he did! as you epigrammatically remark."

"And you, what answer did you give?" asks the boy, quickly, his mouth emulating the example of his eyes, and opening wide, too.

"I said I was much obliged, but that, for the present, I preferred being my own."

"You said 'No,' of course?"

"Yes, I did; ever so many 'Noes.' I did not count them, but I'm sure their name was Legion."

Jack gives a sigh of relief, and throws a biscuit to the ceaselessly attent sheep-dog. "Poor beggar!" he says. "Here, Luath, old man. You old muff! why did you not catch it? He is as good a fellow as ever I came across, and now, I suppose, it will be all different and disagreeable. Hang it! what a plague women are!"

"But, Jack – "

"Well, Essie, not done yet? Any more unlucky fellows sent off with their tails between their legs?"

"No, no; but, Jack" (looking down, and staining her fingers with the henna of the strawberries), "I – I'm not quite sure that, after all those 'Noes,' I did not say something that was not quite 'No.'"

"That was 'Yes?'"

"No, not 'Yes' either; not positive, actual 'Yes;' something betwixt and between; a sort of possible, hypothetical 'Yes.'"

"More fool you!" said Jack, briefly.

"Don't scold me, you bad boy!" she cries, running over to him and putting her gentle arms about his neck in the caressing way which sisters affect so much, and which brothers, in general, disrelish so highly, "or I vow I'll cry, and you know you hate that."

"I hate your making a fool of yourself worse," growls Jack, mollified, but struggling. "I say, you need not strangle a fellow."

"Wait till I do make a fool of myself," she says, very gaily. "I'm only talking about it as yet, and there's a good wide ditch between saying and doing."

"More shame for you to say what you don't mean."

"Jack, dear boy, don't you know that I hate saying things that vex a person? I never had a faculty for telling people home-truths; I'd far sooner tell them any amount of stories; and I got so tired of saying 'No,' and he seemed to take it so much to heart, that I said 'Yes,' just for a change – just for peace. In fact, 'anything for a quiet life' is my motto."

"And may I ask what you intend to live upon?" asks Jack (the romantic side of whose mind lies at present fallow and uncultivated, and whose thoughts, Briton-like, speedily turn from "love's young dream" to the pound, shilling, and pence aspect of the matter).

"On love, to be sure. On – what is it? – 6s. 6d. a day; and perhaps I may take in soldiers' washing," Esther says, bursting out into a violent fit of laughing.

"Uncommonly funny, no doubt!" Jack says, laughing too, but sorely against his will. "And do you mean to tell me that you like Brandon all of a sudden enough to be such an abject pauper with him for the rest of your days? Why it was only yesterday that you were laughing at him, saying he danced like a pair of tongs."

Esther has slidden down to the floor, and sits there tailor-fashion.

"I don't mean to tell you anything of the kind," she answers, gravely. "Poor dear fellow! – it is very odious of me – but between you and me I think I should survive it if I were to know that I should never see him again; only, please don't tell him I said so."

"Love, who to none beloved to love again remits – "

she repeats softly, musing to herself; "that is a very lovely line, but it is horribly untrue."

"What do you mean to do then, if it is not an impertinent question?" asks Jack, throwing back his young head, and looking in an inquisitorial manner at the penitent at his feet from under his eyelids. "Marry a man that you don't like, and who has not a farthing to keep you on, merely because he is the first person that asked you?"

"Nothing is farther from my intentions," says Esther, getting rather red. "And how unkind of you to twit me with my dearth of admirers. I mean *you* to interpose your parental authority and forbid the banns; I intend to shift the odium of the transaction on to your shoulders," she says, relapsing into levity, – "poor, dear shoulders!" (patting them very fondly) "they are not very wide, but they are broader than mine, at all events; to them I transfer my difficulties."

"*That* you shan't!" cries Jack, with animation, shaking off her hand, and looking very indignant and honest. "You are to do shabby things, and I am to have the credit of them! Thanks, very much, but I don't admire that division of labour. I don't think I ever heard a meaner proposition."

Esther's little head, rich in a soft plenitude of dusky love-locks, sinks low down towards her lap; she is very easily snubbed, especially by Jack.

"A nice name you'll make for yourself, Miss Essie," pursues the young Solomon, severely, still brandishing the metaphorical birch-rod over his sister. "I expect you'll make the country too hot to hold us in a short time."

Esther lifts up two sudden, tearful eyes, that look like great jewels seen through running water, and says, piteously, "But, Jack, you know, as you said just now, it was the first time; one never does things well the first time one tries; one is always clumsy at them; I shall know better next time."

"I don't see what 'next time' you are likely to have," says Jack, inexorable in his young severity. "It will be rather late in the day for people to propose to you when you are Bob Brandon's half-starved or whole-starved wife."

"But I'm not, Jack," cries Esther, very eagerly.

She looks grave enough now; rather alarmed at the little gay sketch her brother has drawn of her future destiny.

"I'm not going to marry him or any one else, *ever*. Do you think I'd leave you to marry the Angel Gabriel, if he came down from heaven on purpose to ask me?"

"Why did you tell Brandon that you would then?" asks the young fellow, not a bit disarmed by her sweet flattery.

"I did not tell him so; I said I would try; but even if I do try, I need not succeed; and even if I do manage to get up a sort of liking for him, I need not *marry* him. You are in such a hurry to jump at conclusions; *there's* the beauty of his being so poor, don't you see? He cannot expect me to marry him, when he has no bread and butter to put into my mouth."

"Then why be engaged to him at all, my good girl?" asks honest Jack, rather bewildered by these new lights – these subtleties on the subject of betrothal.

"Why do people give babies gin? – it is not good for them, but it keeps them quiet; *that* is precisely my principle. Being engaged to me may not be good for Robert, but it is *gin* to him; it keeps him quiet," answers Esther, on the battle-field of whose small face smiles and tears are fighting.

Her brother does not seem to see the beauty of this ingenious mode of reasoning in a very strong light.

"I won't have you playing fast and loose with him," he says, very decisively, shaking a stern young head – stern, despite its curliness and its total dearth of those care-lines that are supposed to be Wisdom's harsh footprints. "He is much too good a fellow to be played tricks with; mind that, Miss Esther!"

"I have not the slightest desire in life to play tricks with him; if I ever do play tricks, I hope it will be with some one more amusing," answers Essie, very pettishly, looking excessively mutine and ill-humoured. "I don't care if I never hear his ugly name again; he has spoilt the dinner and made you

as cross as two sticks; and – and – I wish he was *dead, that* I do!" concludes happy Mr. Brandon's *fiancée* weeping.

CHAPTER IV

Morning is come again. The sun cannot bear to be long away from his young sweetheart, the earth, so he has come back hasting, with royal pomp, with his crown of gay gold beams on his head, with his flame-cloak about his strong shoulders, and with a great troop of light, flaky clouds – each with a reflex of his red smile on its courtier face – at his back. He has come back to see himself in the laughing blue eyes of her seas and streams, and to rest at noontide, like a sleepy giant, on her warm green lap.

The daily miracle – the miracle that none can contest, to which all are witness, has been worked – the resurrection of the world. And this resurrection is not partial, not limited to humanity, as that final one is towards which the eyes of the Christian church have been looking steadfastly for eighteen centuries and a half; but every beast and bird and flower has shaken off Death's sweet semblance, his gentle counterfeit, and is feeling, in bounding vein and rushing sap, the ecstatic bliss of the mystery of life. If we never slept, we should not know the joy of waking; if we never woke, we should not know the joy of sleep. How, I marvel, shall we *feel* the happiness of heaven, if we never lose, and consequently regain it?

The thrushes and blackbirds are already in the midst of their glees and madrigals and part songs. They sing the same songs every day, so that they are quite perfect in them; and they are all very joyful ones. In their sweet flute-language there are no words expressive of sorrow or pain; they know of no minor key. There were twenty roses born last night, and the flowers are all rejoicing greatly. They are smiling and whispering and gossiping together; the sweet peas, like pink and purple butterflies,

> "…on tiptoe for a flight,
> With wings of delicate flush o'er virgin white,"

each half-inclined to hover away with the young west wind that is sighing such a little gentle story all about himself into their ears. The lambs, grown so big and woolly that one might almost mistake them for their mothers, are leaping and racing and plunging about in the field below the house, in the giddiness of youth, unprescient of the butcher. Hated of Miss Craven's soul as much as ever were the blind and lame of King David's are those too, *too* agile sheep. Grievously prone are they to ignore the low stone wall of partition, and work havoc and devastation among the aster tops and cabbage shoots of her garden.

> "The king was in his counting-house,
> Counting out his money;
> The queen was in the parlour,
> Eating bread and honey."

The King of Glan-yr-Afon is not counting out his money, because he has not any to count, poor young fellow. He is sitting on a garden-chair, reading the *Times*, and thinking how much better he would rule the Fatherland, how much less mean and shabby and selfish he would make her in other nations' eyes, if he might but have the whip and reins for six months or so. Old Luath lies at his feet, with dim eyes half closed, snapping lazily at the flies, and catching on an average about one every quarter of an hour. Esther is in the stack-yard, holding a levy of ravenous fowls. She has tied a large white kitchen-apron round her waist; with one hand she is holding it up, with the other she is scattering light wheat among a mixed multitude. Baby Cochins, in primrose velvet; hobbledehoy Cochins, *au naturel*, with not a stitch of clothes on their bare, indecent backs; adult Cochins, muffled and smothered up to the chin in a wealth of cinnamon feathers, and with cinnamon stockings down to

their heels; Rouen ducks, and scraggy-necked turkeys. She is doing her very best to administer justice to her commonwealth, to protect the weak, to prevent aggression and violence; but like many another lawgiver she finds it rather up-hill work. Strive as she may, the ducks get far the best of it. They have no sense of shame, and can shovel up such a quantity at a time in their long yellow bills. The turkey-cock, on the other hand, gets much the worst, by reason of the long red pendant to his nose, that gets in his way and hinders him. They say that Nature never makes anything for ornament alone, divorced from use; but I confess to being ignorant as to what function that long flabby dangler has to fulfil. The stack-yard is all on the slant; it slopes down with its many stack-frames, to the old rough grey barn that is stained all over – walls and roof and door – with the stormy tears of a score of winters. There is no lack of voices all about the farm to-day: voice of Sarah chattering in the drying ground, where she is hanging Esther's cotton gowns and Jack's shirts on the lines; voice of Evan Evans, the carter, talking friendly to his heavy team in that deplorable tongue which, we trust, will soon be among the abuses of the past; voice of Seryn (Welsh for Star), from the pasture, lowing for her calf, which a day ago became veal, and a day hence (Oh blessed short memory! why cannot we take lessons from a cow?) she will have forgotten utterly. Presently comes another voice, clearer, stronger, nearer than the others – comes sailing up through the July air.

"Es – ther!"

"Ye – es!" responds Esther at the tip-top of her voice, and consequently not particularly harmonious. It is only the lark that can talk at the top of his voice and yet not be shrill.

"Where are you?" (*Forte*.)

"In the stack-yard." (*Fortissimo*).

Obedient to this direction, in about two minutes the owner of the voice, and of the excellent lungs which sent it out, makes his appearance in loose cool clothes and a smile – Jack, in fact, looking very ugly and pleasant and good-natured.

"Jack, dear boy, open the gate. Quick! Out of the way! Don't let him get under the stack-frame. Shoo!" cries Esther, in great excitement, rushing wildly about in her big apron, in pursuit of a large drake with a grasping soul, and a wonderful rainbow neck, who, with bill wide open and wings half extended, is waddling, flying, quacking away from Nemesis as hard as his splay feet and his full crop will let him.

Jack obeys. "There is a person in the drawing-room wanting to speak to you," he says, leaning his arms on the top of the gate, and looking rather malicious.

"What sort of a person?" Esther asks abstractedly, craning her long neck round the corner of the barn, to see whether the drake shows symptoms of returning. "There he is again! Shoo!"

"What was the name of Esther's husband? the man that bullied his first wife so. Oh! I know; his name, oh Queen Esther, is Ahasuerus, which, being interpreted, is Bob."

Esther's apron drops from her fingers and the wheat rolls down in a shower on to the broad backs of the Cochin householders. Fiercely the war of chickens – the pushing, the fluttering, the pecking – rages about her feet. "Already!" she says: and in her voice there is none of love's sweet quiver, nor on her cheeks is there any sign of love's pretty flag being hung out, neither the red nor the white one. She only looks a little blank – a little troubled.

"Yes, already," says Jack, mercilessly; "and not only has he come himself, but he has brought all his household gods with him. He has come with a great company of old women at his back. I fancy they have brought a notary or a scrivener, or what do you call it? with them, and that there is to be a grand betrothal in form."

"Nonsense!" says Esther, and she comes all over to the gate, and clasps two little petitioning hands on his shoulder. "You will come with me, won't you, Jack?"

"Not I!" says Jack, stoutly. "I would not trust myself with those old maids, in their present excited state, if you were to give me my next half-year's rent: they would be employing the notary in my case too before I knew where I was."

"Jack, is my hair pretty tidy?" stroking it down with the improvised brush and comb of her slim fingers.

"Extremely so: it looks as if the chickens had got into it, and been scratching there by mistake."

Meanwhile Master Brandon and his old women, to wit, his mother, Mrs. Brandon, and his sisters, the two Misses Brandon, are posed about the drawing-room, waiting. Waiting is always a painful process, from the modified form of suffering involved in the ten minutes before dinner, when every man's tongue is tied, and his wits congealed by the frost of expectant hunger; upward to the Gehenna of a dentist's antechamber. Robert is all on wires this morning: he cannot sit still; he keeps shuffling and twisting his long, awkward legs about, beating the devil's tattoo on the floor with his nailed boots, and hammering an ugly little tune with a paper knife on an old Book of Beauty on the table. "How you fidget, Bob!" cries his sister Bessy.

Miss Elizabeth Brandon is ten years older and about ten feet shorter than her brother; she is in process of souring, like cowslip wine that has been kept too long, or small beer in thunder. She is not so very sour, after all, poor little virgin! only ten years ago she was, and ten years hence she will be mellower than she is now.

"All right!" says Bob, "I won't;" and he stops, only to commence, two seconds later, a new noise, seven times worse than the first; a very disagreeable sort of scraping with the hind legs of his chair. Is not it one of Miss Yonge's goody heroes, who, when he feels disposed to be impatient, sits down and strums away at the "Harmonious Blacksmith?" Bob could not get through a bar of that soothing melody this morning. Mrs. Brandon is just beginning to say, "Do you think the servant could have told her?" when the door opens, and a little vision comes in with delicate hair ruffling about her sweet, shining eyes; a little vision that ought to be walking on rosy clouds, Bob thinks, with cherubim and seraphim holding up her train, instead of on shabby oil-cloth and faded carpet, dragging her train behind her.

"I – I'm very sorry; I'm afraid I have kept you waiting: I did not" (did not expect you so early is on the tip of her tongue, but she remembers just in time that it would be about the impolitest remark she could make. Never, until the millennium, will the marriage of Truth and Civility be solemnized) – "did not know you were here till Jack came and told me a moment ago," she substitutes so adroitly that none of her auditors perceive the rivet that joins the two halves of her sentence together.

"I don't know what your brother will say to us for taking his house by storm, but you must blame *him*, my dear, you must blame *him!*" says Mrs. Brandon, nodding her head towards Bob, and looking as if there was something peculiarly humorous in the idea of Esther being in a condition to blame him for anything he could do or leave undone.

Mrs. Brandon is an old woman, with a smooth, holy face, and a villainous black poke bonnet: she kisses Esther, and the Misses Brandon likewise come forward and inflict a prim sisterly salute with their thin old-maid lips, on the velvet rose-leaf of her cheek. They had never kissed her before, and she felt as if the manacles were being fastened round her wrists, and the gyves about her ankles. She longs to cry out and say, "What are you all about? you are quite mistaken, every one of you; Mrs. Brandon, I am not your daughter; Miss Bessy, I am not your sister; I don't want to be: take back those kisses of yours, if you please, if they mean that!" Had she been alone with Robert, she would probably have said this; have said it without much difficulty, but now the words seemed infinitely, impossibly hard to frame. There is upon her the shyness of a young woman with an old one; the shyness of one against three. She feels, too, that it seems ungracious, churlish, when they are so glad to take her in to themselves, to adopt her as their own, not to be very glad too. When a person says to one, if not in words, yet with looks and gestures, "Our people shall be thy people, and our God thy God," it is not easy for a plastic, gracious nature to say "No, they shall not!" however little they may relish the arrangement. So, in her muteness, Esther accepts the Brandon God and people as hers.

Wordless and demure, she sits down on a little low seat as far removed as may be from Robert. Esther will, no doubt, be an ugly old woman; she makes rather an ugly photograph; but who can deny

that she is a delicious bit of colour as she sits there right in the eye of the morning sun, and not at all afraid of his strict scrutiny? So many women, now-a-days, are neutral-tinted, drabbish, greyish, as if the colours that God painted with were not fast, but faded, like Reynolds'. Esther's colouring is as distinct, as decided, as clean and clear as that on a flower's petal or a butterfly's wing. Nobody speaks, except the clock with the short-waisted Minerva on it, and it does not say anything particularly original. Then the old woman bends towards the young one, and says in a kind, low voice, "You see Robert has told us his news, my dear." There is flowing in through the French window a broad river of yellow light from the great fountain in the sky; it is deluging Mrs. Brandon's bonnet and Esther's hair. The bonnet is black, and the hair is black; but there are blacks and blacks. The May grass is green, and a beer bottle is green; but the resemblance between the two is not striking. Esther has not the remotest idea what answer to make; so she chooses one of the shortest words she knows of, and says "Yes!" half-assentingly, half-interrogatively.

"And we could not rest till we came and told you what good news we thought it," pursues the old lady, encouragingly.

Esther says nothing. Her eyelids feel glued down to her cheeks; she is conscious, with inward rage and vexation, of looking blushing, bashful, everything that a young betrothed should look.

"I'm an old woman," concludes Mrs. Brandon, rather moved by her own eloquence, "and I cannot expect a great many more years of life. You know what the Psalmist sweetly says, love; but I trust I may be spared to see God bless both my children, and make them His happy servants for this world and the next."

As she speaks she lays one hand on Esther's head. Bob is happily too far off, or she would lay the other on his, while the two little virgin clerks from the sofa cry "Amen!" in a breath. Esther is half-frightened. What with the serious words, with the three women's solemn faces, she half feels as if she were being married on the spot; her thoughts fly to Jack and the notary; after that "Amen!" she is not quite sure that her name is not Esther Brandon. She shrinks away a little, but not at all rudely.

"You are very kind," she says, in her gentle voice, "and it was so good of you coming all through the wood – such a long walk for you, too; but I think – I'm afraid that there is some mistake about – this – about me; there is nothing settled – nothing at all, I assure you. I told your son so yesterday quite plainly, only I'm afraid he did not understand me," she concludes, looking rather reproachfully over at him.

"I did understand you," protests poor Bob, eagerly, jumping up, upsetting his chair, and never thinking of picking it up again, "I did, indeed. I told mother your very words, only she would have it that they meant – what we all wished they should mean," he ends, looking very downcast and snubbed and disconsolate.

There is another pause, then Mrs. Brandon rises and puts out her hand to Esther – in farewell this time.

"I'm afraid I've been in too great a hurry, my dear," she says, trying not to speak stiffly, and not succeeding quite so well as she deserved. "But you'll forgive me, I'm sure; you see, mothers are apt to be partial people, and I could not imagine any one trying to love my boy, and not succeeding."

But Miss Craven can never let well alone. She would marry Old Nick himself sooner than that his mother or sister should look askance at her, or seem hurt and grieved with her for expressing any want of relish for him, hoofs and tail and horns and all.

"Oh no, you must not go!" she cries, in her quick, eager way, putting up two anxious hands in deprecation; "you must not be vexed with me; I did not mean to be disagreeable. I shall like very much to belong to you, I'm sure. I was only afraid of your expecting more from me than I had to give *yet*," she ends, with head drooped a little, and cheeks reddened like a peach's that the sun has been kissing all the afternoon.

The stiffness goes away: nobody can be stiff for long with Esther Craven, any more than a snow-ball can remain a snow-ball under the fire's warm gaze.

"We don't want you to belong to us if you don't wish it yourself," the old woman says, very gravely, yet not ill-naturedly.

"I hardly know what I wish," answers the girl, naïvely, in a sort of bewilderment.

Then they go, and Robert walks off with his old mother on his arm. He would walk down Pall Mall with her in that identical poke bonnet, and the two little dowdy vestals pottering behind in the most perfect unconsciousness and simplicity, even if he were to know that his brother officers, to a man, were looking out at him from the "Rag" windows.

"Oh, my cheeks! my cheeks! will they ever get cool again!" cries Esther, flinging herself down on the oak bench in the porch, and laying her face against the cold ivy leaves.

"You look rather as if you had been poking your countenance between the bars of the kitchen grate," responds Jack, with all a brother's candour. Jack has been dodging behind the laurel bushes, after the fashion in which the English gentleman is fond of receiving his friends when they come to call on him.

"Why did not you come to my rescue, you unnatural brother? What chance had I, single-handed, against those three Gorgons? Pah! it makes my head ache to think of mamma's coiffure."

"When a person gets into a scrape themselves, I make it a rule to let them get out of it themselves, as it makes them more careful for the future," replies Jack, with philosophy.

"But I'm not getting out of it; I'm floundering deeper and deeper and deeper in, like a man in an Irish bog," says Esther, ruefully. "Oh, Jack!" she concludes, laughing, yet vexed (laughter is as often the exponent of annoyance as of enjoyment, I think), "if you could have heard the stories I was forced to tell, I'm sure I deserve to be wound up, carried out, and buried, as much as ever Ananias did."

CHAPTER V

This world is divided into poor and rich; into those who do things for themselves, and those who get other people to do them for them. The Cravens belong to the former class. On the afternoon of the day mentioned in my last chapter, Miss Craven is doing for herself what she had much rather that some one else should do for her. She is sitting at her sewing-machine, with a pile of huckaback cut up into towel-lengths beside her. As long as civilization remains at its present ridiculous pitch of elevation, people must have towels, and there is a prejudice in favour of hemmed versus ravelled edges. In the kitchen garden the maid-servants are all busy, picking currants and raspberries for preserving. Owen, the gardening man, is helping them; they are combining business with pleasure; fruit-picking with persiflage. How loudly and shrilly they laugh! and yet loud, shrill laughter expresses mirth and cause for mirth, as well as low and silvery. Esther, grave and alone, catches herself wondering what the joke was that caused such general merriment two minutes ago. Probably, did she know it, she would not laugh at it, would see no point in it, perhaps, but she would be glad to hear it. The huckaback is thick and heavy; bending down one's head over one's work sends all the blood in one's body into it. Phew! How hot! How much pleasanter to be out of doors, tweaking off dead rose heads, watching the great red poppies straightening out their folded creases, pulling the green nightcaps off the escholtzia buds! A shadow darkens the French window, causing Miss Craven to give one of those starts that make one feel as if one literally jumped out of one's skin, and fill one with ungodly wrath against the occasion of them.

"I rang several times," says Robert Brandon, apologetically, "but nobody came."

"Oh! it's you, is it?" she says, with a tone not exactly of rapture in her voice; "our servants always manage to be out of the way on the rare occasions when any one calls. They are all in the garden, picking currants; one would have been plenty, but they prefer working, like convicts or navvies, in gangs."

"I came to see whether you were inclined to take a walk?" he says, hesitatingly, for her manner is not encouraging.

"Too hot!" she answers, lazily, leaning her head on the back of her chair, and closing her eyes, as if his presence disposed her to sleep.

"Not in the wood?" he rejoins, eagerly. "Under our oaks it is as cool and almost as dark as night, and there is always a breeze from the brook."

"I am busy!" she says, pettishly, annoyed at his persistence, and taking in with a dissatisfied eye his *tout ensemble*– yellow beard, frayed coat-sleeves, vigorous rustic comeliness.

He does not pursue the subject further, but stands leaning wistfully and uncertain against the window.

"Jack is not at home, I'm afraid," she says, stiffly, by-and-by.

"I did not come to see Jack," he answers, bluntly. She does not invite him to come in, but he, crossing the threshold diffidently, takes a seat near, but not aggressively near, her. "Don't let me interrupt you!" he says, deprecatingly.

She takes him at his word, and continues her homely occupation. Up and down, up and down her foot goes, keeping the wheel in motion; prick, prick, prick, the needle travels with its quick, regular stabs. If, as I have said, the process of bending over work on a July afternoon is heating, the consciousness that another person is watching every quiver of your eyelids, counting every breath you draw, and every displaced hair that straggles about brow or cheek, does not conduce to make it less so. The magnetic influence that sooner or later compels the eyes of the looked at to seek those of the looker, obliges Esther, after awhile, to raise hers – reluctant and protesting – to Robert's.

"I wish my mother could see you!" he says, with a smile of placid happiness. Mr. Brandon carries his mother metaphorically upon his back, almost as much as pious Æneas did the old Anchises literally. Esther suspends her employment for a moment.

"I beg your pardon; this machine makes such a noise that I did not catch what you said."

"I was only wishing that mother could see you now."

"It is a pleasure she enjoys pretty frequently. Why *now* particularly?"

"She would see how thrifty and housewifely you can be."

"I am glad she does not, then," answers the girl, drily, beginning to work again faster than ever, and flushing with annoyance; "she would form a most erroneous estimate of me. I dislike particularly to be found by people in one of my rare paroxysms of virtue; they take it for my normal state, and judge and expect of me accordingly."

"I shall tell her that, at all events, my judgment of you was nearer the truth than hers," says Robert, triumphantly.

Esther laughs awkwardly.

"I don't know whether you are aware of it, but you are conveying to my mind the idea that your mother has been pronouncing a very unfavourable verdict upon me and my character."

"She thinks you are too pretty and lively, and – and – " (frivolous had been the word employed by Mrs. Brandon, but Robert cannot find it in his heart to apply it to his idol) – "too fond of society to care about being useful in tame, humdrum, everyday ways."

Esther gives her head a little impatient shake.

"Mrs. Brandon adheres to the golden axiom, so evidently composed by some one to whom beauty was sour grapes, that it is better to be good than pretty; an axiom that assumes that the one is incompatible with the other."

So speaking she relapses into a chafed silence, and he into his vigilant dumb observation of her. At the end of a quarter of an hour, as he still shows no signs of moving, finding the present position of affairs no longer tolerable, Miss Craven jumps up, flings down her heap of huckaback on the floor, and says abruptly, with a sort of forced resignation:

"I will come to the wood, if you wish; it will be all the same a hundred years hence."

"I am perfectly happy as I am," he answers with provoking good humour, looking up in blissful unconsciousness at her charming cross face, and the plain yet dainty fit of her trim cheap gown.

"But I am not," she rejoins brusquely; "indoors it is stifling to-day; please introduce me as quickly as possible to that breeze you spoke of; I have not been able to find a trace of one all day."

She fetches her hat and puts it on; too indifferent as to her appearance in his eyes to take the trouble of casting even a passing glance at herself in the glass, to see whether it is put on straight or crooked.

The Glan-yr-Afon wood is a fickle, changeable place; like a vain woman, it is always taking off one garment and putting on another. Three months ago, when the April woods were piping to it, it had on a mist-blue cloak of hyacinths – what could be prettier? – but now it has laid it aside, and is all tricked out in gay grass, green, flecked here and there with rosy families of catch-fly and groups of purple orchis spires. Do you remember those words of the sweetest, wildest, fancifullest of all our singers?

"And the sinuous paths of lawn and of moss,
That led through this garden along and across, —
Some open at once to the sun and the breeze,
Some lost among bowers of blossoming trees, —

"Were all paved with daisies and delicate bells
As fair as the fabulous asphodels,

And flow'rets that, drooping as day drooped too,
Fell into pavilions white, purple, and blue,
To roof the glowworm from the evening dew."

They describe Glan-yr-Afon wood much better than I can. It is a great green cathedral, where choral service goes on all day long, and where the rook preaches impressive sermons from the swinging tree-tops.

"Had we not better walk arm in arm?" asks Esther, sardonically, as they march along in silence. "I believe it is the correct thing on these occasions; at least Gwen and her sweetheart always do on Sunday evenings."

He turns towards her; an expression of surprised delight upspringing into his eyes.

"Do you mean *really*?"

She is mollified, despite herself, by the simple joy beaming in his poor, good-looking face – face that would be more than good-looking if only some great grief would give it fuller expression; if only a few months of late hours and mundane dissipations would wear off its look of exuberant bucolic healthiness.

"No, no; I was only joking."

"Shall we sit here?" asks Brandon, presently, pointing to a rustic seat that stands under a great girthed oak, taller and thicker-foliaged than its neighbours. "See! did not I tell you true? Hardly a sunbeam pierces through these leaves, and the brawling of the brook comes up so pleasantly from below."

Esther looks, but the situation does not please her; it is too secluded, too sentimental; it looks like a seat on which Colin and Dowsabel might sit fluting and weaving and simpering at one another over the tops of their crooks.

"… belts of straw and ivy buds,"

"I don't fancy it," she says, beginning to walk on; "it looks *earwiggy*."

"Only the other day you said it was quite a lovers' seat!" he exclaims, in surprise.

"Exactly; and for that very reason I prefer waiting till I am more qualified to sit upon it."

By-and-by Miss Craven finds a position that suits her better; one nearer the edge of the wood, in full view of the Naullan road, along which market women, coal carts, stray limping tramps, go passing, and where loverly blandishments are out of the question.

The sun slides down between two birch stems that stand amid rock fragments, and riots at his will about her head, as she sits at the birch foot on a great grey stone, all flourished over with green mosses and little clinging plants. Below, the baby river runs tinkling; it is such a baby river that it has not strength to grapple with the boulders that lie in its bed; it comes stealing round their hoary sides with a coaxing noise, in gentlest swirls and bubbled eddies. The squirrels brought their nuts last autumn to Esther's stone to crack; the shells are lying there still; she is picking them up and dropping them again in idle play. Little dancing lights are flashing down through the birch's feathery-green locks, and playing Hide and Seek over Esther's gown and Robert's recumbent figure, as he lies in the repose of warmth, absolute idleness, absolute content at her feet. An hour and a half, two hours to be spent in trying to like Robert! Faugh! She yawns.

"That is the seventh time you have yawned since we have been here," remarks her lover, a little reproachfully.

"I dare say; and if you wait five minutes longer, you will probably be able to tell me that it is the seventy-seventh time."

"You did not yawn while we were indoors."

"I had my work; what is a woman without her work? A dismounted dragoon – a pump without water!" She stretches out her arms lazily, to embrace the dry, warm air. "Does every one find being courted as tedious a process as I do?" (Aside.) Aloud: "Some one said to me the other day, that no woman could be happy who was not fond of work. It is putting one's felicity on rather a low level, but I believe it is true."

"In the same way as no man can be good-tempered who is not fond of smoking," says Bob, starting a rival masculine proposition.

"I don't know anything at all about men," replies Esther, exhaustively. "No woman in the world can have a more limited acquaintance with the masculine gender than I have."

"You are young yet," says Brandon, consolingly.

"I was seventeen last May, if you call that young," she answers, her thoughts recurring to "Heartsease," the heroine of which is before her sixteenth birthday.

"Wooed and married and a'"

"You are eight years younger than I am."

"Am I?" carelessly, as if such comparative statistics were profoundly uninteresting to her.

"Yes; I am glad there is so much difference in age between us."

"Why?"

"Because you are the more likely to outlive me."

She passes by the little sentimentalism with silent contempt. "I shall *certainly* outlive you," she says confidently. "Women mostly outlive men, even when they are of the same age. We lead slower, safer lives. If I spend all my life here, I shall probably creep on, like a tortoise, to a hundred."

"But you will not spend all your life here?" he cries, eagerly.

She shrugs her shoulders. "*Cela dépend*. I shall live here as long as Jack remains unmarried."

"That will not be very long, I prophesy," cries Brandon, cheerfully. "A farmer requires a wife more than most men."

"More than a soldier, certainly," retorts she, with a malicious smile.

He laughs; too warm and lazy and content to be offended, and makes ineffectual passes at a gnat that has settled upon his nose. "Has he never yet shown even a *preference* for any one?" he asks, feeling a more personal interest than he had ever before experienced in Jack's amours and amourettes.

"Not that I am aware of; Jack and I never show preferences for any one, nor does any one ever show a preference for us; we are a good deal too poor to be in any demand."

"I am glad of it."

"You may have the doubtful satisfaction of knowing that no one ever showed the slightest inclination to be your rival."

"So much the better; I don't want you any the less because nobody else wants you."

"Don't you? 'A poor thing, but mine own,' that is your motto, I suppose?"

A pause. An old woman, with a myriad-wrinkled Welsh face rides by along the road on a drooping-headed donkey; a large blue and orange handkerchief tied over her bonnet and a basket on each arm.

Esther watches her as she jogs along with a feeling of envy. Fortunate, fortunate old woman! she has no lover!

"I wish you would not look so happy," Miss Craven says suddenly, flashing round an uneasy look out of her great black eyes at her companion.

"Why should not I? I *am* happy."

"But you have no right to be, no reason for being so," she cries, emphatically.

"I have, at all events, as much reason as the birds have and they seem pretty jolly; I am alive, and the sun is shining."

"You were alive, and the sun was shining, this time yesterday," she says drily; "but you were not so happy then as you are now."

At the decided damper to his hilarity so evidently intended in this speech, a slight cloud passes over the young man's face; he looks down with a snubbed expression.

"I suppose I am over-sanguine about everything," he says, humbly, "because I have always been such a lucky fellow; my profession suits me down to the ground; I have never had an ache or a pain in all my life, and I have the best woman in England for my mother."

A body free from disease, a commission in a marching regiment, a methodistical, *exigeante* old mother. These would seem but a poor *chétif* list of subjects of thankfulness to Fortune's curled and perfumed darlings.

"Your acquaintance amongst old ladies must be extensive to justify you in that last statement," says Esther, with a smile.

"The best woman I know, then."

"It is a pity that when you went, like Coelebs, in search of a wife, you did not try to find some one more like her," rejoins Esther, piqued and surprised, despite her utter indifference to his opinion of her, at finding that, notwithstanding the imbecile pitch of love for herself at which she believes him to have arrived, he can still set a dowdy, havering, brown old woman on a pedestal, above even that which she, with all the radiant red and white beauty of which she is so calmly aware, all the triumph of her seventeen sweet summers, occupies in his heart.

"You are young and she is old," says Robert, encouragingly; "I don't see why you should not be like her when you are her age."

"I think not; I hope not," says Miss Craven, coolly, strangling her twenty-fifth yawn. "Without meaning any insult to Mrs. Brandon, I should be sorry to think that, at any period of my life, I should be a mere reproduction of some one else."

Another long pause. (Have we been here an hour yet?) The brown bees go humming, droning, lumbering about, velvet-coated: a high-shouldered grasshopper chirps shrilly: the dim air vibrates.

"Just listen to that cricket!" says Esther, presently, for the sake of saying something. "How noisy he is! I read in a book the other day that if a man's voice were as strong in proportion to his size as a locust's, he could be heard from here to St. Petersburg."

"Could he?" says Bob, absently, not much interested in his betrothed's curious little piece of entomological information; "how unpleasant!" Then dragging himself along the grass and the flowers still closer to her feet, he says, "Esther, mother hopes to see a great deal more of you now than she has done hitherto."

"Does she? she is very good, I am sure," answers Esther, formally, with a feeling of compunction at her utter inability to echo the wish.

"She bid me tell you that she hopes you will come in as often as you can of an evening. We are all sure to be at home then; the girls read aloud by turns, and mother thought that – "

"That it might improve my mind, and that it needs improving," interrupts Esther, smiling drily; "so it does. I quite agree with her; but not even for that object could I leave Jack of an evening; he is out all day long, and the evening is the only time when I have him to myself."

"You find plenty to say to *him* always, I suppose?" says Robert, with an involuntary sigh and slight stress upon the word *him*.

"Not a word, sometimes. We sit opposite or beside each other in sociable silence."

"*How* fond you are of that fellow!" says Robert, sighing again, and thinking, ruefully, what a long time it would be before any one would say to her, "*How* fond you are of Bob Brandon!"

"He is the one thing upon earth that I could not do without!" she answers shortly, turning away her head.

There are some people that we love so intensely that we can hardly speak even of our own love for them without tears.

"I should be afraid to say that of any one," says Bob, bluntly, "for fear of being shown that I *must* do without them."

"What have I in all the world but him?" she cries, a passionate earnestness chasing the slow languor from her voice, all her soft face afire with eager tenderness; "neither kith nor kin; neither friends nor money. I am as destitute, in fact, though not in seeming, as that girl that passed just now, shuffling her bare feet along in the dust, and with three boxes of matches – her whole stock-in-trade – in her dirty hand. But for Jack," she continues, in a lighter strain, "you might at the present moment be carrying half a pound of tea or four penn'orth of snuff as a present to me in the Naullan almshouses."

Robert looks attentive, and says "Hem," which is a sort of "Selah" or "Higgaion," and does not express much beyond inarticulate interest.

"I often think that he is too good for this world," says the young girl, mournfully, picking an orchis leaf, and looking down absently on the capricious black splashes that freak its green surface.

Bob is a little embarrassed between his love of truth and his desire to coincide in opinion with his beloved.

Jack is not in the least like the little morbid boys and girls in his sister Bessy's books, who retire into corners in play-hours to read about hell-fire, to whom marbles and toffee and bull's-eyes are as dung, and who are inextricably entangled in his mind with the idea of "too good for this world." He evades the discussion of the alarming nature of young Craven's goodness by a judicious silence.

"I am such an expense to him," continues Esther, lugubriously, the corners of her mouth drooping like a child's about to cry – "what with clothes, and food, and altogether. Even though one does not eat very much every day, it comes to a great deal at the end of the year, does it not?"

"If you come to me, you would be no expense at all to him," Robert answers, stroking his great, broad, yellow beard (beard that will have to disappear before he rejoins his gallant corps in Bermuda), and looking very sentimental; yet not that either, for sentimental implies the existence of a little feeling, and the affectation of a great deal more.

"He would have to provide me with a trousseau and a wedding-cake, even in that case."

"I would excuse him both."

"Would you?" she says, jestingly; "I wouldn't; it has always seemed to me that the best part of holy matrimony is the avalanche of new clothes that attends being wed."

"You shall have any amount of new clothes."

"I should be an expense to you, then," she says, giving him a smile that is grateful and bright and cold, all in one, like a January morning. Cold as her smile is, it is a smile, and he is encouraged by it to refer to a subject nearer his heart than Jack Craven's excellences.

"If you cannot spare time to come to us of an evening, would you let me – might I – would you mind my joining you and Jack – now and then – for half an hour or so – if I should not be in the way?"

Her countenance falls, more visibly than she is herself perhaps aware of.

"Of course," she answers, in a constrained voice, "if you wish; we shall always be glad to see you, of course."

"I would not come often," says the poor young man wistfully; "once a week perhaps – so that we might get to know one another better; mother says – "

"Don't tell me any more of your mother's speeches to-day, or we shall have none left for to-morrow," interrupts Esther, with a sort of ironical playfulness, flapping about with her pocket-handkerchief at a squadron of young midges, and looking mild exasperation at the unlucky six-foot slave at her feet. Then she stretches out her hand, plucks a dandelion, or what was a dandelion a week ago, but is now a sphere of delicatest, fragilest, downspikes, and blows it like a child to see what o'clock it is. "One, two, three, four, five, six. Time to go home!" she says, flinging away the hollow stalk and springing up.

"It seems only five minutes since we came," says Robert, with a great sigh of good-bye, looking down at the long stretch of bruised grass that indicates his late resting-place.

"Do you think so?" exclaims Esther, opening her eyes very wide, and the most violent negative could not have expressed dissent more clearly.

So they pass home through the loudly vocal wood, and he parts from her under the porch. He had meant to squeeze her hand at parting; perhaps still bolder forms of adieu flitted before his mind's eye, but a certain expression in her face makes all such plans take to their heels. He looks as if he would come in if he were asked; but he is not asked, therefore, courage failing him, he departs. She stands in the shadow watching him, and thinks, "What bad boots! and is not one shoulder rather higher than the other?" It is not the least bit higher; no young fir is straighter than he; but when a thing belongs, or may possibly belong, to oneself, one waxes marvellous critical.

CHAPTER VI

"Something new! something new!" cried the Athenians; and across two thousand years we catch up and echo their greedy cry. But why do we? We all know well enough that there is nothing new; there was not even in King Solomon's time – not even in all his treasure-house, nor among his seven hundred wives. What an advantage those ancients who saw the world's infancy had over us – over us, who have to content ourselves with the lees of the wine, which the few dropped ears scattered about the great reaped harvest field! Who would not fain have lived in the days when nothing had yet been said – when everything, consequently, remained to be said? Who could be trite then, in that blest epoch when platitudes were unborn, when *Tupper* was an impossibility, and even the statement that two and two make four had something startlingly novel about it? *Then* a man's thoughts were his own, his *very* own, his own by the best of all rights – creation; *now* they are the bastard product of ten thousand buried men's dead ideas.

Original is a pleasant word, is it not? – fair and well-sounding; but it is like the sample figs at the top of the box: it represents nothing, or something infinitely smaller than itself behind and underneath it. Is it too much to say that it is impossible to find an original idea in any writer we wot of? You meet, perhaps, some day in a book a thought, an image that strikes you. You say, "This is this thinker's own; there is the stamp of this one individual mind upon it;" when lo! mayhap but a few hours later you are reading the thoughts of some elder scribe, one that has been dust nigh ten or twenty centuries back, and you find the same thought, half fledged or quarter fledged, only in the egg, perhaps – but still it is there. There is nothing new under the sun.

And if this is true of other subjects, how much truer of that most outworn, threadbare old theme, Love! The world has been spinning round six thousand years at the lowest, most exploded computation; in any thousand years there have been thirty or forty generations, and each unit in every one of those generations, if he has lived to man's estate, has surely loved after one fashion or another. Whosoever has done any worthy thing, whosoever has sent out his thoughts in writing or speech or action to the world, has felt the stirrings of this strange instinct; unconsciously it has moulded and permeated his deeds and his words: and yet, old as it is, we are not tired of it, any more than we are of the back-coming green of the spring, or the never-extinguished lamps of the stars.

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended;" at least well nigh ended. Jack and Esther are at breakfast: outside the scarlet geraniums are blazing away in the morning sun, trying their best to shine as brightly as he is doing, and the gnats are dancing round and round on the buoyant floor of their ball-room – the air. I wonder that that incessant valsing does not make them giddy. I am not sure that human beings, like the lions and tigers and uneasy black bears in the Zoological, look their best at feeding-time; but such as they are, here they are.

Esther in a chintz gown, sown all over with little red carnations as thickly as the firmament with heavenly bodies. She looks as fresh as a daisy – as an Englishwoman, to whom morning *déshabille*, wrapper, slippers, undressed hair, are unknown Gallic abominations – and is eating porridge with a spoon. Jack reading his letters, which look all bills and circulars, after the fashion of men's correspondence; for what man made after the fashion of a man, would sit down to indite an epistle to another man, were it his *alter ego* unless he had something to say about a horse or a dog or a gun? Presently he finishes this cursory survey, crumples up the last blue envelope in his hand, flings it with manly untidiness into the summer-dressed grate, and says, resuming a conversation which had been interrupted a quarter of an hour ago by the entrance of prayers and the urn, "I cannot imagine what you have done to the fellow! he used not to be half a bad fellow to talk to. Never a genius, you know, but still I used to like to have him to walk over the farm with me – not that he knows a swede from a mangold: don't see much sign of his old mother's farming mantle falling upon him. But now he has not a word to throw to a dog; he is as stupid as a stuck pig."

"I have not cut out his tongue or tied it up in a bag, if that is what you are hinting at," says Esther, with a smile as confused as a dog's, when, not quite sure of his reception, he sneaks up to you sideways, lifting his upper lip, and from tail to muzzle one nervous wriggle. "Perhaps he is like the birds, and gets silent towards the end of the summer."

"Why you keep him dangling after you, like the tail of a kite, I cannot conceive," Mr. Craven cries, crumbling his bread with a little irritation. "It must be such a nuisance having a great long thing like him knocking about under your feet morning, noon, and night."

Esther is silent; only her head droops lower, lower, till her little nose almost immerses itself in her stirabout.

"Whereas," pursues Jack, helping himself to a great deal of cold beef, "if you were to give him his *congé* now (Jack is by no means neglectful of the *g* in the French word), he would be all right again in a fortnight, ready for the shooting."

"He would, would he?" says Esther, lifting up her nose and reddening with vexation.

No woman likes to think of her empire as anything short of eternal.

"If you don't like to do it yourself, I'll do it for you," pursues her brother, making a magnanimously handsome offer. "I would say to him, 'My dear fellow, it is no good, she does not seem to care about you,' as soon as look at him."

"What a delicate way of breaking the news!" cries Esther, ironically. "Commend me to a man for gentle *finesse*."

"I don't believe in *breaking* news," replies Jack, sturdily. "If you were to go off in a fit, or the bay colt was to break his leg, or anything to go wrong, I'd far sooner people would tell me so without any humming and hawing and keeping me on the tenter hooks. Breaking news is like half cutting your throat before you are hanged, making you die two deaths instead of one."

"But suppose I do seem to care a little about him?" suggests Esther, blushing furiously, but holding up her head bravely, and looking straight at her brother.

"Suppose the cow jumped over the moon," replies Jack with incredulity.

"I don't know whether the cow has accomplished her feat, but I have accomplished mine," says Esther, trying to make her face as brass, and failing signally.

Jack puts up his hand, and strokes the future birthplace of his moustache, to hide an unavoidable smile.

"I don't wish to be rude," he says; "but may I ask, since when? Was it a week ago, or less, that you requested me to accompany you on one of your joint excursions to that everlasting wood, and told me you thought your watch wanted cleaning, the time seemed to go so slow?"

"A week!" cries his sister, indignantly. "Three weeks, or a month, at least."

"Wrong, Essie, wrong; it was this day fortnight, Ryvel Horse Fair, which was the reason why I had to decline your invitation."

"What does a week one way or another signify?" she cries, becoming irrational, as a worsted woman mostly does.

"Nothing to a woman or a – weathercock."

This last insult is too much for Miss Craven.

"I see you are determined to turn me into ridicule; I see you don't believe me!" she cries, preparing to rush from the room like a tornado.

"My good Essie," says Jack, jumping up, taking her two hands, and manfully repressing his inclination to laugh – "here I am; tell me *anything*, and I'll swear by the tomb of my grandmother to believe it."

"Why should not I like him? What is there in him so hateful as to make my being fond of him incredible?" asks Essie, unreasonable and sobbing.

"Nothing that I know of – except his *boots*, and you told me *they* were – "

"So they are," she says, smiling through her tears – "more than hateful; they haunt one like a bad dream."

"He is not the least penitent about them, I can tell you: only yesterday he showed them me with ungodly glee, told me he had got them at Hugh Hughes's, at Naullan, and advised me to go and do likewise."

"But – but – his boots are not he; he is not his boots, I mean," remarks Miss Craven, with meek suggestion; "mercifully, they are separable."

"He was not born in them, you mean? I did not suppose he was; he would have been worse than Richard the Third, who made his appearance with all his teeth in his head – didn't he? – if he had."

"It is quite true – perfectly true," continues Esther, leaning her two hands on the back of a chair, and tilting it up and down, "what you say about his being so stupid; he *is* extremely stupid: often I feel inclined to box his ears, for the thing he says, and for not understanding things, and having to have them explained to him; but after all, do you know, I am not sure that it is the people who say clever things, and snap one up all in a minute, that are the best to live with."

"You contemplate living with him then, eh? Last time I was favoured with your plans, you were to be a vestal to the end of the chapter."

"A provision for old age: I cannot expect you to be satisfied with me always," she answers, with rather a sad smile. "And when I am superseded, a good worthy simpleton, with obsolete chivalrous ideas of *Woman* in the abstract —*Woman* with a big *W*– who will laugh at my worst jokes whether he sees them or not, and make none himself, is better than nothing."

"All right," says Jack, calmly, walking towards the door, and unfolding the *Times* with a crackling that nearly drowns his voice: "please yourself and you'll please me: only be so good as to tell me when the wedding day is fixed, as I must get a new coat. I suppose that the one I had for Uncle John's funeral will not do, will it?"

Who is it says in the "Tempest," if neither Ferdinand nor any other beautiful young Prince had come on the scene, yet if Miranda had remained alone with her father, and the storms and winds and water-spirits, she would have ended by loving Caliban? I do not know about Miranda, but I am sure that if Esther had been in Miranda's place she would have so ended; would have carried faggots in her slender arms for the shaggy monster – have called him caressing diminutives, and asked him little interested questions about his dam Sycorax.

The desire to be loved is strong enough in us all; in this girl it amounted to madness: it is the key to all the foolish, wicked, senseless things you will find her doing through this history's short course. If she could have had her will, every man, woman, and child, every cow and calf and dog and cat that met her, would have watched her coming with joy and her going with grief. Add to which, in the summer time most women like to have a lover; it is almost as necessary to them as warm clothes at Christmas. In winter the fire is lover enough for any one. The frosty splendour of the stars and the chill flashing of the northern lights provoke no yearning in any one human soul towards any other; we peep at them through our icy casements, then drop the curtain shivering, and leave them alone to their high cold play in the sky. But who can look at a July moon alone?

You will say that Esther was not alone, that she had her brother to look at it with her; but who will deny that a brother who makes agricultural remarks about the Queen of Night, and observes that the haze round her royal head looks well for the turnips, is worse, immeasurably worse than nobody? To me it seems that there is nothing absolute, positive in all this shifting, kaleidoscope world; everything is comparative. There is nothing either good, bad, pretty, ugly, large, small, except as compared with something better, worse, prettier, uglier, larger, smaller. Measure two men together, and you find one tall and the other short; put the short one by himself or among a world of pigmies, and straightway he grows tall. Lacking a standard to go by, we make egregious errors. I have known many a woman to pass through life with a pigmy beside her, taking him for a giant all the while, nor undeceived to the end. Esther has no man to measure her Robert by; none at all, save the cowman,

the carter, and the groom. Intellectually, morally, physically, he outtops them in stature, and that is all she can as yet know about him. Moonlight, propinquity, total absence of objects of comparison – these three must be Esther's excuses.

Robert is not much like her ideal, certainly – the ideal whose picture she has been painting life-size on the canvas of her mind during the vacant moments of the last two transitional years; but if we all waited to be wed till our ideal came knocking at our doors, the world would be shortly dispeopled of legitimate inhabitants. Miss Craven's ideal is dark; at seventeen, most ideals are dark: he has long, fierce, sleepy, unfathomable eyes. Robert is straw-coloured: his eyes are blue; very wide awake: they say exactly what his tongue does, neither more nor less, and there is absolutely no harm in them – a doubtful recommendation to a woman. The ideal's nose is fine cut, delicately chiselled; his cheeks are a little haggard, slightly hollowed and paled by five and thirty years or so of the reckless life of one that has lived, not existed. Robert's nose is broad and blunt; his cheeks have the roundness and bloom of a countryman's five and twenty. The ideal breaks most of the commandments with easy grace; is inclined to be sceptical and a little sarcastic over the old world beliefs, and facts hoary with time and reverence. Robert nightly prays on bent knees to be "not led into temptation but delivered from evil;" he believes firmly every thing that he ever was taught, from the Peep of Day upwards, and he could no more shape his honest lips into a sneer than he could square the circle. Before the fell shafts of the ideal's eyes women lie slain as thick as Greeks lay beneath the arrows of Apollo in the Iliad's opening clash; the number of Robert's female victims is represented by a duck's egg.

"Je ne comprends pas l'amour sans effroi," says one of the characters in the best French novel I have read this many a day. The ideal inspires fear equally with love; you can imagine his being harsh, fierce, cruel, to the woman he loves. In none of the most hard-hearted of created beings could Robert provoke alarm. Children who see him for the first time come and thrust their little dimpled hands into his, and laugh up with confident impudence in his face. Dogs to whom he has never been introduced come and rub their shaggy heads against his knees, and curl and wriggle about his friendly feet.

Esther can indulge no faintest hope that he will bully her. The ideal rides straight as a die, and is as much a part of his horse as a centaur. Robert is very fond of getting a day's hunting when he can afford the two guineas requisite for the hiring of a horse, which is not very often; and he likes to get his money's worth by blundering blindly over everything that comes in his way, but he has about as much idea of *riding* as a tailor or a cow. The ideal is an idol to be set up and worshipped – a Baal to be adored with tears and blood and knife-gashings. Robert is a worshipper to be encouraged by a cold look and smile flung to him every now and then, like a bone to a dog, or spurned away with disapproving foot, as Cain was from his unaccepted altar. To worship is to a woman always sweeter than to be worshipped. To worship one must look up; to be worshipped one must look down…

Come with me this August Sunday through the wood from Glan-yr-Afon to Plas Berwyn – from Esther's home to Robert's. It is but a few hundred yards of shade and shine, a small, scarce trodden wood-path whose narrow, faint track the ripe grasses and the seeded ferns have wellnigh obliterated, flinging themselves across it in all the *abandon* of their unspeakable grace. The apples' round faces are reddening in the little Plas Berwyn orchard; the shorn fields slope barely, slantwise along the hill-side in their yellow stubble. For weeks and weeks the corn has been whitening under the sun's hard, veilless stare, and now at last it has fallen; the barley has bowed its bearded head beneath the sickle's stroke, and the oats their tremulous ringlets. They are all gathered in, and garnered in Mrs. Brandon's stout, well-thatched stacks; to thatch a stack is the one thing a Welshman can do.

It is an hour past noon, and the Reverend Evan Evans has released the bodies of his congregation from that white-washed, tumble-down old barn that he is pleased to call his church, and their minds from the tension necessary to take in the ill-strung-together, misapplied texts that he is pleased to call his sermon.

Plas Berwyn is a house of about the same size as Glan-yr-Afon, but the rooms do not look so large, they are so full of large things and large people. The dining-room is crowded up with a great

mahogany table, a great mahogany sideboard, great mahogany chairs – inconvenient relics, fondly clung to by people who from a larger house have subsided into a smaller one – a sort of warranty of past respectability like the cottager's japanned tea-tray and brass candlesticks. There is an atmosphere of lumbersome age and gravity about the whole place; none of the fragrance and light and melody that youth, sheer youth, even divorced from any other attractive qualities, brings with it.

Of all the gods of the Greek mythology I will bring my votive crowns and my salt cakes to Bacchus. Not the bloated old gentleman striding drunk over a barrel, as we figure him, but Bacchus eternally young. What is there so worthy of adoration in this aging, wrinkling world as never ending youth?

Most people are cross and most people are unusually hungry on Sunday. I do not know why it is, but if you observe your acquaintance you will find it to be true. Hungry or not, the Brandons are at dinner, dining frugally and sparely on cold roast beef and cold apple tart. Nothing hot ever figures on the Brandons' Sabbath table, not even potatoes; indeed, unless they boiled themselves, and hopped out of the pot judiciously when they found themselves done, I do not see how they could, as on the Sabbath morn every living soul at Plas Berwyn, every reluctant scullion and recalcitrant housemaid, is trundled off to church, the house-door locked, and the key deposited in Mrs. Brandon's pocket.

All the Brandons hate dining in the middle of the day, consequently they always dine in the middle of the day on Sunday. Everybody knows that there are few things more distinctly unpleasant than to sit in the same room in which you have your meals; to live with the unending smell and steam of departed viands up your nose and eyes and ears: consequently the Brandons always sit in the dining-room on Sunday. Sunday is to them a sort of aggravated Ash Wednesday and Good Friday rolled into one. On Saturday night Miss Bessy Brandon swoops down upon all novels, travels, biographies, magazines, poetry books, that may be lying about, makes a clean sweep of them and consigns them to disgrace and a cupboard till the return of Monday releases them.

The Brandon family at the present moment have got their Sunday faces and their Sunday clothes on, and they misbecome most of them very sorely. Very few men look their best in their Go-to-Meeting clothes. For some unexplained reason, a black coat made by a country tailor shows its shortcomings more plainly than a coloured one. The garment that cases Bob's broad shoulders would draw tears from Mr. Poole's eyes, could he see it. As for Mrs. Brandon, she always has more or less of a Sunday face on – which I do not say in any dispraise, but merely to express a sober, steadfast face, unfurrowed by any violent gust of mirth or blast of anger. She is like Enid and her mother,

"clad all in faded silk,"

and on her breast she has a miniature of the departed Brandon, in Geneva gown and bands, about as big as a teacup, and with two small glutinous curls of the departed's hair at the back. It is so long ago since he died, that she must have forgotten all about him – what he was like, even; but she still wears his effigy, as an old inn continues to hang out the sign of the Saracen's Head, though it is centuries since ever a Saracen has been seen on the earth's face.

Opposite each other, like little bad mirrors of one another, sit the Misses Brandon, in melancholy little gowns of no particular stuff and no particular colour, and little wisps of thin, fine hair well down over their ears, and minute chignons on the napes of their necks – their little, bustless, waistless, hipless figures, long plaintive noses, and meek, dull eyes proclaiming them of that virgin band to whom St. Paul has awarded the palm of excellence. The Sunday literature is scattered about on the hard-bottomed chairs. "Stop the Leak" lies on the pit of its stomach, open at the spot where Miss Bessy abandoned it in favour of the cold beef; the "Saturday Night of the World," with its mouth open, and a paper-knife in it.

"Cut two or three good large slices, Bob, dear; they will be so nice for old John Owen," Mrs. Brandon is saying, in her benignant, cracked, old voice.

"We can leave them as we go by to church; Bob can carry them," says Miss Brandon, with authority.

Robert is silent.

"Bob does not like the idea of being seen carrying a basket; he thinks it would spoil his appearance."

"Hang the appearance!" says Bob, with an easy laugh. "If a man is a gentleman, it does not make him any the less a gentleman even if he were seen wheeling a perambulator down Regent Street; but, to tell the truth, I don't think I shall go to church this afternoon."

"Not go to church! Not go to church!! Not go to church!!!" in three different keys, rising from astonishment to horrified incredulity.

But seldom has Mr. Brandon missed attending divine service from the auspicious day, two and twenty years ago, when, at the tender age of three years, being, Eutychus-like, overcome with sleep, he fell down with much clamour from a high bench, and raised a mountainous red lump on his baby forehead, coming into contact with the hard pew floor:

"And his head, as he tumbled, went knicketty-knock,
Like a pebble in Carisbrook well."

Robert feels the weight of public opinion to be heavy, but he sticks like a man to what he said.

"Not to-day, mother, I think. Esther said she would be coming in by-and-by to say good-bye to you all, and, as it is her last day, I thought I might as well have as much as I could of her."

"What *do* you mean, Bob? Is the girl going to die to-night?" inquires Miss Brandon, perking up her little tow-coloured head sharply.

"God forbid!" he cries, with a hasty shudder; "don't suggest anything so frightful; but she is off to-morrow for a week or ten days on a visit to some friends."

"Going away without mentioning a word about it!"

"Going away *now!*"

These two sentences shoot out with simultaneous velocity from two mouths.

"Are you surprised at her not telling *us* where she is going? Does she ever tell *us* anything? Does she make *us* her confidants!" subjoins Miss Bessy, with mild spite.

Spite is permissible on the Sabbath, though hot potatoes and novels are not.

"She did not know herself till yesterday," says Bob, briefly, cutting away rather viciously at the beef.

"But who are these sudden friends that have sprung up all at once? What are their names? Where do they live? Tell us all about them, dear boy," says the old woman, gently, seeing that her son is chafed.

"Their names are Sir Thomas and Lady Gerard; they are old friends of the Cravens' father, and they live in – shire; that is all I know about them."

"A steady-going old couple, I suppose? Will not that be rather dull for a little gay thing like Esther?"

"There is a girl of about her own age, I believe, a ward of Sir Thomas's."

"A ward! – oh!"

"And also a son."

"A son! o – h!"

"Well, why should not there be a son? What harm is there in that?" asks Robert, raising his voice a little in irritation.

"No harm whatever! Much better thing than a daughter! Can push his own way in the world. Not that I know in the least what you are talking about," cries a young, saucy voice, which, with the little sleek, dark head it belongs to, appears uninvited at the door at this juncture. "Oh! I see you are

all at dinner, so I'll stay outside till you have finished; it is so horrible to be watched when one is eating, isn't it? I hate it myself." And the head and the voice disappear again as quickly as they came.

A ruddier tinge rushes into Robert's already ruddy cheek – ruddy as King David's when he tended his few sheep in the Syrian pastures, before the weight of the heavy Israelitish crown, and of his own wars and murders had blanched it. Down go the carving knife and fork with a clatter, and, "like a doting mallard," he flies after the little vision, banging the door behind him with an impetus that makes his sisters bound up from their horsehair chairs like two small parched peas. Presently he brings her back in triumph.

"So you are going to run away from us, my love?" says Mrs. Brandon, holding Esther's young white hand in her old veiny one.

"Yes, I'm afraid so; it is a great bore, isn't it?" answers Esther, trying her best to lengthen her round face and look miserable.

"If it is a bore, why do you go?" inquires Miss Bessy, drily.

"Because I think I ought to make some friends for myself; I never met anybody before that had no friends, as Jack and I have not; we literally have not one – except all of you, of course," she ends with a happy after-thought.

"When you come to my age, my dear," says Mrs. Brandon, shaking her head, and all the innumerous stiff frillings of her cap, and bringing to bear on Esther's sanguine youth the weight of her own gloomy experiences, in the infuriating way that old people do, "you will have found out that a few good friends are worth more than a great many indifferent ones."

"But why should not these people be good friends?" asks the girl, a little incredulously. "Who knows? Surely there must be more good people in the world than bad ones; so the chances are in favour of them."

"We are expressly forbidden to judge," begins Miss Bessy, charitably; "otherwise – There's the first bell beginning; we had better go and put on our things, Jane."

CHAPTER VII

Five minutes more, and three large brown parasols, a large black poke bonnet and two little dirt-coloured ones, are seen slowly pacing down the hill to the House of Prayer. The lovers have Plas Berwyn to themselves. Bob has gained his point, despite a parting fleer from Bessy as to the undesirability of neglecting the Creator for the creature.

"Tim Dowler! Tim Dowler! Tim Dowler!" cries Esther, joyously, jumping about the room like a child, and mimicking the one church bell which is heard clearly tinkling through the valley. "Listen, Bob! Does it not say 'Tim Dowler' just exactly as if it were speaking it? Oh! look here: I'll lose all their places for them in their good books, and I bet anything they'll never find them again." So saying, she proceeds to remove the paper-knife from the "Saturday Night of the World," and carefully closes "Stop the Leak."

"What spirits you are in to-day, Essie!" says Bob, balancing himself on the window-sill, with his long legs dangling lugubriously, and following her about the room with his eyes, as a child does a butterfly. "I believe it is because you are going to be rid of me for a fortnight."

"Partly, I think," replies Esther, nonchalantly. "It seems as if all my life I had seen and heard of nothing but Glan-yr-Afon and Plas Berwyn, Plas Berwyn and Glan-yr-Afon, and now I'm going to see and hear something fresh; it may be better and it may be worse; but, at all events, it will be something different. Perhaps I shall come back as the country mouse did, more in love than ever with my own cheeseparings and tallow-candle ends; perhaps" – swinging her Sunday bonnet by the strings and looking up maliciously – "perhaps I shall see some one I like better than you, and not come back at all."

"Hush!" he cries, hurriedly, putting up his hand before her mouth. "Don't say that; it is bad luck. I should not mind your saying it if it were not so horribly probable."

Esther subsides into gravity.

"I wish to Heaven you were not so fond of me!" she says, hastily; "please do try not to be: it makes me feel as if I were cheating all the time – having things and not paying for them."

"I could have given you up *at first*, if you had told me it must be so positively; I'm sure I could have made shift to do without you, as I have made shift to do without many a thing that other fellows consider necessaries of life; but now – "

He has seized her two hands, and now holds her standing there before him. To hold her hand is the one familiarity Robert is permitted; not once in all his life has he kissed his betrothed.

"It was a foolish, silly custom," she said one day, pettishly – "no sensibler than rubbing noses together, as the Feejee islanders did; for her part, she hated it, &c."

"But now, what? finish your sentence, please," says the little captive, gaily.

"Esther, I wish these people had not got a son."

"What people?"

"These Gerards."

"Why so? Do you think that they would have left you their money if they had not?"

"No, not that," smiling against his will. "But, Essie, you'll promise to write and tell me what he is like?"

"Yes."

"What sort of age?"

"Yes."

"Whether you see much of him?"

"Yes."

"What he says to you?"

"Come, I cannot promise that," says Esther, bursting out laughing. "Oh you dear old goose! are you jealous of a name, a shade, an imagination?"

"I *am* jealous," he answers, reddening. "I can no more help it than a man in the gout can help having twinges. I shall always be jealous until you are really mine past stealing or taking back again: after that I never shall."

"I should hope not," retorts she, with levity: "if you were, I should think it my duty to try and give you some cause."

The church bell has ceased; there is no sound in the quiet room but that of one fat-bodied bluebottle, labouring and buzzing up the pane, and then tumbling back again. Robert has abandoned the window-sill, finding it a painful and not luxurious seat: he is walking up and down, up and down; one stride and a half of his long legs taking him from end to end of the little room. Esther has thrown herself into an American rocking chair, and is rocking violently backwards and forwards, trying her best to tip herself over.

"Promise me, Essie," says the young man, coming to a sudden standstill beside her – "promise me that you'll talk seriously of – you know what – when you come home; I give you till then? Good heavens! what sort of stuff could Jacob have been made of to have held out all those fourteen years!"

"'The little maid replied,
Some say a little sighed,
And what shall we have for to eat, eat, eat?
Will the love that you're so rich in
Make a fire in the kitchen,
Or the little god of love turn the spit, spit, spit?'"

answers Esther, evading her lover's urgency by a quotation.

"If I could get an Adjutancy of Volunteers," pursues he, resuming his walk, with his eyes bent on the ground, and frowning away in the intensity of his thinking, "or, better still, a Militia one, or a Chief Constableship, or the Governorship of a gaol: there are always some of those sort of things going about. Why should I not come in for one as well as another fellow? We want so little – "

"Want so little?" interrupts Esther, briskly. "Speak for yourself, please: I want a great deal; only, as far as I can see, want is likely to be my master."

"You are no fine lady," pursues he, talking more to himself than to her, "that requires to be waited on; you can make your own bonnets and gowns, cannot you? My sisters always do."

"So I should imagine," says Esther, drily.

"What do you mean? Are not they all right? is there anything the matter with them?" inquires he, stopping short and looking surprised, as if the idea of there being any deficiency in his sisters' costumes was an entirely new light to him. But Miss Craven purses up her pretty mouth in a silence more damnatory of the Misses Brandon's toilettes than any words could be.

"If we had not a large enough income to live by ourselves," says he, beginning again his tramp, tramp, "we might join housekeeping with mother and the girls; they would not object, I'm sure."

"But I should, *strongly*," cries Esther, springing up, and getting crimson with vexation. "Why, we should all be by the ears in a week. Robert, how many times will you make me tell you that I like you well enough to go sailing along beside you on the sea of life as long as it is nice and smooth, but I really do not love you enough to go bumping over rocks and into breakers with you? I would do it for Jack, and welcome, but for no other human being on the face of the earth."

"Will you never like me as well as you do Jack?" he inquires, sadly, looking at her with eyes so loving, that one would think her own must catch the infection. But, no; they remain coldly bright, with the cold brightness of friendship.

"Never."

"Not after ten years?"

"No."

"Nor twenty?"

"No."

"Nor thirty?"

"No, nor a thousand. Cannot you see what a different thing it is? If one loses a lover one can get a hundred more just as good as, if not better than, the one lost; but if I were to lose Jack – oh, God! how can I suggest anything so awful – who could give me another brother?"

"So be it, then, since it must be that I am to play second fiddle all my life (sighing); but, Essie, you'll promise to write to me every day, won't you?"

"Certainly not."

"Every second day, then?"

"Certainly not."

"Twice a week, then?"

"Per – haps; if I have anything to say."

"And you'll be sure not to stay beyond the fortnight?"

"That depends. If they are *fine*, and inclined to 'country cousin' me, I shall probably be back the day after to-morrow: if they make a great fuss with me, and if Mr. Gerard is young and handsome and civil-spoken, I dare say you will not see me again under two months."

He looks so sincerely pained that her conscience smites her.

"There," she says, "I have teased you enough for one day; let us kiss and make friends, – that is, figuratively. Come," putting out her hand to draw him along with her, "let us go to the kitchen garden and see if the wasps have left us any apricots. If Bessy were here, she would tell us some pleasing anecdote of how some people went and picked apricots on the Sabbath, and got stung in the throat and swelled, and died in great agonies; but I'm willing to run the risk if you are."

Nine o'clock! The maid-servants are at evening church, combining the double advantage of *making their souls* and meeting their sweethearts. Esther, happily rid of hers, is sitting on the ground at the French window of the study, beside her brother. The rooks that blackened the meadow awhile ago have flapped heavily home to the mile-off rookery. It is such a great, still world; who would fancy that there were so many noisy men, barking dogs, snorting steam-engines in it? It seems a world of stars and flowers, as one would imagine it after reading one of Mrs. Heman's poems.

Jack is smoking; now and then Esther takes the pipe out of his mouth, gives a little puff, coughs and chokes, and puts it back again. Oh, blessed state of intimacy, when you may sit by a person for hours and never utter to them! Esther is thinking what a pretty, pleasant Idyllic life hers is; like an Arcadian shepherdess's in this lovely valley, far away from smoky towns and vulgar cares and sordid toils. Young and beautiful (what pretty woman is mock-modest to her own thoughts?), living with a brother who is to her what father, mother, brothers, sisters, husband, children, are to other women; a brother who is only three years older than herself, consequently not likely to die much before her. She is thinking, a little regretfully, that, fair and poetic as this life is, it is passing, and that as it passes she does not feel its beauty as acutely as she ought – does not suck out all its sweetness, as a man swallows a delicious draught hastily, carelessly, without tasting and dwelling upon its rare flavour. It is the same *sort* of thought (only much weaker) as those that torment us as we sit alone by the hearth mourning our dead, and reproach ourselves, with a yearning pain, that while they were yet with us we did not draw our chairs half close enough to theirs – did not take hold of their hands and kiss their faces half often enough – did not half often enough tell them, with eager lips, how preciouser than life they were to us.

"What will you be doing this time to-morrow, Essie?" asks Jack, breaking in upon her reverie; and has not he a right, for is not he king and hero of it?

"Wishing myself back again, to a dead certainty," answers Essie, emphatically. "Jack" (rubbing her cheek up and down softly against his shoulder – Jack is but a young, slight stripling), "I do believe that if I were in heaven, and saw you sitting all alone here smoking your pipe, I should have to throw away my harp and crown, and come down to keep you company."

"If you were in heaven," returns Jack, gravely, "I think you would be so surprised and pleased to find yourself there that you would be in no hurry to come out again for me or anybody else."

"Perhaps so, but I think not," she answers, sighing, and thrusting her arm gently through his.

"Have you got any money, Essie?"

"Plenty."

"How much?"

"Plenty."

"But how much?"

"Never you mind."

"But I do mind."

"Enough to take me there and bring me back again, and I don't suppose they'll charge me for board and lodging."

"Servants at those sort of swell places expect such a lot of tipping," says Jack, pensively, knocking the ash out of his pipe.

"They may expect, then; a little disappointment is very wholesome for us all. They are much better able to tip me than I them."

"There are sure to be charity sermons, too," continues the boy, with a forethought worthy of riper years. "I don't know how it is, but I never went to a strange place in my life without there being a collection for the Kaffirs or the Jews or the Additional Curates or something the very first Sunday after I got there."

"I would pretend I had forgotten my purse."

Jack puts his pipe in his pocket, rises, retires into his sanctum, lights a candle, rummages in a drawer, and presently returns with a five-pound note. Bank notes grew but in scanty crops at Glan-yr-Afon.

"Here, Essie."

"No! *no!* NO!" cries Essie, volubly, jumping up and clasping her hands behind her back.

"Yes! *yes!* YES!"

"No! no! You won't have enough money to pay the men on Saturday night."

"Talk about what you understand," says Jack, gruffly. "Do you think I'm going to let my sister go about like a beggar and whine for halfpence?"

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" throwing herself about his neck, and burying her face in his sunburnt throat. "How bitter it is always to take, and never to give! Oh! if I had but something to give you; but you know I have got nothing in the world."

"You have got Bob."

"Ah! so I have" (making a little grimace); "and if he would do you any good, you might have him, and welcome, to make mincemeat of, if you liked."

CHAPTER VIII

The 2.25 train from Brainton is due at Felton at 5.30. It is drawing near Hither now, escorted by a vanguard, bodyguard, and rearguard of dust-clouds; it rushes along, with the sun beating down on the roofs of the carriages, making them like little compartments of Hades. If the devil took a hint from the Coldbath Fields cells for "improving the prisons of Hell," he certainly might take a hint from the Brainton train for improving the travelling conveyances of the same locality.

In one of the first-class carriages there is a baby: it has got a cold, and seems rather inclined to be sick; so both the nurse, on whose lap it lies gaping and blowing bubbles, and the idolising mother, who sits over against it, insist on keeping its window tight up. There is a rusty old divine, in gilt-rimmed spectacles and a jowl, reading the *Guardian;* a commercial traveller, with his hat off, his legs up, and a gaudy cap on his head, fast asleep; and, lastly, a little young lady, sitting facing the engine, with the dusty blast driving hot and full in her face, blinking, coughing, choking, with the utmost patience. On her lap lies a huge bunch of red and yellow roses and heavy-scented double-stocks, all limp and drooping and soiled. Bob gave them to her when he came down to the station to see her off – and very kind of him too, and very nice they are; but all the same, as she has already a bag, a box, and a parasol to carry, she thinks (though she barely owns it to herself) that she would almost as soon have been without them.

The dusty blast blows gentler, moderates to a dusty zephyr; the train is slackening speed. "Fel – ton!" "Fel – ton!" cry a row of green-fustianed porters, as the long bulk draws up at the platform.

"Please 'm, are you Miss Craven?" inquires a tall footman in powder and a cockade, touching his hat to Esther, as she stands all by herself, trying to take several beams out of her own eye.

"Yes."

"The carriage is here for you, 'm. Would you please to show me which is your maid and luggage?"

"I have no maid, and there's my luggage," responds Esther, pointing with one grimy kid finger to a small trunk standing on its head, and looking half inclined to burst asunder in the midst. She is ashamed of her destitute condition, and ashamed of herself for being ashamed of it.

"Will it change into a pumpkin?" thinks Miss Craven, as she steps into a large yellow barouche, with two fidgety, showy greys, that is waiting for her at the station gate. After the yammering of the baby, the dull rumble-rumble of the train, how delicious! "If it were only my own," she says to herself, throwing herself back with a consequential feeling on the soft cushions, as some country people pass and pull their forelocks to the well-known liveries.

"Well, odder things have happened! *But* for Bob! The Prince fell in love with Cinderella at first sight; why should not Prince Gerard with me? I dare say I'm quite as good-looking as Cinderella was!"

As they pass Lady Gerard's model school, twenty little charity girls come trooping out in the uniformity of their cotton frock and straw bonnet livery, and drop twenty bob courtesies to Esther, who feels as the man in the "Arabian Nights" did who woke and found himself Sultan. Labouring men go stumping heavily home, with their tools over their shoulders and their heads bent earthwards, as is always the case with the tillers of the soil, who must – oh, hard necessity! – be ever looking down.

Park palings, through which the strong brake fern is thrusting itself, slide past; then a red lodge, picked out with blue bricks, where an obsequious old woman rushes out from the washtub, with hands all soapsuds, to open the gates; then a grassy, knolly park; then a great red house, likewise picked out with blue bricks; then stones clattering under an echoing portico; then the pumpkin stops, and Cinderella descends.

"Miss Craven!" announces the butler, opening a tall door; and Miss Craven, plucking up heart, marches into a high, dark library, lined with high, dark books – marches in, looking very much like a chimney sweep. Dust lies in ridges on her once white bonnet; dust, instead of belladonna, in streaks

under her eyes; dust on the parting of her hair, on her eyelashes, up her nose (on which there is also, though, happily for her, she does not know it, a large smut), and a double portion of dust on the great, faded, yellow roses, to which she cleaves with as much pertinacity as the idiot in "Excelsior" clave to that senseless banner which he was so determined to run up hill with.

As she enters, a goddess rises like an exhalation (as Pandemonium did), and comes floating on lilac clouds towards her. This is as things seem to her; in reality, a large, fair, young woman comes forward in a long-tailed mauve muslin. Simultaneously a man's two legs are seen disappearing over the window-sill.

"How do you do?" says the goddess, sweetly. "I think the train must have been rather late; we expected you half an hour ago."

"Yes."

A little pause, each taking stock.

"Won't you have some tea?"

"Thanks."

The tea is poured out; it has been standing on the table an hour, and is perfectly cold. The goddess and the little female collier examine each other stealthily.

"Rather alarming," thinks the latter: "talks in such a low voice, and has such a difficulty in pronouncing her *r*'s. So that is the correct thing, is it? Well, I'll always call Robert *Wobert* for the future."

"Might be pretty, if she were not so filthy," thinks the other.

"Same age as I am, indeed! She looks five years older."

"I think, if you don't mind, we had perhaps better be going to dress. Sir Thomas is so very particular as to punctuality."

"Is he? was that Sir Thomas that got out of the window just as I came in?"

"Oh no! that was St. John."

("St. John! What a pretty name! How much prettier than Bob!")

Sir Thomas Gerard is walking up and down the library, with his watch in his hand, prepared the instant the clock strikes to ring the bell violently, and inquire what is the meaning of dinner being so late. Sir Thomas is a big man, who affects the country squire, the good, old English gentleman – plain Sir Thomas, without any nonsense about him; dresses to the character, and succeeds in looking not unlike the Frenchman's idea of an English *milord*, as depicted in *Punch* some years ago, where he is represented in low-crowned hat and breeches, with the face of a truculent butcher, cracking a whip, and exclaiming, with equal coherency and elegance, "Rosbif! I send my wife to Smiffel! God dam!"

Sir Thomas does not use such strong language when speaking of Lady Gerard, but in other respects the portrait is not unfaithful. Lady Gerard is lying in an arm-chair. She is fat to make you shudder; she has a short, turn-up nose, short legs, a red skin, and next to no hair – all very good points in a pig, but hardly so good in a lady. The clock strikes, and at the same instant the butler opens the door, and announces "Dinner!"

"Come along, Conny!" says Sir Thomas, sticking out his elbow to his ward.

"Are not you going to wait for Miss Craven? And St. John is not down, either," suggests Lady Gerard, who is hoisting herself slowly up out of her chair.

"Wait for 'em? Not I," responds Sir Roger de Coverley. "If people don't choose to conform to the rules of my house, they may go without their dinner for all I care, and serve 'em right, too. Come along, Conny!"

The soup is nearly ended when two people, who have come together by a fortuitous concourse of atoms at the door, make a simultaneous entry into the dining-room.

"Companions in iniquity!" says St. John, with a sarcastic look at his father, bowing to Esther, as he seats himself beside Miss Blessington.

"How do?" says Sir Thomas, putting out his left hand (his right is still grasping his spoon). "Never wait for anybody here; would not let the soup get cold for the Queen nor the Lord Chancellor either."

"Miss Craven mistook you for Sir Thomas before dinner," says Miss Blessington, in her sweet, smooth way to her neighbour.

"Did she? Unintentional compliments are always the most flattering," replies Mr. Gerard, quietly.

Then he looks across through the partition wall of great bigonias in silver pots, and sees a little face peeping at him under and over the broad crimson leaves.

No one would ever call Esther's a Madonna face. No artist would ever ask her to sit for St. Catherine, or St. Cecilia, or St. Anybody else; hers is essentially *beauté du diable*– one of those little, sparkling, provoking, petulant faces that have a fresh dress of smiles or tears, or dimples or blushes, for every trivial, passing question; one of those little faces that have been at the bottom of half the mischiefs the world has seen.

"I only saw a pair of legs," replies the face, exculpating itself; "how could I tell whether they were young or old legs?"

Miss Blessington looks rather shocked, as if she thought that Esther's modes of expression were somewhat *libre;* and indeed at the rate of purity at which we are advancing, *legs* will soon walk off into the limbo of silence and unmentionableness; *arms* will probably follow them, and then perhaps noses.

Although Miss Blessington looks shocked, St. John only laughs. He looks pleasant when he laughs; he did not look pleasant just now, when he was turning up his nose at his cold soup. When he is in an ill-humour he has a decided look of his father, though it puts him into an awful rage to tell him so. He is not handsome, certainly; not a straight-nosed, pink-cheeked, flaxen-curled, fairy prince at all; neither is he very young – not a boy, that is to say – five-and-thirty, or thereabouts; his face has a weather-beaten look, as of one that has felt many an icy wind and many a tropic sun beat against it. No lily-handed, curled woman's darling.

"What do you mean?" cries Sir Thomas, raising his voice, and turning round in a fury (with his stiff grey hair standing upright, and the veins in his forehead swelling) upon an unlucky footman, who has had the *maladresse* to drop three spoons that he was carrying upon a tray. "You stupid hound, mind what you are about, or else keep out of the room, one or the other!"

Esther's mouth opens; she feels a sensation of shamefaced aghastness; but the rest of the company sit with the composure induced by long familiarity with the good old English gentleman's courtesies. Only one little flash of indignant contempt shoots from St. John's grey eyes. "How I hate my father!" would be his reading of the great statesman's dying ejaculation, "How I love my country!"

Nobody ever speaks much at dinner at Felton. St. John because he knows, if he trusted himself to speak at all, it would be to contradict his father flat *whatever* he said, for the mere pleasure of contradicting him; Lady Gerard because she has heard that it is impossible to do two things well at the same time, and as she is quite resolved upon doing the eating part well, she thinks she will leave the talking alone; Miss Blessington because, having contributed her hard, cold beauty to the entertainment, she thinks she has done enough.

The company being rather silent, Esther turns her eyes round the room, and scans the pictures. Two or three Gerards, by Sir Thomas Lawrence, in very full dress; a large copper-coloured woman by Rubens, in no dress at all; "Susanna and the Elders;" "Jupiter and Leda" (twice life-size); a "Venus Sleeping, surprised by Satyrs" (a great gem); and many other like subjects, such as one mostly meets with in the dining-rooms of English nobles and gentles – subjects pleasant and profitable, to employ the eyes and minds of their daughters while engaged in eating their dinners. Esther is staring hard at Susanna's fat, coy face, when her attention is recalled by Mr. Gerard's voice addressing her. She starts and blushes furiously, like a child whose fingers have been found straying among the jam-pots. He looks amused at her confusion.

"I have just been thinking, Miss Craven, how pleasant your first impressions of us must be. What a well-mannered, courteous family you must think us! – I tumbling out of the window at the risk of breaking my neck to avoid you, and my father and mother going to dinner without you."

"If you had been a little quicker in your movements, I should have known nothing about you," responds she, the carmine called forth by her detection dying slowly out of her cheeks, and noticing only the half of his sentence that refers to himself.

"Ah! I am not so young as I was" (with a sigh); "but, to tell the truth, we had just been dragging the pool, like Boodles in 'Happy Thoughts,' and I was such a mass of mud that I had not moral courage to face you."

"We should have met on equal terms. I was as black as a coal, was not I?"

"Railroads do make one wonderfully dusty," replies Miss Blessington, with a polite, evasive platitude.

"I had a worse infliction than any dust to bear," says Esther, stretching her long throat around the bigonia to get a fuller view of her *vis-à-vis*.

"A baby, of course?" replies he, stretching his neck too for a like purpose.

"An aggravated case of baby – a baby that had something odd the matter with it."

"Not so bad as a man drinking sherry," says he, his grey eyes and a bit of his nose laughing through the leaves; "a woman eating gingerbread is bad enough. I travelled once with a woman who ate gingerbread from London to Holyhead without stopping."

"And did not offer you any?"

"Good heavens, no! What a prodigious suggestion! – that would have been adding insult to injury."

"If I had been travelling with you I should undoubtedly have offered you some. I should have judged you by myself, and I am very fond of gingerbread."

"Indeed!"

"And" (with a mischievous look) "fonder still of peppermint lozenges, particularly in church on hot Sunday afternoons."

They were getting quite voluble, chatting and chirping like a nest of magpies – like children playing and laughing in a garden, unmindful that in a cave in a corner is a great old bear who may pounce out on them at any moment. The Felton bear pounces.

"What the devil do you mean leaving that door open? Morris! John! George! Here, some of you! there's a door open somewhere between here and the kitchen. Don't contradict me, sir! I say there is; if I catch you propping those swing doors open," &c. &c.

The birds have gone to bed, and the slugs come out to walk on the damp garden paths. Now and then a little wind gets up, whispers a word or two to the polished laurel leaves, and lies down again. There is a carpet of thin, smoke-grey clouds over heaven's blue floor. The two girls are strolling up and down the terrace walk. Esther has got a red cloak thrown about her shoulders; she is not in the least afraid of taking cold, and declined the offer of it in the first instance; but on second thoughts, reflecting that the dining-room windows look on the terrace, and that the fairy prince may see and like the combination of black eyes and red cloth (fairy princes being always partial to gay colours), accepted it.

I have called Esther "little," and Miss Blessington "large" but the truth is they are much of a height. The difference between them is, that one is a young, slight sapling that has been so busy shooting up skywards, that it has had no leisure to grow broad, and that the other is a full-grown, spreading, stately forest tree. And yet they are the same age; but some women develop, mind and body, much quicker than others.

From the unshuttered dining-room windows comes a great square of yellow lamplight, and lies smooth upon the gravel. Looking in you see rifled fruit dishes, half-filled wine-glasses, moths flying round and round the lamp globes, trying their best to find an entrance to fiery death.

Sir Thomas, in his red velvet easy chair, with his white duck legs stretched out before him – duck trousers and a blue coat and brass buttons are, I need hardly say, the fine old English gentleman's dinner costume – with his head thrown back, till you can see either up into his brains or down his throat, whichever you choose. St. John, with his elbow resting on the shining oak table, which reflects it as a mirror would, and his head on his hand, in a brown study.

"Do you always walk up and down here, Miss Blessington?" inquires Esther, who is getting rather tired of pacing along, along, along monotonously, with her gown sweeping a little avalanche of pebbles behind her.

"Generally" (with a pretty smile).

Miss Blessington has a very pretty smile – an "angelic smile" – people say who see her only once; but it is only one, and is aired every hour of the day – comes out for Sir Thomas, for Lady Gerard, for servants, for dogs, for callers, for old almswomen, for St. John – so that none can take it personally, can they?

"By yourself?"

"Not generally."

The pretty smile is dashed with a faint complacency.

("H'm! That means with St. John —

> "'Walking in a shady grove
> With my Juliana.'

"Pleasant look-out for me! A bad third! What a pity that Bob is not here! we should be a *partie carrée*, and might change partners every now and then; Miss Blessington should have Bob, and I would have St. John!")

Below the terrace spreads a large square of grass, uninvaded by flower-bed or shrub, mowed and rolled, rolled and mowed, into the similitude of a pancake for flatness. There croquet-hoops glance whitely in the soft half-light; mallets lie strewn like dead soldiers after a battle; balls red, blue, and yellow, like great ripe fruit tumbled among the grass.

"Is this your croquet-ground?"

"Yes."

"Nice and level?"

"Yes."

"Like a billiard table, only a prettier green?"

"Yes; would you like a game?"

"Better than doing nothing, isn't it?" answers Esther, cheerily; she being a young woman to whom the words *rest* and *enjoyment* are not synonymous, as they mostly grow to be to people in later years.

From the dining-room comes the faint melody of the trombone, played with the skill of much practice by Sir Thomas's nose. Some one comes to the window, looks out, puts a hand on the sill, and jumps down. St. John apparently has an aversion from going out and coming in by the authorised modes of exit and entrance. Now that one can see him without any bigonia interposing, one notices that he has kind, eager eyes – eyes that seem to be looking, looking for something that they have not found yet – and rather a long nose, that the sun has got hold of and browned, as a cook browns mashed potatoes.

"Won't you join us, St. John?" asks Miss Blessington, stooping to reinstate a fallen hoop, and looking calm invitation at him out of her great, fine, passionless, cow eyes.

St. John hesitates, and looks towards Esther to see whether she is not going to second the invitation; but she is balancing herself with her two feet on a croquet-mallet, and does not appear to see him.

"Gooseberry I may be," she thinks, "but, at all events, I won't be instrumental in making myself so."

"Do I ever play?" asks he, with petulance, walking off in a huff.

"He did not accept your invitation with the exultant gratitude one would have expected, did he?" says Miss Craven, maliciously.

"He hates the game," replies Miss Blessington, rather sharplier than is her wont – "particularly playing with odd numbers."

"Oh!"

The match begins; it is about as fair as a foot race between Deerfoot and a lame baby. Esther has played about six times in the course of her life; Miss Blessington about six thousand. Miss Blessington makes the round of the hoops in triumphant solitude, while poor Essie struggles feebly, ignorantly, unscientifically, to ring a bell that refuses to emit the faintest tinkle.

"Hare and tortoise!" cries she, laughing at her own discomfiture; "you'll go to sleep presently, and I shall crawl in and win."

"Since you wish me, I don't mind taking a mallet," says St. John, appearing suddenly round a big Wellingtonia, and looking confusedly conscious of being seen descending very awkwardly from his high horse.

"How do you know we wish you to take one? – we never said so," says Essie, flashing at him with her wicked, laughing, half-lowered eyes. ("Since I am another's and he is another's, I don't see why we should not try to amuse each other," she says to herself.)

"It is your turn to play, Miss Craven," interposes Constance, coldly.

"Come to my rescue, won't you?" says Esther, making her seventy-second careless, abortive attempt at the bell, and throwing twice as much *empressement* into her voice from the amiable motive that she thinks such *empressement* is displeasing to Miss Blessington.

"You snubbed me so just now that I don't think I will. I'll leave you to perish miserably," answers he, looking at her as he speaks with an intentness only excusable by the dim light, and the indistinctness of all objects in it.

"Constance, if you don't mind I'll take one of Miss Craven's balls."

"If you remember, I asked you to join us half an hour ago," replies Constance, in her measured way.

"I make one stipulation before we start," cries Esther, gaily, "and that is, that you make no remarks upon my play except such as are of a laudatory nature."

"I'll make no stipulation of the kind," answers he, gaily too; "if I see anything reprehensible I shall testify."

Fate does not smile upon the union of St. John and Esther. Disgrace and disaster attend their arms; in ignorance, unskilfulness, and general incapacity, St. John is no whit inferior to his partner.

"Why, you play worse than I do," cries she, delighted at the discovery.

"I know I do," he answers, not too amiably; "I should be ashamed of myself if I did not; it is the vilest, stupidest game ever any idiot invented; no play in it whatever. All luck! all chance! Look there!" pointing with a sort of ill-tempered resignation to Constance, who, with dress delicately lifted with one hand, and foot gracefully poised, is inflicting heavy chastisement, with a calm, satisfied vindictiveness, on his ball.

"Take that, you fool you!" (this is addressed to the ball, not to Miss Blessington) hurling his mallet at it as it scuds swiftly over the sward and lodges in the pink and purple breast of an aster bed. The head and handle of the mallet fly asunder from the violence of their passage through the air, and Mr. Gerard is reduced to the ignominy of picking up the *disjecta membra* and hammering them together again.

"You must make a sensation when you go to a croquet party," remarks Esther, sarcastically.

"Do you think so badly of me as to suppose I ever do? is thy servant a curate that he should do this thing?" he answers, coming over and standing close to her.

"Please attend to the game, St. John! It is you to play!" exclaims Constance, with suppressed, lady-like irritation, from the other end of the ground, where she stands in majestic solitude.

It is the penalty of greatness to be lonely. A few more egregious blunders on the part of the firm of Gerard and Craven, a few more masterstrokes by Miss Blessington, and the game draws to a conclusion.

"It is ridiculous playing against such luck as yours, Constance," cries St. John, flinging down his weapon in an unjust, unreasonable fury. "It is always the same; it does not matter what – whist, billiards, anything – always the same story. Take my advice" (turning to Essie, and speaking eagerly), "never play at anything, or do anything, or be anything with me, or you'll be sure to be a loser. I am the most unlucky devil under the sun." Then he feels that he is making a fool of himself, and walks off in a rage.

"Why, he is *really* cross," says Esther, opening her great eyes and looking a little blankly after him.

"He is rather odd-tempered," answers Miss Blessington, composedly; "and the most singular thing is, that it is always the people he is fondest of with whom he is most easily irritated."

"How fond he must be of you!" says Esther, internally.

CHAPTER IX

Death and the sun are very much alike in one respect, and that is, their utter impartiality and stupid want of discernment. They make no difference between those who love them and those who hate. They pay their visits equally to those who are longing for and lifting up eager hands towards them, and those who would much prefer to be without them.

I will drop the parallel, which cannot be carried much farther, and talk of the sun only. He certainly shows very little judgment, and less taste, in these matters. He gives his great, warm light just as readily to a scullery as a boudoir, to an ill-smelling dunghill as to a bed of mignonette; kisses with just as much relish the raddled cheeks of an old fish-wife as the fresh scarlet lips of a young countess.

This present August morning he is blazing full and hot on that very grievous daub of Mrs. Brandon in a no-waisted black satin, out of which she appears to be bursting, like a chrysalis from its sheath, in the Plas Berwyn dining-room, and not a whit more fully or more hotly on the exquisite "Monna Lisa" of Da Vinci, which is the chief jewel of the Gerard collection.

The same sunbeam that brings out with such clearness Monna Lisa's faint, weird smile, takes in also within its compass Esther's small, swart head, round the back of which coils a great, loose, careless twist of burnished hair, like a black snake. She is standing outside the dining-room door, with her lithe, *svelte* figure stooped forward a little. The family are at prayers, as she ascertained by applying her ear to the key-hole, and hearing a harsh, elderly voice going at a good round trot through a variety of petitions, for himself, his children (he has only one, and hates him), his friends, his enemies, his queen, his bishops and curates, his black brethren, &c., all without the vestige of a comma between them.

"What! eavesdropping?" asks St. John, coming down the handsome, shallow stairs in knickerbockers and heather-mixture stockings that his old mother made him.

"Hush!" holding up her forefinger; "they are at prayers."

St. John listens too, and a sneer comes and settles on his mouth.

"Isn't he a worthy rival for the man who said he would give any one as far as Pontius Pilate in the Creed, and then beat him?"

"You ought not to abuse your own father" (in a whisper).

"I know I ought not" (in another whisper).

"Why do you, then?" casting down her eyes, that he may see how large a portion of downy cheeks her long curly lashes shade.

"I only do for him what I know he would do for me if he had the chance."

"Hush! they are nearly over."

"… be with us all evermore. Amen. Morris!"

"Yes, Sir Thomas."

"What the deuce do you mean sticking the legs of that chair against the wall knocking all the paint off the wainscot?"

> "Oh! blessings on his kindly voice,
> And on his silver hair!"

says St. John, in ironical quotation; and then the door opens, and a long string of servants issue out, and the two culprits again, as on the previous evening, together enter.

Lady Gerard never appears at breakfast. About twenty years ago she had an illness, and, on the strength of it, has kept up a character for invalidhood ever since. Miss Blessington takes her place at the head of the table; she is sitting there now. Her shapely hands are busy among the teacups; her white lids drooped over her calm eyes. There is a great gold cross on her breast, that rises and falls

in soft, even undulations. Eve, as she was when first she grew into separate entity and embodiment out of Adam's side; Eve, of creamiest flesh, and richest, reddest blood, before a soul – a tormenting, puzzling, intangible, incomprehensible soul – was breathed into her.

When Constance marries, her husband will gaze at her as a man might gaze at Gibson's "Venus," supposing that he had bought for a great price that marvel of modern sculpture, and had set it up in the place of honour in his gallery. He would half-shut his eyes, the better to appreciate the exquisite turn of the cold, stately throat, the modelling of the little rounded wrist; would put his head on one side, and look at it this way and that, to determine whether he liked the tinting.

"Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,"

as the pithy line that everybody knows, and that next to nobody could have written, hath it. At forty Constance will be a much handsomer woman than Esther. At forty those clean-cut, immovable, expressionless features will be hardly the worse for wear; that colourless marble skin will be hardly less smoothly polished than it is now. At forty Esther (if she live so long) will have cried and laughed, and fretted and teased herself into a mere shadow of her present self.

Every one's letters at Felton are put on their plate for them. As Esther takes her seat, she perceives that there is one for her – one directed in a scrawling, schoolboy hand. The blood rushes to her face, as it does to a turkeycock's wattles when he is excited or angry, and she thrusts it hastily into her pocket. To her guilty imagination it seems that written all over it, in big red letters, legible to every eye, is, "From Bob Brandon, Esther Craven's lover." As her eyes lift themselves shyly, to see whether St. John is observing her, they meet his, looking at her curiously, interestedly, puzzledly.

"We allow people to read their letters at breakfast here," he says, with a friendly smile; "we are not particular as to manners, as I dare say you have found out by this time."

"Oh! thanks, I'm in no hurry; it's of no consequence – it will keep," answers Esther, disjointedly, with would-be indifference, and the turkeycock hue spreading to the edge of her white gown.

The morning hours at Felton are not exciting. Sir Thomas is building a new orchid house, and spends much of his time standing over the bricklayers, like an Egyptian overseer, telling them with his usual courteous candour how much more he knows about their trade than they themselves do, who have been at it all their lives. St. John disappears too, and Constance and Esther are left *tête-à-tête*.

Esther has plenty of time to read Bob's letter, and to understand it, which latter requires some ingenuity, as, from the greater rapidity of his thoughts than of his pen, he omits most of the little words —*tos* and *ands* and *whichs* and *whos* and *hes* and *shes*. There is a good deal about his mother in it: several messages from her; a great many questions as to what Mr. Gerard was like, with solemn adjurations to answer them; a sheet devoted to the exposition of the luxury in which it is possible to live on £300 a year; and, lastly, a sentence or two as to his great loneliness, and his eager longing to have his darling Esther back again – not much on that head, as if he were afraid of marring her enjoyment by intruding upon her the picture of his own disconsolateness. It was not an eloquent letter; in fact, it was rather a stupid one, and had evidently been written with a very nasty scratchy pen; but for all that it was a nice one, and so Esther felt, and wished that it had been less so.

Bob is a dear fellow; and, no doubt, when she goes back to Glan-yr-Afon, she will be very glad to see him, and be very fond of him; but, for the present, she would like to forget him altogether – to have a holiday from him: he seems to come in incongruously now somehow.

"Where's St. John?" grunts miladi, who makes her appearance towards luncheon time, from the arm-chair which is witness to so many gentle dozes on her part.

Miladi likes St. John; he is very good to her, and often stands in the breach between her and Sir Thomas.

"Vanished," answers Miss Blessington, in her slow, sweet drawl. "I think Miss Craven must have frightened him away."

It is very pleasant, is not it? when you think you have been making a highly favourable impression on a person, to hear that they have fled before you in abject fear.

"I had no idea that he was such a timid fawn," answers Essie, nettled.

"He is very peculiar," says Constance, her white fingers flying swiftly in and out among the coloured silks of the smoking cap she is embroidering; "and has a most unfortunate shrinking from strangers."

"The greatest friends must have been strangers once," objects Essie, feeling rather small.

"Quite true, so they must; but he is so very *difficile*, we never can get him to admire any one – can we, aunt?"

But "aunt" has fallen sweetly asleep.

"With the exception of two or three fortunate blondes – I prefer dark people myself infinitely, don't you?"

"Infinitely," replies Esther, with emphasis.

It is not true – she does nothing of the kind; but, after all, what is truth in comparison of the discomfiture of an adversary?

CHAPTER X

Luncheon comes, but no St. John. After luncheon Sir Thomas, Miss Blessington, and Miss Craven go out riding. Miss Craven's knowledge of horsemanship is confined to her exploits on a small, shaggy, down-hearted Welsh pony, concerning whom it would be difficult to predicate which he was fullest of, years or grass. Miss Blessington has lent her an old habit; it is much too big in the waist and shoulders for her, but a well-made garment always manages to adapt itself more or less to any figure, and she does not look amiss in it. It is a matter of very little consequence to her at the present moment how she looks; she is the arrantest coward in Christendom, and her heart sinks down to the bottom of her boots as she sees three horses that look unnaturally tall and depressingly cheerful issue through the great folding-doors that open into the stable-yard.

"Oh, Sir Thomas! it is a chesnut, is it? Don't they say that chesnuts always have very uncertain tempers? Oh! please – I'm rather frightened. I think, if you don't mind, I'd almost as soon – "

"Fiddlesticks!" answers Sir Thomas, roughly. "Cannot have my horses saddled and unsaddled every half-hour because you don't know your own mind. God bless my soul, child! Don't look as if you were going to be hanged! Why, you might ride her with a bit of worsted. Here, Simpson, look sharp, and put Miss Craven up."

After two abortive attempts, in the first of which she springs short, and glides ignobly to earth again, and in the second takes a bound that goes near to carrying her clean over her steed, after having given Simpson a kick in the face, and torn a hole in her borrowed habit, Miss Craven is at length settled in her seat.

It is a hot afternoon; after all, I think that miladi has the best of it, sitting in a garden-chair under a tulip tree, eating apricots. The deer, with dappled sides and heavy-horned heads, are herding about the rough, knotted feet of the great trees that stand here and there in solitary kingship about the park. They spread their ancient, outstretched arms between earth and heaven, and man and beast rejoice in the shade thereof. The dust lies a hand-breadth thick upon the road; the nuts in the hedgerow, the half-ripe blackberries, the rag-wort in the grass – all merge their distinctive colours in one dirty-white mask.

"Is she going to kick, do you think?" asks Esther, in a mysterious whisper of Miss Blessington, across Sir Thomas. "Does not it mean that when they put their ears back?"

"I don't think you need be alarmed," answers Constance, with politely-veiled contempt; "it is only the flies that tease her."

The animal that inspires such alarm in Esther's mind, is a slight, showy thing, nearly thoroughbred; a capital lady's park hack. It is quiet enough, only that the quietness of a young, oats-fed mare, and of an antediluvian Welsh pony blown out with grass, are two different things. She is sidling along now, half across the road, coquetting with her own shadow.

"Oh, Sir Thomas!" (in an agonised voice) "why does not she walk straight? Why does she go like a crab?"

"Pooh!" answers Sir Thomas, in his hard, loud voice; "it's only play!"

"If I'm upset, I don't much care whether it is in play or earnest," rejoins Esther, ruefully.

The glare from the road, the dust and the midges, make people keep their eyes closed as nearly as they can: so that it is not till they are close upon him that they perceive that the man who is dawdling along to meet them on a stout, grey cob, with his hat and coat and whiskers nearly as white as any miller's, is St. John. He looks rather annoyed at the rencontre.

"I have been over to Melford, Sir Thomas, to see that pointer of Burleigh's. It will not do at all; it's not half broken."

"You had better turn back with us, St. John," suggests Constance, graciously.

"No, thanks; much too hot!"

"*Au revoir*, then," nodding her head and her tall hat, and about a million flies that are promenading on it, gracefully.

Esther's fears vanish.

"Three is no company," she says in a low voice, and making rather a plaintive little face as he passes her.

Drawn by the magnet that has succeeded in drawing to itself most things that it wished – viz., a woman's inviting eyes – he turns the cob's head sharp round.

"But four is," he answers, with an eager smile, putting his horse alongside of hers.

She was rather compunctious the moment she had said it. It is reversing the order of things – the woman after the man; "the haystack after the cow;" as the homely old proverb says.

The road is broad, and for a little while they all four jog on abreast, as in a Roman chariot-race or a city omnibus – rather a dreary squadron.

"This is very dull," thinks Esther. "Oh! if I could lose my handkerchief, or my veil, or my gloves! Why cannot I drop my whip?"

No sooner said than done.

"Oh! Mr. Gerard, I am so sorry, I have dropped my whip!"

Mr. Gerard, of course, dismounts and picks it up; Sir Thomas and his ward pass on.

"What a happy thought that was of yours!" says St. John, wiping the little delicate switch before giving it back to her.

"*Happy thought!* What do you mean?" (reddening).

"Oh! it was accident, was it? I quite thought you had dropped it on purpose, and was lost in admiration of your ingenuity."

He looks at her searchingly as he speaks.

"I *did* drop it on purpose," she answers, blushing painfully. "Why do you make me tell the truth, when I did not mean to do so?"

"Don't you always tell truth?" (a little anxiously).

"Does anybody?"

"I hope so. A few men do, I think."

"As I have no pretensions to being a man, you cannot be surprised that my veracity is not my strongest point."

"You are only joking" (looking at her with uneasy intentness). "Please reassure me, by saying that you do not tell any greater number of fibs than every one is compelled to contribute towards the carrying on of society."

"Perhaps I do, and perhaps I do not."

He looks only half-satisfied with this oracular evasion; but does not press the point farther.

"It is not often that my papa and I take the air together; we think we have almost enough of each other's society in-doors."

"He is your father," says Esther, rather snappishly; a little out of humour with him for having put her out of conceit with herself.

"I never could see what claim to respect that was," answers he, gravely; "on the contrary I think that one's parents ought to apologise to one for bringing one, without asking one's leave, into such a disagreeable place as this world is."

"Disagreeable!" cries Esther, turning her eyes, broad open, in childish wonder upon him. "Disagreeable to *you!* Young and – "

"Beautiful, were you going to say?"

"No, certainly not – and with plenty of money to make it pleasant?"

"But I have not plenty of money. I *shall* have, probably, when I'm too old to care about it! *he* is good for thirty years more, you know," nodding respectfully at Sir Thomas's broad, blue back.

"It *must* be tiring, waiting for dead men's shoes," says Esther, a little sardonically.

"*Tiring!* I believe you," says St. John, energetically; "it is worse than tiring – it is degrading. Do you suppose I do not think my own life quite as contemptible as you can? Take my word for it" (emphasising every syllable), "there is no class of men in England so much to be pitied as heirs to properties. We cannot dig; to beg we are ashamed."

"I never was heir to anything, so I cannot tell."

"I should have been a happier fellow, and worth something then, perhaps, if I had been somebody's tenth son, and had had to earn my bread quill-driving, or soap-boiling, or sawbones-ing. I think I see myself pounding away at a pestle and mortar in the surgery" (laughing). "I should have had a chance, then, of being liked for myself too, even if I did smell rather of pills and plaister; whereas now, if anybody looks pleasant at me, or says anything civil to me, I always think it is for love of Felton, not of me."

"You should go about *incognito*, like the Lord of Burleigh."

"He was but a landscape painter, you know. Do you know that once, not a very many years ago, I had a ridiculous notion in my head that one ought to try and do some little good in the world? Thanks to Sir Thomas's assistance and example, I have very nearly succeeded in getting rid of that chimera. If I am asked at the Last Day how I have spent my life, I can say, I have shot a few bears in Norway, and a good many turkeys and grebe in Albania; I have killed several salmon in Connemara: I have made a fool of myself once, and a beast of myself many times."

"How did you make a fool of yourself?" pricking up her ears.

"Oh! never mind; it is a stupid story without any point, and I have not quite come to the pitch of dotage of telling senile anecdotes about myself. Here, let us turn in at this gate, and take a cut across the park: it is cooler, and we can have a nice gallop under the trees, without coming in for the full legacy of Sir Thomas's and Conny's dust, as we are doing now."

"But – but – is not it rather *dangerous?*" objects Esther, demurring. "Don't they sometimes put their feet into rabbit-holes, and tumble down and break their legs?"

"Frequently, I may almost say *invariably*," answers St. John, laughing, and opening the gate with the handle of his whip.

The soft, springy, green turf is certainly pleasanter than the hard, whity-brown turnpike road, and so the horses think as they break into a brisk canter. The quick air freshens the riders' faces – comes to them like comfortable words from Heaven to a soul in Purgatory – as they dash along under the trees, stooping their heads every now and then to avoid coming into contact with the great, low-spreading boughs.

Laughing, flushed, half-fright, half-enjoyment:

"She looked so lovely as she swayed
The rein with dainty finger-tips;
A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly worth for this —
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips."

"Delicious! I'm not a bit afraid now; I bid defiance to the rabbit-holes," she cries, with little breathless pauses between the words.

Let no one shout before they are out of the wood. Hardly have the words left her mouth, when all at once, at their very feet almost, from among the seven-foot-high fern, where they have been crouching, rise a score of deer with sudden rustling; and, their slender knees bent, spring away with speedy grace through the mimic forest. Esther's mare, frightened at the sudden apparition (many horses are afraid of deer), swerves violently to the left; then gets her head down, and sets to kicking as if she would kick herself out of her skin.

"Mind! Take care! Hold tight! Keep her head up!" shouts St. John, in an agony.

Next moment the chesnut, with head in the air, nostrils extended, and bridle swinging to and fro against her fore legs, tears riderless past him. In a second he is off, and at the side of the heap of blue cloth that is lying motionless among the buttercups.

"I'm not dead," says the heap, raising itself, and smiling rather a difficult smile up at him, as he leans over it or her, his burnt face whitened with extremest fear. "Don't look so frightened!"

"Thank God!" he says, hardly above his breath, and more devoutly than he is in the habit of saying his prayers. "When I saw you there, lying all shapeless, I half thought – Oh!" (with a shudder) "I don't know what I thought."

"I must be tied on next time, mustn't I?" says Essie, putting up her hand to her head with an uncertain movement, as if she were not quite sure of finding it there. "Oh! Mr. Gerard," – the colour coming back faintly to her lips and cheeks – "I *do* hate riding! it's horribly dangerous! quite as bad as a battle!"

"Quite!" acquiesces St. John, laughing heartily in his intense relief. "And you are quite sure you are not hurt?"

"Quite!"

"Really?"

"Really!"

To prove how perfectly intact she is, she jumps up; but, as she does so, her face grows slightly distorted with a look of pain, and she sinks back on her buttercup bed.

"Not quite sure, either; I seem to have done something stupid to my foot – turned it or twisted it."

So saying, she thrusts out from under her habit a small foot. It *is* a small – a *very* small – foot; but the boot in which it is cased is country made, and about three times too big for it; so that it might rattle in it, like a pea in a drum. Even at this affecting moment St. John cannot repress a slight feeling of disappointment.

"I'm awfully sorry! Whereabouts does it hurt? There?" putting his fingers gently on the slender, rounded ankle.

"Yes, a little."

"I'm awfully sorry!" (You see there is not much variety in his laments.) "What can I do for it? gallop home as hard as I can, and make them send the carriage?"

"With a doctor, a lawyer, and a parson in it? No, I think not."

"But you cannot sit here all night. Could you *ride* home, do you think?"

"On that dreadful beast?" with a horrified intonation.

"But if I lead her all the way?"

"Very well" (reluctantly); "but (brightening a little) I cannot ride her; she is not here."

"I suppose I must be going to look after her," says St. John, dragging himself up very unwillingly. "Brute! she is as cunning as Old Nick! And you are sure you don't mind being left here by yourself for a minute or two?"

"Not if there are no horses within reach," she answers, with an innocent smile, which he carries away with him through the sunshine and the fern and the grass.

Essie spends full half an hour pushing out, pinching in, smoothing and stroking Miss Blessington's caved-in hat; full a quarter of an hour in picking every grass and sedge and oxeye that grew within reach of her destroying arm; and full another quarter in thinking what a pleasant, manly, straightforward face St. John's is – what a thoroughly terrified face it looked when she met it within an inch of her own nose after her disgraceful *bouleversement*– what a much better height five feet ten is for all practical purposes than six feet four.

At the end of the fourth quarter Mr. Gerard returns, with a fire hardly inferior to St. Anthony's in his face; with his hair cleaving damply to his brows, and without the mare.

"Would not let me get within half a mile of her! far too knowing! Brute! and now she'll be sure to go and knock the saddle to pieces, and then there'll be the devil to pay!"

"I'm so sorry," says Esther, looking up sympathisingly, with her lap full of decapitated oxeyes.

"So am I, for your sake: you'll have to ride the cob home."

"I shall have to turn into a man, then," she says, glancing rather doubtfully at the male saddle.

"No, you won't," (laughing).

He rises, and unfastens the cob from the tree-branch to which he has been tied. He has been indulging a naturally greedy disposition – biting off leaves and eating them – until he has made his bit and his mouth as green as green peas.

"You must let me put you up, I think," says Gerard bending down and looking into his companion's great, sweet eyes, under the rim of her battered, intoxicating-looking hat.

"Must I?" (lowering her eyelids shyly.)

"Yes; do you mind much?"

"No – o."

He stoops and lifts her gently. He is not a Samson or a prize-fighter, and well grown young women of seventeen are not generally feather-weights; but yet it seems to him that the second occupied in raising her from the ground and placing her in the saddle was shorter than other seconds.

A man's arms are not sticks or bits of iron, that they can hold a beautiful woman without feeling it. St. John's blood is giving little quick throbs of pleasure. His arms seem to feel the pressure of that pleasant burden long after they have been emptied of it.

"I think you must let me hold you," he says, gently and very respectfully passing his arm round her waist.

"No, no!" she cries, hastily, pulling herself away – "no need! – no need at all! I shall not fall."

She feels an overpowering shrinking from the enforced, unavoidable familiarity. It does not arise from any distaste for St. John certainly, nor yet from any quixotic loyalty to Bob; it springs from a new, unknown, uncomprehended shyness.

"Very well," he answers, quietly, releasing her instantly, and taking the bridle in his hand. "But I'm afraid you will find that you are mistaken."

They set forward across the park, at a foot's pace and in silence. Esther twists her hands in the cob's mane, and tries to persuade herself that pommelless pigskin does not make a slippery seat. Every two paces she slides down an inch or so, and then recovers herself with an awkward jerk. The sun is hot. Now and then, as the cob puts his foot on a mole-hill, or some other slight inequality in the ground, her ankle bumps against the saddle-flap. She feels turning giddy and sick with the heat and the pain.

"Mr. Gerard! Mr. Gerard! I'm falling!" she calls out loud, stretching out her arms to him, and clutching hold of his shoulder with a violence and tenacity that she herself is not in the least aware of.

He is magnanimous. He does not exult over her; he does not say, "I knew how it would be; I told you so!" He only says, in a kind, anxious voice, and plainlier still with kind, anxious eyes, "I'm afraid you are in great pain?" and replaces the rejected arm in its former obnoxious position.

As they enter the lodge gate, they see Sir Thomas and his ward advancing down the avenue towards them. Miss Blessington is a great favourite of Sir Thomas's. She is good to look at, and hardly ever speaks; or, if she does, it is only to say, "Yea, yea, and Nay, nay."

"Now for an exchange of civilities," says Gerard, rather bitterly; "even at this distance I can see him getting the steam up."

"Miss Craven has had a fall, Sir Thomas, and hurt herself," he remarks, explanatorily, as soon as the two parties come within speaking distance.

"Broken the mare's knees, I suppose?" cries Sir Thomas, loudly, taking no notice whatever of Miss Craven's casualties. "Some fool's play, of course; larking over the palings, I dare say. Well,

sir, what have you done with her? where have you left her? out with it!" (lashing himself up into an irrational turkeycock fury.)

"Damn the mare!" answered St. John in a rage, growing rather white, and forgetting his manners.

St. John's rages, when he does get into them, which is not very often, are far worse ones than his papa's, and so the latter knows, and is cowed by the first symptoms of the approach of one.

Miss Blessington looks up shocked. This *jeune personne bien élevée* always is shocked at whatever people ought to be shocked at – Colenso, Swinburne, skittles, &c.

"You are not much hurt, *really*, I hope?" she says, suavely, walking along beside Esther, while Sir Thomas and his heir wrangle in the background. "Which way did you come, and what *has* become of your horse?"

"We came through the park," answers Esther, holding on by her eyelids to the cob's slippery back; "so I suppose the horse is there still. Mr. Gerard tried to catch it, and could not."

"Through the park!" repeats Miss Blessington, with a slight smile of superior intelligence. "Oh! I see; a short cut home! Poor St. John has such a horror of taking a ride for riding's sake, that he always tries to shorten his penance as much as possible!"

CHAPTER XI

It is the 1st of September, and the seal of impending destruction is set upon many a little plump brown bird; but ignorance is bliss, and the little brown birds do not know it, and are walking about the turnip ridges and amongst the stubble fields as confidently as if there were no such man as Purdey, and no such infernal machine as a gun. St. John and his papa go out shooting together. Sir Thomas knocks up by luncheon time, and returns to his orchid-house, and to the goading the bricklayers, as King Agamemnon did his fellow-chiefs, with bitter words. Esther spends the day in her bedroom, lying in state on a sofa with her ankle bandaged up. It hurts her acutely if she attempts to walk on it; but if she keeps quiet, she is hardly aware of there being anything wrong with it. It is very annoying having to play the invalid for an ailment that is purely local when you feel in riotous health and spirits – to have your dinner sent up to you on a tray when you are so hungry that you could eat double your allotted portion, if it were not that, being an invalid, you are ashamed to say so. One has a sense of shamming, malingering.

Poor Miss Craven passes a very dull day; the red rose on one side the window, and the travellers' joy on the other, look in and say, "Why is this lazy child lying all day on a couch, when we and so many other flowers have been calling to her with our voiceless voices to come out into the breeze and shine?" A bee comes in sometimes, and goes buzz – buzzing about, telling himself how busy he is, and that he has no time to waste now that his honey-harvest is drawing so near to its sweet close. The room is so still that, but for feeling intensely alive, and not having her chin tied up, Esther might almost imagine herself laid out previous to her interment. Now and again Miss Blessington enters noiselessly, says "I hope you are feeling a little easier," in her soft monotone, and then rustles gently away again. She has provided Esther with a novel and a book of acrostics, and thinks she has done her duty by her neighbour amply. The novel is one written with a purpose; a dull one-sided tilt against Ritualism. Esther never found out an acrostic in her life, and has seldom been so completely vacant of employment as to try. She is, therefore, reduced to spending half the day in writing to Bob – half the day! and yet when the letter is finished it only covers three sides of a sheet. She has written, rewritten, and re-rewritten it. All around and about her lie half-covered, quarter-covered, whole-covered sheets, all stamped with the seal of condemnation. Gerard is the stumbling block; his name either will not come in at all, which looks unnatural, or else insists on thrusting itself in every second line. This is the form in which Miss Craven's billetdoux finally presents itself at Plas Berwyn:

> "Dear Bob, – Thanks very much for your letter; please put a few stops next time. I had a very disagreeable journey here – bushels of dust and a sick baby. This is a very handsome place, and they are all very kind to me. (H'm! are they? I don't know about that; *one* of them is.) Yesterday I went out riding with Sir Thomas and his ward (so I did; I set out with them), and I stupidly fell from my horse, a sort of thing that nobody but I would have done, and hurt my foot a little; but nothing to speak of. Miss Blessington, the ward, is remarkably handsome, but looks a great deal older than I do. My love to your mother, and thanks for her kind messages; the same to the girls. Tell Bessy that it is hardly worth while sending me 'The Sinfulness of Little Sins,' as I shall have more time for reading when I get home again.
> *"Yours affectionately,*
> *"E. C.*
>
> "P. S. – Mr. Gerard is not at all good-looking; he seems very fond of shooting; he has been out all to-day."

"The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs."

Dinner is over; nothing to look forward to but bed-time. Yah! How dull! A knock comes at the door. Miss Blessington enters with flowers in her hand – jessamine, heliotrope, everything that smells sweetly and not heavily – unlike Bob's well meaning but annihilating double stocks.

"I hope you are in less pain now" (the usual formula, that comes as regularly and frequently as the doxology in church).

"Oh yes! thanks; I'm very well" (yawning and looking woefully bored.) "What lovely flowers!"

"St. John sent them to you" (rather shortly).

"Mr. Gerard?" (with animation, the bored look vanishing.) "How very kind of him!"

"He always is so good-natured," answers Constance, with a cold generality.

"It is so particularly kind of him, when he has such an overpowering aversion for strangers," continues Essie, with a malicious twinkle in her eyes.

Constance sweeps to the window, slightly discomfited.

"He told me to ask you whether you would like him to come and carry you downstairs for an hour or two?" she says, in a somewhat constrained voice; "but I daresay you would rather be left in peace up here; and I should think that the quieter you kept your foot the better for it."

"On the contrary, I should like it of all things," cries Essie, with perverse alacrity. "In your cheerful company downstairs, I shall be more likely to forget my sufferings, such as they are, than all by my dull self up here; to tell the truth, I was meditating asking your maid to come and talk to me about haberdashery."

Outside Miss Craven's door St. John pauses, as one that is devout hesitates on the threshold of a sanctuary. Chintz curtains rose-lined, white-dressed toilet-table, simple valueless ornaments lying about, two little slippers, that look as if they had been just kicked off – his eye takes in all the details. He feels like Faust in Marguerite's chamber. And Marguerite herself, lying careless, restful on her couch, her two arms flung lazily upwards and backwards, to make a resting-place for her head; the smooth elbows and shoulders gleaming warm, cream-white, through the colder blue-white of her dress; and the up-looking face, childish in its roundness, and blooming down – but oh! most womanish – in the shafts of quick fire that greet him from the laughing, sleepy eyes. Where did she learn that art of shooting? From the pigs and cabbages at Glan-yr-Afon? From old Mrs. Brandon? From Miss Bessie? From – "Stop the Leak?" Deponent sayeth not whence.

"*How* good of you!" she says, with emphasis, stretching out her hand to him, as he stands beside her sofa, looking rather fagged with his day's work. "I had just been calculating how many hours there would be before I could have a decent pretext for going to bed; one gets so tired of oneself."

"Not so tired as one does of one's family," answers St. John, rather ruefully.

"I have no family," she rejoins, simply.

"We Gerards have a particularly happy knack of rubbing each other the wrong way," he says, rather irritably. "I am sometimes tempted to think that we are the most unamiable family God ever put breath into."

"People always think that of their own family," answers Essie, laughing; "they know their own little crookednesses much better than any one else's."

"Has Miss Craven changed her mind, St. John?" asks Miss Blessington from the doorway.

St. John starts. "Not that I know of."

He stoops, and lifts her carefully, as a thing most precious; as he does so, a little foolish trembling passes over her, as a baby-breeze passes over some still pool's breast, hardly troubling the sky and the trees that lie far down in the blue mirror. Down the grand staircase he bears her, and Constance follows to see that there is no loitering by the way.

The morning-room at Felton (so called because the family always sit there in the evenings) is very lofty. You have to crane your neck up to see the stucco stalactites, faintly imitative of Staffa

and Iona, pendant from the ceiling. There are statuettes in plenty standing about in niches and on pedestals. Venuses and Minervas and Clyties, all with their hair very elaborately dressed, and not a stitch of clothes on. There is a great litter of papers and magazines on the round table: the *Justice of the Peace*, that is Sir Thomas's; the *Field*, that is St. John's; the *Cornhill*, that is everybody's. Sir Thomas and miladi are playing backgammon; miladi is compelled to do so every night as a penance for her sins – four rubbers, and if *he* wins, as she prays and endeavours that he may, five.

"Don't take the dice up in such a hurry, miladi," he says, snappishly; "how the deuce can I see what your throw is?"

"Seizes, Sir Thomas," responds miladi, meekly.

"Seizes! don't believe a word of it! much more like seize ace!"

Miss Blessington, dressed by Elise in Chambéry gauze, and by Nature in her usual panoply of beautiful stupidity, which she wears sleeping and waking, at home and abroad, living and dying, is at work at a little table, a nude Dian, with cold, chaste smile and crinkly hair, on a red velvet shrine just above her head.

"Do they play every evening?" asks Esther, from the recess where she has been deposited by St. John, whose eyes she encounters, considering her attentively over the top of the *Saturday*. Shams, Flunkeyism, Woman's Rights, Dr. Cumming, the Girl of the Period – they have all been passing through his eye into his brain, and, mixed with Esther Craven, make a fine jumble there.

St. John has been rather unlucky in his experiences of women hitherto. He has got rather into the habit of thinking that all good women must be stupid, and that all pleasant women must be bad. Esther is not stupid. Is she bad, then? Those glances of hers, they give a man odd sensations about the midriff; they inspire in him a greedy, covetous desire for more of them; but are they such as Una would have given her Red Cross Knight? Are they such as a man would like to see his wife bestow on his men friends? The wilder a man is or has been himself, the more scrupulously fastidious he is about the almost prudish nicety of the women that belong to him. He likes to see the sheep and the goats as plainly, widely separated as they are in the parable; it moves him to deep wrath when he sees a good woman faintly, poorly imitating a bad one. I do not think that good women believe this half generally enough; or, if they do, they do not act upon it.

"Do they play every evening?"

"Every evening, and Sir Thomas always accuses my mother of cheating."

"And you, what do you do?"

"Read, go to sleep, play cribbage or bézique with Conny."

"Does she live here always?"

"Always."

"You and she are inseparable, I suppose?"

"We get on very well in a quiet way; she is a very good girl, and comes and sits in my smoking-room by the hour with me."

"Wrong, but pleasant, as the monkey said when he kissed the cat," remarks Esther, flippantly. "You are very fond of her, I suppose?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.