Oliphant Margaret

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Helen had still another incident before her, however, ere she left St Mary's Road. It was late in the afternoon when she went back. To go back at all, to enter the dismantled place, and have that new dreary picture thrust into her mind instead of the old image of home, was painful enough, and Norah's cheeks were pale, and even to Helen the air and the movement conveyed a certain relief. They went into the quieter part of the park and walked for an hour or two saying little. Now and then poor Norah would be beguiled into a little monologue, to which her mother lent a half attention – but that was all. It was easier to be in motion than to keep still, and it was less miserable to look at the trees, the turf, the blue sky, than at the walls of a room which was full of associations of happiness. They did not get home until the carriages were beginning to roll into the park for the final round before dinner. And when they reached their own house, there stood a smart cabriolet before it, the horse held by a little tiger. Within the gate two gentlemen met them coming down the steps. One of them was a youth of eighteen or nineteen, who looked at Helen with a wondering awe-stricken glance. The other

was – Mr Golden. Norah had closed the garden door heedlessly after her. They were thus shut in, the four together confronting each other, unable to escape. Helen could not believe her eyes. Her heart began to beat, her pale cheeks to flush, a kind of mist of excitement came before her vision. Mr Golden, too, was not without a certain perturbation. He had not expected to see any one. He took off his hat, and cleared his voice, and made an effort to seem at his ease.

'I had just called,' he said, 'to express – to inquire – I did not know things had been so far advanced. I would not intrude – for the world.'

'Oh!' cried Helen, facing him, standing between him and the door, 'how dare you come here?'

'Dare, Mrs Drummond? I – I don't understand – '

'You do understand,' she said, 'better – far better than any one else does. And how dare you come to look at your handiwork? A man may be what you are, and yet have a little shame. Oh, you robber of the dead! if I had been anything but a woman, you would not have ventured to look me in the face.'

He did not venture to look her in the face then; he looked at his companion instead, opening his eyes, and nodding his head slightly, as if to imply that she was crazed. 'It is only a woman who can insult a man with impunity,' he said, 'but I hope I am able to make allowance for your excited feelings. It is natural for a lady to blame some one, I suppose. Rivers, let us go.'

'Not till I have spoken,' she cried in her excitement. 'This is but

a boy, and he ought to know whom he is with. Oh, how is it that I cannot strike you down and trample upon you? If I were to call that policeman he would not take you, I suppose. You liar and thief! don't dare to answer me. What, at my own door; at the door of the man whose good name you have stolen, whom you have slandered in his grave – oh my God! who has not even a grave because you drove him mad! – ' she cried, her eyes blazing, her cheeks glowing, all the silent beauty of her face growing splendid in her passion.

The young man gazed at her as at an apparition, his lips falling apart, his face paling. He had never heard such a voice, never seen such an outburst of outraged human feeling before.

'Mrs Drummond, this is madness. I – I can make allowance for – for excitement – '

'Be silent, sir,' cried Helen, in her fury. 'Who do you suppose cares what you think? And how dare you open your mouth before me? It is I who have a right to speak. And I wish there were a hundred to hear instead of one. This man had absconded till he heard my husband was dead. Then he came back and assumed innocence, and laid the blame on him who – could not reply. I don't know who you are; but you are young, and you should have a heart. There is not a liar in England – not a thing so vile as this man. He has plundered the dead of his good name. Now go, sir. I have said what I had to say.'

'Mrs Drummond, sometime you will have to answer – sometime you will repent of this,' cried Golden, losing his

presence of mind.

'I shall never repent it, not if you could kill me for it,' cried Helen. 'Go; you make the place you stand on vile. Take him away from my sight. I have said what I had to say.'

Mr Golden made an effort to recover himself. He struck his young companion on the shoulder with an attempt at jocularity.

'Come, Rivers,' he said, 'come along, we are dismissed. Don't you see we are no longer wanted here?'

But the lad did not answer the appeal. He stayed behind with his eyes still fixed upon Helen.

'Please, don't blame me,' he said. 'Tell me if I can do anything. I – did not know – '

'Thank you,' she said faintly. Her excitement had failed her all at once. She had put her arms round Norah, and was leaning upon her, haggard and pale as if she were dying. 'Thank you,' she repeated, with a motion of her hand towards the door.

The youth stole out with a sore heart. He stood for a moment irresolute on the pavement. The cab was his and not Golden's; but that personage had got into it, and was calling to him to follow.

'Thanks,' said young Rivers, with the impetuosity of his years. 'I shall not trouble you. Go on pray. I prefer to walk.'

And he turned upon his heel, and went rapidly away. He was gone before the other could realise it; and it was with feelings that it would be impossible to describe, with a consciousness that seemed both bodily and mental of having been beaten and wounded all over, with a singing in his ears, and a bewildered

sense of punishment, that Golden picked up the reins and drove away. It was only a few sharp words from a woman's tongue, a thing which a man must steel himself to bear when his operations are of a kind which involve the ruin of families. But Helen had given her blow far more skilfully, far more effectively, than she was aware of. She had clutched at her first chance of striking, without any calculation of results; and the youth she had appealed to in her excitement might have been any nameless lad for what she knew. It was Mr Golden's hard fate that he was not a nameless lad. He was Cyril Rivers, Lord Rivers's eldest son. The manager drove on a little way, slowly, and in great perturbation. And then he drew up the horse, and sprang to the ground.

'You had better go home,' he said to the little groom.

And then, still with that sense of bodily suffering as well as mental, he made his way through Kensington Gardens to the drive. He was a man of fashion, too, as well as a man of business – if he ever could hold up his head again.

Of course he did hold up his head, and in an hour after was ready to have made very good fun of the 'scolding' he had received, and the impression it had made on his young companion.

'I don't wonder,' he said; 'though her rage was all against me, I could not help admiring her. You never can tell what a woman is till you see her in a passion. She was splendid. Her friends ought to advise her to go on the stage.'

'Why should she go on the stage?' said some one standing by.

'Because she is left a beggar. She has not a penny, I suppose.'

'It is lucky that you have suffered so little when so many people are beggared, Golden,' said one of his fine friends.

This little winged shaft went right into the wound made by Helen's fiery lance, and so far as sensation went (which was nothing) Mr Golden had not a happy time that night.

As for Helen, she went in, prostrated by her own vehemence, and threw herself down on her bed, and hid her face from the light. After the first excitement was over shame seized upon her. She had descended from her proper place. She had flown into this outburst of passion and rage before her child. She had lowered herself in Norah's eyes, as she thought – though the child would not take her arm from her neck, nor her lips from her cheek, but clung to her sobbing, 'Oh, poor mamma! poor mamma!' with sympathetic passion. All this fiery storm through which she had passed had developed Norah. She had gained three or four years in a day. At one bound, from the child who was a piece of still life in the family, deeply beloved, but not needed, by the two who were each other's companions, she had become, all at once, her mother's only stay, her partizan, her supporter, her comrade-in-arms. It is impossible to over-estimate the difference this makes in a child's, and especially in a girl's, life. It made of her an independent, thinking, acting creature, all in a moment. For years everything had been said before her, under the supposition that Norah, absorbed in her book, heard nothing. But she had heard a thousand things. She knew all now

without any need of explanation, as well as so young a mind could understand. And she began to grope in her mind towards further knowledge, to put things together which even her mother had not thought of.

'Do you know who the boy was, mamma?' she whispered, after she had sat a long time on the bed, silently consoling the sufferer. 'Oh, I am so glad you spoke, he will never forget it. Now one more knows it besides you and me.'

'There are others who know, dear,' said Helen, who had still poor Stephen's magazine in her hand.

'Yes,' said Norah, 'Dr Maurice and the people who wrote to the papers; but, mamma, nobody like you and me. Whatever they say we know. I am little, and I suppose I shall always be little; but that does not matter. I shall soon be grown up, and able to help. And, mamma, this shall be my work as well as yours – I shall never stop till it is done – never, all my life!'

'Oh, my darling!' cried Helen, clasping her child in her arms. It was not that she received the vow as the child meant it, or even desired that in Norah's opening life there should be nothing of more importance than this early self-devotion; but the sympathy was sweet to her beyond describing, the more that the little creature, who had played and chattered by her side, had suddenly become her friend. In the midst of her sorrow and pain, and even of the prostration and sensitive visionary shame with which this encounter had filled her, she had one sudden throb of pleasure. She was not alone any more.

It was Helen who fell asleep that evening worn out with emotion, and weariness, and suffering. And then Norah rose up softly, and made a pilgrimage by herself all over the deserted house. She went through the conservatory, where, of all the beautiful things poor Robert had loved to see, there remained nothing but the moonlight which filled its emptiness; and into the studio, where she sat down on the floor beside the easel, and clasped her arms round it and cried. She was beginning to weary of the atmosphere of grief, beginning to long for life and sunshine, but yet she clung to the easel and indulged in one childish passion of sobs and tears. 'Oh, papa!' That was all Norah said to herself. But the recollection of all he had been, and of all that had been done to him, surged over the child, and filled her with that sense of the intolerable which afflicts the weak. She could not bear it, yet she had to bear it; just as her mother, just as poor Haldane had to bear – struggling vainly against a power greater than theirs, acquiescing when life and strength ran low, sometimes for a moment divinely consenting, accepting the will of God. But it is seldom that even the experienced soul gets so far as that.

Next morning Mrs Drummond and her daughter went to Dura. Their arrival at the station was very different from that of Mr Burton. No eager porters rushed at them as they stepped out of the railway carriage; the station-master moved to the other side; they landed, and were left on the platform by themselves to count their boxes while the train swept on. It was the first time it had

ever happened so to Helen. Her husband had always either been with her, or waiting for her, wherever she travelled. And she was weary with yesterday's agitation, and with all that had so lately happened. Norah came forward and took everything in hand. It was she who spoke to the porter, and set the procession in order.

'Cab? Bless you, miss! there ain't but one in the place, and it's gone on a 'xcursion,' he said, 'but I'll get a wheelbarrow and take 'em down. It ain't more than ten minutes' walk.'

'I know the way,' said Helen; and she took her child's hand and walked on into the familiar place. She had not been there since her marriage; but oh! how well she knew it! She put her crape veil over her face to hide her from curious eyes; and it threw a black mist at the same time over the cheerful village. It seemed to Helen as if she was walking in a dream. She knew everything, every stone on the road, the names above the shops, the forms of the trees. There was one great elm, lopsided, which had lost a huge branch (how well she remembered!) by a thunderstorm when she was a child; was it all a dream? Everything looked like a dream except Norah; but Norah was real. As for the child, there was in her heart a lively thrill of pleasure at sight of all this novelty which she could not quite subdue. She had no veil of crape over her eyes, and the red houses all lichened over, the glimpses of fields and trees, the rural aspect of the road, the vision of the common in the distance, all filled her with a suppressed delight. It was wrong, Norah knew; she called herself back now and then and sighed, and asked herself how she could be so devoid of

feeling; but yet the reaction would come. She began to talk in spite of herself.

'I think some one might have come to meet us at the station,' she said. 'Ned might have come. He is a boy, and can go anywhere. I am sure, mamma, *we* would have gone to make them feel a little at home. Where is the Gatehouse? What is that place over there? Why there are shops – a draper's and a confectioner's – and a library! I am very glad there is a library. Mamma, I think I shall like it; is that the common far away yonder? Do you remember any of the people? I should like to know some girls if you will let me. There is little Clara, of course, who is my cousin. Do you think we shall live here always, mamma?'

Norah did not ask nor, indeed, look for any answer to this string of questions. She made a momentary pause of courtesy to leave room for a reply, should any come; but Helen's thoughts were full of the past, and as she made no answer Norah resumed the strain.

'It looks very cheerful here, mamma; though it is a village, it does not look dull. I like the red tiles on the cottages and all this red-brick; perhaps it is a little hot-looking now, but in winter it will be so comfortable. Shall we be able to get our things here without going to town? That seems quite a good shop. I wonder what Mrs Burton and Clara do? But then they are so rich, and we are – poor. Shall I be able to have any lessons, mamma? Can I go on with my music? I wonder if Clara has a governess. She will think it very strange that you should teach me. But I am very

glad; I like you better than twenty governesses. Mamma, will it make any difference between Clara and me, them being so rich and us so poor?'

'Oh, Norah, I cannot tell you. Don't ask so many questions,' said Helen.

Norah was wounded; she did not give up her mother's hand, but she loosed her hold of it to show her feelings. She had been very sympathetic, very quiet, and respectful of the grief which in its intensity was beyond her; and now she seemed to herself to have a right to a little sympathy in return. She could understand but dimly what was in her mother's mind; she did not know the associations of which Dura was full; and it was hard to be thus stopped short in that spring of renovating life. As she resigned herself to silence, a feeling of injury came over her; and here, just before her eyes, suddenly appeared a picture of life so different from hers. She saw a band of children gathered about the gate of a house, which stood at a short distance from the road, surrounded by shrubberies and distinguished by one great splendid cedar which stretched its glorious branches over the high garden wall behind, and made a point in the landscape. A lady was driving a little pony-carriage through the open gate, while the children stood watching and waving their hands to her. 'Good-bye, mamma,' 'Don't be long,' 'And mind you bring back Clara with you,' they were calling to her. With a wistful sense of envy Norah gazed and wondered who they were, and if she should ever know them. 'Why are people so different?' she asked

herself. She had nobody in the world but her mother, lost behind that crape veil, lost in her own thoughts, who told her not to ask questions, while those other little girls had a smiling mamma in a pretty pony-carriage, who was taking one to drive with her, and was to bring Clara back to see them. Which Clara? Was it the Clara who belonged to Norah, her own cousin, to whom she had a better right than any one? Norah's heart sank as she realized this. No doubt Clara must have many friends; she could not stand in need of Norah as Norah did of her. She would be a stranger, an interloper, a new little girl whom nobody knew, whom nobody perhaps would care to know. Tears came to the child's eyes. She had been a woman last night rising to the height of the tragedy in which her little life was involved; but now Nature had regained its sway, and she was only twelve years old. It was while her mind was occupied with these thoughts that her mother interrupted them, suddenly pressing her hand.

'Norah, this is our house, where we are to live,' said Helen. Her voice faltered, she held the child's hand as if for support. And now they were at their own door.

Norah gazed at it with a certain dismay. She, too, like Mr Haldane, had her theory about a house in the country. It must be like Southlees, she thought, though without the river; or perhaps, as they had grown poor, it might be something a little better than the lodge at Southlees, a little cottage; but she had never dreamed of anything like this tall red-brick house which twinkled at her with all its windows. She was awed and chilled, and a

little frightened, as she crossed the road. Susan was standing at the open door parleying with the porter about their boxes, which she declined to admit till 'the family' came. The one fear which possessed Susan's life, the fear of being 'put upon,' was strong in her at this moment. But she set the balance straight for Norah, by making a sudden curtsey, which tempted the child so sorely to laughter, that her eyes began to shine and her heart to rise once more. She ran up the white steps eagerly before her mother. 'Oh, mamma, I am first. I can say welcome to you,' she said.

But the sight of the drawing-room, into which Susan ushered them, solemnly closing the door after them, struck a moment's chill to Norah's heart. It seemed so strange to be thus shut in, as if it was not their own house but a prison. It was afternoon, and the sunshine had all gone from that side of the road, and the graceful, old-fashioned room looked dim and ghostly to eyes which had just come out of the light. The windows all draped with brown and grey, the old-fashioned slim grand piano in the corner ('I shall have my music,' said Norah), the black japanned screen with its funny little pictures, the high carved mantelpiece with that square mirror which nobody could see into, puzzled the child, at once attracting and repelling her. There was another round, convex mirror like a shield, on the side wall, but even that did not enable Norah to see herself, it only made a little twinkling picture of her in a vast perspective of drawing-room. Helen had seated herself as soon as the door was shut, and there was she, too, in the picture like a lady come to call. What a strange, dim,

ghostly place it was! The bumping of the boxes as they went upstairs was a comfort to Norah. It was a sound of life breaking the terrible silence. She asked herself what would happen when it was over. Should they fall under some charm and sleep there, like the enchanted princess, for a hundred years? And to think that all this was within reach of that lady in the pony-carriage, and of her children who waved their hands to her! – so near, yet in a different world.

'Mayn't we go and see the house, mamma?' Norah whispered, standing close to her mother's side. 'Shouldn't you like to see where we are to sleep? Shouldn't you like to get out of this room? It frightens me so; it feels like a prison. Oh, mamma! perhaps it would not look so strange – and so – dull – and so – funny,' cried Norah, feeling disposed to cry, 'if you would take your bonnet off.'

Just at this moment there was a sound in the road which stirred the whole village into life, and roused Norah. She ran to the window to see what it was. It was an event which happened every evening, which all the children in Dura ran to see, though they were so familiar with it. It was Mr Burton driving his high-stepping bays home from the station. He had come by the express made on purpose for him and such as him, which arrived half-an-hour later than the train by which the Drummonds had come. Norah climbed up on her knees on a chair to see over the little old-fashioned blinds. There was some one seated by Mr Burton in the dog-cart, some one who looked at the Gatehouse, as Mr

Burton did, while they dashed past. At the sight of him Norah started, and from a little fantastical child became a woman all at once again. It was the young man who the day before had been with Mr Golden at St Mary's Road, he who had heard her father's vindication, and had believed it, and 'was on our side,' Norah felt, against all the world.

CHAPTER II

There is always a little excitement in a village over a new inhabitant, and the Drummonds were not common strangers to be speculated vaguely about. There were many people in Dura who remembered Helen in her beauty and youth. And next morning, when it became known that she had arrived at the Gatehouse, the whole place burst into gossip on the subject. Even the new people, the City people who lived in the white villas near the station, were moved by it. For poor Drummond's story was known everywhere, and his miserable fate, and the discussion in the newspapers. Even here, in the quietness of the country, people took sides, and public opinion was by no means so unanimous as poor Helen had supposed. The papers had accepted her husband's guilt as certain, but opinion was very much divided on the subject among people who had means of knowing. 'Burton ought to have warned that poor fellow,' one of the City gentlemen said to another at the station, going up by the early train. 'I would not trust a simpleton in the hands of a smart man like Golden.'

'Do you think he was a simpleton?' said the other.

'In business, yes – ' said the first speaker.

'How could he be otherwise? But, by Jove, sir, what a splendid painter! I never saw anything I liked better than that picture of his in the last Exhibition. Poor fellow! And to put him in Golden's

hands, a man well known to be up to every dodge. I wonder what Burton could be thinking of. I wonder he can look that poor lady in the face.'

'I should just like to find out how much Burton himself knew about it,' said the other, nodding his head.

'And so should I,' the first speaker said significantly, as they took their place in the train.

Thus it will be seen that the world, which Helen thought of so bitterly as all against her, was by no means so clear on the subject. At the breakfast-table in the Rectory the conversation took a still more friendly tone.

'I hear that poor Mrs Drummond has come to the Gatehouse,' said Mrs Dalton. 'I almost think I saw her yesterday – a tall woman, in a crape veil, with a little girl about Mary's size. I shall make a point of calling the first time I go out. Oh, George, what a sad, sad story! I hope she will let me be of some use to her.'

'I don't see that you can be of much use,' said her husband. 'She has the Burtons, of course, to fall back upon. How strange to think of Helen Burton coming back here! I could not have supposed it possible. So proud a girl! And how that man at Dura could ask her! I suppose he feels the sweetness of revenge in it. Everybody knew she refused him.'

'Oh George, hush! the children,' cried Mrs Dalton under her breath.

'Psha! everybody knows. What a difference it would have made to her, though! It is strange she should have chosen to come

and live in sight of his splendour.'

'Oh, do you think she cares about his splendour? Poor soul!' said kind Mrs Dalton, with tears in her eyes. 'She must have very different thoughts in her mind. Most likely she was glad of any shelter where she could hide her head, after all the newspapers and the publicity. Oh, George! it must be doubly hard upon her if she was proud.'

'Probably it was her pride that made her husband such a fool,' said the rector. 'You women have a great deal to answer for. If she drove him into that thirst for money-making – a thing he could know nothing about – You are all fond of money – '

'For money's worth, George,' said Mrs Dalton humbly. She could not deny the accusation. For her own part she would have done anything for money – she with her eight children, and Charlie's education so dreadfully on her mind.

'Oh, I don't say you are miserly,' said the rector, who was a literary man of superior mind, and hated to be bothered by family cares, which incapacitated him for thought; 'but when a woman wants more than her husband can give her, what is the unhappy man to do? *Ne sutor ultra crepidam.* Which means, Mary – '

'I have heard it before,' said his wife meekly. 'I think I know what it means.'

'Then you see what comes of it,' said Mr Dalton. 'I don't believe a word that is in the papers. I seldom do. He went and got himself involved and bamboozled. How was he to know what he was doing? I don't blame poor Drummond, but I am not so sure

it was not her fault.'

At the great house the talk was different; there was no discussion of the rights or wrongs of the question. Mr Burton, indeed, preferred not to speak of Mr Drummond; and young Mr Rivers, who had come down with him on the previous night, had got no opening to report the scene of which he had been a spectator. They were early people, and though they had entertained a large party the night before, their breakfast was earlier than that at the Rectory. They were all out on the lawn, visitors, children, dogs, and all, while Mr Dalton drank his coffee. Ned was busily employed training the Skye to jump over a stick, an exercise which was not much to Shaggy's taste; while the big pointer (who was only in his babyhood, though he was so big, and was imbecile, as puppies are) looked on, and made foolish springs and vaults about his clever brother. Malta, in his blue ribbon, kept close by Mrs Burton's side, and looked on at the performance with the contemptuous toleration of a superior being; and Clara, also decked with blue ribbons, hung by her mother too.

'You had better come with me and see Helen, said the head of the house. 'I told you she arrived last night.'

'Now!' said Mrs Burton, with some surprise. She had her gardening gloves on and a basket in her hand for flowers. These she would have laid down at once, had it been only a walk to the station which was in question; but this was a different affair.

'Yes; why not now?' said her husband with that roll of wealth

and comfort in his voice. 'We are relations, we need not stand upon ceremony. You mean to call on her some time, I suppose.'

'Oh, certainly, I shall call; but not at this hour, Mr Burton. I have only seen her once. Familiarity would be impertinence in me.'

'Pshaw, nonsense! one of your fantastic notions,' he said. 'I have seen her more than once, and I can't afford to stand on ceremony. Come along. I am going there now.'

'Then I think you should go immediately,' said Mrs Burton, looking at her watch, 'or you will be too late for the train. Clara, papa will not want us this morning; we can go for some flowers. You will be back by the usual train? I will pick you up at the station, if you like, for I have some calls to make to-day.'

'As you please,' said her husband; 'but I can't understand why you should cross me, Clara, about my cousin. You don't mean to say,' he added with a laugh, 'that you have any – feeling on the subject? That you are – ever so little – piqued about poor Helen? I shouldn't like to use the other word.'

Clara Burton looked at her husband very calmly. She was not offended. It was human nature; men were known to possess this kind of vanity, though it was so strange. 'I am not at all piqued,' she said; 'but I like to be civil. I don't suppose Mrs Drummond and I will be moved to rush into each other's arms all at once, and I don't wish to look as if I paid her less respect because she is poor. If you are going there, you ought to go immediately. You will be late for the train.'

'Confound your composure!' Mr Burton said to himself, as he went down the avenue.

It would have pleased him had his wife been a little discomposed. But, after a while, he took comfort, saying to himself that Clara was a consummate little actress, but that she could not take *him* in. Of course, she was nettled by the presence of his old love, and by his haste to visit her; but she was proud, and would not show it. He felt a double triumph in the sense that these two women were both affected, and endured, for his sweet sake, a certain amount of pain. He set out his chest more than ever, and held up his head. Now was his moment of triumph over the woman who had once rejected him. Had he been able to induce her to come to Dura while she was still prosperous, the triumph would have been sweeter, for it would have been unmingled with any tinge of regretful or remorseful feeling; but as it was it was sweet. For the first time she would see him in his full importance, in all his state and splendour, she would see him from the depths of her own humiliation, and the force of a contrast greater than he had desired, more complete even than he had dreamed, must already have flashed upon her. Yes, now she would see what she had lost – what a mistake she had made. He meant to be very kind; he would have given her anything she chose to ask for, if she but showed the least sign of penitence, of clearer perception, of being aware of what she had lost. There was nothing which her cousin would not have done for Helen; but he could not resign his own delightful consciousness

of triumph. Under this genial influence, he was overflowing with good-nature and kindness.

'What! come out for a little sunshine, old John,' he said to the old man at the lodge, who was seated basking in the warmth on the bench at his door. 'Good for the rheumatics, ain't it, a day like this? I envy you, old fellow, with nothing to do but sit by your door in the sun and sniff your flowers; you are better off than I am, I can tell you.'

'Ay, ay! master, it's fine for me; but you wouldn't think much on't yourself, if you had it,' said old John.

Mr Burton went on laughing and waving his hand, amused with the old man's impudence.

'If I had it myself,' he said, with a smile, 'I! – ' The thought tickled him. It was hard to believe that he himself, a man in the prime of life, growing richer every day, was made of the same clay as old John; and yet of course it was so, he admitted good humouredly. His mind was full of his own benevolence and kind-heartedness as he pursued his way to visit his cousin. What quantities of people were dependent upon his will and pleasure – upon his succour and help! his servants, so many that he could scarcely count them; the clerks in his office; the governess who taught Clara, and who in her turn supported her mother and sisters; and then there was old Stephenson in the village, in his decay, who had once been in Mr Burton's office; and his old nurse; and the poor Joneses and Robinsons, whose boys he had taken in as errand boys. He ran over this list with

such a pleasant sense of his goodness, that his face shone in the morning sunshine. And at the head of all, first of his pensioners, chief of his dependents – Helen! Mr Burton laughed half aloud, and furtively rubbed his hands. Yes, yes, by this time there could be no doubt she must have found out her mistake.

Helen had got up that morning with the determination to put grief away from the foreground of her life, and resume such occupations as remained to her. Norah's books had been got out, and her music, and some work – small matters which made a difference in the ghostly drawing-room already, and brought it back to life. Helen was standing by the table arranging some flowers when Mr Burton came in. Norah had gathered them almost before the dew was off them, and stood by her mother watching her as she grouped them together.

'I wish I could arrange flowers as you do, mamma,' Norah was saying admiringly. 'How nice it must be to be able to do everything one tries! They will not come right when *I* do it. You are like the fairy that touched the feathers with her wand, and they all came together as they ought. I wonder how you do it. And you never break anything or spoil anything; but if I only *look* at a vase it breaks.'

Norah was saying this with a rueful look when Mr Burton's smart summons came to the door; and the next minute he had come in, bringing so much air with him into the room, and motion, and sense of importance. Helen put the flowers aside hastily and gave him her hand.

'So you are making use of the garden,' he said, taking note of everything with an eye of proprietorship; 'quite right, quite right. I hope you will make yourselves quite at home. It is a funny old house, but it is a good style of a place. You need not be ashamed to receive any one here. And I have no doubt you will find everybody very civil, Helen. I have let the people in Dura know you are my cousin. That, though I say it that shouldn't, is a very good passport here.'

'I hope you will not take any trouble about us,' said Helen hastily. 'All I want is to be quiet. I do not care for civilities.'

'But you prefer them to incivilities, I hope,' said Mr Burton. 'My wife thinks I am wrong to come in this unceremonious way to call. I wanted her to come with me, but she would not. You ladies have your own ways of acting. But I felt that you would be mortified if you saw me pass the door.'

'Oh no. I should not have been mortified.'

'I will take care you sha'n't,' he said, the roll in his voice sounding more full of protection and benevolence than ever. 'I have not much time now. But, my dear Helen, remember that I am always at your service – always. I have mentioned you to all the nicest people. And we hope very soon to see you at the House. I should not have brought you here, I assure you, without intending to be a friend to you in every way. You may rely upon me.'

'You are very kind,' was all Helen could say.

'I want to be kind. You cannot please me better than by

asking me for what you want. Tell me always when your mother wants anything, Norah. There now, I won't say any more; you understand me, Helen. I have a few things in my power, and one of them is to make you comfortable. When you have time to see about you you will perceive that things have gone very well with me: not that I intend to boast; but Providence, no doubt, has been very kind. My wife will call this afternoon, and should you like a drive or anything, I am sure Clara – '

'Please don't trouble. I would rather be quiet. You forget,' said Helen, with a momentary sharpness in her voice, 'that Providence, which has been so kind to you, has been hard upon us.'

'My dear Helen! you are too good and pious, I am sure, not to know that we ought not to repine.'

'I don't think I repine, and I am sure you mean to be kind; but oh! if you would take pity on me, and let me alone – '

It was all she could do to keep from tears. But she would not weep before him. Her jealousy of him and distrust were all coming back. Instinctively she felt the triumph in his voice.

'Poor Helen!' said Mr Burton, 'poor girl! I will not trouble you longer just now. You shall not be bothered. Good-bye; trust to me, and I will take care of you, my poor dear!'

It was ludicrous, it was pitiable; she scorned herself for the impression it made upon her; but how could she help it? She felt that she hated Reginald Burton, as he stood before her in all his wealth and comfort, patronising and soothing her. When

he was gone, she rushed up to her room, that Norah might not see her weakness, to weep a few hot, burning tears, and to overcome the wild, unreasonable anger that swelled in her heart. It was his moment of triumph. Perhaps Helen felt it all the more because, deep down in her heart, she had a consciousness that she too had once triumphed over him, and rejoiced to feel that she could humble him. This was a hard punishment for such an old girlish offence; but still it felt like a punishment, and added a sting to everything he did and said. And whether it was at that moment or at a later period, she herself could not have told, but a sudden gleam came across her of some words which she had once read somewhere – 'Burton and Golden have done it.' Whence came these words? had she dreamt them? had she read them somewhere? They came before her as if they had been written upon the wall. Burton and Golden! Was it true? What could it mean?

Mrs Burton called in the afternoon. She had Clara with her, and what was still more remarkable, young Mr Rivers, who was staying in the house, but who up to this time had made no mention of the scene he had witnessed. Perhaps it was for lack of an opportunity, perhaps because he did not know how far it would be safe to mention Helen – whom he heard spoken of as a relative, yet not with the feeling which moved his own mind when he thought of her. Cyril Rivers was but a big boy, though he began to think himself a man, and Helen had moved him to that sudden fantastic violence of admiration with which an older

woman often momentarily inspires a boy. He was eager to go with Mrs Burton to call. He would walk down with her, he said, and continue his walk after the carriage had picked her up; and in his heart he said to himself that he must see that woman again. He was full of awe and enthusiasm at the thought of her. She was to him like the heroine of a tragedy, of a story more striking, more affecting than any tragedy he had ever heard of; for this was real, and she was a true woman expressing her natural sentiments, forgiving nothing. It seemed to bring the youth, who was all thrilling with natural romance, within that charmed inner circle of emotion and passion which is, though it is seldom visible, the centre and heart of life.

But Helen bore a very different aspect when she waited to receive Mrs Burton's call from that which she bore at the door of St Mary's Road, confronting Golden. Her flush of colour and glow of energy and vehemence were gone. She was seated, pale and silent, by the table near the window, with her dead white cap encircling her face, and some needlework in her hand. It was not the same Mrs Drummond, was young Rivers' first disappointed thought. And when she invited the party to sit down, and began to talk about the weather and the country round, he was so bewildered that he longed to steal away. The two ladies sat opposite to each other, and said the sort of things which all ladies say when they call or are called upon. Helen's tone was low, and her voice fell; but these and her black dress were the only things that made it apparent that anything had happened to her. It was

only when this little artificial conversation flagged and a pause occurred that the real state of affairs became even slightly visible. The momentary silence fell heavy upon people who had so much on their minds; and while they all sat motionless, the little mirror on the wall made a picture of them in little, which looked like a caricature, full of humourous perception and significance. Mrs Burton had been hesitating as to what she should say. Helen was a study to her, of which she had as yet made nothing; and perhaps it was as much from curiosity as any other feeling that she at last introduced a subject more interesting than the weather or the landscape. It was after a second pause still more serious than the first.

'It must be very strange to you coming back to Dura after all that has happened. It must be – hard upon you,' she said.

'Yes; it is hard,' Helen could not trust herself to many words.

'If there is anything in which I can be of use,' Mrs Burton began, 'will you let me know? If there is anything that can make it less painful for you. I should be very glad to be of any use.'

Mrs Drummond made no reply; she gave a little bow, and went on with the needlework she held in her hands, but not as if she cared for that. She was not like what he had thought, but yet young Rivers got up with a certain tremulous awe and approached her. She had not recognised him. She turned her eyes upon him wondering what he could have to do with her. Her heart was steeled to encounter all those words of routine which she knew would have to be said – but who was this boy?

'I think I will go now,' he said hastily to Mrs Burton; and then he lowered his voice. 'May I say just one word? If I can ever do anything to set things right, will you let me know? I shall never forget what you said – on Tuesday.'

'On Tuesday?' Helen repeated, in her great surprise looking at him. She ran over Tuesday's proceedings in her mind; at first in vain, and then a little flush came over her face. 'Ah,' she said, 'it was you who came with – Mr Golden. I remember now.'

'But I shall never be with him again,' said the youth with energy, which brought the responsive blood to his cheeks. 'Of that you may be sure. I am Cyril Rivers. I am not much good now, but I might be – afterwards. Will you remember me? Will you let me serve you if ever I can?'

'Thanks,' said Helen, putting out her hand, with a sudden softness in her voice.

The lad was young, romantic, chivalrous. She was to him like some majestic dethroned queen in her sorrow and wronged estate. He stooped down, and touched her white fingers with his lips, and then, without looking round, turned, and went away. His impulsive generous words, his fanciful pledge of eagerness to help her, went to Helen's heart. She had not expected this, and it surprised and touched her. She was not conscious for a moment of her visitor's steady, investigating glance.

'What a romantic boy!' said Mrs Burton, with a smile.

'Yes,' said Helen, and she called herself back with an effort. 'But romance sometimes does one good. It is a surprise at least.'

'At that age it does not matter much. I did not know you knew the Riverses,' said Mrs Burton. 'This is the eldest son, to be sure; but since the late misfortune they are quite poor. They have not much in their power.'

She said this with a charitable motive. It seemed to her as if Helen must mean something by it. Everybody appeared to mean something in the eyes of this philosopher. And she was a little moved by the misfortunes of the woman beside her. She thought it was kind to warn her not to waste her efforts. Helen, on her side, did not know in the least what Mrs Burton meant; did not suppose she meant anything indeed, and sat patient, accepting this speech with the others as an effort to make conversation, not ungrateful to Mrs Burton, but wondering when she would go away.

Meanwhile Cyril Rivers hastened out full of emotion. He took the wrong turn in going out, and before he knew, found himself in the garden, where the two girls were 'making acquaintance,' as Mrs Burton had bidden them do. Clara was big and fair, with her father's full form, and a beautiful complexion, the greatest possible contrast to little Norah, with her light figure, and faint rose tints. But Norah at this moment was flushed and angry, looking as her mother had done that memorable evening at St Mary's Road.

'Oh, do come here, Mr Rivers,' said Clara, 'Norah is so cross. I only said what papa says so often – that it would be wretched to live in the country without a carriage or a pony or anything.

Don't you think so too?'

Norah flushed more deeply than ever. 'I am not cross. We did not come to live in the country for pleasure, and what does it matter to us about carriages and ponies? We are poor.'

'And so am I,' said the boy, with that instinctive adoption of 'our side' which Norah had attributed to him. He thought how pretty she was as she lifted her brown eyes. What a pretty child! and he was approaching twenty, a man, and his heart yearned over the helpless and sorrowful. 'I shall have to sell my horses and go afoot; but I don't think I shall be wretched. Everybody cannot be rich like Mr Burton, you know.'

'But you are always Lord Rivers's son,' said Clara. 'You can have what you like everywhere. I think it is very cross of Norah not to care.'

And Mr Burton's daughter, foiled in her first attempt to secure her own cousin's envy and admiration, looked as if she would like to cry. Young Rivers laughed as he went away at her discomfiture. As he turned to find the right way of exit, he looked back upon them with an unconscious comparison. He did not know or think what was Norah Drummond's descent. He took her unconsciously as the type of a higher class impoverished but not fallen, beside that small representative of the *nouveaux riches*. And all his sympathies were on the side of the former. He pulled a little white rosebud from a tree as he passed, and put it in his coat with a meaning which was partly real and partly fantastic. They were poor, they were injured, and wronged, and in trouble.

He put their colours, as it were, in his helmet. Foolish boy, full of romance and nonsense! one day or other in their cause he felt he might couch his lance.

CHAPTER III

The next day after Mrs Burton's carriage had been seen at Helen's door a great many people called on Mrs Drummond – all 'the nicest people' – some who had known her or known about her in the old days, some who came because she was Mr Burton's cousin, and some who took that means of showing their sympathy. The door was besieged; and Susan, half-flattered by the importance of her position, half-alarmed lest this might be a commencement of the system of putting upon which she dreaded, brought in the cards, gingerly holding them in a hand which she had wrapped up in her apron, and giving a little sketch of the persons represented. There was the doctor's wife, and the major's lady, and Mrs Ashurst from the Row, and 'them London folks,' all of whom were sensible enough to make their advances solely in this way. Mrs Dalton was the only person admitted. Helen was too well brought up, she had too much sense of the proprieties of her position, to shut her door against the clergyman's wife – who brought her husband's card, and explained that he would have come too but for the fear of intruding too early.

'But I hope you will let us see you,' the kind woman added. 'We are such near neighbours. My eldest little girl is the same age as yours. I think we should understand each other. And I have such a busy life – to be able to run across and talk things over

now and then would be such a comfort to me.'

'You mean it would be a comfort to me,' said Helen, 'the sight of a kind face.'

'And Norah will come and see my Mary. They can take their walks together, and amuse each other. It is such a pleasure to me,' said Mrs Dalton, 'to look across at these windows, and think that you are here.' She had said so much with the amiable power of make-believe, not exactly deception, which an affectionate temper and her position as clergy-woman made natural to her – when she caught Helen's eye, and nature suddenly had the mastery. 'Oh, Mrs Drummond, how I babble! I am so sorry, so sorry!' she said, and her eyes ran over with tears, though Helen did not weep. It is not easy to repel such a visitor. They grew friends at that first interview, while Norah stood by and made her observations too.

'May I go and see Mary?' she asked, when Mrs Dalton had gone. 'I think I shall like her better than Clara Burton. How funny it must be to have so many brothers and sisters, mamma; and I who never had either a brother or a sister! I should like to have had just one – a little sister with blue eyes. But, then, if you had been very fond of her, fonder than of me, I should not have liked that. Perhaps, on the whole, a brother would have been the best. A boy is a change – they are useless, and yet they are nice – for a long walk, for instance. I wish I had had a big brother, older than me – quite old – almost grown up. How funny it would have been! I wonder what we should have called him. If he had been

as big as – Mr Rivers, for instance – that would have been nice for you too.'

Helen smiled, and let the child run on. It was the music to which her life was set. Norah's monologue accompanied everything. Sometimes, indeed, an answer was necessary, which interrupted the strain, but generally a word, a smile, or a monosyllable was enough. She went on weaving her big brother out of her imagination; it was more delightful than speculating about Mary Dalton.

'I am sure it would have been nice for you too,' she said. 'He would have given you his arm when you were tired, and looked after the luggage, and locked all the doors at nights. The only thing is, it would have been a great expense. When people are poor, I suppose they can't afford to have boys. They want so many things. But yet he would have been nice all the same. I hope he would have had a pretty name; not so short as Ned, and not so common as Charlie. Charlie is the eldest of the Daltons – such a big boy. Oh, I wonder what our boy's name would have been? Do you like Oswald, mamma, or Eustace? Eustace sounds like a priest or something dreadfully wise. I don't like solemn boys. So long as he was big and strong, and not too clever. But oh, dear, dear, what is the use of talking? We never can have a big boy, I suppose? I must be content with other girls' brothers. I shall never have one of my very own.'

'The less you have to do with other girls' brothers the better, Norah,' said Helen, beguiled into a smile.

'I do not care for them, I am sure,' said Norah, with dignity; 'though I don't dislike gentlemen, mamma – quite old gentlemen, like Dr Maurice and Mr Haldane, are very nice. And I should like to have had – Mr Rivers, for instance – for a big brother. I rather think, too, I like Ned Burton better than Clara. It is more natural to hear a boy talk of ponies and things. She never thinks of anything else – dogs, and horses, and carriages, and the fine things she has. It is not polite to talk of such things to people who have not got them. I told her I did not care for ponies, nor grapes, nor hot-house flowers; and that I would rather live in London than at the House. And, oh, so many – stories, mamma! Is it wrong to tell a little fib when you don't mean any harm? Just a little one, when people boast and make themselves disagreeable – and when you don't mean any harm?'

'It is always wrong to tell fibs; and I don't know the difference between big ones and little ones,' said Helen.

'Oh, mamma, but I do! A big story is – for instance. If I were to say Susan had stolen your watch, that would be a wicked lie. But when I say I don't care for grapes, and would not like to have a pony, it isn't quite true, but then it makes Clara be quiet, and does nobody any harm. I am sure there is a great difference. It would be very nice to have a pony, you know. Only think, mamma, to go cantering away across the common and on the turf! But I would not give in to say that I should like to be Clara, or that she was better off than me!'

Norah's casuistry silenced her mother. She shook her head,

but she did not say anything. Something of the same feeling was, indeed, in her own mind. She, too, would have liked to be contemptuous of the luxuries which her neighbours dangled before her eyes. And Norah resumed her monologue. The mother only partially heard it, waking up now and then to give the necessary response, but carrying on all the time her own separate thread of cogitation, which would not shape itself into words. The old parlour, with its brown-grey curtains and all its spindle-legged furniture, enclosed and seemed to watch the human creatures who disturbed the silence. A room which has been long unoccupied, and which is too large for its new inhabitants, has often this spectator look. The pictures looked down from the walls and watched; up in the little round mirror two people in a miniature interior, who were in reality reflections of the two below, but looked quite different, glanced down upon them, and watched also. The sky looked in through the five windows, and the lime-trees in front kept tapping with their branches against the panes to show that they were looking on. All the rest were clandestine, but the lime-trees were honest in their scrutiny. And in the midst of it the mother and daughter led their subdued lives. Norah's voice ran through all like a brook or a bird. Helen was mostly silent, saying little. They had a roof to shelter them, enough of daily bread, the kindness of strangers outside, the rude but sympathetic kindness of Susan within. This was more, a great deal more, than often falls to the lot of human wrecks after a great shipwreck. Norah after a little while accepted it as the natural

rule of life, and forgot every other; and Helen was silent, though she did not forget. The silence of the house, however, by times oppressed the child. She lay awake in the great bed-room upstairs, afraid to go to sleep till her mother should come; and even in the daylight there were moments when Norah was afraid of the ghostly drawing-room, and could not but feel that weird aged women, the Miss Pagets, whom her mother had known, or some of the old Harcourts, were watching her from behind the doors, or from the shade of the curtains. There was a deep china closet beside the fireplace with one particular knot in the wood-work which fascinated Norah, and made her feel that some mysterious eye was gazing at her from within. But all these fancies dispersed the moment Mrs Drummond appeared. There was protection in the soft rustle of her gown, the distant sound of her voice. And so the routine of life – a new routine, but soon firmly established, supporting them as upon props of use and wont, began again. There were the lessons in the morning, and Norah's music, and a long walk in the afternoon; and they went to bed early, glad to be done with life and another day. Or at least Helen was glad to be done with it – not Norah, to whom it was the opening of the story, and to whom once more the sunshine began to look as sweet as ever, and each new morning was a delight.

A few weeks after their arrival the Haldanes followed them. Miss Jane had written beforehand begging for information about the house and the journey; and it was only then that Helen learned, with a mortification she could scarcely overcome, that

the Gatehouse was to be their refuge too. This fact so changed the character of her cousin's kindness to her, that her pride was with difficulty subdued to silence; but she had sufficient self-control to say nothing – pride itself coming to her aid.

'Perhaps you would be so good as to send me a line with a few particulars,' Miss Jane wrote. 'I should like to know for myself and mother if there is a good minister of our denomination, and if you would mention the price of meat, and how much you are giving for the best butter, I should be very much obliged. I should like to know if there is a good room on the ground-floor that would do for Stephen, and if we could have a Bath-chair to bring him down from the station, for I am very distrustful of cabs. Also about a charwoman, which is very important. I am active myself and always look after the washing, so that one strong handy woman to come from six in the morning till two would do all I should require.

Mrs Drummond made an effort and answered all these questions, and even walked to the station to see them arrive. It was a mournful sight enough. She stood and looked on with her heart aching, and saw the man whom she had known so different lifted out of the carriage and put into the invalid chair. She saw the look of dumb anguish and humiliation in his eyes which showed how he felt this public exposure of his weakness. He was very patient; he smiled and thanked the people who moved him: yet Helen, with her perceptions quickened by her own suffering, felt the intolerable pain in the other's soul, and

went away hurriedly, not to afflict him further by her presence. What had he done? How had this man sinned more than others? All the idlers that lounged about and watched him, were they better or dearer to God than he was? Mrs Drummond was half a Pagan, though she did not know it. She hurried away with a miserable sense that it was past bearing. But Stephen set his lips tight and bore it. He bore the looks of the village people who came out to their doors to look at him as he passed. As for his mother and sister, they scarcely remarked his silence. They were so happy that everything had gone off so well, that he had borne it so easily.

'I don't think he looks a bit the worse,' said Miss Jane.

They were the tenderest, the most patient of nurses, but they had accepted his illness long ago as a matter of course. From the moment he was placed in the chair, and so off their mind, as it were, the luggage came into the ascendant and took his place. They had a wonderful amount of parcels, mostly done up in brown paper. Mrs Haldane herself carried her pet canary in its cage, tied up in a blue-and-white handkerchief. She was more anxious about this for the moment than about her son. The procession was one which caught everybody's eye. First two wheelbarrows with the luggage, the first of which was occupied by Stephen's bed and chair, the other piled up with boxes, among the rest two portmanteaus of his own, on which he could still read, on old labels which he had preserved with pride, the names of Naples, Florence, and Rome. Had he been actually there, he

who was now little more than a piece of luggage himself? Miss Jane divided her attentions between her brother and the second wheelbarrow, on which the brown-paper parcels were tumbling and nodding, ready to fall. His mother walked on the other side, holding fast by the parcel in the blue-and-white handkerchief. Mrs Burton, who was passing in her carriage, stopped to look after them. She, too, had known Stephen in better days. She did not ask passionate questions as Helen was doing; but she felt the shock in her way, and only comforted herself by thinking that the feelings get blunted in such unfortunate cases, and that no doubt other people felt more for him than he felt for himself.

But notwithstanding the callousness which use had brought, there was no indifference to Stephen's comfort in the minds of his attendants. Everything was arranged for him that evening as if he had been surrounded by a crowd of servants. When Helen went to see him he was seated by the window with flowers upon his table and all his papers arranged upon it. The flowers were not very choice; they were of Miss Jane's selection, and marigolds and plumy variegated grass looked beautiful in her eyes. Yet nothing but love could have put everything in its place so soon, and metamorphosed all at once the dining-room of the Gatehouse into Stephen's room, where everything bore a reference to him and was arranged for his special comfort. Perhaps they did not always feel for him, or even see what room there was for feeling. But this they could do – and in it they never failed.

'Does not he look comfortable?' Miss Jane said with triumph.

'You would think to see him he had never budged from his chair. And he got through the journey very well. If you but knew how frightened I was when we set out!'

Stephen looked at Mrs Drummond with a smile. There were some lines about his mouth and a quiver in his upper lip which spoke to her more clearly than to his sister. Helen had not been in the way of going out of herself to sympathise with others; and it seemed to her as if she had suddenly got a new pair of eyes, an additional sense. While they were all talking she saw what the journey had really cost him in his smile.

'It is strange to see the world again after so long,' he said, 'and to realise that once one walked about it quite carelessly like other people, without thinking what a thing it was.'

'But, Stephen, I am sure you don't repine,' said his mother, 'you know whose will it is, and you would not have it different? That is such a comfort whatever we may have to suffer.'

'You would not have it different!'

Helen looked at him almost with tears in her eyes.

'That is a great deal to say, mother,' he answered with a suppressed sigh; while she still went on asking herself passionately what had he done? what had he done?

'I think the charwoman will suit very well,' said Miss Jane. 'She seems clean, and that is the great thing. I am very well satisfied with everything I have seen as yet. The kitchen garden is beautiful. I suppose as there is no division, we are to have it between us – that and the fruit? I have been thinking a few fowls

would be very nice if you have no objection. They cost little to keep, and to have your own eggs is a great luxury. And meat seems reasonable. I am very well satisfied with all I have seen.'

'If we only knew about the chapel,' said Mrs Haldane. 'So much of your comfort depends on your minister. If he is a nice man he will be company for Stephen. That is what I am most afraid of – that he will be dull in the country. There was always some one coming in about the magazine or some society or other when we were in town. I am afraid, Stephen, you will feel quite lost here.'

'Not for want of the visitors, mother,' he said; 'especially if Mrs Drummond will spare me Norah. She is better than any minister – not meaning any slight to my brethren,' he added, in a half-apologetic, half-laughing tone. He could laugh still, which was a thing Helen found it very difficult to understand.

'Norah is very nice, and I like dearly to see her,' said his mother; 'but, Stephen, I don't like to hear you talk like that. Mrs Drummond is not to know that it is all your nonsense. You were always such a one for a joke.'

'My jokes have not been very brilliant lately,' he said, with a smile. Mrs Haldane rose at that moment to help her daughter with something she was moving to the other end of the room, and Stephen, seizing the opportunity, turned quickly round upon Helen, who was sitting by him. 'You are very sorry for me,' he said, with a mixture of gratitude and impatience. 'Don't! it is better not!'

'How can I help it?' cried Helen. 'And why is it better not?'

'Because I cannot bear it,' he said, almost sternly.

This passed in a moment, while the unconscious women at the other end had altered the position of a table. Never man had more tender nurses than these two; but they had ceased to be sorry for him in look or word. They had accepted their own fate and his; his helplessness was to them like the daylight or the dark, a thing inevitable, the course of nature; and the matter-of-fact way in which they had learned to treat it made his life supportable. But it was difficult for a stranger to realise such a fact.

'I never told you that we were disappointed about letting the house,' said Miss Jane. 'A great many people came, but no one who was satisfactory. It is a great loss. I have left a person in it to try for a few months longer. People are very unprincipled, coming out of mere curiosity, and turning over your blankets and counterpanes without a thought.'

Here the conversation came to a pause, and Helen rose. She was standing saying her farewells and making such offers of assistance as she could, when the daily event with which she had grown familiar took place.

'There is some one coming,' said Stephen, from the window. 'It ought to be the queen by the commotion it makes: but it is only Burton.'

And Mrs Haldane and Miss Jane both rushed forward to see. Helen withdrew out of sight with a secret bitterness which she could not have put into words. Mr Burton was driving home

from the station in all his usual importance. His horses were groomed to perfection, the mountings of his harness sparkled in the sun. He half drew up as he passed, making his bays prance and express their disapprobation, while he took off his hat to the new arrivals. It was such a salutation as a jocund monarch might have tossed at a humble worshipper, mock ceremony and conscious condescension. The women looking out never thought of that. They ran from one window to another to watch him entering the avenue, they talked to each other of his fine horses, the neat groom beside him, and how polite he was. Stephen had been looking on, too, with keen interest. A smile was on his face, but the lines above his eyes were contracted, and the eyes themselves gleamed with a sudden fire which startled Helen.

'I wonder what he thinks of it all,' he said to her under his breath, 'if he thinks at all. I wonder if he is comfortable when he reflects who are living at his gates?'

The words were said so low that she had to stoop to hear; and with a wondering thrill of half-comprehension she looked at him. What did he mean? From whence came that tone which was almost fierce in its self-restraint? It seemed to kindle a smouldering fire in her, of the nature of which she was not quite aware. 'Burton and Golden' suddenly flashed across her thoughts again. Where was it she had seen the names linked together? What did it mean? and what did Stephen mean? She felt as if she had almost found out something, which quickened her pulse and made her heart beat – almost. But the last point of enlightenment

was yet to come.

'Now he has turned in at the gate,' said Miss Jane. 'Well, for my part, I am glad to have seen him; and to think that a man could do all that by his own exertions! If he had been a nobleman I should not have thought half so much of it. I suppose, now, that could not be seen anywhere but in England? You may smile, Stephen, and think me very vulgar-minded; but I do think it is a very wonderful sight.'

And thus the second household settled down, and became a part of the landscape which the family at Dura surveyed with complaisant proprietorship, and through which Mr Burton drove every afternoon, calling admiring spectators to all the windows. The rich man had never enjoyed the commotion he made so much as he did now when he could see at the Gatehouse those faces looking out. There was scarcely an evening but Miss Jane or her mother would stand up to see him, gazing with unconscious worship at this representative of wealth and strength, and that practical power which sways the world; while Norah would clamber up on a chair behind the blinds at the other end, and look out with her big brown eyes full of serious observation. He thought Norah wondered and worshipped too, not being able to understand the language of her eyes. And sometimes he would see, or think he saw, her mother behind her. When he did so he went home in high good-humour, and was more jocular than usual; for nothing gave him such a sense of his own greatness, his prosperity, and superiority to common flesh and blood, as the

homage, or supposed homage, paid to him by those lookers-on at the windows of the Gatehouse.

Mr Burton's satisfaction came to a climax when his father-in-law came to pay his next visit, which happened not very long after the arrival of the Haldanes. Mr Baldwin, as we have said, was a Dissenter, and something like a lay bishop in his denomination. He was very rich, and lived very plainly at Clapham with his two sisters, Mrs Everett and Miss Louisa. They were all very good people in their way. There was not a man in England who subscribed to more societies or presided at a greater number of meetings. He spent half his income in this way; he 'promoted' charities as his son-in-law promoted joint-stock companies; and prided himself on the simplicity of his living and his tastes, notwithstanding his wealth. When he and his sisters came to pay a visit at Dura they walked from the station, leaving their servants and their boxes to follow in a fly. 'We have the use of our limbs, I am thankful to Providence,' one of the sisters would say; 'why should we have a carriage for a little bit of road like that?' They walked in a little procession, the gentleman in advance, like a triumphant cock in front of his harem, the two ladies a little behind. Mr Baldwin wore his hat on the back of his head, and a white tie, like one of his favourite ministers; he had a round, chubby face, without any whiskers, and a complexion almost as clear as little Clara's. The two ladies were like him, except that Mrs Everett, who was a widow, was large and stout, and Miss Louisa pale and thin. They walked along with a natural feeling of

benevolent supremacy, making their remarks on everybody and everything with distinct voices. When they got to the Gatehouse they paused and inspected it, though the windows were all open.

'I think Reginald was wrong to give such a house as this to those poor people,' said the married sister in front of the door. 'It is a handsome house. He might have found some little cottage for them, and let this to a family.'

'But, Martha, he gave what he had, and it is that that is always accepted,' said Miss Louisa.

The brother drowned her plaintive little voice with a more decided reply —

'I am very glad Haldane has such good quarters. As for the lady, I suppose she was not to blame; but when a man flies in the face of Providence I would not reward him by providing for his wife and family. I agree with Martha. It is a waste of the gifts of God to give this house to poor people who cannot enjoy it; but still Burton is right on the whole. If you cannot do better with your property, why should not you use it to make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness? I approve of his charity on the whole.'

Inside the recipients of the charity sat and heard all through the open windows. But what then? Mr Baldwin and his sisters were not responsible for that. They went on to the avenue making the same candid and audible remarks all along the road. It was not necessary that they should exercise self-restraint. They were in the dominions of their relation. They were absolute over all

foolish sentiment and false pride. They said it loud out, frankly, whatever they might have to say. The arrival of these visitors always made a certain commotion at Dura. It moved Mr Burton a great deal more than it did his wife. Indeed, if there was anything which vexed him in her exemplary behaviour, it was that she would not make temporarily the changes which he thought were 'only respectful' to suit the tastes of her father and aunts. 'You know your father likes only plain roast and boiled,' he would say to her, half-indignantly, adding, with a laugh, 'and minister sauce.' This last was one of his favourite jokes, though it did not strike his wife as particularly brilliant. But the minister sauce was the only thing which Mrs Burton provided for her father. She held fast by her *menu*, though he disapproved of it. She dressed herself tranquilly for dinner, though her aunts held up their hands, and asked her solemnly if she knew what all this extravagance must come to? In these matters Clara would not give way; but she asked the minister of the chapel in the village to dinner, and it was in the presence of this functionary that Mr Baldwin filled up the measure of his son-in-law's content.

'I see you have been very generous to poor Haldane,' he said. 'I am very much obliged to you, Burton. He is my own man; I should have been compelled to do something for him if you had not taken him up; and my hands are always so full! You will find I do not forget it. But it was a great waste to put him into such a handsome house.'

'I am delighted to have pleased you,' said Mr Burton. 'It was

an empty house; and I have put my cousin, Mrs Drummond, in the other end, whom I was obliged to take care of. It was the cheapest way of doing it. I am most happy to think I have relieved you, even of so little as that.'

'Oh yes, you have relieved me,' said Mr Baldwin. 'I sha'n't forget it. It will be an encouragement to Mr Truston and to many of the brethren to see that a sick friend is never abandoned. I don't mean to say that you want any inducement – but, still, when you can see that even in the case of failing strength – '

'Oh yes. I am sure it is most encouraging,' the poor minister faltered.

Encouraging to think of Stephen Haldane, who was thus provided for! The two rich men went on with their talk over their wine, while some confused speculation as to the ways of Providence went through the head of their companion. He was young, and he felt ill at ease, and he did not like to interfere much. Had it been Mr Dalton he would have been less easily silenced. Thus Mr Burton found his benevolence in one particular at least attended with the most perfect success.

CHAPTER IV

And everything settled down, and Nature resumed her common round. This is what Nature does in all circumstances. There never was so bad a storm but next morning the thrifty mother took heart and set to work again as best she could to make amends for it. It is only when the storm affects human hearts and lives that this cheerful, pathetic effort to get the better of it becomes terrible; for the mending in such cases is so often but superficial, the cure impossible. Other trees grow up to fill the gap made by the one blown down; but not other loves or other hopes. Yet gradually the tempest calms, the wreck is swept away, and some things that are new are always better than some things that were old, even though the old can never be replaced while life goes on.

Of all the dwellers in the Gatehouse, it was poor Haldane who felt this the most. The reality of this life in the country was very different from the anticipation. The fresh air which his mother had hoped to have for Stephen – the cottage garden which they had all dreamt of (even he himself by moments), where he could be wheeled in his chair to sit under the apple-tree and smell the flowers – had vanished from their list of possibilities. All the fresh air he could have was from the open window by which his chair was placed. But not even the garden and the apple-tree would have done so much for him as the varieties of the

country road. Instead of the garden walls at Victoria Villas, the strip of dusty grass, the chance sight of a neighbour's child at play, or (more likely) of a neighbour's clothes hung out to dry, he had a genuine rural highroad, with all its sights. He saw the carts passing with rural produce, full of big baskets of vegetables for the London market; he saw the great waggons of odorous hay, with a man asleep on the top, half-buried in the warm and fragrant mass, or cracking his whip on the path, and shouting drowsy, inarticulate calls to the horses, who took their own way, and did not mind him; he saw the carriages gleam past with the great people, whom by degrees he got to know; and then the Rectory children were always about, and Mrs Dalton in her pony-chaise, and the people coming and going from the village. There were two of the village folk in particular who brought a positive pleasure into his life – not a pair of lovers, or any pretty group, but only Clippings, the tailor, and Brown, the shoemaker, who strolled down the road in the evening to smoke their pipes and talk politics as far as the Rectory gate. Clippings, who lived 'up town,' was always decorous in his shabby coat; but Brown, whose shop was 'at the corner,' came in his shirt-sleeves, with his apron turned up obliquely to one side. They would stop just opposite his window when they got hot in their discussion. Sometimes it was the parish they talked of, sometimes the affairs of the state, and it was in Stephen's mind sometimes to invite them to cross the road, and to have his say in the matter. They were not men of education or intelligence perhaps; but they *were* men, living

the natural human life from which he had been torn, and it did him good to watch them. After a while they began to look over at him and take off their hats, half with village obsequiousness to a possible customer, half with natural feeling for a soul in prison; and he gave them a nod in return.

But this vulgar fancy of his was not quite approved of within. 'If you are so friendly with these men, Stephen, you will have them coming over, and poisoning the whole house with tobacco,' Mrs Haldane said, with an expressive sniff. 'I think I smell it even now.' But his mother was not aware that the scent of the tobacco was like an air of paradise to poor Stephen, who had loved it well enough when he was his own master, though it had become impossible now.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.