Oliphant Margaret

At His Gates. Volume 3

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The drawing-room within was very different from the wild conflict of light and darkness outside. There was music going on at one end, some people were reading, some talking. There were flirtations in hand, and grave discussions. In short, the evening was being spent as people are apt to spend the evening when there is nothing particular going on. There had been a good deal of private yawning and inspection of watches throughout the evening, and some of the party had already gone to bed, or rather to their rooms, where they could indulge in the happiness of fancying themselves somewhere else – an amusement which is very popular and general in a country house.

But seated in an easy-chair by the fire was a tall man, carefully dressed, with diamond studs in his shirt, and a toilette which, though subdued in tone as a gentleman's evening dress must be, was yet too elaborate for the occasion. The fact that this new guest was a stranger to him, and that his father was seated by him in close conversation, made it at once apparent to Ned that it must be Golden. Clara was close to them listening with a look of eager interest to all they said. These three made a little detached group

by one side of the fire. At the other corner sat Mrs Burton, with her little feet on a footstool, as near as possible to the fender. She had just said good-night to the dignified members of the party, the people who had to be considered; the others who remained were mere young people, about whose proceedings she did not concern herself. She was taking no part in the talk at the other side of the fire. She sat and warmed her little toes and pondered; her vivid little mind all astir and working, but uninfluenced by, and somewhat contemptuous of, what was going on around; and her chilly little person basking in the ruddy warmth of the fire.

Ned came up and stood by her when he came in. No one took any notice of him, the few persons who remained in the room having other affairs in hand. Ned was fond of his mother, though she had never shown any fondness for him. She had done all for him which mere intellect could do. She had been very just to the boy all his life; when he got into scrapes, as boys will, she had not backed him up emotionally, it is true, but she had taken all the circumstances into account, and had not judged him harshly. She had been tolerant when his father was harsh. She had never lost her temper. He had always felt that he could appeal to her sense of justice – to her calm and impartial reason. This is not much like the confidence with which a boy generally throws himself upon his mother's sympathy, yet it was a great deal in Ned's case. And accordingly he loved his mother. Mrs Burton, too, loved him perhaps more than she loved any one. She was doing her best to break his heart; but that is not at all uncommon even when

parents and children adore each other. And then Ned was not aware that his mother had any share intentionally or otherwise in the cruel treatment he had received.

'Who is that?' he asked under his breath.

'A Mr Golden, a friend of your father's,' said Mrs Burton, lifting her eyes and turning them calmly upon the person she named. There was no feeling in them of one kind or another, and yet Ned felt that she at least did not admire Mr Golden, and it was a comfort to him. He went forward to the fire, and placed himself, as an Englishman loves to do, in front of it. He stood there for ten minutes or so, paying no particular attention to the conversation on his right hand. His father, however, looked more animated than he had done for a long time, and Clara was bending forward with a faint rose-tint from the fire tinging the whiteness of her forehead and throat, and deeper roses glowing on her cheeks. Her blue eyes were following Mr Golden's movements as he spoke, her hair was shining like crisp gold in the light. She was such a study of colour, of splendid flesh and blood, as Rubens would have worshipped; and Mr Golden had discrimination enough to perceive it. He stopped to address himself to Clara. He turned to her, and gave her looks of admiration, for which her brother, bitterly enough biassed against him on his own account, could have 'throttled the fellow!' Ned grew more and more wrathful as he looked on. And in the mean time the late young ladies came fluttering to say good-night to their hostess; the young men went off to the smoking-

room, where Ned knew he ought to accompany them, but did not, being too fully occupied; and thus the family were left alone. Notwithstanding, however, his wrath and his curiosity, it was only the sound of one name which suddenly made the conversation by his side quite articulate and intelligible to Ned.

'I hear the Drummond has a pretty daughter; that is a new weapon for her, Burton. I wonder you venture to have such a family established at your gates.'

'The daughter is not particularly pretty; not so pretty by a long way as Helen was,' said Mr Burton. 'I don't see what harm she can do with poor little Norah. We are not afraid of her, Clara, are we?' and he looked admiringly at his daughter, and laughed.

As for Clara she grew crimson. She was not a girl of much feeling, but still there was something of the woman in her.

'I don't understand how we could be supposed to be afraid of Norah Drummond,' she said.

'But I assure you I do,' said Mr Golden. 'Pardon me, but I don't suppose you have seen the Drummond herself, the Drummond mamma – in a fury.'

'Father,' said Ned, 'is Mr Golden aware that the lady he is speaking of is our relation – and friend? Do you mean to suffer her to be so spoken of in your house?'

'Hold your tongue, Ned.'

'Ned! to be sure it is Ned. Why, my boy, you have grown out of all recollection,' said Golden, jumping up with a great show of cordiality, and holding out his hand.

Ned bowed, and drew a step nearer his mother. He had his hands in his pockets; there were times, no doubt, when his manners left a great deal to be desired.

'Ah, I see! there are spells,' said Mr Golden, and he took his seat again with a hearty laugh – a laugh so hearty that there seemed just a possibility of strain and forced merriment in it. 'My dear Miss Burton,' he said, in an undertone, which however Ned could hear, 'didn't I tell you there was danger? Here's an example for you, sooner than I thought.'

'Mother,' said Ned, 'can I get your candle? I am sure it is time for you to go up-stairs.'

'Yes, and for Clara too. Run away, child, and take care of your roses; Golden and I have some business to talk over; run away. As for you, Ned, to-morrow morning I shall have something to say to you.'

'Very well, sir,' said Ned solemnly.

He lighted his mother's candle, and he gave her his arm, having made up his mind not to let her go. The sounds of laughter which came faintly from the smoking-room did not tempt him; if truth must be told, they tempted Clara much more, who stood for a moment with her candle in her hand, and said to herself, 'What fun they must be having!' and fretted against the feminine fetters which bound her. Such a thought would not have come into Norah's head, nor into Katie Dalton's, nor even into that of Lady Florizel, though it was a foolish little head enough; but Clara, who was all flesh and blood, and had been badly brought up, was

the one of those four girls who probably would have impressed most deeply a journalist's fancy as illustrating the social problem of English young womanhood.

Ned led his mother not to her own room, but to his. He made her come in, and placed a chair for her before the fire. It is probable that he had sense enough to feel that had he asked her consent to his marriage with Norah Drummond he would have found difficulties in his way; but short of this, he had full confidence in the justice which indeed he had never had any reason to doubt.

'Do you like this man Golden, mother?' he asked. 'Tell me, what is his connection with us?'

'His connection, I suppose, is a business connection with your father,' said Mrs Burton. 'For the rest, I neither like him nor hate him. He is well enough, I suppose, in his way.'

'Mrs Drummond does not think so,' said Ned.

'Ah, Mrs Drummond! She is a woman of what are called strong feelings. I don't suppose she ever stopped to inquire into the motives of anybody who went against her in her life. She jumps at a conclusion, and reaches it always from her own point of view. According to her view of affairs, I don't wonder, with her disposition, that she should hate him.'

'Why, mother?'

'Well,' said Mrs Burton, I am not in the habit of using words which would come naturally to a mind like Mrs Drummond's. But from her point of view, I should say, she must believe that

he ruined her husband – drove him to suicide, and then did all he could to ruin his reputation. These are things, I allow, which people do not readily forget.'

'And, mother, do you believe all this? Is it true?'

'I state it in a different way,' she said. 'Mr Golden, I suppose, thought the business could be redeemed, to start with. When he drew poor Mr Drummond into active work in the concern, he did it in a moment when there was nobody else to refer to. And then you must remember, Ned, that Mr Drummond had enjoyed a good deal of profit, and had as much right as any of the others to suffer in the loss. He was ignorant of business, to be sure, and did not know what he was doing; but then an ignorant man has no right to go into business. Mr Golden is very sharp, and he had to preserve himself if he could. It was quite natural he should take advantage of the other's foolishness. And then I don't suppose he ever imagined that poor Mr Drummond would commit suicide. He himself would never have done it under similar circumstances – nor your father.'

'Had my father anything to do with this?' said Ned hoarsely.

'That is not the question,' said Mrs Burton. 'But neither the one nor the other would have done anything so foolish. How were they to suppose Mr Drummond would? This sort of thing requires a power of realising other people's ways of thinking which few possess, Ned. After he was dead, and it could not be helped, I don't find anything surprising,' she went on, putting her feet nearer the fire, 'in the fact that Mr Golden turned it to his

advantage. It could not hurt Drummond any more, you know. Of course it hurt his wife's feelings; but I am not clear how far Golden was called upon to consider the feelings of Drummond's wife. It was a question of life and death for himself. Of course I do not believe for a moment, and I don't suppose anybody whose opinion is worth considering could believe, that a poor, innocent, silly man destroyed those books – '

'Mother, I don't know what you are speaking of; but it seems to me as if you were describing the most devilish piece of villany – '

'People do employ such words, no doubt,' said Mrs Burton calmly; 'I don't myself. But if that is how it appears to your mind, you are right enough to express yourself so. Of course that is Mrs Drummond's opinion. I have something to say to you about the Drummonds, Ned.'

'One moment, mother,' he cried, with a tremor and heat of excitement which puzzled her perhaps more than anything she had yet met with in the matter. For why should Ned be disturbed by a thing which did not concern him, and which had happened so long ago? 'You have mentioned my father. You have said *they*, speaking of this man's infamous – Was my father concerned?'

Mrs Burton turned, and looked her son in the face. The smallest little ghost of agitation – a shadow so faint that it would not have showed upon any other face – glided over hers.

'That is just the point on which I can give you least information,' she said; and then, after a pause, 'Ned,' she

continued, 'you are grown up; you are capable of judging for yourself. I tell you I don't know. I am not often deterred by any cause from following out a question I am interested in; but I have preferred not to follow up this. I put away all the papers, thinking I might some day care to go into it more deeply. You can have them if you like. To tell the truth,' she added, sinking her voice, betrayed into a degree of confidence which perhaps she had never given to human creature before, 'I think it is a bad sign that this man has come back.'

'A sign of what?'

Mrs Burton's agitation increased. Though it was the very slightest of agitations, it startled Ned, so unlike was it to his mother.

'Ned,' she said, with a shiver that might be partly cold, 'nobody that I ever heard of is so strong as their own principles. I do not know, if it came to me to have to bear it, whether I could bear ruin and disgrace.'

'Ruin and disgrace!' cried Ned.

'I don't know if I have fortitude enough. Perhaps I could by myself; I should feel that it was brought about by natural means, and that blame was useless and foolish. But if we had to bear the comments in the newspapers, the talk of everybody, the reflections on our past, I don't know whether I have fortitude to bear it; I feel as if I could not.

'Mother, has this been in your mind, while I have been thinking you took so little interest? My poor little mamma!'

The wicked little woman! And yet all that she had been saying was perfectly true.

'Ned,' she said, with great seriousness, 'this dread, which I can never get quite out of my mind, is the reason why I have been so very earnest about the Merewethers. I have never, you know, supported your father's wish that you should go into the business. On the contrary, I have always endeavoured to secure you your own career. I have wished that you at least should be safe – '

'Safe!' he cried. 'Mother, if there is a possibility of disgrace, how can I, how can any of us, escape from it – and more especially I? And if there is a chance of ruin, why I should be as great a villain as that man is, should I consent to carry it into another house.'

'It is quite a different case,' she cried with some eagerness, seeing she had overshot her mark. 'I hope there will be neither; and you have not the least reason to suppose that either is possible. Look round you; go with your father to the office, inspect his concerns as much as you please; you will see nothing but evidences of prosperity. So far as you know, or can know, your father is one of the most prosperous men in England. Nobody would have a word to say against you, and I shall be rich enough to provide for you. If there is any downfall at all, which I do not expect, nobody would ever imagine for a moment that you knew anything of it; and your career and your comfort would be safe.'

'O mother! mother!' Poor Ned turned away from her and hid

his face in his hands. This was worse to him than all the rest.

'You ought to think it over most carefully,' she said; 'all this is perfectly clear before you. I may have taken fright, though it is not very like me. I may be fanciful enough' (Mrs Burton smiled at herself, and even Ned in his misery half smiled) 'to consider this man as a sort of raven, boding misfortune. But you know nothing about it; there is abundant time for you to save yourself and your credit; and this is the wish which, above everything in the world, I have most at heart, that, if there is going to be any disaster, – I don't expect it, I don't believe in it; but mercantile men are always subject to misfortune, – you might at least be safe. I will not say anything more about it to-night; but think it over, Ned.'

She rose as she spoke and took up her candle, and her son bent over her and touched her little cold face with his hot lips. 'I will send you the papers,' she said as she went away. Strange little shadow of a mother! She glided along the passage, not without a certain maternal sentiment – a feeling that on the whole she was doing what was best for her boy. *She* could provide for him, whatever happened; and if evil came he might so manage as to thrust himself out from under the shadow of the evil. She was a curious problem, this woman; she could enter into Mr Golden's state of mind, but not into her son's. She could fathom those struggles of self-preservation which might lead a man into fraud and robbery; but she could not enter into those which tore a generous, sensitive, honourable soul in pieces. She was an analyst, with the lowest view of human nature, and not a

sympathetic being entering into the hearts of others by means of her own.

No smoking-room, no jovial midnight party, received Ned that night. He sat up till the slow November morning dawned reading those papers; and then he threw himself on his bed, and hid his face from the cold increasing light. A bitterness which he could not put into words, which even to himself it was impossible to explain, filled his heart. There was nothing, or at least very little, about his father in these papers. There was no accusation made against Mr Burton, nothing that any one could take hold of – only here and there a word of ominous suggestion which chilled the blood in his veins. But Golden's character was not spared by any one; it came out in all its blackness, more distinct even than it could have done at the moment these events occurred. Men had read the story at the time with their minds full of foregone conclusions on the subject – of prejudices and the heat of personal feeling. But to Ned it was history; and as he read Golden's character stood out before him as in a picture. And this man, this deliberate cold-blooded scoundrel, was sleeping calmly under his father's roof – a guest whom his father delighted to honour. Ned groaned, and covered his eyes with his hands to shut out the hazy November morning, as if it were a spy that might find out something from his haggard countenance. Sleep was far from his eyes; his brain buzzed with the unaccustomed crowd of thoughts that whirled and rustled through it. A hundred projects, all very practicable at the first glance and impossible afterwards,

flashed before him. The only thing that he never thought of was that which his mother had called the wish of her heart – that he should escape and secure his own career out of the possible fate that might be impending. This, of all projects, was the only one which, first and last, was impossible to Ned.

The first step which he took in the matter was one strangely different. He had to go through all the ordinary remarks of the breakfast-table upon his miserable looks; but he was too much agitated to be very well aware what people were saying to him. He watched anxiously till he saw his father prepare to leave the house. Fortunately Mr Golden was not with him. Mr Golden was a man of luxury, who breakfasted late, and had not so much as made his appearance at the hour when Mr Burton, who, above everything, was a man of business, started for the station. Ned went out with him, avoiding his mother's eye. He took from his father's hand a little courier's bag full of papers which he was taking with him.

'I will carry it for you, sir,' he said.

Mr Burton was intensely surprised; the days were long gone by when Ned would strut by his side, putting out his chest in imitation of his father.

'Wants some money, I suppose!' Mr Burton – no longer the boy's proud progenitor, but a wary parent, awake to all the possible snares and traps which are set for such – said to himself.

They had reached the village before Ned had began to speak of anything more important than the weather or the game. Then

he broke into his subject quite abruptly.

'Father,' he said, 'within the last few days I have been thinking of a great many things. I have been thinking that for your only son to set his face against business was hard lines on you. Will you tell me frankly whether a fellow like me, trained so differently, would be of real use to you? Could I help you to keep things straight, save you from being cheated? – do anything for you? I have changed my ideas on a great many subjects. This is what I want to know.'

'Upon my word, a wonderful conversion,' said his father with a laugh; 'there must be some famous reason for a change so sudden. Help *me* to keep things straight! – Keep ME from being cheated! You simpleton! you have at least a capital opinion of yourself.'

'But it was with that idea, I suppose, that you thought of putting me into the business,' said Ned, overcoming with an effort his first boyish impulse of offence.

'Perhaps in the long-run,' said Mr Burton jocularly; 'but not all at once, my fine fellow. Your Greek and your Latin won't do you much service in the city, my boy. Though you have taken your degree – and a deuced deal of money that costs, a great deal more than it's worth – you would have to begin by singing very small in the office. You would be junior clerk to begin with at fifty pounds a year. How should you find that suit your plans, my fine gentleman Ned?'

'Was that all you intended me for?' asked Ned sternly. A rigid air and tone was the best mask he could put upon his bitter

mortification.

'Certainly, at first,' said Mr Burton; 'but I have changed my mind altogether on the subject,' he added sharply. 'I see that I was altogether deceived in you. You never would be of any use in business. If you were in Golden's hands, perhaps – but you have let yourself be influenced by some wretched fool or other.'

'Has Mr Golden anything to say to your business?' asked Ned.

The question took his father by surprise.

'Confound your impudence!' he cried, after a keen glance at his son and sputter of confused words, which sounded very much like swearing. 'What has given you so sudden an interest in my business, I should like to know? Do you think I am too old to manage it for myself?'

'It was the sight of this man, father,' said Ned, with boyish simplicity and earnestness, 'and the knowledge who he was. Couldn't I serve you instead of him? I pledge you my word to give up all that you consider nonsense, to settle steadily to business. I am not a fool, though I am ignorant. And then if I am ignorant, no man could serve you so truly as your son would, whose interests are the same as yours. Try me! I could serve you better than he.'

'You preposterous idiot!' cried Mr Burton, who had made two or three changes from anger to ridicule while this speech was being delivered. 'You serve me better than Golden! – Golden, by Jove! And may I ask if I were to accept this splendid offer of yours, what would you expect as an equivalent? My consent to some wretched marriage or other, I suppose, allowance doubled,

home provided, and my blessing, eh? I suppose that is what you are aiming at. Out with it – how much was the equivalent to be?'

'Nothing,' said Ned. He had grown crimson; his eyes were cast down, not to betray the feeling in them – a choking sensation was in his throat. Then he added slowly – 'not even the fifty pounds a year you offered me just now – nothing but permission to stand by you, to help to – keep danger off.'

Mr Burton took the bag roughly out of his hand. 'Go home,' he said, 'you young ass; and be thankful I don't chastise you for your impudence. Danger! – I should think you were the danger if you were not such a fool. Go home! I don't desire your further company. A pretty help and defender you would be!'

And Ned found himself suddenly standing alone outside the station, his fingers tingling with the roughness with which the bag had been snatched from him. He stood still for half a minute, undecided, and then he turned round and strolled listlessly back along the street. He was very unhappy. His father was still his father, though he had begun to distrust, and had long given over expecting any sympathy from him. And the generous resolution which it had cost him so much pain to make, had not only come to nothing, but had been trampled under foot with derision. His heart was very sore. It was a hazy morning, with a frosty, red sun trying hard to break through the mist; and everything moved swiftly to resist the cold, and every step rang sharp upon the road; except poor Ned's, who had not the heart to do anything but saunter listlessly and slowly, with his hands in his pockets and

his eyes fixed wistfully upon nothing. Everything in a moment had become blank to him. He wondered why the people took the trouble to take off their hats to him – to one who was the heir of misery and perhaps of disgrace and ruin, as his mother had said. Ruin and disgrace! What awful words they are when you come to think of it – dreadful to look forward to, and still more dreadful to bear if any man could ever realise their actual arrival to himself!

Norah was standing at the open door of the Gatehouse. He thought for a moment that he would pass without taking any notice; and then it occurred to him in a strange visionary way that it might be the last time he should see her. He stopped, and she said a cold little 'Good morning' to him, without even offering her hand. Then a sudden yearning seized poor Ned.

'Norah,' he said, in that listless way, 'I wish you would say something kind to me to-day. I don't know why I should be so anxious for it, but I think it would do me good. If you knew how unhappy I am – '

'Oh Ned, for heaven's sake don't talk such nonsense,' cried impatient Norah. '*You* unhappy, that never knew what it was to have anything go wrong! It makes me quite ill to hear you. You that have got everything that heart can desire; because you can't just exactly have your own way – about – me – Oh, go away; I cannot put up with such nonsense – and to me, too, that knows what real trouble means!'

Poor Ned made no protest against this impatient decision. He

put on his hat in a bewildered way, with one long look at her, and then passed, and disappeared within his father's gates. Norah did not know what to make of it. She stood at the door, bewildered too, ready to wave her hand and smile at him when he looked round; but he never looked round. He went on slowly, listlessly, as if he did not care for anything – doing what both had told him – the father whom he had been willing to give up his life to – the girl who had his heart.

That afternoon he carried out their commands still more fully. He went away from his father's house. On a visit, it was said; but to go away on a visit in the middle of the shooting season, when your father's house is full of guests, was, all the young men thought, the most extraordinary thing which, even in the freedom of the nineteenth century, an only son, deputy master of the establishment, had ever been known to do.

CHAPTER II

It was a long time before it was fully understood in Dura what had become of Ned. At first it was said he had gone on a visit, then that he had joined some of his college friends in an expedition abroad; but before spring it began to be fully understood, though nobody could tell how, that Ned had gone off from his home, and that though occasional letters came from him, his family did not always know where he was, or what he was about. There was no distinct authority for this, but the whole neighbourhood became gradually aware of it. The general idea was that he had gone away because Norah Drummond had refused him; and the consequence was that Norah Drummond was looked upon with a certain mixture of disapproval and envy by the youthful community. The girls felt to their hearts the grandeur of her position. Some were angry, taking Ned's part, and declaring vehemently that she had 'led him on;' some were sympathetic, feeling that poor Norah was to be pitied for the tragical necessity of dismissing a lover; but all felt the proud distinction she had acquired by thus driving a man (they did not say boy) to despair. The boys, for the most part, condemned Ned as a muff – but in their hearts felt a certain pride in him, as proving that their side was still capable of a great act of decision and despair. As for Norah, when the news burst upon her, her kind little heart was broken. She cried till her

pretty eyes were like an old woman's. She gave herself a violent headache, and turned away from all consolation, and denounced herself as the wickedest and cruellest of beings. It was natural that Norah should believe it implicitly. After that scene in the Rectory garden, when poor Ned, in his boyish passion, had half thrown the responsibility of his life upon her shoulders, there had been other scenes of a not unsimilar kind; and there was that last meeting at the door of the Gatehouse, when she had dismissed him so summarily. Oh, if he had only looked round, Norah thought; and she remembered, with a passing gleam of consolation, that she had intended to wave her hand to him. 'What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?' she said, 'if – anything should happen to him, mamma, I shall have killed him! If anybody calls me a murderess, I shall not have a word to say.'

'Not so bad as that, my darling,' Helen said, soothing her; but Helen herself was very deeply moved. This was the revenge, the punishment she had dreamt of. By her means, whom he had injured so deeply, Reginald Burton's only son had been driven away from him, and all his hopes and plans for his boy brought to a sudden end. It was revenge; but the revenge was not sweet. Christianity, heaven knows, has not done all for us which it might have done, but yet it has so far changed the theories of existence that the vague craving of the sufferer for punishment to its oppressors gives little gratification when it is fulfilled. Helen was humbled to the dust with remorse and compunction for the passing thought, which could scarcely be called an intention,

the momentary, visionary sense of triumph she had felt in her daughter's power (as she believed) to disturb all the plans of the others. Now that was done which it had given her a vague triumph to think of; and though her tears were not so near the surface as Norah's, her shame and pain were deeper. And this was all the more the fact because she dared not express it. A word of sympathy from her (she felt) would have looked like nothing so much as the waving of a flag of triumph. And, besides, from Ned's own family there came no word of complaint.

The Dura people put the very best face upon it possible. Mrs Burton, who had never been known to show any emotion in her life, of course made none of her feelings visible. Her husband declared that 'my young fool of a son' preferred amusing himself abroad to doing any work at home. Clara was the only one who betrayed herself. She assured Katie Dalton, in confidence, that she never could bear to see that hateful Norah again – that she was sure it was all her fault. That Ned would never have looked at her had not she done everything in her power to 'draw him on' – and then cast him off because somebody better worth having came in her way. Clara's indignation was sharp and vehement. It was edged with her own grievance, which she was not too proud to refer to in terms which could not disguise her feelings. But she was the only one of her house who allowed that Ned's disappearance had any significance. His mother said nothing at all on the subject even to her husband and her child; but in reality it was the severest blow that fate had ever aimed at her.

Her hopes for his 'career' toppled over like a house of cards. The Merewethers, astounded at the apology which had to be sent in reply to their invitation to Ned for Christmas, suddenly slackened in their friendship. Lady Florizel ceased to write to Clara, and the Marchioness sent no more notes, weighted with gilded coronets, to her dear Mrs Burton. So far as that noble household was concerned, Ned's prospects had come to an end. The son of so rich a man, future proprietor of Dura, might have been accepted had he been on the spot to press his suit; but the Ladies Merewether were young and fair, and not so poor as to be pressed upon any one. So Lady Florizel and the parliamentary influence sunk into the background; and keenly to the intellectual machine, which served Mrs Burton instead of a heart, went the blow. This was the moment, she felt, in which Ned could have made himself 'safe,' and disentangled himself from the fatal web which instinct told her her husband was weaving about his feet. There was no confidence on business matters between Mr Burton and his wife; but a woman cannot be a man's constant companion for twenty years without divining him, and understanding, without the aid of words, something of what is going on in his mind. She had felt, even before Golden's arrival, a certain vague sense of difficulty and anxiety. His arrival made her sure of it. He had been abroad, withdrawn from the observation of English mercantile society for all these years; but his talents as the pilot of a ship, desperately making way through rocks and sandbanks, were sufficiently well known; and

his appearance was confirmation sure to Mrs Burton of all her fears. Thus she felt in her reticent, silent breast that her boy had thrown up his only chance. The son of the master of Dura could have done so much – the son of a bankrupt could do nothing. He might have withdrawn himself from all risk – established himself in a sure position – had he taken her advice; and he had not taken it. It was the hardest personal blow she had ever received. It did not move her to tears, as it would have done most women. She had not that outlet for her sorrow; but it disarranged the intellectual machinery for the moment, and made her feel incapable of more thinking or planning. Even her motherhood had thus its anguish, probably as deep an anguish as she was capable of feeling. She was balked once more – her labour was in vain, and her hopes in vain. She had more mind than all of her family put together, and she knew it; but here once more, as so often in her experience, the fleshly part in which she was so weak overrode the mind, and brought its counsels to nought. It would be hard to estimate the kind and degree of suffering which such a conviction brought.

Time went on, however, as it always does; stole on, while people were thinking of other things, discussing Ned's disappearance and Norah's remorse, and Mr Nicholas's hopes of a living, and Mary's trousseau. When the first faint glimmer of the spring began, they had another thing to talk of, which was that Cyril Rivers had appeared on the scene again, often coming down from London to spend a day, and then so ingratiating himself

with the Rectory people, and even with Nicholas, the bridegroom elect, that now and then he was asked to spend a night. This time, however, he was not invited to the great house; neither would Mrs Drummond ask him, though he was constantly there. She was determined that nobody should say she drew him on this time, people said. But the fact was that Helen's heart was sick of the subject altogether, and that she would have gone out of her way to avoid any one who had been connected with the Burtons, or who might be supposed to minister to that revenge of which she was so bitterly ashamed. While Cyril Rivers went and came to Dura village, Mr Golden became an equally frequent visitor at the House. The city men in the white villas had been filled with consternation at the first sight of him; but latterly began to make stiff returns to his hearty morning salutations when he went up to town along with them. It was so long ago; and nothing positively had been proved against him; and it was hard, they said, to crush a man altogether, who, possibly, was trying to amend his ways. Perhaps they would have been less charitable had he been living anywhere else than at the great house. Gradually, however, his presence became expected in Dura; he was always there when there were guests or festivities going on. And never had the Burtons been so gay. They seemed to celebrate their son's departure by a double rush of dissipation. The idea of any trouble being near so pleasant, so brilliant a place was ridiculous, and whatever Mrs Burton's thoughts on the subject might have been, she said nothing, but sent out her invitations, and assembled her

guests with her usual calm. The Rectory people were constantly invited, and so indeed were the Drummonds, though neither Norah nor her mother had the heart to go.

Things were in this gay and festive state when Mr Baldwin suddenly one morning paid his daughter a visit. It was not one of his usual visits, accompanied by the two aunts, and the old man-servant and the two maids. These visits had grown rarer of late. Mrs Burton had so many guests, and of such rank, that to arrange the days for her father on which the minister of the chapel could be asked to dinner, and a plain joint provided, grew more and more difficult; while the old people grew more and more alarmed and indignant at the way Clara was going on. 'Her dress alone must cost a fortune,' her aunt Louisa said. 'And the boy brought up as if he were a young Lord; and the girl never to touch a needle nor an account-book in her life,' said Mrs Everest; and they all knew by experience that to 'speak to' Clara was quite futile. 'She will take her own way, brother, whatever you say,' was the verdict of both; and Mr Baldwin knew it was a true one. Nevertheless, there came a day when he felt it was his duty to speak to Clara. 'I have something to say to Haldane; and something to arrange with the chapel managers,' he said apologetically to his sisters; and went down all alone, in his black coat and his white tie with his hat very much on the back of his head, to his daughter's great house.

'I have got some business with Haldane and with the chapel managers,' he said, repeating his explanation; 'and I thought as I

was here, Clara, I might as well come on and see you.'

'You are very welcome always, papa.'

'But I don't know if I shall be welcome to-day,' he went on, 'because I want to speak to you, Clara.'

'I know,' she said, with a faint smile, 'about our extravagance and all that. It is of no use. I may as well say this to you at once. I cannot stop it if I would; and I don't know that I would stop it if I could.'

'Do you know,' he said, coming forward to her, and laying his hand on her shoulder; for though he wore his hat on the back of his head, and took the chair at public meetings, he was a kind man, and loved his only child. Do you know, Clara, that in the City – you may despise the City, my dear, but it is all-important to your husband – do you know they say Burton is going too fast? I wish I could contradict it, but I can't. They say he's in a bad way. They say – '

'Tell me everything, papa. I am quite able to bear it.'

'Well, my dear, I don't want to make you unhappy,' said Mr Baldwin, drawing a long breath, 'but people do begin to whisper, in the best-informed circles, that he is very heavily involved.'

'Well?' she said looking up at him. She too drew a long breath, her face, perhaps, paled by the tenth of the tint. But her blue eyes looked up undaunted, without a shadow in them. Her composure, her calm question, drove even Mr Baldwin, who was used to his daughter's ways, half out of himself.

'Well?' he cried. 'Clara, you must be mad. If this is so,

what can you think of yourself, who never try to restrain or to remedy? – who never made an attempt to retrench or save a penny? If your husband has even the slightest shadow of embarrassment in his business, is this great, splendid house, full of guests and entertainments, the way to help him through?'

'It is as good a way as any other,' she said, still looking at him. 'Papa, you speak in ignorance of both him and me. I don't know his circumstances; he does not tell me. It is he that enjoys all this; not me. And if he really should be in danger, I suppose he thinks he had better enjoy it as long as he can; and that is my idea too.'

'Enjoy it as long as he can! Spend other people's money in every kind of folly and extravagance!' cried Mr Baldwin aghast. 'Clara, you must be mad.'

'No, indeed,' she said quietly. 'I am very much in my senses. I know nothing about other people's money. I cannot control Mr Burton in his business, and he does not tell me. But don't suppose I have not thought this all over. I have taken every circumstance into consideration, papa, and every possibility. If we should ever be ruined, we shall have plenty to bear when that comes. There is Clary to be taken into consideration too. If there were only two days between Mr Burton and bankruptcy I should give a ball on one of those days. Clary has a right to it. This will be her only moment if what you say is true.'

To describe Mr Baldwin's consternation, his utter amazement, the eyes with which he contemplated his child, would be beyond my power. He could not, as people say, believe his ears. It seemed

to him as if he must be mistaken, and that her words must have some other meaning, which he did not reach.

'Clara,' he said, faltering, 'you are beyond me. I hope you understand yourself – what – you mean. It is beyond me.'

'I understand it perfectly,' she said; and then, with a little change of tone, 'You understand, papa, that I would not speak so plainly to any one but you. But to you I need not make any secret. If it comes to the worst, Clary and I – Ned has deserted us – will have enough to bear.'

'You will always have your settlement, my dear,' said her father, quite cowed and overcome, he could not tell why.

'Yes. I shall have my settlement,' she said calmly; 'but there will be enough to bear.'

It was rather a relief to the old man when Clary came in, before whom nothing more could be said. And he was glad to hurry off again, with such astonishment and pain in his heart as an honest couple might have felt who had found a perverse fairy changeling in their child's cradle. He had thought that he knew his daughter. 'Clara has a cold exterior,' he had said times without number; 'but she has a warm heart.' Had she a heart at all? he asked himself; had she a conscience? What was she? – a woman or a – The old man could have stopped on the way and wept. He was an honest old man, and a kind, but what kind of a strange being was this whom he had nourished so long in his heart? It was a relief to him to get among his chapel managers, and regulate their accounts; and then he took Mr Truston, the

minister, by the arm, and walked upon him. 'Come with me and see Haldane,' he said. Mr Truston was the same man who had wanted to be faithful to Stephen about the Magazine, but never had ventured upon it yet.

'I am afraid you are ill,' said the minister. 'Lean upon me. If you will come to my house and take a glass of wine.'

'No, no; with my daughter so near I should never be a charge to the brethren,' said Mr Baldwin. 'And so poor Haldane gets no better? It is a terrible burden upon the congregation in Ormond Road.'

'It must be indeed. I am sure they have been very kind; many congregations – '

'Many congregations would have thrown off the burden utterly; and I confess since they have heard that he has published again, and has been making money by his books – '

'Ah, yes; a literary man has such advantages,' said the minister with a sigh.

He did not want to favour the congregation in Ormond Road to the detriment of one of his own cloth; and at the same time it was hard to go against Mr Baldwin, the lay bishop of the denomination. In this way they came to the Gatehouse. Stephen had his proofs before him, as usual; but the pile of manuscripts was of a different complexion. They were no longer any pleasure to him. The work was still grateful, such as it was, and the power of doing something; but to spend his life recording tea-meetings was hard. He raised his eyes to welcome his old friend with

a certain doubt and almost alarm. He too knew that he was a burden upon the congregation in Ormond Road.

'My dear fellow, my dear Stephen!' the old man said, very cordially shaking his hand, 'why you are looking quite strong. We shall have him dashing up to Ormond Road again, Mrs Haldane, and giving out his text, before we know where we are.'

Stephen shook his head, with such attempt at smiling as was possible. Mr Baldwin, however, was not so much afraid of breaking bad news to him as he had been at the great house.

'It is high time you should,' he continued, rubbing his hands cheerfully; 'for the friends are falling sadly off. We want you there, or somebody like you, Haldane. How we are to meet the expenses next year is more than I can say.'

A dead silence followed. Miss Jane, who had been arranging Stephen's books in the corner, stopped short to listen. Mrs Haldane put on her spectacles to hear the better; and poor Mr Truston, dragged without knowing it into the midst of such a scene, looked around him as if begging everybody's forbearance, and rubbed his hands faintly too.

'The fact is, my dear Haldane – it was but for five years – and now we've come to the end of the second five – and you have been making money by your books, people say – '

It was some little time before Stephen could answer, his lips had grown so dry. 'I think – I know – what you mean,' he said.

'Yes. I am afraid that is how it must be. Not with my will – not with my will,' said Mr Baldwin; 'but then you see people say

you have been making money by your books.'

'He has made sixteen pounds in two years,' said Miss Jane.

Stephen held up his hand hurriedly. 'I know how it must be,' he said. 'Everybody's patience, of course, must give way at last.'

'Yes – that is just about how it is.'

There was very little more said. Mr Baldwin picked up his hat, which he had put on the floor, and begged the minister to give him his arm again. He shook hands very affectionately with everybody; he gave them, as it were, his blessing. They all bore it as people ought to bear a great shock, with pale faces, without any profane levity. 'They take it very well,' he said, as he went out. 'They are good people. Oh, my dear Truston, I don't know a greater sign of the difference between the children of this world and the children of the light than the way in which they receive a sudden blow.'

He had given two such blows within an hour; he had a right to speak. And in both cases, different as was the mien of the sufferers, the blow itself had all the appearance of a *coup de grâce*. It had not occurred to Mr Baldwin, when he made that classification, that it was his own child whom he had taken as the type of the children of wrath. He thought of it in the railway, going home; and it troubled him. 'Poor Clara! her brain must be affected,' he thought; he had never heard of anything so heathenish as her boldly-professed determination to give a ball, if need was, on the eve of her husband's bankruptcy, and for the reason that they would have a right to it. It horrified him a

great deal more than if she had risked somebody else's money in trade and lost. Poor Clara! what might be coming upon her? But, anyhow, he reflected, she had her settlement, and that she was a child of many prayers.

Mrs Burton said nothing of this stroke which had fallen upon her. It made her fears into certainty, and she took certain steps accordingly, but told nobody. In Stephen's room at the Gatehouse there was silence, too, all the weary afternoon. They had lost the half of their living at a blow. The disaster was too great, too sudden and overwhelming, to be spoken of; and to one of them, to him who was helpless and could do nothing, it tasted like the very bitterness of death.

CHAPTER III

Mrs Burton said nothing about her troubles to any one: she avoided rather than sought confidential intercourse with her husband. She formed her plans and declined to receive any further information on the subject. Her argument to herself was that no one could have any right to suppose she knew. When the crash came, if come it must, she would be universally considered the first of the victims. The very fact of her entertainments and splendours would be so much evidence that she knew nothing about it – and indeed what did she know? her own fears and suspicions, her father's hints of coming trouble – nothing more. Her husband had never said a warning word to her which betrayed alarm or anxiety. She stood on the verge of the precipice, which she felt a moral certainty was before her, and made her arrangements like a queen in the plenitude of her power. 'There will be enough to bear,' she repeated to herself. She called all the county about her in these spring months before people had as yet gone to town. She made Dura blaze with lights and echo with music: she filled it full of guests. She made her entertainments on so grand a scale, that everything that had hitherto been known there was thrown into the shade. The excitement, so far as excitement could penetrate into her steady little soul, sustained and kept her up; or at least the occupation did, and the thousand arrangements, big and little, which were

necessary. If her husband was ever tempted to seek her sympathy in these strange, wild, brilliant days which passed like a dream – if the burden on his shoulders ever so bowed the man down that he would have been glad to lean it upon hers, it is impossible to say; he looked at her sometimes wondering what was in her mind; but he was not capable of understanding that clear, determined intelligence. He thought she had got fairly into the whirl of mad dissipation and enjoyed it. She was playing into his hands, she was doing the best that could be done to veil his tottering steps, and divert public attention from his business misfortunes. He had no more idea why she was doing it, or with what deliberate conscious steps she was marching forward to meet ruin, than he had of any other incomprehensible wonder in heaven or earth.

The Haldanes made no secret of the distress which had fallen upon them. It was a less loss than the cost of one of Mrs Burton's parties, but it was unspeakable to them who had no way of replacing it. By one of those strange coincidences, however, which occur so often when good people are driven to desperation, Stephen's publisher quite unexpectedly sent him in April a cheque for fifty pounds, the produce of his last book, a book which he had called 'The Window,' and which was a kind of moral of his summer life and thoughts. It was not, he himself thought, a very good book; it was a medley of fine things and poor things, not quite free from that personal twaddle which it is so difficult to keep out of an invalid's or a recluse's view of human affairs. But then the British public is fond of personal

twaddle, and like those bits best which the author was most doubtful about. It was a cheap little work, published by one of those firms which are known as religious publishers; and nothing could be more unexpected, more fortunate, more consoling, than this fifty pounds. Mrs Haldane, with a piety which, perhaps, was a little contemptuous of poor Stephen's powers, spoke of it, with tears in her eyes, as an answer to prayer; while Miss Jane, who was proud of her brother, tried to apportion the credit, half to Providence and half to Stephen; but anyhow it made up the lost allowance for the current year, and gave the poor souls time to breathe.

All this time the idea which had come into Dr Maurice's mind on the day of the picnic in October had been slowly germinating. He was not a man whose projects ripened quickly, and this was a project so delicate that it took him a long time to get it fully matured, and to accustom himself to it. It had come to full perfection in his mind when in the end of April Mrs Drummond received a letter from him, inviting Norah and herself to go to his house for a few days, to see the exhibitions and other shows which belong to that period of the year. This was an invitation which thrilled Norah's soul within her. She was at a very critical moment of her life. She had lost the honest young lover of her childhood, the boy whose love and service had grown so habitual to her that nobody but Norah knew how dreary the winter had been without him; and she was at present exposed to the full force of attentions much more close, much more subtle and skilful,

but perhaps not so honest and faithful. Norah had exchanged the devotion of a young man who loved her as his own soul, for the intoxicating homage of a man who was very much in love with her, but who knew that his prospects would be deeply injured, and his position compromised, did he win the girl whom he wooed with all the fascinations of a hero in a romance, and all the persistency of a mind set upon having its own way. His whole soul was set upon winning her; but what to do afterwards was not so clear, and Rivers, like many another adventurer in love and in war, left the morrow to provide for itself. But Norah was very reluctant to be won. Sometimes, indeed, capitulation seemed very near at hand, but then her lively little temper would rise up again, or some hidden susceptibility would be touched, or the girl's independent soul would rise in arms against the thought of being subjugated like a young woman in a book by this 'novel-hero!' What were his dark eyes, his speaking glances, his skilful inference of a devotion above words, to her? Had not she read about such wiles a thousand times? And was it not an understood rule that the real hero, the true lover, the first of men, was never this bewitching personage, but the plainer, ruder man in the background, with perhaps a big nose, who was not very lovely to look upon? These thoughts contended in Norah with the fascinations of him whom she began to think of as the *contre-heros*. The invitation to London was doubly welcome to her, insomuch that it interrupted this current of thought and gave her something new to think about. She was fond of Dr Maurice:

she had not been in town since she was a child: she wanted to see the parks and the pictures, and all the stir and tumult of life. For all these six years, though Dura was so near town, the mother and daughter had never been in London. And it looked so bright to Norah, bright with all the associations of her childhood, and full of an interest which no other place could ever have in its associations with the terrible event which ended her childhood. 'You will go, mamma?' she said, wistfully reading the letter a second time over her mother's shoulder. And Helen, who felt the need of an interruption and something new to think of as much as her child did, answered 'Yes.'

Dr Maurice was more excited about the approaching event than they were, though he had to take no thought about his wardrobe, and they had to take a great deal of thought; the question of Norah's frocks was nothing to his fussiness and agitation about the ladies' rooms and all the arrangements for their comfort. He invited an old aunt who lived near to come and stay with him for the time of the Drummonds' visit, a precaution which seemed to her, as it seems to me, quite unnecessary. I do not think Helen would have had the least hesitation in going to his house at her age, though there had been no chaperon. It was he who wanted the chaperon: he was quite coy and bashful about the business altogether: and the old aunt, who was a sharp old lady, was not only much amused, but had her suspicions aroused. In the afternoon, before his visitors arrived, he was particularly fidgety. 'If you want to go out, Henry, I will receive your guests,' the

old lady said, not without a chuckle of suppressed amusement; 'probably they will only arrive in time to get dressed before dinner. You may leave them to me.'

'You are very kind,' said the doctor, but he did not go away. He walked from one end of the big drawing-room to the other, and looked at himself in the mirror between the windows, and the mirror over the mantelpiece. And then he took up his position before the fireplace, where of course there was nothing but cut paper. 'How absurd are all the relations between men and women,' he said, 'and how is it that I cannot ask my friend's widow, a woman in middle life, to come to my house – without – '

'Without having me?' said the aunt. 'My dear Henry, I have told you before – I think you could. I have no patience with the freedom of the present day in respect to young people, but, so far as this goes, I think you are too particular – I am sure you could – '

'You must allow me to be the best judge, aunt, of a matter that concerns myself,' said Dr Maurice, with gentle severity. 'I know very well what would happen: there would be all sorts of rumours and reports. People might not, perhaps, say there was anything absolutely wrong between us – Pray may I ask what you are laughing at?'

For the old lady had interrupted him by a low laugh, which it was beyond her power to keep in.

'Nothing, my dear, nothing,' she said, in a little alarm. 'I am sure I beg your pardon, Henry. I had no idea you were so

sensitive. How old may this lady be?'

'The question is not about this lady, my dear aunt,' he answered in the dogmatic impatient tone which was so unlike him, 'but about any lady. It might happen to be a comfort to me to have a housekeeper I could rely on. It would be a great pleasure to be able to contribute to the comfort of Robert Drummond's family, poor fellow. But I dare not. I know the arrangement would no sooner be made than the world would say all sorts of things. How old is Mrs Drummond? She was under twenty when they were married, I know – and poor Drummond was about my own age. That is, let me see, how long ago? Norah is about eighteen, between eighteen and nineteen. Her mother must be nearly, if not quite, forty, I should think – '

'Then, my dear Henry – ' began the old lady.

'Why, here they are!' he said, rushing to the window. But it was only a cab next door, or over the way. He went back to his position with a little flush upon his middle-aged countenance. 'My dear aunt,' he resumed, with a slight tremor in his voice, 'it is not a matter that can be discussed, I assure you. I know what would happen; and I know that poor Helen – I mean Mrs Drummond – would never submit to anything that would compromise her as Norah's mother. Even if she were not very sensitive on her own account, as women generally are, as Norah's mother of course she requires to be doubly careful. And here am I, the oldest friend they have, as fond of that child as if she were my own, and prevented by an absurd punctilio from taking

them into my house, and doing my best to make her happy! As I said before, the relations between men and women are the most ridiculous things in the world.'

'But I do think, Henry, you make too much of the difficulties,' said the old aunt, busying herself with her work, and not venturing to say more.

'You must allow me to be the best judge,' he said, with a mixture of irritation and superiority. 'You may know the gossip of the drawing-rooms, which is bad enough, I don't doubt; but I know what *men* say.'

'Oh, then, indeed, my poor Henry,' said the old lady, with vivacity, eagerly seizing the opportunity to have one shot on her own side, 'I can only pray, Good Lord deliver you; for everybody knows there never was a bad piece of scandal yet, but it was a man that set it on foot.'

Aunt Mary thus had the last word, and retired with flying colours and in very high feather from the conflict; for at this moment the Drummonds arrived, and Dr Maurice rushed downstairs to meet them. The old aunt was a personage very well worth knowing, though she has very little to do with this history, and it was with mingled curiosity and amusement that she watched for the entrance of Mrs Drummond and her daughter. It would be a very wise step for him anyhow to marry, she thought. The Maurice family were very well off, and there were not many young offshoots of the race to contend for the doctor's money. Was he contemplating the idea of a wife young enough to be his

daughter? or had he really the good sense to think of a woman about his own age? Aunt Mary, though she was a woman herself, and quite ready to stand up for her own side, considered Helen Drummond, under forty, as about his own age, though he was over fifty. But as the question went through her mind, she shook her head. She knew a great many men who had made fools of themselves by marrying, or wishing to marry, the girl young enough to be their daughter; but the other class who had the good sense, &c., were very rare indeed.

There was, however, very little light thrown upon the subject by Aunt Mary's observations that evening. Mrs Drummond was very grave, almost sad; for the associations of the house were all melancholy ones, and her last visit to it came back very closely into her memory as she entered one room – the great old gloomy dining-room – where Norah, a child, had been placed by Dr Maurice's side at table on that memorable occasion, while she, unable even to make a pretence of eating, sat and looked on. She could not go back now into the state which her mind had been in on that occasion. Everything was calmed and stilled, nay, chilled by this long interval. She could think of her Robert without the sinking of the heart – the sense of hopeless loneliness – which had moved her then. The wound had closed up: the blank, if it had not closed up, had acquired all the calmness of a long-recognized fact. She had made up her mind long since that the happiness which she could not then consent to part with, was over for her. That is the great secret of what is called resignation:

to consent and agree that what you have been in the habit of calling happiness is done with; that you must be content to fill its place with something else, something less. Helen had come to this. She no longer looked for it – no longer thought of it. It was over for her, as her youth was over. Her heart was tried, not by active sorrow, but by a heavy sense of past pain; but that did not hinder her from taking her part in the conversation – from smiling at Norah's sallies, at her enthusiasm, at all the height of her delight in the pleasure Dr Maurice promised her. Norah was the principal figure in the scene. She was surrounded on every side by that atmosphere of fond partiality in which the flowers of youth are most ready to unfold themselves. Dr Maurice was even fonder than her mother, and more indulgent; for Helen had the jealous eye which marks imperfections, and that intolerant and sovereign love which cannot put up with a flaw or a speck in those it cherishes. To Dr Maurice the specks and flaws were beauties. Norah led the conversation, was gay for every one, talked for every one. And the old aunt laughed within herself, and shook her head: 'He cannot keep his eyes off her; he cannot see anything but perfection in her, – but she is a mere excited child, and her mother is a beautiful woman,' said Aunt Mary to herself; 'man's taste and woman's, it is to be supposed, will be different to the end of time.' But after she had made this observation, the old lady was struck by the caressing, fatherly ways of her nephew towards this child. He would smooth her hair when he passed by her; would take her hand into his, unconsciously, and pat it; would lay

his hand upon her shoulder; none of which things he would have ventured to do had he meant to present himself to Norah as her lover. He even kissed her cheek, when she said good-night, with uncontrollable fondness, yet unmistakable composure. What did the man mean?

He had sketched out a very pretty programme for them for their three days. Next evening they were to go to the theatre; the next again, to an opera. Norah could not walk, she danced as she went up-stairs. 'The only thing is, will my dress do?' she said, as she hung about her mother in the pretty fresh room, new-prepared, and hung with bright chintz, in which Mrs Drummond was lodged. Could it have been done on purpose? For certainly the other rooms in the house still retained their dark old furniture; dark-coloured, highly-polished mahogany, with deep red and green damask curtains – centuries old, as Norah thought. Mrs Drummond was surprised, too, at the aspect of this room. She was more than surprised, she was almost offended, by the presence of the old aunt as chaperon. 'Does the man think I am such a fool as to be afraid of him?' she wondered, with a frown and a smile, but gave herself up to Norah's pleasure, rejoicing to see that the theatre and the opera were strong enough to defeat for the moment and drive from the field both Cyril and Ned. And the next day, and the next, passed like days of paradise to Norah. She drove about in Dr Maurice's carriage, and laughed at her own grandeur, and enjoyed it. She called perpetually to her mother to notice ladies walking who were like themselves. 'That is what

you and I should be doing, if it were not for this old darling of a doctor! trudging along in the sun, getting hot and red – '

'But think, you little sybarite, that is what we shall be doing to-morrow,' cried Helen, half amused and half afraid.

'No, the day after to-morrow,' said Norah, 'and then it will be delightful. We can look at the people in the carriages, and say, "We are as good as you; – we looked down upon you yesterday." And, mamma, we are going to the opera to-night!'

'You silly child,' Helen said. But to eyes that danced so, and cheeks that glowed so, what could any mother say?

It was the after-piece after that opera, however, which was what neither mother nor daughter had calculated upon, but which, no doubt, was the special cause of their invitation, and of the new chintz in the bed-rooms, and of all the expense Dr Maurice had been at. Norah was tired when they got home. She had almost over-enjoyed herself. She chatted so that no one could say a word. Her cheeks were blazing with excitement. When the two elder people could get a hearing, they sent her off to bed, though she protested she had not said half she had to say. 'Save it up for to-morrow,' said Dr Maurice, 'and run off and put yourself to bed, or I shall have you ill on my hands. Mrs Drummond, send her away.'

'Go, Norah, dear, you are tired,' said Helen.

Norah stood protesting, with her pretty white cloak hanging about her; her rose-ribbons a little in disorder; her eyes like two sunbeams. How fondly her old friend looked at her; with what

proud, tender, adoring, fatherly admiration! If Aunt Mary had not been away in bed, then at least she must have divined. Dr Maurice lit her candle and took her to the door. He stooped down suddenly to her ear and whispered, 'I have something to say to your mother.' Norah could not have explained the sensation that came over her. She grew chill to her very fingers' ends, and gave a wondering glance at him, then accepted the candle without a word, and went away. The wonder was still in her eyes when she got up-stairs, and looked at herself in the glass. Instead of throwing off her cloak to see how she looked, as is a girl's first impulse, she stared blankly into the glass, and could see nothing but that surprise. What could he be going to talk about? What would her mother say?

Helen had risen to follow her daughter, but Dr Maurice came back, having closed the door carefully, and placed a chair for her. 'Mrs Drummond, can you give me ten minutes? I have something to say to you,' he said.

'Surely,' said Helen; and she took her seat, somewhat surprised; but not half so much surprised as Norah was, nor, indeed, so much as Dr Maurice was, now that matters had finally come to a crisis, to find himself in such an extraordinary position. Helen ran lightly over in her mind a number of subjects on which he might be going to speak to her; but the real subject never entered her thoughts. He did not sit down, though he had given her a chair. He moved about uneasily in front of her, changing his attitude a dozen times in a minute, and clearing his throat.

'He is going to offer me money for Norah,' was Helen's thought.

'Mrs Drummond,' he said – and his beginning confirmed her in her idea – 'I am not a – marrying man, as you know. I am – past the age – when men think of such things. I am on the shady side of fifty, though not very far gone; and you are – about forty, I suppose?'

'Thirty-nine,' said Helen, with more and more surprise, and yet with the natural reluctance of a woman to have a year unjustly added to her age.

'Well, well, it is very much the same thing. I never was in love that I know of, at least not since; – and – and – that sort of thing, of course, is over for – you.'

'Dr Maurice, what do you mean?' cried Helen in dismay.

'Well, it is not very hard to guess,' he said doggedly. 'I mean that you are past the love-business, you know, and I – never came to it, so to speak. Look here, Helen Drummond, why shouldn't you and I, if it comes to that – marry? If I durst do it I'd ask you to come and live here, and let Norah be child to both of us, without any nonsense between you and me. But that can't be done, as you will easily perceive. Now, I am sure we could put up with one another as well as most people, and we have one strong bond between us in Norah – and – I could give her everything she wishes for. I could and I would provide for her when I die. You are not one to want pretences made to you, or think much of a sacrifice for your child's sake. I am not so vain but to allow that it might be a sacrifice – to us both.'

'Dr Maurice,' said Helen, half laughing, half sobbing, 'if this is a joke – '

'Joke! am I in the way of making such jokes? Why, it has cost me six months to think this joke out. There is no relaxation of the necessary bonds that I would not be ready to allow. You know the house and my position, and everything I could offer. As for settlements, and all business of that kind – '

'Hush,' she said. 'Stop!' She rose up and held out her hand to him. There were tears in her eyes; but there was also a smile on her face, and a blush which went and came as she spoke. 'Dr Maurice,' she said, 'don't think I cannot appreciate the pure and true friendship for Robert and me – '

'Just so, just so!' he interposed, nodding his head; he put his other hand on hers, and patted it as he had patted Norah's, but he did not again look her in the face. The elderly bachelor had grown shy – he did not know why; the most curious sensation, a feeling quite unknown to him was creeping about the region of his heart.

'And the love for Norah – ' resumed Helen.

'Just so, just so.'

'Which have made you think of this. But – but – but – ' She stopped; she had been running to the side of tears, when suddenly she changed her mind. 'But I think it is all a mistake! I am quite ready to come and stay with you, to keep house for you, to let you have Norah's company, when you like to ask us. I don't want any chaperon. Your poor, dear, good aunt! Dr Maurice,' cried

Helen, her voice rising into a hysterical laugh, 'I assure you it is all a mistake.'

He let her hand drop out of his. He turned away from her with a shrug of his shoulders. He walked to the table and screwed up the moderator lamp, which had run down. Then he came back to his former position and said, 'I am much more in the world than you are; you will permit me to consider myself the best judge in this case. It is not a mistake. And I have no answer from you to my proposal as yet.'

Then Helen's strength gave way. The more serious view which she had thrust from her, which she had rejected as too solemn, came back. The blush vanished from her face, and so did the smile. 'You were his friend,' she said with quivering lips. 'You loved him as much as any one could, except me. Have you forgotten you are speaking to – Robert's wife?'

'Good lord!' cried Dr Maurice with sudden terror; 'but he is dead.'

'Yes, he is dead; but I do not see what difference that makes; when a woman has once been a man's wife, she is so always. If there is any other world at all, she must be so always. I hate the very name of widow!' cried Helen vehemently, with the tears glittering in her eyes. 'I abhor it; I don't believe in it. I am his wife!'

Dr Maurice was a man who had always held himself to be invincible to romantic or high-flown feelings. But somehow he was startled by this view of the question. It had not occurred to

him before; for the moment it staggered him, so that he had to pause and think it over. Then he said, 'Nonsense!' abruptly. 'Mrs Drummond, I cannot think that such a view as this is worth a moment's consideration; it is against both reason and common sense.'

She did not make any reply; she made a movement of her hand, deprecating, expostulating, but she would not say any more.

'And Scripture, too,' said Dr Maurice triumphantly, 'it is quite against Scripture.' Then he remembered that this was not simply an argument in which he was getting the better, but a most practical question. 'If it is disagreeable to you, it is a different matter,' he said; 'but I had hoped, with all the allowances I was ready to make, and for Norah's sake – '

'It is not disagreeable, Dr Maurice; it is simply impossible, and must always be so,' she said.

Then there was another silence, and the two stood opposite to each other, not looking at each other, longing both for something to free them. 'In that case I suppose there had better be no more words on the subject,' he said, turning half away.

'Except thanks,' she cried; 'thanks for the most generous thoughts, the truest friendship. I will never forget – '

'I do not know how far it was generous,' he said moodily, and he got another candle and lighted it for her, as he had done for Norah; 'and the sooner you forget the better. Good night.'

Good night! When he looked round the vacant room a

moment after, and felt himself alone, it seemed to Dr Maurice as if he had been dreaming. He must have fallen down suddenly from some height or other – fallen heavily and bruised himself, he thought – and so woke up out of an odd delusion quite unlike him, which had arisen he could not tell how. It was a very curious sensation. He felt sore and downcast, sadly disappointed and humbled in his own conceit. It had not even occurred to him that the matter might end in this way. He gave a long sigh, and said aloud, 'Perhaps it is quite as well it has ended so. Probably we should not have liked it had we tried it,' and then went up to his lonely chamber, hearing, as he thought, his step echo over all the vacant house. Yes, it was a vacant house. He had chosen that it should be years ago, and yet the feeling now was dreary to him, and it would never be anything but vacant for all the rest of his life.

CHAPTER IV

It was difficult for the two who had thus parted at night to meet again at the breakfast-table next morning without any sign of that encounter, before the sharp eyes of Aunt Mary, and Norah's youthful, vivacious powers of observation. Dr Maurice was the one who found the ordeal most hard. He was sullen, and had a headache, and talked very little, not feeling able for it. 'You are bilious, Henry; that is what it is,' the aunt said. But though he was over fifty, and prided himself on his now utterly prosaic character, the doctor felt wounded by such an explanation. He did not venture to glance at Helen, even when he shook hands with her; though he had a lurking curiosity within him to see how she looked, whether triumphant or sympathetic. He knew that he ought to have been gay and full of talk, to put the best face possible upon his downfall; but he did not feel able to do it; not to feel sore, not to feel small, and miserable, and disappointed, was beyond his powers. Helen was not gay either, nor at all triumphant; she felt the embarrassment of the position as much as he did; but in these cases it is the woman who generally has her wits most about her; and Mrs Drummond, who was conscious also of her child's jealous inspection, talked rather more than usual. Norah had demanded to know what the doctor had to say on the previous night; a certain dread was in her mind. She had felt that something was coming, something that threatened

the peace of the world. 'What did he say to you, mamma?' she had asked anxiously. 'Nothing of importance,' Helen had replied. But Norah knew better; and all that bright May morning while the sunshine shone out of doors, even though it was in London, and tempted the country girl abroad, she kept by her mother's side and watched her with suspicious eyes. Had Norah known the real state of affairs, her shame and indignation would have known no bounds; but Helen made so great an effort to dismiss all consciousness from her face and tone, that the child was balked at last, and retired from the field. Aunt Mary, who had experience to back her, saw more clearly. Whatever had been going to happen had happened, she perceived, and had not been successful. Thus they all breakfasted, watching each other, Helen being the only one who knew everything and betrayed nothing. After breakfast they were going to the Exhibition. It had been deferred to this day, which was to be their last.

'I do not think I will go,' said Dr Maurice; and then he caught Norah's look full of disappointment, which was sweet to him. '*You* want me, do you, child?' he asked. There was a certain ludicrous pathos in the emphasis which was almost too much for Helen's gravity, though, indeed, laughter was little in her thoughts.

'Of course I want you,' said Norah; 'and so does mamma. Fancy sending us away to wander about London by ourselves! That was not what you invited us for, surely, Dr Maurice? And then after the pictures, let us have another splendid drive in the

carriage, and despise all the people who are walking! It will be the last time. You rich people, you have not half the pleasure you might have in being rich. I suppose, now, when you see out of the carriage window somebody you know walking, it does not make you proud?'

'I don't think it does,' said the doctor with a smile.

'That is because you are hardened to it,' said Norah. 'You can have it whenever you please; but as for me, I am as proud – '

'I wish you had it always, my dear,' said Dr Maurice; and this time his tone was almost lachrymose. It was so hard-hearted of Helen to deny her child these pleasures and advantages, all to be purchased at the rate of a small personal sacrifice on her part – a sacrifice such as he himself was quite ready to make.

'Oh, I should not mind that,' cried Norah; 'if I had it always I should get hardened to it too. I should not mind; most likely then I should prefer walking, and think carriages only fit for old ladies. Didn't you say that one meets everybody at the Academy, mamma?'

'A great many people, Norah.'

'I wonder whom we shall meet,' said the girl; and a sudden blush floated over her face. Helen looked at her with some anxiety. She did not know what impression Cyril Rivers might have made on Norah's heart. Was it him she was thinking of? Mrs Drummond herself wondered, too, a little. She was half afraid of the old friends she might see there. But then she reflected to herself dreamily, that life goes very quickly in London, that

six years was a long time, and that her old friends might have forgotten her. How changed her own feelings were! She had never been fond of painters, her husband's brothers-in-arms. Now the least notable of them, the most painty, the most slovenly, would look somehow like a shadow of Robert. Should she see any of those old faces? Whom should she meet? Norah's light question moved many echoes of which the child knew nothing; and it was to be answered in a way of which neither of them dreamed.

The mere entrance into those well-known rooms had an indescribable effect upon Helen. How it all rushed back upon her, the old life! The pilgrimages up those steps, the progress through the crowd to that special spot where one picture was hung; the anxiety to see how it looked – if there was anything near that 'killed' it in colour, or threw it into the shade in power; her own private hope, never expressed to any one, that it might 'come better' in the new place. Dr Maurice stalked along by her side, but he did not say anything to her; and for her part, she could not speak – her heart and her eyes were full. She could only see the other people's pictures glimmering as through a mist. It seemed so strange to her, almost humiliating, that there was nothing of her own to go to – nothing to make a centre to this gallery, which had relapsed into pure art, without any personal interest in it. By-and-by, when the first shock had worn off, she began to be able to see what was on the walls, and to come back to her present circumstances. So many names were new to her in

those six years; so many that she once knew had crept out of sight into corners and behind doorways. She had begun to get absorbed in the sight, which was so much more to her than to most people, when Mr Rivers came up to them. He had known they were to be in town; he had seen them at the opera the previous night, and had found out a good deal about their plans. But London was different from Dura; and he had not ventured to offer his attentions before the eyes of all the world, and all the cousins and connections and friends who might have come to a knowledge of the fact that an unknown pretty face had attracted his homage. But of a morning, at the Royal Academy, he felt himself pretty safe; there every one is liable to meet some friend from the county, and the most watchful eyes of society are not on the alert at early hours. He came to them now with eager salutations.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.