# YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

## THE CLEVER WOMAN OF THE FAMILY

Charlotte Yonge

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**Yonge C.**

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# Содержание

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## CHAPTER I. IN SEARCH OF A MISSION

"Thou didst refuse the daily round
Of useful, patient love,
And longedst for some great emprise
Thy spirit high to prove."—C. M. N.
"Che mi sedea con l'antica Rachele."

—*DANTE.*

"It is very kind in the dear mother."

"But—what, Rachel? Don't you like it! She so enjoyed choosing it for you."

"Oh yes, it is a perfect thing in its way. Don't say a word to her; but if you are consulted for my next birthday present, Grace, couldn't you suggest that one does cease to be a girl."

"Only try it on, Rachel dear, she will be pleased to see you in it."

"Oh yes, I will bedizen myself to oblige her. I do assure you I am not ungrateful. It is beautiful in itself, and shows how well nature can be imitated; but it is meant for a mere girl, and this is the very day I had fixed for hauling down the flag of youth."

"Oh, Rachel."

"Ah, ha! If Rachel be an old maid, what is Grace? Come, my dear, resign yourself! There is nothing more unbecoming than want of perception of the close of young-ladyhood."

"Of course I know we are not quite young girls now," said Grace, half perplexed, half annoyed.

"Exactly, from this moment we are established as the maiden sisters of Avonmouth, husband and wife to one another, as maiden pairs always are."

"Then thus let me crown, our bridal," quoth Grace, placing on her sister's head the wreath of white roses.

"Treacherous child!" cried Rachel, putting up her hands and tossing her head, but her sister held her still.

"You know brides always take liberties. Please, dear, let it stay till the mother has been in, and pray don't talk, before her of being so very old."

"No, I'll not be a shock to her. We will silently assume our immunities, and she will acquiesce if they come upon her gradually."

Grace looked somewhat alarmed, being perhaps in some dread of immunities, and aware that Rachel's silence would in any one else have been talkativeness.

"Ah, mother dear, good morning," as a pleasant placid-looking lady entered, dressed in black, with an air of feeble health, but of comely middle age.

Birthday greetings, congratulations, and thanks followed, and the mother looked critically at the position of the wreath, and Rachel for the first time turned to the glass and met a set of features of an irregular, characteristic cast, brow low and broad, nose retrousse, with large, singularly sensitive nostrils quivering like those of a high-bred horse at any emotion, full pouting lips, round cheeks glowing with the freshest red, eyes widely opened, dark deep grey and decidedly prominent, though curtained with thick black lashes. The glossy chestnut hair partook of the redundance and vigour of the whole being, and the roses hung on it gracefully though not in congruity with the thick winter dress of blue and black tartan, still looped up over the dark petticoat and hose, and stout high-heeled

boots, that like the grey cloak and felt hat bore witness to the early walk. Grace's countenance and figure were in the same style, though without so much of mark or animation; and her dress was of like description, but less severely plain.

"Yes, my dear, it looks very well; and now you will oblige me by not wearing that black lace thing, that looks fit for your grandmother."

"Poor Lovedy Kelland's aunt made it, mother, and it was very expensive, and wouldn't sell."

"No wonder, I am sure, and it was very kind in you to take it off their hands; but now it is paid for, it can't make much difference whether you disfigure yourself with it or not."

"Oh yes, dear mother, I'll bind my hair when you bid me do it and really these buds do credit to the makers. I wonder whether they cost them as dear in health as lace does," she added, taking off the flowers and examining them with a grave sad look.

"I chose white roses," proceeded the well-pleased mother, "because I thought they would suit either of the silks you have now, though I own I should like to see you in another white muslin."

"I have done with white muslin," said Rachel, rousing from her reverie. "It is an affectation of girlish simplicity not becoming at our age."

"Oh Rachel!" thought Grace in despair; but to her great relief in at that moment filed the five maids, the coachman, and butler, and the mother began to read prayers.

Breakfast over, Rachel gathered up her various gifts, and betook herself to a room on the ground floor with all the appliances of an ancient schoolroom. Rather dreamily she took out a number of copy-books, and began to write copies in them in large text hand.

"And this is all I am doing for my fellow-creatures," she muttered half aloud. "One class of half-grown lads, and those grudged to me! Here is the world around one mass of misery and evil! Not a paper do I take up but I see something about wretchedness and crime, and here I sit with health, strength, and knowledge, and able to do nothing, nothing—at the risk of breaking my mother's heart! I have pottered about cottages and taught at schools in the dilettante way of the young lady who thinks it her duty to be charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and that I may be satisfied. Satisfied, when I see children cramped in soul, destroyed in body, that fine ladies may wear lace trimmings! Satisfied with the blight of the most promising buds! Satisfied, when I know that every alley and lane of town or country reeks with vice and corruption, and that there is one cry for workers with brains and with purses! And here am I, able and willing, only longing to task myself to the uttermost, yet tethered down to the merest mockery of usefulness by conventionalities. I am a young lady forsooth! —I must not be out late, I must not put forth my views; I must not choose my acquaintance, I must be a mere helpless, useless being, growing old in a ridiculous fiction of prolonged childhood, affecting those graces of so-called sweet seventeen that I never had—because, because why? Is it for any better reason than because no mother can bear to believe her daughter no longer on the lists for matrimony? Our dear mother does not tell herself that this is the reason, but she is unconsciously actuated by it. And I have hitherto given way to her wish. I mean to give way still in a measure; but I am five and twenty, and I will no longer be withheld from some path of usefulness! I will judge for myself, and when my mission has declared itself, I will not be withheld from it by any scruple that does not approve itself to my reason and conscience. If it be only a domestic mission—say the care of Fanny, poor dear helpless Fanny, I would that I knew she was safe,—I would not despise it, I would throw myself into it, and regard the training her and forming her boys as a most sacred office. It would not be too homely for me. But I had far rather become the founder of some establishment that might relieve women from the oppressive task-work thrown on them in all their branches of labour. Oh, what a worthy ambition!"

"Rachel!" called Grace. "Come, there's a letter, a letter from Fanny herself for you. Make haste, mamma is so nervous till you read it."

No exhortation was needed to make Rachel hurry to the drawing-room, and tear open the black-edged letter with the Australian stamp.

"All is right, mamma. She has been very ill, but is fast recovering, and was to sail by the Voluta. Why, she may be here any day."

"Any day! My dear Grace, see that the nurseries are well aired."

"No, mother, she says her party is too large, and wants us to take a furnished house for her to come into at once—Myrtlewood if possible. Is it let, Grace?"

"I think I saw the notice in the window yesterday."

"Then, I'll go and see about it at once."

"But, my dear, you don't really mean that poor dear Fanny thinks of coming anywhere but to us?" said her mother, anxiously.

"It is very considerate of her," said Grace, "with so many little children. You would find them too much for you, dear mother. It is just like Fanny to have thought of it. How many are there, Rachel?"

"Oh! I can't tell. They got past my reckoning long ago. I only know they are all boys, and that this baby is a girl."

"Baby! Ah, poor Fanny, I feared that was the reason the did not come sooner."

"Yes, and she has been very ill; she always is, I believe, but there is very little about it. Fanny never could write letters; she only just says: 'I have not been able to attempt a letter sooner, though my dear little girl is five weeks old to-day. Think of the daughter coming at last, too late for her dear father, who had so wished for one. She is very healthy, I am thankful to say; and I am now so much better, that the doctor says I may sail next week. Major Keith has taken our cabins, in the Voluta, and soon after you receive this, I hope to be showing you my dear boys. They are such good, affectionate fellows; but I am afraid they would be too much for my dear aunt, and our party is so large, so the Major and I both think it will be the best way for you to take a house for me for six months. I should like Myrtlewood best, if it is to be had. I have told Conrade all about it, and how pretty it is, and it is so near you that I think there I can be happy as ever I can be again in this world, and have your advice for the dear children.'"

"Poor darling! she seems but a child herself."

"My age—five and twenty," returned Rachel. "Well I shall go and ask about the house. Remember, mother, this influx is to bring no trouble or care on you; Fanny Temple is my charge from henceforth. My mission has come to seek me," she added as she quitted the room, in eager excitement of affection, emotion, and importance, for Fanny had been more like a sister than a cousin.

Grace and Rachel Curtis were the daughters of the squire of the Homestead; Fanny, of his brother, an officer in the army. Left at home for education, the little girl had spent her life, from her seventh to her sixteenth year, as absolutely one with her cousins, until she was summoned to meet her father at the Cape, under the escort of his old friend, General Sir Stephen Temple. She found Colonel Curtis sinking under fatal disease, and while his relations were preparing to receive, almost to maintain, his widow and daughter, they were electrified by the tidings that the gentle little Fanny, at sixteen, had become the wife of Sir Stephen Temple, at sixty.

From that time little had been known about her; her mother had continued with her, but the two Mrs. Curtises had never been congenial or intimate; and Fanny was never a full nor willing correspondent, feeling perhaps the difficulty of writing under changed circumstances. Her husband had been in various commands in the colonies, without returning to England; and all that was known of her was a general impression that she had much ill-health and numerous children, and was tended like an infant by her bustling mother and doting husband. More than half a year back, tidings had come of the almost sudden death of her mother; and about three months subsequently, one of the officers of Sir Stephen's staff had written to announce that the good old general had been killed by a fall from his horse, while on a round of inspection at a distance from home. The widow was then completely prostrated by the shock, but promised to write as soon as she was able, and this was the

fulfilment of that promise, bringing the assurance that Fanny was coming back with her little ones to the home of her childhood.

Of that home, Grace and Rachel were the joint-heiresses, though it was owned by the mother for her life. It was an estate of farm and moorland, worth some three or four thousand a year, and the house was perched on a beautiful promontory, running out into the sea, and inclosing one side of a bay, where a small fishing-village had recently expanded into a quiet watering-place, esteemed by some for its remoteness from railways, and for the calm and simplicity that were yearly diminished by its increasing popularity. It was the family fashion to look down from their crag at the new esplanade with pity and contempt for the ruined loneliness of the pebbly beach; and as Mrs. Curtis had not health to go often into society, she had been the more careful where she trusted her daughters. They belonged to the county by birth and tradition, and were not to be mixed up with the fleeting residents of the watering-place, on whom they never called, unless by special recommendation from a mutual friend; and the few permanent inhabitants chanced to be such, that a visit to them was in some degree a condescension. Perhaps there was more of timidity and caution than of pride in the mother's exclusiveness, and Grace had always acquiesced in it as the natural and established state of affairs, without any sense of superiority, but rather of being protected. She had a few alarms as to the results of Rachel's new immunities of age, and though never questioning the wisdom of her clever sister's conclusions, dreaded the effect on the mother, whom she had been forbidden to call mamma. "At their age it was affecting an interesting childishness."

Rachel had had the palm of cleverness conceded to her ever since she could recollect, when she read better at three years old than her sister at five, and ever after, through the days of education, had enjoyed, and excelled in, the studies that were a toil to Grace. Subsequently, while Grace had contented herself with the ordinary course of unambitious feminine life, Rachel had thrown herself into the process of self-education with all her natural energy, and carried on her favourite studies by every means within her reach, until she considerably surpassed in acquirements and reflection all the persons with whom she came in frequent contact. It was a homely neighbourhood, a society well born, but of circumscribed interests and habits, and little connected with the great progressive world, where, however, Rachel's sympathies all lay, necessarily fed, however, by periodical literature, instead of by conversation or commerce with living minds.

She began by being stranded on the ignorance of those who surrounded her, and found herself isolated as a sort of pedant; and as time went on, the narrowness of interests chafed her, and in like manner left her alone. As she grew past girlhood, the cui bono question had come to interfere with her ardour in study for its own sake, and she felt the influence of an age eminently practical and sifting, but with small powers of acting. The quiet Lady Bountiful duties that had sufficed her mother and sister were too small and easy to satisfy a soul burning at the report of the great cry going up to heaven from a world of sin and woe. The examples of successful workers stimulated her longings to be up and doing, and yet the ever difficult question between charitable works and filial deference necessarily detained her, and perhaps all the more because it was not so much the fear of her mother's authority as of her horror and despair, that withheld her from the decisive and eccentric steps that she was always feeling impelled to take. Gentle Mrs. Curtis had never been a visible power in her house, and it was through their desire to avoid paining her that her government had been exercised over her two daughters ever since their father's death, which had taken place in Grace's seventeenth year. Both she and Grace implicitly accepted Rachel's superiority as an unquestionable fact, and the mother, when traversing any of her clever daughter's schemes, never disputed either her opinions or principles, only entreated that these particular developments might be conceded to her own weakness; and Rachel generally did concede. She could not act; but she could talk uncontradicted, and she hated herself for the enforced submission to a state of things that she despised.

This twenty-fifth birthday had long been anticipated as the turning-point when this submissive girlhood ought to close, and the privileges of acting as well as thinking for herself ought to be assumed.

Something to do was her cry, and on this very day that something seemed to be cast in her way. It was not ameliorating the condition of the masses, but it was educating those who might ameliorate them; and Rachel gladly hailed the prospect of a vocation that might be conducted without pain to her mother.

Young children of her own class were not exactly what her dream of usefulness had devised; but she had already a decided theory of education, and began to read up with all her might, whilst taking the lead in all the details of house taking, servant hiring, &c., to which her regular occupations of night school in the evening and reading to the lacemakers by day, became almost secondary. In due time the arrival of the ship was telegraphed, a hurried and affectionate note followed, and, on a bright east-windy afternoon, Rachel Curtis set forth to take up her mission. A telegram had announced the arrival of the Voluta, and the train which would bring the travellers to Avonchester. The Homestead carriage was sent to meet them, and Rachel in it, to give her helpless cousin assistance in this beginning of English habits. A roomy fly had been engaged for nurses and children, and Mrs. Curtis had put under the coachman's charge a parcel of sandwiches, and instructed him to offer all the appliances for making her own into an invalid carriage.

Full of warm tenderness to those who were to be dependent on her exertions, led by her good sense, Rachel paced the platform till the engine rushed up, and she looked along the line of windows, suddenly bewildered. Doors opened, but gentlemen alone met her disappointed eye, until close to her a soft voice said, "Rachel!" and she saw a figure in deep black close to her; but her hand had been hardly clasped before the face was turned eagerly to a tall, bearded man, who was lifting out little boy after little boy, apparently in an endless stream, till at last a sleeping baby was brought out in the arms of a nurse.

"Good-bye. Thank you, oh, thank you. You will come soon. Oh, do come on now."

"Do come on now," was echoed by many voices.

"I leave you in good hands. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. Conrade dear, see what Cyril is doing; never mind, Wilfred, the Major will come and see us; run on with Coombe." This last was a respectable military-looking servant, who picked up a small child in one hand and a dressing-case in the other, and awaited orders.

There was a clinging to the Major by all the children, only ended by his finally precipitating himself into the carriage, and being borne off. Then came a chorus—"Mamma, let me go with you;" "I'll go with mamma;" "Me go with mamma;" according to the gradations of age.

While Coombe and mamma decided the question by lifting the lesser ones into the fly, Rachel counted heads. Her mission exceeded her expectations. Here was a pair of boys in knickerbockers, a pair in petticoats, a pair in pelisses, besides the thing in arms. When the fly had been nearly crammed, the two knickerbockers and one pelisse remained for the carriage, quite against Rachel's opinion, but "Little Wilfred can sit on my lap, he has not been well, poor little man," was quite conclusive; and when Rachel suggested lying back to rest, there was a sweet, low laugh, and, "Oh, no thank you, Wilfred never tires me."

Rachel's first satisfaction was in seeing the veil disclose the face of eight years back, the same soft, clear, olive skin, delicate, oval face, and pretty deep-brown eyes, with the same imploring, earnest sweetness; no signs of having grown older, no sign of wear and tear, climate, or exertion, only the widow's dress and the presence of the great boys enhancing her soft youthfulness. The smile was certainly changed; it was graver, sadder, tenderer, and only conjured up by maternal affection or in grateful reply, and the blitheness of the young brow had changed to quiet pensiveness, but more than ever there was an air of dependence almost beseeching protection, and Rachel's heart throbbed with Britomart's devotion to her Amoret.

"Why wouldn't the Major come, mamma?"

"He will soon come, I hope, my dear."

Those few words gave Rachel a strong antipathy to the Major.

Then began a conversation under difficulties, Fanny trying to inquire after her aunt, and Rachel to detail the arrangements made for her at Myrtlewood, while the two boys were each accommodated with a window; but each moment they were claiming their mother's attention, or rushing across the ladies' feet to each other's window, treating Rachel's knees as a pivot, and vouchsafing not the slightest heed to her attempts at intelligent pointing out of the new scenes.

And Fanny made no apology, but seemed pleased, ready with answers and with eyes, apparently ignorant that Rachel's toes were less insensible than her own, and her heavy three-years-old Wilfred asleep on her lap all the time.

"She feeble, helpless, sickly!" thought Rachel, "I should have been less tired had I walked the twenty miles!"

She gave up talking in despair, and by the time the young gentlemen had tired themselves into quiescence, and began to eat the provisions, both ladies were glad to be allowed a little silence.

Coming over the last hill, Conrade roused at his mother's summons to look out at "home," and every word between them showed how fondly Avonmouth had been remembered far away.

"The sea!" said Fanny, leaning forwards to catch sight of the long grey line; "it is hard to believe we have been on it so long, this seems so much more my own."

"Yes," cried Rachel, "you are come to your own home, for us to take care of you."

"I take care of mamma! Major Keith said so," indignantly exclaimed Conrade.

"There's plenty of care for you both to take," said Fanny, half-smiling, half-sobbing. "The Major says I need not be a poor creature, and I will try. But I am afraid I shall be on all your hands."

Both boys drummed on her knee in wrath at her presuming to call herself a poor creature—Conrade glaring at Rachel as if to accuse her of the calumny.

"See the church," said Lady Temple, glad to divert the storm, and eagerly looking at the slender spire surmounting the bell-turret of a small building in early-decorated style, new, but somewhat stained by sea-wind, without having as yet acquired the tender tints of time. "How beautiful!" was her cry. "You were beginning the collection for it when I went away! How we used to wish for it."

"Yes, we did," said Rachel, with a significant sigh; but her cousin had no time to attend, for they were turning in a pepper-box lodge. The boys were told that they were arrived, and they were at the door of a sort of overgrown Swiss cottage, where Mrs. Curtis and Grace stood ready to receive them.

There was a confusion of embraces, fondlings, and tears, as Fanny clung to the aunt who had been a mother to her—perhaps a more tender one than the ruling, managing spirit, whom she had hardly known in her childhood; but it was only for a moment, for Wilfred shrieked out in an access of shyness at Grace's attempt to make acquaintance with him; Francis was demanding, "Where's the orderly?" and Conrade looking brimful of wrath at any one who made his mother cry. Moreover, the fly had arrived, and the remainder had to be produced, named, and kissed—Conrade and Francis, Leoline and Hubert, Wilfred and Cyril, and little Stephana the baby. Really the names were a study in themselves, and the cousins felt as if it would be hopeless to endeavour to apply them.

Servants had been engaged conditionally, and the house was fully ready, but the young mother could hardly listen to her aunt's explanations in her anxiety that the little ones should be rested and fed, and she responded with semi-comprehending thanks, while moving on with her youngest in her arms, and as many hanging to her dress as could get hold of it. Her thanks grew more emphatic at the sight of cribs in inviting order, and all things ready for a meal.

"I don't drink tea with nurse," was Conrade's cry, the signal for another general outcry, untranquillized by soothings and persuasions, till the door was shut on the younger half of the family, and those who could not open it remained to be comforted by nurse, a soldier's widow, who had been with them from the birth of Conrade.

The Temple form of shyness seemed to consist in ignoring strangers, but being neither abashed nor silenced, only resenting or avoiding all attempts at intercourse, and as the boys rushed in and out of the rooms, exploring, exclaiming, and calling mamma, to the interruption of all that was going

on, only checked for a few minutes by her uplifted hand and gentle hush, Grace saw her mother so stunned and bewildered that she rejoiced in the fear of cold that had decided that Rachel alone should spend the evening there. Fanny made some excuses; she longed to see more of her aunt, but when they were a little more settled,—and as a fresh shout broke out, she was afraid they were rather unruly, —she must come and talk to her at the dear Homestead. So kind of Rachel to stay—not that the boys seemed to think so, as they went racing in and out, stretching their ship-bound legs, and taking possession of the minute shrubbery, which they scorned for the want of gum-trees and parrots.

"You won't mind, Rachel dear, I must first see about baby;" and Rachel was left to reflect on her mission, while the boys' feet cantered up and down the house, and one or other of them would look in, and burst away in search of mamma.

Little more satisfactory was the rest of the evening, for the boys took a great deal of waiting on at tea, and then some of the party would not go to sleep in strange beds without long persuasions and comfortings, till Fanny looked so weary that it was plain that no conversation could have been hoped from her, even if the baby had been less vociferous. All that could be done for her was to wish her good-night, and promise to come down early.

Come early! Yes, Rachel might come, but what was the use of that when Fanny was at the mercy of so many claimants? She looked much better than the day before, and her sweet, soft welcome was most cordial and clinging. "Dear Rachel, it is like a dream to have you so near. I felt like the old life come back again to hear the surge of the sea all night, and know I should see you all so soon again."

"Yes, it is a great satisfaction to have you back in your old home, under our wing. I have a great deal to tell you about the arrangements."

"Oh yes; thank you—"

"Mamma!" roared two or three voices.

"I wanted to explain to you—" But Fanny's eye was roaming, and just then in burst two boys. "Mamma, nurse won't undo the tin box, and my ship is in it that the Major gave me."

"Yes, and my stuffed duck-bill, and I want it, mamma."

"My dear Con, the Major would not let you shout so loud about it, and you have not spoken to Aunt Rachel."

The boys did present their hands, and then returned to the charge. "Please order nurse to unpack it, mamma, and then Coombe will help us to sail it."

"Excuse me, dear Rachel," said Fanny, "I will first see about this."

And a very long seeing it was, probably meaning that she unpacked the box herself, whilst Rachel was deciding on the terrible spoiling of the children, and preparing a remonstrance.

"Dear Rachel, you have been left a long time."

"Oh, never mind that, but, Fanny, you must not give way to those children too much; they will be always—Hark! was that the door-bell?"

It was, and the visitor was announced as "Mr. Touchett;" a small, dark, thin young clergyman he was, of a nervous manner, which, growing more nervous as he shook hands with Rachel, became abrupt and hesitating.

"My call is—is early, Lady Temple; but I always pay my respects at once to any new parishioner —resident, I mean—in case I can be of any service."

"Thank you, I am very much obliged," said Fanny, with a sweet, gracious smile and manner that would have made him more at ease at once, if Rachel had not added, "My cousin is quite at home here, Mr. Touchett."

"Oh yes," he said, "so—so I understood."

"I know no place in England so well; it is quite a home to me, so beautiful it is," continued Fanny.

"And you see great changes here."

"Changes so much for the better," said Fanny, smiling her winning smile again.

"One always expects more from improvements than they effect," put in Rachel, severely.

"You have a large young party," said Mr. Touchett, looking uneasily towards Lady Temple.

"Yes, I have half a dozen boys and one little girl."

"Seven!" Mr. Touchett looked up half incredulous at the girlish contour of the gentle face, then cast down his eyes as if afraid he had been rude. "Seven! It is—it is a great charge."

"Yes, indeed it is," she said earnestly; "and I am sure you will be kind enough to give your influence to help me with them—poor boys."

"Oh! oh!" he exclaimed, "anything I can do—" in such a transport of eager helpfulness that Rachel coldly said, "We are all anxious to assist in the care of the children." He coloured up, and with a sort of effort at self-assertion, blurted out, "As the clergyman of the parish—," and there halted, and was beginning to look foolish, when Lady Temple took him up in her soft, persuasive way. "Of course we shall look to you so much, and you will be so kind as to let me know if there is any one I can send any broth to at anytime."

"Thank you; you are very good;" and he was quite himself again. "I shall have the pleasure of sending you down a few names."

"I never did approve the broken victual system," began Rachel, "it creates dependence."

"Come here, Hubert," said Fanny, beckoning a boy she saw at a distance, "come and shake hands with Mr. Touchett." It was from instinct rather than reason; there was a fencing between Rachel and the curate that made her uncomfortable, and led her to break it off by any means in her power; and though Mr. Touchett was not much at his ease with the little boy, this discussion was staged off. But again Mr. Touchett made bold to say that in case Lady Temple wished for a daily governess, he knew of a very desirable young person, a most admirable pair of sisters, who had met with great reverses, but Rachel snapped him off shorter than ever. "We can decide nothing yet; I have made up my mind to teach the little boys at present."

"Oh, indeed!"

"It is very kind," said the perplexed Lady Temple.

"I beg your pardon, I only thought, in case you were wishing for some one, that Miss Williams will be at liberty shortly."

"I do not imagine Miss Williams is the person to deal with little boys," said Rachel. "In fact, I think that home teaching is always better than hired."

"I am so much obliged," said Fanny, as Mr. Touchett, after this defeat, rose up to take leave, and she held out her hand, smiled, thanked, and sent him away so much sweetened and gratified, that Rachel would have instantly begun dissecting him, but that a whole rush of boys broke in, and again engrossed their mother, and in the next lull, the uppermost necessity was of explaining about the servants who had been hired for the time, one of whom was a young woman whose health had given way over her lace pillow, and Rachel was eloquent over the crying evils of the system (everything was a system with Rachel) that chained girls to an unhealthy occupation in their early childhood, and made an overstocked market and underpaid workers—holding Fanny fast to listen by a sort of fascination in her overpowering earnestness, and great fixed eyes, which, when once their grasp was taken, would not release the victim; and this was a matter of daily occurrence on which Rachel felt keenly and spoke strongly.

"It is very sad. If you want to help the poor things, I will give anything I can."

"Oh, yes, thank you, but it is doleful merely to help them to linger out the remnant of a life consumed upon these cobwebs of vanity. It is the fountainhead that must be reached—the root of the system!"

Fanny saw, or rather felt, a boy making signs at the window, but durst not withdraw her eyes from the fascination of those eager ones. "Lace and lacemakers are facts," continued Rachel; "but if the middle men were exploded, and the excess of workers drafted off by some wholesome outlet,

the price would rise, so that the remainder would be at leisure to fulfil the domestic offices of womanhood."

There was a great uproar above.

"I beg your pardon, dear Rachel," and away went Fanny.

"I do declare," cried Rachel, when Grace, having despatched her home-cares, entered the room a quarter of an hour after; "poor Fanny's a perfect slave. One can't get in a word edgeways."

Fanny at last returned, but with her baby; and there was no chance for even Rachel to assert herself while this small queen was in presence. Grace was devoted to infants, and there was a whole court of brothers vying with one another in picking up her constantly dropped toys, and in performing antics for her amusement. Rachel, desirous to be gracious and resigned, attempted conversation with one of the eldest pair, but the baby had but to look towards him, and he was at her feet.

On her departure, Rachel resumed the needful details of the arrangements respecting the house and servants, and found Lady Temple as grateful and submissive as ever, except that, when advised to take Myrtlewood for a term of seven years, she replied, that the Major had advised her not to bind herself down at once.

"Did you let him think we should quarrel?"

"Oh, no, my dear; but it might not agree with the children."

"Avonmouth! Grace, do you hear what heresy Fanny has been learning? Why, the proportion of ozone in the air here has been calculated to be five times that of even Aveton!"

"Yes, dearest," said poor Fanny, very humbly, and rather scared, "there is no place like Avonmouth, and I am sure the Major will think so when he has seen it."

"But what has he to do with your movements?"

"Sir Stephen wished—" murmured Fanny.

"The Major is military secretary, and always settles our head-quarters, and no one interferes with him," shouted Conrade.

Rachel, suspicious and jealous of her rival, was obliged to let Fanny pass on to the next item, where her eager acceptance of all that was prescribed to her was evidently meant as compensation for her refractoriness about the house.

Grace had meanwhile applied herself to keeping off the boys, and was making some progress in their good graces, and in distinguishing between their sallow faces, dark eyes, and crisp, black heads. Conrade was individualized, not only by superior height, but by soldierly bearing, bright pride glancing in his eyes, his quick gestures, bold, decided words, and imperious tone towards all, save his mother—and whatever he was doing, his keen, black eye was always turning in search of her, he was ever ready to spring to her side to wait on her, to maintain her cause in rough championship, or to claim her attention to himself. Francis was thick-set, round-shouldered, bullet-headed and dull-eyed, in comparison, not aggressive, but holding his own, and not very approachable; Leoline, thin, white-cheeked, large-eyed and fretful-lipped, was ready to whine at Conrade's tyranny and Francis's appropriations, but was grateful for Grace's protection, and more easy of access than his elders; and Hubert was a handsome, placid child, the good boy, as well as the beauty of the family. The pair in the nursery hardly came on the stage, and the two elders would be quite sufficient for Mrs. Curtis, with whom the afternoon was to be spent.

The mother, evidently, considered it a very long absence, but she was anxious to see both her aunt and her own home, and set out, leaning on Rachel's arm, and smiling pleased though sad recognition of the esplanade, the pebbly beach, bathing machines and fishing boats, and pointing them out to her sons, who, on their side, would only talk of the much greater extent of Melbourne.

Within the gates of the Homestead, there was a steep, sharp bit of road, cut out in the red sandstone rock, and after a few paces she paused to rest with a sigh that brought Conrade to her side, when she put her arm round his neck, and leant on his shoulder; but even her two supporters could not prevent her from looking pale and exhausted.

"Never mind," she said, "this salt wind is delightful. How like old times it is!" and she stood gazing across the little steep lawn at the grey sea, the line of houses following the curve of the bay, and straggling up the valley in the rear, and the purple headlands projecting point beyond point, showing them to her boys, and telling their names.

"It is all ugly and cold," said Francis, with an ungracious shiver. "I shall go home to Melbourne when I'm a man."

"And you will come, mamma?" added Conrade.

He had no answer, for Fanny was in her aunt's arms; and, like mother and daughter, they clung to each other—more able to sympathize, more truly one together, than the young widow could be with either of the girls.

As soon as Fanny had rested and enjoyed the home atmosphere downstairs, she begged to visit the dear old rooms, and carried Conrade through a course of recognitions through the scarcely altered apartments. Only one had been much changed, namely, the schoolroom, which had been stripped of the kindly old shabby furniture that Fanny tenderly recollected, and was decidedly bare; but a mahogany box stood on a stand on one side; there was a great accession of books, and writing implements occupied the plain deal table in the centre.

"What have you done to the dear old room—do you not use it still?" asked Fanny.

"Yes, I work here," said Rachel.

Vainly did Lady Temple look for that which women call work.

"I have hitherto ground on at after-education and self-improvement," said Rachel; "now I trust to make my preparation available for others. I will undertake any of your boys if you wish it."

"Thank you; but what is that box?"—in obedience to a curious push and pull from Conrade.

"It is her dispensary," said Grace.

"Yes," said Rachel, "you are weak and nervous, and I have just the thing for you."

"Is it homoeopathy?"

"Yes, here is my book. I have done great things in my district, and should do more but for prejudice. There, this globule is the very thing for your case; I made it out last night in my book. That is right, and I wanted to ask you some questions about little Wilfred."

Fanny had obediently swallowed her own globule, but little Wilfred was a different matter, and she retreated from the large eyes and open book, saying that he was better, and that Mr. Frampton should look at him; but Rachel was not to be eluded, and was in full career of elucidation to the meanest capacity, when a sharp skirmish between the boys ended the conversation, and it appeared that Conrade had caught Francis just commencing an onslaught on the globules, taking them for English sweetmeats of a minute description.

The afternoon passed with the strange heaviness well known to those who find it hard to resume broken threads after long parting. There was much affection, but not full certainty what to talk about, and the presence of the boys would have hindered confidence, even had they not incessantly occupied their mother. Conrade, indeed, betook himself to a book, but Francis was only kept out of mischief by his constantly turning over pictures with him; however, at dark, Coombe came to convey them home, and the ladies of the Homestead experienced a sense of relief. Rachel immediately began to talk of an excellent preparatory school.

"I was thinking of asking you," said Fanny, "if there is any one here who would come as a daily governess."

"Oh!" cried Rachel, "these two would be much better at school, and I would form the little ones, who are still manageable."

"Conrade is not eight years old yet," said his mother in an imploring tone, "and the Major said I need not part with him till he has grown a little more used to English ways."

"He can read, I see," said Grace, "and he told me he had done some Latin with the Major."

"Yes, he has picked up a vast deal of information, and on the voyage the Major used to teach him out of a little pocket Virgil. The Major said it would not be of much use at school, as there was no dictionary; but that the discipline and occupation would be useful, and so they were. Conrade, will do anything for the Major, and indeed so will they all."

Three Majors in one speech, thought Rachel; and by way of counteraction she enunciated, "I could undertake the next pair of boys easily, but these two are evidently wanting school discipline."

Lady Temple feathered up like a mother dove over her nest.

"You do not know Conrade. He is so trustworthy and affectionate, dear boy, and they are both always good with me. The Major said it often hurts boys to send them too young."

"They are very young, poor little fellows," said Mrs. Curtis.

"And if they are forward in some things they are backward in others," said Fanny. "What Major Keith recommended was a governess, who would know what is generally expected of little boys."

"I don't like half measures," muttered Rachel. "I do not approve of encouraging young women to crowd the overstocked profession of governesses."

Fanny opened her brown eyes, and awaited the words of wisdom.

"Is it not a flagrant abuse," continued Rachel, "that whether she have a vocation or not, every woman of a certain rank, who wishes to gain her own livelihood, must needs become a governess? A nursery maid must have a vocation, but an educated or half-educated woman has no choice; and educator she must become, to her own detriment, and that of her victims."

"I always did think governesses often much to be pitied," said Fanny, finding something was expected of her.

"What's the use of pity if one runs on in the old groove? We must prevent the market from being drugged, by diverting the supply into new lines."

"Are there any new lines?" asked Fanny, surprised at the progress of society in her absence.

"Homoeopathic doctresses," whispered Grace; who, dutiful as she was, sometimes indulged in a little fun, which Rachel would affably receive unless she took it in earnest, as in the present instance.

"Why not—I ask why not? Some women have broken through prejudice, and why should not others? Do you not agree with me, Fanny, that female medical men—I mean medical women—would be an infinite boon?"

"It would be very nice if they would never be nervous."

"Nerves are merely a matter of training. Think of the numbers that might be removed from the responsibility of incompetently educating! I declare that to tempt a person into the office of governess, instead of opening a new field to her, is the most short-sighted indolence."

"I don't want to tempt any one," said Fanny. "She ought to have been out before and be experienced, only she most be kind to the poor boys. I wanted the Major to inquire in London, but he said perhaps I might hear of some one here."

"That was right, my dear," returned her aunt. "A gentleman, an officer, could not do much in such a matter."

"He always does manage whatever one wants."

At which speech Rachel cast a glance towards her mother, and saw her look questioning and perplexed.

"I was thinking," said Grace, "that I believe the people at the Cliff Cottages are going away, and that Miss Williams might be at liberty."

"Didn't I know that Grace would come out with Miss Williams?" exclaimed Rachel. "A regular eruption of the Touchettomania. We have had him already advertising her."

"Miss Williams!" said Mrs. Curtis. "Yes, she might suit you very well. I believe they are very respectable young women, poor things! I have always wished that we could do more for them."

"Who?" asked Fanny.

"Certain pets of Mr. Touchett's," said Rachel; "some of the numerous ladies whose mission is that curatolatry into which Grace would lapse but for my strenuous efforts."

"I don't quite know why you call them his pets," said Grace, "except that he knew their antecedents, and told us about them."

"Exactly, that was enough, for me. I perfectly understand the meaning of Mr. Touchett's recommendations, and if what Fanny wants is a commonplace sort of upper nursemaid, I dare say it would do." And Rachel leant back, applied herself to her wood carving, and virtually retired from the discussion.

"One sister is a great invalid," said Grace, "quite a cripple, and the other goes out as a daily governess. They are a clergyman's daughters, and once were very well off, but they lost everything through some speculation of their brother. I believe he fled the country under some terrible suspicion of dishonesty; and though no one thought they had anything to do with it, their friends dropped them because they would not give him up, nor believe him guilty, and a little girl of his lives with them."

"Poor things!" exclaimed Lady Temple. "I should very much like to employ this one. How very sad."

"Mrs. Grey told me that her children had never done so well with any one," said Mrs. Curtis. "She wanted to engage Miss Williams permanently, but could not induce her to leave her sister, or even to remove her to London, on account of her health."

"Do you know her, Grace?" asked Fanny.

"I have called once or twice, and have been very much pleased with the sick sister; but Rachel does not fancy that set, you see. I meet the other at the Sunday school, I like her looks and manner very much, and she is always at the early service before her work."

"Just like a little mauve book!" muttered Rachel.

Fanny absolutely stared. "You go, don't you, Rachel? How we used to wish for it!"

"You have wished and we have tried," said Rachel, with a sigh.

"Yes, Rachel," said Grace; "but with all drawbacks, all disappointments in ourselves, it is a great blessing. We would not be without it."

"I could not be satisfied in relinquishing it voluntarily," said Rachel, "but I am necessarily one of the idle. Were I one of the occupied, laborare est orare would satisfy me, and that poor governess ought to feel the same. Think of the physical reaction of body on mind, and tell me if you could have the barbarity of depriving that poor jaded thing of an hour's sleep, giving her an additional walk, fasting, in all weathers, and preparing her to be savage with the children."

"Perhaps it refreshes her, and hinders her from being cross."

"Maybe she thinks so; but if she have either sense or ear, nothing would so predispose her to be cross as the squeaking of Mr. Touchett's penny-whistle choir."

"Poor Mr. Touchett," sighed Mrs. Curtis; "I wish he would not make such ambitious attempts."

"But you like the choral service," said Fanny, feeling as if everything had turned round. "When all the men of a regiment chant together you cannot think how grand it is, almost finer than the cathedral."

"Yes, where you can do it," said Rachel, "but not where you can't."

"I wish you would not talk about it," said Grace.

"I must, or Fanny will not understand the state of parties at Avonmouth."

"Parties! Oh, I hope not."

"My dear child, party spirit is another word for vitality. So you thought the church we sighed for had made the place all we sighed to see it, and ourselves too. Oh! Fanny is this what you have been across the world for?"

"What is wrong?" asked Fanny, alarmed.

"Do you remember our axiom? Build your church, and the rest will take care of itself. You remember our scraping and begging, and how that good Mr. Davison helped us out and brought the

endowment up to the needful point for consecration, on condition the incumbency was given to him. He held it just a year, and was rich, and could help out his bad health with a curate. But first he went to Madeira, and then he died, and there we are, a perpetual curacy of £70 a year, no resident gentry but ourselves, a fluctuating population mostly sick, our poor demoralized by them, and either crazed by dissent, or heathenized by their former distance from church. Who would take us? No more Mr. Davisons! There was no more novelty, and too much smartness to invite self-devotion. So we were driven from pillar to post till we settled down into this Mr. Touchett, as good a being as ever lived, working as hard as any two, and sparing neither himself nor any one else."

Fanny looked up prepared to admire.

"But he has two misfortunes. He was not born a gentleman, and his mind does not measure an inch across."

"Rachel, my dear, it is not fair to prejudice Fanny; I am sure the poor man is very well-behaved."

"Mother! would you be calling the ideal Anglican priest, poor man?"

"I thought he was quite gentlemanlike," added Fanny.

"Gentlemanlike! ay, that's it," said Rachel, "just so like as to delight the born curatolatress, like Grace and Miss Williams."

"Would it hurt the children?" asked Fanny, hardly comprehending the tremendous term.

"Yes, if it infected you," said Rachel, intending some playfullness. "A mother of contracted mind forfeits the allegiance of her sons."

"Oh, Rachel, I know I am weak and silly," said the gentle young widow, terrified, "but the Major said if I only tried to do my duty by them I should be helped."

"And I will help you, Fanny," said Rachel. "All that is requisite is good sense and firmness, and a thorough sense of responsibility."

"That is what is so dreadful. The responsibility of all those dear fatherless boys, and if—if I should do wrong by them."

Poor Fanny fell into an uncontrollable fit of weeping at the sense of her own desolation and helplessness, and Mrs. Curtis came to comfort her, and tell her affectionately of having gone through the like feelings, and of the repeated but most comfortable words of promise to the fatherless and the widow—words that had constantly come before the sufferer, but which had by no means lost their virtue by repetition, and Fanny was soothed with hearing instances of the special Providence over orphaned sons, and their love and deference for their mother. Rachel, shocked and distressed at the effect of her sense, retired out of the conversation, till at the announcement of the carriage for Lady Temple, her gentle cousin cheered up, and feeling herself to blame for having grieved one who only meant aid and kindness, came to her and fondly kissed her forehead, saying, "I am not vexed, dear Rachel, I know you are right. I am not clever enough to bring them up properly, but if I try hard, and pray for them, it may be made up to them. And you will help me, Rachel dear," she added, as her readiest woe-offering for her tears, and it was the most effectual, for Rachel was perfectly contented as long as Fanny was dependent on her, and allowed her to assume her mission, provided only that the counter influence could be averted, and this Major, this universal referee, be eradicated from her foolish clinging habits of reliance before her spirits were enough recovered to lay her heart open to danger.

But the more Rachel saw of her cousin, the more she realized this peril. When she went down on Monday morning to complete the matters of business that had been slurred over on the Saturday, she found that Fanny had not the slightest notion what her own income was to be. All she knew was that her General had left everything unreservedly to herself, except £100 and one of his swords to Major Keith, who was executor to the will, and had gone to London to "see about it," by which word poor Fanny expressed all the business that her maintenance depended on. If an old general wished to put a major in temptation, could he have found a better means of doing so? Rachel even thought that Fanny's incapacity to understand business had made her mistake the terms of the bequest, and

that Sir Stephen must have secured his property to his children; but Fanny was absolutely certain that this was not the case, for she said the Major had made her at once sign a will dividing the property among them, and appointing himself and her Aunt Curtis their guardians. “I did not like putting such a charge on my dear aunt,” said Fanny, “but the Major said I ought to appoint a relation, and I had no one else! And I knew you would all be good to them, if they had lost me too, when baby was born.”

“We would have tried,” said Rachel, a little humbly, “but oh! I am glad you are here, Fanny!”

Nothing could of course be fixed till the Major had “seen about it.” After which he was to come to let Lady Temple know the result; but she believed he would first go to Scotland to see his brother. He and his brother were the only survivors of a large family, and he had been on foreign service for twelve years, so that it would be very selfish to wish him not to take full time at home. “Selfish,” thought Rachel; “if he will only stay away long enough, you shall learn, my dear, how well you can do without him!”

The boys had interrupted the conversation less than the previous one, because the lesser ones were asleep, or walking out, and the elder ones having learnt that a new week was to be begun steadily with lessons, thought it advisable to bring themselves as little into notice as possible; but fate was sure to pursue them sooner or later, for Rachel had come down resolved on testing their acquirements, and deciding on the method to be pursued with them; and though their mamma, with a curtain instinctive shrinking both for them and for herself, had put off the ordeal to the utmost by listening to all the counsel about her affairs, it was not to be averted.

“Now, Fanny, since it seems that more cannot be done at present, let us see about the children’s education. Where are their books?”

“We have very few books,” said Fanny, hesitating; “we had not much choice where we were.”

“You should have written to me for a selection.”

“Why—so we would, but there was always a talk of sending Conrade and Francis home. I am afraid you will think them very backward, dear Rachel, especially Francie; but it is not their fault, dear children, and they are not used to strangers,” added Fanny, nervously.

“I do not mean to be a stranger,” said Rachel.

And while Fanny, in confusion, made loving protestations about not meaning that, Rachel stepped out upon the lawn, and in her clear voice called “Conrade, Francis!” No answer. She called “Conrade” again, and louder, then turned round with “where can they be—not gone down on the beach?”

“Oh, dear no, I trust not,” said the mother, flurried, and coming to the window with a call that seemed to Rachel’s ears like the roar of a sucking dove.

But from behind the bushes forth came the two young gentlemen, their black garments considerably streaked with the green marks of laurel climbing.

“Oh, my dears, what figures you are! Go to Coombe and get yourselves brushed, and wash your hands, and then come down, and bring your lesson books.”

Rachel prognosticated that these preparations would be made the occasion, of much waste of time; but she was answered, and with rather surprised eyes, that they had never been allowed to come into the drawing-room without looking like little gentlemen.

“But you are not living in state here,” said Rachel; “I never could enter into the cult some people, mamma especially, pay to their drawing-room.”

“The Major used to be very particular about their not coming to sit down untidy,” said Fanny. “He said it was not good for anybody.”

Martinet! thought Rachel, nearly ready to advocate the boys making no toilette at any time; and the present was made to consume so much time that, urged by her, Fanny once more was obliged to summon her boys and their books.

It was not an extensive school library—a Latin grammar an extremely dilapidated spelling-book, and the fourth volume of Mrs. Marcet’s “Little Willie.” The other three—one was unaccounted

for, but Cyril had torn up the second, and Francis had thrown the first overboard in a passion. Rachel looked in dismay. “I don’t know what can be done with these!” she said.

“Oh, then we’ll have holidays till we have got books, mamma,” said Conrade, putting his hands on the sofa, and imitating a kicking horse.

“It is very necessary to see what kind of books you ought to have,” returned Rachel. “How far have you gone in this?”

“I say, mamma,” reiterated Conrade, “we can’t do lessons without books.”

“Attend to what your Aunt Rachel says, my dear; she wants to find out what books you should have.”

“Yes, let me examine you.”

Conrade came most inconveniently close to her; she pushed her chair back; he came after her. His mother uttered a remonstrating, “My dear!”

“I thought she wanted to examine me,” quoth Conrade. “When Dr. M’Vicar examines a thing, he puts it under a microscope.”

It was said gravely, and whether it were malice or simplicity, Rachel was perfectly unable to divine, but she thought anyway that Fanny had no business to laugh, and explaining the species of examination that she intended, she went to work. In her younger days she had worked much at schools, and was really an able and spirited teacher, liking the occupation; and laying hold of the first book in her way, she requested Conrade to read. He obeyed, but in such a detestable gabble that she looked up appealingly to Fanny, who suggested, “My dear, you can read better than that.” He read four lines, not badly, but then broke off, “Mamma, are not we to have ponies? Coombe heard of a pony this morning; it is to be seen at the ‘Jolly Mariner,’ and he will take us to look at it.”

“The ‘Jolly Mariner!’ It is a dreadful place, Fanny, you never will let them go there?”

“My dear, the Major will see about your ponies when he comes.”

“We will send the coachman down to inquire,” added Rachel.

“He is only a civilian, and the Major always chooses our horses,” said Conrade.

“And I am to have one too, mamma,” added Francis. “You know I have been out four times with the staff, and the Major said I could ride as well as Con!”

“Reading is what is wanted now, my dear, go on.”

Five lines more; but Francis and his mother were whispering together, and of course Conrade stopped to listen. Rachel saw there was no hope but in getting him alone, and at his mother’s reluctant desire, he followed her to the dining-room; but there he turned dogged and indifferent, made a sort of feint of doing what he was told, but whether she tried him in arithmetic, Latin, or dictation, he made such ludicrous blunders as to leave her in perplexity whether they arose from ignorance or impertinence. His spelling was phonetic to the highest degree, and though he owned to having done sums, he would not, or did not answer the simplest question in mental arithmetic. “Five apples and eight apples, come, Conrade, what will they make?”

“A pie.”

That was the hopeful way in which the examination proceeded, and when Rachel attempted to say that his mother would be much displeased, he proceeded to tumble head over heels all round the room, as if he knew better; which performance broke up the seance, with a resolve on her part that when she had the books she would not be so beaten. She tried Francis, but he really did know next to nothing, and whenever he came to a word above five letters long stopped short, and when told to spell it, said, “Mamma never made him spell;” also muttering something depreciating about civilians.

Rachel was a woman of perseverance. She went to the bookseller’s, and obtained a fair amount of books, which she ordered to be sent to Lady Temple’s. But when she came down the next morning, the parcel was nowhere to be found. There was a grand interrogation, and at last it turned out to have been safely deposited in an empty dog-kennel in the back yard. It was very hard on Rachel that Fanny giggled like a school-girl, and even though ashamed of herself and her sons, could not find voice

to scold them respectably. No wonder, after such encouragement, that Rachel found her mission no sinecure, and felt at the end of her morning's work much as if she had been driving pigs to market, though the repetition was imposing on the boys a sort of sense of fate and obedience, and there was less active resistance, though learning it was not, only letting teaching be thrown at them. All the rest of the day, except those two hours, they ran wild about the house, garden, and beach—the latter place under the inspection of Coombe, whom, since the "Jolly Mariner" proposal, Rachel did not in the least trust; all the less when she heard that Major Keith, whose soldier-servant he had originally been, thought very highly of him. A call at Myrtlewood was formidable from the bear-garden sounds, and delicate as Lady Temple was considered to be, unable to walk or bear fatigue, she never appeared to be incommoded by the uproar in which she lived, and had even been seen careering about the nursery, or running about the garden, in a way that Grace and Rachel thought would tire a strong woman. As to a tete-a-tete with her, it was never secured by anything short of Rachel's strong will, for the children were always with her, and she went to bed, or at any rate to her own room, when they did, and she was so perfectly able to play and laugh with them that her cousins scarcely thought her sufficiently depressed, and comparing her with what their own mother had been after ten months' widowhood, agreed that after all "she had been very young, and Sir Stephen very old, and perhaps too much must not be expected of her."

"The grand passion of her life is yet to come," said Rachel.

"I hope not," said Grace.

"You may be certain of that," said Rachel. "Feminine women always have it one time or other in their lives; only superior ones are exempt. But I hope I may have influence enough to carry her past it, and prevent her taking any step that might be injurious to the children."

# CHAPTER II. RACHEL'S DISCIPLINE

"Thought is free, as sages tells us—
Free to rove, and free to soar;
But affection lives in bondage,
That enthrals her more and more."

*JEAN INGELOW.*

An old friend lived in the neighbourhood who remembered Fanny's father, and was very anxious to see her again, though not able to leave the house. So the first day that it was fine enough for Mrs. Curtis to venture out, she undertook to convey Fanny to call upon her, and was off with a wonderfully moderate allowance of children, only the two youngest boys outside with their maid. This drive brought more to light about Fanny's past way of life and feelings than had ever yet appeared. Rachel had never elicited nearly so much as seemed to have come forth spontaneously to the aunt, who had never in old times been Fanny's confidante.

Fanny's life had been almost a prolonged childhood. From the moment of her marriage with the kind old General, he and her mother had conspired to make much of her; all the more that she was almost constantly disabled by her state of health, and was kept additionally languid and helpless by the effects of climate. Her mother had managed her household, and she had absolutely had no care, no duty at all but to be affectionate and grateful, and to be pretty and gracious at the dinner parties. Even in her mother's short and sudden illness, the one thought of both the patient and the General had been to spare Fanny, and she had been scarcely made aware of the danger, and not allowed to witness the suffering. The chivalrous old man who had taken on himself the charge of her, still regarded the young mother of his children as almost as much of a baby herself, and devoted himself all the more to sparing her trouble, and preventing her from feeling more thrown upon her by her mother's death. The notion of training her to act alone never even occurred to him, and when he was thrown from his horse, and carried into a wayside-hut to die, his first orders were that no hurried message might be sent to her, lest she might be startled and injured by the attempt to come to him. All he could do for her was to leave her in the charge of his military secretary, who had long been as a son to him. Fanny told her aunt with loving detail all that she had heard from Major Keith of the brave old man's calm and resigned end—too full of trust even to be distressed with alarms for the helpless young wife and children, but committing them in full reliance to the care of their Father in heaven, and to the present kindness of the friend who stood by his pillow.

The will, which not only Rachel but her mother thought strangely unguarded, had been drawn up in haste, because Sir Stephen's family had outgrown the provisions of a former one, which had besides designated her mother, and a friend since dead, as guardians. Haste, and the conscious want of legal knowledge, had led to its being made as simple as possible, and as it was, Sir Stephen had scarcely had the power to sign it.

It was Major Keith who had borne the tidings to the poor little widow, and had taken the sole care of the boys during the sad weeks of care utter prostration and illness. Female friends were with her, and tended her affectionately, but if exertion or thought were required of her, the Major had to be called to her sofa to awaken her faculties, and she always awoke to attend to his wishes, as though he were the channel of her husband's. This state of things ended with the birth of the little girl, the daughter that Sir Stephen had so much wished for, coming too late to be welcomed by him, but awakening her mother to tearful joy and renewed powers of life. The nine months of little Stephana's life had been a tone of continual change and variety, of new interests and occupations, and of the resumption of a feeling of health which had scarcely been tasted since the first plunge into warm

climates. Perhaps it was unreasonable to expect to find Fanny broken down; and she talked in her own simple way with abundant overflowing affection of her husband; but even Mrs. Curtis thought it was to her more like the loss of her own father than of the father of her children; and though not in the least afraid of anything unbecoming in her gentle, retiring Fanny, still felt that it was more the charge of a girl than of a widow, dreaded the boys, dreaded their fate, and dreaded the Major more.

During this drive, Grace and Rachel had the care of the elder boys, whom Rachel thought safer in her keeping than in Coombe's. A walk along the cliffs was one resource for their amusement, but it resulted in Conrade's climbing into the most break-neck places, by preference selecting those that Rachel called him out of, and as all the others thought it necessary to go after him, the jeopardy of Leoline and Hubert became greater than it was possible to permit; so Grace took them by the hands, and lured them home with promises of an introduction to certain white rabbits at the lodge. After their departure, their brothers became infinitely more obstreperous. Whether it were that Conrade had some slight amount of consideration for the limbs of his lesser followers, or whether the fact were—what Rachel did not remotely imagine—that he was less utterly unmanageable with her sister than with herself, certain it is that the brothers went into still more intolerable places, and treated their guardian as ducklings treat an old hen. At last they quite disappeared from the view round a projecting point of rock, and when she turned it, she found a battle royal going on over an old lobster-pot—Conrade hand to hand with a stout fisher-boy, and Francis and sundry amphibious creatures of both sexes exchanging a hail of stones, water-smoothed brick-bats, cockle-shells, fishes' backbones, and other unsavoury missiles. Abstractedly, Rachel had her theory that young gentlemen had better scramble their way among their poor neighbours, and become used to all ranks; but when it came to witnessing an actual skirmish when she was responsible for Fanny's sons, it was needful to interfere, and in equal dismay and indignation she came round the point. The light artillery fled at her aspect, and she had to catch Francis's arm in the act of discharging after them a cuttlefish's white spine, with a sharp "For shame, they are running away! Conrade, Zack, have done!" Zack was one of her own scholars, and held her in respect.

He desisted at once, and with a touch of his rough forelock, looked sheepish, and said, "Please ma'am, he was meddling with our lobster-pot."

"I wasn't doing any harm," said Conrade. "I was just looking in, and they all came and shied stones at us."

"I don't care how the quarrel began," said Rachel. "You would not have run into it if you had been behaving properly. Zack was quite right to protect his father's property, but he might have been more civil. Now shake hands, and have done with it."

"Not shake hands with a low boy," growled Francis. But happily Conrade was of a freer spirit, and in spite of Rachel's interference, had sense enough to know himself in the wrong. He held out his hand, and when the ceremony had been gone through, put his hands in his pockets, produced a shilling, and said, "There, that's in case I did the thing any harm." Rachel would have preferred Zachary's being above its acceptance, but he was not, and she was thankful that a wood path offend itself, leading through the Homestead plantations away from the temptations and perils of the shore.

That the two boys, instead of listening to her remonstrance, took to punching and kicking one another, was a mitigated form of evil for which she willingly compounded, having gone through so much useless interference already, that she felt as if she had no spirit left to keep the peace, and that they must settle their little affairs between themselves. It was the most innocent diversion in which she could hope to see them indulge. She only desired that it might last them past a thrush's nest, in the hedge between the park and plantation, a somewhat treasured discovery of Grace's. No such good luck. Either the thrush's imprudence or Grace's visits had made the nest dangerously visible, and it was proclaimed with a shout. Rachel, in hot haste, warned them against taking birds'-nests in general, and that in particular.

"Nests are made to be taken," said Francis.

"I've got an egg of all the Australian birds the Major could get me," said Conrade, "and I mean to have all the English ones."

"Oh, one egg; there's no harm in taking that; but this nest has young birds."

The young birds must of course be seen, and Rachel stood by with despairing frowns, commands, and assurances of their mother's displeasure, while they peeped in, tantalized the gaping yellow throats, by holding up their fingers, and laid hands on the side of the nest, peeping at her with laughing, mischievous eyes, enjoying her distress. She was glad at last to find them coming away without the nest, and after crossing the park, arrived at the house, tired out, but with two hours of the boys still on her hands. They, however, were a little tired, too; and, further, Grace had hunted out the old bowls, much to the delight of the younger ones. This sport lasted a good while, but at last the sisters, who had relaxed their attention a little, perceived that Conrade and Hubert were both missing, and on Rachel's inquiry where they were, she received from Francis that elegant stock answer, "in their skins." However, they came to light in process of time, the two mothers returned home, and Mrs. Curtis and Grace had the conversation almost in their own hands. Rachel was too much tired to do anything but read the new number of her favourite "Traveller's Magazine," listening to her mother with one ear, and gathering additional impressions of Sir Stephen Temple's imprudence, and the need of their own vigilance. To make Fanny feel that she could lean upon some one besides the military secretary, seemed to be the great object, and she was so confiding and affectionate with her own kin, that there were great hopes. Those boys were an infliction, no doubt, but, thought Rachel, "there is always an ordeal at the beginning of one's mission. I am mastering them by degrees, and should do so sooner if I had them in my own hands, and no more worthy task can be done than training human beings for their work in this world, so I must be willing to go through a little while I bring them into order, and fit their mother for managing them."

She spent the time before breakfast the next morning in a search among the back numbers of the "Traveller's Magazine" for a paper upon "Educational Laws," which she thought would be very good reading for Fanny. Her search had been just completed when Grace returned home from church, looking a good deal distressed. "My poor thrushes have not escaped, Rachel," she said; "I came home that way to see how they were going on, and the nest is torn out, one poor little fellow lying dead below it."

"Well, that is much worse than I expected!" burst out Rachel. "I did think that boy Conrade would at least keep his promises." And she detailed the adventure of the previous day, whence the conclusion was but too evident. Grace, however, said in her own sweet manner that she believed boys could not resist a nest, and thought it mere womanhood to intercede for such lawful game. She thought it would be best to take no notice, it would only distress Fanny and make "the mother" more afraid of the boys than she was already, and she doubted the possibility of bringing it home to the puerile conscience.

"That is weak!" said Rachel. "I received the boy's word, and it is my business to deal with the breach of promise."

So down went Rachel, and finding the boys rushing about the garden, according to their practice, before her arrival, she summoned Conrade, and addressed him with, "Well, Conrade, I knew that you were violent and disobedient, but I never expected you to fail in your honour as a gentleman."

"I'll thrash any one who says I have," hotly exclaimed Conrade.

"Then you must thrash me. You gave your word to me not to take your Aunt Grace's thrush's nest."

"And I didn't," said Conrade, boldly.

But Rachel, used to flat denials at the village-school, was not to be thus set aside. "I am shocked at you, Conrade," she said. "I know your mamma will be exceedingly grieved. You must have fallen into very sad ways to be able to utter such a bold untruth. You had better confess at once, and then I shall have something to tell her that will comfort he."

Conrade's dark face looked set as iron.

"Come; tell me you are sorry you took the nest, and have broken your word, and told a falsehood."

Red colour flushed into the brown cheek, and the hands were clenched.

"There is not the smallest use in denying it. I know you took it when you and Hubert went away together. Your Aunt Grace found it gone this morning, and one of the poor little birds dead below. What have you done with the others?"

Not a word.

"Then I grieve to say I must tell all to your mother."

There was a sort of smile of defiance, and he followed her. For a moment she thought of preventing this, and preparing Fanny in private, but recollecting that this would give him the opportunity of preparing Hubert to support his falsehood, she let him enter with her, and sought Lady Temple in the nursery.

"Dear Fanny, I am very sorry to bring you so much vexation. I am afraid it will be a bitter grief to you, but it is only for Conrade's own sake that I do it. It was a cruel thing to take a bird's-nest at all, but worse when he knew that his Aunt Grace was particularly fond of it; and, besides, he had promised not to touch it, and now, saddest of all, he denies having done so."

"Oh, Conrade, Conrade!" cried Fanny, quite confounded, "You can't have done like this!"

"So, I have not," said Conrade, coming up to her, as she held out her hand, positively encouraging him, as Rachel thought, to persist in the untruth.

"Listen, Fanny," said Rachel. "I do not wonder that you are unwilling to believe anything so shocking, but I do not come without being only too certain." And she gave the facts, to which Fanny listened with pale cheeks and tearful eyes, then turned to the boy, whose hand she had held all the time, and said, "Dear Con, do pray tell me if you did it."

"I did not," said Conrade, wrenching his hand away, and putting it behind his back.

"Where's Hubert?" asked Rachel, looking round, and much vexed when she perceived that Hubert had been within hearing all the time, though to be sure there was some little hope to be founded upon the simplicity of five years old.

"Come here, Hubert dear," said his mother; "don't be frightened, only come and tell me where you and Con went yesterday, when the others were playing at bowls." Hubert hung his head, and looked at his brother.

"Tell," quoth Conrade. "Never mind her, she's only a civilian."

"Where did you go, Hubert?"

"Con showed me the little birds in their nest."

"That is right, Hubert, good little boy. Did you or he touch the nest?"

"Yes." Then, as Conrade started, and looked fiercely at him, "Yes you did, Con, you touched the inside to see what it was made of."

"But what did you do with it?" asked Rachel.

"Left it there, up in the tree," said the little boy.

"There, Rachel!" said the mother, triumphantly.

"I don't know what you mean," said Rachel, angrily, "only that Conrade is a worse boy than I had thought him, end has been teaching his little brother falsehood."

The angry voice set Hubert crying, and little Cyril, who was very soft-hearted, joined in chorus, followed by the baby, who was conscious of something very disagreeable going on in her nursery. Thereupon, after the apparently most important business of comforting Miss Temple had been gone through, the court of justice adjourned, Rachel opening the door of Conrade's little room, and recommending solitary imprisonment there till he should be brought to confession. She did not at all reckon on his mother going in with him, and shutting the door after her. It was not the popular notion

of solitary confinement, and Rachel was obliged to retire, and wait in the drawing-room for a quarter of an hour before Fanny came down, and then it was to say—

"Do you know, Rachel dear, I am convinced that it must be a mistake. Conrade assures me he never touched the nest."

"So he persists in it?"

"And indeed, Rachel dear, I cannot help believing him. If it had been Francie, now; but I never knew Conrade tell an untruth in his life."

"You never knew, because you always believe him."

"And it is not only me, but I have often heard the Major say he could always depend on Conrade's word."

Rachel's next endeavour was at gentle argument. "It must be dreadful to make such a discovery, but it was far worse to let deceit go on undetected; and if only they were firm—" At that moment she beheld two knickerbocker boys prancing on the lawn.

"Didn't you lock the door? Has he broken out? How audacious!"

"I let him come out," said Fanny; "there was nothing to shut him up for. I beg your pardon, dear Rachel; I am very sony for the poor little birds and for Grace, but I am sure Conrade did not take it."

"How can you be so unreasonable, Fanny—the evidence," and Rachel went over it all again.

"Don't you think," said Fanny, "that some boy may have got into the park?"

"My dear Fanny, I am sorry for you, it is quite out of the question to think so; the place is not a stone's-throw from Randall's lodge. It will be the most fatal thing in the world to let your weakness be imposed on in this way. Now that the case is clear, the boy must be forced to confession, and severely punished."

Fanny burst into tears.

"I am very sorry for you, Fanny. I know it is very painful; I assure you it is so to me. Perhaps it would be best if I were to lock him up, and go from time to time to see if he is come to a better mind."

She rose up.

"No, no, Rachel!" absolutely screamed Fanny, starting up, "my boy hasn't done anything wrong, and I won't have him locked up! Go away! If anything is to be done to my boys, I'll do it myself: they haven't got any one but me. Oh, I wish the Major would come!"

"Fanny, how can you be so foolish?—as if I would hurt your boys!"

"But you won't believe Conrade—my Conrade, that never told a falsehood in his life!" cried the mother, with a flush in her cheeks and a bright glance in her soft eyes. "You want me to punish him for what he hasn't done."

"How much alike mothers are in all classes of life," thought Rachel, and much in the way in which she would have brought Zack's mother to reason by threats of expulsion from the shoe-club, she observed, "Well Fanny, one thing is clear, while you are so weak as to let that boy go on in his deceit, unrepentant and unpunished, I can have no more to do with his education."

"Indeed," softly said Fanny, "I am afraid so, Rachel. You have taken a great deal of trouble, but Conrade declares he will never say a lesson to you again, and I don't quite see how to make him after this."

"Oh, very well; then there's an end of it. I am sorry for you, Fanny."

And away walked Rachel, and as she went towards the gate two artificial jets d'eau, making a considerable curve in the air, alighted, the one just before her, the other, better aimed, in the back of her neck. She had too much dignity to charge back upon the offenders, but she went home full of the story of Fanny's lamentable weakness, and prognostications of the misery she was entailing on herself. Her mother and sister were both much concerned, and thought Fanny extremely foolish; Mrs. Curtis consoling herself with the hope that the boys would be cured and tamed at school, and begging that they might never be let loose in the park again. Rachel could not dwell much longer on the matter, for she had to ride to Upper Avon Park to hold council on the books to be ordered for

the book-club; for if she did got go herself, whatever she wanted especially was always set aside as too something or other for the rest of the subscribers.

Mrs. Curtis was tired, and stayed at home; and Grace spent the afternoon in investigations about the harrying of the thrushes, but, alas! without coming a bit nearer the truth. Nothing was seen or heard of Lady Temple till, at half-past nine, one of the midges, or diminutive flies used at Avonmonth, came to the door, and Fanny came into the drawing-room—wan, tearful, agitated.

"Dear Rachel, I am so afraid I was hasty, I could not sleep without coming to tell you how sorry I am."

"Then you are convinced? I knew you would be."

"Oh, yes, I have just been sitting by him after he was gone to bed. He never goes to sleep till I have done that, and he always tells me if anything is on his mind. I could not ask him again, it would have been insulting him; but he went over it all of himself, and owned he ought not to have put a finger on the edge of the nest, but he wanted so to see what it was lined with; otherwise he never touched it. He says, poor boy, that it was only your being a civilian that made you not able to believe him, I am sure you must believe him now."

Mrs. Curtis began, in her gentle way, about the difficulty of believing one's children in fault, but Lady Temple was entirely past accepting the possibility of Conrade's being to blame in this particular instance. It made her bristle up again, so that even Rachel saw the impossibility of pressing it, and trusted to some signal confutation to cure her of her infatuation. But she was as affectionate as ever, only wanting to be forgiven for the morning's warmth, and to assure dear Aunt Curtis, dear Grace, and dearest Rachel in particular, that there was no doing without them, and it was the greatest blessing to be near them.

"Oh! and the squirting, dear Rachel! I was so sorry when I found it out, it was only Francie and Leo. I was very angry with them for it, and I should like to make them ask pardon, only I don't think Francie would. I'm afraid they are very rude boys. I must write to the Major to find me a governess that won't be very strict with them, and if she could be an officer's daughter, the boys would respect her so much more."

# CHAPTER III. MACKAREL LANE

"For I would lonely stand
Uplifting my white hand,
On a mission, on a mission,
To declare the coming vision."

*ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.*

"Well, Grace, all things considered, perhaps I had better walk down with you to Mackarel Lane, and then I can form a judgment on these Williamses without committing Fanny."

"Then you do not intend to go on teaching?"

"Not while Conrade continues to brave me, and is backed up by poor Fanny."

"I might speak to Miss Williams after church, and bring her in to Myrtlewood for Fanny to see."

"Yes, that might do in time; but I shall make up my mind first. Poor Fanny is so easily led that we must take care what influences fall in her way."

"I always wished you would call."

"Yes, and I would not by way of patronage to please Mr. Touchett, but this is for a purpose; and I hope we shall find both sisters at home."

Mackarel Lane was at right angles to the shore, running up the valley of the Avon; but it soon ceased to be fishy, and became agricultural, owning a few cottages of very humble gentility, which were wont to hang out boards to attract lodgers of small means. At one of these Grace rang, and obtained admittance to a parlour with crazy French windows opening on a little strip of garden. In a large wheeled chair, between the fire and the window, surrounded by numerous little appliances for comfort and occupation, sat the invalid Miss Williams, holding out her hand in welcome to the guests.

"A fine countenance! what one calls a fine countenance!" thought Rachel. "Is it a delusion of insipidity as usual? The brow is good, massive, too much for the features, but perhaps they were fuller once; eyes bright and vigorous, hazel, the colour for thought; complexion meant to be brilliant brunette, a pleasant glow still; hair with threads of grey. I hope she does not affect youth; she can't be less than one or two and thirty! Many people set up for beauties with far less claim. What is the matter with her? It is not the countenance of deformity—accident, I should say. Yes, it is all favourable except the dress. What a material; what a pattern! Did she get it second-hand from a lady's-maid? Will there be an incongruity in her conversation to match? Let us see. Grace making inquiries—Quite at my best—Ah! she is not one of the morbid sort, never thinking themselves better."

"I was afraid, I had not seen you out for some time."

"No; going out is a troublesome business, and sitting in the garden answers the same purpose."

"Of air, perhaps, but hardly of change or of view."

"Oh! I assure you there is a wonderful variety," she answered, with an eager and brilliant smile.

"Clouds and sunsets?" asked Rachel, beginning to be interested.

"Yes, differing every day. Then I have the tamarisk and its inhabitants. There has been a tom-tit's nest every year since we came, and that provides us with infinite amusement. Besides the sea-gulls are often so good as to float high enough for me to see them. There is a wonderful charm in a circumcribed view, because one is obliged to look well into it all."

"Yes; eyes and no eyes apply there," said Rachel.

"We found a great prize, too, the other day. Rosie!"

At the call a brown-haired, brown-eyed child of seven, looking like a little fawn, sprang to the window from the outside.

"My dear, will you show the sphynx to Miss Curtis?"

The little girl daintily brought a box covered with net, in which a huge apple-green caterpillar, with dashes of bright colour on his sides, and a horny spike on his tail, was feasting upon tamarisk leaves. Grace asked if she was going to keep it. “Yes, till it buries itself,” said the child. “Aunt Ermine thinks it is the elephant sphynx.”

“I cannot be sure,” said the aunt, “my sister tried to find a figure of it at Villars’, but he had no book that gave the caterpillars. Do you care for those creatures?”

“I like to watch them,” said Grace, “but I know nothing about them scientifically; Rachel does that.”

“Then can you help us to the history of our sphynx?” asked Miss Williams, with her pleasant look.

“I will see if I have his portrait,” said Rachel, “but I doubt it. I prefer general principles to details.”

“Don’t you find working out details the best way of entering into general principles?”

It was new to Rachel to find the mention of a general principle received neither with a stare nor a laugh; and she gathered herself up to answer, “Naming and collecting is not science.”

“And masonry is not architecture, but you can’t have architecture without it.”

“One can have broad ideas without all the petty work of flower botanists and butterfly naturalists.”

“Don’t you think the broad ideas would be rather of the hearsay order, at least to most people, unless their application were worked out in the trifle that came first to hand?”

“Experimental philosophy,” said Rachel, in rather a considering tone, as if the notion, when presented to her in plain English, required translation into the language of her thoughts.

“If you like to call it so,” said Miss Williams, with a look of arch fun. “For instance, the great art of mud pie taught us the porous nature of clay, the expansive power of steam, etc. etc.”

“You had some one to improve it to you?”

“Oh dear no. Only afterwards, when we read of such things we remembered how our clay manufactures always burst in the baking unless they were well dried first.”

“Then you had the rare power of elucidating a principle?”

“No, not I. My brother had; but I could only perceive the confirmation.”

“This reminds me of an interesting article on the Edgeworth system of education in the ‘Traveller’s Review.’ I will send it down to you.”

“Thank you, but I have it here.”

“Indeed; and do you not think it excellent, and quite agree with it?”

“Yes, I quite agree with it,” and there was an odd look in her bright transparent eyes that made Grace speculate whether she could have heard that agreement with the Invalid in the “Traveller’s Review” was one of the primary articles of faith acquired by Rachel.

But Grace, though rather proud of Rachel’s falling under the spell of Miss Williams’ conversation, deemed an examination rather hard on her, and took the opportunity of asking for her sister.

“She is generally at home by this time; but this is her last day at Cliff Cottages, and she was to stay late to help in the packing up.”

“Will she be at home for the present?” asked Grace.

“Yes, Rose and I are looking forward to a festival of her.”

Grace was not at all surprised to hear Rachel at once commit herself with “My cousin, Lady Temple,” and rush into the matter in hand as if secure that the other Miss Williams would educate on the principles of the Invalid; but full in the midst there was a sound of wheels and a ring at the bell. Miss Williams quietly signed to her little attendant to put a chair in an accessible place, and in walked Lady Temple, Mrs. Curtis, and the middle brace of boys.

"The room will be too full," was Grace's aside to her sister, chiefly thinking of her mother, but also of their hostess; but Rachel returned for answer, "I must see about it;" and Grace could only remove herself into the verandah, and try to attract Leoline and Hubert after her, but failing in this, she talked to the far more conversible Rose about the bullfinch that hung at the window, which loved no one but Aunt Ermine, and scolded and pecked at every one else; and Augustus, the beloved tame toad, that lived in a hole under a tree in the garden. Mrs. Curtis, considerate and tender-hearted, startled to find her daughter in the field, and wishing her niece to begin about her own affairs, talked common-place by way of filling up the time, and Rachel had her eyes free for a range of the apartment. The foundation was the dull, third-rate lodging-house, the superstructure told of other scenes. One end of the room was almost filled by the frameless portrait of a dignified clergyman, who would have had far more justice done to him by greater distance; a beautifully-painted miniature of a lady with short waist and small crisp curls, was the centre of a system of photographs over the mantel-piece; a large crayon sketch showed three sisters between the ages of six and sixteen, sentimentalizing over a flower-basket; a pair of water-colour drawings represented a handsome church and comfortable parsonage; and the domestic gallery was completed by two prints—one of a middle-aged county-member, the other one of Chalon's ladylike matrons in watered-silk aprons. With some difficulty Rachel read on the one the autograph, J. T. Beauchamp, and on the other the inscription, the Lady Alison Beauchamp. The table-cover was of tasteful silk patchwork, the vase in the centre was of red earthenware, but was encircled with real ivy leaves gummed on in their freshness, and was filled with wild flowers; books filled every corner; and Rachel felt herself out of the much-loathed region of common-place, but she could not recover from her surprise at the audacity of such an independent measure on the part of her cousin; and under cover of her mother's civil talk, said to Fanny, "I never expected to see you here."

"My aunt thought of it," said Fanny, "and as she seems to find the children too much—"

She broke off, for Mrs. Curtis had paused to let her introduce the subject, but poor Fanny had never taken the initiative, and Rachel did it for her by explaining that all had come on the same errand, to ask if Miss Williams would undertake the lessons of her nephews; Lady Temple softly murmured under her veil something about hopes and too much trouble; an appointment was made for the following morning, and Mrs. Curtis, with a general sensation of an oppressive multitude in a small room, took her leave, and the company departed, Fanny, all the way home, hoping that the other Miss Williams would be like her sister, pitying the cripple, wishing that the sisters were in the remotest degree military, so as to obtain the respect of the hoys, and wondering what would be the Major's opinion.

"So many ladies!" exclaimed little Rose. "Aunt Ermine, have they made your head ache?"

"No, my dear, thank you, I am only tired. If you will pull out the rest for my feet, I will be quiet a little, and be ready for tea when Aunt Ailie comes."

The child handily converted the chair into a couch, arranging the dress and coverings with the familiarity of long use, and by no means shocked by the contraction and helplessness of the lower limbs, to which she had been so much accustomed all her life that it never even occurred to her to pity Aunt Ermine, who never treated herself as an object of compassion. She was thanked by a tender pressure on her hair, and then saying—

"Now I shall wish Augustus good night; bring Violetta home from her play in the garden, and let her drink tea, and go to bed."

Ah, Violetta, purchased with a silver groat, what was not your value in Mackarel Lane? Were you not one of its most considered inhabitants, scarcely less a child of Aunt Ermine and Aunt Alison than their Rosebud herself?

Murmur, murmur, rippled the child's happy low-toned monologue directed to her silent but sufficient playmate, and so far from disturbing the aunt, that more than one smile played on her lips at the quaint fancies, and at the well of gladness in the young spirit, which made day after day of

the society of a cripple and an old doll, one constant song of bliss, one dream of bright imaginings. Surely it was an equalization of blessings that rendered little lonely Rose, motherless and well nigh fatherless, poor, with no companion but a crippled aunt, a bird and a toad, with scarcely a toy, and never a party of pleasure, one of the most joyous beings under the sun, free from occasions of childish troubles, without collisions of temper, with few contradictions, and with lessons rather pleasure than toil. Perhaps Ermine did not take into account the sunshiny content and cheerfulness that made herself a delightful companion and playfellow, able to accept the child as her solace, not her burthen.

Presently Rose looked up, and meeting the bright pleasant eyes, observed—"Violetta has been very good, and said all her lessons quite perfect, and she would like to sit up till her Aunt Ailie comes home. Do you think she may?"

"Will she not be tired to-morrow?"

"Oh, then she will be lazy, and not get up when she is called, till I pull all the clothes off, and that will be fun."

"Or she may be fretful now?"

A series of little squeaks ensued, followed by "Now, my love; that is taking a very unfair advantage of my promise. You will make your poor Aunt Ermine's head ache, and I shall have to send you to bed."

"Would not a story pass away the time?"

"You tell it, Aunt Ermine; your stories are always the best. And let there be a fairy in it!"

The fairy had nearly performed her part, when the arrival took place, and Rose darted forward to receive Aunt Ailie's greeting kiss.

"Yes, Rosie—yes, Violetta; what do you think I have got for you?"

And out came a doll's chair with a broken leg, condemned by the departing pupils, and granted with a laugh to the governess's request to take it to her little niece; but never in its best days had the chair been so prized. It was introduced to Violetta as the reward of virtue for having controlled her fretfulness, and the repair of its infirmity was the first consideration that occupied all the three. After all, Violetta's sitting posture was, as Alison observed, an example of the inclined plane, but that was nothing to Rose, and the seance would have been indefinitely prolonged, but for considerations for Violetta's health.

The sisters were alike, and Alison had, like her elder, what is emphatically called countenance, but her features were less chiselled, and her dark straight brows so nearly met that, as Rose had once remarked, they made a bridge of one arch instead of two. Six years younger, in full health, and daily battling with the world, Alison had a remarkable look of concentration and vigour, her upright bearing, clear decided speech, and glance of kindness won instant respect and reliance, but her face missed the radiant beamy brightness of her sister's; her face was sweet and winning, but it was not habitual with her, and there was about her a look as if some terrible wave of grief or suffering had swept over her ere yet the features were fully fixed, and had thus moulded her expression for life. But playfulness was the tone that reigned around Ermine's couch at ordinary moments, and beside her the grave Alison was lively, not with effort, but by infection.

"There," she said, holding up a cheque; "now we'll have a jubilee, and take you down under the East cliff, and we'll invest a shilling in 'Ivanhoe,' and Rose and Violetta shall open their ears!"

"And you shall have a respectable Sunday mantle."

"Oh, I dare say Julia will send us a box."

"Then you will have to put a label on your back, 'Second-hand!' or her velvet will be a scandal. I can't wear out that at home like this flagrant, flowery thing, that I saw Miss Curtis looking at as rather a disreputable article. There's preferment for you, Ailie! What do you think of a general's widow with six boys? She is come after you. We had a great invasion—three Curtises and this pretty little widow, and various sons!"

"Will she stay?"

"Most likely, for she is a relation of Mrs. Curtis, and comes to be near her. You are to call for inspection at eleven o'clock tomorrow, so I fear your holiday will be short."

"Well, the less play the less anxiety. How many drives will the six young gentlemen be worth to you?"

"I am afraid it will be at the cost of tough work to you; she looked to me too sweet a creature to have broken her sons in, but I should think she would be pleasant to deal with."

"If she be like Miss Curtis, I am sure she will."

"Miss Curtis? My old friend you mean. She was rather suppressed today, and I began to comprehend the reason of the shudder with which Mr. Touchett speaks of the dogmatical young lady."

"I hope she did not overwhelm you!"

"Oh, no! I rather liked her; she was so earnest and spirited, I could fancy enjoying a good passage at arms with her if these were old times. But I hope she will not take the direction of your school-room, though she is an admirer of the educational papers in the 'Traveller.'"

And here the discussion was ended by the entrance of little Rose with the preliminaries of the evening meal, after which she went to bed, and the aunts took out books, work, and writing materials.

Alison's report the next day was—"Well, she is a very sweet creature. There is something indescribably touching in her voice and eyes, so soft and wistful, especially when she implores one not to be hard on those great scrambling boys of hers."

"So she is your fate?"

"Oh, yes, if there had been ten more engagements offered, I could not have helped accepting hers, even if it had not been on the best terms I have ever had."

"What?"

"Seventy—for the hours between nine and five. Pretty well for a journeyman hack, is it not? Indeed, the pretty thing's only fear seemed to be that she was requiring too much, and offering too little. No, not her only fear, for there is some major in the distance to whose approval everything must be subject—uncle or guardian, I suppose, but he seemed to be rather an object of jealousy to the younger Miss Curtis, for every hint of wishing to wait for the Major made her press on the negotiations."

"Seventy! I hope you will make it do, Ailie. It would be a great relief."

"And spare your brains not a little. Yes, I do trust to keeping it, for Lady Temple is delightful; and as to the boys, I fancy it is only taming they want. The danger is, as Miss Rachel told me, whether she can bear the sight of the process. I imagine Miss Rachel herself has tried it, and failed."

"Part amateur work," said Ermine, smiling. "It really is lucky you had to turn governess, Ailie, or there would have been a talent thrown away."

"Stay till I have tried," said Alison, who had, however, had experience enough not to be much alarmed at the prospect. Order was wont to come with her presence, and she hardly knew the aspect of tumultuous idleness or insubordination to unenforced authority; for her eye and voice in themselves brought cheerful discipline without constraint, and upheld by few punishments, for the strong influence took away the spirit of rebellion.

After her first morning's work she came home full of good auguries; the boys had been very pleasant with her after the first ten minutes, and Conrade had gained her heart by his attention to his mother. He had, however, examined her minutely whether she had any connexion with the army, and looked grave on her disavowal of any relationship with soldiers; Hubert adding, "You see, Aunt Rachel is only a civilian, and she hasn't any sense at all." And when Francis had been reduced to the much disliked process of spelling unknown words, he had muttered under his breath, "She was only a civilian." To which she had rejoined that "At least she knew thus much, that the first military duty was obedience," and Francis's instant submission proved that she had made a good shot. Of the Major she had heard much more. Everything was referred to him, both by mother and children, and Alison was the more puzzled as to his exact connexion with them. "I sometimes suspect," she said,

"that he may have felt the influence of those winsome brown eyes and caressing manner, as I know I should if I were a man. I wonder how long the old general has been dead? No, Ermine, you need not shake your head at me. I don't mean even to let Miss Curtis tell me if she would. I know confidences from partisan relations are the most mischief-making things in the world."

In pursuance of this principle Alison, or Miss Williams, as she was called in her vocation, was always reserved and discreet, and though ready to talk in due measure, Rachel always felt that it was the upper, not the under current that was proffered. The brow and eyes, the whole spirit of the face, betokened reflection and acuteness, and Rachel wanted to attain to her opinions; but beyond a certain depth there was no reaching. Her ways of thinking, her views of the children's characters, her estimate of Mr. Touchett—nay, even her tastes as to the Invalid's letters in the "Traveller's Review," remained only partially revealed, in spite of Rachel's best efforts at fishing, and attempting to set the example.

"It really seemed," as she observed to Grace, "as if the more I talk, the less she says." At which Grace gave way to a small short laugh, though she owned the force of Rachel's maxim, that to bestow confidence was the way to provoke it; and forbore to refer to a certain delightful afternoon that Rachel, in her childhood, had spent alone with a little girl whom she had never discovered to be deaf and dumb. Still Rachel had never been able to make out why Grace, with no theories at all, got so many more confidences than she did. She was fully aware of her sister's superior attractiveness to common-place people, and made her welcome to stand first with the chief of their kindred, and most of the clergy and young ladies around. But it was hard that where Rachel really liked and met half-way, the intimate confidence should always be bestowed upon Grace, or even the mother. She had yet to learn that the way to draw out a snail is not to, grasp its horns, and that halfway meeting is not to launch one's self to the opposite starting point. Either her inquiries were too point blank to invite detailed replies, or her own communications absorbed her too much to leave room for a return. Thus she told Miss Williams the whole story of the thrush's nest, and all her own reflections upon the characteristics it betokened; and only afterwards, on thinking over the conversation, perceived that she had elicited nothing but that it was very difficult to judge in such cases, not even any decided assent to her own demonstrations. It was true that riots and breaches of the peace ceased while Miss Williams was in the house, and learning and good manners were being fast acquired; but until Conrade's duplicity should be detected, or the whole disposition of the family discussed with herself, Rachel doubted the powers of the instructress. It was true that Fanny was very happy with her, and only regretted that the uncertainty of the Major's whereabouts precluded his being informed of the newly-found treasure; but Fanny was sure to be satisfied as long as her boys were happy and not very naughty, and she cared very little about people's minds.

If any one did "get on" with the governess it was Grace, who had been the first acquaintance in the family, and met her often in the service of the parish, as well as in her official character at the Homestead. It so chanced that one Sunday afternoon they found themselves simultaneously at the door of the school-house, whence issued not the customary hum, but loud sounds of singing.

"Ah!" said Grace, "Mr. Touchett was talking of getting the choir master from Avoncester, and giving up an afternoon to practice for Easter, but he never told me it was to be to-day."

On inquiry, it appeared that notice had been given in the morning, but not till after Miss Williams had gone home to fetch her little niece, and while Rachel was teaching her boys in the class-room out of hearing. It was one of the little bits of bad management that were sure to happen wherever poor Mr. Touchett was concerned; and both ladies feeling it easy to overlook for themselves, were thankful that it had not befallen Rachel. Alison Williams, thinking it far to walk either to the Homestead or Myrtlewood before church, proposed to Grace to come home with her, an offer that was thankfully accepted, with merely the scruple whether she should disturb the invalid.

"Oh, no, it would be a great pleasure; I always wish we could get more change and variety for her on Sunday."

"She is very self-denying to spare you to the school."

"I have often wished to give it up, but she never will let me. She says it is one of the few things we can do, and I see besides that it brings her fresh interests. She knows about all my class, and works for them, and has them to see her; and I am sure it is better for her, though it leaves her more hours alone with Rose."

"And the Sunday services are too long for her?"

"Not so much that, as that she cannot sit on those narrow benches unless two are put close together so that she can almost lie, and there is not room for her chair in the aisle on a Sunday. It is the greatest deprivation of all."

"It is so sad, and she is so patient and so energetic," said Grace, using her favourite monosyllable in peace, out of Rachel's hearing.

"You would say so, indeed, if you really knew her, or how she has found strength and courage for me through all the terrible sutfering."

"Then does she suffer so much?"

"Oh, no, not now! That was in the first years."

"It was not always so."

"No, indeed! You thought it deformity! Oh, no, no! she was so beautiful."

"That she is still. I never saw my sister so much struck with any one. There is something so striking in her bright glance out of those clear eyes."

"Ah! if you had only seen her bloom before—"

"The accident?"

"I burnt her," said Alison, almost inaudibly.

"You! you, poor dear! How dreadful for you."

"Yes, I burnt her," said Alison, more steadily. "You ought not to be kind to me without knowing about it. It was an accident of course, but it was a fit of petulance. I threw a match without looking where it was going."

"It must have been when you were very young."

"Fourteen. I was in a naughty fit at her refusing to go to the great musical meeting with us. We always used to go to stay at one of the canon's houses for it, a house where one was dull and shy; and I could not bear going without her, nor understand the reason."

"And was there a reason?"

"Yes, poor dear Ermine. She knew he meant to come there to meet her, and she thought it would not be right; because his father had objected so strongly, and made him exchange into a regiment on foreign service."

"And you did not know this?"

"No, I was away all the time it was going on, with my eldest sister, having masters in London. I did not come home till it was all over, and then I could not understand what was the matter with the house, or why Ermine was unlike herself, and papa restless and anxious about her. They thought me too young to be told, and the atmosphere made me cross and fretful, and papa was displeased with me, and Ermine tried in vain to make me good; poor patient Ermine, even then the chief sufferer!"

"I can quite imagine the discomfort and fret of being in ignorance all the time."

"Dear Ermine says she longed to tell me, but she had been forbidden, and she went on blaming herself and trying to make me enjoy my holidays as usual, till this dreadful day, when I had worried her intolerably about going to this music meeting, and she found reasoning only made me worse. She still wrote her note of refusal, and asked me to light the taper; I dashed down the match in a frenzy of temper and—"

She paused for breath, and Grace squeezed her hand.

"We did not see it at first, and then she threw herself down and ordered me not to come near. Every one was there directly, I believe, but it burst out again and again, and was not put out till they all thought she had not an hour to live. There was no pain, and there she lay, all calmness, comforting

us all, and making papa and Edward promise to forgive me—me, who only wished they would kill me! And the next day he came; he was just going to sail, and they thought nothing would hurt her then. I saw him while he was waiting, and never did I see such a fixed deathly face. But they said she found words to cheer and soothe him."

"And what became of him?"

"We do not know. As long as Lady Alison lived (his aunt) she let us hear about him, and we knew he was recovering from his wound. Then came her death, and then my father's, and all the rest, and we lost sight of the Beauchamps. We saw the name in the Gazette as killed at Lucknow, but not the right Christian name nor the same rank; but then, though the regiment is come home, we have heard nothing of him, and though she has never spoken of him to me, I am sure Ermine believes he is dead, and thinks of him as part of the sunshine of the old Beauchamp days—the sunshine whose reflection lasts one's life."

"He ought to be dead," said Grace.

"Yes, it would be better for her than to hear anything else of him! He had nothing of his own, so there would have been a long waiting, but his father and brother would not hear of it, and accused us of entrapping him, and that angered my father. For our family is quite good, and we were very well off then. My father had a good private fortune besides the Rectory at Beauchamp; and Lady Alison, who had been like a mother to us ever since our own died, quite thought that the prospect was good enough, and I believe got into a great scrape with her family for having promoted the affair."

"Your squire's wife?"

"Yes, and Julia and Ermine had come every day to learn lessons with her daughters. I was too young; but as long as she lived we were all like one family. How kind she was! How she helped us through those frightful weeks!"

"Of your sister's illness? It must have lasted long?"

"Long? Oh longer than long! No one thought of her living. The doctors said the injury was too extensive to leave any power of rallying; but she was young and strong, and did not die in the torture, though people said that such an existence as remained to her was not worth the anguish of struggling back to it. I think my father only prayed that she might suffer less, and Julia stayed on and on, thinking each day would be the last, till Dr. Long could not spare her any longer; and then Lady Alison nursed her night after night and day after day, till she had worn herself into an illness, and when the doctors spoke of improvement, we only perceived worse agony. It was eight months before she was even lifted up in bed, and it was years before the burns ceased to be painful or the constitution at all recovered the shock; and even now weather tells on her, though since we have lived here she has been far better than I ever dared to hope."

"Then you consider her still recovering?"

"In general health she is certainly greatly restored, and has strength to attempt more, but the actual injury, the contraction, can never be better than now. When we lived at Richmond she had constantly the best advice, and we were told that nothing more could be hoped for."

"I wonder more and more at her high spirits. I suppose that was what chiefly helped to carry her through?"

"I have seen a good many people," said Alison, pausing, "but I never did see any one so happy! Others are always wanting something; she never is. Every enjoyment seems to be tenfold to her what it is to other people; she sees the hopeful side of every sorrow. No burthen is a burthen when one has carried it to her."

As Alison spoke, she pushed open the narrow green door of the little lodging-house, and there issued a weak, sweet sound of voices: "The strain upraise of joy and praise." It was the same that had met their ears at the school-door, but the want of body in the voices was fully compensated by the heartfelt ring, as if here indeed was praise, not practice.

"Aunt Ailie! O Aunt Ailie!" cried the child, as the room-door opened and showed the little choir, consisting of herself, her aunt, and the small maid of the house, "you should not have come, you were not to hear us till Trinity Sunday."

Explanations were given, and Miss Curtis was welcomed, but Alison, still too much moved for ordinary conversation, slipped into the bedroom adjoining, followed by her sister's quick and anxious eye, and half-uttered inquiry.

"I am afraid it is my fault," said Grace; "she has been telling me about your accident."

"Poor Ailie," said Ermine, "she never will receive kindness without having that unlucky story out! It is just one of the things that get so cruelly exaggerated by consequences. It was one moment's petulance that might have caused a fright and been forgotten ever after, but for those chemicals. Ah! I see, she said nothing about them, because they were Edward's. They were some parcels for his experiments, gun cotton and the like, which were lying in the window till he had time to take them upstairs. We had all been so long threatened with being blown up by his experiments that we had grown callous and careless, and it served us right!" she added, stroking the child's face as it looked at her, earnest to glean fresh fragments of the terrible half-known tale of the past. "Yes, Rosie, when you go and keep house for papa on the top of the Oural Mountains, or wherever it may be, you are to remember that if Aunt Ermine had not been in a foolish, inattentive mood, and had taken his dangerous goods out of the way, she might have been trotting to church now like other people. But poor Ailie has always helped herself to the whole blame, and if every childish fit of temper were the root of such qualities, what a world we should have here!"

"Ah! no wonder she is devoted to you."

"The child was not fifteen, had never known cross or care, but from that moment she never was out of my room if it was possible to be in; and when nurse after nurse was fairly worn out, because I could not help being so distressing, there was always that poor child, always handy and helpful, growing to be the chief dependence, and looking so piteously imploring whatever was tried, that it really helped me to go through with it. Poor Ailie," she added with an odd turn of playfulness, "I always fancied those frowns of anxiety made her eyebrows grow together. And ever since we came here, we know how she has worked away for her old cinder and her small Rosebud, don't we?" she added, playfully squeezing the child's cheeks up into a more budding look, hiding deeper and more overcoming feelings by the sportive action. And as her sister came back, she looked up and shook her head at her, saying,—

"You gossiping Ailie, to go ripping up old grievances. I am going to ask Miss Curtis not to let the story go any farther, now you have relieved your mind of it."

"I did tell Lady Temple," said Alison; "I never think it right not to let people know what sort of person they have to teach their children."

And Grace, on feeling her way, discovered that Lady Temple had been told the bare fact in Miss Williams's reserved and business-like manner, but with nothing of the affair that had led to it. She merely looked on it in the manner fully expressed by—"Ah, poor thing; how sad for her!" as a shocking secret, never to be talked of or thought about. And that voluntary detailed relation from Alison could only be regarded as drawn forth by Grace's own individual power of winning confidence, and the friendliness that had so long subsisted between them. Nor indeed was the reserve regarding the cause of the present reduced circumstances of the sisters at all lessened; it was only known that their brother had ruined them by a fraudulent speculation, and had then fled to the Continent, leaving them burthened with the maintenance of his child, but that they refused to believe in his guilt, and had thus incurred the displeasure of other relatives and friends. Alison was utterly silent about him. Ermine seemed to have a tender pleasure in bringing in a reference to his ways as if all were well, and it were a matter of course to speak of "Edward;" but it was plain that Ermine's was an outspoken nature. This might, however, be only because the one had been a guarded, sheltered invalid, while

the other had gone forth among strangers to battle for a livelihood, and moreover, the elder sister had been fully grown and developed before the shock which had come on the still unformed Alison.

At any rate, nobody but Grace "got on" with the governess, while the invalid made friends with all who visited her, and most signally with Rachel, who, ere long, esteemed her environment a good work, worthy of herself. The charity of sitting with a twaddling, muffatee-knitting old lady was indisputable, but it was perfectly within Grace's capacity; and Rachel believed herself to be far more capable of entertaining the sick Miss Williams, nor was she mistaken. When excited or interested, most people thought her oppressive; but Ermine Williams, except when unwell, did not find her so, and even then a sharp debate was sometimes a cure for the nervous ailments induced by the monotony of her life. They seemed to have a sort of natural desire to rub their minds one against the other, and Rachel could not rest without Miss Williams's opinion of all that interested her—paper, essay, book, or event; but often, when expecting to confer a favour by the loan, she found that what was new to her was already well known in that little parlour, and even the authorship no mystery. Ermine explained this by her correspondence with literary friends of her brother's, and country-bred Rachel, to whom literature was still an oracle unconnected with living agencies, listened, yes, absolutely listened to her anecdotes of sayings and doings, far more like clever memoirs than the experiences of the banks of the Avon. Perhaps there was this immediate disadvantage, that hearing of a more intellectual tone of society tended to make Rachel less tolerant of that which surrounded her, and especially of Mr. Touchett. It was droll that, having so long shunned the two sisters under the impression that they were his protegees and worshippers, she found that Ermine's point of view was quite the rectorial one, and that to venerate the man for his office sake was nearly as hard to Ermine as to herself, though the office was more esteemed.

Alison, the reserved, had held her tongue on his antecedents; but Ermine was drawn into explaining that his father had been a minor canon, who had eked out his means with a combination of chaplaincies and parts of curacies, and by teaching at the school where his son was educated. Indignant at the hack estimation in which his father had been held, the son, far more justly viewing both the dignity and duty of his office, was resolved to be respected; but bred up in second rate society, had neither weight, talent, nor manners to veil his aggressive self-assertion, and he was at this time especially trying to the Curtises.

Cathedral music had been too natural to him for the endurance of an unchoral service, and the prime labour of his life was to work up his choir; but he was musical by education rather than nature, and having begun his career with such mortal offence to the native fiddlers and singers as to impel them into the arms of dissent, he could only supply the loss from the school by his own voice, of which he was not chary, though using it with better will than taste. The staple of his choir were Rachel's scholars. Her turn had always been for boys, and her class on Sunday mornings and two evenings in the week had long been in operation before the reign of Mr. Touchett. Then two lads, whose paternal fiddles had seceded to the Plymouth Brethren, were suspended from all advantages by the curate, and Rachel was with difficulty withheld from an explosion; but even this was less annoying than the summons at the class-room door every Sunday morning, that, in the midst of her lesson, carried off the chief of her scholars to practise their chants. Moreover, the blame of all imperfect lessons was laid on the "singing for the parson," and all faults in the singing by the tasks for Miss Rachel; and one night, the excellent Zack excused his failure in geography by saying that Mr. Touchett had thrown away his book, and said that it was no better than sacrilege, omitting, however, to mention that he had been caught studying it under his surplice during the lessons.

At last, with his usual fatality, the curate fixed the grand practice for the Saturday evenings that were Rachel's great days for instruction in the three R's, and for a sort of popular lecture. Cricket was to succeed the singing, and novelty carried the day, but only by the desertion of her scholars did Rachel learn the new arrangement, and she could hardly credit the assertion that the curate was not aware that it was her day. In fact, it was the only one when the fisher lads were sure not to be at sea,

and neither party would yield it. Mr. Touchett was determined not to truckle to dictation from the great house; so when Rachel declared she would have nothing to do with the boys unless the Saturdays were conceded to her, he owned that he thought the clergyman had the first right to his lads, and had only not claimed them before out of deference for the feelings of a well-meaning parishioner.

Both parties poured out their grievances to the same auditor, for Mr. Touchett regarded Ermine Williams as partly clerical, and Rachel could never be easy without her sympathy. To hear was not, however, to make peace, while each side was so sore, so conscious of the merits of its own case, so blind to those of the other. One deemed praise in its highest form the prime object of his ministry; the other found the performance indevotional, and raved that education should be sacrificed to wretched music. But that the dissension was sad and mischievous, it would have been very diverting; they were both so young in their incapacity of making allowances, their certainty that theirs was the theory to bring in the golden age, and even in their magnanimity of forgiveness, and all the time they thought themselves so very old. “I am resigned to disappointments; I have seen something of life.”—“You forget, Miss Williams, that my ministerial experience is not very recent.”

There was one who would have smoothed matters far better than any, who, like Ermine, took her weapons from the armoury of good sense; but that person was entirely unconscious how the incumbent regarded her soft eyes, meek pensiveness, motherly sweetness, and, above all, the refined graceful dignity that remained to her from the leading station she had occupied. Her gracious respect towards her clergyman was a contrast as much to the deferential coquetry of his admirers as to the abruptness of his foe, and her indifference to parish details had even its charm in a world of fussiness; he did not know himself how far a wish of hers would have led him, and she was the last person to guess. She viewed him, like all else outside her nursery, as something out of the focus of her eye; her instinct regarded her clergyman as necessarily good and worthy, and her ear heard Rachel railing at him; it sounded hard, but it was a pity Rachel should be vexed and interfered with. In fact, she never thought of the matter at all; it was only part of that outer kind of dreamy stage-play at Avonmouth, in which she let herself he moved about at her cousin’s bidding. One part of her life had passed away from her, and what remained to her was among her children; her interests and intelligence seemed contracted to Conrade’s horizon, and as to everything else, she was subdued, gentle, obedient, but slow and obtuse.

Yet, little as he knew it, Mr. Touchett might have even asserted his authority in a still more trying manner. If the gentle little widow had not cast a halo round her relatives, he could have preached that sermon upon the home-keeping duties of women, or have been too much offended to accept any service from the Curtis family; and he could have done without them, for he had a wide middle-class popularity; his manners with the second-rate society, in which he had been bred, were just sufficiently superior and flattering to recommend all his best points, and he obtained plenty of subscriptions from visitors, and of co-operation from inhabitants. Many a young lady was in a flutter at the approach of the spruce little figure in black, and so many volunteers were there for parish work, that districts and classes were divided and subdivided, till it sometimes seemed as if the only difficulty was to find poor people enough who would submit to serve as the corpus vile for their charitable treatment.

For it was not a really poor population. The men were seafaring, the women lacemaking, and just well enough off to make dissent doubly attractive as an escape from some of the interfering almsgiving of the place. Over-visiting, criticism of dress, and inquisitorial examinations had made more than one Primitive Methodist, and no severe distress had been so recent as to render the women tolerant of troublesome weekly inspections. The Curtis sisters were, however, regarded as an exception; they were viewed as real gentlefolks, not only by their own tenants, but by all who were conscious of their hereditary claims to respect; they did not care whether hair were long or short, and their benefits were more substantial and reliable than could be looked for from the casual visitors and petty gentry around, so that sundry houses that were forbidden ground to district visitors, were ready to grant them a welcome.

One of these belonged to the most able lacemaker in the place, a hard-working woman, who kept seven little pupils in a sort of cupboard under the staircase, with a window into the back garden, "because," said she, "they did no work if they looked out into the front, there were so many gapsies;" these gapsies consisting of the very scanty traffic of the further end of Mackarel Lane. For ten hours a day did these children work in a space just wide enough for them to sit, with the two least under the slope of the stairs, permitted no distraction from their bobbins, but invaded by their mistress on the faintest sound of tongues. Into this hotbed of sprigs was admitted a child who had been a special favourite at school, an orphan niece of the head of the establishment. The two brothers had been lost together at sea; and while the one widow became noted for her lace, the other, a stranger to the art, had maintained herself by small millinery, and had not sacrificed her little girl to the Moloch of lace, but had kept her at school to a later age than usual in the place. But the mother died, and the orphan was at once adopted by the aunt, with the resolve to act the truly kind part by her, and break her in to lacemaking. That determination was a great blow to the school visitors; the girls were in general so young, or so stupefied with their work, that an intelligent girl like Lovedy Kelland was no small treasure to them; there were designs of making her a pupil teacher in a few years, and offers and remonstrances rained in upon her aunt. But they had no effect; Mrs. Kelland was persuaded that the child had been spoilt by learning, and in truth poor Lovedy was a refractory scholar; she was too lively to bear the confinement patiently; her mind was too much awake not to rebel against the dulness, and her fingers had not been brought into training early enough. Her incessant tears spoilt her thread, and Mrs. Kelland decided that "she'd never get her bread till she was broke of her buke;" which breaking was attempted by a summary pawning of all poor Lovedy's reward books. The poor child confided her loss to her young lady teacher at the Sunday school; the young lady, being new, young, and inflammable, reproached Mrs. Kelland with dishonesty and tyranny to the orphan, and in return was nearly frightened out of her wits by such a scolding as only such a woman as the lace mistress could deliver. Then Mr. Touchett tried his hand, and though he did not meet with quite so much violence, all he heard was that she had "given Lovedy the stick for being such a little tod as to complain, when she knew the money for the bukes was put safe away in her money-box. She was not going to the Sunday schule again, not she, to tell stories against her best friends!" And when the next district visitor came that way, the door was shut in her face, with the tract thrown out at the opening, and an intimation in Mrs. Kelland's shrill voice, that no more bukes were wanted; she got plenty from Miss Curtis.

These bukes from Miss Curtis were sanatory tracts, which Rachel was constantly bestowing, and which on Sundays Mrs. Kelland spelt through, with her finger under the line, in happy ignorance whether the subject were temporal or spiritual, and feeling herself in the exemplary discharge of a Sunday duty. Moreover, old feudal feeling made Rachel be unmolested when she came down twice a week, opened the door of the blackhole under the stairs, and read aloud something religious, something improving, and a bit of a story, following it up by mental arithmetic and a lesson on objects, which seemed to Mrs. Kelland the most arrant nonsense in the world, and to her well-broken scholars was about as interesting as the humming of a blue-bottle fly; but it was poor Lovedy's one enjoyment, though making such havoc of her work that it was always expiated by extra hours, not on her pillow, but at it.

These visits of Rachel were considered to encourage the Kelland refractoriness, and it was officially intimated that it would be wise to discontinue them, and that "it was thought better" to withdraw from Mrs. Kelland all that direct patronage of her trade, by which the ladies had enabled her to be in some degree independent of the middle-men, who absorbed so much of the profit from the workers. Grace and Rachel, sufficiently old inhabitants to remember the terrible wreck that had left her a struggling widow, felt this a hard, not to say a vindictive decision. They had long been a kind of agents for disposing of her wares at a distance; and, feeling that the woman had received

provocation, Grace was not disposed to give her up, while Rachel loudly averred that neither Mr. Touchett nor any of his ladies had any right to interfere, and she should take no notice.

"But," said Grace, "can we run counter to our clergyman's direct wishes?"

"Yes, when he steps out of his province. My dear Grace, you grew up in the days of curatolatry, but it won't do; men are fallible even when they preach in a surplice, and you may be thankful to me that you and Fanny are not both led along in a string in the train of Mr. Touchett's devotees!"

"I wish I knew what was right to do," said Grace, quietly, and she remained wishing it after Rachel had said a great deal more; but the upshot of it was, that one day when Grace and Fanny were walking together on the esplanade, they met Mr. Touchett, and Grace said to him, "We have been thinking it over, and we thought, perhaps, you would not wish us not to give any orders to Mrs. Kelland. I know she has behaved very ill; but I don't see how she is to get on, and she has this child on her hands."

"I know," said Mr. Touchett, "but really it was flagrant."

"Oh," said Lady Temple, gently, "I dare say she didn't mean it, and you could not be hard on a widow."

"Well," said Mr. Touchett, "Miss Brown was very much put out, and—and—it is a great pity about the child, but I never thought myself that such strong measures would do any good."

"Then you will not object to her being employed?"

"No, not at all. From a distance, it is not the same thing as close at home; it won't be an example."

"Thank you," said Grace; and "I am so glad," said Lady Temple; and Mr. Touchett went on his way, lightened of his fear of having let his zealous coadjutors oppress the hard-working, and far more brightened by the sweet smile of requital, but all the time doubtful whether he had been weak. As to the victory, Rachel only laughed, and said, "If it made Grace more comfortable, it was well, except for that acknowledgment of Mr. Touchett's jurisdiction."

A few days after, Rachel made her appearance in Mackerel Lane, and announced her intention of consulting Ermine Williams under seal of secrecy. "I have an essay that I wish you to judge of before I send it to the 'Traveller.'"

"Indeed!" said Ermine, her colour rising. "Would it not be better—"

"Oh, I know what you mean, but don't scruple on that score. At my age, with a mother like mine, it is simply to avoid teasing and excitement that I am silent."

"I was going to say I was hardly a fair—"

"Because of your different opinions? But those go for nothing. You are a worthy antagonist, and enter into my views as my mother and sister cannot do, even while you oppose them."

"But I don't think I can help you, even if—"

"I don't want help; I only want you to judge of the composition. In fact, I read it to you that I may hear it myself."

Ermine resigned herself.

"'Curatolatry is a species—'"

"I beg your pardon."

"Curatolatry. Ah! I thought that would attract attention."

"But I am afraid the scholars would fall foul of it."

"Why, have not they just made Mariolatry?"

"Yes; but they are very severe on hybrids between Latin and Greek."

"It is not worth while to boggle at trifles when one has an expressive term," said Rachel; "if it turns into English, that is all that is wanted."

"Would it not be rather a pity if it should turn into English? Might it not be hard to brand with a contemptuous name what does more good than harm?"

"That sickly mixture of flirtation and hero worship, with a religious daub as a salve to the conscience."

"Laugh it down, and what do you leave? In Miss Austen's time silly girls ran to balls after militiamen, now, if they run to schools and charities more for the curate's sake than they quite know, is not the alternative better?"

"It is greater humbug," said Rachel. "But I knew you would not agree, at least beforehand, it is appreciation that I want."

Never did Madame de Genlis make a cleverer hit than in the reading of the Genius Phanor's tragedy in the Palace of Truth. Comically absurd as the inconsistency is of transporting the lecture of a Parisian academician into an enchanted palace, full of genii and fairies of the remotest possible connexion with the Arab jinn, the whole is redeemed by the truth to nature of the sole dupe in the Palace of Truth being the author reading his own works. Ermine was thinking of him all the time. She was under none of the constraint of Phanor's auditors, though she carried a perpetual palace of truth about with her; she would not have had either fears or compunctions in criticising, if she could. The paper was in the essay style, between argument and sarcasm, something after the model of the Invalid's Letters; but it was scarcely lightly touched enough, the irony was wormwood, the gravity heavy and sententious, and where there was a just thought or happy hit, it seemed to travel in a road-waggon, and be lost in the rumbling of the wheels. Ermine did not restrain a smile, half of amusement, half of relief, at the self-antidote the paper contained; but the smile passed with the authoress as a tribute to her satire.

"In this age," she said, "we must use those lighter weapons of wit, or no one will attend."

"Perhaps," said Ermine, "if I approve your object, I should tell you you don't use them lightly."

"Ah! but I know you don't approve it. You are not lay woman enough to be impartial, and you belong to the age that was trying the experiment of the hierarchy modified: I to that which has found it will not do. But at least you understand my view; I have made out my case."

"Yes, I understand your view; but—"

"You don't sympathize. Of course not; but when it receives its full weight from the printer's bands, you will see that it will tell. That bit about the weak tea fumes I thought of afterwards, and I am afraid I did not read it well."

"I remember it; but forgive me if I say first I think the whole is rather too—too lengthy to take."

"Oh, that is only because manuscript takes long to read aloud. I counted the words, so I can't be mistaken, at least I collated twenty lines, and multiplied; and it is not so long as the Invalid's last letter about systematic reading."

"And then comes my question again, Is good to come of it?"

"That I can't expect you to see at this time; but it is to be the beginning of a series, exposing the fallacies of woman's life as at present conducted; and out of these I mean to point the way to more consistent, more independent, better combined exertion. If I can make myself useful with my pen, it will compensate for the being debarred from so many more obvious outlets. I should like to have as much influence over people's minds as that Invalid for instance, and by earnest effort I know I shall attain it."

"I—I—" half-laughing and blushing, "I hope you will, for I know you would wish to use it for good; but, to speak plainly, I doubt about the success of this effort, or—or if it ought to succeed."

"Yes, I know you do," said Rachel. "No one ever can judge of a manuscript. You have done all I wished you to do, and I value your sincerity. Of course I did not expect praise, since the more telling it is on the opposite side, the less you could like it. I saw you appreciated it."

And Rachel departed, while Rose crept up to her aunt, asking, "Aunt Ermine, why do you look so very funny? It was very tiresome. Are not you glad it is over?"

"I was thinking, Rose, what a difficult language plain English is sometimes."

"What, Miss Rachel's? I couldn't understand one bit of her long story, except that she did not like weak tea."

"It was my own that I meant," said Ermine. "But, Rose, always remember that a person who stands plain speaking from one like me has something very noble and generous in her. Were you here all the time, Rosie? I don't wonder you were tired."

"No, Aunt Ermine, I went and told Violetta and Augustus a fairy tale out of my own head."

"Indeed; and how did they like it?"

"Violetta looked at me all the time, and Augustus gave three winks, so I think he liked it."

"Appreciated it!" said Aunt Ermine.

# CHAPTER IV. THE HERO

"And which is Lucy's? Can it be
That puny fop, armed cap-a-pie,
Who loves in the saloon to show
The arms that never knew a foe."

—*SCOTT.*

"My lady's compliments, ma'am, and she would he much obliged if you would remain till she comes home," was Coombe's reception of Alison. "She is gone to Avoncester with Master Temple and Master Francis."

"Gone to Avoncester!" exclaimed Rachel, who had walked from church to Myrtlewood with Alison.

"Mamma is gone to meet the Major!" cried three of the lesser boys, rushing upon them in full cry; then Leoline, facing round, "Not the major, he is lieutenant-colonel now—Colonel Keith, hurrah!"

"What—what do you mean? Speak rationally, Leoline, if you can."

"My lady sent a note to the Homestead this morning," explained Coombe. "She heard this morning that Colonel Keith intended to arrive to-day, and took the young gentlemen with her to meet him."

Rachel could hardly refrain from manifesting her displeasure, and bluntly asked what time Lady Temple was likely to be at home.

"It depended," Coombe said, "upon the train; it was not certain whether Colonel Keith would come by the twelve or the two o'clock train."

And Rachel was going to turn sharply round, and dash home with the tidings, when Alison arrested her with the question—

"And who is Colonel Keith?"

Rachel was too much wrapped up in her own view to hear the trembling of the voice, and answered, "Colonel Keith! why, the Major! You have not been here so long without hearing of the Major?"

"Yes, but I did not know. Who is he?" And a more observant person would have seen the governess's gasping effort to veil her eagerness under her wonted self-control.

"Don't you know who the Major is?" shouted Leoline. "He is our military secretary."

"That's the sum total of my knowledge," said Rachel, "I don't understand his influence, nor know where he was picked up."

"Nor his regiment?"

"He is not a regimental officer; he is on our staff," said Leoline, whose imagination could not attain to an earlier condition than "on our staff."

"I shall go home, then," said Rachel, "and see if there is any explanation there."

"I shall ask the Major not to let Aunt Rachel come here," observed Hubert, as she departed; it was well it was not before.

"Leoline," anxiously asked Alison, "can you tell me the Major's name?"

"Colonel Keith—Lieutenant-Colonel Keith," was all the answer.

"I meant his Christian name, my dear."

"Only little boys have Christian names!" they returned, and Alison was forced to do her best to tame herself and them to the duties of the long day of anticipation so joyous on their part, so full of confusion and bewildered anxiety on her own. She looked in vain, half stealthily, as often before, for

a recent Army List or Peerage. Long ago she had lost the Honourable Colin A. Keith from among the officers of the —th Highlanders, and though in the last Peerage she had laid hands on he was still among the surviving sons of the late Lord Keith, of Gowanbrae, the date had not gone back far enough to establish that he had not died in the Indian war. It was fear that predominated with her, there were many moments when she would have given worlds to be secure that the newcomer was not the man she thought of, who, whether constant or inconstant, could bring nothing but pain and disturbance to the calm tenour of her sister's life. Everything was an oppression to her; the children, in their wild, joyous spirits and gladsome inattention, tried her patience almost beyond her powers; the charge of the younger ones in their mother's absence was burthensome, and the delay in returning to her sister became well-nigh intolerable, when she figured to herself Rachel Curtis going down to Ermine with the tidings of Colonel Keith's arrival, and her own discontent at his influence with her cousin. Would that she had spoken a word of warning; yet that might have been merely mischievous, for the subject was surely too delicate for Rachel to broach with so recent a friend. But Rachel had bad taste for anything! That the little boys did not find Miss Williams very cross that day was an effect of the long habit of self-control, and she could hardly sit still under the additional fret, when, just as tea was spread for the school-room party, in walked Miss Rachel, and sat herself down, in spite of Hubert, who made up a most coaxing, entreating face, as he said, "Please, Aunt Rachel, doesn't Aunt Grace want you very much!"

"Not at all. Why, Hubert?"

"Oh, if you would only go away, and not spoil our fun when the Major comes."

For once Rachel did laugh, but she did not take the hint, and Alison obtained only the satisfaction of hearing that she had at least not been in Mackarel Lane. The wheels sounded on the gravel, out rushed the boys; Alison and Rachel sat in strange, absolute silence, each forgetful of the other, neither guarding her own looks, nor remarking her companion's. Alison's lips were parted by intense listening; Rachel's teeth were set to receive her enemy. There was a chorus of voices in the hall, and something about tea and coming in warned both to gather up their looks before Lady Temple had opened the door, and brought in upon them not one foe, but two! Was Rachel seeing double? Hardly that, for one was tall, bald, and bearded, not dangerously young, but on that very account the more dangerously good-looking; and the other was almost a boy, slim and light, just of the empty young officer type. Here, too, was Fanny, flushed, excited, prettier and brighter than Rachel had seen her at all, waving an introduction with head and hand; and the boys hanging round the Major with deafening exclamations of welcome, in which they were speedily joined by the nursery detachment. Those greetings, those observations on growth and looks, those glad, eager questions and answers, were like the welcome of an integral part of the family; it was far more intimate and familiar than had been possible with the Curtises after the long separation, and it was enough to have made the two spectators feel out of place, if such a sensation had been within Rachel's capacity, or if Alison had not been engaged with the tea. Lady Temple made a few explanations, sotto voce, to Alison, whom she always treated as though in dread of not being sufficiently considerate. "I do hope the children have been good; I knew you would not mind; I could not wait to see you, or I should have been too late to meet the train, and then he would have come by the coach; and it is such a raw east wind. He must be careful in this climate."

"How warm and sunshiny it has been all day," said Rachel, by way of opposition to some distant echo of this whisper.

"Sunshiny, but treacherous," answered Colonel Keith; "there are cold gusts round corners. This must be a very sheltered nook of the coast."

"Quite a different zone from Avoncester," said the youth.

"Yes, delightful. I told you it was just what would suit you," added Fanny, to the colonel.

"Some winds are very cold here," interposed Rachel. "I always pity people who are imposed upon to think it a Mentone near home. They are choking our churchyard."

"Very inconsiderate of them," muttered the young man.

"But what made you come home so late, Fanny?" said Rachel.

Alison suspected a slight look of wonder on the part of both the officers at hearing their general's wife thus called to account; but Fanny, taking it as a matter of course, answered, "We found that the-th was at Avoncester. I had no idea of it, and they did not know I was here; so I went to call upon Mrs. Hammond, and Colonel Keith went to look for Alick, and we have brought him home to dine."

Fanny took it for granted that Rachel must know who Alick was, but she was far from doing so, though she remembered that the —th had been her uncle's regiment, and had been under Sir Stephen Temple's command in India at the time of the mutiny. The thought of Fanny's lapsing into military society was shocking to her. The boys were vociferating about boats, ponies, and all that had been deferred till the Major's arrival, and he was answering them kindly, but hushing the extra outcry less by word than sign, and his own lowered voice and polished manner—a manner that excessively chafed her as a sort of insult to the blunt, rapid ways that she considered as sincere and unaffected, a silkiness that no doubt had worked on the honest, simple general, as it was now working on the weak young widow. Anything was better than leaving her to such influence, and in pursuance of the intention that Rachel had already announced at home, she invited herself to stay to dinner; and Fanny eagerly thanked her, for making it a little less dull for Colonel Keith and Alick. It was so good to come down and help. Certainly Fanny was an innocent creature, provided she was not spoilt, and it was a duty to guard her innocence.

Alison Williams escaped to her home, sure of nothing but that her sister must not be allowed to share her uncertainties; and Lady Temple and her guests sat down to dinner. Rachel meant to have sat at the bottom and carved, as belonging to the house; but Fanny motioned the Colonel to the place, observing, "It is so natural to see you there! One only wants poor Captain Dent at the other end. Do you know whether he has his leave?"

Wherewith commenced a discussion of military friends—who had been heard of from Australia, who had been met in England, who was promoted, who married, who retired, &c., and all the quarters of the-th since its return from India two years ago; Fanny eagerly asking questions and making remarks, quite at home and all animation, absolutely a different being from the subdued, meek little creature that Rachel had hitherto seen. Attempts were made to include Miss Curtis in the conversation by addressing anecdotes to her, and asking if she knew the places named; but she had been to none, and the three old friends quickly fell into the swing of talk about what interested them. Once, however, she came down on them with, "What conclusion have you formed upon female emigration?"

"'His sister she went beyond the seas,
And died an old maid among black savagees.'

"That's the most remarkable instance of female emigration on record, isn't it?" observed Alick.

"What; her dying an old maid?" said Colonel Keith. "I am not sure. Wholesale exportations of wives are spoiling the market."

"I did not mean marriage," said Rachel, stoutly. "I am particularly anxious to know whether there is a field open to independent female labour."

"All the superior young women seemed to turn nurserymaids," said the Colonel.

"Oh," interposed Fanny, "do you remember that nice girl of ours who would marry that Orderly-Sergeant O'Donoghoe? I have had a letter from her in such distress."

"Of course, the natural termination," said Alick, in his lazy voice.

"And I thought you would tell me how to manage sending her some help," proceeded Fanny.

"I could have helped you, Fanny. Won't an order do it?"

"Not quite," said Fanny, a shade of a smile playing on her lip. "It is whether to send it through one of the officers or not. If Captain Lee is with the regiment, I know he would take care of it for her."

So they plunged into another regiment, and Rachel decided that nothing was so wearisome as to hear triflers talk shop.

There was no opportunity of calling Fanny to order after dinner, for she went off on her progress to all the seven cribs, and was only just returning from them when the gentlemen came in, and then she made room for the younger beside her on the sofa, saying, "Now, Alick, I do so want to hear about poor, dear little Bessie;" and they began so low and confidentially, that Rachel wondered if her alarms wore to be transfered from the bearded colonel to the dapper boy, or if, in very truth, she must deem poor Fanny a general coquette. Besides, a man must be contemptible who wore gloves at so small a party, when she did not.

She had been whiling away the time of Fanny's absence by looking over the books on the table, and she did not regard the present company sufficiently to desist on their account. Colonel Keith began to turn over some numbers of the "Traveller" that lay near him, and presently looked up, and said, "Do you know who is the writer of this?"

"What is it? Ah! one of the Invalid's essays. They strike every one; but I fancy the authorship is a great secret."

"You do not know it?"

"No, I wish I did. Which of them are you reading? 'Country Walks.' That is not one that I care about, it is a mere hash of old recollections; but there are some very sensible and superior ones, so that I have heard it sometimes doubted whether they are man's or woman's writing. For my part, I think them too earnest to be a man's; men always play with their subject."

"Oh, yes," said Fanny, "I am sure only a lady could have written anything so sweet as that about flowers in a sick-room; it so put me in mind of the lovely flowers you used to bring me one at a time, when I was ill at Cape Town."

There was no more sense to be had after those three once fell upon their reminiscences.

That night, after having betrayed her wakefulness by a movement in her bed, Alison Williams heard her sister's voice, low and steady, saying, "Ailie, dear, be it what it may, guessing is worse than certainty."

"Oh, Ermine, I hoped—I know nothing—I have nothing to tell."

"You dread something," said Ermine; "you have been striving for unconcern all the evening, my poor dear, but surely you know, Ailie, that nothing is so bad while we share it."

"And I have frightened you about nothing."

"Nothing! nothing about Edward?"

"Oh, no, no!"

"And no one has made you uncomfortable?"

"No."

"Then there is only one thing that it can be, Ailie, and you need not fear to tell me that. I always knew that if he lived I must be prepared for it, and you would not have hesitated to tell me of his death."

"It is not that, indeed it is not, Ermine, it is only this—that I found to-day that Lady Temple's major has the same name."

"But you said she was come home. You must have seen him."

"Yes, but I should not know him. I had only seen him once, remember, twelve years ago, and when I durst not look at him."

"At least," said Ermine, quickly, "you can tell me what you saw to-day."

"A Scotch face, bald head, dark beard, grizzled hair."

"Yes I am grey, and he was five years older; but he used not to have a Scotch face. Can you tell me about his eyes?"

"Dark," I think.

"They were very dark blue, almost black. Time and climate must have left them alone. You may know him by those eyes, Ailie. And you could not make out anything about him?"

"No, not even his Christian name nor his regiment. I had only the little ones and Miss Rachel to ask, and they knew nothing. I wanted to keep this from you till I was sure, but you always find me out."

"Do you think I couldn't see the misery you were in all the evening, poor child? But now you have had it out, sleep, and don't be distressed."

"But, Ermine, if you—"

"My dear, I am thankful that nothing is amiss with you or Edward. For the rest, there is nothing but patience. Now, not another word; you must not lose your sleep, nor take away my chance of any."

How much the sisters slept they did not confide to one another, but when they rose, Alison shook her head at her sister's heavy eyelids, and Ermine retorted with a reproachful smile at certain dark tokens of sleeplessness under Alison's eyes.

"No, not the flowered flimsiness, please," she said, in the course of her toilette, "let me have the respectable grey silk." And next she asked for a drawer, whence she chose a little Nuremberg horn brooch for her neck. "I know it is very silly," she said, "but I can't quite help it. Only one question, Ailie, that I thought of too late. Did he hear your name?"

"I think not, Lady Temple named nobody. But why did you not ask me last night?"

"I thought beginning to talk again would destroy your chance of sleep, and we had resolved to stop."

"And, Ermine, if it be, what shall I do?"

"Do as you feel right at the moment," said Ermine, after a moment's pause. "I cannot tell how it may be. I have been thinking over what you told me about the Major and Lady Temple."

"Oh, Ermine, what a reproof this is for that bit of gossip."

"Not at all, my dear, the warning may be all the better for me," said Ermine, with a voice less steady than her words. "It is not what, under the circumstances, I could think likely in the Colin whom I knew; but were it indeed so, then, Ailie, you had better say nothing about me, unless he found you out. We would get employment elsewhere."

"And I must leave you to the suspense all day."

"Much better so. The worst thing we could do would be to go on talking about it. It is far better for me to be left with my dear little unconscious companion."

Alison tried to comfort herself with this belief through the long hours of the morning, during which she only heard that mamma and Colonel Keith were gone to the Homestead, and she saw no one till she came forth with her troop to the midday meal.

And there, at sight of Lady Temple's content and calm, satisfied look, as though she were once more in an accustomed atmosphere, and felt herself and the boys protected, and of the Colonel's courteous attention to her and affectionate authority towards her sons, it was an absolute pang to recognise the hue of eye described by Ermine; but still Alison tried to think them generic Keith eyes, till at length, amid the merry chatter of her pupils, came an appeal to "Miss Williams," and then came a look that thrilled through her, the same glance that she had met for one terrible moment twelve years before, and renewing the same longing to shrink from all sight or sound. How she kept her seat and continued to attend to the children she never knew, but the voices sounded like a distant Babel; and she did not know whether she were most relieved, disappointed, or indignant when she left the dining-room to take the boys for their walk. Oh, that Ermine could be hid from all knowledge of what would be so much harder to bear than the death in which she had long believed!

Harder to bear? Yes, Ermine had already been passing through a heart sickness that made the morning like an age. Her resolute will had struggled hard for composure, cheerfulness, and occupation; but the little watchful niece had seen through the endeavour, and had made her own to the sleepless night and the headache. The usual remedy was a drive in a wheeled chair, and Rose

was so urgent to be allowed to go and order one, that Ermine at last yielded, partly because she had hardly energy enough to turn her refusal graciously, partly because she would not feel herself staying at home for the vague hope and when the child was out of sight, she had the comfort of clasping her hands, and ceasing to restrain her countenance, while she murmured, “Oh, Colin, Colin, are you what you were twelve years back? Is this all dream, all delusion, and waste of feeling, while you are lying in your Indian grave, more mine than you can ever be living be as it may,—

“‘Calm me, my God, and keep me calm
While these hot breezes blow;
Be like the night dew’s cooling balm
Upon earth’s fevered brow.
Calm me, my God, and keep me calm,
Soft resting on Thy breast;
Soothe me with holy hymn and psalm,
And bid my spirit rest.’”

# CHAPTER V. MILITARY SOCIETY

"My trust
Like a good parent did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary as great
As my trust was, which had indeed no limit."

—*TEMPEST*.

Rose found the wheeled chair, to which her aunt gave the preference, was engaged, and shaking her little discreet head at "the shakey chair" and "the stuffy chair," she turned pensively homeward, and was speeding down Mackarel Lane, when she was stayed by the words, "My little girl!" and the grandest and most bearded gentleman she had ever seen, demanded, "Can you tell me if Miss Williams lives here?"

"My aunt?" exclaimed Rose, gazing up with her pretty, frightened-fawn look.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, looking eagerly at her, "then you are the child of a very old friend of mine! Did you never hear him speak of his old school-fellow, Colin Keith?"

"Papa is away," said Rose, turning back her neck to get a full view of his face from under the brim of her hat.

"'Will you run on and ask your aunt if she would like to see me?" he added.

Thus it was that Ermine heard the quick patter of the child's steps, followed by the manly tread, and the words sounded in her ears, "Aunt Ermine, there's a gentleman, and he has a great beard, and he says he is papa's old friend! And here he is."

Ermine's beaming eyes as absolutely met the new comer as though she had sprung forward. "I thought you would come," she said, in a voice serene with exceeding bliss.

"I have found you at last," as their hands clasped; and they gazed into each other's faces in the untroubled repose of the meeting, exclusive of all else.

Ermine was the first to break silence. "Oh, Colin, you look worn and altered."

"You don't; you have kept your sunbeam face for me with the dear brown glow I never thought to have seen again. Why did they tell me you were an invalid, Ermine?"

"Have you not seen Alison?" she asked, supposing he would have known all.

"I saw her, but did not hear her name, till just now at luncheon, when our looks met, and I saw it was not another disappointment."

"And she knows you are come to me?"

"It was not in me to speak to her till I had recovered you! One can forgive, but not forget."

"You will do more when you know her, and how she has only lived and worked for me, dear Ailie, and suffered far more than I—"

"While I was suffering from being unable to do anything but live for you," he repeated, taking up her words; "but that is ended now—" and as she made a negative motion of her head, "have you not trusted to me?"

"I have thought you not living," she said; "the last I know was your letter to dear Lady Alison, written from the hospital at Cape Town, after your wound. She was ill even when it came, and she could only give it to Ailie for me."

"Dear good aunt, she got into trouble with all the family for our sake; and when she was gone no one would give me any tidings of you."

"It was her last disappointment that you were not sent home on sick leave. Did you get well too fast?"

"Not exactly; but my father, or rather, I believe, my brother, intimated that I should be welcome only if I had laid aside a certain foolish fancy, and as lying on my back had not conduced to that end, I could only say I would stay where I was."

"And was it worse for you? I am sure, in spite of all that tanned skin, that your health has suffered. Ought you to have come home?"

"No, I do not know that London surgeons could have got at the ball," he said, putting his hand on his chest, "and it gives me no trouble in general. I was such a spectacle when I returned to duty, that good old Sir Stephen Temple, always a proverb for making his staff a refuge for the infirm, made me his aide-de-camp, and was like a father to me."

"Now I see why I never could find your name in any list of the officers in the moves of the regiment! I gave you quite up when I saw no Keith among those that came home from India. I did believe then that you were the Colonel Alexander Keith whose death I had seen mentioned, though I had long trusted to his not being honourable, nor having your first name."

"Ah! he succeeded to the command after Lady Temple's father. A kind friend to me he was, and he left me in charge of his son and daughter. A very good and gallant fellow is that young Alick. I must bring him to see you some day—"

"Oh! I saw his name; I remember! I gloried in the doings of a Keith; but I was afraid he had died, as there was no such name with the regiment when it came home."

"No, he was almost shattered to pieces; but Sir Stephen sent him up the hills to be nursed by Lady Temple and her mother, and he was sent home as soon as he could be moved. I was astonished to see how entirely he had recovered."

"Then you went through all that Indian war?"

"Yes; with Sir Stephen."

"You must show me all your medals! How much you have to tell me! And then—?"

"Just when the regiment was coming home, my dear old chief was appointed to the command in Australia, and insisted on my coming with him as military secretary. He had come to depend on me so much that I could not well leave him; and in five years there was the way to promotion and to claiming you at once. We were just settled there, when what I heard made me long to have decided otherwise, but I could not break with him then. I wrote to Edward, but had my letter returned to me."

"No wonder; Edward was abroad, all connexion broken."

"I wrote to Beauchamp, and he knew nothing, and I could only wait till my chief's time should be up. You know how it was cut short, and how the care of the poor little widow detained me till she was fit for the voyage. I came and sought you in vain in town. I went home, and found my brother lonely and dispirited. He has lost his son, his daughters are married, and he and I are all the brothers left out of the six! He was urgent that I should come and live with him and marry. I told him I would, with all my heart, when I had found you, and he saw I was too much in earnest to be opposed. Then I went to Beauchamp, but Harry knew nothing about any one. I tried to find out your sister and Dr. Long, but heard they were gone to Belfast."

"Yes, they lost a good deal in the crash, and did not like retrenching among their neighbours, so they went to Ireland, and there they have a flourishing practice."

"I thought myself on my way there," he said, smiling; "only I had first to settle Lady Temple, little guessing who was her treasure of a governess! Last night I had nearly opened, on another false scent; I fell in with a description that I could have sworn was yours, of the heather behind the parsonage. I made a note of the publisher in case all else had failed."

"I'm glad you knew the scent of the thyme!"

"Then it was no false scent?"

"One must live, and I was thankful to do anything to lighten Ailie's burthen. I wrote down that description that I might live in the place in fancy; and one day, when the contribution was wanted and I was hard up for ideas, I sent it, though I was loth to lay open that bit of home and heart."

"Well it might give me the sense of meeting you! And in other papers of the series I traced your old self more ripened."

"The editor was a friend of Edward's, and in our London days he asked me to write letters on things in general, and when I said I saw the world through a key-hole, he answered that a circumscribed view gained in distinctness. Most kind and helpful he has been, and what began between sport and need to say out one's mind has come to be a resource for which we are very thankful. He sends us books for reviewal, and that is pleasant and improving, not to say profitable."

"Little did I think you were in such straits!" he said, stroking the child's head, and waiting as though her presence were a restraint on inquiries, but she eagerly availed herself of the pause. "Aunt Ermine, please what shall I say about the chairs? Will you have the nice one and Billy when they come home? I was to take the answer, only you did talk so that I could not ask!"

"Thank you, my dear; I don't want chairs nor anything else while I can talk so," she answered, smiling. "You had better take a run in the garden when you come back;" and Rose replied with a nod of assent that made the colonel smile and say, "Good-bye then, my sweet Lady Discretion, some day we will be better acquainted."

"Dear child," said Ermine, "she is our great blessing, and some day I trust will be the same to her dear father. Oh, Colin! it is too much to hope that you have not believed what you must have heard! And yet you wrote to him."

"Nay, I could not but feel great distrust of what I heard, since I was also told that his sisters were unconvinced; and besides, I had continually seen him at school the victim of other people's faults."

"This is best of all," exclaimed Ermine, with glistening eyes, and hand laid upon his; "it is the most comfortable word I have heard since it happened. Yes, indeed, many a time before I saw you, had I heard of 'Keith' as the friend who saw him righted. Oh, Colin! thanks, thanks for believing in him more than for all!"

"Not believing, but knowing," he answered—"knowing both you and Edward. Besides, is it not almost invariable that the inventor is ruined by his invention—a Prospero by nature?"

"It was not the invention," she answered; "that throve as long as my father lived."

"Yes, he was an excellent man of business."

"And he thought the concern so secure that there was no danger in embarking all the available capital of the family in it, and it did bring us in a very good income."

"I remember that it struck me that the people at home would find that they had made a mistake after all, and missed a fortune for me! It was an invention for diminishing the fragility of glass under heat; was it not?"

"Yes, and the manufacture was very prosperous, so that my father was quite at ease about us. After his death we made a home for Edward in London, and looked after him when he used to be smitten with some new idea and forgot all sublunary matters. When he married we went to live at Richmond, and had his dear little wife very much with us, for she was a delicate tender creature, half killed by London. In process of time he fell in with a man named Maddox, plausible and clever, who became a sort of manager, especially while Edward was in his trances of invention; and at all times knew more about his accounts than he did himself. Nothing but my father's authority had ever made him really look into them, and this man took them all off his hands. There was a matter about the glass that Edward was bent on ascertaining, and he went to study the manufacture in Bohemia, taking his wife with him, and leaving Rose with us. Shortly after, Dr. Long and Harry Beauchamp received letters asking for a considerable advance, to be laid out on the materials that this improvement would require. Immediately afterwards came the crash."

"Exactly what I heard. Of course the letters were written in ignorance of what was impending."

"Colin, they were never written at all by Edward! He denied all knowledge of them. Alison saw Dr. Long's, most ingeniously managed—foreign paper and all—but she could swear to the forgery—"

"You suspect this Maddox?"

"Most strongly! He knew the state of the business; Edward did not. And he had a correspondence that would have enabled so ingenious a person easily to imitate Edward's letters. I do not wonder at their having been taken in; but how Julia—how Harry Beauchamp could believe—what they do believe. Oh, Colin! it will not do to think about it!"

"Oh, that I had been at home! Were no measures taken?"

"Alas! alas! we urged Edward to come home and clear himself; but that poor little wife of his was terrified beyond measure, imagined prisons and trials. She was unable to move, and he could not leave her; she took from him an unhappy promise not to put himself in what she fancied danger from the law, and then died, leaving him a baby that did not live a day. He was too broken-hearted to care for vindicating himself, and no one-no one would do it for him!"

Colonel Keith frowned and clenched the hand that lay in his grasp till it was absolute pain, but pain that was a relief to feel. "Madness, madness!" he said. "Miserable! But how was it at home—? Did this Maddox stand his ground?"

"Yes, if he had fled, all would have been clear, but he doctored the accounts his own way, and quite satisfied Dr. Long and Harry. He showed Edward's receipt for the £6000 that had been advanced, and besides, there was a large sum not accounted for, which was, of course, supposed to have been invested abroad by Edward—some said gambled away—as if he had not had a regular hatred of all sorts of games."

"Edward with his head in the clouds! One notion is as likely as the other.—Then absolutely nothing was done!"

"Nothing! The bankruptcy was declared, the whole affair broken up; and certainly if every one had not known Edward to be the most heedless of men, the confusion would have justified them in thinking him a dishonest one. Things had been done in his name by Maddox that might have made a stranger think him guilty of the rest, but to those who had ever known his abstraction, and far more his real honour and uprightness, nothing could have been plainer."

"It all turned upon his absence."

"Yes, he must have borne the brunt of what had been done in his name, I know; that would have been bad enough, but in a court of justice, his whole character would have been shown, and besides, a prosecution for forgery of his receipt would have shown what Maddox was, sufficiently to exculpate him."

"And you say the losers by the deception would not believe in it?"

"No, they only shook their heads at our weak sisterly affection."

"I wish I could see one of those letters. Where is Maddox now?"

"I cannot tell. He certainly did not go away immediately after the settlement of accounts, but it has not been possible to us to keep up a knowledge of his movements, or something might have turned up to justify Edward. Oh, what it is to be helpless women! You are the very first person, Colin, who has not looked at me pityingly, like a creature to be forborne with an undeniable delusion!"

"They must be very insolent people, then, to look at that brow and eyes, and think even sisterly love could blind them," he said. "Yes, Ermine, I was certain that unless Edward were more changed than I could believe, there must be some such explanation. You have never seen him since?"

"No, he was too utterly broken by the loss of his wife to feel anything else. For a long time we heard nothing, and that was the most dreadful time of all! Then he wrote from a little German town, where he was getting his bread as a photographer's assistant. And since that he has cast about the world, till just now he has some rather interesting employment at the mines in the Oural Mountains, the first thing he has really seemed to like or care for."

"The Oural Mountains! that is out of reach. I wish I could see him. One might find some means of clearing him. What directed your suspicion to Maddox?"

"Chiefly that the letters professed to have been sent in a parcel to him to be posted from the office. If it had been so, Edward and Lucy would certainly have written to us at the same time. I could

have shown, too, that Maddox had written to me the day before to ascertain where Edward was, so as to be sure of the date. It was a little country village, and I made a blunder in copying the spelling from Lucy's writing. Ailie found that very blunder repeated in Dr. Long's letter, and we showed him that Edward did not write it so. Besides, before going abroad, Edward had lost the seal-ring with his crest, which you gave him. You remember the Saxon's head?"

"I remember! You all took it much to heart that the engraver had made it a Saracen's head, and not a long-haired Saxon."

"Well, Edward had renewed the ring, and taken care to make it a Saxon. Now Ailie could get no one to believe her, but she is certain that the letter was sealed with the old Saracen not the new Saxon. But—but—if you had but been there—"

"Tell me you wished for me, Ermine."

"I durst not wish anything about you," she said, looking up through a mist of tears.

"And you, what fixed you here?"

"An old servant of ours had married and settled here, and had written to us of her satisfaction in finding that the clergyman was from Hereford. We thought he would recommend Ailie as daily governess to visitors, and that Sarah would be a comfortable landlady. It has answered very well; Rose deserves her name far more than when we brought her here, and it is wonderful how much better I have been since doctors have become a mere luxury."

"Do you, can you really mean that you are supporting yourselves?"

"All but twenty-five pounds a year, from a legacy to us, that Mr. Beauchamp would not let them touch. But it has been most remarkable, Colin," she said, with the dew in her eyes, "how we have never wanted our daily bread, and how happy we have been! If it had not been for Edward, this would in many ways have been our happiest time. Since the old days the little frets have told less, and Ailie has been infinitely happier and brighter since she has had to work instead of only to watch me. Ah, Colin, must I not own to having been happy? Indeed it was very much because peace had come when the suspense had sunk into belief that I might think of you as—, where you would not be grieved by the sight of what I am now—"

As she spoke, a knock, not at the house, but at the room door, made them both start, and impel their chairs to a more ordinary distance, just as Rachel Curtis made her entrance, extremely amazed to find, not Mr. Touchett, but a much greater foe and rival in that unexpected quarter. Ermine, the least disconcerted, was the first to speak. "You are surprised to find a visitor here," she said, "and indeed only now, did we find out that 'our military secretary,' as your little cousins say, was our clear old squire's nephew."

There was a ring of gladness in the usually patient voice that struck even Rachel, though she was usually too eager to be observant, but she was still unready with talk for the occasion, and Ermine continued: "We had heard so much of the Major before-hand, that we had a sort of Jupiter-like expectation of the coming man. I am not sure that I shall not go on expecting a mythic major!"

Rachel, never understanding playfulness, thought this both audacious and unnecessary, and if it had come from any one else, would have administered a snub, but she felt the invalid sacred from her weapons.

"Have you ever seen the boys?" asked Colonel Keith. "I am rather proud of Conrade, my pupil; he is so chivalrous towards his mother."

"Alison has brought down a division or two to show me. How much alike they are."

"Exactly alike, and excessively unruly and unmanageable," said Rachel. "I pity your sister."

"More unmanageable in appearance than in reality," said the colonel: "there's always a little trial of strength against the hand over them, and they yield when they find it is really a hand. They were wonderfully good and considerate when it was an object to keep the house quiet."

Rachel would not encourage him to talk of Lady Temple, so she turned to Ermine on the business that had brought her, collecting and adapting old clothes for emigrants.—It was not exactly

gentlemen's pastime, and Ermine tried to put it aside and converse, but Rachel never permitted any petty consideration to interfere with a useful design, and as there was a press of time for the things, she felt herself justified in driving the intruder off the field and outstaying him. She succeeded; he recollected the desire of the boys that he should take them to inspect the pony at the "Jolly Mariner," and took leave with—"I shall see you to-morrow."

"You knew him all the time!" exclaimed Rachel, pausing in her unfolding of the Master Temples' ship wardrobe. "Why did you not say so?"

"We did not know his name. He was always the 'Major.'"

"Who, and what is he?" demanded Rachel, as she knelt before her victim, fixing those great prominent eyes, so like those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother, that Ermine involuntarily gave a backward impulse to her wheeled chair, as she answered the readiest thing that occurred to her, —"He is brother to Lord Keith of Gowan-brae."

"Oh," said Rachel, kneeling on meditatively, "that accounts for it. So much the worse. The staff is made up of idle honourables."

"Quoth the 'Times!'" replied Ermine; "but his appointment began on account of a wound, and went on because of his usefulness—"

"Wounded! I don't like wounded heroes," said Rachel; "people make such a fuss with them that they always get spoilt."

"This was nine years ago, so you may forget it if you like," said Ermine, diversion suppressing displeasure.

"And what is your opinion of him?" said Rachel, edging forward on her knees, so as to bring her inquisitorial eyes to bear more fully.

"I had not seen him for twelve years," said Ermine, rather faintly.

"He must have had a formed character when you saw him last. The twelve years before five-and-forty don't alter the nature."

"Five-and-forty! Illness and climate have told, but I did not think it was so much. He is only thirty-six—"

"That is not what I care about," said Rachel, "you are both of you so cautious that you tell me what amounts to nothing! You should consider how important it is to me to know something about the person in whose power my cousin's affairs are left."

"Have you not sufficient guarantee in the very fact of her husband's confidence?"

"I don't know. A simple-hearted old soldier always means a very foolish old man."

"Witness the Newcomes," said Ermine, who, besides her usual amusement in tracing Rachel's dicta to their source, could only keep in her indignation by laughing.

"General observation," said Rachel, not to be turned from her purpose. "I am not foolishly suspicious, but it is not pleasant to see great influence and intimacy without some knowledge of the person exercising it."

"I think," said Ermine, bringing herself with difficulty to answer quietly, "that you can hardly understand the terms they are on without having seen how much a staff officer becomes one of the family."

"I suppose much must be allowed for the frivolity and narrowness of a military set in a colony. Imagine my one attempt at rational conversation last night. Asking his views on female emigration, absolutely he had none at all; he and Fanny only went off upon a nursemaid married to a sergeant!"

"Perhaps the bearings of the question would hardly suit mixed company."

"To be sure there was a conceited young officer there; for as ill luck will have it, my uncle's old regiment is quartered at Avoncester, and I suppose they will all be coming after Fanny. It is well they are no nearer, and as this colonel says he is going to Belfast in a day or two, there will not be much provocation to them to come here. Now this great event of the Major's coming is over, we will try to put Fanny upon a definite system, and I look to you and your sister as a great assistance

to me, in counteracting the follies and nonsenses that her situation naturally exposes her to. I have been writing a little sketch of the dangers of indecision, that I thought of sending to the 'Traveller.' It would strike Fanny to see there what I so often tell her; but I can't get an answer about my paper on 'Curatocult,' as you made me call it."

"Did I!"

"You said the other word was of two languages. I can't think why they don't insert it; but in the meantime I will bring down my 'Human Reeds,' and show them to you. I have only an hour's work on them; so I'll come to-morrow afternoon."

"I think Colonel Keith talked of calling again—thank you," suggested Ermine in despair.

"Ah, yes, one does not want to be liable to interruptions in the most interesting part. When he is gone to Belfast—"

"Yes, when he is gone to Belfast!" repeated Ermine, with an irresistible gleam of mirth about her lips and eyes, and at that moment Alison made her appearance. The looks of the sisters met, and read one another so far as to know that the meeting was over, and for the rest they endured, while Rachel remained, little imagining the trial her presence had been to Alison's burning heart—sick anxiety and doubt. How could it be well? Let him be loveable, let him be constant, that only rendered Ermine's condition the more pitiable, and the shining glance of her eyes was almost more than Alison could bear. So happy as the sisters had been together, so absolutely united, it did seem hard to disturb that calm life with hopes and agitations that must needs be futile; and Alison, whose whole life and soul were in her sister, could not without a pang see that sister's heart belonging to another, and not for hopeful joy, but pain and grief. The yearning of jealousy was sternly reproved and forced down, and told that Ermine had long been Colin Keith's, that the perpetrator of the evil had the least right of any one to murmur that her own monopoly of her sister was interfered with; that she was selfish, unkind, envious; that she had only to hate herself and pray for strength to bear the punishment, without alloying Ermine's happiness while it lasted. How it could be so bright Alison knew not, but so it was she recognised by every tone of the voice, by every smile on the lip, by even the upright vigour with which Ermine sat in her chair and undertook Rachel's tasks of needlework.

And yet, when the visitor rose at last to go, Alison was almost unwilling to be alone with her sister, and have that power of sympathy put to the test by those clear eyes that were wont to see her through and through. She went with Rachel to the door, and stood taking a last instruction, hearing it not at all, but answering, and relieved by the delay, hardly knowing whether to be glad or not that when she returned Rose was leaning on the arm of her aunt's chair with the most eager face. But Rose was to be no protection, for what was passing between her and her aunt?

"O auntie, I am go glad he is coming back. He is just like the picture you drew of Robert Bruce for me. And he is so kind. I never saw any gentleman speak to you in such: a nice soft voice."

Alison had no difficulty in smiling as Ermine stroked the child's hair, kissed her, and looked up with an arch, blushing, glittering face that could not have been brighter those long twelve years ago.

And then Rose turned round, impatient to tell her other aunt her story. "O aunt Ailie, we have had such a gentleman here, with a great brown beard like a picture. And he is papa's old friend, and kissed me because I am papa's little girl, and I do like him so very much. I went where I could look at him in the garden, when you sent me out, aunt Ermine."

"You did, you monkey?" said Ermine, laughing, and blushing again. "What will you do if I send you out next time? No, I won't then, my dear, for all the time, I should like you to see him and know him."

"Only, if you want to talk of anything very particular," observed Rose.

"I don't think I need ask many questions," said Alison, smiling being happily made very easy to her. "Dear Ermine, I see you are perfectly satisfied—"

"O Ailie, that is no word for it! Not only himself, but to find him loving Rose for her father's sake, undoubting of him through all. Ailie, the thankfulness of it is more than one can bear."

"And he is the same?" said Alison.

"The same—no, not the same. It is more, better, or I am able to feel it more. It was just like the morrow of the day he walked down the lane with me and gathered honeysuckles, only the night between has been a very, very strange time."

"I hope the interruption did not come very soon."

"I thought it was directly, but it could not have been so soon, since you are come home. We had just had time to tell what we most wanted to know, and I know a little more of what he is. I feel as if it were not only Colin again, but ten times Colin. O Ailie, it must be a little bit like the meetings in heaven!"

"I believe it is so with you," said Alison, scarcely able to keep the tears from her eyes.

"After sometimes not daring to dwell on him, and then only venturing because I thought he must be dead, to have him back again with the same looks, only deeper—to find that he clung to those weeks so long ago, and, above all, that there was not one cloud, one doubt about the troubles —Oh, it is too, too much."

Ermine lent back with clasped hands. She was like one weary with happiness, and lain to rest in the sense of newly-won peace. She said little more that evening, and if spoken to, seemed like one wakened out of a dream, so that more than once she laughed at herself, begged her sister's pardon, and said that it seemed to her that she could not hear anything for the one glad voice that rang in her ear, "Colin is come home." That was sufficient for her, no need for any other sympathy, felt Alison, with another of those pangs crushed down. Then wonder came—whether Ermine could really contemplate the future, or if it were absolutely lost in the present?

Colonel Keith went back to be seized by Conrade and Francis, and walked off to the pony inspection, the two boys, on either side of him, communicating to him the great grievance of living in a poky place like this, where nobody had ever been in the army, nor had a bit of sense, and Aunt Rachel was always bothering, and trying to make mamma think that Con told stories.

"I don't mind that," said Conrade, stoutly; "let her try!"

"Oh, but she wanted mamma to shut you up," added Francis.

"Well, and mamma knows better," said Conrade, "and it made her leave off teaching me, so it was lucky. But I don't mind that; only don't you see, Colonel, they don't know how to treat mamma! They go and bully her, and treat her like—like a subaltern, till I hate the very sight of it."

"My boy," said the Colonel, who had been giving only half attention; "you must make up your mind to your mother not being at the head of everything, as she used to be in your father's time. She will always be respected, but you must look to yourself as you grow up to make a position tor her!"

"I wish I was grown up!" sighed Conrade; "how I would give it to Aunt Rachel! But why must we live here to have her plaguing us?"

Questions that the Colonel was glad to turn aside by moans of the ponies, and by a suggestion that, if a very quiet one were found, and if Conrade would be very careful, mamma might, perhaps, go out riding with them. The motion was so transcendant that, no sooner had the ponies been seen, than the boys raced home, and had communicated it at the top of their voices to mamma long before their friend made his appearance. Lady Temple was quite startled at the idea. "Dear papa," as she always called her husband, "had wished her to ride, but she had seldom done so, and now—" The tears came into her eyes.

"I think you might," said the Colonel, gently; "I could find you a quiet animal, and to have you with Conrade would be such a protection to him," he added, as the boys had rushed out of the room.

"Yes; perhaps, dear boy. But I could not begin alone; it is so long since I rode. Perhaps when you come back from Ireland."

"I am not going to Ireland."

"I thought you said—" said Fanny looking up surprised; "I am very glad! But if you wished to go, pray don't think about us! I shall learn to manage in time, and I cannot bear to detain you."

"You do not detain me," he said, sitting down by her; "I have found what I was going in search of, and through your means."

"What—what do you mean! You were going to see Miss Williams this afternoon, I thought!"

"Yes, and it was she whom I was seeking." He paused, and added slowly, as if merely for the sake of dwelling on the words, "I have found her!"

"Miss Williams!" said Fanny, with perplexed looks.

"Miss Williams!—my Ermine whom I had not seen since the day after her accident, when we parted as on her deathbed!"

"That sister! Oh, poor thing, I am so glad! But I am sorry!" cried the much confused Fanny, in a breath; "were not you very much shocked?"

"I had never hoped to see her face in all its brightness again," he said. "Twelve years! It is twelve years that she has suffered, and of late she has been brought to this grievous state of poverty, and yet the spirit is as brave and cheerful as ever! It looks out of the beautiful eyes—more beautiful than when I first saw them,—I could see and think of nothing else!"

"Twelve years!" repeated Fanny; "is it so long since you saw her?"

"Almost since I heard of her! She was like a daughter to my aunt at Beauchamp, and her brother was my schoolfellow. For one summer, when I was quartered at Hertford, I was with her constantly, but my family would not even hear of the indefinite engagement that was all we could have looked to, and made me exchange into the —th."

"Ah! that was the way we came to have you! I must tell you, dear Sir Stephen always guessed. Once when he had quite vexed poor mamma by preventing her from joking you in her way about young ladies, he told me that once, when he was young, he had liked some one who died or was married, I don't quite know which, and he thought it was the same with you, from something that happened when you withdrew your application for leave after your wound."

"Yes! it was a letter from home, implying that my return would be accepted as a sign that I gave her up. So that was an additional instance of the exceeding kindness that I always received."

And there was a pause, both much affected by the thought of the good old man's ever ready consideration. At last Fanny said, "I am sure it was well for us! What would he have done without you?—and," she added, "do you really mean that you never heard of her all these years?"

"Never after my aunt's death, except just after we went to Melbourne, when I heard in general terms of the ruin of the family and the false imputation on their brother."

"Ah! I remember that you did say something about going home, and Sir Stephen was distressed, and mamma and I persuaded you because we saw he would have missed you so much, and mamma was quite hurt at your thinking of going. But if you had only told him your reason, he would never have thought of standing in your way."

"I know he would not, but I saw he could hardly find any one else just then who knew his ways so well. Besides, there was little use in going home till I had my promotion, and could offer her a home; and I had no notion how utter the ruin was, or that she had lost so much. So little did I imagine their straits that, but for Alison's look, I should hardly have inquired even on hearing her name."

"How very curious—how strangely things come round!" said Fanny; then with a start of dismay, "but what shall I do? Pray, tell me what you would like. If I might only keep her a little while till I can find some one else, though no one will ever be so nice, but indeed I would not for a moment, if you had rather not."

"Why so? Alison is very happy with you, and there can be no reason against her going on."

"Oh!" cried Lady Temple, with an odd sound of satisfaction, doubt, and surprise, "but I thought you would not like it."

"I should like, of course, to set them all at ease, but as I can do no more than make a home for Ermine and her niece, I can only rejoice that Alison is with you."

"But your brother!"

"If he does not like it, he must take the consequence of the utter separation he made my father insist on," said the Colonel sternly. "For my own part, I only esteem both sisters the more, if that were possible, for what they have done for themselves."

"Oh! that is what Rachel would like! She is so fond of the sick—I mean of your—Miss Williams. I suppose I may not tell her yet."

"Not yet, if you please. I have scarcely had time as yet to know what Ermine wishes, but I could not help telling you."

"Thank you—I am so glad," she said, with sweet earnestness, holding out her hand in congratulation. "When may I go to her? I should like for her to come and stay here. Do you think she would?"

"Thank you, I will see. I know how kind you would be—indeed, have already been to her."

"And I am so thankful that I may keep Miss Williams! The dear boys never were so good. And perhaps she may stay till baby is grown up. Oh! how long it will be first!"

"She could not have a kinder friend," said the Colonel, smiling, and looking at his watch.

"Oh, is it time to dress? It is very kind of my dear aunt; but I do wish we could have stayed at home to-night. It is so dull for the boys when I dine out, and I had so much to ask you. One thing was about that poor little Bessie Keith. Don't you think I might ask her down here, to be near her brother?"

"It would be a very kind thing in you, and very good for her, but you must be prepared for rather a gay young lady."

"Oh, but she would not mind my not going out. She would have Alick, you know, and all the boys to amuse her; but, if you think it would be tiresome for her, and that she would not be happy, I should be very sorry to have her, poor child."

"I was not afraid for her," said Colonel Keith, smiling, "but of her being rather too much for you."

"Rachel is not too much for me," said Fanny, "and she and Grace will entertain Bessie, and take her out. But I will talk to Alick. He spoke of coming to-morrow. And don't you think I might ask Colonel and Mrs. Hammond to spend a day? They would so like the sea for the children."

"Certainly."

"Then perhaps you would write—oh, I forgot," colouring up, "I never can forget the old days, it seems as if you were on the staff still."

"I always am on yours, and always hope to be," he said, smiling, "though I am afraid I can't write your note to the Hammonds for you."

"But you won't go away," she said. "I know your time will be taken up, and you must not let me or the boys be troublesome; but to have you here makes me so much less lost and lonely. And I shall have such a friend in your Erminia. Is that her name?"

"Ermine, an old Welsh name, the softest I ever heard. Indeed it is dressing time," added Colonel Keith, and both moved away with the startled precision of members of a punctual military household, still feeling themselves accountable to somebody.

# CHAPTER VI. ERMINE'S RESOLUTION

"For as his hand the weather steers,
So thrive I best 'twixt joys and tears,
And all the year have some green ears."—

*H. VAUGHAN.*

Alison had not been wrong in her presentiment that the second interview would be more trying than the first. The exceeding brightness and animation of Ermine's countenance, her speaking eyes, unchanged complexion, and lively manner—above all, the restoration of her real substantial self—had so sufficed and engrossed Colin Keith in the gladness of their first meeting that he had failed to comprehend her helpless state; and already knowing her to be an invalid, not entirely recovered from her accident, he was only agreeably surprised to see the beauty of face he had loved so long, retaining all its vivacity of expression. And when he met Alison the next morning with a cordial brotherly greeting and inquiry for her sister, her "Very well," and "not at all the worse for the excitement," were so hearty and ready that he could not have guessed that "well" with Ermine meant something rather relative than positive. Alison brought him a playful message from her, that since he was not going to Belfast, she should meet him with a freer conscience if he would first give her time for Rose's lessons, and, as he said, he had lived long enough with Messrs. Conrade and Co. to acknowledge the wisdom of the message. But Rose had not long been at leisure to look out for him before he made his appearance, and walked in by right, as one at home; and sitting down in his yesterday's place, took the little maiden on his knee, and began to talk to her about the lessons he had been told to wait for. What would she have done without them? He knew some people who never could leave the house quiet enough to hear one's-self speak if they were deprived of lessons. Was that the way with her? Rose laughed like a creature, her aunt said, "to whom the notion of noise at play was something strange and ridiculous; necessity has reduced her to Jacqueline Pascal's system with her pensionnaires, who were allowed to play one by one without any noise."

"But I don't play all alone," said Rose; "I play with you, Aunt Ermine, and with Violetta."

And Violetta speedily had the honour of an introduction, very solemnly gone through, in due form; Ermine, in the languid sportiveness of enjoyment of his presence and his kindness to the child, inciting Rose to present Miss Violetta Williams to Colonel Keith, an introduction that he returned with a grand military salute, at the same time as he shook the doll's inseparable fingers. "Well, Miss Violetta, and Miss Rose, when you come to live with me, I shall hope for the pleasure of teaching you to make a noise."

"What does he mean?" said Rose, turning round amazed upon her aunt.

"I am afraid he does not quite know," said Ermine, sadly.

"Nay, Ermine," said he, turning from the child, and bending over her, "you are the last who should say that. Have I not told you that there is nothing now in our way—no one with a right to object, and means enough for all we should wish, including her—? What is the matter?" he added, startled by her look.

"Ah, Colin! I thought you knew—"

"Knew what, Ermine?" with his brows drawn together.

"Knew—what I am," she said; "knew the impossibility. What, they have not told you? I thought I was the invalid, the cripple, with every one."

"I knew you had suffered cruelly; I knew you were lame," he said, breathlessly; "but—what—"

"It is more than lame," she said. "I should be better off if the fiction of the Queens of Spain were truth with me. I could not move from this chair without help. Oh, Colin! poor Colin! it was very

cruel not to have prepared you for this!" she added, as he gazed at her in grief and dismay, and made a vain attempt to find the voice that would not come. "Yes, indeed it is so," she said; "the explosion, rather than the fire, did mischief below the knee that poor nature could not repair, and I can but just stand, and cannot walk at all."

"Has anything been done—advice?" he murmured.

"Advice upon advice, so that I felt at the last almost a compensation to be out of the way of the doctors. No, nothing more can be done; and now that one is used to it, the snail is very comfortable in its shell. But I wish you could have known it sooner!" she added, seeing him shade his brow with his hand, overwhelmed.

"What you must have suffered!" he murmured.

"That is all over long ago; every year has left that further behind, and made me more content. Dear Colin, for me there is nothing to grieve."

He could not control himself, rose up, made a long stride, and passed through the open window into the garden.

"Oh, if I could only follow him," gasped Ermine, joining her hands and looking up.

"Is it because you can't walk?" said Rose, somewhat frightened, and for the first time beginning to comprehend that her joyous-tempered aunt could be a subject for pity.

"Oh! this was what I feared!" sighed Ermine. "Oh, give us strength to go through with it." Then becoming awake to the child's presence—"A little water, if you please, my dear." Then, more composedly, "Don't be frightened, my Rose; you did not know it was such a shock to find me so laid by—"

"He is in the garden walking up and down," said Rose. "May I go and tell him how much merrier you always are than Aunt Ailie?"

Poor Ermine felt anything but merry just then, but she had some experience of Rose's powers of soothing, and signed assent. So in another second Colonel Keith was met in the hasty, agonized walk by which he was endeavouring to work off his agitation, and the slender child looked wistfully up at him from dark depths of half understanding eyes—"Please, please don't be so very sorry," she said. "Aunt Ermine does not like it. She never is sorry for herself—"

"Have I shaken her—distressed her?" he asked, anxiously.

"She doesn't like you to be sorry," said Rose, looking up. "And, indeed, she does not mind it; she is such a merry aunt! Please, come in again, and see how happy we always are—"

The last words were spoken so near the window that Ermine caught them, and said, "Yes, come in, Colin, and learn not to grieve for me, or you will make me repent of my selfish gladness yesterday."

"Not grieve!" he exclaimed, "when I think of the beautiful vigorous being that used to be the life of the place—" and he would have said more but for a deprecating sign of the hand.

"Well," she said, half smiling, "it is a pity to think even of a crushed butterfly; but indeed, Colin, if you can bear to listen to me, I think I can show you that it all has been a blessing even by sight, as well as, of course, by faith. Only remember the unsatisfactoriness of our condition—the never seeing or hearing from one another after that day when Mr. Beauchamp came down on us. Did not the accident win for us a parting that was much better to remember than that state of things? Oh, the pining, weary feel as if all the world had closed on me! I do assure you it was much worse than anything that came after the burn. Yes, if I had been well and doing like others, I know I should have fretted and wearied, pined myself ill perhaps, whereas I could always tell myself that every year of your absence might be a step towards your finding me well; and when I was forced to give up that hope for myself, why then, Colin, the never seeing your name made me think you would never be disappointed and grieved as you are now. It is very merciful the way that physical trials help one through those of the mind."

"I never knew," said the Colonel; "all my aunt's latter letters spoke of your slow improvement beyond hope."

"True, in her time, I had not reached the point where I stopped. The last time I saw her I was still upstairs; and, indeed, I did not half know what I could do till I tried."

"Yes," said he, brightened by that buoyant look so remarkable in her face; "and you will yet do more, Ermine. You have convinced me that we shall be all the happier together—"

"But that was not what I meant to convince you of—" she said, faintly.

"Not what you meant, perhaps; but what it did convince me was, that you—as you are, my Ermine—are ten thousand times more to me than even as the beautiful girl, and that there never can be a happier pair than we shall be when I am your hands and feet."

Ermine sat up, and rallied all her forces, choked back the swelling of her throat, and said, "Dear Colin, it cannot be! I trusted you were understanding that when I told you how it was with me."

He could not speak from consternation.

"No," she said; "it would be wrong in me to think of it for an instant. That you should have done so, shows—O Colin, I cannot talk of it; but it would be as ungenerous in me to consent, as it is noble of you to propose it."

"It is no such thing," he answered; "it has been the one object and thought of my life, the only hope I have had all these years."

"Exactly so," she said, struggling again to speak firmly; "and that is the very thing. You kept your allegiance to the bright, tall, walking, active girl, and it would be a shame in the scorched cripple to claim it."

"Don't call yourself names. Have I not told you that you are more than the same?"

"You do not know. You are pleased because my face is not burnt, nor grown much older, and because I can talk and laugh in the same voice still." (Oh, how it quivered!) "But it would be a wicked mockery in me to pretend to be the wife you want. Yes, I know you think you do, but that is just because my looks are so deceitful, and you have kept on thinking about me; but you must make a fresh beginning."

"You can tell me that," he said, indignantly.

"Because it is not new to me," she said; "the quarter of an hour you stood by me, with that deadly calm in your white face, was the real farewell to the young hopeful dream of that bright summer. I wish it was as calm now."

"I believed you dying then," answered he.

"Do not make me think it would have been better for you if I had been," she said, imploringly. "It was as much the end, and I knew it from the time my recovery stopped short. I would have let you know if I could, and then you would not have been so much shocked."

"So as to cut me off from you entirely?"

"No, indeed. The thought of seeing you again was too—too overwhelming to be indulged in; knowing, as I did, that if you were the same to me, it must be at this sad cost to you," and her eyes filled with tears.

"It is you who make it so, Ermine."

"No; it is the providence that has set me aside from the active work of life. Pray do not go on, Colin, it is only giving us both useless pain. You do not know what it costs me to deny you, and I feel that I must. I know you are only acting on the impulse of generosity. Yes, I will say so, though you think it is to please yourself," she added, with one of those smiles that nothing could drive far from her lips, and which made it infinitely harder to acquiesce in her denial.

"I will make you think so in time," he said. "Then I might tell you, you had no right to please yourself," she answered, still with the same air of playfulness; "you have got a brother, you know—and—yes, I hear you growl; but if he is a poor old broken man out of health, it is the more reason you should not vex him, nor hamper yourself with a helpless commodity."

"You are not taking the way to make me forget what my brother has done for us."

"How do you know that he did not save me from being a strong-minded military lady! After all, it was absurd to expect people to look favourably on our liking for one another, and you know they could not be expected to know that there was real stuff in the affair. If there had not been, we should have thought so all the same, you know, and been quite as furious."

He could not help smiling, recollecting fury that, in the course of these twelve years, he had seen evinced under similar circumstances by persons who had consoled themselves before he had done pitying them. "Still," he said gravely, "I think there was harshness."

"So do I, but not so much as I thought at that time, and—oh, surely that is not Rachel Curtis? I told her I thought you would call."

"Intolerable!" he muttered between his teeth. "Is she always coming to bore you?"

"She has been very kind, and my great enlivenment," said Ermine, "and she can't be expected to know how little we want her. Oh, there, the danger is averted! She must have asked if you were here."

"I was just thinking that she was the chief objection to Lady Temple's kind wish of having you at Myrtlewood."

"Does Lady Temple know?" asked Ermine, blushing.

"I could not keep it from one who has been so uniformly kind to me; but I desired her not to let it go further till I should hear your wishes."

"Yes, she has a right to know," said Ermine; "but please, not a word elsewhere."

"And will you not come to stay with her?"

"I? Oh, no; I am fit for no place but this. You don't half know how bad I am. When you have seen a little more of us, you will be quite convinced."

"Well, at least, you give me leave to come here."

"Leave? When it is a greater pleasure than I ever thought to have again; that is, while you understand that you said good-bye to the Ermine of Beauchamp Parsonage twelve years ago, and that the thing here is only a sort of ghost, most glad and grateful to be a friend—a sister."

"So," he said, "those are to be the terms of my admission."

"The only possible ones."

"I will consider them. I have not accepted them."

"You will," she said.

But she met a smile in return, implying that there might be a will as steadfast as her own, although the question might be waived for a time.

Meantime, Rachel was as nearly hating Colonel Keith as principle would allow, with "Human Reeds," newly finished, burning in her pocket, "Military Society" fermenting in her brain, and "Curatocult" still unacknowledged. Had he not had quite time for any rational visit? Was he to devour Mackarel Lane as well as Myrtlewood? She was on her way to the latter house, meeting Grace as she went, and congratulating herself that he could not be in two places at once, whilst Grace secretly wondered how far she might venture to build on Alison Williams's half confidence, and regretted the anxiety wasted by Rachel and the mother; though, to be sure, that of Mrs. Curtis was less uncalled for than her daughter's, since it was only the fear of Fanny's not being sufficiently guarded against misconstructions.

Rachel held up her hands in despair in the hall. "Six officers' cards!" she exclaimed.

"No, only six cards," said Grace; "there are two of each."

"That's enough," sighed Rachel; "and look there," gazing through the garden-door. "She is walking with the young puppy that dined here on Thursday, and they called Alick."

"Do you remember," said Grace, "how she used to chatter about Alick, when she first came to us, at six years old. He was the child of one of the officers. Can this be the same?"

"That's one of your ideas, Grace. Look, this youth could have been hardly born when Fanny came to us. No; he is only one of the idlers that military life has accustomed her to."

Rather against Grace's feeling, Rachel drew her on, so as to come up with Lady Temple and her friend in the midst of their conversation, and they heard the last words—

"Then you will give me dear Bessie's direction?"

"Thank you, it will be the greatest kindness—"

"Oh, Grace, Rachel, is it you?" exclaimed Fanny. "You have not met before, I think. Mr. Keith —Miss Curtis."

Very young indeed were both face and figure, fair and pale, and though there was a moustache, it was so light and silky as to be scarcely visible; the hair, too, was almost flaxen, and the whole complexion had a washed-out appearance. The eyes, indeed, were of the same peculiar deep blue as the Colonel's, but even these were little seen under their heavy sleepy lids, and the long limbs had in every movement something of weight and slowness, the very sight of which fretted Rachel, and made her long to shake him. It appeared that he was come to spend the Sunday at Avonmouth, and Grace tried to extract the comfort for her mother that two gentlemen were better than one, and Fanny need not be on their minds for chaperonage for that day.

A party of garden-chairs on the lawn invited repose, and there the ladies seated themselves; Fanny laying down her heavy crape bonnet, and showing her pretty little delicate face, now much fresher and more roseate than when she arrived, though her wide-spreading black draperies gave a certain dignity to her slight figure, contrasting with the summer muslins of her two cousins; as did her hot-house plant fairness, with their firm, healthy glow of complexion; her tender shrinking grace, with their upright vigour. The gentleman of the party leant hack in a languid, easy posture, as though only half awake, and the whole was so quiet that Grace, missing the usual tumult of children, asked after them.

"The boys have gone to their favourite cove under the plantation. They have a fort there, and Hubert told me he was to be a hero, and Miss Williams a she-ro."

"I would not encourage that description of sport," said Rachel, willing to fight a battle in order to avert maternal anecdotes of boyish sayings.

"They like it so much," said Fanny, "and they learn so much now that they act all the battles they read about."

"That is what I object to," said Rachel; "it is accustoming them to confound heroism with pugnacity."

"No, but Rachel dear, they do quarrel and fight among themselves much less now that this is all in play and good humour," pleaded Fanny.

"Yes, that may be, but you are cultivating the dangerous instinct, although for a moment giving it a better direction."

"Dangerous? Oh, Alick! do you think it can be?" said Fanny, less easily borne down with a supporter beside her.

"According to the Peace Society," he answered, with a quiet air of courteous deference; "perhaps you belong to it?"

"No, indeed," answered Rachel, rather indignantly, "I think war the great purifier and ennobler of nations, when it is for a good and great cause; but I think education ought to protest against confounding mere love of combat with heroism."

"Query, the true meaning of the word?" he said, leaning back.

"Heros, yes from the same root as the German herr," readily responded Rachel, "meaning no more than lord and master; but there can be no doubt that the progress of ideas has linked with it a much nobler association."

"Progress! What, since the heroes were half divine!"

"Half divine in the esteem of a people who thought brute courage godlike. To us the word maintains its semi-divinity, and it should be our effort to associate it only with that which veritably has the god-like stamp."

"And that is—?"

"Doing more than one's duty," exclaimed Rachel, with a glistening eye.

"Very uncomfortable and superfluous, and not at all easy," he said, half shutting his already heavy eyes.

"Easy, no, that's the beauty and the glory—"

"Major Sherborne and Captain Lester in the drawing room, my lady," announced Coombe, who had looked infinitely cheered since this military influx.

"You will come with me, Grace," said Fanny, rising. "I dare say you had rather not, Rachel, and it would be a pity to disturb you, Alick."

"Thank you; it would be decidedly more than my duty."

"I am quite sorry to go, you are so amusing," said Fanny, "but I suppose you will have settled about heroism by the time we come out again, and will tell me what the boys ought to play at."

Rachel's age was quite past the need of troubling herself at being left tete-a-tete with a mere lad like this; and, besides, it was an opportunity not to be neglected of giving a young carpet knight a lesson in true heroism. There was a pause after the other two had moved off. Rachel reflected for a few moments, and then, precipitated by the fear of her audience falling asleep, she exclaimed—

"No words have been more basely misused than hero and heroine. The one is the mere fighting animal whose strength or fortune have borne him through some more than ordinary danger, the other is only the subject of an adventure, perfectly irrespective of her conduct in it."

"Bathos attends all high words," he said, as she paused, chiefly to see whether he was awake, and not like her dumb playfellow of old.

"This is not their natural bathos but their misuse. They ought to be reserved for those who in any department have passed the limits to which the necessity of their position constrained them, and done acts of self-devotion for the good of others. I will give you an instance, and from your own profession, that you may see I am not prejudiced, besides, the hero of it is past praise or blame."

Encouraged by seeing a little more of his eyes, she went on. "It was in the course of the siege of Delhi, a shell came into a tent where some sick and wounded were lying. There was one young officer among them who could move enough to have had a chance of escaping the explosion, but instead of that he took the shell up, its fuse burning as it was, and ran with it out of the tent, then hurled it to a distance. It exploded, and of course was his death, but the rest were saved, and I call that a deed of heroism far greater than mounting a breach or leading a forlorn hope."

"Killed, you say?" inquired Mr. Keith, still in the same lethargic manner.

"Oh yes, mortally wounded: carried back to die among the men he had saved."

"Jessie Cameron singing his dirge," mumbled this provoking individual, with something about the form of his cheek that being taken by Rachel for a derisive smile, made her exclaim vehemently, "You do not mean to undervalue an action like that in comparison with mere animal pugnacity in an advance."

"More than one's duty was your test," he said.

"And was not this more than duty? Ah! I see yours is a spirit of depreciation, and I can only say I pity you."

He took the trouble to lift himself up and make a little bow of acknowledgment. Certainly he was worse than the Colonel; but Rachel, while mustering her powers for annihilating him, was annoyed by all the party in the drawing-room coming forth to join them, the other officers rallying young Keith upon his luxurious station, and making it evident that he was a proverb in the regiment for taking his ease. Chairs were brought out, and afternoon tea, and the callers sat down to wait for Colonel Keith to come in; Grace feeling obliged to stay to help Fanny entertain her visitors, and Rachel to protect her from their follies. One thing Grace began to perceive, that Lady Temple had in her former world been a person of much more consideration than she was made here, and seeing the polite and deferential manner of these officers to her, could only wonder at her gentle content and

submission in meeting with no particular attention from anybody, and meekly allowing herself to be browbeaten by Rachel and lectured by her aunt.

A lecture was brewing up for her indeed. Poor Mrs. Curtis was very much concerned at the necessity, and only spurred up by a strong sense of duty to give a hint—the study of which hint cost her a whole sleepless night and a very weary Sunday morning. She decided that her best course would be to drive to Myrtlewood rather early on her way to church, and take up Fanny, gaining a previous conference with her alone, if possible. "Yes, my dear," she said to Grace, "I must get it over before church, or it will make me so nervous all through the service." And Grace, loving her mother best, durst not suggest what it might do to Fanny, hoping that the service might help her to digest the hint.

Mrs. Curtis's regular habits were a good deal shocked to find Fanny still at the breakfast table. The children had indeed long finished, and were scattered about the room, one of them standing between Colonel Keith's knees, repeating a hymn; but the younger guest was still in the midst of his meal, and owned in his usual cool manner that he was to blame for the lateness, there was no resisting the charms of no morning parade.

Her aunt's appearance made Fanny imagine it much later than it really was, and she hurried off the children to be dressed, and proceeded herself to her room, Mrs. Curtis following, and by way of preliminary, asking when Colonel Keith was going to Ireland.

"Oh!" said Fanny, blushing most suspiciously under her secret, "he is not going to Ireland now."

"Indeed! I quite understood he intended it."

"Yes," faltered Fanny, "but he found that he need not."

"Indeed!" again ejaculated poor perplexed Mrs. Curtis; "but then, at least, he is going away soon."

"He must go to Scotland by-and-by, but for the present he is going into lodgings. Do you know of any nice ones, dear aunt?"

"Well, I suppose you can't help that; you know, my dear, it would never do for him to stay in this house."

"I never thought of that," said Fanny simply, the colour coming in a fresh glow.

"No, my dear, but you see you are very young and inexperienced. I do not say you have done anything the least amiss, or that you ever would mean it, only you will forgive your old aunt for putting you on your guard."

Fanny kissed her, but with eyes full of tears, and cheeks burning, then her candour drew from her—"It was he that thought of getting a lodging. I am glad I did not persuade him not; but you know he always did live with us."

"With us. Yes, my poor dear, that is the difference, and you see he feels it. But, indeed, my dear child, though he is a very good man, I dare say, and quite a gentleman all but his beard, you had better not encourage—You know people are so apt to make remarks."

"I have no fear," said Fanny, turning away her head, conscious of the impossibility of showing her aunt her mistake.

"Ah! my dear, you don't guess how ready people are to talk; and you would not like—for your children's sake, for your husband's sake—that—that—"

"Pray, pray aunt," cried Fanny, much pained, "indeed you don't know. My husband had confidence in him more than in any one. He told him to take care of me and look after the boys. I couldn't hold aloof from him without transgressing those wishes"—and the words were lost in a sob.

"My dear, indeed I did not mean to distress you. You know, I dare say—I mean—" hesitated poor Mrs. Curtis. "I know you must see a great deal of him. I only want you to take care—appearances are appearances, and if it was said you had all these young officers always coming about—"

"I don't think they will come. It was only just to call, and they have known me so long. It is all out of respect to my father and Sir Stephen," said Fanny, meekly as ever. "Indeed, I would not for

the world do anything you did not like, dear aunt; but there can't be any objection to my having Mrs. Hammond and the children to spend the day to-morrow."

Mrs. Curtis did not like it; she had an idea that all military ladies were dashing and vulgar, but she could not say there was any objection, so she went on to the head of poor Fanny's offending. "This young man, my dear, he seems to make himself very intimate."

"Alick Keith? Oh aunt!" said Fanny, more surprised than by all the rest; "don't you know about him? His father and mother were our greatest friends always; I used to play with him every day till I came to you. And then just as I married, poor Mrs. Keith died, and we had dear little Bessie with us till her father could send her home. And when poor Alick was so dreadfully wounded before Delhi, Sir Stephen sent him up in a litter to the hills for mamma and me to nurse. Mamma was so fond of him, she used to call him her son."

"Yes, my dear, I dare say you have been very intimate; but you see you are very young; and his staying here—"

"I thought he would be so glad to come and be with the Colonel, who was his guardian and Bessie's," said Fanny, "and I have promised to have Bessie to stay with me, she was such a dear little thing—"

"Well, my dear, it may be a good thing for you to have a young lady with you, and if he is to come over, her presence will explain it. Understand me, my dear, I am not at all afraid of your —your doing anything foolish, only to get talked of is so dreadful in your situation, that you can't be too careful."

"Yes, yes, thank you, dear aunt," murmured the drooping and subdued Fanny, aware how much the remonstrance must cost her aunt, and sure that she must be in fault in some way, if she could only see how. "Please, dear aunt, help me, for indeed I don't know how to manage—tell me how to be civil and kind to my dear husband's friends without—without—"

Her voice broke down, though she kept from tears as an unkindness to her aunt.

In very fact, little as she knew it, she could not have defended herself better than by this humble question, throwing the whole guidance of her conduct upon her aunt. If she had been affronted, Mrs. Curtis could have been displeased; but to be thus set to prescribe the right conduct, was at once mollifying and perplexing.

"Well, well, my dear child, we all know you wish to do right; you can judge best. I would not have you ungrateful or uncivil, only you know you are living very quietly, and intimacy—oh! my dear, I know your own feeling will direct you. Dear child! you have taken what I said so kindly. And now let me see that dear little girl."

Rachel had not anticipated that the upshot of a remonstrance, even from her mother, would be that Fanny was to be directed by her own feeling!

That same feeling took Lady Temple to Mackarel Lane later in the day. She had told the Colonel her intention, and obtained Alison's assurance that Ermine's stay at Myrtlewood need not be impracticable, and armed with their consent, she made her timid tap at Miss Williams' door, and showed her sweet face within it.

"May I come in? Your sister and your little niece are gone for a walk. I told them I would come! I did want to see you!"

"Thank you," said Ermine, with a sweet smile, colouring cheek, yet grave eyes, and much taken by surprise at being seized by both hands, and kissed on each cheek.

"Yes, you must let me," said her visitor, looking up with her pretty imploring gesture, "you know I have known him so long, and he has been so good to me!"

"Indeed it is very kind in you," said Ermine, fully feeling the force of the plea expressed in the winning young face and gentle eyes full of tears.

"Oh, no, I could not help it. I am only so sorry we kept him away from you when you wanted him so much; but we did not know, and he was Sir Stephen's right hand, and we none of us knew what to do without him; but if he had only told—"

"Thank you, oh, thank you!" said Ermine, "but indeed it was better for him to be away."

Even her wish to console that pleading little widow could not make her say that his coming would not have been good for her. "It has been such a pleasure to hear he had so kind and happy a home all these years."

"Oh, you cannot think how Sir Stephen loved and valued him. The one thing I always did wish was, that Conrade should grow up to be as much help and comfort to his father, and now he never can! But," driving back a tear, "it was so hard that you should not have known how distinguished and useful and good he was all those years. Only now I shall have the pleasure of telling you," and she smiled. She was quite a different being when free from the unsympathizing influence which, without her understanding it, had kept her from dwelling on her dearest associations.

"It will be a pleasure of pleasures," said Ermine, eagerly.

"Then you will do me a favour, a very great favour," said Lady Temple, laying hold of her hand again, "if you and your sister and niece will come and stay with me." And as Ermine commenced her refusal, she went on in the same coaxing way, with a description of her plans for Ermine's comfort, giving her two rooms on the ground floor, and assuring her of the absence of steps, the immunity from all teasing by the children, of the full consent of her sister, and the wishes of the Colonel, nay, when Ermine was still unpersuaded of the exceeding kindness it would be to herself. "You see I am terribly young, really," she said, "though I have so many boys, and my aunt thinks it awkward for me to have so many officers calling, and I can't keep them away because they are my father's and Sir Stephen's old friends; so please do come and make it all right!"

Ermine was driven so hard, and so entirely deprived of all excuse, that she had no alternative left but to come to the real motive.

"I ought not," she said, "it is not good for him, so you must not press me, dear Lady Temple. You see it is best for him that nobody should ever know of what has been between us."

"What! don't you mean—?" exclaimed Fanny, breaking short off.

"I cannot!" said Ermine.

"But he would like it. He wishes it as much as ever."

"I know he does," said Ermine, with a troubled voice; "but you see that is because he did not know what a wretched remnant I am, and he never has had time to think about any one else."

"Oh no, no."

"And it would be very unfair of me to take advantage of that, and give him such a thing as I am."

"Oh dear, but that is very sad!" cried Fanny, looking much startled.

"But I am sure you must see that it is right."

"It may be right," and out burst Fanny's ready tears; "but it is very, very hard and disagreeable, if you don't mind my saying so, when I know it is so good of you. And don't you mean to let him even see you, when he has been constant so long?"

"No; I see no reason for denying myself that; indeed I believe it is better for him to grow used to me as I am, and be convinced of the impossibility."

"Well then, why will you not come to me?"

"Do you not see, in all your kindness, that my coming to you would make every one know the terms between us, while no one remarks his just coming to me here as an old friend? And if he were ever to turn his mind to any one else—"

"He will never do that, I am sure."

"There is no knowing. He has never been, in his own estimation, disengaged from me," said Ermine; "his brother is bent on his marrying, and he ought to be perfectly free to do so, and not under the disadvantage that any report of this affair would be to him."

"Well, I am sure he never will," said Fanny, almost petulantly; "I know I shall hate her, that's all."

Ermine thought her own charity towards Mrs. Colin Keith much more dubious than Lady Temple's, but she continued—

"At any rate you will be so very kind as not to let any one know of it. I am glad you do. I should not feel it right that you should not, but it is different with others."

"Thank you. And if you will not come to me, you will let me come to you, won't you? It will be so nice to come and talk him over with you. Perhaps I shall persuade you some of these days after all. Only I must go now, for I always give the children their tea on Sunday. But please let your dear little niece come up to-morrow and play with them; the little Hammonds will be there, she is just their age."

Ermine felt obliged to grant this at least, though she was as doubtful of her shy Rose's happiness as of the expedience of the intimacy; but there was no being ungracious to the gentle visitor, and no doubt Ermine felt rejoiced and elevated. She did not need fresh assurances of Colin's constancy, but the affectionate sister-like congratulations of this loving, winning creature, showed how real and in earnest his intentions were. And then Lady Temple's grateful esteem for him being, as it was, the reflection of her husband's, was no small testimony to his merits.

"Pretty creature!" said Ermine to herself, "really if it did come to that, I could spare him to her better than to any one else. She has some notion how to value him."

Alison and Rose had, in the meantime, been joined by Colonel Keith and the boys, whom Alick had early deserted in favour of a sunny sandy nook. The Colonel's purpose was hard on poor Alison; it was to obtain her opinion of her sister's decision, and the likelihood of persistence in it. It was not, perhaps, bad for either that they conversed under difficulties, the boys continually coming back to them from excursions on the rocks, and Rose holding her aunt's hand all the time, but to be sure Rose had heard nearly all the Colonel's affairs, and somehow mixed him up with Henry of Cranstoun.

Very tenderly towards Alison herself did Colin Keith speak. It was the first time they had ever been brought into close contact, and she had quite to learn to know him. She had regarded his return as probably a misfortune, but it was no longer possible to do so when she heard his warm and considerate way of speaking of her sister, and saw him only desirous of learning what was most for her real happiness. Nay, he even made a convert of Alison herself! She did believe that would Ermine but think it right to consent, she would be happy and safe in the care of one who knew so well how to love her. Terrible as the wrench would be to Alison herself, she thought he deserved her sister, and that she would be as happy with him as earth could make her. But she did not believe Ermine would ever accept him. She knew the strong, unvarying resolution by which her sister had always held to what she thought right, and did not conceive that it would waver. The acquiescence in his visits, and the undisguised exultant pleasure in his society, were evidences to Alison not of wavering or relenting, but of confidence in Ermine's own sense of impossibility. She durst not give him any hope, though she owned that he merited success. "Did she think his visits bad for her sister?" he then asked in the unselfishness that pleaded so strongly for him.

"No, certainly not," she answered eagerly, then made a little hesitation that made him ask further.

"My only fear," she said candidly, "is, that if this is pressed much on her, and she has to struggle with you and herself too, it may hurt her health. Trouble tells not on her cheerfulness, but on her nerves."

"Thank you," he said, "I will refrain."

Alison was much happier than she had been since the first apprehension of his return. The first pang at seeing Ermine's heart another's property had been subdued; the present state of affairs was indefinitely-prolonged, and she not only felt trust in Colin Keith's consideration for her sister, but she knew that an act of oblivion was past on her perpetration of the injury. She was right. His original pitying repugnance to a mere unknown child could not be carried on to the grave, saddened woman devoted to her sister, and in the friendly brotherly tone of that interview, each understood

the other. And when Alison came home and said, “I have been walking with Colin,” her look made Ermine very happy.

“And learning to know him.”

“Learning to sympathize with him, Ermine,” with steady eyes and voice. “You are hard on him.”

“Now, Ailie,” said Ermine, “once for all, he is not to set you on me, as he has done with Lady Temple. The more he persuades me, the better I know that to listen would be an abuse of his constancy. It would set him wrong with his brother, and, as dear Edward’s affairs stand, we have no right to carry the supposed disgrace into a family that would believe it, though he does not. If I were ever so well, I should not think it right to marry. I shall not shun the sight of him; it is delightful to me, and a less painful cure to him than sending him away would be. It is in the nature of things that he should cool into a friendly kindly feeling, and I shall try to bear it. Or if he does marry, it will be all right I suppose—” but her voice faltered, and she gave a sort of broken laugh.

“There,” she said, with a recovered flash of liveliness, “there’s my resolution, to do what I like more than anything in the world as long as I can; and when it is over I shall be helped to do without it!”

“I can’t believe—” broke out Alison.

“Not in your heart, but in your reason,” said Ermine, endeavouring to smile. “He will hover about here, and always be kind, loving, considerate; but a time will come that he will want the home happiness I cannot give. Then he will not wear out his affection on the impossible literary cripple, but begin over again, and be happy. And, Alison, if your love for me is of the sound, strong sort I know it is, you will help me through with it, and never say one word to make all this less easy and obvious to him.”

# CHAPTER VII. WAITNG FOR ROSE

"Not envy, sure! for if you gave me
Leave to take or to refuse
In earnest, do you think I'd choose
That sort of new love to enslave me?"

*—R. BROWNING.*

So, instead of going to Belfast, here was Colonel Keith actually taking a lodging and settling himself into it; nay, even going over to Avoncester on a horse-buying expedition, not merely for the Temples, but for himself.

This time Rachel did think herself sure of Miss Williams' ear in peace, and came down on her with two fat manuscripts upon Human Reeds and Military Society, preluding, however, by bitter complaints of the "Traveller" for never having vouchsafed her an answer, nor having even restored "Curatocult," though she had written three times, and sent a directed envelope and stamps for the purpose. The paper must be ruined by so discourteous an editor, indeed she had not been nearly so much interested as usual by the last few numbers. If only she could get her paper back, she should try the "Englishwoman's Hobby-horse," or some other paper of more progress than that "Traveller."
"Is it not very hard to feel one's self shut out from the main stream of the work of the world when one's heart is burning?"

"I think you overrate the satisfaction."

"You can't tell! You are contented with that sort of home peaceful sunshine that I know suffices many. Even intellectual as you are, you can't tell what it is to feel power within, to strain at the leash, and see others in the race."

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.