GEORGE MEREDITH

RHODA FLEMING. COMPLETE

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Meredith G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Remains of our good yeomanry blood will be found in Kent, developing stiff, solid, unobtrusive men, and very personable women. The distinction survives there between Kentish women and women of Kent, as a true South-eastern dame will let you know, if it is her fortune to belong to that favoured portion of the county where the great battle was fought, in which the gentler sex performed manful work, but on what luckless heads we hear not; and when garrulous tradition is discreet, the severe historic Muse declines to hazard a guess. Saxon, one would presume, since it is thought something to have broken them.

My plain story is of two Kentish damsels, and runs from a home of flowers into regions where flowers are few and sickly, on to where the flowers which breathe sweet breath have been proved in mortal fire.

Mrs. Fleming, of Queen Anne's Farm, was the wife of a yeoman-farmer of the county. Both were of sound Kentish extraction, albeit varieties of the breed. The farm had its name from a tradition, common to many other farmhouses within a circuit of the metropolis, that the ante-Hanoverian lady had used the place in her day as a nursery-hospital for the royal little ones. It was a square three-storied building of red brick, much beaten and stained by the weather, with an ivied side, up which the ivy grew stoutly, topping the roof in triumphant lumps. The house could hardly be termed picturesque. Its aspect had struck many eyes as being very much that of a red-coat sentinel grenadier, battered with service, and standing firmly enough, though not at ease. Surrounding it was a high wall, built partly of flint and partly of brick, and ringed all over with grey lichen and brown spots of bearded moss, that bore witness to the touch of many winds and rains. Tufts of pale grass, and gilliflowers, and travelling stone-crop, hung from the wall, and driblets of ivy ran broadening to the outer ground. The royal Arms were said to have surmounted the great iron gateway; but they had vanished, either with the family, or at the indications of an approaching rust. Rust defiled its bars; but, when you looked through them, the splendour of an unrivalled garden gave vivid signs of youth, and of the taste of an orderly, laborious, and cunning hand.

The garden was under Mrs. Fleming's charge. The joy of her love for it was written on its lustrous beds, as poets write. She had the poetic passion for flowers. Perhaps her taste may now seem questionable. She cherished the old-fashioned delight in tulips; the house was reached on a gravel-path between rows of tulips, rich with one natural blush, or freaked by art. She liked a bulk of colour; and when the dahlia dawned upon our gardens, she gave her heart to dahlias. By good desert, the fervent woman gained a prize at a flower-show for one of her dahlias, and `Dahlia' was the name uttered at the christening of her eldest daughter, at which all Wrexby parish laughed as long as the joke could last. There was laughter also when Mrs. Fleming's second daughter received the name of 'Rhoda;' but it did not endure for so long a space, as it was known that she had taken more to the solitary and reflective reading of her Bible, and to thoughts upon flowers eternal. Country people are not inclined to tolerate the display of a passion for anything. They find it as intrusive and exasperating as is, in the midst of larger congregations, what we call genius. For some years, Mrs. Fleming's proceedings were simply a theme for gossips, and her vanity was openly pardoned, until that delusively prosperous appearance which her labour lent to the house, was worn through by the enforced confession of there being poverty in the household. The ragged elbow was then projected in the face of Wrexby in a manner to preclude it from a sober appreciation of the fairness of the face.

Critically, moreover, her admission of great poppy-heads into her garden was objected to. She would squander her care on poppies, and she had been heard to say that, while she lived, her children should be fully fed. The encouragement of flaunting weeds in a decent garden was indicative of a moral twist that the expressed resolution to supply her table with plentiful nourishment, no matter whence it came, or how provided, sufficiently confirmed. The reason with which she was stated to have fortified her stern resolve was of the irritating order, right in the abstract, and utterly unprincipled in the application. She said, `Good bread, and good beef, and enough of both, make good blood; and my children shall be stout.' This is such a thing as maybe announced by foreign princesses and rulers over serfs; but English Wrexby, in cogitative mood, demanded an equivalent for its beef and divers economies consumed by the hungry children of the authoritative woman. Practically it was obedient, for it had got the habit of supplying her. Though payment was long in arrear, the arrears were not treated as lost ones by Mrs. Fleming, who, without knowing it, possessed one main secret for mastering the custodians of credit. She had a considerate remembrance and regard for the most distant of her debts, so that she seemed to be only always a little late, and exceptionally wrongheaded in theory. Wrexby, therefore, acquiesced in helping to build up her children to stoutness, and but for the blindness of all people, save artists, poets, novelists, to the grandeur of their own creations, the inhabitants of this Kentish village might have had an enjoyable pride in the beauty and robust grace of the young girls,—fair-haired, black-haired girls, a kindred contrast, like fire and smoke, to look upon. In stature, in bearing, and in expression, they were, if I may adopt the eloquent modern manner of eulogy, strikingly above their class. They carried erect shoulders, like creatures not ashamed of showing a merely animal pride, which is never quite apart from the pride of developed beauty. They were as upright as Oriental girls, whose heads are nobly poised from carrying the pitcher to the well. Dark Rhoda might have passed for Rachel, and Dahlia called her Rachel. They tossed one another their mutual compliments, drawn from the chief book of their reading. Queen of Sheba was Dahlia's title. No master of callisthenics could have set them up better than their mother's receipt for making good blood, combined with a certain harmony of their systems, had done; nor could a schoolmistress have taught them correcter speaking. The characteristic of girls having a disposition to rise, is to be cravingly mimetic; and they remembered, and crooned over, till by degrees they adopted the phrases and manner of speech of highly grammatical people, such as the rector and his lady, and of people in story-books, especially of the courtly French fairy-books, wherein the princes talk in periods as sweetly rounded as are their silken calves; nothing less than angelically, so as to be a model to ordinary men.

The idea of love upon the lips of ordinary men, provoked Dahlia's irony; and the youths of Wrexby and Fenhurst had no chance against her secret Prince Florizels. Them she endowed with no pastoral qualities; on the contrary, she conceived that such pure young gentlemen were only to be seen, and perhaps met, in the great and mystic City of London. Naturally, the girls dreamed of London. To educate themselves, they copied out whole pages of a book called the `Field of Mars,' which was next to the family Bible in size among the volumes of the farmer's small library. The deeds of the heroes of this book, and the talk of the fairy princes, were assimilated in their minds; and as they looked around them upon millers', farmers', maltsters', and tradesmen's sons, the thought of what manner of youth would propose to marry them became a precocious tribulation. Rhoda, at the age of fifteen, was distracted by it, owing to her sister's habit of masking her own dismal internal forebodings on the subject, under the guise of a settled anxiety concerning her sad chance.

In dress, the wife of the rector of Wrexby was their model. There came once to Squire Blancove's unoccupied pew a dazzling vision of a fair lady. They heard that she was a cousin of his third wife, and a widow, Mrs. Lovell by name. They looked at her all through the service, and the lady certainly looked at them in return; nor could they, with any distinctness, imagine why, but the look dwelt long in their hearts, and often afterward, when Dahlia, upon taking her seat in church, shut her eyes, according to custom, she strove to conjure up the image of herself, as she had appeared to the

beautiful woman in the dress of grey-shot silk, with violet mantle and green bonnet, rose-trimmed; and the picture she conceived was the one she knew herself by, for many ensuing years.

Mrs. Fleming fought her battle with a heart worthy of her countrywomen, and with as much success as the burden of a despondent husband would allow to her. William John Fleming was simply a poor farmer, for whom the wheels of the world went too fast:—a big man, appearing to be difficult to kill, though deeply smitten. His cheeks bloomed in spite of lines and stains, and his large, quietly dilated, brown ox-eyes, that never gave out a meaning, seldom showed as if they had taken one from what they saw. Until his wife was lost to him, he believed that he had a mighty grievance against her; but as he was not wordy, and was by nature kind, it was her comfort to die and not to know it. This grievance was rooted in the idea that she was ruinously extravagant. The sight of the plentiful table was sore to him; the hungry mouths, though he grudged to his offspring nothing that he could pay for, were an afflicting prospect. “Plump ‘em up, and make ‘em dainty,” he advanced in contravention of his wife’s talk of bread and beef.

But he did not complain. If it came to an argument, the farmer sidled into a secure corner of prophecy, and bade his wife to see what would come of having dainty children. He could not deny that bread and beef made blood, and were cheaper than the port-wine which doctors were in the habit of ordering for this and that delicate person in the neighbourhood; so he was compelled to have recourse to secret discontent. The attention, the time, and the trifles of money shed upon the flower garden, were hardships easier to bear. He liked flowers, and he liked to hear the praise of his wife’s horticultural skill. The garden was a distinguishing thing to the farm, and when on a Sunday he walked home from church among full June roses, he felt the odour of them to be so like his imagined sensations of prosperity, that the deception was worth its cost. Yet the garden in its bloom revived a cruel blow. His wife had once wounded his vanity. The massed vanity of a silent man, when it does take a wound, desires a giant’s vengeance; but as one can scarcely seek to enjoy that monstrous gratification when one’s wife is the offender, the farmer escaped from his dilemma by going apart into a turnip-field, and swearing, with his fist outstretched, never to forget it. His wife had asked him, seeing that the garden flourished and the farm decayed, to yield the labour of the farm to the garden; in fact, to turn nurseryman under his wife’s direction. The woman could not see that her garden drained the farm already, distracted the farm, and most evidently impoverished him. She could not understand, that in permitting her, while he sweated fruitlessly, to give herself up to the occupation of a lady, he had followed the promptings of his native kindness, and certainly not of his native wisdom. That she should deem herself `best man’ of the two, and suggest his stamping his name to such an opinion before the world, was an outrage.

Mrs. Fleming was failing in health. On that plea, with the solemnity suited to the autumn of her allotted days, she persuaded her husband to advertise for an assistant, who would pay a small sum of money to learn sound farming, and hear arguments in favour of the Corn Laws. To please her, he threw seven shillings away upon an advertisement, and laughed when the advertisement was answered, remarking that he doubted much whether good would come of dealings with strangers. A young man, calling himself Robert Armstrong, underwent a presentation to the family. He paid the stipulated sum, and was soon enrolled as one of them. He was of a guardsman’s height and a cricketer’s suppleness, a drinker of water, and apparently the victim of a dislike of his species; for he spoke of the great night-lighted city with a horror that did not seem to be an estimable point in him, as judged by a pair of damsels for whom the mysterious metropolis flew with fiery fringes through dark space, in their dreams.

In other respects, the stranger was well thought of, as being handsome and sedate. He talked fondly of one friend that he had, an officer in the army, which was considered pardonably vain. He did not reach to the ideal of his sex which had been formed by the sisters; but Mrs. Fleming, trusting to her divination of his sex’s character, whispered a mother’s word about him to her husband a little while before her death.

It was her prayer to heaven that she might save a doctor's bill. She died, without lingering illness, in her own beloved month of June; the roses of her tending at the open window, and a soft breath floating up to her from the garden. On the foregoing May-day, she had sat on the green that fronted the iron gateway, when Dahlia and Rhoda dressed the children of the village in garlands, and crowned the fairest little one queen of May: a sight that revived in Mrs. Fleming's recollection the time of her own eldest and fairest taking homage, shy in her white smock and light thick curls. The gathering was large, and the day was of the old nature of May, before tyrannous Eastwinds had captured it and spoiled its consecration. The mill-stream of the neighbouring mill ran blue among the broad green pastures; the air smelt of cream-bowls and wheaten loaves; the firs on the beacon-ridge, far southward, over Fenhurst and Helm villages, were transported nearer to see the show, and stood like friends anxious to renew acquaintance. Dahlia and Rhoda taught the children to perceive how they resembled bent old beggar-men. The two stone-pines in the miller's grounds were likened by them to Adam and Eve turning away from the blaze of Paradise; and the saying of one receptive child, that they had nothing but hair on, made the illustration undying both to Dahlia and Rhoda.

The magic of the weather brought numerous butterflies afield, and one fiddler, to whose tuning the little women danced; others closer upon womanhood would have danced likewise, if the sisters had taken partners; but Dahlia was restrained by the sudden consciousness that she was under the immediate observation of two manifestly London gentlemen, and she declined to be led forth by Robert Armstrong. The intruders were youths of good countenance, known to be the son and the nephew of Squire Blancove of Wrexby Hall. They remained for some time watching the scene, and destroyed Dahlia's single-mindedness. Like many days of gaiety, the Gods consenting, this one had its human shadow. There appeared on the borders of the festivity a young woman, the daughter of a Wrexby cottager, who had left her home and but lately returned to it, with a spotted name. No one addressed her, and she stood humbly apart. Dahlia, seeing that every one moved away from her, whispering with satisfied noddings, wished to draw her in among the groups. She mentioned the name of Mary Burt to her father, supposing that so kind a man would not fail to sanction her going up to the neglected young woman. To her surprise, her father became violently enraged, and uttered a stern prohibition, speaking a word that stained her cheeks. Rhoda was by her side, and she wilfully, without asking leave, went straight over to Mary, and stood with her under the shadow of the Adam and Eve, until the farmer sent a messenger to say that he was about to enter the house. Her punishment for the act of sinfulness was a week of severe silence; and the farmer would have kept her to it longer, but for her mother's ominously growing weakness. The sisters were strangely overclouded by this incident. They could not fathom the meaning of their father's unkindness, coarseness, and indignation. Why, and why? they asked one another, blankly. The Scriptures were harsh in one part, but was the teaching to continue so after the Atonement? By degrees they came to reflect, and not in a mild spirit, that the kindest of men can be cruel, and will forget their Christianity toward offending and repentant women.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Fleming had a brother in London, who had run away from his Kentish home when a small boy, and found refuge at a Bank. The position of Anthony Hackbut in that celebrated establishment, and the degree of influence exercised by him there, were things unknown; but he had stuck to the Bank for a great number of years, and he had once confessed to his sister that he was not a beggar. Upon these joint facts the farmer speculated, deducing from them that a man in a London Bank, holding money of his own, must have learnt the ways of turning it over—farming golden ground, as it were; consequently, that amount must now have increased to a very considerable sum. You ask, What amount? But one who sits brooding upon a pair of facts for years, with the imperturbable gravity of creation upon chaos, will be as successful in evoking the concrete from the abstract. The farmer saw round figures among the possessions of the family, and he assisted mentally in this money-turning of Anthony's, counted his gains for him, disposed his risks, and eyed the pile of visionary gold with an interest so remote, that he was almost correct in calling it disinterested. The brothers-in-law had a mutual plea of expense that kept them separate. When Anthony refused, on petition, to advance one hundred pounds to the farmer, there was ill blood to divide them. Queen Anne's Farm missed the flourishing point by one hundred pounds exactly. With that addition to its exchequer, it would have made head against its old enemy, Taxation, and started rejuvenescent. But the Radicals were in power to legislate and crush agriculture, and "I've got a miser for my brother-in-law," said the farmer. Alas! the hundred pounds to back him, he could have sowed what he pleased, and when it pleased him, partially defying the capricious clouds and their treasures, and playing tunefully upon his land, his own land. Instead of which, and while too keenly aware that the one hundred would have made excesses in any direction tributary to his pocket, the poor man groaned at continuous falls of moisture, and when rain was prayed for in church, he had to be down on his knees, praying heartily with the rest of the congregation. It was done, and bitter reproaches were cast upon Anthony for the enforced necessity to do it.

On the occasion of his sister's death, Anthony informed his bereaved brother-in-law that he could not come down to follow the hearse as a mourner. "My place is one of great trust;" he said, "and I cannot be spared." He offered, however, voluntarily to pay half the expenses of the funeral, stating the limit of the cost. It is unfair to sound any man's springs of action critically while he is being tried by a sorrow; and the farmer's angry rejection of Anthony's offer of aid must pass. He remarked in his letter of reply, that his wife's funeral should cost no less than he chose to expend on it. He breathed indignant fumes against "interferences." He desired Anthony to know that he also was "not a beggar," and that he would not be treated as one. The letter showed a solid yeoman's fist. Farmer Fleming told his chums, and the shopkeeper of Wrexby, with whom he came into converse, that he would honour his dead wife up to his last penny. Some month or so afterward it was generally conjectured that he had kept his word.

Anthony's rejoinder was characterized by a marked humility. He expressed contrition for the farmer's misunderstanding of his motives. His fathomless conscience had plainly been reached. He wrote again, without waiting for an answer, speaking of the Funds indeed, but only to pronounce them worldly things, and hoping that they all might meet in heaven, where brotherly love, as well as money, was ready made, and not always in the next street. A hint occurred that it would be a gratification to him to be invited down, whether he could come or no; for holidays were expensive, and journeys by rail had to be thought over before they were undertaken; and when you are away from your post, you never knew who maybe supplanting you. He did not promise that he could come, but frankly stated his susceptibility to the friendliness of an invitation. The feeling indulged by Farmer Fleming in refusing to notice Anthony's advance toward a reconciliation, was, on the whole, not creditable to him. Spite is more often fattened than propitiated by penitence. He may have thought besides (policy

not being always a vacant space in revengeful acts) that Anthony was capable of something stronger and warmer, now that his humanity had been aroused. The speculation is commonly perilous; but Farmer Fleming had the desperation of a man who has run slightly into debt, and has heard the first din of dunning, which to the unaccustomed imagination is fearful as bankruptcy (shorn of the horror of the word). And, moreover, it was so wonderful to find Anthony displaying humanity at all, that anything might be expected of him. “Let’s see what he will do,” thought the farmer in an interval of his wrath; and the wrath is very new which has none of these cool intervals. The passions, do but watch them, are all more or less intermittent.

As it chanced, he acted sagaciously, for Anthony at last wrote to say that his home in London was cheerless, and that he intended to move into fresh and airier lodgings, where the presence of a discreet young housekeeper, who might wish to see London, and make acquaintance with the world, would be agreeable to him. His project was that one of his nieces should fill this office, and he requested his brother-in-law to reflect on it, and to think of him as of a friend of the family, now and in the time to come. Anthony spoke of the seductions of London quite unctuously. Who could imagine this to be the letter of an old crabbed miser? “Tell her,” he said, “there’s fruit at stalls at every street-corner all the year through—oysters and whelks, if she likes—winkles, lots of pictures in shops —a sight of muslin and silks, and rides on omnibuses—bands of all sorts, and now and then we can take a walk to see the military on horseback, if she’s for soldiers.” Indeed, he joked quite comically in speaking of the famous horse-guards—warriors who sit on their horses to be looked at, and do not mind it, because they are trained so thoroughly. “Horse-guards blue, and horse-guards red,” he wrote—“the blue only want boiling.” There is reason to suppose that his disrespectful joke was not original in him, but it displayed his character in a fresh light. Of course, if either of the girls was to go, Dahlia was the person. The farmer commenced his usual process of sitting upon the idea. That it would be policy to attach one of the family to this chirping old miser, he thought incontestable. On the other hand, he had a dread of London, and Dahlia was surpassingly fair. He put the case to Robert, in remembrance of what his wife had spoken, hoping that Robert would amorously stop his painful efforts to think fast enough for the occasion. Robert, however, had nothing to say, and seemed willing to let Dahlia depart. The only opponents to the plan were Mrs. Sumfit, a kindly, humble relative of the farmer’s, widowed out of Sussex, very loving and fat; the cook to the household, whose waist was dimly indicated by her apron-string; and, to aid her outcries, the silently-protesting Master Gammon, an old man with the cast of eye of an antediluvian lizard, the slowest old man of his time—a sort of foreman of the farm before Robert had come to take matters in hand, and thrust both him and his master into the background. Master Gammon remarked emphatically, once and for all, that “he never had much opinion of London.” As he had never visited London, his opinion was considered the less weighty, but, as he advanced no further speech, the sins and backslidings of the metropolis were strongly brought to mind by his condemnatory utterance. Policy and Dahlia’s entreaties at last prevailed with the farmer, and so the fair girl went up to the great city.

After months of a division that was like the division of her living veins, and when the comfort of letters was getting cold, Rhoda, having previously pledged herself to secresy, though she could not guess why it was commanded, received a miniature portrait of Dahlia, so beautiful that her envy of London for holding her sister away from her, melted in gratitude. She had permission to keep the portrait a week; it was impossible to forbear from showing it to Mrs. Sumfit, who peeped in awe, and that emotion subsiding, shed tears abundantly. Why it was to be kept secret, they failed to inquire; the mystery was possibly not without its delights to them. Tears were shed again when the portrait had to be packed up and despatched. Rhoda lived on abashed by the adorable new refinement of Dahlia’s features, and her heart yearned to her uncle for so caring to decorate the lovely face.

One day Rhoda was at her bed-room window, on the point of descending to encounter the daily dumpling, which was the principal and the unvarying item of the midday meal of the house, when she beheld a stranger trying to turn the handle of the iron gate. Her heart thumped. She divined

correctly that it was her uncle. Dahlia had now been absent for very many months, and Rhoda's growing fretfulness sprang the conviction in her mind that something closer than letters must soon be coming. She ran downstairs, and along the gravel-path. He was a little man, square-built, and looking as if he had worn to toughness; with an evident Sunday suit on: black, and black gloves, though the day was only antecedent to Sunday.

"Let me help you, sir," she said, and her hands came in contact with his, and were squeezed.

"How is my sister?" She had no longer any fear in asking.

"Now, you let me through, first," he replied, imitating an arbitrary juvenile. "You're as tight locked in as if you was in dread of all the thieves of London. You ain't afraid o' me, miss? I'm not the party generally outside of a fortification; I ain't, I can assure you. I'm a defence party, and a reg'lar lion when I've got the law backing me."

He spoke in a queer, wheezy voice, like a cracked flute, combined with the effect of an ill-resined fiddle-bow.

"You are in the garden of Queen Anne's Farm," said Rhoda.

"And you're my pretty little niece, are you? 'the darkie lass,' as your father says. 'Little,' says I; why, you needn't be ashamed to stand beside a grenadier. Trust the country for growing fine gals."

"You are my uncle, then?" said Rhoda. "Tell me how my sister is. Is she well? Is she quite happy?"

"Dahly?" returned old Anthony, slowly.

"Yes, yes; my sister!" Rhoda looked at him with distressful eagerness.

"Now, don't you be uneasy about your sister Dahly." Old Anthony, as he spoke, fixed his small brown eyes on the girl, and seemed immediately to have departed far away in speculation. A question recalled him.

"Is her health good?"

"Ay; stomach's good, head's good, lungs, brain, what not, all good. She's a bit giddy, that's all."

"In her head?"

"Ay; and on her pins. Never you mind. You look a steady one, my dear. I shall take to you, I think."

"But my sister—" Rhoda was saying, when the farmer came out, and sent a greeting from the threshold,—

"Brother Tony!"

"Here he is, brother William John."

"Surely, and so he is, at last." The farmer walked up to him with his hand out.

"And it ain't too late, I hope. Eh?"

"It's never too late—to mend," said the farmer.

"Eh? not my manners, eh?" Anthony struggled to keep up the ball; and in this way they got over the confusion of the meeting after many years and some differences.

"Made acquaintance with Rhoda, I see," said the farmer, as they turned to go in.

"The 'darkie lass' you write of. She's like a coal nigh a candle. She looks, as you'd say, 't' other side of her sister.' Yes, we've had a talk."

"Just in time for dinner, brother Tony. We ain't got much to offer, but what there is, is at your service. Step aside with me."

The farmer got Anthony out of hearing a moment, questioned, and was answered: after which he looked less anxious, but a trifle perplexed, and nodded his head as Anthony occasionally lifted his, to enforce certain points in some halting explanation. You would have said that a debtor was humbly putting his case in his creditor's ear, and could only now and then summon courage to meet the censorious eyes. They went in to Mrs. Sumfit's shout that the dumplings were out of the pot: old Anthony bowed upon the announcement of his name, and all took seats. But it was not the same sort of dinner-hour as that which the inhabitants of the house were accustomed to; there was conversation.

The farmer asked Anthony by what conveyance he had come. Anthony shyly, but not without evident self-approbation, related how, having come by the train, he got into conversation with the driver of a fly at a station, who advised him of a cart that would be passing near Wrexby. For threepennyworth of beer, he had got a friendly introduction to the carman, who took him within two miles of the farm for one shilling, a distance of fifteen miles. That was pretty good!

"Home pork, brother Tony," said the farmer, approvingly.

"And home-made bread, too, brother William John," said Anthony, becoming brisk.

"Ay, and the beer, such as it is." The farmer drank and sighed.

Anthony tried the beer, remarking, "That's good beer; it don't cost much."

"It ain't adulterated. By what I read of your London beer, this stuff's not so bad, if you bear in mind it's pure. Pure's my motto. 'Pure, though poor!'"

"Up there, you pay for rank poison," said Anthony. "So, what do I do? I drink water and thank 'em, that's wise."

"Saves stomach and purse." The farmer put a little stress on 'purse.'

"Yes, I calculate I save threepence a day in beer alone," said Anthony.

"Three times seven's twenty-one, ain't it?"

Mr. Fleming said this, and let out his elbow in a small perplexity, as Anthony took him up: "And fifty-two times twenty-one?"

"Well, that's, that's—how much is that, Mas' Gammon?" the farmer asked in a bellow.

Master Gammon was laboriously and steadily engaged in tightening himself with dumpling. He relaxed his exertions sufficiently to take this new burden on his brain, and immediately cast it off.

"Ah never thinks when I feeds—Ah was al'ays a bad hand at 'counts. Gi'es it up."

"Why, you're like a horse that never was rode! Try again, old man," said the farmer.

"If I drags a cart," Master Gammon replied, "that ain't no reason why I should leap a gate."

The farmer felt that he was worsted as regarded the illustration, and with a bit of the boy's fear of the pedagogue, he fought Anthony off by still pressing the arithmetical problem upon Master Gammon; until the old man, goaded to exasperation, rolled out thunderingly,—

"If I works fer ye, that ain't no reason why I should think fer ye," which caused him to be left in peace.

"Eh, Robert?" the farmer transferred the question; "Come! what is it?"

Robert begged a minute's delay, while Anthony watched him with hawk eyes.

"I tell you what it is—it's pounds," said Robert.

This tickled Anthony, who let him escape, crying: "Capital! Pounds it is in your pocket, sir, and you hit that neatly, I will say. Let it be five. You out with your five at interest, compound interest; soon comes another five; treat it the same: in ten years—eh? and then you get into figures; you swim in figures!"

"I should think you did!" said the farmer, winking slyly.

Anthony caught the smile, hesitated and looked shrewd, and then covered his confusion by holding his plate to Mrs. Sumfit for a help. The manifest evasion and mute declaration that dumpling said "mum" on that head, gave the farmer a quiet glow.

"When you are ready to tell me all about my darlin', sir," Mrs. Sumfit suggested, coaxingly.

"After dinner, mother—after dinner," said the farmer.

"And we're waitin', are we, till them dumplings is finished?" she exclaimed, piteously, with a glance at Master Gammon's plate.

"After dinner we'll have a talk, mother."

Mrs. Sumfit feared from this delay that there was queer news to be told of Dahlia's temper; but she longed for the narrative no whit the less, and again cast a sad eye on the leisurely proceedings of Master Gammon. The veteran was still calmly tightening. His fork was on end, with a vast mouthful impaled on the prongs. Master Gammon, a thoughtful eater, was always last at the meal, and a latent,

deep-lying irritation at Mrs. Sumfit for her fidgetiness, day after day, toward the finish of the dish, added a relish to his engulfing of the monstrous morsel. He looked at her steadily, like an ox of the fields, and consumed it, and then holding his plate out, in a remorseless way, said, “You make ‘em so good, marm.”

Mrs. Sumfit, fretted as she was, was not impervious to the sound sense of the remark, as well as to the compliment.

“I don’t want to hurry you, Mas’ Gammon,” she said; “Lord knows, I like to see you and everybody eat his full and be thankful; but, all about my Dahly waitin’,—I feel pricked wi’ a pin all over, I do; and there’s my blessed in London,” she answered, “and we knowin’ nothin’ of her, and one close by to tell me! I never did feel what slow things dumplin’s was, afore now!”

The kettle simmered gently on the hob. Every other knife and fork was silent; so was every tongue. Master Gammon ate and the kettle hummed. Twice Mrs. Sumfit sounded a despairing, “Oh, deary me!” but it was useless. No human power had ever yet driven Master Gammon to a demonstration of haste or to any acceleration of the pace he had chosen for himself. At last, she was not to be restrained from crying out, almost tearfully,—

“When do you think you’ll have done, Mas’ Gammon?”

Thus pointedly addressed, Master Gammon laid down his knife and fork. He half raised his ponderous, curtaining eyelids, and replied,—

“When I feels my buttons, marm.”

After which he deliberately fell to work again.

Mrs. Sumfit dropped back in her chair as from a blow.

But even dumplings, though they resist so doggedly for a space, do ultimately submit to the majestic march of Time, and move. Master Gammon cleared his plate. There stood in the dish still half a dumpling. The farmer and Rhoda, deeming that there had been a show of inhospitality, pressed him to make away with this forlorn remainder.

The vindictive old man, who was as tight as dumpling and buttons could make him, refused it in a drooping tone, and went forth, looking at none. Mrs. Sumfit turned to all parties, and begged them to say what more, to please Master Gammon, she could have done? When Anthony was ready to speak of her Dahlia, she obtruded this question in utter dolefulness. Robert was kindly asked by the farmer to take a pipe among them. Rhoda put a chair for him, but he thanked them both, and said he could not neglect some work to be done in the fields. She thought that he feared pain from hearing Dahlia’s name, and followed him with her eyes commiseratingly.

“Does that young fellow attend to business?” said Anthony.

The farmer praised Robert as a rare hand, but one affected with bees in his nightcap,—who had ideas of his own about farming, and was obstinate with them; “pays you due respect, but’s got a notion as how his way of thinking’s better ‘n his seniors. It’s the style now with all young folks. Makes a butt of old Mas’ Gammon; laughs at the old man. It ain’t respectful t’ age, I say. Gammon don’t understand nothing about new feeds for sheep, and dam nonsense about growing such things as melons, fiddle-faddle, for ‘em. Robert’s a beginner. What he knows, I taught the young fellow. Then, my question is, where’s his ideas come from, if they’re contrary to mine? If they’re contrary to mine, they’re contrary to my teaching. Well, then, what are they worth? He can’t see that. He’s a good one at work—I’ll say so much for him.”

Old Anthony gave Rhoda a pat on the shoulder.

CHAPTER III

"Pipes in the middle of the day's regular revelry," ejaculated Anthony, whose way of holding the curved pipe-stem displayed a mind bent on reckless enjoyment, and said as much as a label issuing from his mouth, like a figure in a comic woodcut of the old style:—"that's," he pursued, "that's if you haven't got to look up at the clock every two minutes, as if the devil was after you. But, sitting here, you know, the afternoon's a long evening; nobody's your master. You can on wi' your slippers, up wi' your legs, talk, or go for'ard, counting, twicing, and three-timesing; by George! I should take to drinking beer if I had my afternoons to myself in the city, just for the sake of sitting and doing sums in a tap-room; if it's a big tap-room, with pew sort o' places, and dark red curtains, a fire, and a smell of sawdust; ale, and tobacco, and a boy going by outside whistling a tune of the day. Somebody comes in. 'Ah, there's an idle old chap,' he says to himself, (meaning me), and where, I should like to ask him, 'd his head be if he sat there dividing two hundred and fifty thousand by forty-five and a half!"

The farmer nodded encouragingly. He thought it not improbable that a short operation with these numbers would give the sum in Anthony's possession, the exact calculation of his secret hoard, and he set to work to stamp them on his brain, which rendered him absent in manner, while Mrs. Sumfit mixed liquor with hot water, and pushed at his knee, doubling in her enduring lips, and lengthening her eyes to aim a side-glance of reprehension at Anthony's wandering loquacity.

Rhoda could bear it no more.

"Now let me hear of my sister, uncle," she said.

"I'll tell you what," Anthony responded, "she hasn't got such a pretty sort of a sweet blackbirdy voice as you've got."

The girl blushed scarlet.

"Oh, she can mount them colours, too," said Anthony.

His way of speaking of Dahlia indicated that he and she had enough of one another; but of the peculiar object of his extraordinary visit not even the farmer had received a hint. Mrs. Sumfit ventured to think aloud that his grog was not stiff enough, but he took a gulp under her eyes, and smacked his lips after it in a most convincing manner.

"Ah! that stuff wouldn't do for me in London, half-holiday or no half-holiday," said Anthony.

"Why not?" the farmer asked.

"I should be speculating—deep—couldn't hold myself in: Mexicans, Peroovians, Venzeshoolians, Spaniards, at 'em I should go. I see bonds in all sorts of colours, Spaniards in black and white, Peruvians—orange, Mexicans—red as the British army. Well, it's just my whim. If I like red, I go at red. I ain't a bit of reason. What's more, I never speculate."

"Why, that's safest, brother Tony," said the farmer.

"And safe's my game—always was, always will be! Do you think"—Anthony sucked his grog to the sugar-dregs, till the spoon settled on his nose—"do you think I should hold the position I do hold, be trusted as I am trusted? Ah! you don't know much about that. Should I have money placed in my hands, do you think—and it's thousands at a time, gold, and notes, and cheques—if I was a risky chap? I'm known to be thoroughly respectable. Five and forty years I've been in Boyne's Bank, and thank ye, ma'am, grog don't do no harm down here. And I will take another glass. 'When the heart of a man!'—but I'm no singer."

Mrs. Sumfit simpered, "Hem; it's the heart of a woman, too: and she have one, and it's dying to hear of her darlin' blessed in town, and of who cuts her hair, and where she gets her gownds, and whose pills—"

The farmer interrupted her irritably.

"Divide a couple o' hundred thousand and more by forty-five and a half," he said. "Do wait, mother; all in good time. Forty-five and a-half, brother Tony; that was your sum—ah!—you

mentioned it some time back—half of what? Is that half a fraction, as they call it? I haven't forgot fractions, and logareems, and practice, and so on to algebrae, where it always seems to me to blow hard, for, whizz goes my head in a jiffy, as soon as I've mounted the ladder to look into that country. How 'bout that forty-five and a half, brother Tony, if you don't mind condescending to explain?"

"Forty-five and a half?" muttered Anthony, mystified.

"Oh, never mind, you know, if you don't like to say, brother Tony." The farmer touched him up with his pipe-stem.

"Five and a half," Anthony speculated. "That's a fraction you got hold of, brother William John,—I remember the parson calling out those names at your wedding: 'I, William John, take thee, Susan;' yes, that's a fraction, but what's the good of it?"

"What I mean is, it ain't forty-five and half of forty-five. Half of one, eh? That's identical with a fraction. One—a stroke—and two under it."

"You've got it correct," Anthony assented.

"How many thousand divide it by?"

"Divide what by, brother William John? I'm beat."

"Ah! out comes the keys: lockup everything; it's time!" the farmer laughed, rather proud of his brother-in-law's perfect wakefulness after two stiff tumblers. He saw that Anthony was determined with all due friendly feeling to let no one know the sum in his possession.

"If it's four o'clock, it is time to lock up," said Anthony, "and bang to go the doors, and there's the money for thieves to dream of—they can't get a-nigh it, let them dream as they like. What's the hour, ma'am?"

"Not three, it ain't," returned Mrs. Sumfit; "and do be good creatures, and begin about my Dahly, and where she got that Bumptious gownd, and the bonnet with blue flowers lyin' by on the table: now, do!"

Rhoda coughed.

"And she wears lavender gloves like a lady," Mrs. Sumfit was continuing.

Rhoda stamped on her foot.

"Oh! cruel!" the comfortable old woman snapped in pain, as she applied her hand to the inconsolable fat foot, and nursed it. "What's roused ye, you tiger girl? I shan't be able to get about, I shan't, and then who's to cook for ye all? For you're as ignorant as a raw kitchen wench, and knows nothing."

"Come, Dody, you're careless," the farmer spoke chidingly through Mrs. Sumfit's lamentations.

"She stops uncle Anthony when he's just ready, father," said Rhoda.

"Do you want to know?" Anthony set his small eyes on her: "do you want to know, my dear?" He paused, fingering his glass, and went on: "I, Susan, take thee, William John, and you've come of it. Says I to myself, when I hung sheepish by your mother and by your father, my dear, says I to myself, I ain't a marrying man: and if these two, says I, if any progeny comes to 'em—to bless them, some people'd say, but I know what life is, and what young ones are—if—where was I? Liquor makes you talk, brother William John, but where's your ideas? Gone, like hard cash! What I meant was, I felt I might some day come for'ard and help the issue of your wife's weddin', and wasn't such a shady object among you, after all. My pipe's out."

Rhoda stood up, and filled the pipe, and lit it in silence. She divined that the old man must be allowed to run on in his own way, and for a long time he rambled, gave a picture of the wedding, and of a robbery of Boyne's Bank: the firm of Boyne, Burt, Hamble, and Company. At last, he touched on Dahlia.

"What she wants, I can't make out," he said; "and what that good lady there, or somebody, made mention of—how she manages to dress as she do! I can understand a little goin' a great way, if you're clever in any way; but I'm at my tea"—Anthony laid his hand out as to exhibit a picture. "I ain't a complaining man, and be young, if you can, I say, and walk about and look at shops; but, I'm at my

tea: I come home rather tired there's the tea-things, sure enough, and tea's made, and, maybe, there's a shrimp or two; she attends to your creature comforts. When everything's locked up and tight and right, I'm gay, and ask for a bit of society: well, I'm at my tea: I hear her foot thumping up and down her bed-room overhead: I know the meaning of that: I'd rather hear nothing: down she runs: I'm at my tea, and in she bursts."—Here followed a dramatic account of Dahlia's manner of provocation, which was closed by the extinction of his pipe.

The farmer, while his mind still hung about thousands of pounds and a certain incomprehensible division of them to produce a distinct intelligible total, and set before him the sum of Anthony's riches, could see that his elder daughter was behaving flightily and neglecting the true interests of the family, and he was chagrined. But Anthony, before he entered the house, had assured him that Dahlia was well, and that nothing was wrong with her. So he looked at Mrs. Sumfit, who now took upon herself to plead for Dahlia: a young thing, and such a handsome creature! and we were all young some time or other; and would heaven have mercy on us, if we were hard upon the young, do you think? The motto of a truly religious man said, try 'em again. And, maybe, people had been a little hard upon Dahlia, and the girl was apt to take offence. In conclusion, she appealed to Rhoda to speak up for her sister. Rhoda sat in quiet reserve.

She was sure her sister must be justified in all she did but the picture of the old man coming from his work every night to take his tea quite alone made her sad. She found herself unable to speak, and as she did not, Mrs. Sumfit had an acute twinge from her recently trodden foot, and called her some bitter names; which was not an unusual case, for the kind old woman could be querulous, and belonged to the list of those whose hearts are as scales, so that they love not one person devotedly without a corresponding spirit of opposition to another. Rhoda merely smiled.

By-and-by, the women left the two men alone.

Anthony turned and struck the farmer's knee.

"You've got a jewel in that gal, brother William John."

"Eh! she's a good enough lass. Not much of a manager, brother Tony. Too much of a thinker, I reckon. She's got a temper of her own too. I'm a bit hurt, brother Tony, about that other girl. She must leave London, if she don't alter. It's flightiness; that's all. You mustn't think ill of poor Dahly. She was always the pretty one, and when they know it, they act up to it: she was her mother's favourite."

"Ah! poor Susan! an upright woman before the Lord."

"She was," said the farmer, bowing his head.

"And a good wife," Anthony interjected.

"None better—never a better; and I wish she was living to look after her girls."

"I came through the churchyard, hard by," said Anthony; "and I read that writing on her tombstone. It went like a choke in my throat. The first person I saw next was her child, this young gal you call Rhoda; and, thinks I to myself, you might ask me, I'd do anything for ye—that I could, of course."

The farmer's eye had lit up, but became overshadowed by the characteristic reservation.

"Nobody'd ask you to do more than you could," he remarked, rather coldly.

"It'll never be much," sighed Anthony.

"Well, the world's nothing, if you come to look at it close," the farmer adopted a similar tone.

"What's money!" said Anthony.

The farmer immediately resumed his this-worldliness:

"Well, it's fine to go about asking us poor devils to answer ye that," he said, and chuckled, conceiving that he had nailed Anthony down to a partial confession of his ownership of some worldly goods.

"What do you call having money?" observed the latter, clearly in the trap. "Fifty thousand?"

"Whew!" went the farmer, as at a big draught of powerful stuff.

"Ten thousand?"

Mr. Fleming took this second gulp almost contemptuously, but still kindly.

"Come," quoth Anthony, "ten thousand's not so mean, you know. You're a gentleman on ten thousand. So, on five. I'll tell ye, many a gentleman'd be glad to own it. Lor' bless you! But, you know nothing of the world, brother William John. Some of 'em haven't one—ain't so rich as you!"

"Or you, brother Tony?" The farmer made a grasp at his will-o'-the-wisp.

"Oh! me!" Anthony sniggered. "I'm a scraper of odds and ends. I pick up things in the gutter. Mind you, those Jews ain't such fools, though a curse is on 'em, to wander forth. They know the meaning of the multiplication table. They can turn fractions into whole numbers. No; I'm not to be compared to gentlemen. My property's my respectability. I said that at the beginning, and I say it now. But, I'll tell you what, brother William John, it's an emotion when you've got bags of thousands of pounds in your arms."

Ordinarily, the farmer was a sensible man, as straight on the level of dull intelligence as other men; but so credulous was he in regard to the riches possessed by his wife's brother, that a very little tempted him to childish exaggeration of the probable amount. Now that Anthony himself furnished the incitement, he was quite lifted from the earth. He had, besides, taken more of the strong mixture than he was ever accustomed to take in the middle of the day; and as it seemed to him that Anthony was really about to be seduced into a particular statement of the extent of the property which formed his respectability (as Anthony had chosen to put it), he got up a little game in his head by guessing how much the amount might positively be, so that he could subsequently compare his shrewd reckoning with the avowed fact. He tamed his wild ideas as much as possible; thought over what his wife used to say of Anthony's saving ways from boyhood, thought of the dark hints of the Funds, of many bold strokes for money made by sagacious persons; of Anthony's close style of living, and of the lives of celebrated misers; this done, he resolved to make a sure guess, and therefore aimed below the mark.

Money, when the imagination deals with it thus, has no substantial relation to mortal affairs. It is a tricksy thing, distending and contracting as it dances in the mind, like sunlight on the ceiling cast from a morning tea-cup, if a forced simile will aid the conception. The farmer struck on thirty thousand and some odd hundred pounds—outlying debts, or so, excluded—as what Anthony's will, in all likelihood, would be sworn under: say, thirty thousand, or, safer, say, twenty thousand. Bequeathed —how? To him and to his children. But to the children in reversion after his decease? Or how? In any case, they might make capital marriages; and the farm estate should go to whichever of the two young husbands he liked the best. Farmer Fleming asked not for any life of ease and splendour, though thirty thousand pounds was a fortune; or even twenty thousand. Noblemen have stooped to marry heiresses owning no more than that! The idea of their having done so actually shot across him, and his heart sent up a warm spring of tenderness toward the patient, good, grubbing old fellow, sitting beside him, who had lived and died to enrich and elevate the family. At the same time, he could not refrain from thinking that Anthony, broad-shouldered as he was, though bent, sound on his legs, and well-coloured for a Londoner, would be accepted by any Life Insurance office, at a moderate rate, considering his age. The farmer thought of his own health, and it was with a pang that he fancied himself being probed by the civil-speaking Life Insurance doctor (a gentleman who seems to issue upon us applicants from out the muffled folding doors of Hades; taps us on the chest, once, twice, and forthwith writes down our fateful dates). Probably, Anthony would not have to pay a higher rate of interest than he.

"Are you insured, brother Tony?" the question escaped him.

"No, I ain't, brother William John;" Anthony went on nodding like an automaton set in motion. "There's two sides to that. I'm a long-lived man. Long-lived men don't insure; that is, unless they're fools. That's how the Offices thrive."

"Case of accident?" the farmer suggested.

"Oh! nothing happens to me," replied Anthony.

The farmer jumped on his legs, and yawned.

“Shall we take a turn in the garden, brother Tony?”

“With all my heart, brother William John.”

The farmer had conscience to be ashamed of the fit of irritable vexation which had seized on him; and it was not till Anthony being asked the date of his birth, had declared himself twelve years his senior, that the farmer felt his speculations to be justified. Anthony was nearly a generation ahead. They walked about, and were seen from the windows touching one another on the shoulder in a brotherly way. When they came back to the women, and tea, the farmer’s mind was cooler, and all his reckonings had gone to mist. He was dejected over his tea.

“What is the matter, father?” said Rhoda.

“I’ll tell you, my dear,” Anthony replied for him. “He’s envying me some one I want to ask me that question when I’m at my tea in London.”

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Fleming kept his forehead from his daughter's good-night kiss until the room was cleared, after supper, and then embracing her very heartily, he informed her that her uncle had offered to pay her expenses on a visit to London, by which he contrived to hint that a golden path had opened to his girl, and at the same time entreated her to think nothing of it; to dismiss all expectations and dreams of impossible sums from her mind, and simply to endeavour to please her uncle, who had a right to his own, and a right to do what he liked with his own, though it were forty, fifty times as much as he possessed—and what that might amount to no one knew. In fact, as is the way with many experienced persons, in his attempt to give advice to another, he was very impressive in lecturing himself, and warned that other not to succumb to a temptation principally by indicating the natural basis of the allurement. Happily for young and for old, the intense insight of the young has much to distract or soften it. Rhoda thanked her father, and chose to think that she had listened to good and wise things.

"Your sister," he said—"but we won't speak of her. If I could part with you, my lass, I'd rather she was the one to come back."

"Dahlia would be killed by our quiet life now," said Rhoda.

"Ay," the farmer mused. "If she'd got to pay six men every Saturday night, she wouldn't complain o' the quiet. But, there—you neither of you ever took to farming or to housekeeping; but any gentleman might be proud to have one of you for a wife. I said so when you was girls. And if, you've been dull, my dear, what's the good o' society? Tea-cakes mayn't seem to cost money, nor a glass o' grog to neighbours; but once open the door to that sort o' thing and your reckoning goes. And what I said to your poor mother's true. I said: Our girls, they're mayhap not equals of the Hollands, the Nashaws, the Perrets, and the others about here—no; they're not equals, because the others are not equals o' them, maybe."

The yeoman's pride struggled out in this obscure way to vindicate his unneighbourliness and the seclusion of his daughters from the society of girls of their age and condition; nor was it hard for Rhoda to assure him, as she earnestly did, that he had acted rightly.

Rhoda, assisted by Mrs. Sumfit, was late in the night looking up what poor decorations she possessed wherewith to enter London, and be worthy of her sister's embrace, so that she might not shock the lady Dahlia had become.

"Depend you on it, my dear," said Mrs. Sumfit, "my Dahly's grown above him. That's nettles to your uncle, my dear. He can't abide it. Don't you see he can't? Some men's like that. Others 'd see you dressed like a princess, and not be satisfied. They vary so, the teasin' creatures! But one and all, whether they likes it or not, owns a woman's the better for bein' dressed in the fashion. What do grieve me to my insidest heart, it is your bonnet. What a bonnet that was lying beside her dear round arm in the po'trait, and her finger up making a dimple in her cheek, as if she was thinking of us in a sorrowful way. That's the arts o' being lady-like—look sad-like. How could we get a bonnet for you?"

"My own must do," said Rhoda.

"Yes, and you to look like lady and servant-gal a-goin' out for an airin'; and she to feel it! Pretty, that'd be!"

"She won't be ashamed of me," Rhoda faltered; and then hummed a little tune, and said firmly —"It's no use my trying to look like what I'm not."

"No, truly;" Mrs. Sumfit assented. "But it's your bein' behind the fashions what hurt me. As well you might be an old thing like me, for any pleasant looks you'll git. Now, the country—you're like in a coalhole for the matter o' that. While London, my dear, its pavement and gutter, and omnibus traffic; and if you're not in the fashion, the little wicked boys of the streets themselves 'll let you know it; they've got such eyes for fashions, they have. And I don't want my Dahly's sister to be laughed at, and called 'coal-scuttle,' as happened to me, my dear, believe it or not—and shoved aside, and

said to—'Who are you?' For she reely is nice-looking. Your uncle Anthony and Mr. Robert agreed upon that."

Rhoda coloured, and said, after a time, "It would please me if people didn't speak about my looks."

The looking-glass probably told her no more than that she was nice to the eye, but a young man who sees anything should not see like a mirror, and a girl's instinct whispers to her, that her image has not been taken to heart when she is accurately and impartially described by him.

The key to Rhoda at this period was a desire to be made warm with praise of her person. She beheld her face at times, and shivered. The face was so strange with its dark thick eyebrows, and peculiarly straight-gazing brown eyes; the level long red under-lip and curved upper; and the chin and nose, so unlike Dahlia's, whose nose was, after a little dip from the forehead, one soft line to its extremity, and whose chin seemed shaped to a cup. Rhoda's outlines were harder. There was a suspicion of a heavenward turn to her nose, and of squareness to her chin. Her face, when studied, inspired in its owner's mind a doubt of her being even nice to the eye, though she knew that in exercise, and when smitten by a blush, brightness and colour aided her claims. She knew also that her head was easily poised on her neck; and that her figure was reasonably good; but all this was unconfirmed knowledge, quickly shadowed by the doubt. As the sun is wanted to glorify the right features of a landscape, this girl thirsted for a dose of golden flattery. She felt, without envy of her sister, that Dahlia eclipsed her: and all she prayed for was that she might not be quite so much in the background and obscure.

But great, powerful London—the new universe to her spirit—was opening its arms to her. In her half sleep that night she heard the mighty thunder of the city, crashing, tumults of disordered harmonies, and the splendour of the lamp-lighted city appeared to hang up under a dark-blue heaven, removed from earth, like a fresh planet to which she was being beckoned.

At breakfast on the Sunday morning, her departure was necessarily spoken of in public. Robert talked to her exactly as he had talked to Dahlia, on the like occasion. He mentioned, as she remembered in one or two instances, the names of the same streets, and professed a similar anxiety as regarded driving her to the station and catching the train. "That's a thing which makes a man feel his strength's nothing," he said. "You can't stop it. I fancy I could stop a four-in-hand at full gallop. Mind, I only fancy I could; but when you come to do with iron and steam, I feel like a baby. You can't stop trains."

"You can trip 'em," said Anthony, a remark that called forth general laughter, and increased the impression that he was a man of resources.

Rhoda was vexed by Robert's devotion to his strength. She was going, and wished to go, but she wished to be regretted as well; and she looked at him more. He, on the contrary, scarcely looked at her at all. He threw verbal turnips, oats, oxen, poultry, and every possible melancholy matter-of-fact thing, about the table, described the farm and his fondness for it and the neighbourhood; said a farmer's life was best, and gave Rhoda a week in which to be tired of London.

She sneered in her soul, thinking "how little he knows of the constancy in the nature of women!" adding, "when they form attachments."

Anthony was shown at church, in spite of a feeble intimation he expressed, that it would be agreeable to him to walk about in the March sunshine, and see the grounds and the wild flowers, which never gave trouble, nor cost a penny, and were always pretty, and worth twenty of your artificial contrivances.

"Same as I say to Miss Dahly," he took occasion to remark; "but no!—no good. I don't believe women hear ye, when you talk sense of that kind. 'Look,' says I, 'at a violet.' 'Look,' says she, 'at a rose.' Well, what can ye say after that? She swears the rose looks best. You swear the violet costs least. Then there you have a battle between what it costs and how it looks."

Robert pronounced a conventional affirmative, when called on for it by a look from Anthony. Whereupon Rhoda cried out,—

"Dahlia was right—she was right, uncle."

"She was right, my dear, if she was a ten-thousander. She wasn't right as a farmer's daughter with poor expectations.—I'd say humble, if humble she were. As a farmer's daughter, she should choose the violet side. That's clear as day. One thing's good, I admit; she tells me she makes her own bonnets, and they're as good as milliners', and that's a proud matter to say of your own niece. And to buy dresses for herself, I suppose, she's sat down and she made dresses for fine ladies. I've found her at it. Save the money for the work, says I. What does she reply—she always has a reply: 'Uncle, I know the value of money better. 'You mean, you spend it,' I says to her. 'I buy more than it's worth,' says she. And I'll tell you what, Mr. Robert Armstrong, as I find your name to be, sir; if you beat women at talking, my lord! you're a clever chap."

Robert laughed. "I give in at the first mile."

"Don't think much of women—is that it, sir?"

"I'm glad to say I don't think of them at all."

"Do you think of one woman, now, Mr. Robert Armstrong?"

"I'd much rather think of two."

"And why, may I ask?"

"It's safer."

"Now, I don't exactly see that," said Anthony.

"You set one to tear the other," Robert explained.

"You're a Grand Turk Mogul in your reasonings of women, Mr. Robert Armstrong. I hope as your morals are sound, sir?"

They were on the road to church, but Robert could not restrain a swinging outburst.

He observed that he hoped likewise that his morals were sound.

"Because," said Anthony, "do you see, sir, two wives—"

"No, no; one wife," interposed Robert. "You said 'think about;' I'd 'think about' any number of women, if I was idle. But the woman you mean to make your wife, you go to at once, and don't 'think about' her or the question either."

"You make sure of her, do you, sir?"

"No: I try my luck; that is all."

"Suppose she won't have ye?"

"Then I wait for her."

"Suppose she gets married to somebody else?"

"Well, you know, I shouldn't cast eye on a woman who was a fool."

"Well, upon my—" Anthony checked his exclamation, returning to the charge with, "Just suppose, for the sake of supposing—supposing she was a fool, and gone and got married, and you thrown back'ard on one leg, starin' at the other, stupified-like?"

"I don't mind supposing it," said Robert. "Say, she's a fool. Her being a fool argues that I was one in making a fool's choice. So, she jilts me, and I get a pistol, or I get a neat bit of rope, or I take a clean header with a cannon-ball at my heels, or I go to the chemist's and ask for stuff to poison rats, —anything a fool'd do under the circumstances, it don't matter what."

Old Anthony waited for Rhoda to jump over a stile, and said to her,—

"He laughs at the whole lot of ye."

"Who?" she asked, with betraying cheeks.

"This Mr. Robert Armstrong of yours."

"Of mine, uncle!"

"He don't seem to care a snap o' the finger for any of ye."

"Then, none of us must care for him, uncle."

"Now, just the contrary. That always shows a young fellow who's attending to his business. If he'd seen you boil potatoes, make dumplings, beds, tea, all that, you'd have had a chance. He'd have marched up to ye before you was off to London."

"Saying, 'You are the woman.'" Rhoda was too desperately tickled by the idea to refrain from uttering it, though she was angry, and suffering internal discontent. "Or else, 'You are the cook,'" she muttered, and shut, with the word, steel bars across her heart, calling him, mentally, names not justified by anything he had said or done—such as mercenary, tyrannical, and such like.

Robert was attentive to her in church. Once she caught him with his eyes on her face; but he betrayed no confusion, and looked away at the clergyman. When the text was given out, he found the place in his Bible, and handed it to her pointedly—"There shall be snares and traps unto you;" a line from Joshua. She received the act as a polite pawing civility; but when she was coming out of church, Robert saw that a blush swept over her face, and wondered what thoughts could be rising within her, unaware that girls catch certain meanings late, and suffer a fiery torture when these meanings are clear to them. Rhoda called up the pride of her womanhood that she might despise the man who had dared to distrust her. She kept her poppy colour throughout the day, so sensitive was this pride. But most she was angered, after reflection, by the doubts which Robert appeared to cast on Dahlia, in setting his finger upon that burning line of Scripture. It opened a whole black kingdom to her imagination, and first touched her visionary life with shade. She was sincere in her ignorance that the doubts were her own, but they lay deep in unawakened recesses of the soul; it was by a natural action of her reason that she transferred and forced them upon him who had chanced to make them visible.

CHAPTER V

When young minds are set upon a distant object, they scarcely live for anything about them. The drive to the station and the parting with Robert, the journey to London, which had latterly seemed to her secretly-distressed anticipation like a sunken city—a place of wonder with the waters over it—all passed by smoothly; and then it became necessary to call a cabman, for whom, as he did her the service to lift her box, Rhoda felt a gracious respect, until a quarrel ensued between him and her uncle concerning sixpence;—a poor sum, as she thought; but representing, as Anthony impressed upon her understanding during the conflict of hard words, a principle. Those who can persuade themselves that they are fighting for a principle, fight strenuously, and maybe reckoned upon to overmatch combatants on behalf of a miserable small coin; so the cabman went away discomfited. He used such bad language that Rhoda had no pity for him, and hearing her uncle style it "the London tongue," she thought dispiritedly of Dahlia's having had to listen to it through so long a season. Dahlia was not at home; but Mrs. Wicklow, Anthony's landlady, undertook to make Rhoda comfortable, which operation she began by praising dark young ladies over fair ones, at the same time shaking Rhoda's arm that she might not fail to see a compliment was intended. "This is our London way," she said. But Rhoda was most disconcerted when she heard Mrs. Wicklow relate that her daughter and Dahlia were out together, and say, that she had no doubt they had found some pleasant and attentive gentleman for a companion, if they had not gone purposely to meet one. Her thoughts of her sister were perplexed, and London seemed a gigantic net around them both.

"Yes, that's the habit with the girls up here," said Anthony; "that's what fine bonnets mean."

Rhoda dropped into a bitter depth of brooding. The savage nature of her virgin pride was such that it gave her great suffering even to suppose that a strange gentleman would dare to address her sister. She half-fashioned the words on her lips that she had dreamed of a false Zion, and was being righteously punished. By-and-by the landlady's daughter returned home alone, saying, with a dreadful laugh, that Dahlia had sent her for her Bible; but she would give no explanation of the singular mission which had been entrusted to her, and she showed no willingness to attempt to fulfil it, merely repeating, "Her Bible!" with a vulgar exhibition of simulated scorn that caused Rhoda to shrink from her, though she would gladly have poured out a multitude of questions in the ear of one who had last been with her beloved. After a while, Mrs. Wicklow looked at the clock, and instantly became overclouded with an extreme gravity.

"Eleven! and she sent Mary Ann home for her Bible. This looks bad. I call it hypocritical, the idea of mentioning the Bible. Now, if she had said to Mary Ann, go and fetch any other book but a Bible!"

"It was mother's Bible," interposed Rhoda.

Mrs. Wicklow replied: "And I wish all young women to be as innocent as you, my dear. You'll get you to bed. You're a dear, mild, sweet, good young woman. I'm never deceived in character."

Vaunting her penetration, she accompanied Rhoda to Dahlia's chamber, bidding her sleep speedily, or that when her sister came they would be talking till the cock crowed hoarse.

"There's a poultry-yard close to us?" said Rhoda; feeling less at home when she heard that there was not.

The night was quiet and clear. She leaned her head out of the window, and heard the mellow Sunday evening roar of the city as of a sea at ebb. And Dahlia was out on the sea. Rhoda thought of it as she looked at the row of lamps, and listened to the noise remote, until the sight of stars was pleasant as the faces of friends. "People are kind here," she reflected, for her short experience of the landlady was good, and a young gentleman who had hailed a cab for her at the station, had a nice voice. He was fair. "I am dark," came a spontaneous reflection. She undressed, and half dozing over her beating heart in bed, heard the street door open, and leaped to think that her sister approached, jumping up

in her bed to give ear to the door and the stairs, that were conducting her joy to her: but she quickly recomposed herself, and feigned sleep, for the delight of revelling in her sister's first wonderment. The door was flung wide, and Rhoda heard her name called by Dahlia's voice, and then there was a delicious silence, and she felt that Dahlia was coming up to her on tiptoe, and waited for her head to be stooped near, that she might fling out her arms, and draw the dear head to her bosom. But Dahlia came only to the bedside, without leaning over, and spoke of her looks, which held the girl quiet.

"How she sleeps! It's a country sleep!" Dahlia murmured. "She's changed, but it's all for the better. She's quite a woman; she's a perfect brunette; and the nose I used to laugh at suits her face and those black, thick eyebrows of hers; my pet! Oh, why is she here? What's meant by it? I knew nothing of her coming. Is she sent on purpose?"

Rhoda did not stir. The tone of Dahlia's speaking, low and almost awful to her, laid a flat hand on her, and kept her still.

"I came for my Bible," she heard Dahlia say. "I promised mother—oh, my poor darling mother! And Dody lying in my bed! Who would have thought of such things? Perhaps heaven does look after us and interfere. What will become of me? Oh, you pretty innocent in your sleep! I lie for hours, and can't sleep. She binds her hair in a knot on the pillow, just as she used to in the old farm days!"

Rhoda knew that her sister was bending over her now, but she was almost frigid, and could not move.

Dahlia went to the looking-glass. "How flushed I am!" she murmured. "No; I'm pale, quite white. I've lost my strength. What can I do? How could I take mother's Bible, and run from my pretty one, who expects me, and dreams she'll wake with me beside her in the morning! I can't—I can't If you love me, Edward, you won't wish it."

She fell into a chair, crying wildly, and muffling her sobs. Rhoda's eyelids grew moist, but wonder and the cold anguish of senseless sympathy held her still frost-bound. All at once she heard the window open. Some one spoke in the street below; some one uttered Dahlia's name. A deep bell swung a note of midnight.

"Go!" cried Dahlia.

The window was instantly shut.

The vibration of Dahlia's voice went through Rhoda like the heavy shaking of the bell after it had struck, and the room seemed to spin and hum. It was to her but another minute before her sister slid softly into the bed, and they were locked together.

CHAPTER VI

Boyne's bank was of the order of those old and firmly fixed establishments which have taken root with the fortunes of the country—are honourable as England's name, solid as her prosperity, and even as the flourishing green tree to shareholders: a granite house. Boyne himself had been disembodied for more than a century: Burt and Hamble were still of the flesh; but a greater than Burt or Hamble was Blancove—the Sir William Blancove, Baronet, of city feasts and charities, who, besides being a wealthy merchant, possessed of a very acute head for banking, was a scholarly gentleman, worthy of riches. His brother was Squire Blancove, of Wrexby; but between these two close relatives there existed no stronger feeling than what was expressed by open contempt of a mind dedicated to business on the one side, and quiet contempt of a life devoted to indolence on the other. Nevertheless, Squire Blancove, though everybody knew how deeply he despised his junior for his city-gained title and commercial occupation, sent him his son Algernon, to get the youth into sound discipline, if possible. This was after the elastic Algernon had, on the paternal intimation of his colonel, relinquished his cornetcy and military service. Sir William received the hopeful young fellow much in the spirit with which he listened to the tales of his brother's comments on his own line of conduct; that is to say, as homage to his intellectual superiority. Mr. Algernon was installed in the Bank, and sat down for a long career of groaning at the desk, with more complacency than was expected from him. Sir William forwarded excellent accounts to his brother of the behaviour of the heir to his estates. It was his way of rebuking the squire, and in return for it the squire, though somewhat comforted, despised his clerkly son, and lived to learn how very unjustly he did so. Adolescents, who have the taste for running into excesses, enjoy the breath of change as another form of excitement: change is a sort of debauch to them. They will delight infinitely in a simple country round of existence, in propriety and church-going, in the sensation of feeling innocent. There is little that does not enrapture them, if you tie them down to nothing, and let them try all. Sir William was deceived by his nephew. He would have taken him into his town-house; but his own son, Edward, who was studying for the Law, had chambers in the Temple, and Algernon, receiving an invitation from Edward, declared a gentle preference for the abode of his cousin. His allowance from his father was properly contracted to keep him from excesses, as the genius of his senior devised, and Sir William saw no objection to the scheme, and made none. The two dined with him about twice in the month.

Edward Blancove was three-and-twenty years old, a student by fits, and a young man given to be moody. He had powers of gaiety far eclipsing Algernon's, but he was not the same easy tripping sinner and flippant soul. He was in that yeasty condition of his years when action and reflection alternately usurp the mind; remorse succeeded dissipation, and indulgences offered the soporific to remorse. The friends of the two imagined that Algernon was, or would become, his evil genius. In reality, Edward was the perilous companion. He was composed of better stuff. Algernon was but an airy animal nature, the soul within him being an effervescence lightly let loose. Edward had a fatally serious spirit, and one of some strength. What he gave himself up to, he could believe to be correct, in the teeth of an opposing world, until he tired of it, when he sided as heartily with the world against his quondam self. Algernon might mislead, or point his cousin's passions for a time; yet if they continued their courses together, there was danger that Algernon would degenerate into a reckless subordinate —a minister, a valet, and be tempted unknowingly to do things in earnest, which is nothing less than perdition to this sort of creature.

But the key to young men is the ambition, or, in the place of it, the romantic sentiment nourished by them. Edward aspired to become Attorney-General of these realms, not a judge, you observe; for a judge is to the imagination of youthful minds a stationary being, venerable, but not active; whereas, your Attorney-General is always in the fray, and fights commonly on the winning side,—a point that renders his position attractive to sagacious youth. Algernon had other views. Civilization had

tried him, and found him wanting; so he condemned it. Moreover, sitting now all day at a desk, he was civilization's drudge. No wonder, then, that his dream was of prairies, and primeval forests, and Australian wilds. He believed in his heart that he would be a man new made over there, and always looked forward to savage life as to a bath that would cleanse him, so that it did not much matter his being unclean for the present.

The young men had a fair cousin by marriage, a Mrs. Margaret Lovell, a widow. At seventeen she had gone with her husband to India, where Harry Lovell encountered the sword of a Sikh Sirdar, and tried the last of his much-vaunted swordsmanship, which, with his skill at the pistols, had served him better in two antecedent duels, for the vindication of his lovely and terrible young wife. He perished on the field, critically admiring the stroke to which he owed his death. A week after Harry's burial his widow was asked in marriage by his colonel. Captains, and a giddy subaltern likewise, disputed claims to possess her. She, however, decided to arrest further bloodshed by quitting the regiment. She always said that she left India to save her complexion; "and people don't know how very candid I am," she added, for the colonel above-mentioned was wealthy,—a man expectant of a title, and a good match, and she was laughed at when she thus assigned trivial reasons for momentous resolutions. It is a luxury to be candid; and perfect candour can do more for us than a dark disguise.

Mrs. Lovell's complexion was worth saving from the ravages of an Indian climate, and the persecution of claimants to her hand. She was golden and white, like an autumnal birch-tree—yellow hair, with warm-toned streaks in it, shading a fabulously fair skin. Then, too, she was tall, of a nervous build, supple and proud in motion, a brilliant horsewoman, and a most distinguished sitter in an easy drawing-room chair, which is, let me impress upon you, no mean quality. After riding out for hours with a sweet comrade, who has thrown the mantle of dignity half-way off her shoulders, it is perplexing, and mixed strangely of humiliation and ecstasy, to come upon her clouded majesty where she reclines as upon rose-hued clouds, in a mystic circle of restriction (she who laughed at your jokes, and capped them, two hours ago) a queen.

Between Margaret Lovell and Edward there was a misunderstanding, of which no one knew the nature, for they spoke in public very respectfully one of the other. It had been supposed that they were lovers once; but when lovers quarrel, they snarl, they bite, they worry; their eyes are indeed unveiled, and their mouths unmuzzled. Now Margaret said of Edward: "He is sure to rise; he has such good principles." Edward said of Margaret: "She only wants a husband who will keep her well in hand." These sentences scarcely carried actual compliments when you knew the speakers; but outraged lovers cannot talk in that style after they have broken apart. It is possible that Margaret and Edward conveyed to one another as sharp a sting as envenomed lovers attempt. Gossip had once betrothed them, but was now at fault. The lady had a small jointure, and lived partly with her uncle, Lord Elling, partly with Squire Blancove, her aunt's husband, and a little by herself, which was when she counted money in her purse, and chose to assert her independence. She had a name in the world. There is a fate attached to some women, from Helen of Troy downward, that blood is to be shed for them. One duel on behalf of a woman is a reputation to her for life; two are notoriety. If she is very young, can they be attributable to her? We charge them naturally to her overpowering beauty. It happened that Mrs. Lovell was beautiful. Under the light of the two duels her beauty shone as from an illumination of black flame. Boys adored Mrs. Lovell. These are moths. But more, the birds of air, nay, grave owls (who stand in this metaphor for whiskered experience) thronged, dashing at the apparition of terrible splendour. Was it her fault that she had a name in the world?

Mrs. Margaret Lovell's portrait hung in Edward's room. It was a photograph exquisitely coloured, and was on the left of a dark Judith, dark with a serenity of sternness. On the right hung another coloured photograph of a young lady, also fair; and it was a point of taste to choose between them. Do you like the hollowed lily's cheeks, or the plump rose's? Do you like a thinnish fall of golden hair, or an abundant cluster of nut-brown? Do you like your blonde with limpid blue eyes, or prefer an endowment of sunny hazel? Finally, are you taken by an air of artistic innocence winding

serpentine about your heart's fibres; or is blushing simplicity sweeter to you? Mrs. Lovell's eyebrows were the faintly-marked trace of a perfect arch. The other young person's were thickish, more level; a full brown colour. She looked as if she had not yet attained to any sense of her being a professed beauty: but the fair widow was clearly bent upon winning you, and had a shy, playful intentness of aspect. Her pure white skin was flat on the bone; the lips came forward in a soft curve, and, if they were not artistically stained, were triumphantly fresh. Here, in any case, she beat her rival, whose mouth had the plebeian beauty's fault of being too straight in a line, and was not trained, apparently, to tricks of dainty pouting.

It was morning, and the cousins having sponged in pleasant cold water, arranged themselves for exercise, and came out simultaneously into the sitting-room, slippered, and in flannels. They nodded and went through certain curt greetings, and then Algernon stepped to a cupboard and tossed out the leather gloves. The room was large and they had a tolerable space for the work, when the breakfast-table had been drawn a little on one side. You saw at a glance which was the likelier man of the two, when they stood opposed. Algernon's rounded features, full lips and falling chin, were not a match, though he was quick on his feet, for the wary, prompt eyes, set mouth, and hardness of Edward. Both had stout muscle, but in Edward there was vigour of brain as well, which seemed to knit and inform his shape without which, in fact, a man is as a ship under no command. Both looked their best; as, when sparring, men always do look.

"Now, then," said Algernon, squaring up to his cousin in good style, "now's the time for that unwholesome old boy underneath to commence groaning."

"Step as light as you can," replied Edward, meeting him with the pretty motion of the gloves.

"I'll step as light as a French dancing-master. Let's go to Paris and learn the savate, Ned. It must be a new sensation to stand on one leg and knock a fellow's hat off with the other."

"Stick to your fists."

"Hang it! I wish your fists wouldn't stick to me so."

"You talk too much."

"Gad, I don't get puffy half so soon as you."

"I want country air."

"You said you were going out, old Ned."

"I changed my mind."

Saying which, Edward shut his teeth, and talked for two or three hot minutes wholly with his fists. The room shook under Algernon's boundings to right and left till a blow sent him back on the breakfast-table, shattered a cup on the floor, and bespattered his close flannel shirt with a funereal coffee-tinge.

"What the deuce I said to bring that on myself, I don't know," Algernon remarked as he rose. "Anything connected with the country disagreeable to you, Ned? Come! a bout of quiet scientific boxing, and none of these beastly rushes, as if you were singling me out of a crowd of magsmen. Did you go to church yesterday, Ned? Confound it, you're on me again, are you?"

And Algernon went on spouting unintelligible talk under a torrent of blows. He lost his temper and fought out at them; but as it speedily became evident to him that the loss laid him open to punishment, he prudently recovered it, sparred, danced about, and contrived to shake the room in a manner that caused Edward to drop his arms, in consideration for the distracted occupant of the chambers below. Algernon accepted the truce, and made it peace by casting off one glove.

"There! that's a pleasant morning breather," he said, and sauntered to the window to look at the river. "I always feel the want of it when I don't get it. I could take a thrashing rather than not on with the gloves to begin the day. Look at those boats! Fancy my having to go down to the city. It makes me feel like my blood circulating the wrong way. My father'll suffer some day, for keeping me at this low ebb of cash, by jingo!"

He uttered this with a prophetic fierceness.

"I cannot even scrape together enough for entrance money to a Club. It's sickening! I wonder whether I shall ever get used to banking work? There's an old clerk in our office who says he should feel ill if he missed a day. And the old porter beats him—bangs him to fits. I believe he'd die off if he didn't see the house open to the minute. They say that old boy's got a pretty niece; but he don't bring her to the office now. Reward of merit!—Mr. Anthony Hackbut is going to receive ten pounds a year extra. That's for his honesty. I wonder whether I could earn a reputation for the sake of a prospect of ten extra pounds to my salary. I've got a salary! hurrah! But if they keep me to my hundred and fifty per annum, don't let them trust me every day with the bags, as they do that old fellow. Some of the men say he's good to lend fifty pounds at a pinch.—Are the chops coming, Ned?"

"The chops are coming," said Edward, who had thrown on a boating-coat and plunged into a book, and spoke echoing.

"Here's little Peggy Lovell." Algernon faced this portrait. "It don't do her justice. She's got more life, more change in her, more fire. She's starting for town, I hear."

"She is starting for town," said Edward.

"How do you know that?" Algernon swung about to ask.

Edward looked round to him. "By the fact of your not having fished for a holiday this week. How did you leave her yesterday, Algy? Quite well, I hope."

The ingenuous face of the young gentleman crimsoned.

"Oh, she was well," he said. "Ha! I see there can be some attraction in your dark women."

"You mean that Judith? Yes, she's a good diversion." Edward gave a two-edged response. "What train did you come up by last night?"

"The last from Wrexby. That reminds me: I saw a young Judith just as I got out. She wanted a cab. I called it for her. She belongs to old Hackbut of the Bank—the old porter, you know. If it wasn't that there's always something about dark women which makes me think they're going to have a moustache, I should take to that girl's face."

Edward launched forth an invective against fair women.

"What have they done to you-what have they done?" said Algernon.

"My good fellow, they're nothing but colour. They've no conscience. If they swear a thing to you one moment, they break it the next. They can't help doing it. You don't ask a gilt weathercock to keep faith with anything but the wind, do you? It's an ass that trusts a fair woman at all, or has anything to do with the confounded set. Cleopatra was fair; so was Delilah; so is the Devil's wife. Reach me that book of Reports."

"By jingo!" cried Algernon, "my stomach reports that if provision doesn't soon approach–why don't you keep a French cook here, Ned? Let's give up the women, and take to a French cook."

Edward yawned horribly. "All in good time. It's what we come to. It's philosophy—your French cook! I wish I had it, or him. I'm afraid a fellow can't anticipate his years—not so lucky!"

"By Jove! we shall have to be philosophers before we breakfast!" Algernon exclaimed. "It's nine. I've to be tied to the stake at ten, chained and muzzled—a leetle-a dawg! I wish I hadn't had to leave the service. It was a vile conspiracy against me there, Ned. Hang all tradesmen! I sit on a stool, and add up figures. I work harder than a nigger in the office. That's my life: but I must feed. It's no use going to the office in a rage."

"Will you try on the gloves again?" was Edward's mild suggestion.

Algernon thanked him, and replied that he knew him. Edward hit hard when he was empty.

They now affected patience, as far as silence went to make up an element of that sublime quality. The chops arriving, they disdained the mask. Algernon fired his glove just over the waiter's head, and Edward put the ease to the man's conscience; after which they sat and ate, talking little. The difference between them was, that Edward knew the state of Algernon's mind and what was working within it, while the latter stared at a blank wall as regarded Edward's.

"Going out after breakfast, Ned?" said Algernon. "We'll walk to the city together, if you like."

Edward fixed one of his intent looks upon his cousin. “You’re not going to the city to-day?”

“The deuce, I’m not!”

“You’re going to dance attendance on Mrs. Lovell, whom it’s your pleasure to call Peggy, when you’re some leagues out of her hearing.”

Algernon failed to command his countenance. He glanced at one of the portraits, and said, “Who is that girl up there? Tell us her name. Talking of Mrs. Lovell, has she ever seen it?”

“If you’ll put on your coat, my dear Algy, I will talk to you about Mrs. Lovell.” Edward kept his penetrative eyes on Algernon. “Listen to me: you’ll get into a mess there.”

“If I must listen, Ned, I’ll listen in my shirt-sleeves, with all respect to the lady.”

“Very well. The shirt-sleeves help the air of bravado. Now, you know that I’ve what they call ‘knelt at her feet.’ She’s handsome. Don’t cry out. She’s dashing, and as near being a devil as any woman I ever met. Do you know why we broke? I’ll tell you. Plainly, because I refused to believe that one of her men had insulted her. You understand what that means. I declined to be a chief party in a scandal.”

“Declined to fight the fellow?” interposed Algernon. “More shame to you!”

“I think you’re a year younger than I am, Algy. You have the privilege of speaking with that year’s simplicity. Mrs. Lovell will play you as she played me. I acknowledge her power, and I keep out of her way. I don’t bet; I don’t care to waltz; I can’t keep horses; so I don’t lose much by the privation to which I subject myself.”

“I bet, I waltz, and I ride. So,” said Algernon, “I should lose tremendously.”

“You will lose, mark my words.”

“Is the lecture of my year’s senior concluded?” said Algernon.

“Yes; I’ve done,” Edward answered.

“Then I’ll put on my coat, Ned, and I’ll smoke in it. That’ll give you assurance I’m not going near Mrs. Lovell, if anything will.”

“That gives me assurance that Mrs. Lovell tolerates in you what she detests,” said Edward, relentless in his insight; “and, consequently, gives me assurance that she finds you of particular service to her at present.”

Algernon had a lighted match in his hand. He flung it into the fire. “I’m hanged if I don’t think you have the confounded vanity to suppose she sets me as a spy upon you!”

A smile ran along Edward’s lips. “I don’t think you’d know it, if she did.”

“Oh, you’re ten years older; you’re twenty,” bawled Algernon, in an extremity of disgust. “Don’t I know what game you’re following up? Isn’t it clear as day you’ve got another woman in your eye?”

“It’s as clear as day, my good Algy, that you see a portrait hanging in my chambers, and you have heard Mrs. Lovell’s opinion of the fact. So much is perfectly clear. There’s my hand. I don’t blame you. She’s a clever woman, and like many of the sort, shrewd at guessing the worst. Come, take my hand. I tell you, I don’t blame you. I’ve been little dog to her myself, and fetched and carried, and wagged my tail. It’s charming while it lasts. Will you shake it?”

“Your tail, man?” Algernon roared in pretended amazement.

Edward eased him back to friendliness by laughing. “No; my hand.”

They shook hands.

“All right,” said Algernon. “You mean well. It’s very well for you to preach virtue to a poor devil; you’ve got loose, or you’re regularly in love.”

“Virtue! by heaven!” Edward cried; “I wish I were entitled to preach it to any man on earth.”

His face flushed. “There, good-bye, old fellow,” he added.

“Go to the city. I’ll dine with you to-night, if you like; come and dine with me at my Club. I shall be disengaged.”

Algernon mumbled a flexible assent to an appointment at Edward’s Club, dressed himself with care, borrowed a sovereign, for which he nodded his acceptance, and left him.

Edward set his brain upon a book of law.

It may have been two hours after he had sat thus in his Cistercian stillness, when a letter was delivered to him by one of the Inn porters. Edward read the superscription, and asked the porter who it was that brought it. Two young ladies, the porter said.

These were the contents:—

"I am not sure that you will ever forgive me. I cannot forgive myself when I think of that one word I was obliged to speak to you in the cold street, and nothing to explain why, and how much I love, you. Oh! how I love you! I cry while I write. I cannot help it. I was a sop of tears all night long, and oh! if you had seen my face in the morning. I am thankful you did not. Mother's Bible brought me home. It must have been guidance, for in my bed there lay my sister, and I could not leave her, I love her so. I could not have got down stairs again after seeing her there; and I had to say that cold word and shut the window on you. May I call you Edward still? Oh, dear Edward, do make allowance for me. Write kindly to me. Say you forgive me. I feel like a ghost to-day. My life seems quite behind me somewhere, and I hardly feel anything I touch. I declare to you, dearest one, I had no idea my sister was here. I was surprised when I heard her name mentioned by my landlady, and looked on the bed; suddenly my strength was gone, and it changed all that I was thinking. I never knew before that women were so weak, but now I see they are, and I only know I am at my Edward's mercy, and am stupid! Oh, so wretched and stupid. I shall not touch food till I hear from you. Oh, if, you are angry, write so; but do write. My suspense would make you pity me. I know I deserve your anger. It was not that I do not trust you, Edward. My mother in heaven sees my heart and that I trust, I trust my heart and everything I am and have to you. I would almost wish and wait to see you to-day in the Gardens, but my crying has made me such a streaked thing to look at. If I had rubbed my face with a scrubbing-brush, I could not look worse, and I cannot risk your seeing me. It would excuse you for hating me. Do you? Does he hate her? She loves you. She would die for you, dear Edward. Oh! I feel that if I was told to-day that I should die for you to-morrow, it would be happiness. I am dying—yes, I am dying till I hear from you.

"Believe me,
"Your tender, loving, broken-hearted,
"Dahlia."
There was a postscript:—
"May I still go to lessons?"

Edward finished the letter with a calmly perusing eye. He had winced triflingly at one or two expressions contained in it; forcible, perhaps, but not such as Mrs. Lovell smiling from the wall yonder would have used.

"The poor child threatens to eat no dinner, if I don't write to her," he said; and replied in a kind and magnanimous spirit, concluding—"Go to lessons, by all means."

Having accomplished this, he stood up, and by hazard fell to comparing the rival portraits; a melancholy and a comic thing to do, as you will find if you put two painted heads side by side, and set their merits contesting, and reflect on the contest, and to what advantages, personal, or of the artist's, the winner owes the victory. Dahlia had been admirably dealt with by the artist; the charm of pure ingenuousness without rusticity was visible in her face and figure. Hanging there on the wall, she was a match for Mrs. Lovell.

CHAPTER VII

Rhoda returned home the heavier for a secret that she bore with her. All through the first night of her sleeping in London, Dahlia's sobs, and tender hugs, and self-reproaches, had penetrated her dreams, and when the morning came she had scarcely to learn that Dahlia loved some one. The confession was made; but his name was reserved. Dahlia spoke of him with such sacredness of respect that she seemed lost in him, and like a creature kissing his feet. With tears rolling down her cheeks, and with moans of anguish, she spoke of the deliciousness of loving: of knowing one to whom she abandoned her will and her destiny, until, seeing how beautiful a bloom love threw upon the tearful worn face of her sister, Rhoda was impressed by a mystical veneration for this man, and readily believed him to be above all other men, if not superhuman: for she was of an age and an imagination to conceive a spiritual pre-eminence over the weakness of mortality. She thought that one who could so transform her sister, touch her with awe, and give her gracefulness and humility, must be what Dahlia said he was. She asked shyly for his Christian name; but even so little Dahlia withheld. It was his wish that Dahlia should keep silence concerning him.

"Have you sworn an oath?" said Rhoda, wonderingly.

"No, dear love," Dahlia replied; "he only mentioned what he desired."

Rhoda was ashamed of herself for thinking it strange, and she surrendered her judgement to be stamped by the one who knew him well.

As regarded her uncle, Dahlia admitted that she had behaved forgetfully and unkindly, and promised amendment. She talked of the Farm as of an old ruin, with nothing but a thin shade of memory threading its walls, and appeared to marvel vaguely that it stood yet. "Father shall not always want money," she said. She was particular in prescribing books for Rhoda to read; good authors, she emphasized, and named books of history, and poets, and quoted their verses. "For my darling will some day have a dear husband, and he must not look down on her." Rhoda shook her head, full sure that she could never be brought to utter such musical words naturally. "Yes, dearest, when you know what love is," said Dahlia, in an underbreath.

Could Robert inspire her with the power? Rhoda looked upon that poor homely young man half-curiously when she returned, and quite dismissed the notion. Besides she had no feeling for herself. Her passion was fixed upon her sister, whose record of emotions in the letters from London placed her beyond dull days and nights. The letters struck many chords. A less subservient reader would have set them down as variations of the language of infatuation; but Rhoda was responsive to every word and change of mood, from the, "I am unworthy, degraded, wretched," to "I am blest above the angels." If one letter said, "We met yesterday," Rhoda's heart beat on to the question, "Shall I see him again to-morrow?" And will she see him?—has she seen him?—agitated her and absorbed her thoughts.

So humbly did she follow her sister, without daring to forecast a prospect for her, or dream of an issue, that when on a summer morning a letter was brought in at the breakfast-table, marked "urgent and private," she opened it, and the first line dazzled her eyes—the surprise was a shock to her brain. She rose from her unfinished meal, and walked out into the wide air, feeling as if she walked on thunder.

The letter ran thus:—

"My Own Innocent!—I am married. We leave England to-day. I must not love you too much, for I have all my love to give to my Edward, my own now, and I am his trustingly for ever. But he will let me give you some of it—and Rhoda is never jealous. She shall have a great deal. Only I am frightened when I think how immense my love is for him, so that anything—everything he thinks right is right to me. I am not afraid to think so. If I were to try, a cloud would come over me—it does, if only I fancy for half a moment I am rash, and a straw. I cannot exist except through him. So I must

belong to him, and his will is my law. My prayer at my bedside every night is that I may die for him. We used to think the idea of death so terrible! Do you remember how we used to shudder together at night when we thought of people lying in the grave? And now, when I think that perhaps I may some day die for him, I feel like a crying in my heart with joy.

"I have left a letter—sent it, I mean—enclosed to uncle for father. He will see Edward by-and-by. Oh! may heaven spare him from any grief. Rhoda will comfort him. Tell him how devoted I am. I am like drowned to everybody but one.

"We are looking on the sea. In half an hour I shall have forgotten the tread of English earth. I do not know that I breathe. All I know is a fear that I am flying, and my strength will not continue. That is when I am not touching his hand. There is France opposite. I shut my eyes and see the whole country, but it is like what I feel for Edward—all in dark moonlight. Oh! I trust him so! I bleed for him. I could make all my veins bleed out at a sad thought about him. And from France to Switzerland and Italy. The sea sparkles just as if it said 'Come to the sun;' and I am going. Edward calls. Shall I be punished for so much happiness? I am too happy, I am too happy.

"God bless my beloved at home! That is my chief prayer now. I shall think of her when I am in the cathedrals.

"Oh, my Father in heaven! bless them all! bless Rhoda! forgive me!

"I can hear the steam of the steamer at the pier. Here is Edward. He says I may send his love to you.

"Address:—

"Mrs. Edward Ayrton,
"Poste Restante,
"Lausanne,
"Switzerland.

"P.S.—Lausanne is where—but another time, and I will always tell you the history of the places to instruct you, poor heart in dull England. Adieu! Good-bye and God bless my innocent at home, my dear sister. I love her. I never can forget her. The day is so lovely. It seems on purpose for us. Be sure you write on thin paper to Lausanne. It is on a blue lake; you see snow mountains, and now there is a bell ringing—kisses from me! we start. I must sign.

"Dahlia."

By the reading of this letter, Rhoda was caught vividly to the shore, and saw her sister borne away in the boat to the strange countries; she travelled with her, following her with gliding speed through a multiplicity of shifting scenes, opal landscapes, full of fire and dreams, and in all of them a great bell towered. "Oh, my sweet! my own beauty!" she cried in Dahlia's language. Meeting Mrs. Sumfit, she called her "Mother Dumpling," as Dahlia did of old, affectionately, and kissed her, and ran on to Master Gammon, who was tramping leisurely on to the oatfield lying on toward the millholms.

"My sister sends you her love," she said brightly to the old man. Master Gammon responded with no remarkable flash of his eyes, and merely opened his mouth and shut it, as when a duck divides its bill, but fails to emit the customary quack.

"And to you, little pigs; and to you, Mulberry; and you, Dapple; and you, and you, and you."

Rhoda nodded round to all the citizens of the farmyard; and so eased her heart of its laughing bubbles. After which, she fell to a meditative walk of demurer joy, and had a regret. It was simply that Dahlia's hurry in signing the letter, had robbed her of the delight of seeing "Dahlia Ayrton" written proudly out, with its wonderful signification of the change in her life.

That was a trifling matter; yet Rhoda felt the letter was not complete in the absence of the bridal name. She fancied Dahlia to have meant, perhaps, that she was Dahlia to her as of old, and not a stranger. "Dahlia ever; Dahlia nothing else for you," she heard her sister say. But how delicious

and mournful, how terrible and sweet with meaning would “Dahlia Ayrton,” the new name in the dear handwriting, have looked! “And I have a brother-in-law,” she thought, and her cheeks tingled. The banks of fern and foxglove, and the green young oaks fringing the copse, grew rich in colour, as she reflected that this beloved unknown husband of her sister embraced her and her father as well; even the old bent beggarman on the sandy ridge, though he had a starved frame and carried pitiless faggots, stood illumined in a soft warmth. Rhoda could not go back to the house.

It chanced that the farmer that morning had been smitten with the virtue of his wife’s opinion of Robert, and her parting recommendation concerning him.

“Have you a mind to either one of my two girls?” he put the question bluntly, finding himself alone with Robert.

Robert took a quick breath, and replied, “I have.”

“Then make your choice,” said the farmer, and tried to go about his business, but hung near Robert in the fields till he had asked: “Which one is it, my boy?”

Robert turned a blade of wheat in his mouth.

“I think I shall leave her to tell that,” was his answer.

“Why, don’t ye know which one you prefer to choose, man?” quoth Mr. Fleming.

“I mayn’t know whether she prefers to choose me,” said Robert.

The farmer smiled.

“You never can exactly reckon about them; that’s true.”

He was led to think: “Dahlia’s the lass;” seeing that Robert had not had many opportunities of speaking with her.

“When my girls are wives, they’ll do their work in the house,” he pursued. “They may have a little bit o’ property in land, ye know, and they may have a share in—in gold. That’s not to be reckoned on. We’re an old family, Robert, and I suppose we’ve our pride somewhere down. Anyhow, you can’t look on my girls and not own they’re superior girls. I’ve no notion of forcing them to clean, and dish up, and do dairying, if it’s not to their turn. They’re handy with th’ needle. They dress conformably, and do the millinery themselves. And I know they say their prayers of a night. That I know, if that’s a comfort to ye, and it should be, Robert. For pray, and you can’t go far wrong; and it’s particularly good for girls. I’ll say no more.”

At the dinner-table, Rhoda was not present. Mr. Fleming fidgeted, blamed her and excused her, but as Robert appeared indifferent about her absence, he was confirmed in his idea that Dahlia attracted his fancy.

They had finished dinner, and Master Gammon had risen, when a voice immediately recognized as the voice of Anthony Hackbut was heard in the front part of the house. Mr. Fleming went round to him with a dismayed face.

“Lord!” said Mrs. Sumfit, “how I tremble!”

Robert, too, looked grave, and got away from the house. The dread of evil news of Dahlia was common to them all; yet none had mentioned it, Robert conceiving that it would be impertinence on his part to do so; the farmer, that the policy of permitting Dahlia’s continued residence in London concealed the peril; while Mrs. Sumfit flatly defied the threatening of a mischance to one so sweet and fair, and her favourite. It is the insincerity of persons of their class; but one need not lay stress on the wilfulness of uneducated minds. Robert walked across the fields, walking like a man with an object in view. As he dropped into one of the close lanes which led up to Wrexby Hall, he saw Rhoda standing under an oak, her white morning-dress covered with sun-spots. His impulse was to turn back, the problem, how to speak to her, not being settled within him. But the next moment his blood chilled; for he had perceived, though he had not felt simultaneously, that two gentlemen were standing near her, addressing her. And it was likewise manifest that she listened to them. These presently raised their hats and disappeared. Rhoda came on toward Robert.

"You have forgotten your dinner," he said, with a queer sense of shame at dragging in the mention of that meal.

"I have been too happy to eat," Rhoda replied.

Robert glanced up the lane, but she gave no heed to this indication, and asked: "Has uncle come?"

"Did you expect him?"

"I thought he would come."

"What has made you happy?"

"You will hear from uncle."

"Shall I go and hear what those—"

Robert checked himself, but it would have been better had he spoken out. Rhoda's face, from a light of interrogation, lowered its look to contempt.

She did not affect the feminine simplicity which can so prettily misunderstand and put by an implied accusation of that nature. Doubtless her sharp instinct served her by telling her that her contempt would hurt him shrewdly now. The foolishness of a man having much to say to a woman, and not knowing how or where the beginning of it might be, was perceptible about him. A shout from her father at the open garden-gate, hurried on Rhoda to meet him. Old Anthony was at Mr. Fleming's elbow.

"You know it? You have her letter, father?" said Rhoda, gaily, beneath the shadow of his forehead.

"And a Queen of the Egyptians is what you might have been," said Anthony, with a speculating eye upon Rhoda's dark bright face.

Rhoda put out her hand to him, but kept her gaze on her father.

William Fleeting relaxed the knot of his brows and lifted the letter.

"Listen all! This is from a daughter to her father."

And he read, oddly accentuating the first syllables of the sentences:—

> Dear Father,—
> "My husband will bring me to see you when I return to dear England.
> I ought to have concealed nothing, I know. Try to forgive me. I
> hope you will. I shall always think of you. God bless you!
> "I am,
> "Ever with respect,
> "Your dearly loving Daughter,
> "Dahlia."

"Dahlia Blank!" said the farmer, turning his look from face to face.

A deep fire of emotion was evidently agitating him, for the letter rustled in his hand, and his voice was uneven. Of this, no sign was given by his inexpressive features. The round brown eyes and the ruddy varnish on his cheeks were a mask upon grief, if not also upon joy.

"Dahlia—what? What's her name?" he resumed. "Here—'my husband will bring me to see you'—who's her husband? Has he got a name? And a blank envelope to her uncle here, who's kept her in comfort for so long! And this is all she writes to me! Will any one spell out the meaning of it?"

"Dahlia was in great haste, father," said Rhoda.

"Oh, ay, you!—you're the one, I know," returned the farmer. "It's sister and sister, with you."

"But she was very, very hurried, father. I have a letter from her, and I have only 'Dahlia' written at the end—no other name."

"And you suspect no harm of your sister."

"Father, how can I imagine any kind of harm?"

"That letter, my girl, sticks to my skull, as though it meant to say, 'You've not understood me yet.' I've read it a matter of twenty times, and I'm no nearer to the truth of it. But, if she's lying, here in this letter, what's she walking on? How long are we to wait for to hear? I give you my word, Robert, I'm feeling for you as I am for myself. Or, wasn't it that one? Is it this one?" He levelled his finger at Rhoda. "In any case, Robert, you'll feel for me as a father. I'm shut in a dark room with the candle blown out. I've heard of a sort of fear you have in that dilemmer, lest you should lay your fingers on edges of sharp knives, and if I think a step—if I go thinking a step, and feel my way, I do cut myself, and I bleed, I do. Robert, just take and say, it wasn't that one."

Such a statement would carry with it the confession that it was this one for whom he cared this scornful one, this jilt, this brazen girl who could make appointments with gentlemen, or suffer them to speak to her, and subsequently look at him with innocence and with anger.

"Believe me, Mr. Fleming, I feel for you as much as a man can," he said, uneasily, swaying half round as he spoke.

"Do you suspect anything bad?" The farmer repeated the question, like one who only wanted a confirmation of his own suspicions to see the fact built up. "Robert, does this look like the letter of a married woman? Is it daughter-like—eh, man? Help another: I can't think for myself—she ties my hands. Speak out."

Robert set his eyes on Rhoda. He would have given much to have been able to utter, "I do." Her face was like an eager flower straining for light; the very beauty of it swelled his jealous passion, and he flattered himself with his incapacity to speak an abject lie to propitiate her.

"She says she is married. We're bound to accept what she says."

That was his answer.

"Is she married?" thundered the farmer. "Has she been and disgraced her mother in her grave? What am I to think? She's my flesh and blood. Is she—"

"Oh, hush, father!" Rhoda laid her hand on his arm. "What doubt can there be of Dahlia? You have forgotten that she is always truthful. Come away. It is shameful to stand here and listen to unmanly things."

She turned a face of ashes upon Robert.

"Come away, father. She is our own. She is my sister. A doubt of her is an insult to us."

"But Robert don't doubt her—eh?" The farmer was already half distracted from his suspicions. "Have you any real doubt about the girl, Robert?"

"I don't trust myself to doubt anybody," said Robert.

"You don't cast us off, my boy?"

"I'm a labourer on the farm," said Robert, and walked away.

"He's got reason to feel this more 'n the rest of us, poor lad! It's a blow to him." With which the farmer struck his hand on Rhoda's shoulder.

"I wish he'd set his heart on a safer young woman."

Rhoda's shudder of revulsion was visible as she put her mouth up to kiss her father's cheek.

CHAPTER VIII

That is Wrexby Hall, upon the hill between Fenhurst and Wrexby: the white square mansion, with the lower drawing-room windows one full bow of glass against the sunlight, and great single trees spotting the distant green slopes. From Queen Anne's Farm you could read the hour by the stretching of their shadows. Squire Blancove, who lived there, was an irascible, gouty man, out of humour with his time, and beginning, alas for him! to lose all true faith in his Port, though, to do him justice, he wrestled hard with this great heresy. His friends perceived the decay in his belief sooner than he did himself. He was sour in the evening as in the morning. There was no chirp in him when the bottle went round. He had never one hour of a humane mood to be reckoned on now. The day, indeed, is sad when we see the skeleton of the mistress by whom we suffer, but cannot abandon her. The squire drank, knowing that the issue would be the terrific, curse-begetting twinge in his foot; but, as he said, he was a man who stuck to his habits. It was over his Port that he had quarrelled with his rector on the subject of hopeful Algernon, and the system he adopted with that young man. This incident has something to do with Rhoda's story, for it was the reason why Mrs. Lovell went to Wrexby Church, the spirit of that lady leading her to follow her own impulses, which were mostly in opposition. So, when perchance she visited the Hall, she chose not to accompany the squire and his subservient guests to Fenhurst, but made a point of going down to the unoccupied Wrexby pew. She was a beauty, and therefore powerful; otherwise her act of nonconformity would have produced bad blood between her and the squire.

It was enough to have done so in any case; for now, instead of sitting at home comfortably, and reading off the week's chronicle of sport while he nursed his leg, the unfortunate gentleman had to be up and away to Fenhurst every Sunday morning, or who would have known that the old cause of his general abstention from Sabbath services lay in the detestable doctrine of Wrexby's rector?

Mrs. Lovell was now at the Hall, and it was Sunday morning after breakfast. The lady stood like a rival head among the other guests, listening, gloved and bonneted, to the bells of Wrexby, West of the hills, and of Fenhurst, Northeast. The squire came in to them, groaning over his boots, cross with his fragile wife, and in every mood for satire, except to receive it.

"How difficult it is to be gouty and good!" murmured Mrs. Lovell to the person next her.

"Well," said the squire, singling out his enemy, "you're going to that fellow, I suppose, as usual —eh?"

"Not 'as usual,'" replied Mrs. Lovell, sweetly; "I wish it were!"

"Wish it were, do you?—you find him so entertaining? Has he got to talking of the fashions?"

"He talks properly; I don't ask for more." Mrs. Lovell assumed an air of meekness under persecution.

"I thought you were Low Church."

"Lowly of the Church, I trust you thought," she corrected him. "But, for that matter, any discourse, plainly delivered, will suit me."

"His elocution's perfect," said the squire; "that is, before dinner."

"I have only to do with him before dinner, you know."

"Well, I've ordered a carriage out for you."

"That is very honourable and kind."

"It would be kinder if I contrived to keep you away from the fellow."

"Would it not be kinder to yourself," Mrs. Lovell swam forward to him in all tenderness, taking his hands, and fixing the swimming blue of her soft eyes upon him pathetically, "if you took your paper and your slippers, and awaited our return?"

The squire felt the circulating smile about the room. He rebuked the woman's audacity with a frown; "Tis my duty to set an example," he said, his gouty foot and irritable temper now meeting in a common fire.

"Since you are setting an example," rejoined the exquisite widow, "I have nothing more to say."

The squire looked what he dared not speak. A woman has half, a beauty has all, the world with her when she is self-contained, and holds her place; and it was evident that Mrs. Lovell was not one to abandon her advantages.

He snapped round for a victim, trying his wife first. Then his eyes rested upon Algernon.

"Well, here we are; which of us will you take?" he asked Mrs. Lovell in blank irony.

"I have engaged my cavalier, who is waiting, and will be as devout as possible." Mrs. Lovell gave Algernon a smile.

"I thought I hit upon the man," growled the squire. "You're going in to Wrexby, sir! Oh, go, by all means, and I shan't be astonished at what comes of it. Like teacher, like pupil!"

"There!" Mrs. Lovell gave Algernon another smile. "You have to bear the sins of your rector, as well as your own. Can you support it?"

The flimsy fine dialogue was a little above Algernon's level in the society of ladies; but he muttered, bowing, that he would endeavour to support it, with Mrs. Lovell's help, and this did well enough; after which, the slight strain on the intellects of the assemblage relaxed, and ordinary topics were discussed. The carriages came round to the door; gloves, parasols, and scent-bottles were securely grasped; whereupon the squire, standing bare-headed on the steps, insisted upon seeing the party of the opposition off first, and waited to hand Mrs. Lovell into her carriage, an ironic gallantry accepted by the lady with serenity befitting the sacred hour.

"Ah! my pencil, to mark the text for you, squire," she said, taking her seat; and Algernon turned back at her bidding, to get a pencil; and she, presenting a most harmonious aspect in the lovely landscape, reclined in the carriage as if, like the sweet summer air, she too were quieted by those holy bells, while the squire stood, fuming, bareheaded, and with boiling blood, just within the bounds of decorum on the steps. She was more than his match.

She was more than a match for most; and it was not a secret. Algernon knew it as well as Edward, or any one. She was a terror to the soul of the youth, and an attraction. Her smile was the richest flattery he could feel; the richer, perhaps, from his feeling it to be a thing impossible to fix. He had heard tales of her; he remembered Edward's warning; but he was very humbly sitting with her now, and very happy.

"I'm in for it," he said to his fair companion; "no cheque for me next quarter, and no chance of an increase. He'll tell me I've got a salary. A salary! Good Lord! what a man comes to! I've done for myself with the squire for a year."

"You must think whether you have compensation," said the lady, and he received it in a cousinly squeeze of his hand.

He was about to raise the lank white hand to his lips.

"Ah!" she said, "there would be no compensation to me, if that were seen;" and her dainty hand was withdrawn. "Now, tell me," she changed her tone. "How do the loves prosper?"

Algernon begged her not to call them 'loves.' She nodded and smiled.

"Your artistic admirations," she observed. "I am to see her in church, am I not? Only, my dear Algy, don't go too far. Rustic beauties are as dangerous as Court Princesses. Where was it you saw her first?"

"At the Bank," said Algernon.

"Really! at the Bank! So your time there is not absolutely wasted. What brought her to London, I wonder?"

"Well, she has an old uncle, a queer old fellow, and he's a sort of porter—money porter—in the Bank, awfully honest, or he might half break it some fine day, if he chose to cut and run. She's

got a sister, prettier than this girl, the fellows say; I've never seen her. I expect I've seen a portrait of her, though."

"Ah!" Mrs. Lovell musically drew him on. "Was she dark, too?"

"No, she's fair. At least, she is in her portrait."

"Brown hair; hazel eyes?"

"Oh—oh! You guess, do you?"

"I guess nothing, though it seems profitable. That Yankee betting man 'guesses,' and what heaps of money he makes by it!"

"I wish I did," Algernon sighed. "All my guessing and reckoning goes wrong. I'm safe for next Spring, that's one comfort. I shall make twenty thousand next Spring."

"On Templemore?"

"That's the horse. I've got a little on Tenpenny Nail as well. But I'm quite safe on Templemore; unless the Evil Principle comes into the field."

"Is he so sure to be against you, if he does appear?" said Mrs. Lovell.

"Certain!" ejaculated Algernon, in honest indignation.

"Well, Algy, I don't like to have him on my side. Perhaps I will take a share in your luck, to make it—? to make it?"—She played prettily as a mistress teasing her lap-dog to jump for a morsel; adding: "Oh! Algy, you are not a Frenchman. To make it divine, sir! you have missed your chance."

"There's one chance I shouldn't like to miss," said the youth.

"Then, do not mention it," she counselled him. "And, seriously, I will take a part of your risk. I fear I am lucky, which is ruinous. We will settle that, by-and-by. Do you know, Algy, the most expensive position in the world is a widow's."

"You needn't be one very long," growled he.

"I'm so wretchedly fastidious, don't you see? And it's best not to sigh when we're talking of business, if you'll take me for a guide. So, the old man brought this pretty rustic Miss Rhoda to the Bank?"

"Once," said Algernon. "Just as he did with her sister. He's proud of his nieces; shows them and then hides them. The fellows at the Bank never saw her again."

"Her name is—?"

"Dahlia."

"Ah, yes!—Dahlia. Extremely pretty. There are brown dahlias—dahlias of all colours. And the portrait of this fair creature hangs up in your chambers in town?"

"Don't call them my chambers," Algernon protested.

"Your cousin's, if you like. Probably Edward happened to be at the Bank when fair Dahlia paid her visit. Once seems to have been enough for both of you."

Algernon was unread in the hearts of women, and imagined that Edward's defection from Mrs. Lovell's sway had deprived him of the lady's sympathy and interest in his fortunes.

"Poor old Ned's in some scrape, I think," he said.

"Where is he?" the lady asked, languidly.

"Paris."

"Paris? How very odd! And out of the season, in this hot weather. It's enough to lead me to dream that he has gone over—one cannot realize why."

"Upon my honour!" Algernon thumped on his knee; "by jingo!" he adopted a less compromising interjection; "Ned's fool enough. My idea is, he's gone and got married."

Mrs. Lovell was lying back with the neglectful grace of incontestable beauty; not a line to wrinkle her smooth soft features. For one sharp instant her face was all edged and puckered, like the face of a fair witch. She sat upright.

"Married! But how can that be when we none of us have heard a word of it?"

"I daresay you haven't," said Algernon; "and not likely to. Ned's the closest fellow of my acquaintance. He hasn't taken me into his confidence, you maybe sure; he knows I'm too leaky. There's no bore like a secret! I've come to my conclusion in this affair by putting together a lot of little incidents and adding them up. First, I believe he was at the Bank when that fair girl was seen there. Secondly, from the description the fellows give of her, I should take her to be the original of the portrait. Next, I know that Rhoda has a fair sister who has run for it. And last, Rhoda has had a letter from her sister, to say she's away to the Continent and is married. Ned's in Paris. Those are my facts, and I give you my reckoning of them."

Mrs. Lovell gazed at Algernon for one long meditative moment.

"Impossible," she exclaimed. "Edward has more brains than heart." And now the lady's face was scarlet. "How did this Rhoda, with her absurd name, think of meeting you to tell you such stuff? Indeed, there's a simplicity in some of these young women—" She said the remainder to herself.

"She's really very innocent and good," Algernon defended Rhoda, "she is. There isn't a particle of nonsense in her. I first met her in town, as I stated, at the Bank; just on the steps, and we remembered I had called a cab for her a little before; and I met her again by accident yesterday."

"You are only a boy in their hands, my cousin Algy!" said Mrs. Lovell.

Algernon nodded with a self-defensive knowingness. "I fancy there's no doubt her sister has written to her that she's married. It's certain she has. She's a blunt sort of girl; not one to lie, not even for a sister or a lover, unless she had previously made up her mind to it. In that case, she wouldn't stick at much."

"But, do you know," said Mrs. Lovell—"do you know that Edward's father would be worse than yours over such an act of folly? He would call it an offence against common sense, and have no mercy for it. He would be vindictive on principle. This story of yours cannot be true. Nothing reconciles it."

"Oh, Sir Billy will be rusty; that stands to reason," Algernon assented. "It mayn't be true. I hope it isn't. But Ned has a madness for fair women. He'd do anything on earth for them. He loses his head entirely."

"That he may have been imprudent—" Mrs. Lovell thus blushingly hinted at the lesser sin of his deceiving and ruining the girl.

"Oh, it needn't be true," said Algernon; and with meaning, "Who's to blame if it is?"

Mrs. Lovell again reddened. She touched Algernon's fingers.

"His friends mustn't forsake him, in any case."

"By Jove! you are the right sort of woman," cried Algernon.

It was beyond his faculties to divine that her not forsaking of Edward might haply come to mean something disastrous to him. The touch of Mrs. Lovell's hand made him forget Rhoda in a twinkling. He detained it, audaciously, even until she frowned with petulance and stamped her foot.

There was over her bosom a large cameo-brooch, representing a tomb under a palm-tree, and the figure of a veiled woman with her head bowed upon the tomb. This brooch was falling, when Algernon caught it. The pin tore his finger, and in the energy of pain he dashed the brooch to her feet, with immediate outcries of violent disgust at himself and exclamations for pardon. He picked up the brooch. It was open. A strange, discoloured, folded substance lay on the floor of the carriage. Mrs. Lovell gazed down at it, and then at him, ghastly pale. He lifted it by one corner, and the diminutive folded squares came out, revealing a strip of red-stained handkerchief.

Mrs. Lovell grasped it, and thrust it out of sight.

She spoke as they approached the church-door: "Mention nothing of this to a soul, or you forfeit my friendship for ever."

When they alighted, she was smiling in her old affable manner.

CHAPTER IX

Some consideration for Robert, after all, as being the man who loved her, sufficed to give him rank as a more elevated kind of criminal in Rhoda's sight, and exquisite torture of the highest form was administered to him. Her faith in her sister was so sure that she could half pardon him for the momentary harm he had done to Dahlia with her father; but, judging him by the lofty standard of one who craved to be her husband, she could not pardon his unmanly hesitation and manner of speech. The old and deep grievance in her heart as to what men thought of women, and as to the harshness of men, was stirred constantly by the remembrance of his irresolute looks, and his not having dared to speak nobly for Dahlia, even though he might have had, the knavery to think evil. As the case stood, there was still mischief to counteract. Her father had willingly swallowed a drug, but his suspicions only slumbered, and she could not instil her own vivid hopefulness and trust into him. Letters from Dahlia came regularly. The first, from Lausanne, favoured Rhoda's conception of her as of a happy spirit resting at celestial stages of her ascent upward through spheres of ecstacy. Dahlia could see the snow-mountains in a flying glimpse; and again, peacefully seated, she could see the snow-mountains reflected in clear blue waters from her window, which, Rhoda thought, must be like heaven. On these inspired occasions, Robert presented the form of a malignant serpent in her ideas. Then Dahlia made excursions upon glaciers with her beloved, her helpmate, and had slippings and tumblings—little earthly casualties which gave a charming sense of reality to her otherwise miraculous flight. The Alps were crossed: Italy was beheld. A profusion of "Oh's!" described Dahlia's impressions of Italy; and "Oh! the heat!" showed her to be mortal, notwithstanding the sublime exclamations. Como received the blissful couple. Dahlia wrote from Como:—

> "Tell father that gentlemen in my Edward's position cannot always immediately proclaim their marriage to the world. There are reasons. I hope he has been very angry with me: then it will be soon over, and we shall be—but I cannot look back. I shall not look back till we reach Venice. At Venice, I know I shall see you all as clear as day; but I cannot even remember the features of my darling here."

Her Christian name was still her only signature.

The thin blue-and-pink paper, and the foreign postmarks—testifications to Dahlia's journey not being a fictitious event, had a singular deliciousness for the solitary girl at the Farm. At times, as she turned them over, she was startled by the intoxication of her sentiments, for the wild thought would come, that many, many whose passionate hearts she could feel as her own, were ready to abandon principle and the bondage to the hereafter, for such a long delicious gulp of divine life. Rhoda found herself more than once brooding on the possible case that Dahlia had done this thing.

The fit of languor came on her unawares, probing at her weakness, and blinding her to the laws and duties of earth, until her conscious womanhood checked it, and she sprang from the vision in a spasm of terror, not knowing how far she had fallen.

After such personal experiences, she suffered great longings to be with her sister, that the touch of her hand, the gaze of her eyes, the tone of Dahlia's voice, might make her sure of her sister's safety.

Rhoda's devotions in church were frequently distracted by the occupants of the Blancove pew. Mrs. Lovell had the habit of looking at her with an extraordinary directness, an expressionless dissecting scrutiny, that was bewildering and confusing to the country damsel. Algernon likewise bestowed marked attention on her. Some curious hints had been thrown out to her by this young gentleman on the day when he ventured to speak to her in the lane, which led her to fancy distantly that he had some acquaintance with Dahlia's husband, or that he had heard of Dahlia.

It was clear to Rhoda that Algernon sought another interview. He appeared in the neighbourhood of the farm on Saturdays, and on Sundays he was present in the church, sometimes

with Mrs. Lovell, and sometimes without a companion. His appearance sent her quick wits travelling through many scales of possible conduct: and they struck one ringing note:—she thought that by the aid of this gentleman a lesson might be given to Robert's mean nature. It was part of Robert's punishment to see that she was not unconscious of Algernon's admiration.

The first letter from Venice consisted of a series of interjections in praise of the poetry of gondolas, varied by allusions to the sad smell of the low tide water, and the amazing quality of the heat; and then Dahlia wrote more composedly:—

"Titian the painter lived here, and painted ladies, who sat to him without a bit of garment on, and indeed, my darling, I often think it was more comfortable for the model than for the artist. Even modesty seems too hot a covering for human creatures here. The sun strikes me down. I am ceasing to have a complexion. It is pleasant to know that my Edward is still proud of me. He has made acquaintance with some of the officers here, and seems pleased at the compliments they pay me.

"They have nice manners, and white uniforms that fit them like a kid glove. I am Edward's 'resplendent wife.' A colonel of one of the regiments invited him to dinner (speaking English), 'with your resplendent wife.' Edward has no mercy for errors of language, and he would not take me. Ah! who knows how strange men are! Never think of being happy unless you can always be blind. I see you all at home—Mother Dumpling and all—as I thought I should when I was to come to Venice.

"Persuade—do persuade father that everything will be well. Some persons are to be trusted. Make him feel it. I know that I am life itself to Edward. He has lived as men do, and he can judge, and he knows that there never was a wife who brought a heart to her husband like mine to him. He wants to think, or he wants to smoke, and he leaves me; but, oh! when he returns, he can scarcely believe that he has me, his joy is so great. He looks like a glad thankful child, and he has the manliest of faces. It is generally thoughtful; you might think it hard, at first sight.

"But you must be beautiful to please some men. You will laugh—I have really got the habit of talking to my face and all myself in the glass. Rhoda would think me cracked. And it is really true that I was never so humble about my good looks. You used to spoil me at home—you and that wicked old Mother Dumpling, and our own dear mother, Rhoda—oh! mother, mother! I wish I had always thought of you looking down on me! You made me so vain—much more vain than I let you see I was. There were times when it is quite true I thought myself a princess. I am not worse-looking now, but I suppose I desire to be so beautiful that nothing satisfies me.

"A spot on my neck gives me a dreadful fright. If my hair comes out much when I comb it, it sets my heart beating; and it is a daily misery to me that my hands are larger than they should be, belonging to Edward's 'resplendent wife.' I thank heaven that you and I always saw the necessity of being careful of our fingernails. My feet are of moderate size, though they are not French feet, as Edward says. No: I shall never dance. He sent me to the dancing-master in London, but it was too late. But I have been complimented on my walking, and that seems to please Edward. He does not dance (or mind dancing) himself, only he does not like me to miss one perfection. It is his love. Oh! if I have seemed to let you suppose he does not love me as ever, do not think it. He is most tender and true to me. Addio! I am signora, you are signorina.

"They have such pretty manners to us over here. Edward says they think less of women: I say they think more. But I feel he must be right. Oh, my dear, cold, loving, innocent sister! put out your arms; I shall feel them round me, and kiss you, kiss you for ever!"

Onward from city to city, like a radiation of light from the old farm-house, where so little of it was, Dahlia continued her journey; and then, without a warning, with only a word to say that she neared Rome, the letters ceased. A chord snapped in Rhoda's bosom. While she was hearing from her sister almost weekly, her confidence was buoyed on a summer sea. In the silence it fell upon a dread. She had no answer in her mind for her father's unspoken dissatisfaction, and she had to conceal her cruel anxiety. There was an interval of two months: a blank fell charged with apprehension that was like the humming of a toneless wind before storm; worse than the storm, for any human thing to bear.

Rhoda was unaware that Robert, who rarely looked at her, and never sought to speak a word to her when by chance they met and were alone, studied each change in her face, and read its signs. He was left to his own interpretation of them, but the signs he knew accurately. He knew that her pride had sunk, and that her heart was desolate. He believed that she had discovered her sister's misery.

One day a letter arrived that gave her no joyful colouring, though it sent colour to her cheeks. She opened it, evidently not knowing the handwriting; her eyes ran down the lines hurriedly. After a time she went upstairs for her bonnet.

At the stile leading into that lane where Robert had previously seen her, she was stopped by him.

"No farther," was all that he said, and he was one who could have interdicted men from advancing.

"Why may I not go by you?" said Rhoda, with a woman's affected humbleness.

Robert joined his hands. "You go no farther, Miss Rhoda, unless you take me with you."

"I shall not do that, Mr. Robert."

"Then you had better return home."

"Will you let me know what reasons you have for behaving in this manner to me?"

"I'll let you know by-and-by," said Robert. "At present, You'll let the stronger of the two have his way."

He had always been so meek and gentle and inoffensive, that her contempt had enjoyed free play, and had never risen to anger; but violent anger now surged against him, and she cried, "Do you dare to touch me?" trying to force her passage by.

Robert caught her softly by the wrist. There stood at the same time a full-statured strength of will in his eyes, under which her own fainted.

"Go back," he said; and she turned that he might not see her tears of irritation and shame. He was treating her as a child; but it was to herself alone that she could defend herself. She marvelled that when she thought of an outspoken complaint against him, her conscience gave her no support.

"Is there no freedom for a woman at all in this world?" Rhoda framed the bitter question.

Rhoda went back as she had come. Algernon Blancove did the same. Between them stood Robert, thinking, "Now I have made that girl hate me for life."

It was in November that a letter, dated from London, reached the farm, quickening Rhoda's blood anew. "I am alive," said Dahlia; and she said little more, except that she was waiting to see her sister, and bade her urgently to travel up alone. Her father consented to her doing so. After a consultation with Robert, however, he determined to accompany her.

"She can't object to see me too," said the farmer; and Rhoda answered "No." But her face was bronze to Robert when they took their departure.

CHAPTER X

Old Anthony was expecting them in London. It was now winter, and the season for theatres; so, to show his brother-in-law the fun of a theatre was one part of his projected hospitality, if Mr. Fleming should haply take the hint that he must pay for himself.

Anthony had laid out money to welcome the farmer, and was shy and fidgety as a girl who anticipates the visit of a promising youth, over his fat goose for next day's dinner, and his shrimps for this day's tea, and his red slice of strong cheese, called of Cheshire by the reckless butter-man, for supper.

He knew that both Dahlia and Rhoda must have told the farmer that he was not high up in Boyne's Bank, and it fretted him to think that the mysterious respect entertained for his wealth by the farmer, which delighted him with a novel emotion, might be dashed by what the farmer would behold.

During his last visit to the farm, Anthony had talked of the Funds more suggestively than usual. He had alluded to his own dealings in them, and to what he would do and would not do under certain contingencies; thus shadowing out, dimly luminous and immense, what he could do, if his sagacity prompted the adventure. The farmer had listened through the buzzing of his uncertain grief, only sighing for answer. "If ever you come up to London, brother William John," said Anthony, "you mind you go about arm-in-arm with me, or you'll be judging by appearances, and says you, 'Lor', what a thousander fellow this is!' and 'What a millioner fellow that is!' You'll be giving your millions and your thousands to the wrong people, when they haven't got a penny. All London 'll be topsy-turvy to you, unless you've got a guide, and he'll show you a shabby-coated, head-in-the-gutter old man 'll buy up the lot. Everybody that doesn't know him says—look at him! but they that knows him—hats off, I can tell you. And talk about lords! We don't mind their coming into the city, but they know the scent of cash. I've had a lord take off his hat to me. It's a fact, I have."

In spite of the caution Anthony had impressed upon his country relative, that he should not judge by appearances, he was nevertheless under an apprehension that the farmer's opinion of him, and the luxurious, almost voluptuous, enjoyment he had of it, were in peril. When he had purchased the well-probed fat goose, the shrimps, and the cheese, he was only half-satisfied. His ideas shot boldly at a bottle of wine, and he employed a summer-lighted evening in going a round of wine-merchants' placards, and looking out for the cheapest bottle he could buy. And he would have bought one—he had sealing-wax of his own and could have stamped it with the office-stamp of Boyne's Bank for that matter, to make it as dignified and costly as the vaunted red seals and green seals of the placards—he would have bought one, had he not, by one of his lucky mental illuminations, recollected that it was within his power to procure an order to taste wine at the Docks, where you may get as much wine as you like out of big sixpenny glasses, and try cask after cask, walking down gas-lit paths between the huge bellies of wine which groan to be tapped and tried, that men may know them. The idea of paying two shillings and sixpence for one miserable bottle vanished at the richly-coloured prospect. "That'll show him something of what London is," thought Anthony; and a companion thought told him in addition that the farmer, with a skinful of wine, would emerge into the open air imagining no small things of the man who could gain admittance into those marvellous caverns. "By George! it's like a boy's story-book," cried Anthony, in his soul, and he chuckled over the vision of the farmer's amazement—acted it with his arms extended, and his hat unseated, and plunged into wheezy fits of laughter.

He met his guests at the station. Mr. Fleming was soberly attired in what, to Anthony's London eye, was a curiosity costume; but the broad brim of the hat, the square cut of the brown coat, and the leggings, struck him as being very respectable, and worthy of a presentation at any Bank in London.

"You stick to a leather purse, brother William John?" he inquired, with an artistic sentiment for things in keeping.

"I do," said the farmer, feeling seriously at the button over it.

"All right; I shan't ask ye to show it in the street," Anthony rejoined, and smote Rhoda's hand as it hung.

"Glad to see your old uncle—are ye?"

Rhoda replied quietly that she was, but had come with the principal object of seeing her sister.

"There!" cried Anthony, "you never get a compliment out of this gal. She gives ye the nut, and you're to crack it, and there maybe, or there mayn't be, a kernel inside—she don't care."

"But there ain't much in it!" the farmer ejaculated, withdrawing his fingers from the button they had been teasing for security since Anthony's question about the purse.

"Not much—eh! brother William John?" Anthony threw up a puzzled look. "Not much baggage—I see that—" he exclaimed; "and, Lord be thanked! no trunks. Aha, my dear"—he turned to Rhoda—"you remember your lesson, do ye? Now, mark me—I'll remember you for it. Do you know, my dear," he said to Rhoda confidentially, "that sixpenn'orth of chaff which I made the cabman pay for—there was the cream of it!—that was better than Peruvian bark to my constitution. It was as good to me as a sniff of sea-breeze and no excursion expenses. I'd like another, just to feel young again, when I'd have backed myself to beat—cabmen? Ah! I've stood up, when I was a young 'un, and shut up a Cheap Jack at a fair. Circulation's the soul o' chaff. That's why I don't mind tackling cabmen—they sit all day, and all they've got to say is 'rat-tat,' and they've done. But I let the boys roar. I know what I was when a boy myself. I've got devil in me—never you fear—but it's all on the side of the law. Now, let's off, for the gentlemen are starin' at you, which won't hurt ye, ye know, but makes me jealous."

Before the party moved away from the platform, a sharp tussle took place between Anthony and the farmer as to the porterage of the bulky bag; but it being only half-earnest, the farmer did not put out his strength, and Anthony had his way.

"I rather astonished you, brother William John," he said, when they were in the street.

The farmer admitted that he was stronger than he looked.

"Don't you judge by appearances, that's all," Anthony remarked, setting down the bag to lay his finger on one side of his nose for impressiveness.

"Now, there we leave London Bridge to the right, and we should away to the left, and quiet parts." He seized the bag anew. "Just listen. That's the roaring of cataracts of gold you hear, brother William John. It's a good notion, ain't it? Hark!—I got that notion from one of your penny papers. You can buy any amount for a penny, now-a-days—poetry up in a corner, stories, tales o' temptation—one fellow cut his lucky with his master's cash, dashed away to Australia, made millions, fit to be a lord, and there he was! liable to the law! and everybody bowing their hats and their heads off to him, and his knees knocking at the sight of a policeman—a man of a red complexion, full habit of body, enjoyed his dinner and his wine, and on account of his turning white so often, they called him—'sealing-wax and Parchment' was one name; 'Carrots and turnips' was another; 'Blumonge and something,' and so on. Fancy his having to pay half his income in pensions to chaps who could have had him out of his town or country mansion and popped into gaol in a jiffy. And found out at last! Them tales set you thinking. Once I was an idle young scaramouch. But you can buy every idea that's useful to you for a penny. I tried the halfpenny journals. Cheapness ain't always profitable. The moral is, Make your money, and you may buy all the rest."

Discoursing thus by the way, and resisting the farmer's occasional efforts to relieve him of the bag, with the observation that appearances were deceiving, and that he intended, please his Maker, to live and turn over a little more interest yet, Anthony brought them to Mrs. Wicklow's house. Mrs. Wicklow promised to put them into the track of the omnibuses running toward Dahlia's abode in the Southwest, and Mary Ann Wicklow, who had a burning desire in her bosom to behold even the outside shell of her friend's new grandeur, undertook very disinterestedly to accompany them. Anthony's strict injunction held them due at a lamp-post outside Boyne's Bank, at half-past three o'clock in the afternoon.

"My love to Dahly," he said. "She was always a head and shoulders over my size. Tell her, when she rolls by in her carriage, not to mind me. I got my own notions of value. And if that Mr. Ayrton of hers 'll bank at Boyne's, I'll behave to him like a customer. This here's the girl for my money." He touched Rhoda's arm, and so disappeared.

The farmer chided her for her cold manner to her uncle, murmuring aside to her: "You heard what he said." Rhoda was frozen with her heart's expectation, and insensible to hints or reproof. The people who entered the omnibus seemed to her stale phantoms bearing a likeness to every one she had known, save to her beloved whom she was about to meet, after long separation.

She marvelled pityingly at the sort of madness which kept the streets so lively for no reasonable purpose. When she was on her feet again, she felt for the first time, that she was nearing the sister for whom she hungered, and the sensation beset her that she had landed in a foreign country. Mary Ann Wicklow chattered all the while to the general ear. It was her pride to be the discoverer of Dahlia's terrace.

"Not for worlds would she enter the house," she said, in a general tone; she knowing better than to present herself where downright entreaty did not invite her.

Rhoda left her to count the numbers along the terrace-walk, and stood out in the road that her heart might select Dahlia's habitation from the other hueless residences. She fixed upon one, but she was wrong, and her heart sank. The fair Mary Ann fought her and beat her by means of a careful reckoning, as she remarked,—

"I keep my eyes open; Number 15 is the corner house, the bow-window, to a certainty."

Gardens were in front of the houses; or, to speak more correctly, strips of garden walks. A cab was drawn up close by the shrub-covered iron gate leading up to No. 15. Mary Ann hurried them on, declaring that they might be too late even now at a couple of dozen paces distant, seeing that London cabs, crawlers as they usually were, could, when required, and paid for it, do their business like lightning. Her observation was illustrated the moment after they had left her in the rear; for a gentleman suddenly sprang across the pavement, jumped into a cab, and was whirled away, with as much apparent magic to provincial eyes, as if a pantomimic trick had been performed. Rhoda pressed forward a step in advance of her father.

"It may have been her husband," she thought, and trembled. The curtains up in the drawing-room were moved as by a hand; but where was Dahlia's face? Dahlia knew that they were coming, and she was not on the look-out for them!—a strange conflict of facts, over which Rhoda knitted her black brows, so that she looked menacing to the maid opening the door, whose "Oh, if you please, Miss," came in contact with "My sister—Mrs.—, she expects me. I mean, Mrs.—" but no other name than "Dahlia" would fit itself to Rhoda's mouth.

"Ayrton," said the maid, and recommenced, "Oh, if you please, Miss, and you are the young lady, Mrs. Ayrton is very sorry, and have left word, would you call again to-morrow, as she have made a pressing appointment, and was sure you would excuse her, but her husband was very anxious for her to go, and could not put it off, and was very sorry, but would you call again to-morrow at twelve o'clock? and punctually she would be here."

The maid smiled as one who had fairly accomplished the recital of her lesson. Rhoda was stunned.

"Is Mrs. Ayrton at home?—Not at home?" she said.

"No: don't ye hear?" quoth the farmer, sternly.

"She had my letter—do you know?" Rhoda appealed to the maid.

"Oh, yes, Miss. A letter from the country."

"This morning?"

"Yes, Miss; this morning."

"And she has gone out? What time did she go out? When will she be in?"

Her father plucked at her dress. “Best not go making the young woman repeat herself. She says, nobody’s at home to ask us in. There’s no more, then, to trouble her for.”

“At twelve o’clock to-morrow?” Rhoda faltered.

“Would you, if you please, call again at twelve o’clock to-morrow, and punctually she would be here,” said the maid.

The farmer hung his head and turned. Rhoda followed him from the garden. She was immediately plied with queries and interjections of wonderment by Miss Wicklow, and it was not until she said: “You saw him go out, didn’t you?—into the cab?” that Rhoda awakened to a meaning in her gabble.

Was it Dahlia’s husband whom they had seen? And if so, why was Dahlia away from her husband? She questioned in her heart, but not for an answer, for she allowed no suspicions to live. The farmer led on with his plodding country step, burdened shoulders, and ruddy-fowled, serious face, not speaking to Rhoda, who had no desire to hear a word from him, and let him be. Mary Ann steered him and called from behind the turnings he was to take, while she speculated aloud to Rhoda upon the nature of the business that had torn Dahlia from the house so inopportunely. At last she announced that she knew what it was, but Rhoda failed to express curiosity. Mary Ann was driven to whisper something about strange things in the way of purchases. At that moment the farmer threw up his umbrella, shouting for a cab, and Rhoda ran up to him,—

“Oh, father, why do we want to ride?”

“Yes, I tell ye!” said the farmer, chafing against his coat-collar.

“It is an expense, when we can walk, father.”

“What do I care for th’ expense? I shall ride.” He roared again for a cab, and one came that took them in; after which, the farmer, not being spoken to, became gravely placid as before. They were put down at Boyne’s Bank. Anthony was on the look-out, and signalled them to stand away some paces from the door. They were kept about a quarter of an hour waiting between two tides of wayfarers, which hustled them one way and another, when out, at last, came the old, broad, bent figure, with little finicking steps, and hurried past them head foremost, his arms narrowed across a bulgy breast. He stopped to make sure that they were following, beckoned with his chin, and proceeded at a mighty rate. Marvellous was his rounding of corners, his threading of obstructions, his skilful diplomacy with passengers. Presently they lost sight of him, and stood bewildered; but while they were deliberating they heard his voice. He was above them, having issued from two swinging bright doors; and he laughed and nodded, as he ran down the steps, and made signs, by which they were to understand that he was relieved of a weight.

“I’ve done that twenty year of my life, brother William John,” he said. “Eh? Perhaps you didn’t guess I was worth some thousands when I got away from you just now? Let any chap try to stop me! They may just as well try to stop a railway train. Steam’s up, and I’m off.”

He laughed and wiped his forehead. Slightly vexed at the small amount of discoverable astonishment on the farmer’s face, he continued,—

“You don’t think much of it. Why, there ain’t another man but myself Boyne’s Bank would trust. They’ve trusted me thirty year:—why shouldn’t they go on trusting me another thirty year? A good character, brother William John, goes on compound-interesting, just like good coin. Didn’t you feel a sort of heat as I brushed by you—eh? That was a matter of one-two-three-four” Anthony watched the farmer as his voice swelled up on the heightening numbers: “five-six-six thousand pounds, brother William John. People must think something of a man to trust him with that sum pretty near every day of their lives, Sundays excepted—eh? don’t you think so?”

He dwelt upon the immense confidence reposed in him, and the terrible temptation it would be to some men, and how they ought to thank their stars that they were never thrown in the way of such a temptation, of which he really thought nothing at all—nothing! until the farmer’s countenance was lightened of its air of oppression, for a puzzle was dissolved in his brain. It was now manifest to him

that Anthony was trusted in this extraordinary manner because the heads and managers of Boyne's Bank knew the old man to be possessed of a certain very respectable sum: in all probability they held it in their coffers for safety and credited him with the amount. Nay, more; it was fair to imagine that the guileless old fellow, who conceived himself to be so deep, had let them get it all into their hands without any suspicion of their prominent object in doing so.

Mr. Fleming said, "Ah, yes, surely."

He almost looked shrewd as he smiled over Anthony's hat. The healthy exercise of his wits relieved his apprehensive paternal heart; and when he mentioned that Dahlia had not been at home when he called, he at the same time sounded his hearer for excuses to be raised on her behalf, himself clumsily suggesting one or two, as to show that he was willing to swallow a very little for comfort.

"Oh, of course!" said Anthony, jeeringly. "Out? If you catch her in, these next three or four days, you'll be lucky. Ah, brother William John!"

The farmer, half frightened by Anthony's dolorous shake of his head, exclaimed: "What's the matter, man?"

"How proud I should be if only you was in a way to bank at Boyne's!"

"Ah!" went the farmer in his turn, and he plunged his chin deep in his neckerchief.

"Perhaps some of your family will, some day, brother William John."

"Happen, some of my family do, brother Anthony!"

"Will is what I said, brother William John; if good gals, and civil, and marry decently—eh?" and he faced about to Rhoda who was walking with Miss Wicklow. "What does she look so down about, my dear? Never be down. I don't mind you telling your young man, whoever he is; and I'd like him to be a strapping young six-footer I've got in my eye, who farms. What does he farm with to make farming answer now-a-days? Why, he farms with brains. You'll find that in my last week's Journal, brother William John, and thinks I, as I conned it—the farmer ought to read that! You may tell any young man you like, my dear, that your old uncle's fond of ye."

On their arrival home, Mrs. Wicklow met them with a letter in her hand. It was for Rhoda from Dahlia, saying that Dahlia was grieved to the heart to have missed her dear father and her darling sister. But her husband had insisted upon her going out to make particular purchases, and do a dozen things; and he was extremely sorry to have been obliged to take her away, but she hoped to see her dear sister and her father very, very soon. She wished she were her own mistress that she might run to them, but men when they are husbands require so much waiting on that she could never call five minutes her own. She would entreat them to call tomorrow, only she would then be moving to her new lodgings. "But, oh! my dear, my blessed Rhoda!" the letter concluded, "do keep fast in your heart that I do love you so, and pray that we may meet soon, as I pray it every night and all day long. Beg father to stop till we meet. Things will soon be arranged. They must. Oh! oh, my Rhoda, love! how handsome you have grown. It is very well to be fair for a time, but the brunettes have the happiest lot. They last, and when we blonde ones cry or grow thin, oh! what objects we become!"

There were some final affectionate words, but no further explanations.

The wrinkles again settled on the farmer's mild, uncomplaining forehead.

Rhoda said: "Let us wait, father."

When alone, she locked the letter against her heart, as to suck the secret meaning out of it. Thinking over it was useless; except for this one thought: how did her sister know she had grown very handsome? Perhaps the housemaid had prattled.

CHAPTER XI

Dahlia, the perplexity to her sister's heart, lay stretched at full length upon the sofa of a pleasantly furnished London drawing-room, sobbing to herself, with her handkerchief across her eyes. She had cried passion out, and sobbed now for comfort.

She lay in her rich silken dress like the wreck of a joyful creature, while the large red Winter sun rounded to evening, and threw deep-coloured beams against the wall above her head. They touched the nut-brown hair to vivid threads of fire: but she lay faceless. Utter languor and the dread of looking at her eyelids in the glass kept her prostrate.

So, the darkness closed her about; the sickly gas-lamps of the street showing her as a shrouded body.

A girl came in to spread the cloth for dinner, and went through her duties with the stolidity of the London lodging-house maidservant, poking a clogged fire to perdition, and repressing a songful spirit.

Dahlia knew well what was being done; she would have given much to have saved her nostrils from the smell of dinner; it was a great immediate evil to her sickened senses; but she had no energy to call out, nor will of any kind. The odours floated to her, and passively she combated them.

At first she was nearly vanquished; the meat smelt so acrid, the potatoes so sour; each afflicting vegetable asserted itself peculiarly; and the bread, the salt even, on the wings of her morbid fancy, came steaming about her, subtle, penetrating, thick, and hateful, like the pressure of a cloud out of which disease is shot.

Such it seemed to her, till she could have shrieked; but only a few fresh tears started down her cheeks, and she lay enduring it.

Dead silence and stillness hung over the dinner-service, when the outer door below was opened, and a light foot sprang up the stairs.

There entered a young gentleman in evening dress, with a loose black wrapper drooping from his shoulders.

He looked on the table, and then glancing at the sofa, said:

"Oh, there she is!" and went to the window and whistled.

After a minute of great patience, he turned his face back to the room again, and commenced tapping his foot on the carpet.

"Well?" he said, finding these indications of exemplary self-command unheeded. His voice was equally powerless to provoke a sign of animation. He now displaced his hat, and said, "Dahlia!"

She did not move.

"I am here to very little purpose, then," he remarked.

A guttering fall of her bosom was perceptible.

"For heaven's sake, take away that handkerchief, my good child! Why have you let your dinner get cold? Here," he lifted a cover; "here's roast-beef. You like it—why don't you eat it? That's only a small piece of the general inconsistency, I know. And why haven't they put champagne on the table for you? You lose your spirits without it. If you took it when these moody fits came on—but there's no advising a woman to do anything for her own good. Dahlia, will you do me the favour to speak two or three words with me before I go? I would have dined here, but I have a man to meet me at the Club. Of what mortal service is it shamming the insensible? You've produced the required effect, I am as uncomfortable as I need be. Absolutely!

"Well," seeing that words were of no avail, he summed up expostulation and reproach in this sigh of resigned philosophy: "I am going. Let me see—I have my Temple keys?—yes! I am afraid that even when you are inclined to be gracious and look at me, I shall not, be visible to you for some

days. I start for Lord Elling's to-morrow morning at five. I meet my father there by appointment. I'm afraid we shall have to stay over Christmas. Good-bye." He paused. "Good-bye, my dear."

Two or three steps nearer the door, he said, "By the way, do you want anything? Money?—do you happen to want any money? I will send a blank cheque tomorrow. I have sufficient for both of us. I shall tell the landlady to order your Christmas dinner. How about wine? There is champagne, I know, and bottled ale. Sherry? I'll drop a letter to my wine-merchant; I think the sherry's running dry."

Her sense of hearing was now afflicted in as gross a manner as had been her sense of smell. She could not have spoken, though her vitality had pressed for speech. It would have astonished him to hear that his solicitude concerning provender for her during his absence was not esteemed a kindness; for surely it is a kindly thing to think of it; and for whom but for one for whom he cared would he be counting the bottles to be left at her disposal, insomuch that the paucity of the bottles of sherry in the establishment distressed his mental faculties?

"Well, good-bye," he said, finally. The door closed.

Had Dahlia's misery been in any degree simulated, her eyes now, as well as her ears, would have taken positive assurance of his departure. But with the removal of her handkerchief, the loathsome sight of the dinner-table would have saluted her, and it had already caused her suffering enough. She chose to remain as she was, saying to herself, "I am dead;" and softly revelling in that corpse-like sentiment. She scarcely knew that the door had opened again.

"Dahlia!"

She heard her name pronounced, and more entreatingly, and closer to her.

"Dahlia, my poor girl!" Her hand was pressed. It gave her no shudders.

"I am dead," she mentally repeated, for the touch did not run up to her heart and stir it.

"Dahlia, do be reasonable! I can't leave you like this. We shall be separated for some time. And what a miserable fire you've got here! You have agreed with me that we are acting for the best. It's very hard on me I try what I can to make you comf—happy; and really, to see you leaving your dinner to get cold! Your hands are like ice. The meat won't be eatable. You know I'm not my own master. Come, Dahly, my darling!"

He gently put his hand to her chin, and then drew away the handkerchief.

Dahlia moaned at the exposure of her tear-stained face, she turned it languidly to the wall.

"Are you ill, my dear?" he asked.

Men are so considerately practical! He begged urgently to be allowed to send for a doctor.

But women, when they choose to be unhappy, will not accept of practical consolations! She moaned a refusal to see the doctor.

Then what can I do for her? he naturally thought, and he naturally uttered it.

"Say good-bye to me," he whispered. "And my pretty one will write to me. I shall reply so punctually! I don't like to leave her at Christmas; and she will give me a line of Italian, and a little French—mind her accents, though!—and she needn't attempt any of the nasty German—kshrra-kouzzra-kratz!—which her pretty lips can't do, and won't do; but only French and Italian. Why, she learnt to speak Italian! 'La dolcezza ancor dentro me suona.' Don't you remember, and made such fun of it at first? 'Amo zoo;' 'no amo me?' my sweet!"

This was a specimen of the baby-lover talk, which is charming in its season, and maybe pleasantly cajoling to a loving woman at all times, save when she is in Dahlia's condition. It will serve even then, or she will pass it forgivingly, as not the food she for a moment requires; but it must be purely simple in its utterance, otherwise she detects the poor chicanery, and resents the meanness of it. She resents it with unutterable sickness of soul, for it is the language of what were to her the holiest hours of her existence, which is thus hypocritically used to blind and rock her in a cradle of deception. If corrupt, she maybe brought to answer to it all the same, and she will do her part of the play, and babble words, and fret and pout deliciously; and the old days will seem to be revived, when both know they are dead; and she will thereby gain any advantage she is seeking.

But Dahlia's sorrow was deep: her heart was sound. She did not even perceive the opportunity offered to her for a wily performance. She felt the hollowness of his speech, and no more; and she said, "Good-bye, Edward."

He had been on one knee. Springing cheerfully to his feet, "Good-bye, darling," he said. "But I must see her sit to table first. Such a wretched dinner for her!" and he mumbled, "By Jove, I suppose I shan't get any at all myself!" His watch confirmed it to him that any dinner which had been provided for him at the Club would be spoilt.

"Never mind," he said aloud, and examined the roast-beef ruefully, thinking that, doubtless, it being more than an hour behind the appointed dinner-time at the Club, his guest must now be gone.

For a minute or so he gazed at the mournful spectacle. The potatoes looked as if they had committed suicide in their own steam. There were mashed turnips, with a glazed surface, like the bright bottom of a tin pan. One block of bread was by the lonely plate. Neither hot nor cold, the whole aspect of the dinner-table resisted and repelled the gaze, and made no pretensions to allure it.

The thought of partaking of this repast endowed him with a critical appreciation of its character, and a gush of charitable emotion for the poor girl who had such miserable dishes awaiting her, arrested the philosophic reproof which he could have administered to one that knew so little how a dinner of any sort should be treated. He strode to the windows, pulled down the blind he had previously raised, rang the bell, and said,—

"Dahlia, there—I'm going to dine with you, my love. I've rung the bell for more candles. The room shivers. That girl will see you, if you don't take care. Where is the key of the cupboard? We must have some wine out. The champagne, at all events, won't be flat."

He commenced humming the song of complacent resignation. Dahlia was still inanimate, but as the door was about to open, she rose quickly and sat in a tremble on the sofa, concealing her face.

An order was given for additional candles, coals, and wood. When the maid had disappeared Dahlia got on her feet, and steadied herself by the wall, tottering away to her chamber.

"Ah, poor thing!" ejaculated the young man, not without an idea that the demonstration was unnecessary. For what is decidedly disagreeable is, in a young man's calculation concerning women, not necessary at all,—quite the reverse. Are not women the flowers which decorate sublunary life? It is really irritating to discover them to be pieces of machinery, that for want of proper oiling, creak, stick, threaten convulsions, and are tragic and stir us the wrong way. However, champagne does them good: an admirable wine—a sure specific for the sex!

He searched around for the keys to get at a bottle and uncork it forthwith. The keys were on the mantelpiece a bad comment on Dahlia's housekeeping qualities; but in the hurry of action let it pass. He welcomed the candles gladly, and soon had all the cupboards in the room royally open.

Bustle is instinctively adopted by the human race as the substitute of comfort. He called for more lights, more plates, more knives and forks. He sent for ice the maid observed that it was not to be had save at a distant street: "Jump into a cab—champagne's nothing without ice, even in Winter," he said, and rang for her as she was leaving the house, to name a famous fishmonger who was sure to supply the ice.

The establishment soon understood that Mr. Ayrton intended dining within those walls. Fresh potatoes were put on to boil. The landlady came up herself to arouse the fire. The maid was for a quarter of an hour hovering between the order to get ice and the execution of immediate commands. One was that she should take a glass of champagne to Mrs. Ayrton in her room. He drank off one himself. Mrs. Ayrton's glass being brought back untouched, he drank that off likewise, and as he became more exhilarated, was more considerate for her, to such a degree, that when she appeared he seized her hands and only jestingly scolded her for her contempt of sound medicine, declaring, in spite of her protestations, that she was looking lovely, and so they sat down to their dinner, she with an anguished glance at the looking-glass as she sank in her chair.

"It's not bad, after all," said he, drenching his tasteless mouthful of half-cold meat with champagne. "The truth is, that Clubs spoil us. This is Spartan fare. Come, drink with me, my dearest. One sip."

She was coaxed by degrees to empty a glass. She had a gentle heart, and could not hold out long against a visible lively kindliness. It pleased him that she should bow to him over fresh bubbles; and they went formally through the ceremony, and she smiled. He joked and laughed and talked, and she eyed him a faint sweetness. He perceived now that she required nothing more than the restoration of her personal pride, and setting bright eyes on her, hazarded a bold compliment.

Dahlia drooped like a yacht with idle sails struck by a sudden blast, that dips them in the salt; but she raised her face with the full bloom of a blush: and all was plain sailing afterward.

"Has my darling seen her sister?" he asked softly.

Dahlia answered, "No," in the same tone.

Both looked away.

"She won't leave town without seeing you?"

"I hope—I don't know. She—she has called at our last lodgings twice."

"Alone?"

"Yes; I think so."

Dahlia kept her head down, replying; and his observation of her wavered uneasily.

"Why not write to her, then?"

"She will bring father."

The sob thickened in her throat; but, alas for him who had at first, while she was on the sofa, affected to try all measures to revive her, that I must declare him to know well how certain was his mastery over her, when his manner was thoroughly kind. He had not much fear of her relapsing at present.

"You can't see your father?"

"No."

"But, do. It's best."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Not—" she hesitated, and clasped her hands in her lap.

"Yes, yes; I know," said he; "but still! You could surely see him. You rouse suspicions that need not exist. Try another glass, my dear."

"No more."

"Well; as I was saying, you force him to think—and there is no necessity for it. He maybe as hard on this point as you say; but now and then a little innocent deception maybe practised. We only require to gain time. You place me in a very hard position. I have a father too. He has his own idea of things. He's a proud man, as I've told you; tremendously ambitious, and he wants to push me, not only at the bar, but in the money market matrimonial. All these notions I have to contend against. Things can't be done at once. If I give him a shock—well, we'll drop any consideration of the consequences. Write to your sister to tell her to bring your father. If they make particular inquiries—very unlikely I think—but, if they do, put them at their ease."

She sighed.

"Why was my poor darling so upset, when I came in?" said he.

There was a difficulty in her speaking. He waited with much patient twiddling of bread crumbs; and at last she said:

"My sister called twice at my—our old lodgings. The second time, she burst into tears. The girl told me so."

"But women cry so often, and for almost anything, Dahlia."

"Rhoda cries with her hands closed hard, and her eyelids too."

"Well, that maybe her way."

"I have only seen her cry once, and that was when mother was dying, and asked her to fetch a rose from the garden. I met her on the stairs. She was like wood. She hates crying. She loves me so."

The sympathetic tears rolled down Dahlia's cheeks.

"So, you quite refuse to see your father?" he asked.

"Not yet!"

"Not yet," he repeated.

At the touch of scorn in his voice, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Edward! not yet, I cannot. I know I am weak. I can't meet him now. If my Rhoda had come alone, as I hoped—! but he is with her. Don't blame me, Edward. I can't explain. I only know that I really have not the power to see him."

Edward nodded. "The sentiment some women put into things is inexplicable," he said. "Your sister and father will return home. They will have formed their ideas. You know how unjust they will be. Since, however, the taste is for being a victim—eh?"

London lodging-house rooms in Winter when the blinds are down, and a cheerless fire is in the grate, or when blinds are up and street-lamps salute the inhabitants with uncordial rays, are not entertaining places of residence for restless spirits. Edward paced about the room. He lit a cigar and puffed at it fretfully.

"Will you come and try one of the theatres for an hour?" he asked.

She rose submissively, afraid to say that she thought she should look ill in the staring lights; but he, with great quickness of perception, rendered her task easier by naming the dress she was to wear, the jewels, and the colour of the opera cloak. Thus prompted, Dahlia went to her chamber, and passively attired herself, thankful to have been spared the pathetic troubles of a selection of garments from her wardrobe. When she came forth, Edward thought her marvellously beautiful.

Pity that she had no strength of character whatever, nor any pointed liveliness of mind to match and wrestle with his own, and cheer the domestic hearth! But she was certainly beautiful. Edward kissed her hand in commendation. Though it was practically annoying that she should be sad, the hue and spirit of sadness came home to her aspect. Sorrow visited her tenderly falling eyelids like a sister.

CHAPTER XII

Edward's engagement at his Club had been with his unfortunate cousin Algernon; who not only wanted a dinner but 'five pounds or so' (the hazy margin which may extend illimitably, or miserably contract, at the lender's pleasure, and the necessity for which shows the borrower to be dancing on Fortune's tight-rope above the old abyss).

"Over claret," was to have been the time for the asking; and Algernon waited dinnerless until the healthy-going minutes distended and swelled monstrous and horrible as viper-bitten bodies, and the venerable Signior, Time, became of unhealthy hue. For this was the first dinner which, during the whole course of the young man's career, had ever been failing to him. Reflect upon the mournful gap! He could scarcely believe in his ill-luck. He suggested it to himself with an inane grin, as one of the far-away freaks of circumstances that had struck him—and was it not comical?

He waited from the hour of six till the hour of seven. He compared clocks in the hall and the room. He changed the posture of his legs fifty times. For a while he wrestled right gallantly with the apparent menace of the Fates that he was to get no dinner at all that day; it seemed incredibly derisive, for, as I must repeat, it had never happened to him by any accident before. "You are born —you dine." Such appeared to him to be the positive regulation of affairs, and a most proper one,— of the matters of course following the birth of a young being.

By what frightful mischance, then, does he miss his dinner? By placing the smallest confidence in the gentlemanly feeling of another man! Algernon deduced this reply accurately from his own experience, and whether it can be said by other "undined" mortals, does not matter in the least. But we have nothing to do with the constitutionally luckless: the calamitous history of a simple empty stomach is enough. Here the tragedy is palpable. Indeed, too sadly so, and I dare apply but a flash of the microscope to the rageing dilemmas of this animalcule. Five and twenty minutes had signalled their departure from the hour of seven, when Algernon pronounced his final verdict upon Edward's conduct by leaving the Club. He returned to it a quarter of an hour later, and lingered on in desperate mood till eight.

He had neither watch in his pocket, nor ring on his finger, nor disposable stud in his shirt. The sum of twenty-one pence was in his possession, and, I ask you, as he asked himself, how is a gentleman to dine upon that? He laughed at the notion. The irony of Providence sent him by a cook's shop, where the mingled steam of meats and puddings rushed out upon the wayfarer like ambushed bandits, and seized him and dragged him in, or sent him qualmish and humbled on his way.

Two little boys had flattened their noses to the whiteness of winkles against the jealously misty windows. Algernon knew himself to be accounted a generous fellow, and remembering his reputation, he, as to hint at what Fortune might do in his case, tossed some coppers to the urchins, who ducked to the pavement and slid before the counter, in a flash, with never a "thank ye" or the thought of it.

Algernon was incapable of appreciating this childish faith in the beneficence of the unseen Powers who feed us, which, I must say for him, he had shared in a very similar manner only two hours ago. He laughed scornfully: "The little beggars!" considering in his soul that of such is humanity composed: as many a dinnerless man has said before, and will again, to point the speech of fools. He continued strolling on, comparing the cramped misty London aspect of things with his visionary free dream of the glorious prairies, where his other life was: the forests, the mountains, the endless expanses; the horses, the flocks, the slipshod ease of language and attire; and the grog-shops. Aha! There could be no mistake about him as a gentleman and a scholar out there! Nor would Nature shut up her pocket and demand innumerable things of him, as civilization did. This he thought in the vengefulness of his outraged mind.

Not only had Algernon never failed to dine every day of his life: he had no recollection of having ever dined without drinking wine. His conception did not embrace the idea of a dinner lacking wine.

Possibly he had some embodied understanding that wine did not fall to the lot of every fellow upon earth: he had heard of gullets unrefreshed even by beer: but at any rate he himself was accustomed to better things, and he did not choose to excavate facts from the mass of his knowledge in order to reconcile himself to the miserable chop he saw for his dinner in the distance—a spot of meat in the arctic circle of a plate, not shone upon by any rosy-warming sun of a decanter!

But metaphorical language, though nothing other will convey the extremity of his misery, or the form of his thoughts, must be put aside.

"Egad, and every friend I have is out of town!" he exclaimed, quite willing to think it part of the plot.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and felt vagabond-like and reckless. The streets were revelling in their winter muck. The carriages rolling by insulted him with their display of wealth.

He had democratic sentiments regarding them. Oh for a horse upon the boundless plains! he sighed to his heart. He remembered bitterly how he had that day ridden his stool at the bank, dreaming of his wilds, where bailiff never ran, nor duns obscured the firmament.

And then there were theatres here—huge extravagant places! Algernon went over to an entrance of one, to amuse his mind, cynically criticizing the bill. A play was going forward within, that enjoyed great popular esteem, "The Holly Berries." Seeing that the pit was crammed, Algernon made application to learn the state of the boxes, but hearing that one box was empty, he lost his interest in the performance.

As he was strolling forth, his attention was taken by a noise at the pit-doors, which swung open, and out tumbled a tough little old man with a younger one grasping his coat-collar, who proclaimed that he would sicken him of pushing past him at the end of every act.

"You're precious fond of plays," sneered the junior.

"I'm fond of everything I pay for, young fellow," replied the shaken senior; "and that's a bit of enjoyment you've got to learn—ain't it?"

"Well, don't you knock by me again, that's all," cried the choleric youth.

"You don't think I'm likely to stop in your company, do you?"

"Whose expense have you been drinking at?"

"My country's, young fellow; and mind you don't soon feed at the table. Let me go."

Algernon's hunger was appeased by the prospect of some excitement, and seeing a vicious shake administered to the old man by the young one, he cried, "Hands off!" and undertook policeman's duty; but as he was not in blue, his authoritative mandate obtained no respect until he had interposed his fist.

When he had done so, he recognized the porter at Boyne's Bank, whose enemy retired upon the threat that there should be no more pushing past him to get back to seats for the next act.

"I paid," said Anthony; "and you're a ticketer, and you ticketers sha' n't stop me. I'm worth a thousand of you. Holloa, sir," he cried to Algernon; "I didn't know you. I'm much obliged. These chaps get tickets given 'm, and grow as cocky in a theatre as men who pay. He never had such wine in him as I've got. That I'd swear. Ha! ha! I come out for an airing after every act, and there's a whole pitfall of ticketers yelling and tearing, and I chaff my way through and back clean as a red-hot poker."

Anthony laughed, and rolled somewhat as he laughed.

"Come along, sir, into the street," he said, boring on to the pavement. "It's after office hours. And, ha! ha! what do you think? There's old farmer in there, afraid to move off his seat, and the girl with him, sticking to him tight, and a good girl too. She thinks we've had too much. We been to the Docks, wine-tasting: Port—Sherry: Sherry—Port! and, ha! ha! 'what a lot of wine!' says farmer, never thinking how much he's taking on board. 'I guessed it was night,' says farmer, as we got into the air, and to see him go on blinking, and stumbling, and saying to me, 'You stand wine, brother Tony!' I'm blest if I ain't bottled laughter. So, says I, 'come and see "The Holly Berries," brother William John; it's the best play in London, and a suitable winter piece.' 'Is there a rascal hanged in the piece?'

says he. 'Oh, yes!' I let him fancy there was, and he—ha! ha! old farmer's sticking to his seat, solemn as a judge, waiting for the gallows to come on the stage."

A thought quickened Algernon's spirit. It was a notorious secret among the young gentlemen who assisted in maintaining the prosperity of Boyne's Bank, that the old porter—the "Old Ant," as he was called—possessed money, and had no objection to put out small sums for a certain interest. Algernon mentioned casually that he had left his purse at home; and "by the way," said he, "have you got a few sovereigns in your pocket?"

"What! and come through that crush, sir?" Anthony negatived the question decisively with a reference to his general knowingness.

Algernon pressed him; saying at last, "Well, have you got one?"

"I don't think I've been such a fool," said Anthony, feeling slowly about his person, and muttering as to the changes that might possibly have been produced in him by the Docks.

"Confound it, I haven't dined!" exclaimed Algernon, to hasten his proceedings; but at this, Anthony eyed him queerly. "What have you been about then, sir?"

"Don't you see I'm in evening dress? I had an appointment to dine with a friend. He didn't keep it. I find I've left my purse in my other clothes."

"That's a bad habit, sir," was Anthony's comment. "You don't care much for your purse."

"Much for my purse, be hanged!" interjected Algernon.

"You'd have felt it, or you'd have heard it, if there 'd been any weight in it," Anthony remarked.

"How can you hear paper?"

"Oh, paper's another thing. You keep paper in your mind, don't you—eh? Forget pound notes? Leave pound notes in a purse? And you Sir William's nephew, sir, who'd let you bank with him and put down everything in a book, so that you couldn't forget, or if you did, he'd remember for you; and you might change your clothes as often as not, and no fear of your losing a penny."

Algernon shrugged disgustedly, and was giving the old man up as a bad business, when Anthony altered his manner. "Oh! well, sir, I don't mind letting you have what I've got. I'm out for fun. Bother affairs!"

The sum of twenty shillings was handed to Algernon, after he had submitted to the indignity of going into a public-house, and writing his I.O.U. for twenty-three to Anthony Hackbut, which included interest. Algernon remonstrated against so needless a formality; but Anthony put the startling supposition to him, that he might die that night. He signed the document, and was soon feeding and drinking his wine. This being accomplished, he took some hasty puffs of tobacco, and returned to the theatre, in the hope that the dark girl Rhoda was to be seen there; for now that he had dined, Anthony's communication with regard to the farmer and his daughter became his uppermost thought, and a young man's uppermost thought is usually the propelling engine to his actions.

By good chance, and the aid of a fee, he obtained a front seat, commanding an excellent side-view of the pit, which sat wrapt in contemplation of a Christmas scene snow, ice, bare twigs, a desolate house, and a woman shivering—one of man's victims.

It is a good public, that of Britain, and will bear anything, so long as villany is punished, of which there was ripe promise in the oracular utterances of a rolling, stout, stage-sailor, whose nose, to say nothing of his frankness on the subject, proclaimed him his own worst enemy, and whose joke, by dint of repetition, had almost become the joke of the audience too; for whenever he appeared, there was agitation in pit and gallery, which subsided only on his jovial thundering of the familiar sentence; whereupon laughter ensued, and a quieting hum of satisfaction.

It was a play that had been favoured with a great run. Critics had once objected to it, that it was made to subsist on scenery, a song, and a stupid piece of cockneyism pretending to be a jest, that was really no more than a form of slapping the public on the back. But the public likes to have its back slapped, and critics, frozen by the Medusa-head of Success, were soon taught manners. The office of critic is now, in fact, virtually extinct; the taste for tickling and slapping is universal and

imperative; classic appeals to the intellect, and passions not purely domestic, have grown obsolete. There are captains of the legions, but no critics. The mass is lord.

And behold our friend the sailor of the boards, whose walk is even as two meeting billows, appears upon the lonely moor, and salts that uninhabited region with nautical interjections. Loose are his hose in one part, tight in another, and he smacks them. It is cold; so let that be his excuse for showing the bottom of his bottle to the glittering spheres. He takes perhaps a sturdier pull at the liquor than becomes a manifest instrument of Providence, whose services may be immediately required; but he informs us that his ship was never known not to right itself when called upon.

He is alone in the world, he tells us likewise. If his one friend, the uplifted flask, is his enemy, why then he feels bound to treat his enemy as his friend. This, with a pathetic allusion to his interior economy, which was applauded, and the remark "Ain't that Christian?" which was just a trifle risky; so he secured pit and gallery at a stroke by a surpassingly shrewd blow at the bishops of our Church, who are, it can barely be contested, in foul esteem with the multitude—none can say exactly, for what reason—and must submit to be occasionally offered up as propitiatory sacrifices.

This good sailor was not always alone in the world. A sweet girl, whom he describes as reaching to his kneecap, and pathetically believes still to be of the same height, once called him brother Jack. To hear that name again from her lips, and a particular song!—he attempts it ludicrously, yet touchingly withal.

Hark! Is it an echo from a spirit in the frigid air?

The song trembled with a silver ring to the remotest corners of the house.

At that moment the breathless hush of the audience was flurried by hearing "Dahlia" called from the pit.

Algernon had been spying among the close-packed faces for a sight of Rhoda. Rhoda was now standing up amid gathering hisses and outcries. Her eyes were bent on a particular box, across which a curtain was hastily being drawn. "My sister!" she sent out a voice of anguish, and remained with clasped hands and twisted eyebrows, looking toward that one spot, as if she would have flown to it. She was wedged in the mass, and could not move.

The exclamation heard had belonged to brother Jack, on the stage, whose burst of fraternal surprise and rapture fell flat after it, to the disgust of numbers keenly awakened for the sentiment of this scene.

Roaring accusations that she was drunk; that she had just escaped from Bedlam for an evening; that she should be gagged and turned headlong out, surrounded her; but she stood like a sculptured figure, vital in her eyes alone. The farmer put his arm about his girl's waist. The instant, however, that Anthony's head uprose on the other side of her, the evil reputation he had been gaining for himself all through the evening produced a general clamour, over which the gallery played, miauling, and yelping like dogs that are never to be divorced from a noise. Algernon feared mischief. He quitted his seat, and ran out into the lobby.

Half-a-dozen steps, and he came in contact with some one, and they were mutually drenched with water by the shock. It was his cousin Edward, bearing a glass in his hand.

Algernon's wrath at the sight of this offender was stimulated by the cold bath; but Edward cut him short.

"Go in there;" he pointed to a box-door. "A lady has fainted. Hold her up till I come."

No time was allowed for explanation. Algernon passed into the box, and was alone with an inanimate shape in blue bournous. The uproar in the theatre raged; the whole pit was on its legs and shouting. He lifted the pallid head over one arm, miserably helpless and perplexed, but his anxiety concerning Rhoda's personal safety in that sea of strife prompted him to draw back the curtain a little, and he stood exposed. Rhoda perceived him. She motioned with both her hands in dumb supplication. In a moment the curtain closed between them. Edward's sharp white face cursed him mutely for his folly, while he turned and put the water to Dahlia's lips, and touched her forehead with it.

"What's the matter?" whispered Algernon.

"We must get her out as quick as we can. This is the way with women! Come! she's recovering." Edward nursed her sternly as he spoke.

"If she doesn't, pretty soon, we shall have the pit in upon us," said Algernon. "Is she that girl's sister?"

"Don't ask damned questions."

Dahlia opened her eyes, staring placidly.

"Now you can stand up, my dear. Dahlia! all's well. Try," said Edward.

She sighed, murmuring, "What is the time?" and again, "What noise is it?"

Edward coughed in a vexed attempt at tenderness, using all his force to be gentle with her as he brought her to her feet. The task was difficult amid the threatening storm in the theatre, and cries of "Show the young woman her sister!" for Rhoda had won a party in the humane public.

"Dahlia, in God's name give me your help!" Edward called in her ear.

The fair girl's eyelids blinked wretchedly in protestation of her weakness. She had no will either way, and suffered herself to be led out of the box, supported by the two young men.

"Run for a cab," said Edward; and Algernon went ahead.

He had one waiting for them as they came out. They placed Dahlia on a seat with care, and Edward, jumping in, drew an arm tightly about her. "I can't cry," she moaned.

The cab was driving off as a crowd of people burst from the pit-doors, and Algernon heard the voice of Farmer Fleming, very hoarse. He had discretion enough to retire.

CHAPTER XIII

Robert was to drive to the station to meet Rhoda and her father returning from London, on a specified day. He was eager to be asking cheerful questions of Dahlia's health and happiness, so that he might dispel the absurd general belief that he had ever loved the girl, and was now regretting her absence; but one look at Rhoda's face when she stepped from the railway carriage kept him from uttering a word on that subject, and the farmer's heavier droop and acceptance of a helping hand into the cart, were signs of bad import.

Mr. Fleming made no show of grief, like one who nursed it. He took it to all appearance as patiently as an old worn horse would do, although such an outward submissiveness will not always indicate a placid spirit in men. He talked at stale intervals of the weather and the state of the ground along the line of rail down home, and pointed in contempt or approval to a field here and there; but it was as one who no longer had any professional interest in the tilling of the land.

Doubtless he was trained to have no understanding of a good to be derived by his communicating what he felt and getting sympathy. Once, when he was uncertain, and a secret pride in Dahlia's beauty and accomplishments had whispered to him that her flight was possibly the opening of her road to a higher fortune, he made a noise for comfort, believing in his heart that she was still to be forgiven. He knew better now. By holding his peace he locked out the sense of shame which speech would have stirred within him.

"Got on pretty smooth with old Mas' Gammon?" he expressed his hope; and Robert said, "Capitally. We shall make something out of the old man yet, never fear."

Master Gammon was condemned to serve at the ready-set tea-table as a butt for banter; otherwise it was apprehended well that Mrs. Sumfit would have scorched the ears of all present, save the happy veteran of the furrows, with repetitions of Dahlia's name, and wailings about her darling, of whom no one spoke. They suffered from her in spite of every precaution.

"Well, then, if I'm not to hear anything dooring meals—as if I'd swallow it and take it into my stomach!—I'll wait again for what ye've got to tell," she said, and finished her cup at a gulp, smoothing her apron.

The farmer then lifted his head.

"Mother, if you've done, you'll oblige me by going to bed," he said. "We want the kitchen."

"A-bed?" cried Mrs. Sumfit, with instantly ruffled lap.

"Upstairs, mother; when you've done—not before."

"Then bad's the noos! Something have happened, William. You 'm not going to push me out? And my place is by the tea-pot, which I cling to, rememberin' how I seen her curly head grow by inches up above the table and the cups. Mas' Gammon," she appealed to the sturdy feeder, "five cups is your number?"

Her hope was reduced to the prolonging of the service of tea, with Master Gammon's kind assistance.

"Four, marm," said her inveterate antagonist, as he finished that amount, and consequently put the spoon in his cup.

Mrs. Sumfit rolled in her chair.

"O Lord, Mas' Gammon! Five, I say; and never a cup less so long as here you've been."

"Four, marm. I don't know," said Master Gammon, with a slow nod of his head, "that ever I took five cups of tea at a stretch. Not runnin'."

"I do know, Mas' Gammon. And ought to: for don't I pour out to ye? It's five you take, and please, your cup, if you'll hand it over."

"Four's my number, marm," Master Gammon reiterated resolutely. He sat like a rock.

“If they was dumplins,” moaned Mrs. Sumfit, “not four, no, nor five, ‘d do till enough you’d had, and here we might stick to our chairs, but you’d go on and on; you know you would.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.