GEORGE MEREDITH

THE EGOIST: A COMEDY IN NARRATIVE

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Meredith G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A MINOR INCIDENT SHOWING AN HEREDITARY APTITUDE IN THE USE OF THE KNIFE

There was an ominously anxious watch of eyes visible and invisible over the infancy of Willoughby, fifth in descent from Simon Patterne, of Patterne Hall, premier of this family, a lawyer, a man of solid acquirements and stout ambition, who well understood the foundation-work of a House, and was endowed with the power of saying No to those first agents of destruction, besieging relatives. He said it with the resonant emphasis of death to younger sons. For if the oak is to become a stately tree, we must provide against the crowding of timber. Also the tree beset with parasites prospers not. A great House in its beginning lives, we may truly say, by the knife. Soil is easily got, and so are bricks, and a wife, and children come of wishing for them, but the vigorous use of the knife is a natural gift and points to growth. Pauper Patternes were numerous when the fifth head of the race was the hope of his county. A Patterne was in the Marines.

The country and the chief of this family were simultaneously informed of the existence of one Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne, of the corps of the famous hard fighters, through an act of heroism of the unpretending cool sort which kindles British blood, on the part of the modest young officer, in the storming of some eastern riverain stronghold, somewhere about the coast of China. The officer's youth was assumed on the strength of his rank, perhaps likewise from the tale of his modesty: "he had only done his duty". Our Willoughby was then at College, emulous of the generous enthusiasm of his years, and strangely impressed by the report, and the printing of his name in the newspapers. He thought over it for several months, when, coming to his title and heritage, he sent Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne a cheque for a sum of money amounting to the gallant fellow's pay per annum, at the same time showing his acquaintance with the first, or chemical, principles of generosity, in the remark to friends at home, that "blood is thicker than water". The man is a Marine, but he is a Patterne. How any Patterne should have drifted into the Marines, is of the order of questions which are senselessly asked of the great dispensary. In the complimentary letter accompanying his cheque, the lieutenant was invited to present himself at the ancestral Hall, when convenient to him, and he was assured that he had given his relative and friend a taste for a soldier's life. Young Sir Willoughby was fond of talking of his "military namesake and distant cousin, young Patterne—the Marine". It was funny; and not less laughable was the description of his namesake's deed of valour: with the rescued British sailor inebriate, and the hauling off to captivity of the three braves of the black dragon on a yellow ground, and the tying of them together back to back by their pigtails, and driving of them into our lines upon a newly devised dying-top style of march that inclined to the oblique, like the astonished six eyes of the celestial prisoners, for straight they could not go. The humour of gentlemen at home is always highly excited by such cool feats. We are a small island, but you see what we do. The ladies at the Hall, Sir Willoughby's mother, and his aunts Eleanor and Isabel, were more affected than he by the circumstance of their having a Patterne in the Marines. But how then! We English have ducal blood in business: we have, genealogists tell us, royal blood in common trades. For all our pride we are a queer people; and you may be ordering butcher's meat of a Tudor, sitting on the cane-bottom chairs of a Plantagenet. By and by you may . . . but cherish your reverence. Young Willoughby made a kind of shock-head or football hero of his gallant distant cousin, and wondered occasionally that

the fellow had been content to dispatch a letter of effusive thanks without availing himself of the invitation to partake of the hospitalities of Patterne.

He was one afternoon parading between showers on the stately garden terrace of the Hall, in company with his affianced, the beautiful and dashing Constantia Durham, followed by knots of ladies and gentlemen vowed to fresh air before dinner, while it was to be had. Chancing with his usual happy fortune (we call these things dealt to us out of the great hidden dispensary, chance) to glance up the avenue of limes, as he was in the act of turning on his heel at the end of the terrace, and it should be added, discoursing with passion's privilege of the passion of love to Miss Durham, Sir Willoughby, who was anything but obtuse, experienced a presentiment upon espying a thick-set stumpy man crossing the gravel space from the avenue to the front steps of the Hall, decidedly not bearing the stamp of the gentleman "on his hat, his coat, his feet, or anything that was his," Willoughby subsequently observed to the ladies of his family in the Scriptural style of gentlemen who do bear the stamp. His brief sketch of the creature was repulsive. The visitor carried a bag, and his coat-collar was up, his hat was melancholy; he had the appearance of a bankrupt tradesman absconding; no gloves, no umbrella.

As to the incident we have to note, it was very slight. The card of Lieutenant Patterne was handed to Sir Willoughby, who laid it on the salver, saying to the footman, "Not at home."

He had been disappointed in the age, grossly deceived in the appearance of the man claiming to be his relative in this unseasonable fashion; and his acute instinct advised him swiftly of the absurdity of introducing to his friends a heavy unpresentable senior as the celebrated gallant Lieutenant of Marines, and the same as a member of his family! He had talked of the man too much, too enthusiastically, to be able to do so. A young subaltern, even if passably vulgar in figure, can be shuffled through by the aid of the heroical story humourously exaggerated in apology for his aspect. Nothing can be done with a mature and stumpy Marine of that rank. Considerateness dismisses him on the spot, without parley. It was performed by a gentleman supremely advanced at a very early age in the art of cutting.

Young Sir Willoughby spoke a word of the rejected visitor to Miss Durham, in response to her startled look: "I shall drop him a cheque," he said, for she seemed personally wounded, and had a face of crimson.

The young lady did not reply.

Dating from the humble departure of Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne up the limes-avenue under a gathering rain-cloud, the ring of imps in attendance on Sir Willoughby maintained their station with strict observation of his movements at all hours; and were comparisons in quest, the sympathetic eagerness of the eyes of caged monkeys for the hand about to feed them, would supply one. They perceived in him a fresh development and very subtle manifestation of the very old thing from which he had sprung.

CHAPTER II
THE YOUNG SIR WILLOUGHBY

These little scoundrel imps, who have attained to some respectability as the dogs and pets of the Comic Spirit, had been curiously attentive three years earlier, long before the public announcement of his engagement to the beautiful Miss Durham, on the day of Sir Willoughby's majority, when Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson said her word of him. Mrs. Mountstuart was a lady certain to say the remembered, if not the right, thing. Again and again was it confirmed on days of high celebration, days of birth or bridal, how sure she was to hit the mark that rang the bell; and away her word went over the county: and had she been an uncharitable woman she could have ruled the county with an iron rod of caricature, so sharp was her touch. A grain of malice would have sent county faces and characters awry into the currency. She was wealthy and kindly, and resembled our mother Nature in her reasonable antipathies to one or two things which none can defend, and her decided preference of persons that shone in the sun. Her word sprang out of her. She looked at you, and forth it came: and it stuck to you, as nothing laboured or literary could have adhered. Her saying of Laetitia Dale: "Here she comes with a romantic tale on her eyelashes," was a portrait of Laetitia. And that of Vernon Whitford: "He is a Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar," painted the sunken brilliancy of the lean long-walker and scholar at a stroke.

Of the young Sir Willoughby, her word was brief; and there was the merit of it on a day when he was hearing from sunrise to the setting of the moon salutes in his honour, songs of praise and Ciceronian eulogy. Rich, handsome, courteous, generous, lord of the Hall, the feast and the dance, he excited his guests of both sexes to a holiday of flattery. And, says Mrs. Mountstuart, while grand phrases were mouthing round about him, "You see he has a leg."

That you saw, of course. But after she had spoken you saw much more. Mrs. Mountstuart said it just as others utter empty nothings, with never a hint of a stress. Her word was taken up, and very soon, from the extreme end of the long drawing-room, the circulation of something of Mrs. Mountstuart's was distinctly perceptible. Lady Patterne sent a little Hebe down, skirting the dancers, for an accurate report of it; and even the inappreciative lips of a very young lady transmitting the word could not damp the impression of its weighty truthfulness. It was perfect! Adulation of the young Sir Willoughby's beauty and wit, and aristocratic bearing and mien, and of his moral virtues, was common; welcome if you like, as a form of homage; but common, almost vulgar, beside Mrs. Mountstuart's quiet little touch of nature. In seeming to say infinitely less than others, as Miss Isabel Patterne pointed out to Lady Busshe, Mrs. Mountstuart comprised all that the others had said, by showing the needlessness of allusions to the saliently evident. She was the aristocrat reproving the provincial. "He is everything you have had the goodness to remark, ladies and dear sirs, he talks charmingly, dances divinely, rides with the air of a commander-in-chief, has the most natural grand pose possible without ceasing for a moment to be the young English gentleman he is. Alcibiades, fresh from a Louis IV perruquier, could not surpass him: whatever you please; I could outdo you in sublime comparisons, were I minded to pelt him. Have you noticed that he has a leg?"

So might it be amplified. A simple-seeming word of this import is the triumph of the spiritual, and where it passes for coin of value, the society has reached a high refinement: Arcadian by the aesthetic route. Observation of Willoughby was not, as Miss Eleanor Patterne pointed out to Lady Culmer, drawn down to the leg, but directed to estimate him from the leg upward. That, however, is prosaic. Dwell a short space on Mrs. Mountstuart's word; and whither, into what fair region, and with how decorously voluptuous a sensation, do not we fly, who have, through mournful veneration of the Martyr Charles, a coy attachment to the Court of his Merrie Son, where the leg was ribanded with love-knots and reigned. Oh! it was a naughty Court. Yet have we dreamed of it as the period when an

English cavalier was grace incarnate; far from the boor now hustling us in another sphere; beautifully mannered, every gesture dulcet. And if the ladies were . . . we will hope they have been traduced. But if they were, if they were too tender, ah! gentlemen were gentlemen then—worth perishing for! There is this dream in the English country; and it must be an aspiration after some form of melodious gentlemanliness which is imagined to have inhabited the island at one time; as among our poets the dream of the period of a circle of chivalry here is encouraged for the pleasure of the imagination.

Mrs. Mountstuart touched a thrilling chord. "In spite of men's hateful modern costume, you see he has a leg."

That is, the leg of the born cavalier is before you: and obscure it as you will, dress degenerately, there it is for ladies who have eyes. You see it: or, you see he has it. Miss Isabel and Miss Eleanor disputed the incidence of the emphasis, but surely, though a slight difference of meaning may be heard, either will do: many, with a good show of reason, throw the accent upon leg. And the ladies knew for a fact that Willoughby's leg was exquisite; he had a cavalier court-suit in his wardrobe. Mrs. Mountstuart signified that the leg was to be seen because it was a burning leg. There it is, and it will shine through! He has the leg of Rochester, Buckingham, Dorset, Suckling; the leg that smiles, that winks, is obsequious to you, yet perforce of beauty self-satisfied; that twinkles to a tender midway between imperiousness and seductiveness, audacity and discretion; between "You shall worship me", and "I am devoted to you;" is your lord, your slave, alternately and in one. It is a leg of ebb and flow and high-tide ripples. Such a leg, when it has done with pretending to retire, will walk straight into the hearts of women. Nothing so fatal to them.

Self-satisfied it must be. Humbleness does not win multitudes or the sex. It must be vain to have a sheen. Captivating melodies (to prove to you the unavoidableness of self-satisfaction when you know that you have hit perfection), listen to them closely, have an inner pipe of that conceit almost ludicrous when you detect the chirp.

And you need not be reminded that he has the leg without the naughtiness. You see eminent in him what we would fain have brought about in a nation that has lost its leg in gaining a possibly cleaner morality. And that is often contested; but there is no doubt of the loss of the leg.

Well, footmen and courtiers and Scottish Highlanders, and the corps de ballet, draymen too, have legs, and staring legs, shapely enough. But what are they? not the modulated instrument we mean —simply legs for leg-work, dumb as the brutes. Our cavalier's is the poetic leg, a portent, a valiance. He has it as Cicero had a tongue. It is a lute to scatter songs to his mistress; a rapier, is she obdurate. In sooth a leg with brains in it, soul.

And its shadows are an ambush, its lights a surprise. It blushes, it pales, can whisper, exclaim. It is a peep, a part revelation, just sufferable, of the Olympian god—Jove playing carpet-knight.

For the young Sir Willoughby's family and his thoughtful admirers, it is not too much to say that Mrs. Mountstuart's little word fetched an epoch of our history to colour the evening of his arrival at man's estate. He was all that Merrie Charles's court should have been, subtracting not a sparkle from what it was. Under this light he danced, and you may consider the effect of it on his company.

He had received the domestic education of a prince. Little princes abound in a land of heaped riches. Where they have not to yield military service to an Imperial master, they are necessarily here and there dainty during youth, sometimes unmanageable, and as they are bound in no personal duty to the State, each is for himself, with full present, and what is more, luxurious, prospective leisure for the practice of that allegiance. They are sometimes enervated by it: that must be in continental countries. Happily our climate and our brave blood precipitate the greater number upon the hunting-field, to do the public service of heading the chase of the fox, with benefit to their constitutions. Hence a manly as well as useful race of little princes, and Willoughby was as manly as any. He cultivated himself, he would not be outdone in popular accomplishments. Had the standard of the public taste been set in philosophy, and the national enthusiasm centred in philosophers, he would at least have worked at books. He did work at science, and had a laboratory. His admirable passion to excel, however, was

chiefly directed in his youth upon sport; and so great was the passion in him, that it was commonly the presence of rivals which led him to the declaration of love.

He knew himself, nevertheless, to be the most constant of men in his attachment to the sex. He had never discouraged Laetitia Dale's devotion to him, and even when he followed in the sweeping tide of the beautiful Constantia Durham (whom Mrs. Mountstuart called "The Racing Cutter"), he thought of Laetitia, and looked at her. She was a shy violet.

Willoughby's comportment while the showers of adulation drenched him might be likened to the composure of Indian Gods undergoing worship, but unlike them he reposed upon no seat of amplitude to preserve him from a betrayal of intoxication; he had to continue tripping, dancing, exactly balancing himself, head to right, head to left, addressing his idolaters in phrases of perfect choiceness. This is only to say that it is easier to be a wooden idol than one in the flesh; yet Willoughby was equal to his task. The little prince's education teaches him that he is other than you, and by virtue of the instruction he receives, and also something, we know not what, within, he is enabled to maintain his posture where you would be tottering.

Urchins upon whose curly pates grave seniors lay their hands with conventional encomium and speculation, look older than they are immediately, and Willoughby looked older than his years, not for want of freshness, but because he felt that he had to stand eminently and correctly poised.

Hearing of Mrs. Mountstuart's word on him, he smiled and said, "It is at her service."

The speech was communicated to her, and she proposed to attach a dedicatory strip of silk. And then they came together, and there was wit and repartee suitable to the electrical atmosphere of the dancing-room, on the march to a magical hall of supper. Willoughby conducted Mrs. Mountstuart to the supper-table.

"Were I," said she, "twenty years younger, I think I would marry you, to cure my infatuation."

"Then let me tell you in advance, madam," said he, "that I will do everything to obtain a new lease of it, except divorce you."

They were infinitely wittier, but so much was heard and may be reported.

"It makes the business of choosing a wife for him superhumanly difficult!" Mrs. Mountstuart observed, after listening to the praises she had set going again when the ladies were weeded of us, in Lady Patterne's Indian room, and could converse unhampered upon their own ethereal themes.

"Willoughby will choose a wife for himself," said his mother.

CHAPTER III
CONSTANTIA DURHAM

The great question for the county was debated in many households, daughter-thronged and daughterless, long subsequent to the memorable day of Willoughby's coming of age. Lady Busshe was for Constantia Durham. She laughed at Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's notion of Laetitia Dale. She was a little older than Mrs. Mountstuart, and had known Willoughby's father, whose marriage into the wealthiest branch of the Whitford family had been strictly sagacious. "Patternes marry money; they are not romantic people," she said. Miss Durham had money, and she had health and beauty: three mighty qualifications for a Patterne bride. Her father, Sir John Durham, was a large landowner in the western division of the county; a pompous gentleman, the picture of a father-in-law for Willoughby. The father of Miss Dale was a battered army surgeon from India, tenant of one of Sir Willoughby's cottages bordering Patterne Park. His girl was portionless and a poetess. Her writing of the song in celebration of the young baronet's birthday was thought a clever venture, bold as only your timid creatures can be bold. She let the cat out of her bag of verse before the multitude; she almost proposed to her hero in her rhymes. She was pretty; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark-blue, and her soul was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby. And he looked, he certainly looked, though he did not dance with her once that night, and danced repeatedly with Miss Durham. He gave Laetitia to Vernon Whitford for the final dance of the night, and he may have looked at her so much in pity of an elegant girl allied to such a partner. The "Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar" had entirely forgotten his musical gifts in motion. He crossed himself and crossed his bewildered lady, and crossed everybody in the figure, extorting shouts of cordial laughter from his cousin Willoughby. Be it said that the hour was four in the morning, when dancers must laugh at somebody, if only to refresh their feet, and the wit of the hour administers to the wildest laughter. Vernon was likened to Theseus in the maze, entirely dependent upon his Ariadne; to a fly released from a jam-pot; to a "salvage", or green, man caught in a web of nymphs and made to go the paces. Willoughby was inexhaustible in the happy similes he poured out to Miss Durham across the lines of Sir Roger de Coverley, and they were not forgotten, they procured him a reputation as a convivial sparkler. Rumour went the round that he intended to give Laetitia to Vernon for good, when he could decide to take Miss Durham to himself; his generosity was famous; but that decision, though the rope was in the form of a knot, seemed reluctant for the conclusive close haul; it preferred the state of slackness; and if he courted Laetitia on behalf of his cousin, his cousinly love must have been greater than his passion, one had to suppose. He was generous enough for it, or for marrying the portionless girl himself.

There was a story of a brilliant young widow of our aristocracy who had very nearly snared him. Why should he object to marry into our aristocracy? Mrs. Mountstuart asked him, and he replied that the girls of that class have no money, and he doubted the quality of their blood. He had his eyes awake. His duty to his House was a foremost thought with him, and for such a reason he may have been more anxious to give the slim and not robust Laetitia to Vernon than accede to his personal inclination. The mention of the widow singularly offended him, notwithstanding the high rank of the lady named. "A widow?" he said. "I!" He spoke to a widow; an oldish one truly; but his wrath at the suggestion of his union with a widow led him to be for the moment oblivious of the minor shades of good taste. He desired Mrs. Mountstuart to contradict the story in positive terms. He repeated his desire; he was urgent to have it contradicted, and said again, "A widow!" straightening his whole figure to the erectness of the letter I. She was a widow unmarried a second time, and it has been known of the stedfast women who retain the name of their first husband, or do not hamper his title with a little new squire at their skirts, that they can partially approve the objections indicated by Sir

Willoughby. They are thinking of themselves when they do so, and they will rarely say, "I might have married;" rarely within them will they avow that, with their permission, it might have been. They can catch an idea of a gentleman's view of the widow's cap. But a niceness that could feel sharply wounded by the simple rumour of his alliance with the young relict of an earl was mystifying. Sir Willoughby unbent. His military letter I took a careless glance at itself lounging idly and proudly at ease in the glass of his mind, decked with a wanton wreath, as he dropped a hint, generously vague, just to show the origin of the rumour, and the excellent basis it had for not being credited. He was chidden. Mrs. Mountstuart read him a lecture. She was however able to contradict the tale of the young countess. "There is no fear of his marrying her, my dears."

Meanwhile there was a fear that he would lose his chance of marrying the beautiful Miss Durham.

The dilemmas of little princes are often grave. They should be dwelt on now and then for an example to poor struggling commoners, of the slings and arrows assailing fortune's most favoured men, that we may preach contentment to the wretch who cannot muster wherewithal to marry a wife, or has done it and trots the streets, pack-laden, to maintain the dame and troops of children painfully reared to fill subordinate stations. According to our reading, a moral is always welcome in a moral country, and especially so when silly envy is to be chastised by it, the restless craving for change rebuked. Young Sir Willoughby, then, stood in this dilemma:—a lady was at either hand of him; the only two that had ever, apart from metropolitan conquests, not to be recited, touched his emotions. Susceptible to beauty, he had never seen so beautiful a girl as Constantia Durham. Equally susceptible to admiration of himself, he considered Laetitia Dale a paragon of cleverness. He stood between the queenly rose and the modest violet. One he bowed to; the other bowed to him. He could not have both; it is the law governing princes and pedestrians alike. But which could he forfeit? His growing acquaintance with the world taught him to put an increasing price on the sentiments of Miss Dale. Still Constantia's beauty was of a kind to send away beholders aching. She had the glory of the racing cutter full sail on a whining breeze; and she did not court to win him, she flew. In his more reflective hour the attractiveness of that lady which held the mirror to his features was paramount. But he had passionate snatches when the magnetism of the flyer drew him in her wake. Further to add to the complexity, he loved his liberty; he was princelier free; he had more subjects, more slaves; he ruled arrogantly in the world of women; he was more himself. His metropolitan experiences did not answer to his liking the particular question, Do we bind the woman down to us idolatrously by making a wife of her?

In the midst of his deliberations, a report of the hot pursuit of Miss Durham, casually mentioned to him by Lady Busshe, drew an immediate proposal from Sir Willoughby. She accepted him, and they were engaged. She had been nibbled at, all but eaten up, while he hung dubitative; and though that was the cause of his winning her, it offended his niceness. She had not come to him out of cloistral purity, out of perfect radiancy. Spiritually, likewise, was he a little prince, a despotic prince. He wished for her to have come to him out of an egg-shell, somewhat more astonished at things than a chicken, but as completely enclosed before he tapped the shell, and seeing him with her sex's eyes first of all men. She talked frankly of her cousins and friends, young males. She could have replied to his bitter wish: "Had you asked me on the night of your twenty-first birthday, Willoughby!" Since then she had been in the dust of the world, and he conceived his peculiar antipathy, destined to be so fatal to him, from the earlier hours of his engagement. He was quaintly incapable of a jealousy of individuals. A young Captain Oxford had been foremost in the swarm pursuing Constantia. Willoughby thought as little of Captain Oxford as he did of Vernon Whitford. His enemy was the world, the mass, which confounds us in a lump, which has breathed on her whom we have selected, whom we cannot, can never, rub quite clear of her contact with the abominated crowd. The pleasure of the world is to bowl down our soldierly letter I; to encroach on our identity, soil our niceness. To begin to think is the beginning of disgust of the world.

As soon the engagement was published all the county said that there had not been a chance for Laetitia, and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson humbly remarked, in an attitude of penitence, "I'm not a witch." Lady Busshe could claim to be one; she had foretold the event. Laetitia was of the same opinion as the county. She had looked up, but not hopefully. She had only looked up to the brightest, and, as he was the highest, how could she have hoped? She was the solitary companion of a sick father, whose inveterate prognostic of her, that she would live to rule at Patterne Hall, tortured the poor girl in proportion as he seemed to derive comfort from it. The noise of the engagement merely silenced him; recluse invalids cling obstinately to their ideas. He had observed Sir Willoughby in the society of his daughter, when the young baronet revived to a sprightly boyishness immediately. Indeed, as big boy and little girl, they had played together of old. Willoughby had been a handsome, fair boy. The portrait of him at the Hall, in a hat, leaning on his pony, with crossed legs, and long flaxen curls over his shoulders, was the image of her soul's most present angel; and, as a man, he had—she did not suppose intentionally—subjected her nature to bow to him; so submissive was she, that it was fuller happiness for her to think him right in all his actions than to imagine the circumstances different. This may appear to resemble the ecstasy of the devotee of Juggernaut, It is a form of the passion inspired by little princes, and we need not marvel that a conservative sex should assist to keep them in their lofty places. What were there otherwise to look up to? We should have no dazzling beacon-lights if they were levelled and treated as clod earth; and it is worth while for here and there a woman to be burned, so long as women's general adoration of an ideal young man shall be preserved. Purity is our demand of them. They may justly cry for attraction. They cannot have it brighter than in the universal bearing of the eyes of their sisters upon a little prince, one who has the ostensible virtues in his pay, and can practise them without injuring himself to make himself unsightly. Let the races of men be by-and-by astonished at their Gods, if they please. Meantime they had better continue to worship.

Laetitia did continue. She saw Miss Durham at Patterne on several occasions. She admired the pair. She had a wish to witness the bridal ceremony. She was looking forward to the day with that mixture of eagerness and withholding which we have as we draw nigh the disenchanting termination of an enchanting romance, when Sir Willoughby met her on a Sunday morning, as she crossed his park solitarily to church. They were within ten days of the appointed ceremony. He should have been away at Miss Durham's end of the county. He had, Laetitia knew, ridden over to her the day before; but there he was; and very unwontedly, quite surprisingly, he presented his arm to conduct Laetitia to the church-door, and talked and laughed in a way that reminded her of a hunting gentleman she had seen once rising to his feet, staggering from an ugly fall across hedge and fence into one of the lanes of her short winter walks. "All's well, all sound, never better, only a scratch!" the gentleman had said, as he reeled and pressed a bleeding head. Sir Willoughby chattered of his felicity in meeting her. "I am really wonderfully lucky," he said, and he said that and other things over and over, incessantly talking, and telling an anecdote of county occurrences, and laughing at it with a mouth that would not widen. He went on talking in the church porch, and murmuring softly some steps up the aisle, passing the pews of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson and Lady Busshe. Of course he was entertaining, but what a strangeness it was to Laetitia! His face would have been half under an antique bonnet. It came very close to hers, and the scrutiny he bent on her was most solicitous.

After the service, he avoided the great ladies by sauntering up to within a yard or two of where she sat; he craved her hand on his arm to lead her forth by the park entrance to the church, all the while bending to her, discoursing rapidly, appearing radiantly interested in her quiet replies, with fits of intentness that stared itself out into dim abstraction. She hazarded the briefest replies for fear of not having understood him.

One question she asked: "Miss Durham is well, I trust?"

And he answered "Durham?" and said, "There is no Miss Durham to my knowledge."

The impression he left with her was, that he might yesterday during his ride have had an accident and fallen on his head.

She would have asked that, if she had not known him for so thorough an Englishman, in his dislike to have it thought that accidents could hurt even when they happened to him.

He called the next day to claim her for a walk. He assured her she had promised it, and he appealed to her father, who could not testify to a promise he had not heard, but begged her to leave him to have her walk. So once more she was in the park with Sir Willoughby, listening to his raptures over old days. A word of assent from her sufficed him. "I am now myself," was one of the remarks he repeated this day. She dilated on the beauty of the park and the Hall to gratify him.

He did not speak of Miss Durham, and Laetitia became afraid to mention her name.

At their parting, Willoughby promised Laetitia that he would call on the morrow. He did not come; and she could well excuse him, after her hearing of the tale.

It was a lamentable tale. He had ridden to Sir John Durham's mansion, a distance of thirty miles, to hear, on his arrival, that Constantia had quitted her father's house two days previously on a visit to an aunt in London, and had just sent word that she was the wife of Captain Oxford, hussar, and messmate of one of her brothers. A letter from the bride awaited Willoughby at the Hall. He had ridden back at night, not caring how he used his horse in order to get swiftly home, so forgetful of himself was he under the terrible blow. That was the night of Saturday. On the day following, being Sunday, he met Laetitia in his park, led her to church, led her out of it, and the day after that, previous to his disappearance for some weeks, was walking with her in full view of the carriages along the road.

He had, indeed, you see, been very fortunately, if not considerately, liberated by Miss Durham. He, as a man of honour, could not have taken the initiative, but the frenzy of a jealous girl might urge her to such a course; and how little he suffered from it had been shown to the world. Miss Durham, the story went, was his mother's choice for him against his heart's inclinations; which had finally subdued Lady Patterne. Consequently, there was no longer an obstacle between Sir Willoughby and Miss Dale. It was a pleasant and romantic story, and it put most people in good humour with the county's favourite, as his choice of a portionless girl of no position would not have done without the shock of astonishment at the conduct of Miss Durham, and the desire to feel that so prevailing a gentleman was not in any degree pitiable. Constantia was called "that mad thing". Laetitia broke forth in novel and abundant merits; and one of the chief points of requisition in relation to Patterne—a Lady Willoughby who would entertain well and animate the deadness of the Hall, became a certainty when her gentleness and liveliness and exceeding cleverness were considered. She was often a visitor at the Hall by Lady Patterne's express invitation, and sometimes on these occasions Willoughby was there too, superintending the filling up of his laboratory, though he was not at home to the county; it was not expected that he should be yet. He had taken heartily to the pursuit of science, and spoke of little else. Science, he said, was in our days the sole object worth a devoted pursuit. But the sweeping remark could hardly apply to Laetitia, of whom he was the courteous, quiet wooer you behold when a man has broken loose from an unhappy tangle to return to the lady of his first and strongest affections.

Some months of homely courtship ensued, and then, the decent interval prescribed by the situation having elapsed, Sir Willoughby Patterne left his native land on a tour of the globe.

CHAPTER IV
LAETITIA DALE

That was another surprise to the county.

Let us not inquire into the feelings of patiently starving women; they must obtain some sustenance of their own, since, as you perceive, they live; evidently they are not in need of a great amount of nourishment; and we may set them down for creatures with a rush-light of animal fire to warm them. They cannot have much vitality who are so little exclamatory. A corresponding sentiment of patient compassion, akin to scorn, is provoked by persons having the opportunity for pathos, and declining to use it. The public bosom was open to Laetitia for several weeks, and had she run to it to bewail herself she would have been cherished in thankfulness for a country drama. There would have been a party against her, cold people, critical of her pretensions to rise from an unrecognized sphere to be mistress of Patterne Hall, but there would also have been a party against Sir Willoughby, composed of the two or three revolutionists, tired of the yoke, which are to be found in England when there is a stir; a larger number of born sympathetics, ever ready to yield the tear for the tear; and here and there a Samaritan soul prompt to succour poor humanity in distress. The opportunity passed undramatized. Laetitia presented herself at church with a face mildly devout, according to her custom, and she accepted invitations to the Hall, she assisted at the reading of Willoughby's letters to his family, and fed on dry husks of him wherein her name was not mentioned; never one note of the summoning call for pathos did this young lady blow.

So, very soon the public bosom closed. She had, under the fresh interpretation of affairs, too small a spirit to be Lady Willoughby of Patterne; she could not have entertained becomingly; he must have seen that the girl was not the match for him in station, and off he went to conquer the remainder of a troublesome first attachment, no longer extremely disturbing, to judge from the tenour of his letters; really incomparable letters! Lady Busshe and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson enjoyed a perusal of them. Sir Willoughby appeared as a splendid young representative island lord in these letters to his family, despatched from the principal cities of the United States of America. He would give them a sketch of "our democratic cousins", he said. Such cousins! They might all have been in the Marines. He carried his English standard over that continent, and by simply jotting down facts, he left an idea of the results of the measurement to his family and friends at home. He was an adept in the irony of incongruously grouping. The nature of the Equality under the stars and stripes was presented in this manner. Equality! Reflections came occasionally: "These cousins of ours are highly amusing. I am among the descendants of the Roundheads. Now and then an allusion to old domestic differences, in perfect good temper. We go on in our way; they theirs, in the apparent belief that Republicanism operates remarkable changes in human nature. Vernon tries hard to think it does. The upper ten of our cousins are the Infernal of Paris. The rest of them is Radical England, as far as I am acquainted with that section of my country."—Where we compared, they were absurd; where we contrasted, they were monstrous. The contrast of Vernon's letters with Willoughby's was just as extreme. You could hardly have taken them for relatives travelling together, or Vernon Whitford for a born and bred Englishman. The same scenes furnished by these two pens might have been sketched in different hemispheres. Vernon had no irony. He had nothing of Willoughby's epistolary creative power, which, causing his family and friends to exclaim: "How like him that is!" conjured them across the broad Atlantic to behold and clap hands at his lordliness.

They saw him distinctly, as with the naked eye; a word, a turn of the pen, or a word unsaid, offered the picture of him in America, Japan, China, Australia, nay, the continent of Europe, holding an English review of his Maker's grotesques. Vernon seemed a sheepish fellow, without stature abroad, glad of a compliment, grateful for a dinner, endeavouring sadly to digest all he saw and heard.

But one was a Patterne; the other a Whitford. One had genius; the other pottered after him with the title of student. One was the English gentleman wherever he went; the other was a new kind of thing, nondescript, produced in England of late, and not likely to come to much good himself, or do much good to the country.

Vernon's dancing in America was capitally described by Willoughby. "Adieu to our cousins!" the latter wrote on his voyage to Japan. "I may possibly have had some vogue in their ball-rooms, and in showing them an English seat on horseback: I must resign myself if I have not been popular among them. I could not sing their national song—if a congery of states be a nation—and I must confess I listened with frigid politeness to their singing of it. A great people, no doubt. Adieu to them. I have had to tear old Vernon away. He had serious thoughts of settling, means to correspond with some of them." On the whole, forgetting two or more "traits of insolence" on the part of his hosts, which he cited, Willoughby escaped pretty comfortably. The President had been, consciously or not, uncivil, but one knew his origin! Upon these interjections, placable flicks of the lionly tail addressed to Britannia the Ruler, who expected him in some mildish way to lash terga cauda in retiring, Sir Willoughby Patterne passed from a land of alien manners; and ever after he spoke of America respectfully and pensively, with a tail tucked in, as it were. His travels were profitable to himself. The fact is, that there are cousins who come to greatness and must be pacified, or they will prove annoying. Heaven forefend a collision between cousins!

Willoughby returned to his England after an absence of three years. On a fair April morning, the last of the month, he drove along his park palings, and, by the luck of things, Laetitia was the first of his friends whom he met. She was crossing from field to field with a band of school-children, gathering wild flowers for the morrow May-day. He sprang to the ground and seized her hand. "Laetitia Dale!" he said. He panted. "Your name is sweet English music! And you are well?" The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go, saying: "I could not have prayed for a lovelier home-scene to welcome me than you and these children flower-gathering. I don't believe in chance. It was decreed that we should meet. Do not you think so?"

Laetitia breathed faintly of her gladness.

He begged her to distribute a gold coin among the little ones; asked for the names of some of them, and repeated: "Mary, Susan, Charlotte—only the Christian names, pray! Well, my dears, you will bring your garlands to the Hall to-morrow morning; and mind, early! no slugabeds tomorrow; I suppose I am browned, Laetitia?" He smiled in apology for the foreign sun, and murmured with rapture: "The green of this English country is unsurpassed. It is wonderful. Leave England and be baked, if you would appreciate it. You can't, unless you taste exile as I have done—for how many years? How many?"

"Three," said Laetitia.

"Thirty!" said he. "It seems to me that length. At least, I am immensely older. But looking at you, I could think it less than three. You have not changed. You are absolutely unchanged. I am bound to hope so. I shall see you soon. I have much to talk of, much to tell you. I shall hasten to call on your father. I have specially to speak with him. I—what happiness this is, Laetitia! But I must not forget I have a mother. Adieu; for some hours—not for many!"

He pressed her hand again. He was gone.

She dismissed the children to their homes. Plucking primroses was hard labour now—a dusty business. She could have wished that her planet had not descended to earth, his presence agitated her so; but his enthusiastic patriotism was like a shower that, in the Spring season of the year, sweeps against the hard-binding East and melts the air and brings out new colours, makes life flow; and her thoughts recurred in wonderment to the behaviour of Constantia Durham. That was Laetitia's manner of taking up her weakness once more. She could almost have reviled the woman who had given this beneficent magician, this pathetic exile, of the aristocratic sunburned visage and deeply scrutinizing

eyes, cause for grief. How deeply his eyes could read! The starveling of patience awoke to the idea of a feast. The sense of hunger came with it, and hope came, and patience fled. She would have rejected hope to keep patience nigh her; but surely it can not always be Winter! said her reasoning blood, and we must excuse her as best we can if she was assured, by her restored warmth that Willoughby came in the order of the revolving seasons, marking a long Winter past. He had specially to speak with her father, he had said. What could that mean? What, but—She dared not phrase it or view it.

At their next meeting she was "Miss Dale".

A week later he was closeted with her father.

Mr. Dale, in the evening of that pregnant day, eulogized Sir Willoughby as a landlord. A new lease of the cottage was to be granted him on the old terms, he said. Except that Sir Willoughby had congratulated him in the possession of an excellent daughter, their interview was one of landlord and tenant, it appeared; and Laetitia said, "So we shall not have to leave the cottage?" in a tone of satisfaction, while she quietly gave a wrench to the neck of the young hope in her breast. At night her diary received the line: "This day I was a fool. To-morrow?"

To-morrow and many days afterwards there were dashes instead of words.

Patience travelled back to her sullenly. As we must have some kind of food, and she had nothing else, she took to that and found it dryer than of yore. It is a composing but a lean dietary. The dead are patient, and we get a certain likeness to them in feeding on it unintermittingly overlong. Her hollowed cheeks with the fallen leaf in them pleaded against herself to justify her idol for not looking down on one like her. She saw him when he was at the Hall. He did not notice any change. He was exceedingly gentle and courteous. More than once she discovered his eyes dwelling on her, and then he looked hurriedly at his mother, and Laetitia had to shut her mind from thinking, lest thinking should be a sin and hope a guilty spectre. But had his mother objected to her? She could not avoid asking herself. His tour of the globe had been undertaken at his mother's desire; she was an ambitious lady, in failing health; and she wished to have him living with her at Patterne, yet seemed to agree that he did wisely to reside in London.

One day Sir Willoughby, in the quiet manner which was his humour, informed her that he had become a country gentleman; he had abandoned London, he loathed it as the burial-place of the individual man. He intended to sit down on his estates and have his cousin Vernon Whitford to assist him in managing them, he said; and very amusing was his description of his cousin's shifts to live by literature, and add enough to a beggarly income to get his usual two months of the year in the Alps. Previous to his great tour, Willoughby had spoken of Vernon's judgement with derision; nor was it entirely unknown that Vernon had offended his family pride by some extravagant act. But after their return he acknowledged Vernon's talents, and seemed unable to do without him.

The new arrangement gave Laetitia a companion for her walks. Pedestrianism was a sour business to Willoughby, whose exclamation of the word indicated a willingness for any amount of exercise on horseback; but she had no horse, and so, while he hunted, Laetitia and Vernon walked, and the neighbourhood speculated on the circumstances, until the ladies Eleanor and Isabel Patterne engaged her more frequently for carriage exercise, and Sir Willoughby was observed riding beside them.

A real and sunny pleasure befell Laetitia in the establishment of young Crossjay Patterne under her roof; the son of the lieutenant, now captain, of Marines; a boy of twelve with the sprights of twelve boys in him, for whose board and lodgement Vernon provided by arrangement with her father. Vernon was one of your men that have no occupation for their money, no bills to pay for repair of their property, and are insane to spend. He had heard of Captain Patterne's large family, and proposed to have his eldest boy at the Hall, to teach him; but Willoughby declined to house the son of such a father, predicting that the boy's hair would be red, his skin eruptive, and his practices detestable. So Vernon, having obtained Mr. Dale's consent to accommodate this youth, stalked off to Devonport, and brought back a rosy-cheeked, round-bodied rogue of a boy, who fell upon meats and puddings,

and defeated them, with a captivating simplicity in his confession that he had never had enough to eat in his life. He had gone through a training for a plentiful table. At first, after a number of helps, young Crossjay would sit and sigh heavily, in contemplation of the unfinished dish. Subsequently, he told his host and hostess that he had two sisters above his own age, and three brothers and two sisters younger than he: "All hungry!" said die boy.

His pathos was most comical. It was a good month before he could see pudding taken away from table without a sigh of regret that he could not finish it as deputy for the Devonport household. The pranks of the little fellow, and his revel in a country life, and muddy wildness in it, amused Laetitia from morning to night. She, when she had caught him, taught him in the morning; Vernon, favoured by the chase, in the afternoon. Young Crossjay would have enlivened any household. He was not only indolent, he was opposed to the acquisition of knowledge through the medium of books, and would say: "But I don't want to!" in a tone to make a logician thoughtful. Nature was very strong in him. He had, on each return of the hour for instruction, to be plucked out of the earth, rank of the soil, like a root, for the exercise of his big round headpiece on those tyrannous puzzles. But the habits of birds, and the place for their eggs, and the management of rabbits, and the tickling of fish, and poaching joys with combative boys of the district, and how to wheedle a cook for a luncheon for a whole day in the rain, he soon knew of his great nature. His passion for our naval service was a means of screwing his attention to lessons after he had begun to understand that the desert had to be traversed to attain midshipman's rank. He boasted ardently of his fighting father, and, chancing to be near the Hall as he was talking to Vernon and Laetitia of his father, he propounded a question close to his heart, and he put it in these words, following: "My father's the one to lead an army!" when he paused. "I say, Mr. Whitford, Sir Willoughby's kind to me, and gives me crown-pieces, why wouldn't he see my father, and my father came here ten miles in the rain to see him, and had to walk ten miles back, and sleep at an inn?"

The only answer to be given was, that Sir Willoughby could not have been at home. "Oh! my father saw him, and Sir Willoughby said he was not at home," the boy replied, producing an odd ring in the ear by his repetition of "not at home" in the same voice as the apology, plainly innocent of malice. Vernon told Laetitia, however, that the boy never asked an explanation of Sir Willoughby.

Unlike the horse of the adage, it was easier to compel young Crossjay to drink of the waters of instruction than to get him to the brink. His heart was not so antagonistic as his nature, and by degrees, owing to a proper mixture of discipline and cajolery, he imbibed. He was whistling at the cook's windows after a day of wicked truancy, on an April night, and reported adventures over the supper supplied to him. Laetitia entered the kitchen with a reproving forefinger. He jumped to kiss her, and went on chattering of a place fifteen miles distant, where he had seen Sir Willoughby riding with a young lady. The impossibility that the boy should have got so far on foot made Laetitia doubtful of his veracity, until she heard that a gentleman had taken him up on the road in a gig, and had driven him to a farm to show him strings of birds' eggs and stuffed birds of every English kind, kingfishers, yaffles, black woodpeckers, goat-sucker owls, more mouth than head, with dusty, dark-spotted wings, like moths; all very circumstantial. Still, in spite of his tea at the farm, and ride back by rail at the gentleman's expense, the tale seemed fictitious to Laetitia until Crossjay related how that he had stood to salute on the road to the railway, and taken off his cap to Sir Willoughby, and Sir Willoughby had passed him, not noticing him, though the young lady did, and looked back and nodded. The hue of truth was in that picture.

Strange eclipse, when the hue of truth comes shadowing over our bright ideal planet. It will not seem the planet's fault, but truth's. Reality is the offender; delusion our treasure that we are robbed of. Then begins with us the term of wilful delusion, and its necessary accompaniment of the disgust of reality; exhausting the heart much more than patient endurance of starvation.

Hints were dropping about the neighbourhood; the hedgeways twittered, the tree-tops cawed. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson was loud on the subject: "Patterne is to have a mistress at last, you say?

But there never was a doubt of his marrying—he must marry; and, so long as he does not marry a foreign woman, we have no cause to complain. He met her at Cherriton. Both were struck at the same moment. Her father is, I hear, some sort of learned man; money; no land. No house either, I believe. People who spend half their time on the Continent. They are now for a year at Upton Park. The very girl to settle down and entertain when she does think of settling. Eighteen, perfect manners; you need not ask if a beauty. Sir Willoughby will have his dues. We must teach her to make amends to him—but don't listen to Lady Busshe! He was too young at twenty-three or twenty-four. No young man is ever jilted; he is allowed to escape. A young man married is a fire-eater bound over to keep the peace; if he keeps it he worries it. At thirty-one or thirty-two he is ripe for his command, because he knows how to bend. And Sir Willoughby is a splendid creature, only wanting a wife to complete him. For a man like that to go on running about would never do. Soberly—no! It would soon be getting ridiculous. He has been no worse than other men, probably better—infinitely more excusable; but now we have him, and it was time we should. I shall see her and study her, sharply, you may be sure; though I fancy I can rely on his judgement."

In confirmation of the swelling buzz, the Rev. Dr. Middleton and his daughter paid a flying visit to the Hall, where they were seen only by the members of the Patterne family. Young Crossjay had a short conversation with Miss Middleton, and ran to the cottage full of her—she loved the navy and had a merry face. She had a smile of very pleasant humour according to Vernon. The young lady was outlined to Laetitia as tall, elegant, lively; and painted as carrying youth like a flag. With her smile of "very pleasant humour", she could not but be winning.

Vernon spoke more of her father, a scholar of high repute; happily, a scholar of an independent fortune. His maturer recollection of Miss Middleton grew poetic, or he described her in an image to suit a poetic end: "She gives you an idea of the Mountain Echo. Doctor Middleton has one of the grandest heads in England."

"What is her Christian name?" said Laetitia.

He thought her Christian name was Clara.

Laetitia went to bed and walked through the day conceiving the Mountain Echo the swift, wild spirit, Clara by name, sent fleeting on a far half circle by the voice it is roused to subserve; sweeter than beautiful, high above drawing-room beauties as the colours of the sky; and if, at the same time, elegant and of loveable smiling, could a man resist her? To inspire the title of Mountain Echo in any mind, a young lady must be singularly spiritualized. Her father doated on her, Vernon said. Who would not? It seemed an additional cruelty that the grace of a poetical attractiveness should be round her, for this was robbing Laetitia of some of her own little fortune, mystical though that might be. But a man like Sir Willoughby had claims on poetry, possessing as he did every manly grace; and to think that Miss Middleton had won him by virtue of something native to her likewise, though mystically, touched Laetitia with a faint sense of relationship to the chosen girl. "What is in me, he sees on her." It decked her pride to think so, as a wreath on the gravestone. She encouraged her imagination to brood over Clara, and invested her designedly with romantic charms, in spite of pain; the ascetic zealot hugs his share of Heaven—most bitter, most blessed—in his hair-shirt and scourge, and Laetitia's happiness was to glorify Clara. Through that chosen rival, through her comprehension of the spirit of Sir Willoughby's choice of one such as Clara, she was linked to him yet.

Her mood of ecstatic fidelity was a dangerous exaltation; one that in a desert will distort the brain, and in the world where the idol dwells will put him, should he come nigh, to its own furnace-test, and get a clear brain out of a burnt heart. She was frequently at the Hall, helping to nurse Lady Patterne. Sir Willoughby had hitherto treated her as a dear insignificant friend, to whom it was unnecessary that he should mention the object of his rides to Upton Park.

He had, however, in the contemplation of what he was gaining, fallen into anxiety about what he might be losing. She belonged to his brilliant youth; her devotion was the bride of his youth; he was a man who lived backward almost as intensely as in the present; and, notwithstanding Laetitia's

praiseworthy zeal in attending on his mother, he suspected some unfaithfulness: hardly without cause: she had not looked paler of late; her eyes had not reproached him; the secret of the old days between them had been as little concealed as it was exposed. She might have buried it, after the way of woman, whose bosoms can be tombs, if we and the world allow them to be; absolutely sepulchres, where you lie dead, ghastly. Even if not dead and horrible to think of, you may be lying cold, somewhere in a corner. Even if embalmed, you may not be much visited. And how is the world to know you are embalmed? You are no better than a rotting wretch to the world that does not have peeps of you in the woman's breast, and see lights burning and an occasional exhibition of the services of worship. There are women—tell us not of her of Ephesus!—that have embalmed you, and have quitted the world to keep the tapers alight, and a stranger comes, and they, who have your image before them, will suddenly blow out the vestal flames and treat you as dust to fatten the garden of their bosoms for a fresh flower of love. Sir Willoughby knew it; he had experience of it in the form of the stranger; and he knew the stranger's feelings toward his predecessor and the lady.

He waylaid Laetitia, to talk of himself and his plans: the project of a run to Italy. Enviable? Yes, but in England you live the higher moral life. Italy boasts of sensual beauty; the spiritual is yours. "I know Italy well; I have often wished to act as a cicerone to you there. As it is, I suppose I shall be with those who know the land as well as I do, and will not be particularly enthusiastic:—if you are what you were?" He was guilty of this perplexing twist from one person to another in a sentence more than once. While he talked exclusively of himself it seemed to her a condescension. In time he talked principally of her, beginning with her admirable care of his mother; and he wished to introduce "a Miss Middleton" to her; he wanted her opinion of Miss Middleton; he relied on her intuition of character, had never known it err.

"If I supposed it could err, Miss Dale, I should not be so certain of myself. I am bound up in my good opinion of you, you see; and you must continue the same, or where shall I be?" Thus he was led to dwell upon friendship, and the charm of the friendship of men and women, "Platonism", as it was called. "I have laughed at it in the world, but not in the depth of my heart. The world's platonic attachments are laughable enough. You have taught me that the ideal of friendship is possible—when we find two who are capable of a disinterested esteem. The rest of life is duty; duty to parents, duty to country. But friendship is the holiday of those who can be friends. Wives are plentiful, friends are rare. I know how rare!"

Laetitia swallowed her thoughts as they sprang up. Why was he torturing her?—to give himself a holiday? She could bear to lose him—she was used to it—and bear his indifference, but not that he should disfigure himself; it made her poor. It was as if he required an oath of her when he said: "Italy! But I shall never see a day in Italy to compare with the day of my return to England, or know a pleasure so exquisite as your welcome of me. Will you be true to that? May I look forward to just another such meeting?"

He pressed her for an answer. She gave the best she could. He was dissatisfied, and to her hearing it was hardly in the tone of manliness that he entreated her to reassure him; he womanized his language. She had to say: "I am afraid I can not undertake to make it an appointment, Sir Willoughby," before he recovered his alertness, which he did, for he was anything but obtuse, with the reply, "You would keep it if you promised, and freeze at your post. So, as accidents happen, we must leave it to fate. The will's the thing. You know my detestation of changes. At least I have you for my tenant, and wherever I am, I see your light at the end of my park."

"Neither my father nor I would willingly quit Ivy Cottage," said Laetitia.

"So far, then," he murmured. "You will give me a long notice, and it must be with my consent if you think of quitting?"

"I could almost engage to do that," she said.

"You love the place?"

"Yes; I am the most contented of cottagers."

"I believe, Miss Dale, it would be well for my happiness were I a cottager."

"That is the dream of the palace. But to be one, and not to wish to be other, is quiet sleep in comparison."

"You paint a cottage in colours that tempt one to run from big houses and households."

"You would run back to them faster, Sir Willoughby."

"You may know me," said he, bowing and passing on contentedly. He stopped. "But I am not ambitious."

"Perhaps you are too proud for ambition, Sir Willoughby."

"You hit me to the life!"

He passed on regretfully. Clara Middleton did not study and know him like Laetitia Dale.

Laetitia was left to think it pleased him to play at cat and mouse. She had not "hit him to the life", or she would have marvelled in acknowledging how sincere he was.

At her next sitting by the bedside of Lady Patterne she received a certain measure of insight that might have helped her to fathom him, if only she could have kept her feelings down.

The old lady was affectionately confidential in talking of her one subject, her son. "And here is another dashing girl, my dear; she has money and health and beauty; and so has he; and it appears a fortunate union; I hope and pray it may be; but we begin to read the world when our eyes grow dim, because we read the plain lines, and I ask myself whether money and health and beauty on both sides have not been the mutual attraction. We tried it before; and that girl Durham was honest, whatever we may call her. I should have desired an appreciative thoughtful partner for him, a woman of mind, with another sort of wealth and beauty. She was honest, she ran away in time; there was a worse thing possible than that. And now we have the same chapter, and the same kind of person, who may not be quite as honest; and I shall not see the end of it. Promise me you will always be good to him; be my son's friend; his Egeria, he names you. Be what you were to him when that girl broke his heart, and no one, not even his mother, was allowed to see that he suffered anything. Comfort him in his sensitiveness. Willoughby has the most entire faith in you. Were that destroyed—I shudder! You are, he says, and he has often said, his image of the constant woman."

Laetitia's hearing took in no more. She repeated to herself for days: "His image of the constant woman!" Now, when he was a second time forsaking her, his praise of her constancy wore the painful ludicrousness of the look of a whimper on the face.

CHAPTER V
CLARA MIDDLETON

The great meeting of Sir Willoughby Patterne and Miss Middleton had taken place at Cherriton Grange, the seat of a county grandee, where this young lady of eighteen was first seen rising above the horizon. She had money and health and beauty, the triune of perfect starriness, which makes all men astronomers. He looked on her, expecting her to look at him. But as soon as he looked he found that he must be in motion to win a look in return. He was one of a pack; many were ahead of him, the whole of them were eager. He had to debate within himself how best to communicate to her that he was Willoughby Patterne, before her gloves were too much soiled to flatter his niceness, for here and there, all around, she was yielding her hand to partners—obscurant males whose touch leaves a stain. Far too generally gracious was Her Starriness to please him. The effect of it, nevertheless, was to hurry him with all his might into the heat of the chase, while yet he knew no more of her than that he was competing for a prize, and Willoughby Patterne was only one of dozens to the young lady.

A deeper student of Science than his rivals, he appreciated Nature's compliment in the fair ones choice of you. We now scientifically know that in this department of the universal struggle, success is awarded to the bettermost. You spread a handsomer tail than your fellows, you dress a finer top-knot, you pipe a newer note, have a longer stride; she reviews you in competition, and selects you. The superlative is magnetic to her. She may be looking elsewhere, and you will see—the superlative will simply have to beckon, away she glides. She cannot help herself; it is her nature, and her nature is the guarantee for the noblest races of men to come of her. In complimenting you, she is a promise of superior offspring. Science thus—or it is better to say—an acquaintance with science facilitates the cultivation of aristocracy. Consequently a successful pursuit and a wresting of her from a body of competitors, tells you that you are the best man. What is more, it tells the world so.

Willoughby aired his amiable superlatives in the eye of Miss Middleton; he had a leg. He was the heir of successful competitors. He had a style, a tone, an artist tailor, an authority of manner; he had in the hopeful ardour of the chase among a multitude a freshness that gave him advantage; and together with his undeviating energy when there was a prize to be won and possessed, these were scarce resistible. He spared no pains, for he was adust and athirst for the winning-post. He courted her father, aware that men likewise, and parents pre-eminently, have their preference for the larger offer, the deeper pocket, the broader lands, the respectfuller consideration. Men, after their fashion, as well as women, distinguish the bettermost, and aid him to succeed, as Dr. Middleton certainly did in the crisis of the memorable question proposed to his daughter within a month of Willoughby's reception at Upton Park. The young lady was astonished at his whirlwind wooing of her, and bent to it like a sapling. She begged for time; Willoughby could barely wait. She unhesitatingly owned that she liked no one better, and he consented. A calm examination of his position told him that it was unfair so long as he stood engaged, and she did not. She pleaded a desire to see a little of the world before she plighted herself. She alarmed him; he assumed the amazing god of love under the subtlest guise of the divinity. Willingly would he obey her behests, resignedly languish, were it not for his mother's desire to see the future lady of Patterne established there before she died. Love shone cunningly through the mask of filial duty, but the plea of urgency was reasonable. Dr. Middleton thought it reasonable, supposing his daughter to have an inclination. She had no disinclination, though she had a maidenly desire to see a little of the world—grace for one year, she said. Willoughby reduced the year to six months, and granted that term, for which, in gratitude, she submitted to stand engaged; and that was no light whispering of a word. She was implored to enter the state of captivity by the pronunciation of vows—a private but a binding ceremonial. She had health and beauty, and money to gild these gifts; not that he stipulated for money with his bride, but it adds a lustre to dazzle the world; and,

moreover, the pack of rival pursuers hung close behind, yelping and raising their dolorous throats to the moon. Captive she must be.

He made her engagement no light whispering matter. It was a solemn plighting of a troth. Why not? Having said, I am yours, she could say, I am wholly yours, I am yours forever, I swear it, I will never swerve from it, I am your wife in heart, yours utterly; our engagement is written above. To this she considerately appended, "as far as I am concerned"; a piece of somewhat chilling generosity, and he forced her to pass him through love's catechism in turn, and came out with fervent answers that bound him to her too indissolubly to let her doubt of her being loved. And I am loved! she exclaimed to her heart's echoes, in simple faith and wonderment. Hardly had she begun to think of love ere the apparition arose in her path. She had not thought of love with any warmth, and here it was. She had only dreamed of love as one of the distant blessings of the mighty world, lying somewhere in the world's forests, across wild seas, veiled, encompassed with beautiful perils, a throbbing secrecy, but too remote to quicken her bosom's throbs. Her chief idea of it was, the enrichment of the world by love.

Thus did Miss Middleton acquiesce in the principle of selection.

And then did the best man of a host blow his triumphant horn, and loudly.

He looked the fittest; he justified the dictum of Science. The survival of the Patternes was assured. "I would," he said to his admirer, Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, "have bargained for health above everything, but she has everything besides—lineage, beauty, breeding: is what they call an heiress, and is the most accomplished of her sex." With a delicate art he conveyed to the lady's understanding that Miss Middleton had been snatched from a crowd, without a breath of the crowd having offended his niceness. He did it through sarcasm at your modern young women, who run about the world nibbling and nibbled at, until they know one sex as well as the other, and are not a whit less cognizant of the market than men; pure, possibly; it is not so easy to say innocent; decidedly not our feminine ideal. Miss Middleton was different: she was the true ideal, fresh-gathered morning fruit in a basket, warranted by her bloom.

Women do not defend their younger sisters for doing what they perhaps have done—lifting a veil to be seen, and peeping at a world where innocence is as poor a guarantee as a babe's caul against shipwreck. Women of the world never think of attacking the sensual stipulation for perfect bloom, silver purity, which is redolent of the Oriental origin of the love-passion of their lords. Mrs. Mountstuart congratulated Sir Willoughby on the prize he had won in the fair western-eastern.

"Let me see her," she said; and Miss Middleton was introduced and critically observed.

She had the mouth that smiles in repose. The lips met full on the centre of the bow and thinned along to a lifting dimple; the eyelids also lifted slightly at the outer corners, and seemed, like the lip into the limpid cheek, quickening up the temples, as with a run of light, or the ascension indicated off a shoot of colour. Her features were playfellows of one another, none of them pretending to rigid correctness, nor the nose to the ordinary dignity of governess among merry girls, despite which the nose was of a fair design, not acutely interrogative or inviting to gambols. Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face: a pure, smooth-white face, tenderly flushed in the cheeks, where the gentle dints, were faintly intermelting even during quietness. Her eyes were brown, set well between mild lids, often shadowed, not unwakeful. Her hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin, evidently in agreement with her taste; and the triangle suited her; but her face was not significant of a tameless wildness or of weakness; her equable shut mouth threw its long curve to guard the small round chin from that effect; her eyes wavered only in humour, they were steady when thoughtfulness was awakened; and at such seasons the build of her winter-beechwood hair lost the touch of nymphlike and whimsical, and strangely, by mere outline, added to her appearance of studious concentration. Observe the hawk on stretched wings over the prey he spies, for an idea of this change in the look of a young lady whom Vernon

Whitford could liken to the Mountain Echo, and Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson pronounced to be "a dainty rogue in porcelain".

Vernon's fancy of her must have sprung from her prompt and most musical responsiveness. He preferred the society of her learned father to that of a girl under twenty engaged to his cousin, but the charm of her ready tongue and her voice was to his intelligent understanding wit, natural wit, crystal wit, as opposed to the paste-sparkle of the wit of the town. In his encomiums he did not quote Miss Middleton's wit; nevertheless, he ventured to speak of it to Mrs. Mountstuart, causing that lady to say: "Ah, well, I have not noticed the wit. You may have the art of drawing it out."

No one had noticed the wit. The corrupted hearing of people required a collision of sounds, Vernon supposed. For his part, to prove their excellence, he recollected a great many of Miss Middleton's remarks; they came flying to him; and so long as he forbore to speak them aloud, they had a curious wealth of meaning. It could not be all her manner, however much his own manner might spoil them. It might be, to a certain degree, her quickness at catching the hue and shade of evanescent conversation. Possibly by remembering the whole of a conversation wherein she had her place, the wit was to be tested; only how could any one retain the heavy portion? As there was no use in being argumentative on a subject affording him personally, and apparently solitarily, refreshment and enjoyment, Vernon resolved to keep it to himself. The eulogies of her beauty, a possession in which he did not consider her so very conspicuous, irritated him in consequence. To flatter Sir Willoughby, it was the fashion to exalt her as one of the types of beauty; the one providentially selected to set off his masculine type. She was compared to those delicate flowers, the ladies of the Court of China, on rice-paper. A little French dressing would make her at home on the sward by the fountain among the lutes and whispers of the bewitching silken shepherdesses who live though they never were. Lady Busshe was reminded of the favourite lineaments of the women of Leonardo, the angels of Luini. Lady Culmer had seen crayon sketches of demoiselles of the French aristocracy resembling her. Some one mentioned an antique statue of a figure breathing into a flute: and the mouth at the flutestop might have a distant semblance of the bend of her mouth, but this comparison was repelled as grotesque.

For once Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson was unsuccessful.

Her "dainty rogue in porcelain" displeased Sir Willoughby. "Why rogue?" he said. The lady's fame for hitting the mark fretted him, and the grace of his bride's fine bearing stood to support him in his objection. Clara was young, healthy, handsome; she was therefore fitted to be his wife, the mother of his children, his companion picture. Certainly they looked well side by side. In walking with her, in drooping to her, the whole man was made conscious of the female image of himself by her exquisite unlikeness. She completed him, added the softer lines wanting to his portrait before the world. He had wooed her rageingly; he courted her becomingly; with the manly self-possession enlivened by watchful tact which is pleasing to girls. He never seemed to undervalue himself in valuing her: a secret priceless in the courtship of young women that have heads; the lover doubles their sense of personal worth through not forfeiting his own. Those were proud and happy days when he rode Black Norman over to Upton Park, and his lady looked forth for him and knew him coming by the faster beating of her heart.

Her mind, too, was receptive. She took impressions of his characteristics, and supplied him a feast. She remembered his chance phrases; noted his ways, his peculiarities, as no one of her sex had done. He thanked his cousin Vernon for saying she had wit. She had it, and of so high a flavour that the more he thought of the epigram launched at her the more he grew displeased. With the wit to understand him, and the heart to worship, she had a dignity rarely seen in young ladies.

"Why rogue?" he insisted with Mrs. Mountstuart.

"I said—in porcelain," she replied.

"Rogue perplexes me."

"Porcelain explains it."

"She has the keenest sense of honour."

"I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude."

"She has a beautiful bearing."

"The carriage of a young princess!"

"I find her perfect."

"And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain."

"Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma'am?"

"Both."

"And which is which?"

"There's no distinction."

"Rogue and mistress of Patterne do not go together."

"Why not? She will be a novelty to our neighbourhood and an animation of the Hall."

"To be frank, rogue does not rightly match with me."

"Take her for a supplement."

"You like her?"

"In love with her! I can imagine life-long amusement in her company.

Attend to my advice: prize the porcelain and play with the rogue."

Sir Willoughby nodded, unilluminated. There was nothing of rogue in himself, so there could be nothing of it in his bride. Elfishness, tricksiness, freakishness, were antipathetic to his nature; and he argued that it was impossible he should have chosen for his complement a person deserving the title. It would not have been sanctioned by his guardian genius. His closer acquaintance with Miss Middleton squared with his first impressions; you know that this is convincing; the common jury justifies the presentation of the case to them by the grand jury; and his original conclusion that she was essentially feminine, in other words, a parasite and a chalice, Clara's conduct confirmed from day to day. He began to instruct her in the knowledge of himself without reserve, and she, as she grew less timid with him, became more reflective.

"I judge by character," he said to Mrs. Mountstuart.

"If you have caught the character of a girl," said she.

"I think I am not far off it."

"So it was thought by the man who dived for the moon in a well."

"How women despise their sex!"

"Not a bit. She has no character yet. You are forming it, and pray be advised and be merry; the solid is your safest guide; physiognomy and manners will give you more of a girl's character than all the divings you can do. She is a charming young woman, only she is one of that sort."

"Of what sort?" Sir Willoughby asked, impatiently.

"Rogues in porcelain."

"I am persuaded I shall never comprehend it."

"I cannot help you one bit further."

"The word rogue!"

"It was dainty rogue."

"Brittle, would you say?"

"I am quite unable to say."

"An innocent naughtiness?"

"Prettily moulded in a delicate substance."

"You are thinking of some piece of Dresden you suppose her to resemble."

"I dare say."

"Artificial?"

"You would not have her natural?"

"I am heartily satisfied with her from head to foot, my dear Mrs.

Mountstuart."

"Nothing could be better. And sometimes she will lead, and generally you will lead, and everything will go well, my dear Sir Willoughby."

Like all rapid phrasers, Mrs. Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness, and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected. Her directions for the reading of Miss Middleton's character were the same that she practised in reading Sir Willoughby's, whose physiognomy and manners bespoke him what she presumed him to be, a splendidly proud gentleman, with good reason.

Mrs. Mountstuart's advice was wiser than her procedure, for she stopped short where he declined to begin. He dived below the surface without studying that index-page. He had won Miss Middleton's hand; he believed he had captured her heart; but he was not so certain of his possession of her soul, and he went after it. Our enamoured gentleman had therefore no tally of Nature's writing above to set beside his discoveries in the deeps. Now it is a dangerous accompaniment of this habit of driving, that where we do not light on the discoveries we anticipate, we fall to work sowing and planting; which becomes a disturbance of the gentle bosom. Miss Middleton's features were legible as to the mainspring of her character. He could have seen that she had a spirit with a natural love of liberty, and required the next thing to liberty, spaciousness, if she was to own allegiance. Those features, unhappily, instead of serving for an introduction to the within, were treated as the mirror of himself. They were indeed of an amiable sweetness to tempt an accepted lover to angle for the first person in the second. But he had made the discovery that their minds differed on one or two points, and a difference of view in his bride was obnoxious to his repose. He struck at it recurringly to show her error under various aspects. He desired to shape her character to the feminine of his own, and betrayed the surprise of a slight disappointment at her advocacy of her ideas. She said immediately: "It is not too late, Willoughby," and wounded him, for he wanted her simply to be material in his hands for him to mould her; he had no other thought. He lectured her on the theme of the infinity of love. How was it not too late? They were plighted; they were one eternally; they could not be parted. She listened gravely, conceiving the infinity as a narrow dwelling where a voice droned and ceased not. However, she listened. She became an attentive listener.

CHAPTER VI
HIS COURTSHIP

The world was the principal topic of dissension between these lovers. His opinion of the world affected her like a creature threatened with a deprivation of air. He explained to his darling that lovers of necessity do loathe the world. They live in the world, they accept its benefits, and assist it as well as they can. In their hearts they must despise it, shut it out, that their love for one another may pour in a clear channel, and with all the force they have. They cannot enjoy the sense of security for their love unless they fence away the world. It is, you will allow, gross; it is a beast. Formally we thank it for the good we get of it; only we two have an inner temple where the worship we conduct is actually, if you would but see it, an excommunication of the world. We abhor that beast to adore that divinity. This gives us our oneness, our isolation, our happiness. This is to love with the soul. Do you see, darling?

She shook her head; she could not see it. She would admit none of the notorious errors, of the world; its backbiting, selfishness, coarseness, intrusiveness, infectiousness. She was young. She might, Willoughby thought, have let herself be led; she was not docile. She must be up in arms as a champion of the world; and one saw she was hugging her dream of a romantic world, nothing else. She spoilt the secret bower-song he delighted to tell over to her. And how, Powers of Love! is love-making to be pursued if we may not kick the world out of our bower and wash our hands of it? Love that does not spurn the world when lovers curtain themselves is a love—is it not so?—that seems to the unwhipped, scoffing world to go slinking into basiation's obscurity, instead of on a glorious march behind the screen. Our hero had a strong sentiment as to the policy of scorning the world for the sake of defending his personal pride and (to his honour, be it said) his lady's delicacy.

The act of seeming put them both above the world, said retro Sathanas! So much, as a piece of tactics: he was highly civilized: in the second instance, he knew it to be the world which must furnish the dry sticks for the bonfire of a woman's worship. He knew, too, that he was prescribing poetry to his betrothed, practicable poetry. She had a liking for poetry, and sometimes quoted the stuff in defiance of his pursed mouth and pained murmur: "I am no poet;" but his poetry of the enclosed and fortified bower, without nonsensical rhymes to catch the ears of women, appeared incomprehensible to her, if not adverse. She would not burn the world for him; she would not, though a purer poetry is little imaginable, reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence, in honour of him, and so, by love's transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry. She preferred to be herself, with the egoism of women. She said it: she said: "I must be myself to be of any value to you, Willoughby." He was indefatigable in his lectures on the aesthetics of love. Frequently, for an indemnification to her (he had no desire that she should be a loser by ceasing to admire the world), he dwelt on his own youthful ideas; and his original fancies about the world were presented to her as a substitute for the theme.

Miss Middleton bore it well, for she was sure that he meant well. Bearing so well what was distasteful to her, she became less well able to bear what she had merely noted in observation before; his view of scholarship; his manner toward Mr. Vernon Whitford, of whom her father spoke warmly; the rumour concerning his treatment of a Miss Dale. And the country tale of Constantia Durham sang itself to her in a new key. He had no contempt for the world's praises. Mr. Whitford wrote the letters to the county paper which gained him applause at various great houses, and he accepted it, and betrayed a tingling fright lest he should be the victim of a sneer of the world he contemned. Recollecting his remarks, her mind was afflicted by the "something illogical" in him that we readily discover when our natures are no longer running free, and then at once we yearn for a disputation. She resolved that she would one day, one distant day, provoke it—upon what? The special point eluded her. The world is too huge a client, and too pervious, too spotty, for a girl to defend against a man.

That "something illogical" had stirred her feelings more than her intellect to revolt. She could not constitute herself the advocate of Mr. Whitford. Still she marked the disputation for an event to come.

Meditating on it, she fell to picturing Sir Willoughby's face at the first accents of his bride's decided disagreement with him. The picture once conjured up would not be laid. He was handsome; so correctly handsome, that a slight unfriendly touch precipitated him into caricature. His habitual air of happy pride, of indignant contentment rather, could easily be overdone. Surprise, when he threw emphasis on it, stretched him with the tall eyebrows of a mask—limitless under the spell of caricature; and in time, whenever she was not pleased by her thoughts, she had that, and not his likeness, for the vision of him. And it was unjust, contrary to her deeper feelings; she rebuked herself, and as much as her naughty spirit permitted, she tried to look on him as the world did; an effort inducing reflections upon the blessings of ignorance. She seemed to herself beset by a circle of imps, hardly responsible for her thoughts.

He outshone Mr. Whitford in his behaviour to young Crossjay. She had seen him with the boy, and he was amused, indulgent, almost frolicsome, in contradistinction to Mr. Whitford's tutorly sharpness. He had the English father's tone of a liberal allowance for boys' tastes and pranks, and he ministered to the partiality of the genus for pocket-money. He did not play the schoolmaster, like bookworms who get poor little lads in their grasp.

Mr. Whitford avoided her very much. He came to Upton Park on a visit to her father, and she was not particularly sorry that she saw him only at table. He treated her by fits to a level scrutiny of deep-set eyes unpleasantly penetrating. She had liked his eyes. They became unbearable; they dwelt in the memory as if they had left a phosphorescent line. She had been taken by playmate boys in her infancy to peep into hedge-leaves, where the mother-bird brooded on the nest; and the eyes of the bird in that marvellous dark thickset home, had sent her away with worlds of fancy. Mr. Whitford's gaze revived her susceptibility, but not the old happy wondering. She was glad of his absence, after a certain hour that she passed with Willoughby, a wretched hour to remember. Mr. Whitford had left, and Willoughby came, bringing bad news of his mother's health. Lady Patterne was fast failing. Her son spoke of the loss she would be to him; he spoke of the dreadfulness of death. He alluded to his own death to come carelessly, with a philosophical air.

"All of us must go! our time is short."

"Very," she assented.

It sounded like want of feeling.

"If you lose me, Clara!"

"But you are strong, Willoughby."

"I may be cut off to-morrow."

"Do not talk in such a manner."

"It is as well that it should be faced."

"I cannot see what purpose it serves."

"Should you lose me, my love!"

"Willoughby!"

"Oh, the bitter pang of leaving you!"

"Dear Willoughby, you are distressed; your mother may recover; let us hope she will; I will help to nurse her; I have offered, you know; I am ready, most anxious. I believe I am a good nurse."

"It is this belief—that one does not die with death!"

"That is our comfort."

"When we love?"

"Does it not promise that we meet again?"

"To walk the world and see you perhaps—with another!"

"See me?—Where? Here?"

"Wedded . . . to another. You! my bride; whom I call mine; and you are! You would be still —in that horror! But all things are possible; women are women; they swim in infidelity, from wave to wave! I know them."

"Willoughby, do not torment yourself and me, I beg you."

He meditated profoundly, and asked her: "Could you be such a saint among women?"

"I think I am a more than usually childish girl."

"Not to forget me?"

"Oh! no."

"Still to be mine?"

"I am yours."

"To plight yourself?"

"It is done."

"Be mine beyond death?"

"Married is married, I think."

"Clara! to dedicate your life to our love! Never one touch; not one whisper! not a thought, not a dream! Could you—it agonizes me to imagine . . . be inviolate? mine above?—mine before all men, though I am gone:—true to my dust? Tell me. Give me that assurance. True to my name!—Oh, I hear them. 'His relict!' Buzzings about Lady Patterne. 'The widow.' If you knew their talk of widows! Shut your ears, my angel! But if she holds them off and keeps her path, they are forced to respect her. The dead husband is not the dishonoured wretch they fancied him, because he was out of their way. He lives in the heart of his wife. Clara! my Clara! as I live in yours, whether here or away; whether you are a wife or widow, there is no distinction for love—I am your husband—say it—eternally. I must have peace; I cannot endure the pain. Depressed, yes; I have cause to be. But it has haunted me ever since we joined hands. To have you—to lose you!"

"Is it not possible that I may be the first to die?" said Miss Middleton.

"And lose you, with the thought that you, lovely as you are, and the dogs of the world barking round you, might . . . Is it any wonder that I have my feeling for the world? This hand!—the thought is horrible. You would be surrounded; men are brutes; the scent of unfaithfulness excites them, overjoys them. And I helpless! The thought is maddening. I see a ring of monkeys grinning. There is your beauty, and man's delight in desecrating. You would be worried night and day to quit my name, to . . . I feel the blow now. You would have no rest for them, nothing to cling to without your oath."

"An oath!" said Miss Middleton.

"It is no delusion, my love, when I tell you that with this thought upon me I see a ring of monkey faces grinning at me; they haunt me. But you do swear it! Once, and I will never trouble you on the subject again. My weakness! if you like. You will learn that it is love, a man's love, stronger than death."

"An oath?" she said, and moved her lips to recall what she might have said and forgotten. "To what? what oath?"

"That you will be true to me dead as well as living! Whisper it."

"Willoughby, I shall be true to my vows at the altar."

"To me! me!"

"It will be to you."

"To my soul. No heaven can be for me—I see none, only torture, unless I have your word, Clara. I trust it. I will trust it implicitly. My confidence in you is absolute."

"Then you need not be troubled."

"It is for you, my love; that you may be armed and strong when I am not by to protect you."

"Our views of the world are opposed, Willoughby."

"Consent; gratify me; swear it. Say: 'Beyond death.' Whisper it. I ask for nothing more. Women think the husband's grave breaks the bond, cuts the tie, sets them loose. They wed the flesh—pah!

What I call on you for is nobility; the transcendent nobility of faithfulness beyond death. 'His widow!' let them say; a saint in widowhood."

"My vows at the altar must suffice."

"You will not? Clara!"

"I am plighted to you."

"Not a word?—a simple promise? But you love me?"

"I have given you the best proof of it that I can."

"Consider how utterly I place confidence in you."

"I hope it is well placed."

"I could kneel to you, to worship you, if you would, Clara!"

"Kneel to Heaven, not to me, Willoughby. I am—I wish I were able to tell what I am. I may be inconstant; I do not know myself. Think; question yourself whether I am really the person you should marry. Your wife should have great qualities of mind and soul. I will consent to hear that I do not possess them, and abide by the verdict."

"You do; you do possess them!" Willoughby cried. "When you know better what the world is, you will understand my anxiety. Alive, I am strong to shield you from it; dead, helpless—that is all. You would be clad in mail, steel-proof, inviolable, if you would . . . But try to enter into my mind; think with me, feel with me. When you have once comprehended the intensity of the love of a man like me, you will not require asking. It is the difference of the elect and the vulgar; of the ideal of love from the coupling of the herds. We will let it drop. At least, I have your hand. As long as I live I have your hand. Ought I not to be satisfied? I am; only I see further than most men, and feel more deeply. And now I must ride to my mother's bedside. She dies Lady Patterne! It might have been that she . . . But she is a woman of women! With a father-in-law! Just heaven! Could I have stood by her then with the same feelings of reverence? A very little, my love, and everything gained for us by civilization crumbles; we fall back to the first mortar-bowl we were bruised and stirred in. My thoughts, when I take my stand to watch by her, come to this conclusion, that, especially in women, distinction is the thing to be aimed at. Otherwise we are a weltering human mass. Women must teach us to venerate them, or we may as well be bleating and barking and bellowing. So, now enough. You have but to think a little. I must be off. It may have happened during my absence. I will write. I shall hear from you? Come and see me mount Black Norman. My respects to your father. I have no time to pay them in person. One!"

He took the one—love's mystical number—from which commonly spring multitudes; but, on the present occasion, it was a single one, and cold. She watched him riding away on his gallant horse, as handsome a cavalier as the world could show, and the contrast of his recent language and his fine figure was a riddle that froze her blood. Speech so foreign to her ears, unnatural in tone, unmanlike even for a lover (who is allowed a softer dialect), set her vainly sounding for the source and drift of it. She was glad of not having to encounter eyes like Mr. Vernon Whitford's.

On behalf of Sir Willoughby, it is to be said that his mother, without infringing on the degree of respect for his decisions and sentiments exacted by him, had talked to him of Miss Middleton, suggesting a volatility of temperament in the young lady that struck him as consentaneous with Mrs Mountstuart's "rogue in porcelain", and alarmed him as the independent observations of two world-wise women. Nor was it incumbent upon him personally to credit the volatility in order, as far as he could, to effect the soul-insurance of his bride, that he might hold the security of the policy. The desire for it was in him; his mother had merely tolled a warning bell that he had put in motion before. Clara was not a Constantia. But she was a woman, and he had been deceived by women, as a man fostering his high ideal of them will surely be. The strain he adopted was quite natural to his passion and his theme. The language of the primitive sentiments of men is of the same expression at all times, minus the primitive colours when a modern gentleman addresses his lady.

Lady Patterne died in the winter season of the new year. In April Dr Middleton had to quit Upton Park, and he had not found a place of residence, nor did he quite know what to do with himself in the prospect of his daughter's marriage and desertion of him. Sir Willoughby proposed to find him a house within a circuit of the neighbourhood of Patterne. Moreover, he invited the Rev. Doctor and his daughter to come to Patterne from Upton for a month, and make acquaintance with his aunts, the ladies Eleanor and Isabel Patterne, so that it might not be so strange to Clara to have them as her housemates after her marriage. Dr. Middleton omitted to consult his daughter before accepting the invitation, and it appeared, when he did speak to her, that it should have been done. But she said, mildly, "Very well, papa."

Sir Willoughby had to visit the metropolis and an estate in another county, whence he wrote to his betrothed daily. He returned to Patterne in time to arrange for the welcome of his guests; too late, however, to ride over to them; and, meanwhile, during his absence, Miss Middleton had bethought herself that she ought to have given her last days of freedom to her friends. After the weeks to be passed at Patterne, very few weeks were left to her, and she had a wish to run to Switzerland or Tyrol and see the Alps; a quaint idea, her father thought. She repeated it seriously, and Dr. Middleton perceived a feminine shuttle of indecision at work in her head, frightful to him, considering that they signified hesitation between the excellent library and capital wine-cellar of Patterne Hall, together with the society of that promising young scholar, Mr. Vernon Whitford, on the one side, and a career of hotels—equivalent to being rammed into monster artillery with a crowd every night, and shot off on a day's journey through space every morning—on the other.

"You will have your travelling and your Alps after the ceremony," he said.

"I think I would rather stay at home," said she.

Dr Middleton rejoined: "I would."

"But I am not married yet papa."

"As good, my dear."

"A little change of scene, I thought . . ."

"We have accepted Willoughby's invitation. And he helps me to a house near you."

"You wish to be near me, papa?"

"Proximate—at a remove: communicable."

"Why should we separate?"

"For the reason, my dear, that you exchange a father for a husband."

"If I do not want to exchange?"

"To purchase, you must pay, my child. Husbands are not given for nothing."

"No. But I should have you, papa!"

"Should?"

"They have not yet parted us, dear papa."

"What does that mean?" he asked, fussily. He was in a gentle stew already, apprehensive of a disturbance of the serenity precious to scholars by postponements of the ceremony and a prolongation of a father's worries.

"Oh, the common meaning, papa," she said, seeing how it was with him.

"Ah!" said he, nodding and blinking gradually back to a state of composure, glad to be appeased on any terms; for mutability is but another name for the sex, and it is the enemy of the scholar.

She suggested that two weeks of Patterne would offer plenty of time to inspect the empty houses of the district, and should be sufficient, considering the claims of friends, and the necessity of going the round of London shops.

"Two or three weeks," he agreed, hurriedly, by way of compromise with that fearful prospect.

CHAPTER VII
THE BETROTHED

During the drive from Upton to Patterne, Miss Middleton hoped, she partly believed, that there was to be a change in Sir Willoughby's manner of courtship. He had been so different a wooer. She remembered with some half-conscious desperation of fervour what she had thought of him at his first approaches, and in accepting him. Had she seen him with the eyes of the world, thinking they were her own? That look of his, the look of "indignant contentment", had then been a most noble conquering look, splendid as a general's plume at the gallop. It could not have altered. Was it that her eyes had altered?

The spirit of those days rose up within her to reproach, her and whisper of their renewal: she remembered her rosy dreams and the image she had of him, her throbbing pride in him, her choking richness of happiness: and also her vain attempting to be very humble, usually ending in a carol, quaint to think of, not without charm, but quaint, puzzling.

Now men whose incomes have been restricted to the extent that they must live on their capital, soon grow relieved of the forethoughtful anguish wasting them by the hilarious comforts of the lap upon which they have sunk back, insomuch that they are apt to solace themselves for their intolerable anticipations of famine in the household by giving loose to one fit or more of reckless lavishness. Lovers in like manner live on their capital from failure of income: they, too, for the sake of stifling apprehension and piping to the present hour, are lavish of their stock, so as rapidly to attenuate it: they have their fits of intoxication in view of coming famine: they force memory into play, love retrospectively, enter the old house of the past and ravage the larder, and would gladly, even resolutely, continue in illusion if it were possible for the broadest honey-store of reminiscences to hold out for a length of time against a mortal appetite: which in good sooth stands on the alternative of a consumption of the hive or of the creature it is for nourishing. Here do lovers show that they are perishable. More than the poor clay world they need fresh supplies, right wholesome juices; as it were, life in the burst of the bud, fruits yet on the tree, rather than potted provender. The latter is excellent for by-and-by, when there will be a vast deal more to remember, and appetite shall have but one tooth remaining. Should their minds perchance have been saturated by their first impressions and have retained them, loving by the accountable light of reason, they may have fair harvests, as in the early time; but that case is rare. In other words, love is an affair of two, and is only for two that can be as quick, as constant in intercommunication as are sun and earth, through the cloud or face to face. They take their breath of life from one another in signs of affection, proofs of faithfulness, incentives to admiration. Thus it is with men and women in love's good season. But a solitary soul dragging a log must make the log a God to rejoice in the burden. That is not love.

Clara was the least fitted of all women to drag a log. Few girls would be so rapid in exhausting capital. She was feminine indeed, but she wanted comradeship, a living and frank exchange of the best in both, with the deeper feelings untroubled. To be fixed at the mouth of a mine, and to have to descend it daily, and not to discover great opulence below; on the contrary, to be chilled in subterranean sunlessness, without any substantial quality that she could grasp, only the mystery of the inefficient tallow-light in those caverns of the complacent-talking man: this appeared to her too extreme a probation for two or three weeks. How of a lifetime of it!

She was compelled by her nature to hope, expect and believe that Sir Willoughby would again be the man she had known when she accepted him. Very singularly, to show her simple spirit at the time, she was unaware of any physical coldness to him; she knew of nothing but her mind at work, objecting to this and that, desiring changes. She did not dream of being on the giddy ridge of the

passive or negative sentiment of love, where one step to the wrong side precipitates us into the state of repulsion.

Her eyes were lively at their meeting—so were his. She liked to see him on the steps, with young Crossjay under his arm. Sir Willoughby told her in his pleasantest humour of the boy's having got into the laboratory that morning to escape his task-master, and blown out the windows. She administered a chiding to the delinquent in the same spirit, while Sir Willoughby led her on his arm across the threshold, whispering: "Soon for good!" In reply to the whisper, she begged for more of the story of young Crossjay. "Come into the laboratory," said he, a little less laughingly than softly; and Clara begged her father to come and see young Crossjay's latest pranks. Sir Willoughby whispered to her of the length of their separation, and his joy to welcome her to the house where she would reign as mistress very won. He numbered the weeks. He whispered: "Come." In the hurry of the moment she did not examine a lightning terror that shot through her. It passed, and was no more than the shadow which bends the summer grasses, leaving a ruffle of her ideas, in wonder of her having feared herself for something. Her father was with them. She and Willoughby were not yet alone.

Young Crossjay had not accomplished so fine a piece of destruction as Sir Willoughby's humour proclaimed of him. He had connected a battery with a train of gunpowder, shattering a window-frame and unsettling some bricks. Dr. Middleton asked if the youth was excluded from the library, and rejoiced to hear that it was a sealed door to him. Thither they went. Vernon Whitford was away on one of his long walks.

"There, papa, you see he is not so very faithful to you," said Clara.

Dr Middleton stood frowning over MS notes on the table, in Vernon's handwriting. He flung up the hair from his forehead and dropped into a seat to inspect them closely. He was now immoveable. Clara was obliged to leave him there. She was led to think that Willoughby had drawn them to the library with the design to be rid of her protector, and she began to fear him. She proposed to pay her respects to the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. They were not seen, and a footman reported in the drawing-room that they were out driving. She grasped young Crossjay's hand. Sir Willoughby dispatched him to Mrs. Montague, the housekeeper, for a tea of cakes and jam.

"Off!" he said, and the boy had to run.

Clara saw herself without a shield.

"And the garden!" she cried. "I love the garden; I must go and see what flowers are up with you. In spring I care most for wild flowers, and if you will show me daffodils and crocuses and anemones . . ."

"My dearest Clara! my bride!" said he.

"Because they are vulgar flowers?" she asked him, artlessly, to account for his detaining her.

Why would he not wait to deserve her!—no, not deserve—to reconcile her with her real position; not reconcile, but to repair the image of him in her mind, before he claimed his apparent right!

He did not wait. He pressed her to his bosom.

"You are mine, my Clara—utterly mine; every thought, every feeling. We are one: the world may do its worst. I have been longing for you, looking forward. You save me from a thousand vexations. One is perpetually crossed. That is all outside us. We two! With you I am secure! Soon! I could not tell you whether the world's alive or dead. My dearest!"

She came out of it with the sensations of the frightened child that has had its dip in sea-water, sharpened to think that after all it was not so severe a trial. Such was her idea; and she said to herself immediately: What am I that I should complain? Two minutes earlier she would not have thought it; but humiliated pride falls lower than humbleness.

She did not blame him; she fell in her own esteem; less because she was the betrothed Clara Middleton, which was now palpable as a shot in the breast of a bird, than that she was a captured woman, of whom it is absolutely expected that she must submit, and when she would rather be gazing

at flowers. Clara had shame of her sex. They cannot take a step without becoming bondwomen: into what a slavery! For herself, her trial was over, she thought. As for herself, she merely complained of a prematureness and crudity best unanalyzed. In truth, she could hardly be said to complain. She did but criticize him and wonder that a man was unable to perceive, or was not arrested by perceiving, unwillingness, discordance, dull compliance; the bondwoman's due instead of the bride's consent. Oh, sharp distinction, as between two spheres!

She meted him justice; she admitted that he had spoken in a lover-like tone. Had it not been for the iteration of "the world", she would not have objected critically to his words, though they were words of downright appropriation. He had the right to use them, since she was to be married to him. But if he had only waited before playing the privileged lover!

Sir Willoughby was enraptured with her. Even so purely coldly, statue-like, Dian-like, would he have prescribed his bride's reception of his caress. The suffusion of crimson coming over her subsequently, showing her divinely feminine in reflective bashfulness, agreed with his highest definitions of female character.

"Let me conduct you to the garden, my love," he said.

She replied: "I think I would rather go to my room."

"I will send you a wild-flower posy."

"Flowers, no; I do not like them to be gathered."

"I will wait for you on the lawn."

"My head is rather heavy."

His deep concern and tenderness brought him close.

She assured him sparklingly that she was well. She was ready to accompany him to the garden and stroll over the park.

"Headache it is not," she added.

But she had to pay the fee for inviting a solicitous accepted gentleman's proximity.

This time she blamed herself and him, and the world he abused, and destiny into the bargain. And she cared less about the probation; but she craved for liberty. With a frigidity that astonished her, she marvelled at the act of kissing, and at the obligation it forced upon an inanimate person to be an accomplice. Why was she not free? By what strange right was it that she was treated as a possession?

"I will try to walk off the heaviness," she said.

"My own girl must not fatigue herself."

"Oh, no; I shall not."

"Sit with me. Your Willoughby is your devoted attendant."

"I have a desire for the air."

"Then we will walk out."

She was horrified to think how far she had drawn away from him, and now placed her hand on his arm to appease her self-accusations and propitiate duty. He spoke as she had wished, his manner was what she had wished; she was his bride, almost his wife; her conduct was a kind of madness; she could not understand it.

Good sense and duty counselled her to control her wayward spirit.

He fondled her hand, and to that she grew accustomed; her hand was at a distance. And what is a hand? Leaving it where it was, she treated it as a link between herself and dutiful goodness. Two months hence she was a bondwoman for life! She regretted that she had not gone to her room to strengthen herself with a review of her situation, and meet him thoroughly resigned to her fate. She fancied she would have come down to him amicably. It was his present respectfulness and easy conversation that tricked her burning nerves with the fancy. Five weeks of perfect liberty in the mountains, she thought, would have prepared her for the days of bells. All that she required was a separation offering new scenes, where she might reflect undisturbed, feel clear again.

He led her about the flower-beds; too much as if he were giving a convalescent an airing. She chafed at it, and pricked herself with remorse. In contrition she expatiated on the beauty of the garden.

"All is yours, my Clara."

An oppressive load it seemed to her! She passively yielded to the man in his form of attentive courtier; his mansion, estate, and wealth overwhelmed her. They suggested the price to be paid. Yet she recollected that on her last departure through the park she had been proud of the rolling green and spreading trees. Poison of some sort must be operating in her. She had not come to him to-day with this feeling of sullen antagonism; she had caught it here.

"You have been well, my Clara?"

"Quite."

"Not a hint of illness?"

"None."

"My bride must have her health if all the doctors in the kingdom die for it! My darling!"

"And tell me: the dogs?"

"Dogs and horses are in very good condition."

"I am glad. Do you know, I love those ancient French chateaux and farms in one, where salon windows look on poultry-yard and stalls. I like that homeliness with beasts and peasants."

He bowed indulgently.

"I am afraid we can't do it for you in England, my Clara."

"No."

"And I like the farm," said he. "But I think our drawing-rooms have a better atmosphere off the garden. As to our peasantry, we cannot, I apprehend, modify our class demarcations without risk of disintegrating the social structure."

"Perhaps. I proposed nothing."

"My love, I would entreat you to propose if I were convinced that I could obey."

"You are very good."

"I find my merit nowhere but in your satisfaction."

Although she was not thirsting for dulcet sayings, the peacefulness of other than invitations to the exposition of his mysteries and of their isolation in oneness, inspired her with such calm that she beat about in her brain, as if it were in the brain, for the specific injury he had committed. Sweeping from sensation to sensation, the young, whom sensations impel and distract, can rarely date their disturbance from a particular one; unless it be some great villain injury that has been done; and Clara had not felt an individual shame in his caress; the shame of her sex was but a passing protest, that left no stamp. So she conceived she had been behaving cruelly, and said, "Willoughby"; because she was aware of the omission of his name in her previous remarks.

His whole attention was given to her.

She had to invent the sequel. "I was going to beg you, Willoughby, do not seek to spoil me. You compliment me. Compliments are not suited to me. You think too highly of me. It is nearly as bad as to be slighted. I am . . . I am a . . ." But she could not follow his example; even as far as she had gone, her prim little sketch of herself, set beside her real, ugly, earnest feelings, rang of a mincing simplicity, and was a step in falseness. How could she display what she was?

"Do I not know you?" he said.

The melodious bass notes, expressive of conviction on that point, signified as well as the words that no answer was the right answer. She could not dissent without turning his music to discord, his complacency to amazement. She held her tongue, knowing that he did not know her, and speculating on the division made bare by their degrees of the knowledge, a deep cleft.

He alluded to friends in her neighbourhood and his own. The bridesmaids were mentioned.

"Miss Dale, you will hear from my aunt Eleanor, declines, on the plea of indifferent health. She is rather a morbid person, with all her really estimable qualities. It will do no harm to have none but

young ladies of your own age; a bouquet of young buds: though one blowing flower among them . . . However, she has decided. My principal annoyance has been Vernon's refusal to act as my best man."

"Mr. Whitford refuses?"

"He half refuses. I do not take no from him. His pretext is a dislike to the ceremony."

"I share it with him."

"I sympathize with you. If we might say the words and pass from sight! There is a way of cutting off the world: I have it at times completely: I lose it again, as if it were a cabalistic phrase one had to utter. But with you! You give it me for good. It will be for ever, eternally, my Clara. Nothing can harm, nothing touch us; we are one another's. Let the world fight it out; we have nothing to do with it."

"If Mr. Whitford should persist in refusing?"

"So entirely one, that there never can be question of external influences. I am, we will say, riding home from the hunt: I see you awaiting me: I read your heart as though you were beside me. And I know that I am coming to the one who reads mine! You have me, you have me like an open book, you, and only you!"

"I am to be always at home?" Clara said, unheeded, and relieved by his not hearing.

"Have you realized it?—that we are invulnerable! The world cannot hurt us: it cannot touch us. Felicity is ours, and we are impervious in the enjoyment of it. Something divine! surely something divine on earth? Clara!—being to one another that between which the world can never interpose! What I do is right: what you do is right. Perfect to one another! Each new day we rise to study and delight in new secrets. Away with the crowd! We have not even to say it; we are in an atmosphere where the world cannot breathe."

"Oh, the world!" Clara partly carolled on a sigh that sunk deep.

Hearing him talk as one exulting on the mountain-top, when she knew him to be in the abyss, was very strange, provocative of scorn.

"My letters?" he said, incitingly.

"I read them."

"Circumstances have imposed a long courtship on us, my Clara; and I, perhaps lamenting the laws of decorum—I have done so!—still felt the benefit of the gradual initiation. It is not good for women to be surprised by a sudden revelation of man's character. We also have things to learn—there is matter for learning everywhere. Some day you will tell me the difference of what you think of me now, from what you thought when we first . . . ?"

An impulse of double-minded acquiescence caused Clara to stammer as on a sob.

"I—I daresay I shall."

She added, "If it is necessary."

Then she cried out: "Why do you attack the world? You always make me pity it."

He smiled at her youthfulness. "I have passed through that stage. It leads to my sentiment. Pity it, by all means."

"No," said she, "but pity it, side with it, not consider it so bad. The world has faults; glaciers have crevices, mountains have chasms; but is not the effect of the whole sublime? Not to admire the mountain and the glacier because they can be cruel, seems to me . . . And the world is beautiful."

"The world of nature, yes. The world of men?"

"Yes."

"My love, I suspect you to be thinking of the world of ballrooms."

"I am thinking of the world that contains real and great generosity, true heroism. We see it round us."

"We read of it. The world of the romance writer!"

"No: the living world. I am sure it is our duty to love it. I am sure we weaken ourselves if we do not. If I did not, I should be looking on mist, hearing a perpetual boom instead of music. I remember hearing Mr. Whitford say that cynicism is intellectual dandyism without the coxcomb's feathers; and

it seems to me that cynics are only happy in making the world as barren to others as they have made it for themselves."

"Old Vernon!" ejaculated Sir Willoughby, with a countenance rather uneasy, as if it had been flicked with a glove. "He strings his phrases by the dozen."

"Papa contradicts that, and says he is very clever and very simple."

"As to cynics, my dear Clara, oh, certainly, certainly: you are right. They are laughable, contemptible. But understand me. I mean, we cannot feel, or if we feel we cannot so intensely feel, our oneness, except by dividing ourselves from the world."

"Is it an art?"

"If you like. It is our poetry! But does not love shun the world? Two that love must have their sustenance in isolation."

"No: they will be eating themselves up."

"The purer the beauty, the more it will be out of the world."

"But not opposed."

"Put it in this way," Willoughby condescended. "Has experience the same opinion of the world as ignorance?"

"It should have more charity."

"Does virtue feel at home in the world?"

"Where it should be an example, to my idea."

"Is the world agreeable to holiness?"

"Then, are you in favour of monasteries?"

He poured a little runlet of half laughter over her head, of the sound assumed by genial compassion.

It is irritating to hear that when we imagine we have spoken to the point.

"Now in my letters, Clara . . ."

"I have no memory, Willoughby!"

"You will, however, have observed that I am not completely myself in my letters . . ."

"In your letters to men you may be."

The remark threw a pause across his thoughts. He was of a sensitiveness terribly tender. A single stroke on it reverberated swellingly within the man, and most, and infuriately searching, at the spots where he had been wounded, especially where he feared the world might have guessed the wound. Did she imply that he had no hand for love-letters? Was it her meaning that women would not have much taste for his epistolary correspondence? She had spoken in the plural, with an accent on "men". Had she heard of Constantia? Had she formed her own judgement about the creature? The supernatural sensitiveness of Sir Willoughby shrieked a peal of affirmatives. He had often meditated on the moral obligation of his unfolding to Clara the whole truth of his conduct to Constantia; for whom, as for other suicides, there were excuses. He at least was bound to supply them. She had behaved badly; but had he not given her some cause? If so, manliness was bound to confess it.

Supposing Clara heard the world's version first! Men whose pride is their backbone suffer convulsions where other men are barely aware of a shock, and Sir Willoughby was taken with galvanic jumpings of the spirit within him, at the idea of the world whispering to Clara that he had been jilted.

"My letters to men, you say, my love?"

"Your letters of business."

"Completely myself in my letters of business?" He stared indeed.

She relaxed the tension of his figure by remarking: "You are able to express yourself to men as your meaning dictates. In writing to . . . to us it is, I suppose, more difficult."

"True, my love. I will not exactly say difficult. I can acknowledge no difficulty. Language, I should say, is not fitted to express emotion. Passion rejects it."

"For dumb-show and pantomime?"

"No; but the writing of it coldly."

"Ah, coldly!"

"My letters disappoint you?"

"I have not implied that they do."

"My feelings, dearest, are too strong for transcription. I feel, pen in hand, like the mythological Titan at war with Jove, strong enough to hurl mountains, and finding nothing but pebbles. The simile is a good one. You must not judge of me by my letters."

"I do not; I like them," said Clara.

She blushed, eyed him hurriedly, and seeing him complacent, resumed, "I prefer the pebble to the mountain; but if you read poetry you would not think human speech incapable of. . ."

"My love, I detest artifice. Poetry is a profession."

"Our poets would prove to you . . ."

"As I have often observed, Clara, I am no poet."

"I have not accused you, Willoughby."

"No poet, and with no wish to be a poet. Were I one, my life would supply material, I can assure you, my love. My conscience is not entirely at rest. Perhaps the heaviest matter troubling it is that in which I was least wilfully guilty. You have heard of a Miss Durham?"

"I have heard—yes—of her."

"She may be happy. I trust she is. If she is not, I cannot escape some blame. An instance of the difference between myself and the world, now. The world charges it upon her. I have interceded to exonerate her."

"That was generous, Willoughby."

"Stay. I fear I was the primary offender. But I, Clara, I, under a sense of honour, acting under a sense of honour, would have carried my engagement through."

"What had you done?"

"The story is long, dating from an early day, in the 'downy antiquity of my youth', as Vernon says."

"Mr. Whitford says that?"

"One of old Vernon's odd sayings. It's a story of an early fascination."

"Papa tells me Mr. Whitford speaks at times with wise humour."

"Family considerations—the lady's health among other things; her position in the calculations of relatives—intervened. Still there was the fascination. I have to own it. Grounds for feminine jealousy."

"Is it at an end?"

"Now? with you? my darling Clara! indeed at an end, or could I have opened my inmost heart to you! Could I have spoken of myself so unreservedly that in part you know me as I know myself! Oh, but would it have been possible to enclose you with myself in that intimate union? so secret, unassailable!"

"You did not speak to her as you speak to me?"

"In no degree."

"What could have! . . ." Clara checked the murmured exclamation.

Sir Willoughby's expoundings on his latest of texts would have poured forth, had not a footman stepped across the lawn to inform him that his builder was in the laboratory and requested permission to consult with him.

Clara's plea of a horror of the talk of bricks and joists excused her from accompanying him. He had hardly been satisfied by her manner, he knew not why. He left her, convinced that he must do and say more to reach down to her female intelligence.

She saw young Crossjay, springing with pots of jam in him, join his patron at a bound, and taking a lift of arms, fly aloft, clapping heels. Her reflections were confused. Sir Willoughby was

admirable with the lad. "Is he two men?" she thought; and the thought ensued, "Am I unjust?" She headed a run with young Crossjay to divert her mind.

CHAPTER VIII
A RUN WITH THE TRUANT;
A WALK WITH THE MASTER

The sight of Miss Middleton running inflamed young Crossjay with the passion of the game of hare and hounds. He shouted a view-halloo, and flung up his legs. She was fleet; she ran as though a hundred little feet were bearing her onward smooth as water over the lawn and the sweeps of grass of the park, so swiftly did the hidden pair multiply one another to speed her. So sweet was she in her flowing pace, that the boy, as became his age, translated admiration into a dogged frenzy of pursuit, and continued pounding along, when far outstripped, determined to run her down or die. Suddenly her flight wound to an end in a dozen twittering steps, and she sank. Young Crossjay attained her, with just breath enough to say: "You are a runner!"

"I forgot you had been having your tea, my poor boy," said she.

"And you don't pant a bit!" was his encomium.

"Dear me, no; not more than a bird. You might as well try to catch a bird."

Young Crossjay gave a knowing nod. "Wait till I get my second wind."

"Now you must confess that girls run faster than boys."

"They may at the start."

"They do everything better."

"They're flash-in-the-pans."

"They learn their lessons."

"You can't make soldiers or sailors of them, though."

"And that is untrue. Have you never read of Mary Ambree? and Mistress Hannah Snell of Pondicherry? And there was the bride of the celebrated William Taylor. And what do you say to Joan of Arc? What do you say to Boadicea? I suppose you have never heard of the Amazons."

"They weren't English."

"Then it is your own countrywomen you decry, sir!"

Young Crossjay betrayed anxiety about his false position, and begged for the stories of Mary Ambree and the others who were English.

"See, you will not read for yourself, you hide and play truant with Mr. Whitford, and the consequence is you are ignorant of your country's history."

Miss Middleton rebuked him, enjoying his wriggle between a perception of her fun and an acknowledgment of his peccancy. She commanded him to tell her which was the glorious Valentine's day of our naval annals; the name of the hero of the day, and the name of his ship. To these questions his answers were as ready as the guns of the good ship Captain, for the Spanish four-decker.

"And that you owe to Mr. Whitford," said Miss Middleton.

"He bought me the books," young Crossjay growled, and plucked at grass blades and bit them, foreseeing dimly but certainly the termination of all this.

Miss Middleton lay back on the grass and said: "Are you going to be fond of me, Crossjay?"

The boy sat blinking. His desire was to prove to her that lie was immoderately fond of her already; and he might have flown at her neck had she been sitting up, but her recumbency and eyelids half closed excited wonder in him and awe. His young heart beat fast.

"Because, my dear boy," she said, leaning on her elbow, "you are a very nice boy, but an ungrateful boy, and there is no telling whether you will not punish any one who cares for you. Come along with me; pluck me some of these cowslips, and the speedwells near them; I think we both love wild-flowers." She rose and took his arm. "You shall row me on the lake while I talk to you seriously."

It was she, however, who took the sculls at the boat-house, for she had been a playfellow with boys, and knew that one of them engaged in a manly exercise is not likely to listen to a woman.

"Now, Crossjay," she said. Dense gloom overcame him like a cowl. She bent across her hands to laugh. "As if I were going to lecture you, you silly boy!" He began to brighten dubiously. "I used to be as fond of birdsnesting as you are. I like brave boys, and I like you for wanting to enter the Royal Navy. Only, how can you if you do not learn? You must get the captains to pass you, you know. Somebody spoils you: Miss Dale or Mr. Whitford."

"Do they?" sung out young Crossjay.

"Sir Willoughby does?"

"I don't know about spoil. I can come round him."

"I am sure he is very kind to you. I dare say you think Mr. Whitford rather severe. You should remember he has to teach you, so that you may pass for the navy. You must not dislike him because he makes you work. Supposing you had blown yourself up to-day! You would have thought it better to have been working with Mr. Whitford."

"Sir Willoughby says, when he's married, you won't let me hide."

"Ah! It is wrong to pet a big boy like you. Does not he what you call tip you, Crossjay?"

"Generally half-crown pieces. I've had a crown-piece. I've had sovereigns."

"And for that you do as he bids you? And he indulges you because you . . . Well, but though Mr. Whitford does not give you money, he gives you his time, he tries to get you into the navy."

"He pays for me."

"What do you say?"

"My keep. And, as for liking him, if he were at the bottom of the water here, I'd go down after him. I mean to learn. We're both of us here at six o'clock in the morning, when it's light, and have a swim. He taught me. Only, I never cared for schoolbooks."

"Are you quite certain that Mr. Whitford pays for you."

"My father told me he did, and I must obey him. He heard my father was poor, with a family. He went down to see my father. My father came here once, and Sir Willoughby wouldn't see him. I know Mr. Whitford does. And Miss Dale told me he did. My mother says she thinks he does it to make up to us for my father's long walk in the rain and the cold he caught coming here to Patterne."

"So you see you should not vex him, Crossjay. He is a good friend to your father and to you. You ought to love him."

"I like him, and I like his face."

"Why his face?"

"It's not like those faces! Miss Dale and I talk about him. She thinks that Sir Willoughby is the best-looking man ever born."

"Were you not speaking of Mr. Whitford?"

"Yes; old Vernon. That's what Sir Willoughby calls him," young Crossjay excused himself to her look of surprise. "Do you know what he makes me think of?—his eyes, I mean. He makes me think of Robinson Crusoe's old goat in the cavern. I like him because he's always the same, and you're not positive about some people. Miss Middleton, if you look on at cricket, in comes a safe man for ten runs. He may get more, and he never gets less; and you should hear the old farmers talk of him in the booth. That's just my feeling."

Miss Middleton understood that some illustration from the cricketing-field was intended to throw light on the boy's feeling for Mr. Whitford. Young Crossjay was evidently warming to speak from his heart. But the sun was low, she had to dress for the dinner-table, and she landed him with regret, as at a holiday over. Before they parted, he offered to swim across the lake in his clothes, or dive to the bed for anything she pleased to throw, declaring solemnly that it should not be lost.

She walked back at a slow pace, and sung to herself above her darker-flowing thoughts, like the reed-warbler on the branch beside the night-stream; a simple song of a lighthearted sound, independent of the shifting black and grey of the flood underneath.

A step was at her heels.

"I see you have been petting my scapegrace."

"Mr. Whitford! Yes; not petting, I hope. I tried to give him a lecture.

He's a dear lad, but, I fancy, trying."

She was in fine sunset colour, unable to arrest the mounting tide. She had been rowing, she said; and, as he directed his eyes, according to his wont, penetratingly, she defended herself by fixing her mind on Robinson Crusoe's old goat in the recess of the cavern.

"I must have him away from here very soon," said Vernon. "Here he's quite spoiled. Speak of him to Willoughby. I can't guess at his ideas of the boy's future, but the chance of passing for the navy won't bear trifling with, and if ever there was a lad made for the navy, it's Crossjay."

The incident of the explosion in the laboratory was new to Vernon.

"And Willoughby laughed?" he said. "There are sea-port crammers who stuff young fellows for examination, and we shall have to pack off the boy at once to the best one of the lot we can find. I would rather have had him under me up to the last three months, and have made sure of some roots to what is knocked into his head. But he's ruined here. And I am going. So I shall not trouble him for many weeks longer. Dr. Middleton is well?"

"My father is well, yes. He pounced like a falcon on your notes in the library."

Vernon came out with a chuckle.

"They were left to attract him. I am in for a controversy."

"Papa will not spare you, to judge from his look."

"I know the look."

"Have you walked far to-day?"

"Nine and a half hours. My Flibbertigibbet is too much for me at times, and I had to walk off my temper."

She cast her eyes on him, thinking of the pleasure of dealing with a temper honestly coltish, and manfully open to a specific.

"All those hours were required?"

"Not quite so long."

"You are training for your Alpine tour."

"It's doubtful whether I shall get to the Alps this year. I leave the Hall, and shall probably be in London with a pen to sell."

"Willoughby knows that you leave him?"

"As much as Mont Blanc knows that he is going to be climbed by a party below. He sees a speck or two in the valley."

"He has not spoken of it."

"He would attribute it to changes . . ."

Vernon did not conclude the sentence.

She became breathless, without emotion, but checked by the barrier confronting an impulse to ask, what changes? She stooped to pluck a cowslip.

"I saw daffodils lower down the park," she said. "One or two; they're nearly over."

"We are well off for wild flowers here," he answered.

"Do not leave him, Mr. Whitford."

"He will not want me."

"You are devoted to him."

"I can't pretend that."

"Then it is the changes you imagine you foresee . . . If any occur, why should they drive you away?"

"Well, I'm two and thirty, and have never been in the fray: a kind of nondescript, half scholar, and by nature half billman or bowman or musketeer; if I'm worth anything, London's the field for me. But that's what I have to try."

"Papa will not like your serving with your pen in London: he will say you are worth too much for that."

"Good men are at it; I should not care to be ranked above them."

"They are wasted, he says."

"Error! If they have their private ambition, they may suppose they are wasted. But the value to the world of a private ambition, I do not clearly understand."

"You have not an evil opinion of the world?" said Miss Middleton, sick at heart as she spoke, with the sensation of having invited herself to take a drop of poison.

He replied: "One might as well have an evil opinion of a river: here it's muddy, there it's clear; one day troubled, another at rest. We have to treat it with common sense."

"Love it?"

"In the sense of serving it."

"Not think it beautiful?"

"Part of it is, part of it the reverse."

"Papa would quote the 'mulier formosa'".

"Except that 'fish' is too good for the black extremity. 'Woman' is excellent for the upper."

"How do you say that?—not cynically, I believe. Your view commends itself to my reason."

She was grateful to him for not stating it in ideal contrast with Sir Willoughby's view. If he had, so intensely did her youthful blood desire to be enamoured of the world, that she felt he would have lifted her off her feet. For a moment a gulf beneath had been threatening. When she said, "Love it?" a little enthusiasm would have wafted her into space fierily as wine; but the sober, "In the sense of serving it", entered her brain, and was matter for reflection upon it and him.

She could think of him in pleasant liberty, uncorrected by her woman's instinct of peril. He had neither arts nor graces; nothing of his cousin's easy social front-face. She had once witnessed the military precision of his dancing, and had to learn to like him before she ceased to pray that she might never be the victim of it as his partner. He walked heroically, his pedestrian vigour being famous, but that means one who walks away from the sex, not excelling in the recreations where men and women join hands. He was not much of a horseman either. Sir Willoughby enjoyed seeing him on horseback. And he could scarcely be said to shine in a drawingroom, unless when seated beside a person ready for real talk. Even more than his merits, his demerits pointed him out as a man to be a friend to a young woman who wanted one. His way of life pictured to her troubled spirit an enviable smoothness; and his having achieved that smooth way she considered a sign of strength; and she wished to lean in idea upon some friendly strength. His reputation for indifference to the frivolous charms of girls clothed him with a noble coldness, and gave him the distinction of a far-seen solitary iceberg in Southern waters. The popular notion of hereditary titled aristocracy resembles her sentiment for a man that would not flatter and could not be flattered by her sex: he appeared superior almost to awfulness. She was young, but she had received much flattery in her ears, and by it she had been snared; and he, disdaining to practise the fowler's arts or to cast a thought on small fowls, appeared to her to have a pride founded on natural loftiness.

They had not spoken for awhile, when Vernon said abruptly, "The boy's future rather depends on you, Miss Middleton. I mean to leave as soon as possible, and I do not like his being here without me, though you will look after him, I have no doubt. But you may not at first see where the spoiling hurts him. He should be packed off at once to the crammer, before you are Lady Patterne. Use your

influence. Willoughby will support the lad at your request. The cost cannot be great. There are strong grounds against my having him in London, even if I could manage it. May I count on you?"

"I will mention it: I will do my best," said Miss Middleton, strangely dejected.

They were now on the lawn, where Sir Willoughby was walking with the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, his maiden aunts.

"You seem to have coursed the hare and captured the hart." he said to his bride.

"Started the truant and run down the paedagogue," said Vernon.

"Ay, you won't listen to me about the management of that boy," Sir Willoughby retorted.

The ladies embraced Miss Middleton. One offered up an ejaculation in eulogy of her looks, the other of her healthfulness: then both remarked that with indulgence young Crossjay could be induced to do anything. Clara wondered whether inclination or Sir Willoughby had disciplined their individuality out of them and made them his shadows, his echoes. She gazed from them to him, and feared him. But as yet she had not experienced the power in him which could threaten and wrestle to subject the members of his household to the state of satellites. Though she had in fact been giving battle to it for several months, she had held her own too well to perceive definitely the character of the spirit opposing her.

She said to the ladies, "Ah, no! Mr. Whitford has chosen the only method for teaching a boy like Crossjay."

"I propose to make a man of him," said Sir Willoughby.

"What is to become of him if he learns nothing?"

"If he pleases me, he will be provided for. I have never abandoned a dependent."

Clara let her eyes rest on his and, without turning or dropping, shut them.

The effect was discomforting to him. He was very sensitive to the intentions of eyes and tones; which was one secret of his rigid grasp of the dwellers in his household. They were taught that they had to render agreement under sharp scrutiny. Studious eyes, devoid of warmth, devoid of the shyness of sex, that suddenly closed on their look, signified a want of comprehension of some kind, it might be hostility of understanding. Was it possible he did not possess her utterly? He frowned up.

Clara saw the lift of his brows, and thought, "My mind is my own, married or not."

It was the point in dispute.

CHAPTER IX
CLARA AND LAETITIA MEET: THEY ARE COMPARED

An hour before the time for lessons next morning young Crossjay was on the lawn with a big bunch of wild flowers. He left them at the hall door for Miss Middleton, and vanished into bushes.

These vulgar weeds were about to be dismissed to the dustheap by the great officials of the household; but as it happened that Miss Middleton had seen them from the window in Crossjay's hands, the discovery was made that they were indeed his presentation-bouquet, and a footman received orders to place them before her. She was very pleased. The arrangement of the flowers bore witness to fairer fingers than the boy's own in the disposition of the rings of colour, red campion and anemone, cowslip and speedwell, primroses and wood-hyacinths; and rising out of the blue was a branch bearing thick white blossom, so thick, and of so pure a whiteness, that Miss Middleton, while praising Crossjay for soliciting the aid of Miss Dale, was at a loss to name the tree.

"It is a gardener's improvement on the Vestal of the forest, the wild cherry," said Dr. Middleton, "and in this case we may admit the gardener's claim to be valid, though I believe that, with his gift of double blossom, he has improved away the fruit. Call this the Vestal of civilization, then; he has at least done something to vindicate the beauty of the office as well as the justness of the title."

"It is Vernon's Holy Tree the young rascal has been despoiling," said Sir Willoughby merrily.

Miss Middleton was informed that this double-blossom wild cherry-tree was worshipped by Mr. Whitford.

Sir Willoughby promised he would conduct her to it.

"You," he said to her, "can bear the trial; few complexions can; it is to most ladies a crueller test than snow. Miss Dale, for example, becomes old lace within a dozen yards of it. I should like to place her under the tree beside you."

"Dear me, though; but that is investing the hamadryad with novel and terrible functions," exclaimed Dr. Middleton.

Clara said: "Miss Dale could drag me into a superior Court to show me fading beside her in gifts more valuable than a complexion."

"She has a fine ability," said Vernon.

All the world knew, so Clara knew of Miss Dales romantic admiration of Sir Willoughby; she was curious to see Miss Dale and study the nature of a devotion that might be, within reason, imitable —for a man who could speak with such steely coldness of the poor lady he had fascinated? Well, perhaps it was good for the hearts of women to be beneath a frost; to be schooled, restrained, turned inward on their dreams. Yes, then, his coldness was desireable; it encouraged an ideal of him. It suggested and seemed to propose to Clara's mind the divineness of separation instead of the deadly accuracy of an intimate perusal. She tried to look on him as Miss Dale might look, and while partly despising her for the dupery she envied, and more than criticizing him for the inhuman numbness of sentiment which offered up his worshipper to point a complimentary comparison, she was able to imagine a distance whence it would be possible to observe him uncritically, kindly, admiringly; as the moon a handsome mortal, for example.

In the midst of her thoughts, she surprised herself by saying: "I certainly was difficult to instruct. I might see things clearer if I had a fine ability. I never remember to have been perfectly pleased with my immediate lesson . . ."

She stopped, wondering whither her tongue was leading her; then added, to save herself, "And that may be why I feel for poor Crossjay."

Mr. Whitford apparently did not think it remarkable that she should have been set off gabbling of "a fine ability", though the eulogistic phrase had been pronounced by him with an impressiveness to make his ear aware of an echo.

Sir Willoughby dispersed her vapourish confusion. "Exactly," he said. "I have insisted with Vernon, I don't know how often, that you must have the lad by his affections. He won't bear driving. It had no effect on me. Boys of spirit kick at it. I think I know boys, Clara."

He found himself addressing eyes that regarded him as though he were a small speck, a pin's head, in the circle of their remote contemplation. They were wide; they closed.

She opened them to gaze elsewhere.

He was very sensitive.

Even then, when knowingly wounding him, or because of it, she was trying to climb back to that altitude of the thin division of neutral ground, from which we see a lover's faults and are above them, pure surveyors. She climbed unsuccessfully, it is true; soon despairing and using the effort as a pretext to fall back lower.

Dr. Middleton withdrew Sir Willoughby's attention from the imperceptible annoyance. "No, sir, no: the birch! the birch! Boys of spirit commonly turn into solid men, and the solider the men the more surely do they vote for Busby. For me, I pray he may be immortal in Great Britain. Sea-air nor mountain-air is half so bracing. I venture to say that the power to take a licking is better worth having than the power to administer one. Horse him and birch him if Crossjay runs from his books."

"It is your opinion, sir?" his host bowed to him affably, shocked on behalf of the ladies.

"So positively so, sir, that I will undertake, without knowledge of their antecedents, to lay my finger on the men in public life who have not had early Busby. They are ill-balanced men. Their seat of reason is not a concrete. They won't take rough and smooth as they come. They make bad blood, can't forgive, sniff right and left for approbation, and are excited to anger if an East wind does not flatter them. Why, sir, when they have grown to be seniors, you find these men mixed up with the nonsense of their youth; you see they are unthrashed. We English beat the world because we take a licking well. I hold it for a surety of a proper sweetness of blood."

The smile of Sir Willoughby waxed ever softer as the shakes of his head increased in contradictoriness. "And yet," said he, with the air of conceding a little after having answered the Rev. Doctor and convicted him of error, "Jack requires it to keep him in order. On board ship your argument may apply. Not, I suspect, among gentlemen. No."

"Good-night to you, gentlemen!" said Dr. Middleton.

Clara heard Miss Eleanor and Miss Isabel interchange remarks:

"Willoughby would not have suffered it!"

"It would entirely have altered him!"

She sighed and put a tooth on her under-lip. The gift of humourous fancy is in women fenced round with forbidding placards; they have to choke it; if they perceive a piece of humour, for instance, the young Willoughby grasped by his master,—and his horrified relatives rigid at the sight of preparations for the seed of sacrilege, they have to blindfold the mind's eye. They are society's hard-drilled soldiery. Prussians that must both march and think in step. It is for the advantage of the civilized world, if you like, since men have decreed it, or matrons have so read the decree; but here and there a younger woman, haply an uncorrected insurgent of the sex matured here and there, feels that her lot was cast with her head in a narrower pit than her limbs.

Clara speculated as to whether Miss Dale might be perchance a person of a certain liberty of mind. She asked for some little, only some little, free play of mind in a house that seemed to wear, as it were, a cap of iron. Sir Willoughby not merely ruled, he throned, he inspired: and how? She had noticed an irascible sensitiveness in him alert against a shadow of disagreement; and as he was kind when perfectly appeased, the sop was offered by him for submission. She noticed that even Mr. Whitford forbore to alarm the sentiment of authority in his cousin. If he did not breathe Sir

Willoughby, like the ladies Eleanor and Isabel, he would either acquiesce in a syllable or be silent. He never strongly dissented. The habit of the house, with its iron cap, was on him, as it was on the servants, and would be, oh, shudders of the shipwrecked that see their end in drowning! on the wife.

"When do I meet Miss Dale?" she inquired.

"This very evening, at dinner," replied Sir Willoughby.

Then, thought she, there is that to look forward to.

She indulged her morbid fit, and shut up her senses that she might live in the anticipation of meeting Miss Dale; and, long before the approach of the hour, her hope of encountering any other than another dull adherent of Sir Willoughby had fled. So she was languid for two of the three minutes when she sat alone with Laetitia in the drawing-room before the rest had assembled.

"It is Miss Middleton?" Laetitia said, advancing to her. "My jealousy tells me; for you have won my boy Crossjay's heart, and done more to bring him to obedience in a few minutes than we have been able to do in months."

"His wild flowers were so welcome to me," said Clara.

"He was very modest over them. And I mention it because boys of his age usually thrust their gifts in our faces fresh as they pluck them, and you were to be treated quite differently."

"We saw his good fairy's hand."

"She resigns her office; but I pray you not to love him too well in return; for he ought to be away reading with one of those men who get boys through their examinations. He is, we all think, a born sailor, and his place is in the navy."

"But, Miss Dale, I love him so well that I shall consult his interests and not my own selfishness. And, if I have influence, he will not be a week with you longer. It should have been spoke of to-day; I must have been in some dream; I thought of it, I know. I will not forget to do what may be in my power."

Clara's heart sank at the renewed engagement and plighting of herself involved in her asking a favour, urging any sort of petition. The cause was good. Besides, she was plighted already.

"Sir Willoughby is really fond of the boy," she said.

"He is fond of exciting fondness in the boy," said Miss Dale. "He has not dealt much with children. I am sure he likes Crossjay; he could not otherwise be so forbearing; it is wonderful what he endures and laughs at."

Sir Willoughby entered. The presence of Miss Dale illuminated him as the burning taper lights up consecrated plate. Deeply respecting her for her constancy, esteeming her for a model of taste, he was never in her society without that happy consciousness of shining which calls forth the treasures of the man; and these it is no exaggeration to term unbounded, when all that comes from him is taken for gold.

The effect of the evening on Clara was to render her distrustful of her later antagonism. She had unknowingly passed into the spirit of Miss Dale, Sir Willoughby aiding; for she could sympathize with the view of his constant admirer on seeing him so cordially and smoothly gay; as one may say, domestically witty, the most agreeable form of wit. Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson discerned that he had a leg of physical perfection; Miss Dale distinguished it in him in the vital essence; and before either of these ladies he was not simply a radiant, he was a productive creature, so true it is that praise is our fructifying sun. He had even a touch of the romantic air which Clara remembered as her first impression of the favourite of the county; and strange she found it to observe this resuscitated idea confronting her experience. What if she had been captious, inconsiderate? Oh, blissful revival of the sense of peace! The happiness of pain departing was all that she looked for, and her conception of liberty was to learn to love her chains, provided that he would spare her the caress. In this mood she sternly condemned Constantia. "We must try to do good; we must not be thinking of ourselves; we must make the best of our path in life." She revolved these infantile precepts with humble earnestness; and not to be tardy in her striving to do good, with a remote but pleasurable glimpse of Mr. Whitford

hearing of it, she took the opportunity to speak to Sir Willoughby on the subject of young Crossjay, at a moment when, alighting from horseback, he had shown himself to advantage among a gallant cantering company. He showed to great advantage on horseback among men, being invariably the best mounted, and he had a cavalierly style, possibly cultivated, but effective. On foot his raised head and half-dropped eyelids too palpably assumed superiority. "Willoughby, I want to speak," she said, and shrank as she spoke, lest he should immediately grant everything in the mood of courtship, and invade her respite; "I want to speak of that dear boy Crossjay. You are fond of him. He is rather an idle boy here, and wasting time . . ."

"Now you are here, and when you are here for good, my love for good . . ." he fluttered away in loverliness, forgetful of Crossjay, whom he presently took up. "The boy recognizes his most sovereign lady, and will do your bidding, though you should order him to learn his lessons! Who would not obey? Your beauty alone commands. But what is there beyond?—a grace, a hue divine, that sets you not so much above as apart, severed from the world."

Clara produced an active smile in duty, and pursued: "If Crossjay were sent at once to some house where men prepare boys to pass for the navy, he would have his chance, and the navy is distinctly his profession. His father is a brave man, and he inherits bravery, and he has a passion for a sailor's life; only he must be able to pass his examination, and he has not much time."

Sir Willoughby gave a slight laugh in sad amusement.

"My dear Clara, you adore the world; and I suppose you have to learn that there is not a question in this wrangling world about which we have not disputes and contests ad nauseam. I have my notions concerning Crossjay, Vernon has his. I should wish to make a gentleman of him. Vernon marks him for a sailor. But Vernon is the lad's protector, I am not. Vernon took him from his father to instruct him, and he has a right to say what shall be done with him. I do not interfere. Only I can't prevent the lad from liking me. Old Vernon seems to feel it. I assure you I hold entirely aloof. If I am asked, in spite of my disapproval of Vernon's plans for the boy, to subscribe to his departure, I can but shrug, because, as you see, I have never opposed. Old Vernon pays for him, he is the master, he decides, and if Crossjay is blown from the masthead in a gale, the blame does not fall on me. These, my dear, are matters of reason."

"I would not venture to intrude on them," said Clara, "if I had not suspected that money . . ."

"Yes," cried Willoughby; "and it is a part. And let old Vernon surrender the boy to me, I will immediately relieve him of the burden on his purse. Can I do that, my dear, for the furtherance of a scheme I condemn? The point is thus: latterly I have invited Captain Patterne to visit me: just previous to his departure for the African Coast, where Government despatches Marines when there is no other way of killing them, I sent him a special invitation. He thanked me and curtly declined. The man, I may almost say, is my pensioner. Well, he calls himself a Patterne, he is undoubtedly a man of courage, he has elements of our blood, and the name. I think I am to be approved for desiring to make a better gentleman of the son than I behold in the father: and seeing that life from an early age on board ship has anything but made a gentleman of the father, I hold that I am right in shaping another course for the son."

"Naval officers . . ." Clara suggested.

"Some," said Willoughby. "But they must be men of birth, coming out of homes of good breeding. Strip them of the halo of the title of naval officers, and I fear you would not often say gentlemen when they step into a drawing-room. I went so far as to fancy I had some claim to make young Crossjay something different. It can be done: the Patterne comes out in his behaviour to you, my love; it can be done. But if I take him, I claim undisputed sway over him. I cannot make a gentleman of the fellow if I am to compete with this person and that. In fine, he must look up to me, he must have one model."

"Would you, then, provide for him subsequently?"

"According to his behaviour."

"Would not that be precarious for him?"

"More so than the profession you appear inclined to choose for him?"

"But there he would be under clear regulations."

"With me he would have to respond to affection."

"Would you secure to him a settled income? For an idle gentleman is bad enough; a penniless gentleman . . ."

"He has only to please me, my dear, and he will be launched and protected."

"But if he does not succeed in pleasing you?"

"Is it so difficult?"

"Oh!" Clara fretted.

"You see, my love, I answer you," said Sir Willoughby.

He resumed: "But let old Vernon have his trial with the lad. He has his own ideas. Let him carry them out. I shall watch the experiment."

Clara was for abandoning her task in sheer faintness.

"Is not the question one of money?" she said, shyly, knowing Mr.

Whitford to be poor.

"Old Vernon chooses to spend his money that way." replied Sir Willoughby. "If it saves him from breaking his shins and risking his neck on his Alps, we may consider it well employed."

"Yes," Clara's voice occupied a pause.

She seized her languor as it were a curling snake and cast it off. "But I understand that Mr. Whitford wants your assistance. Is he not—not rich? When he leaves the Hall to try his fortune in literature in London, he may not be so well able to support Crossjay and obtain the instruction necessary for the boy: and it would be generous to help him."

"Leaves the Hall!" exclaimed Willoughby. "I have not heard a word of it. He made a bad start at the beginning, and I should have thought that would have tamed him: had to throw over his Fellowship; ahem. Then he received a small legacy some time back, and wanted to be off to push his luck in Literature: rank gambling, as I told him. Londonizing can do him no good. I thought that nonsense of his was over years ago. What is it he has from me?—about a hundred and fifty a year: and it might be doubled for the asking: and all the books he requires: and these writers and scholars no sooner think of a book than they must have it. And do not suppose me to complain. I am a man who will not have a single shilling expended by those who serve immediately about my person. I confess to exacting that kind of dependency. Feudalism is not an objectionable thing if you can be sure of the lord. You know, Clara, and you should know me in my weakness too, I do not claim servitude, I stipulate for affection. I claim to be surrounded by persons loving me. And with one? . . . dearest! So that we two can shut out the world; we live what is the dream of others. Nothing imaginable can be sweeter. It is a veritable heaven on earth. To be the possessor of the whole of you! Your thoughts, hopes, all."

Sir Willoughby intensified his imagination to conceive more: he could not, or could not express it, and pursued: "But what is this talk of Vernon's leaving me? He cannot leave. He has barely a hundred a year of his own. You see, I consider him. I do not speak of the ingratitude of the wish to leave. You know, my dear, I have a deadly abhorrence of partings and such like. As far as I can, I surround myself with healthy people specially to guard myself from having my feelings wrung; and excepting Miss Dale, whom you like—my darling does like her?"—the answer satisfied him; "with that one exception, I am not aware of a case that threatens to torment me. And here is a man, under no compulsion, talking of leaving the Hall! In the name of goodness, why? But why? Am I to imagine that the sight of perfect felicity distresses him? We are told that the world is 'desperately wicked'. I do not like to think it of my friends; yet otherwise their conduct is often hard to account for."

"If it were true, you would not punish Crossjay?" Clara feebly interposed.

"I should certainly take Crossjay and make a man of him after my own model, my dear. But who spoke to you of this?"

"Mr. Whitford himself. And let me give you my opinion, Willoughby, that he will take Crossjay with him rather than leave him, if there is a fear of the boy's missing his chance of the navy."

"Marines appear to be in the ascendant," said Sir Willoughby, astonished at the locution and pleading in the interests of a son of one. "Then Crossjay he must take. I cannot accept half the boy. I am," he laughed, "the legitimate claimant in the application for judgement before the wise king. Besides, the boy has a dose of my blood in him; he has none of Vernon's, not one drop."

"Ah!"

"You see, my love?"

"Oh, I do see; yes."

"I put forth no pretensions to perfection," Sir Willoughby continued. "I can bear a considerable amount of provocation; still I can be offended, and I am unforgiving when I have been offended. Speak to Vernon, if a natural occasion should spring up. I shall, of course, have to speak to him. You may, Clara, have observed a man who passed me on the road as we were cantering home, without a hint of a touch to his hat. That man is a tenant of mine, farming six hundred acres, Hoppner by name: a man bound to remember that I have, independently of my position, obliged him frequently. His lease of my ground has five years to run. I must say I detest the churlishness of our country population, and where it comes across me I chastise it. Vernon is a different matter: he will only require to be spoken to. One would fancy the old fellow laboured now and then under a magnetic attraction to beggary. My love," he bent to her and checked their pacing up and down, "you are tired?"

"I am very tired to-day," said Clara.

His arm was offered. She laid two fingers on it, and they dropped when he attempted to press them to his rib.

He did not insist. To walk beside her was to share in the stateliness of her walking.

He placed himself at a corner of the door-way for her to pass him into the house, and doated on her cheek, her ear, and the softly dusky nape of her neck, where this way and that the little lighter-coloured irreclaimable curls running truant from the comb and the knot—curls, half-curls, root-curls, vine-ringlets, wedding-rings, fledgling feathers, tufts of down, blown wisps—waved or fell, waved over or up or involutedly, or strayed, loose and downward, in the form of small silken paws, hardly any of them much thicker than a crayon shading, cunninger than long round locks of gold to trick the heart.

Laetitia had nothing to show resembling such beauty.

CHAPTER X
IN WHICH SIR WILLOUGHBY CHANCES TO SUPPLY THE TITLE FOR HIMSELF

Now Vernon was useful to his cousin; he was the accomplished secretary of a man who governed his estate shrewdly and diligently, but had been once or twice unlucky in his judgements pronounced from the magisterial bench as a justice of the Peace, on which occasions a half column of trenchant English supported by an apposite classical quotation impressed Sir Willoughby with the value of such a secretary in a controversy. He had no fear of that fiery dragon of scorching breath—the newspaper press—while Vernon was his right hand man; and as he intended to enter Parliament, he foresaw the greater need of him. Furthermore, he liked his cousin to date his own controversial writings, on classical subjects, from Patterne Hall. It caused his house to shine in a foreign field; proved the service of scholarship by giving it a flavour of a bookish aristocracy that, though not so well worth having, and indeed in itself contemptible, is above the material and titular; one cannot quite say how. There, however, is the flavour. Dainty sauces are the life, the nobility, of famous dishes; taken alone, the former would be nauseating, the latter plebeian. It is thus, or somewhat so, when you have a poet, still better a scholar, attached to your household. Sir Willoughby deserved to have him, for he was above his county friends in his apprehension of the flavour bestowed by the man; and having him, he had made them conscious of their deficiency. His cook, M. Dehors, pupil of the great Godefroy, was not the only French cook in the county; but his cousin and secretary, the rising scholar, the elegant essayist, was an unparalleled decoration; of his kind, of course. Personally, we laugh at him; you had better not, unless you are fain to show that the higher world of polite literature is unknown to you. Sir Willoughby could create an abject silence at a county dinner-table by an allusion to Vernon "at work at home upon his Etruscans or his Dorians"; and he paused a moment to let the allusion sink, laughed audibly to himself over his eccentric cousin, and let him rest.

In addition, Sir Willoughby abhorred the loss of a familiar face in his domestic circle. He thought ill of servants who could accept their dismissal without petitioning to stay with him. A servant that gave warning partook of a certain fiendishness. Vernon's project of leaving the Hall offended and alarmed the sensitive gentleman. "I shall have to hand Letty Dale to him at last!" he thought, yielding in bitter generosity to the conditions imposed on him by the ungenerousness of another. For, since his engagement to Miss Middleton, his electrically forethoughtful mind had seen in Miss Dale, if she stayed in the neighbourhood, and remained unmarried, the governess of his infant children, often consulting with him. But here was a prospect dashed out. The two, then, may marry, and live in a cottage on the borders of his park; and Vernon can retain his post, and Laetitia her devotion. The risk of her casting it of had to be faced. Marriage has been known to have such an effect on the most faithful of women that a great passion fades to naught in their volatile bosoms when they have taken a husband. We see in women especially the triumph of the animal over the spiritual. Nevertheless, risks must be run for a purpose in view.

Having no taste for a discussion with Vernon, whom it was his habit to confound by breaking away from him abruptly when he had delivered his opinion, he left it to both the persons interesting themselves in young Crossjay to imagine that he was meditating on the question of the lad, and to imagine that it would be wise to leave him to meditate; for he could be preternaturally acute in reading any of his fellow-creatures if they crossed the current of his feelings. And, meanwhile, he instructed the ladies Eleanor and Isabel to bring Laetitia Dale on a visit to the Hall, where dinner-parties were soon to be given and a pleasing talker would be wanted, where also a woman of intellect, steeped in a splendid sentiment, hitherto a miracle of female constancy, might stir a younger woman to some

emulation. Definitely to resolve to bestow Laetitia upon Vernon was more than he could do; enough that he held the card.

Regarding Clara, his genius for perusing the heart which was not in perfect harmony with him through the series of responsive movements to his own, informed him of a something in her character that might have suggested to Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson her indefensible, absurd "rogue in porcelain". Idea there was none in that phrase; yet, if you looked on Clara as a delicately inimitable porcelain beauty, the suspicion of a delicately inimitable ripple over her features touched a thought of innocent roguery, wildwood roguery; the likeness to the costly and lovely substance appeared to admit a fitness in the dubious epithet. He detested but was haunted by the phrase.

She certainly had at times the look of the nymph that has gazed too long on the faun, and has unwittingly copied his lurking lip and long sliding eye. Her play with young Crossjay resembled a return of the lady to the cat; she flung herself into it as if her real vitality had been in suspense till she saw the boy. Sir Willoughby by no means disapproved of a physical liveliness that promised him health in his mate; but he began to feel in their conversations that she did not sufficiently think of making herself a nest for him. Steely points were opposed to him when he, figuratively, bared his bosom to be taken to the softest and fairest. She reasoned: in other words, armed her ignorance. She reasoned against him publicly, and lured Vernon to support her. Influence is to be counted for power, and her influence over Vernon was displayed in her persuading him to dance one evening at Lady Culmer's, after his melancholy exhibitions of himself in the art; and not only did she persuade him to stand up fronting her, she manoeuvred him through the dance like a clever boy cajoling a top to come to him without reeling, both to Vernon's contentment and to Sir Willoughby's; for he was the last man to object to a manifestation of power in his bride. Considering her influence with Vernon, he renewed the discourse upon young Crossjay; and, as he was addicted to system, he took her into his confidence, that she might be taught to look to him and act for him.

"Old Vernon has not spoken to you again of that lad?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Whitford has asked me."

"He does not ask me, my dear!"

"He may fancy me of greater aid than I am."

"You see, my love, if he puts Crossjay on me, he will be off. He has this craze for 'enlisting' his pen in London, as he calls it; and I am accustomed to him; I don't like to think of him as a hack scribe, writing nonsense from dictation to earn a pitiful subsistence; I want him here; and, supposing he goes, he offends me; he loses a friend; and it will not be the first time that a friend has tried me too far; but if he offends me, he is extinct."

"Is what?" cried Clara, with a look of fright.

"He becomes to me at once as if he had never been. He is extinct."

"In spite of your affection?"

"On account of it, I might say. Our nature is mysterious, and mine as much so as any. Whatever my regrets, he goes out. This is not a language I talk to the world. I do the man no harm; I am not to be named unchristian. But . . . !"

Sir Willoughby mildly shrugged, and indicated a spreading out of the arms.

"But do, do talk to me as you talk to the world, Willoughby; give me some relief!"

"My own Clara, we are one. You should know me at my worst, we will say, if you like, as well as at my best."

"Should I speak too?"

"What could you have to confess?"

She hung silent; the wave of an insane resolution swelled in her bosom and subsided before she said, "Cowardice, incapacity to speak."

"Women!" said he.

We do not expect so much of women; the heroic virtues as little as the vices. They have not to unfold the scroll of character.

He resumed, and by his tone she understood that she was now in the inner temple of him: "I tell you these things; I quite acknowledge they do not elevate me. They help to constitute my character. I tell you most humbly that I have in me much—too much of the fallen archangel's pride."

Clara bowed her head over a sustained in-drawn breath.

"It must be pride," he said, in a reverie superinduced by her thoughtfulness over the revelation, and glorying in the black flames demoniacal wherewith he crowned himself.

"Can you not correct it?" said she.

He replied, profoundly vexed by disappointment: "I am what I am. It might be demonstrated to you mathematically that it is corrected by equivalents or substitutions in my character. If it be a failing—assuming that."

"It seems one to me: so cruelly to punish Mr. Whitford for seeking to improve his fortunes."

"He reflects on my share in his fortunes. He has had but to apply to me for his honorarium to be doubled."

"He wishes for independence."

"Independence of me!"

"Liberty!"

"At my expense!"

"Oh, Willoughby!"

"Ay, but this is the world, and I know it, my love; and beautiful as your incredulity may be, you will find it more comforting to confide in my knowledge of the selfishness of the world. My sweetest, you will?—you do! For a breath of difference between us is intolerable. Do you not feel how it breaks our magic ring? One small fissure, and we have the world with its muddy deluge!—But my subject was old Vernon. Yes, I pay for Crossjay, if Vernon consents to stay. I waive my own scheme for the lad, though I think it the better one. Now, then, to induce Vernon to stay. He has his ideas about staying under a mistress of the household; and therefore, not to contest it—he is a man of no argument; a sort of lunatic determination takes the place of it with old Vernon!—let him settle close by me, in one of my cottages; very well, and to settle him we must marry him."

"Who is there?" said Clara, beating for the lady in her mind.

"Women," said Willoughby, "are born match-makers, and the most persuasive is a young bride. With a man—and a man like old Vernon!—she is irresistible. It is my wish, and that arms you. It is your wish, that subjugates him. If he goes, he goes for good. If he stays, he is my friend. I deal simply with him, as with every one. It is the secret of authority. Now Miss Dale will soon lose her father. He exists on a pension; she has the prospect of having to leave the neighbourhood of the Hall, unless she is established near us. Her whole heart is in this region; it is the poor soul's passion. Count on her agreeing. But she will require a little wooing: and old Vernon wooing! Picture the scene to yourself, my love. His notion of wooing. I suspect, will be to treat the lady like a lexicon, and turn over the leaves for the word, and fly through the leaves for another word, and so get a sentence. Don't frown at the poor old fellow, my Clara; some have the language on their tongues, and some have not. Some are very dry sticks; manly men, honest fellows, but so cut away, so polished away from the sex, that they are in absolute want of outsiders to supply the silken filaments to attach them. Actually!" Sir Willoughby laughed in Clara's face to relax the dreamy stoniness of her look. "But I can assure you, my dearest, I have seen it. Vernon does not know how to speak—as we speak. He has, or he had, what is called a sneaking affection for Miss Dale. It was the most amusing thing possible; his courtship!—the air of a dog with an uneasy conscience, trying to reconcile himself with his master! We were all in fits of laughter. Of course it came to nothing."

"Will Mr. Whitford," said Clara, "offend you to extinction if he declines?"

Willoughby breathed an affectionate "Tush!" to her silliness.

"We bring them together, as we best can. You see, Clara, I desire, and I will make some sacrifices to detain him."

"But what do you sacrifice?—a cottage?" said Clara, combative at all points.

"An ideal, perhaps. I lay no stress on sacrifice. I strongly object to separations. And therefore, you will say, I prepare the ground for unions? Put your influence to good service, my love. I believe you could persuade him to give us the Highland fling on the drawing-room table."

"There is nothing to say to him of Crossjay?"

"We hold Crossjay in reserve."

"It is urgent."

"Trust me. I have my ideas. I am not idle. That boy bids fair for a capital horseman. Eventualities might . . ." Sir Willoughby murmured to himself, and addressing his bride, "The cavalry? If we put him into the cavalry, we might make a gentleman of him—not be ashamed of him. Or, under certain eventualities, the Guards. Think it over, my love. De Craye, who will, I suppose, act best man for me, supposing old Vernon to pull at the collar, is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Guards, a thorough gentleman—of the brainless class, if you like, but an elegant fellow; an Irishman; you will see him, and I should like to set a naval lieutenant beside him in a drawingroom, for you to compare them and consider the model you would choose for a boy you are interested in. Horace is grace and gallantry incarnate; fatuous, probably: I have always been too friendly with him to examine closely. He made himself one of my dogs, though my elder, and seemed to like to be at my heels. One of the few men's faces I can call admirably handsome;—with nothing behind it, perhaps. As Vernon says, 'a nothing picked by the vultures and bleached by the desert'. Not a bad talker, if you are satisfied with keeping up the ball. He will amuse you. Old Horace does not know how amusing he is!"

"Did Mr. Whitford say that of Colonel De Craye?"

"I forget the person of whom he said it. So you have noticed old Vernon's foible? Quote him one of his epigrams, and he is in motion head and heels! It is an infallible receipt for tuning him. If I want to have him in good temper, I have only to remark, 'as you said'. I straighten his back instantly."

"I," said Clara, "have noticed chiefly his anxiety concerning the boy; for which I admire him."

"Creditable, if not particularly far-sighted and sagacious. Well, then, my dear, attack him at once; lead him to the subject of our fair neighbour. She is to be our guest for a week or so, and the whole affair might be concluded far enough to fix him before she leaves. She is at present awaiting the arrival of a cousin to attend on her father. A little gentle pushing will precipitate old Vernon on his knees as far as he ever can unbend them; but when a lady is made ready to expect a declaration, you know, why, she does not—does she?—demand the entire formula?—though some beautiful fortresses . . ."

He enfolded her. Clara was growing hardened to it. To this she was fated; and not seeing any way to escape, she invoked a friendly frost to strike her blood, and passed through the minute unfeelingly. Having passed it, she reproached herself for making so much of it, thinking it a lesser endurance than to listen to him. What could she do?—she was caged; by her word of honour, as she at one time thought; by her cowardice, at another; and dimly sensible that the latter was a stronger lock than the former, she mused on the abstract question whether a woman's cowardice can be so absolute as to cast her into the jaws of her aversion. Is it to be conceived? Is there not a moment when it stands at bay? But haggard-visaged Honour then starts up claiming to be dealt with in turn; for having courage restored to her, she must have the courage to break with honour, she must dare to be faithless, and not merely say, I will be brave, but be brave enough to be dishonourable. The cage of a plighted woman hungering for her disengagement has two keepers, a noble and a vile; where on earth is creature so dreadfully enclosed? It lies with her to overcome what degrades her, that she may win to liberty by overcoming what exalts.

Contemplating her situation, this idea (or vapour of youth taking the god-like semblance of an idea) sprang, born of her present sickness, in Clara's mind; that it must be an ill-constructed tumbling

world where the hour of ignorance is made the creator of our destiny by being forced to the decisive elections upon which life's main issues hang. Her teacher had brought her to contemplate his view of the world.

She thought likewise: how must a man despise women, who can expose himself as he does to me!

Miss Middleton owed it to Sir Willoughby Patterne that she ceased to think like a girl. When had the great change begun? Glancing back, she could imagine that it was near the period we call in love the first—almost from the first. And she was led to imagine it through having become barred from imagining her own emotions of that season. They were so dead as not to arise even under the form of shadows in fancy. Without imputing blame to him, for she was reasonable so far, she deemed herself a person entrapped. In a dream somehow she had committed herself to a life-long imprisonment; and, oh terror! not in a quiet dungeon; the barren walls closed round her, talked, called for ardour, expected admiration.

She was unable to say why she could not give it; why she retreated more and more inwardly; why she invoked the frost to kill her tenderest feelings. She was in revolt, until a whisper of the day of bells reduced her to blank submission; out of which a breath of peace drew her to revolt again in gradual rapid stages, and once more the aspect of that singular day of merry blackness felled her to earth. It was alive, it advanced, it had a mouth, it had a song. She received letters of bridesmaids writing of it, and felt them as waves that hurl a log of wreck to shore. Following which afflicting sense of antagonism to the whole circle sweeping on with her, she considered the possibility of her being in a commencement of madness. Otherwise might she not be accused of a capriciousness quite as deplorable to consider? She had written to certain of these young ladies not very long since of this gentleman—how?—in what tone? And was it her madness then?—her recovery now? It seemed to her that to have written of him enthusiastically resembled madness more than to shudder away from the union; but standing alone, opposing all she has consented to set in motion, is too strange to a girl for perfect justification to be found in reason when she seeks it.

Sir Willoughby was destined himself to supply her with that key of special insight which revealed and stamped him in a title to fortify her spirit of revolt, consecrate it almost.

The popular physician of the county and famous anecdotal wit, Dr. Corney, had been a guest at dinner overnight, and the next day there was talk of him, and of the resources of his art displayed by Armand Dehors on his hearing that he was to minister to the tastes of a gathering of hommes d'esprit. Sir Willoughby glanced at Dehors with his customary benevolent irony in speaking of the persons, great in their way, who served him. "Why he cannot give us daily so good a dinner, one must, I suppose, go to French nature to learn. The French are in the habit of making up for all their deficiencies with enthusiasm. They have no reverence; if I had said to him, 'I want something particularly excellent, Dehors', I should have had a commonplace dinner. But they have enthusiasm on draught, and that is what we must pull at. Know one Frenchman and you know France. I have had Dehors under my eye two years, and I can mount his enthusiasm at a word. He took hommes d'esprit to denote men of letters. Frenchmen have destroyed their nobility, so, for the sake of excitement, they put up the literary man—not to worship him; that they can't do; it's to put themselves in a state of effervescence. They will not have real greatness above them, so they have sham. That they may justly call it equality, perhaps! Ay, for all your shake of the head, my good Vernon! You see, human nature comes round again, try as we may to upset it, and the French only differ from us in wading through blood to discover that they are at their old trick once more; 'I am your equal, sir, your born equal. Oh! you are a man of letters? Allow me to be in a bubble about you!' Yes, Vernon, and I believe the fellow looks up to you as the head of the establishment. I am not jealous. Provided he attends to his functions! There's a French philosopher who's for naming the days of the year after the birthdays of French men of letters. Voltaire-day, Rousseau-day, Racine-day, so on. Perhaps Vernon will inform us who takes April 1st."

"A few trifling errors are of no consequence when you are in the vein of satire," said Vernon. "Be satisfied with knowing a nation in the person of a cook."

"They may be reading us English off in a jockey!" said Dr. Middleton. "I believe that jockeys are the exchange we make for cooks; and our neighbours do not get the best of the bargain."

"No; but, my dear good Vernon, it's nonsensical," said Sir Willoughby; "why be bawling every day the name of men of letters?"

"Philosophers."

"Well, philosophers."

"Of all countries and times. And they are the benefactors of humanity."

"Bene—!" Sir Willoughby's derisive laugh broke the word. "There's a pretension in all that, irreconcilable with English sound sense. Surely you see it?"

"We might," said Vernon, "if you like, give alternative titles to the days, or have alternating days, devoted to our great families that performed meritorious deeds upon such a day."

The rebel Clara, delighting in his banter, was heard: "Can we furnish sufficient?"

"A poet or two could help us."

"Perhaps a statesman," she suggested.

"A pugilist, if wanted."

"For blowy days," observed Dr. Middleton, and hastily in penitence picked up the conversation he had unintentionally prostrated, with a general remark on new-fangled notions, and a word aside to Vernon; which created the blissful suspicion in Clara that her father was indisposed to second Sir Willoughby's opinions even when sharing them.

Sir Willoughby had led the conversation. Displeased that the lead should be withdrawn from him, he turned to Clara and related one of the after-dinner anecdotes of Dr. Corney; and another, with a vast deal of human nature in it, concerning a valetudinarian gentleman, whose wife chanced to be desperately ill, and he went to the physicians assembled in consultation outside the sick-room, imploring them by all he valued, and in tears, to save the poor patient for him, saying: "She is everything to me, everything; and if she dies I am compelled to run the risks of marrying again; I must marry again; for she has accustomed me so to the little attentions of a wife, that in truth I can't. I can't lose her! She must be saved!" And the loving husband of any devoted wife wrung his hands.

"Now, there, Clara, there you have the Egoist," added Sir Willoughby.

"That is the perfect Egoist. You see what he comes to—and his wife!

The man was utterly unconscious of giving vent to the grossest selfishness."

"An Egoist!" said Clara.

"Beware of marrying an Egoist, my dear!" He bowed gallantly; and so blindly fatuous did he appear to her, that she could hardly believe him guilty of uttering the words she had heard from him, and kept her eyes on him vacantly till she came to a sudden full stop in the thoughts directing her gaze. She looked at Vernon, she looked at her father, and at the ladies Eleanor and Isabel. None of them saw the man in the word, none noticed the word; yet this word was her medical herb, her illuminating lamp, the key of him (and, alas, but she thought it by feeling her need of one), the advocate pleading in apology for her. Egoist! She beheld him—unfortunate, self-designated man that he was!—in his good qualities as well as bad under the implacable lamp, and his good were drenched in his first person singular. His generosity roared of I louder than the rest. Conceive him at the age of Dr. Corney's hero: "Pray, save my wife for me. I shall positively have to get another if I lose her, and one who may not love me half so well, or understand the peculiarities of my character and appreciate my attitudes." He was in his thirty-second year, therefore a young man, strong and healthy, yet his garrulous return to his principal theme, his emphasis on I and me, lent him the seeming of an old man spotted with decaying youth.

"Beware of marrying an Egoist."

Would he help her to escape? The idea of the scene ensuing upon her petition for release, and the being dragged round the walls of his egoism, and having her head knocked against the corners, alarmed her with sensations of sickness.

There was the example of Constantia. But that desperate young lady had been assisted by a gallant, loving gentleman; she had met a Captain Oxford.

Clara brooded on those two until they seemed heroic. She questioned herself. Could she . . . ? were one to come? She shut her eyes in languor, leaning the wrong way of her wishes, yet unable to say No.

Sir Willoughby had positively said beware! Marrying him would be a deed committed in spite of his express warning. She went so far as to conceive him subsequently saying: "I warned you." She conceived the state of marriage with him as that of a woman tied not to a man of heart, but to an obelisk lettered all over with hieroglyphics, and everlastingly hearing him expound them, relishing renewing his lectures on them.

Full surely this immovable stone-man would not release her. This petrifaction of egoism would from amazedly to austerely refuse the petition. His pride would debar him from understanding her desire to be released. And if she resolved on it, without doing it straightway in Constantia's manner, the miserable bewilderment of her father, for whom such a complication would be a tragic dilemma, had to be thought of. Her father, with all his tenderness for his child, would make a stand on the point of honour; though certain to yield to her, he would be distressed in a tempest of worry; and Dr. Middleton thus afflicted threw up his arms, he shunned books, shunned speech, and resembled a castaway on the ocean, with nothing between himself and his calamity. As for the world, it would be barking at her heels. She might call the man she wrenched her hand from, Egoist; jilt, the world would call her. She dwelt bitterly on her agreement with Sir Willoughby regarding the world, laying it to his charge that her garden had become a place of nettles, her horizon an unlighted fourth side of a square.

Clara passed from person to person visiting the Hall. There was universal, and as she was compelled to see, honest admiration of the host. Not a soul had a suspicion of his cloaked nature. Her agony of hypocrisy in accepting their compliments as the bride of Sir Willoughby Patterne was poorly moderated by contempt of them for their infatuation. She tried to cheat herself with the thought that they were right and that she was the foolish and wicked inconstant. In her anxiety to strangle the rebelliousness which had been communicated from her mind to her blood, and was present with her whether her mind was in action or not, she encouraged the ladies Eleanor and Isabel to magnify the fictitious man of their idolatry, hoping that she might enter into them imaginatively, that she might to some degree subdue herself to the necessity of her position. If she partly succeeded in stupefying her antagonism, five minutes of him undid the work.

He requested her to wear the Patterne pearls for a dinner-party of grand ladies, telling her that he would commission Miss Isabel to take them to her. Clara begged leave to decline them, on the plea of having no right to wear them. He laughed at her modish modesty. "But really it might almost be classed with affectation," said he. "I give you the right. Virtually you are my wife."

"No."

"Before heaven?"

"No. We are not married."

"As my betrothed, will you wear them, to please me?"

"I would rather not. I cannot wear borrowed jewels. These I cannot wear. Forgive me, I cannot. And, Willoughby," she said, scorning herself for want of fortitude in not keeping to the simply blunt provocative refusal, "does one not look like a victim decked for the sacrifice?—the garlanded heifer you see on Greek vases, in that array of jewellery?"

"My dear Clara!" exclaimed the astonished lover, "how can you term them borrowed, when they are the Patterne jewels, our family heirloom pearls, unmatched, I venture to affirm, decidedly

in my county and many others, and passing to the use of the mistress of the house in the natural course of things?"

"They are yours, they are not mine."

"Prospectively they are yours."

"It would be to anticipate the fact to wear them."

"With my consent, my approval? at my request?"

"I am not yet . . . I never may be . . ."

"My wife?" He laughed triumphantly, and silenced her by manly smothering.

Her scruple was perhaps an honourable one, he said. Perhaps the jewels were safer in their iron box. He had merely intended a surprise and gratification to her.

Courage was coming to enable her to speak more plainly, when his discontinuing to insist on her wearing the jewels, under an appearance of deference of her wishes, disarmed her by touching her sympathies.

She said, however, "I fear we do not often agree, Willoughby."

"When you are a little older!" was the irritating answer.

"It would then be too late to make the discovery."

"The discovery, I apprehend, is not imperative, my love."

"It seems to me that our minds are opposed."

"I should," said he, "have been awake to it at a single indication, be sure."

"But I know," she pursued, "I have learned that the ideal of conduct for women is to subject their minds to the part of an accompaniment."

"For women, my love? my wife will be in natural harmony with me."

"Ah!" She compressed her lips. The yawn would come. "I am sleepier here than anywhere."

"Ours, my Clara, is the finest air of the kingdom. It has the effect of sea-air."

"But if I am always asleep here?"

"We shall have to make a public exhibition of the Beauty."

This dash of his liveliness defeated her.

She left him, feeling the contempt of the brain feverishly quickened and fine-pointed, for the brain chewing the cud in the happy pastures of unawakedness. So violent was the fever, so keen her introspection, that she spared few, and Vernon was not among them. Young Crossjay, whom she considered the least able of all to act as an ally, was the only one she courted with a real desire to please him, he was the one she affectionately envied; he was the youngest, the freest, he had the world before him, and he did not know how horrible the world was, or could be made to look. She loved the boy from expecting nothing of him. Others, Vernon Whitford, for instance, could help, and moved no hand. He read her case. A scrutiny so penetrating under its air of abstract thoughtfulness, though his eyes did but rest on her a second or two, signified that he read her line by line, and to the end—excepting what she thought of him for probing her with that sharp steel of insight without a purpose.

She knew her mind's injustice. It was her case, her lamentable case—the impatient panic-stricken nerves of a captured wild creature which cried for help. She exaggerated her sufferings to get strength to throw them off, and lost it in the recognition that they were exaggerated: and out of the conflict issued recklessness, with a cry as wild as any coming of madness; for she did not blush in saying to herself. "If some one loved me!" Before hearing of Constantia, she had mused upon liberty as a virgin Goddess—men were out of her thoughts; even the figure of a rescuer, if one dawned in her mind, was more angel than hero. That fair childish maidenliness had ceased. With her body straining in her dragon's grasp, with the savour of loathing, unable to contend, unable to speak aloud, she began to speak to herself, and all the health of her nature made her outcry womanly: "If I were loved!"—not for the sake of love, but for free breathing; and her utterance of it was to insure life and enduringness to the wish, as the yearning of a mother on a drowning ship is to get her infant to shore. "If some noble gentleman could see me as I am and not disdain to aid me! Oh! to be caught

up out of this prison of thorns and brambles. I cannot tear my own way out. I am a coward. My cry for help confesses that. A beckoning of a finger would change me, I believe. I could fly bleeding and through hootings to a comrade. Oh! a comrade! I do not want a lover. I should find another Egoist, not so bad, but enough to make me take a breath like death. I could follow a soldier, like poor Sally or Molly. He stakes his life for his country, and a woman may be proud of the worst of men who do that. Constantia met a soldier. Perhaps she prayed and her prayer was answered. She did ill. But, oh, how I love her for it! His name was Harry Oxford. Papa would call him her Perseus. She must have felt that there was no explaining what she suffered. She had only to act, to plunge. First she fixed her mind on Harry Oxford. To be able to speak his name and see him awaiting her, must have been relief, a reprieve. She did not waver, she cut the links, she signed herself over. Oh, brave girl! what do you think of me? But I have no Harry Whitford, I am alone. Let anything be said against women; we must be very bad to have such bad things written of us: only, say this, that to ask them to sign themselves over by oath and ceremony, because of an ignorant promise, to the man they have been mistaken in, is . . . it is—" the sudden consciousness that she had put another name for Oxford, struck her a buffet, drowning her in crimson.

CHAPTER XI
THE DOUBLE-BLOSSOM WILD CHERRY-TREE

Sir Willoughby chose a moment when Clara was with him and he had a good retreat through folding-windows to the lawn, in case of cogency on the enemy's part, to attack his cousin regarding the preposterous plot to upset the family by a scamper to London: "By the way, Vernon, what is this you've been mumbling to everybody save me, about leaving us to pitch yourself into the stew-pot and be made broth of? London is no better, and you are fit for considerably better. Don't, I beg you, continue to annoy me. Take a run abroad, if you are restless. Take two or three months, and join us as we are travelling home; and then think of settling, pray. Follow my example, if you like. You can have one of my cottages, or a place built for you. Anything to keep a man from destroying the sense of stability about one. In London, my dear old fellow, you lose your identity. What are you there? I ask you, what? One has the feeling of the house crumbling when a man is perpetually for shifting and cannot fix himself. Here you are known, you can study at your ease; up in London you are nobody; I tell you honestly, I feel it myself, a week of London literally drives me home to discover the individual where I left him. Be advised. You don't mean to go."

"I have the intention," said Vernon.

"Why?"

"I've mentioned it to you."

"To my face?"

"Over your shoulder is generally the only chance you give me."

"You have not mentioned it to me, to my knowledge. As to the reason, I might hear a dozen of your reasons, and I should not understand one. It's against your interests and against my wishes. Come, friend, I am not the only one you distress. Why, Vernon, you yourself have said that the English would be very perfect Jews if they could manage to live on the patriarchal system. You said it, yes, you said it!—but I recollect it clearly. Oh, as for your double-meanings, you said the thing, and you jeered at the incapacity of English families to live together, on account of bad temper; and now you are the first to break up our union! I decidedly do not profess to be a perfect Jew, but I do . . ."

Sir Willoughby caught signs of a probably smiling commerce between his bride and his cousin. He raised his face, appeared to be consulting his eyelids, and resolved to laugh: "Well, I own it. I do like the idea of living patriarchally." He turned to Clara. "The Rev. Doctor one of us!"

"My father?" she said.

"Why not?"

"Papa's habits are those of a scholar."

"That you might not be separated from him, my dear!"

Clara thanked Sir Willoughby for the kindness of thinking of her father, mentally analysing the kindness, in which at least she found no unkindness, scarcely egoism, though she knew it to be there.

"We might propose it," said he.

"As a compliment?"

"If he would condescend to accept it as a compliment. These great scholars! . . . And if Vernon goes, our inducement for Dr. Middleton to stay . . . But it is too absurd for discussion . . . Oh, Vernon, about Master Crossjay; I will see to it."

He was about to give Vernon his shoulder and step into the garden, when Clara said, "You will have Crossjay trained for the navy, Willoughby? There is not a day to lose."

"Yes, yes; I will see to it. Depend on me for holding the young rascal in view."

He presented his hand to her to lead her over the step to the gravel, surprised to behold how flushed she was.

She responded to the invitation by putting her hand forth from a bent elbow, with hesitating fingers. "It should not be postponed, Willoughby."

Her attitude suggested a stipulation before she touched him.

"It's an affair of money, as you know, Willoughby," said Vernon. "If I'm in London, I can't well provide for the boy for some time to come, or it's not certain that I can."

"Why on earth should you go?"

"That's another matter. I want you to take my place with him."

"In which case the circumstances are changed. I am responsible for him, and I have a right to bring him up according to my own prescription."

"We are likely to have one idle lout the more."

"I guarantee to make a gentleman of him."

"We have too many of your gentlemen already."

"You can't have enough, my good Vernon."

"They're the national apology for indolence. Training a penniless boy to be one of them is nearly as bad as an education in a thieves' den; he will be just as much at war with society, if not game for the police."

"Vernon, have you seen Crossjay's father, the now Captain of Marines? I think you have."

"He's a good man and a very gallant officer."

"And in spite of his qualities he's a cub, and an old cub. He is a captain now, but he takes that rank very late, you will own. There you have what you call a good man, undoubtedly a gallant officer, neutralized by the fact that he is not a gentleman. Holding intercourse with him is out of the question. No wonder Government declines to advance him rapidly. Young Crossjay does not bear your name. He bears mine, and on that point alone I should have a voice in the settlement of his career. And I say emphatically that a drawing-room approval of a young man is the best certificate for his general chances in life. I know of a City of London merchant of some sort, and I know a firm of lawyers, who will have none but University men at their office; at least, they have the preference."

"Crossjay has a bullet head, fit neither for the University nor the drawing-room," said Vernon; "equal to fighting and dying for you, and that's all."

Sir Willoughby contented himself with replying, "The lad is a favourite of mine."

His anxiety to escape a rejoinder caused him to step into the garden, leaving Clara behind him. "My love!" said he, in apology, as he turned to her. She could not look stern, but she had a look without a dimple to soften it, and her eyes shone. For she had wagered in her heart that the dialogue she provoked upon Crossjay would expose the Egoist. And there were other motives, wrapped up and intertwisted, unrecognizable, sufficient to strike her with worse than the flush of her self-knowledge of wickedness when she detained him to speak of Crossjay before Vernon.

At last it had been seen that she was conscious of suffering in her association with this Egoist! Vernon stood for the world taken into her confidence. The world, then, would not think so ill of her, she thought hopefully, at the same time that she thought most evilly of herself. But self-accusations were for the day of reckoning; she would and must have the world with her, or the belief that it was coming to her, in the terrible struggle she foresaw within her horizon of self, now her utter boundary. She needed it for the inevitable conflict. Little sacrifices of her honesty might be made. Considering how weak she was, how solitary, how dismally entangled, daily disgraced beyond the power of any veiling to conceal from her fiery sensations, a little hypocrisy was a poor girl's natural weapon. She crushed her conscientious mind with the assurance that it was magnifying trifles: not entirely unaware that she was thereby preparing it for a convenient blindness in the presence of dread alternatives; but the pride of laying such stress on small sins gave her purity a blush of pleasure and overcame the inner warning. In truth she dared not think evilly of herself for long, sailing into battle as she was. Nuns and anchorites may; they have leisure. She regretted the forfeits she had to pay for self-assistance, and, if it might be won, the world's; regretted, felt the peril of the loss, and took them up and flung them.

"You see, old Vernon has no argument," Willoughby said to her.

He drew her hand more securely on his arm to make her sensible that she leaned on a pillar of strength.

"Whenever the little brain is in doubt, perplexed, undecided which course to adopt, she will come to me, will she not? I shall always listen," he resumed, soothingly. "My own! and I to you when the world vexes me. So we round our completeness. You will know me; you will know me in good time. I am not a mystery to those to whom I unfold myself. I do not pretend to mystery: yet, I will confess, your home—your heart's—Willoughby is not exactly identical with the Willoughby before the world. One must be armed against that rough beast."

Certain is the vengeance of the young upon monotony; nothing more certain. They do not scheme it, but sameness is a poison to their systems; and vengeance is their heartier breathing, their stretch of the limbs, run in the fields; nature avenges them.

"When does Colonel De Craye arrive?" said Clara.

"Horace? In two or three days. You wish him to be on the spot to learn his part, my love?"

She had not flown forward to the thought of Colonel De Craye's arrival; she knew not why she had mentioned him; but now she flew back, shocked, first into shadowy subterfuge, and then into the criminal's dock.

"I do not wish him to be here. I do not know that he has a part to learn. I have no wish. Willoughby, did you not say I should come to you and you would listen?—will you listen? I am so commonplace that I shall not be understood by you unless you take my words for the very meaning of the words. I am unworthy. I am volatile. I love my liberty. I want to be free . . ."

"Flitch!" he called.

It sounded necromantic.

"Pardon me, my love," he said. "The man you see yonder violates my express injunction that he is not to come on my grounds, and here I find him on the borders of my garden!"

Sir Willoughby waved his hand to the abject figure of a man standing to intercept him.

"Volatile, unworthy, liberty—my dearest!" he bent to her when the man had appeased him by departing, "you are at liberty within the law, like all good women; I shall control and direct your volatility; and your sense of worthiness must be re-established when we are more intimate; it is timidity. The sense of unworthiness is a guarantee of worthiness ensuing. I believe I am in the vein of a sermon! Whose the fault? The sight of that man was annoying. Flitch was a stable-boy, groom, and coachman, like his father before him, at the Hall thirty years; his father died in our service. Mr. Flitch had not a single grievance here; only one day the demon seizes him with the notion of bettering himself he wants his independence, and he presents himself to me with a story of a shop in our county town.—Flitch! remember, if you go you go for good.—Oh, he quite comprehended.—Very well; good-bye, Flitch;—the man was respectful: he looked the fool he was very soon to turn out to be. Since then, within a period of several years, I have had him, against my express injunctions, ten times on my grounds. It's curious to calculate. Of course the shop failed, and Flitch's independence consists in walking about with his hands in his empty pockets, and looking at the Hall from some elevation near."

"Is he married? Has he children?" said Clara.

"Nine; and a wife that cannot cook or sew or wash linen."

"You could not give him employment?"

"After his having dismissed himself?"

"It might be overlooked."

"Here he was happy. He decided to go elsewhere, to be free—of course, of my yoke. He quitted my service against my warning. Flitch, we will say, emigrated with his wife and children, and the ship foundered. He returns, but his place is filled; he is a ghost here, and I object to ghosts."

"Some work might be found for him."

"It will be the same with old Vernon, my dear. If he goes, he goes for good. It is the vital principle of my authority to insist on that. A dead leaf might as reasonably demand to return to the tree. Once off, off for all eternity! I am sorry, but such was your decision, my friend. I have, you see, Clara, elements in me—"

"Dreadful!"

"Exert your persuasive powers with Vernon. You can do well-nigh what you will with the old fellow. We have Miss Dale this evening for a week or two. Lead him to some ideas of her.—Elements in me, I was remarking, which will no more bear to be handled carelessly than gunpowder. At the same time, there is no reason why they should not be respected, managed with some degree of regard for me and attention to consequences. Those who have not done so have repented."

"You do not speak to others of the elements in you," said Clara.

"I certainly do not: I have but one bride," was his handsome reply.

"Is it fair to me that you should show me the worst of you?"

"All myself, my own?"

His ingratiating droop and familiar smile rendered "All myself" so affectionately meaningful in its happy reliance upon her excess of love, that at last she understood she was expected to worship him and uphold him for whatsoever he might be, without any estimation of qualities: as indeed love does, or young love does: as she perhaps did once, before he chilled her senses. That was before her "little brain" had become active and had turned her senses to revolt.

It was on the full river of love that Sir Willoughby supposed the whole floating bulk of his personality to be securely sustained; and therefore it was that, believing himself swimming at his ease, he discoursed of himself.

She went straight away from that idea with her mental exclamation: "Why does he not paint himself in brighter colours to me!" and the question: "Has he no ideal of generosity and chivalry?"

But the unfortunate gentleman imagined himself to be loved, on Love's very bosom. He fancied that everything relating to himself excited maidenly curiosity, womanly reverence, ardours to know more of him, which he was ever willing to satisfy by repeating the same things. His notion of women was the primitive black and white: there are good women, bad women; and he possessed a good one. His high opinion of himself fortified the belief that Providence, as a matter of justice and fitness, must necessarily select a good one for him—or what are we to think of Providence? And this female, shaped by that informing hand, would naturally be in harmony with him, from the centre of his profound identity to the raying circle of his variations. Know the centre, you know the circle, and you discover that the variations are simply characteristics, but you must travel on the rays from the circle to get to the centre. Consequently Sir Willoughby put Miss Middleton on one or other of these converging lines from time to time. Us, too, he drags into the deeps, but when we have harpooned a whale and are attached to the rope, down we must go; the miracle is to see us rise again.

Women of mixed essences shading off the divine to the considerably lower were outside his vision of woman. His mind could as little admit an angel in pottery as a rogue in porcelain. For him they were what they were when fashioned at the beginning; many cracked, many stained, here and there a perfect specimen designed for the elect of men. At a whisper of the world he shut the prude's door on them with a slam; himself would have branded them with the letters in the hue of fire. Privately he did so; and he was constituted by his extreme sensitiveness and taste for ultra-feminine refinement to be a severe critic of them during the carnival of egoism, the love-season. Constantia . . . can it be told? She had been, be it said, a fair and frank young merchant with him in that season; she was of a nature to be a mother of heroes; she met the salute, almost half-way, ingenuously unlike the coming mothers of the regiments of marionettes, who retire in vapours, downcast, as by convention; ladies most flattering to the egoistical gentleman, for they proclaim him the "first". Constantia's offence had been no greater, but it was not that dramatic performance of purity which he desired of an affianced lady, and so the offence was great.

The love-season is the carnival of egoism, and it brings the touchstone to our natures. I speak of love, not the mask, and not of the flutings upon the theme of love, but of the passion; a flame having, like our mortality, death in it as well as life, that may or may not be lasting. Applied to Sir Willoughby, as to thousands of civilized males, the touchstone found him requiring to be dealt with by his betrothed as an original savage. She was required to play incessantly on the first reclaiming chord which led our ancestral satyr to the measures of the dance, the threading of the maze, and the setting conformably to his partner before it was accorded to him to spin her with both hands and a chirrup of his frisky heels. To keep him in awe and hold him enchained, there are things she must never do, dare never say, must not think. She must be cloistral. Now, strange and awful though it be to hear, women perceive this requirement of them in the spirit of the man; they perceive, too, and it may be gratefully, that they address their performances less to the taming of the green and prankish monsieur of the forest than to the pacification of a voracious aesthetic gluttony, craving them insatiably, through all the tenses, with shrieks of the lamentable letter "I" for their purity. Whether they see that it has its foundation in the sensual, and distinguish the ultra-refined but lineally great-grandson of the Hoof in this vast and dainty exacting appetite is uncertain. They probably do not; the more the damage; for in the appeasement of the glutton they have to practise much simulation; they are in their way losers like their ancient mothers. It is the palpable and material of them still which they are tempted to flourish, wherewith to invite and allay pursuit: a condition under which the spiritual, wherein their hope lies, languishes. The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later they see they have been victims of the singular Egoist, have worn a mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight, and have really abandoned the commodity in ministering to the lust for it, suffered themselves to be dragged ages back in playing upon the fleshly innocence of happy accident to gratify his jealous greed of possession, when it should have been their task to set the soul above the fairest fortune and the gift of strength in women beyond ornamental whiteness. Are they not of nature warriors, like men?—men's mates to bear them heroes instead of puppets? But the devouring male Egoist prefers them as inanimate overwrought polished pure metal precious vessels, fresh from the hands of the artificer, for him to walk away with hugging, call all his own, drink of, and fill and drink of, and forget that he stole them.

This running off on a by-road is no deviation from Sir Willoughby Patterne and Miss Clara Middleton. He, a fairly intelligent man, and very sensitive, was blinded to what was going on within her visibly enough, by her production of the article he demanded of her sex. He had to leave the fair young lady to ride to his county-town, and his design was to conduct her through the covert of a group of laurels, there to revel in her soft confusion. She resisted; nay, resolutely returned to the lawn-sward. He contrasted her with Constantia in the amorous time, and rejoiced in his disappointment. He saw the goddess Modesty guarding Purity; and one would be bold to say that he did not hear the Precepts, Purity's aged grannams maternal and paternal, cawing approval of her over their munching gums. And if you ask whether a man, sensitive and a lover, can be so blinded, you are condemned to re-peruse the foregoing paragraph.

Miss Middleton was not sufficiently instructed in the position of her sex to know that she had plunged herself in the thick of the strife of one of their great battles. Her personal position, however, was instilling knowledge rapidly, as a disease in the frame teaches us what we are and have to contend with. Could she marry this man? He was evidently manageable. Could she condescend to the use of arts in managing him to obtain a placable life?—a horror of swampy flatness! So vividly did the sight of that dead heaven over an unvarying level earth swim on her fancy, that she shut her eyes in angry exclusion of it as if it were outside, assailing her; and she nearly stumbled upon young Crossjay.

"Oh, have I hurt you?" he cried.

"No," said she, "it was my fault. Lead me somewhere away from everybody."

The boy took her hand, and she resumed her thoughts; and, pressing his fingers and feeling warm to him both for his presence and silence, so does the blood in youth lead the mind, even cool and innocent blood, even with a touch, that she said to herself, "And if I marry, and then . . . Where will honour be then? I marry him to be true to my word of honour, and if then . . . !" An intolerable languor caused her to sigh profoundly. It is written as she thought it; she thought in blanks, as girls do, and some women. A shadow of the male Egoist is in the chamber of their brains overawing them.

"Were I to marry, and to run!" There is the thought; she is offered up to your mercy. We are dealing with a girl feeling herself desperately situated, and not a fool.

"I'm sure you're dead tired, though," said Crossjay.

"No, I am not; what makes you think so?" said Clara.

"I do think so."

"But why do you think so?"

"You're so hot."

"What makes you think that?"

"You're so red."

"So are you, Crossjay."

"I'm only red in the middle of the cheeks, except when I've been running. And then you talk to yourself, just as boys do when they are blown."

"Do they?"

"They say: 'I know I could have kept up longer', or, 'my buckle broke', all to themselves, when they break down running."

"And you have noticed that?"

"And, Miss Middleton, I don't wish you were a boy, but I should like to live near you all my life and be a gentleman. I'm coming with Miss Dale this evening to stay at the Hall and be looked after, instead of stopping with her cousin who takes care of her father. Perhaps you and I'll play chess at night."

"At night you will go to bed, Crossjay."

"Not if I have Sir Willoughby to catch hold of. He says I'm an authority on birds' eggs. I can manage rabbits and poultry. Isn't a farmer a happy man? But he doesn't marry ladies. A cavalry officer has the best chance."

"But you are going to be a naval officer."

"I don't know. It's not positive. I shall bring my two dormice, and make them perform gymnastics on the dinnertable. They're such dear little things. Naval officers are not like Sir Willoughby."

"No, they are not," said Clara, "they give their lives to their country."

"And then they're dead," said Crossjay.

Clara wished Sir Willoughby were confronting her: she could have spoken.

She asked the boy where Mr. Whitford was. Crossjay pointed very secretly in the direction of the double-blossom wild-cherry. Coming within gaze of the stem, she beheld Vernon stretched at length, reading, she supposed; asleep, she discovered: his finger in the leaves of a book; and what book? She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs, and grasping Crossjay's hand fast she craned her neck, as one timorous of a fall in peeping over chasms, for a glimpse of the page; but immediately, and still with a bent head, she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: "He must be good who loves to be and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!" She would rather have clung to her first impression:

wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns; but the thought of it was no recovery of it; she might as well have striven to be a child. The sensation of happiness promised to be less short-lived in memory, and would have been had not her present disease of the longing for happiness ravaged every corner of it for the secret of its existence. The reflection took root. "He must be good . . . !" That reflection vowed to endure. Poor by comparison with what it displaced, it presented itself to her as conferring something on him, and she would not have had it absent though it robbed her.

She looked down. Vernon was dreamily looking up.

She plucked Crossjay hurriedly away, whispering that he had better not wake Mr. Whitford, and then she proposed to reverse their previous chase, and she be the hound and he the hare. Crossjay fetched a magnificent start. On his glancing behind he saw Miss Middleton walking listlessly, with a hand at her side.

"There's a regular girl!" said he in some disgust; for his theory was, that girls always have something the matter with them to spoil a game.

CHAPTER XII
MISS MIDDLETON AND MR. VERNON WHITFORD

Looking upward, not quite awakened out of a transient doze, at a fair head circled in dazzling blossom, one may temporize awhile with common sense, and take it for a vision after the eyes have regained direction of the mind. Vernon did so until the plastic vision interwound with reality alarmingly. This is the embrace of a Melusine who will soon have the brain if she is encouraged. Slight dalliance with her makes the very diminutive seem as big as life. He jumped to his feet, rattled his throat, planted firmness on his brows and mouth, and attacked the dream-giving earth with tremendous long strides, that his blood might be lively at the throne of understanding. Miss Middleton and young Crossjay were within hail: it was her face he had seen, and still the idea of a vision, chased from his reasonable wits, knocked hard and again for readmission. There was little for a man of humble mind toward the sex to think of in the fact of a young lady's bending rather low to peep at him asleep, except that the poise of her slender figure, between an air of spying and of listening, vividly recalled his likening of her to the Mountain Echo. Man or maid sleeping in the open air provokes your tiptoe curiosity. Men, it is known, have in that state cruelly been kissed; and no rights are bestowed on them, they are teased by a vapourish rapture; what has happened to them the poor fellows barely divine: they have a crazy step from that day. But a vision is not so distracting; it is our own, we can put it aside and return to it, play at rich and poor with it, and are not to be summoned before your laws and rules for secreting it in our treasury. Besides, it is the golden key of all the possible; new worlds expand beneath the dawn it brings us. Just outside reality, it illumines, enriches and softens real things;—and to desire it in preference to the simple fact is a damning proof of enervation.

Such was Vernon's winding up of his brief drama of fantasy. He was aware of the fantastical element in him and soon had it under. Which of us who is of any worth is without it? He had not much vanity to trouble him, and passion was quiet, so his task was not gigantic. Especially be it remarked, that he was a man of quick pace, the sovereign remedy for the dispersing of the mental fen-mist. He had tried it and knew that nonsense is to be walked off.

Near the end of the park young Crossjay overtook him, and after acting the pumped one a trifle more than needful, cried: "I say, Mr. Whitford, there's Miss Middleton with her handkerchief out."

"What for, my lad?" said Vernon.

"I'm sure I don't know. All of a sudden she bumped down. And, look what fellows girls are!—here she comes as if nothing had happened, and I saw her feel at her side."

Clara was shaking her head to express a denial. "I am not at all unwell," she said, when she came near. "I guessed Crossjay's business in running up to you; he's a good-for-nothing, officious boy. I was tired, and rested for a moment."

Crossjay peered at her eyelids. Vernon looked away and said: "Are you too tired for a stroll?"

"Not now."

"Shall it be brisk?"

"You have the lead."

He led at a swing of the legs that accelerated young Crossjay's to the double, but she with her short, swift, equal steps glided along easily on a fine by his shoulder, and he groaned to think that of all the girls of earth this one should have been chosen for the position of fine lady.

"You won't tire me," said she, in answer to his look.

"You remind me of the little Piedmontese Bersaglieri on the march."

"I have seen them trotting into Como from Milan."

"They cover a quantity of ground in a day, if the ground's flat. You want another sort of step for the mountains."

"I should not attempt to dance up."

"They soon tame romantic notions of them."

"The mountains tame luxurious dreams, you mean. I see how they are conquered. I can plod. Anything to be high up!"

"Well, there you have the secret of good work: to plod on and still keep the passion fresh."

"Yes, when we have an aim in view."

"We always have one."

"Captives have?"

"More than the rest of us."

Ignorant man! What of wives miserably wedded? What aim in view have these most woeful captives? Horror shrouds it, and shame reddens through the folds to tell of innermost horror.

"Take me back to the mountains, if you please, Mr. Whitford," Miss Middleton said, fallen out of sympathy with him. "Captives have death in view, but that is not an aim."

"Why may not captives expect a release?"

"Hardly from a tyrant."

"If you are thinking of tyrants, it may be so. Say the tyrant dies?"

"The prison-gates are unlocked and out comes a skeleton. But why will you talk of skeletons! The very name of mountain seems life in comparison with any other subject."

"I assure you," said Vernon, with the fervour of a man lighting on an actual truth in his conversation with a young lady, "it's not the first time I have thought you would be at home in the Alps. You would walk and climb as well as you dance."

She liked to hear Clara Middleton talked of, and of her having been thought of, and giving him friendly eyes, barely noticing that he was in a glow, she said: "If you speak so encouragingly I shall fancy we are near an ascent."

"I wish we were," said he.

"We can realize it by dwelling on it, don't you think?"

"We can begin climbing."

"Oh!" she squeezed herself shadowily.

"Which mountain shall it be?" said Vernon, in the right real earnest tone.

Miss Middleton suggested a lady's mountain first, for a trial. "And then, if you think well enough of me—if I have not stumbled more than twice, or asked more than ten times how far it is from the top, I should like to be promoted to scale a giant."

They went up to some of the lesser heights of Switzerland and Styria, and settled in South Tyrol, the young lady preferring this district for the strenuous exercise of her climbing powers because she loved Italian colour; and it seemed an exceedingly good reason to the genial imagination she had awakened in Mr. Whitford. "Though," said he, abruptly, "you are not so much Italian as French."

She hoped she was English, she remarked.

"Of course you are English; . . . yes." He moderated his ascent with the halting affirmative.

She inquired wonderingly why he spoke in apparent hesitation.

"Well, you have French feet, for example: French wits, French impatience," he lowered his voice, "and charm."

"And love of compliments."

"Possibly. I was not conscious of paying them"

"And a disposition to rebel?"

"To challenge authority, at least."

"That is a dreadful character."

"At all events, it is a character."

"Fit for an Alpine comrade?"

"For the best of comrades anywhere."

"It is not a piece of drawing-room sculpture: that is the most one can say for it!" she dropped a dramatic sigh.

Had he been willing she would have continued the theme, for the pleasure a poor creature long gnawing her sensations finds in seeing herself from the outside. It fell away. After a silence, she could not renew it; and he was evidently indifferent, having to his own satisfaction dissected and stamped her a foreigner. With it passed her holiday. She had forgotten Sir Willoughby: she remembered him and said. "You knew Miss Durham, Mr. Whitford?"

He answered briefly, "I did."

"Was she? . . ." some hot-faced inquiry peered forth and withdrew.

"Very handsome," said Vernon.

"English?"

"Yes; the dashing style of English."

"Very courageous."

"I dare say she had a kind of courage."

"She did very wrong."

"I won't say no. She discovered a man more of a match with herself; luckily not too late. We're at the mercy . . ."

"Was she not unpardonable?"

"I should be sorry to think that of any one."

"But you agree that she did wrong."

"I suppose I do. She made a mistake and she corrected it. If she had not, she would have made a greater mistake."

"The manner. . ."

"That was bad—as far as we know. The world has not much right to judge. A false start must now and then be made. It's better not to take notice of it, I think."

"What is it we are at the mercy of?"

"Currents of feeling, our natures. I am the last man to preach on the subject: young ladies are enigmas to me; I fancy they must have a natural perception of the husband suitable to them, and the reverse; and if they have a certain degree of courage, it follows that they please themselves."

"They are not to reflect on the harm they do?" said Miss Middleton.

"By all means let them reflect; they hurt nobody by doing that."

"But a breach of faith!"

"If the faith can be kept through life, all's well."

"And then there is the cruelty, the injury!"

"I really think that if a young lady came to me to inform me she must break our engagement —I have never been put to the proof, but to suppose it:—I should not think her cruel."

"Then she would not be much of a loss."

"And I should not think so for this reason, that it is impossible for a girl to come to such a resolution without previously showing signs of it to her . . . the man she is engaged to. I think it unfair to engage a girl for longer than a week or two, just time enough for her preparations and publications."

"If he is always intent on himself, signs are likely to be unheeded by him," said Miss Middleton.

He did not answer, and she said, quickly:

"It must always be a cruelty. The world will think so. It is an act of inconstancy."

"If they knew one another well before they were engaged."

"Are you not singularly tolerant?" said she.

To which Vernon replied with airy cordiality:—

"In some cases it is right to judge by results; we'll leave severity to the historian, who is bound to be a professional moralist and put pleas of human nature out of the scales. The lady in question

may have been to blame, but no hearts were broken, and here we have four happy instead of two miserable."

His persecuting geniality of countenance appealed to her to confirm this judgement by results, and she nodded and said: "Four," as the awe-stricken speak.

From that moment until young Crossjay fell into the green-rutted lane from a tree, and was got on his legs half stunned, with a hanging lip and a face like the inside of a flayed eel-skin, she might have been walking in the desert, and alone, for the pleasure she had in society.

They led the fated lad home between them, singularly drawn together by their joint ministrations to him, in which her delicacy had to stand fire, and sweet good-nature made naught of any trial. They were hand in hand with the little fellow as physician and professional nurse.

CHAPTER XIII
THE FIRST EFFORT AFTER FREEDOM

Crossjay's accident was only another proof, as Vernon told Miss Dale, that the boy was but half monkey.

"Something fresh?" she exclaimed on seeing him brought into the Hall, where she had just arrived.

"Simply a continuation," said Vernon. "He is not so prehensile as he should be. He probably in extremity relies on the tail that has been docked. Are you a man, Crossjay?"

"I should think I was!" Crossjay replied, with an old man's voice, and a ghastly twitch for a smile overwhelmed the compassionate ladies.

Miss Dale took possession of him. "You err in the other direction," she remarked to Vernon.

"But a little bracing roughness is better than spoiling him." said Miss Middleton.

She did not receive an answer, and she thought: "Whatever Willoughby does is right, to this lady!"

Clara's impression was renewed when Sir Willoughby sat beside Miss Dale in the evening; and certainly she had never seen him shine so picturesquely as in his bearing with Miss Dale. The sprightly sallies of the two, their rallyings, their laughter, and her fine eyes, and his handsome gestures, won attention like a fencing match of a couple keen with the foils to display the mutual skill. And it was his design that she should admire the display; he was anything but obtuse; enjoying the match as he did and necessarily did to act so excellent a part in it, he meant the observer to see the man he was with a lady not of raw understanding. So it went on from day to day for three days.

She fancied once that she detected the agreeable stirring of the brood of jealousy, and found it neither in her heart nor in her mind, but in the book of wishes, well known to the young where they write matter which may sometimes be independent of both those volcanic albums. Jealousy would have been a relief to her, a dear devil's aid. She studied the complexion of jealousy to delude herself with the sense of the spirit being in her, and all the while she laughed, as at a vile theatre whereof the imperfection of the stage machinery rather than the performance is the wretched source of amusement.

Vernon had deeply depressed her. She was hunted by the figure 4. Four happy instead of two miserable. He had said it, involving her among the four; and so it must be, she considered, and she must be as happy as she could; for not only was he incapable of perceiving her state, he was unable to imagine other circumstances to surround her. How, to be just to him, were they imaginable by him or any one?

Her horrible isolation of secrecy in a world amiable in unsuspectingness frightened her. To fling away her secret, to conform, to be unrebellious, uncritical, submissive, became an impatient desire; and the task did not appear so difficult since Miss Dale's arrival. Endearments had been rare, more formal; living bodily untroubled and unashamed, and, as she phrased it, having no one to care for her, she turned insensibly in the direction where she was due; she slightly imitated Miss Dale's colloquial responsiveness. To tell truth, she felt vivacious in a moderate way with Willoughby after seeing him with Miss Dale. Liberty wore the aspect of a towering prison-wall; the desperate undertaking of climbing one side and dropping to the other was more than she, unaided, could resolve on; consequently, as no one cared for her, a worthless creature might as well cease dreaming and stipulating for the fulfilment of her dreams; she might as well yield to her fate; nay, make the best of it.

Sir Willoughby was flattered and satisfied. Clara's adopted vivacity proved his thorough knowledge of feminine nature; nor did her feebleness in sustaining it displease him. A steady look

of hers had of late perplexed the man, and he was comforted by signs of her inefficiency where he excelled. The effort and the failure were both of good omen.

But she could not continue the effort. He had overweighted her too much for the mimicry of a sentiment to harden and have an apparently natural place among her impulses; and now an idea came to her that he might, it might be hoped, possibly see in Miss Dale, by present contrast, the mate he sought; by contrast with an unanswering creature like herself, he might perhaps realize in Miss Dale's greater accomplishments and her devotion to him the merit of suitability; he might be induced to do her justice. Dim as the loop-hole was, Clara fixed her mind on it till it gathered light. And as a prelude to action, she plunged herself into a state of such profound humility, that to accuse it of being simulated would be venturesome, though it was not positive. The tempers of the young are liquid fires in isles of quicksand; the precious metals not yet cooled in a solid earth. Her compassion for Laetitia was less forced, but really she was almost as earnest in her self-abasement, for she had not latterly been brilliant, not even adequate to the ordinary requirements of conversation. She had no courage, no wit, no diligence, nothing that she could distinguish save discontentment like a corroding acid, and she went so far in sincerity as with a curious shift of feeling to pity the man plighted to her. If it suited her purpose to pity Sir Willoughby, she was not moved by policy, be assured; her needs were her nature, her moods her mind; she had the capacity to make anything serve her by passing into it with the glance which discerned its usefulness; and this is how it is that the young, when they are in trouble, without approaching the elevation of scientific hypocrites, can teach that able class lessons in hypocrisy.

"Why should not Willoughby be happy?" she said; and the exclamation was pushed forth by the second thought: "Then I shall be free!" Still that thought came second.

The desire for the happiness of Willoughby was fervent on his behalf and wafted her far from friends and letters to a narrow Tyrolean valley, where a shallow river ran, with the indentations of a remotely seen army of winding ranks in column, topaz over the pebbles to hollows of ravishing emerald. There sat Liberty, after her fearful leap over the prison-wall, at peace to watch the water and the falls of sunshine on the mountain above, between descending pine-stem shadows. Clara's wish for his happiness, as soon as she had housed herself in the imagination of her freedom, was of a purity that made it seem exceedingly easy for her to speak to him.

The opportunity was offered by Sir Willoughby. Every morning after breakfast Miss Dale walked across the park to see her father, and on this occasion Sir Willoughby and Miss Middleton went with her as far as the lake, all three discoursing of the beauty of various trees, birches, aspens, poplars, beeches, then in their new green. Miss Dale loved the aspen, Miss Middleton the beech, Sir Willoughby the birch, and pretty things were said by each in praise of the favoured object, particularly by Miss Dale. So much so that when she had gone on he recalled one of her remarks, and said: "I believe, if the whole place were swept away to-morrow, Laetitia Dale could reconstruct it and put those aspens on the north of the lake in number and situation correctly where you have them now. I would guarantee her description of it in absence correct."

"Why should she be absent?" said Clara, palpitating.

"Well, why!" returned Sir Willoughby. "As you say, there is no reason why. The art of life, and mine will be principally a country life—town is not life, but a tornado whirling atoms—the art is to associate a group of sympathetic friends in our neighbourhood; and it is a fact worth noting that if ever I feel tired of the place, a short talk with Laetitia Dale refreshes it more than a month or two on the Continent. She has the well of enthusiasm. And there is a great advantage in having a cultivated person at command, with whom one can chat of any topic under the sun. I repeat, you have no need of town if you have friends like Laetitia Dale within call. My mother esteemed her highly."

"Willoughby, she is not obliged to go."

"I hope not. And, my love, I rejoice that you have taken to her. Her father's health is poor. She would be a young spinster to live alone in a country cottage."

"What of your scheme?"

"Old Vernon is a very foolish fellow."

"He has declined?"

"Not a word on the subject! I have only to propose it to be snubbed, I know."

"You may not be aware how you throw him into the shade with her."

"Nothing seems to teach him the art of dialogue with ladies."

"Are not gentlemen shy when they see themselves outshone?"

"He hasn't it, my love: Vernon is deficient in the lady's tongue."

"I respect him for that."

"Outshone, you say? I do not know of any shining—save to one, who lights me, path and person!"

The identity of the one was conveyed to her in a bow and a soft pressure.

"Not only has he not the lady's tongue, which I hold to be a man's proper accomplishment," continued Sir Willoughby, "he cannot turn his advantages to account. Here has Miss Dale been with him now four days in the house. They are exactly on the same footing as when she entered it. You ask? I will tell you. It is this: it is want of warmth. Old Vernon is a scholar—and a fish. Well, perhaps he has cause to be shy of matrimony; but he is a fish."

"You are reconciled to his leaving you?"

"False alarm! The resolution to do anything unaccustomed is quite beyond old Vernon."

"But if Mr. Oxford—Whitford . . . your swans coming sailing up the lake, how beautiful they look when they are indignant! I was going to ask you, surely men witnessing a marked admiration for some one else will naturally be discouraged?"

Sir Willoughby stiffened with sudden enlightenment.

Though the word jealousy had not been spoken, the drift of her observations was clear. Smiling inwardly, he said, and the sentences were not enigmas to her: "Surely, too, young ladies . . . a little? —Too far? But an old friendship! About the same as the fitting of an old glove to a hand. Hand and glove have only to meet. Where there is natural harmony you would not have discord. Ay, but you have it if you check the harmony. My dear girl! You child!"

He had actually, in this parabolic, and commendable, obscureness, for which she thanked him in her soul, struck the very point she had not named and did not wish to hear named, but wished him to strike; he was anything but obtuse. His exultation, of the compressed sort, was extreme, on hearing her cry out:

"Young ladies may be. Oh! not I, not I. I can convince you. Not that. Believe me, Willoughby. I do not know what it is to feel that, or anything like it. I cannot conceive a claim on any one's life —as a claim: or the continuation of an engagement not founded on perfect, perfect sympathy. How should I feel it, then? It is, as you say of Mr. Ox—Whitford, beyond me."

Sir Willoughby caught up the Ox—Whitford.

Bursting with laughter in his joyful pride, he called it a portrait of old Vernon in society. For she thought a trifle too highly of Vernon, as here and there a raw young lady does think of the friends of her plighted man, which is waste of substance properly belonging to him, as it were, in the loftier sense, an expenditure in genuflexions to wayside idols of the reverence she should bring intact to the temple. Derision instructs her.

Of the other subject—her jealousy—he had no desire to hear more. She had winced: the woman had been touched to smarting in the girl: enough. She attempted the subject once, but faintly, and his careless parrying threw her out. Clara could have bitten her tongue for that reiterated stupid slip on the name of Whitford; and because she was innocent at heart she persisted in asking herself how she could be guilty of it.

"You both know the botanic titles of these wild flowers," she said.

"Who?" he inquired.

"You and Miss Dale."

Sir Willoughby shrugged. He was amused.

"No woman on earth will grace a barouche so exquisitely as my Clara."

"Where?" said she.

"During our annual two months in London. I drive a barouche there, and venture to prophesy that my equipage will create the greatest excitement of any in London. I see old Horace De Craye gazing!"

She sighed. She could not drag him to the word, or a hint of it necessary to her subject.

But there it was; she saw it. She had nearly let it go, and blushed at being obliged to name it.

"Jealousy, do you mean. Willoughby? the people in London would be jealous?—Colonel De Craye? How strange! That is a sentiment I cannot understand."

Sir Willoughby gesticulated the "Of course not" of an established assurance to the contrary.

"Indeed, Willoughby, I do not."

"Certainly not."

He was now in her trap. And he was imagining himself to be anatomizing her feminine nature.

"Can I give you a proof, Willoughby? I am so utterly incapable of it that—listen to me—were you to come to me to tell me, as you might, how much better suited to you Miss Dale has appeared than I am—and I fear I am not; it should be spoken plainly; unsuited altogether, perhaps—I would, I beseech you to believe—you must believe me—give you . . . give you your freedom instantly; most truly; and engage to speak of you as I should think of you. Willoughby, you would have no one to praise you in public and in private as I should, for you would be to me the most honest, truthful, chivalrous gentleman alive. And in that case I would undertake to declare that she would not admire you more than I; Miss Dale would not; she would not admire you more than I; not even Miss Dale."

This, her first direct leap for liberty, set Clara panting, and so much had she to say that the nervous and the intellectual halves of her dashed like cymbals, dazing and stunning her with the appositeness of things to be said, and dividing her in indecision as to the cunningest to move him of the many pressing.

The condition of feminine jealousy stood revealed.

He had driven her farther than he intended.

"Come, let me allay these . . ." he soothed her with hand and voice, while seeking for his phrase; "these magnified pinpoints. Now, my Clara! on my honour! and when I put it forward in attestation, my honour has the most serious meaning speech can have; ordinarily my word has to suffice for bonds, promises, or asseverations; on my honour! not merely is there, my poor child! no ground of suspicion, I assure you, I declare to you, the fact of the case is the very reverse. Now, mark me; of her sentiments I cannot pretend to speak; I did not, to my knowledge, originate, I am not responsible for them, and I am, before the law, as we will say, ignorant of them; that is, I have never heard a declaration of them, and I, am, therefore, under pain of the stigma of excessive fatuity, bound to be non-cognizant. But as to myself I can speak for myself and, on my honour! Clara—to be as direct as possible, even to baldness, and you know I loathe it—I could not, I repeat, I could not marry Laetitia Dale! Let me impress it on you. No flatteries—we are all susceptible more or less—no conceivable condition could bring it about; no amount of admiration. She and I are excellent friends; we cannot be more. When you see us together, the natural concord of our minds is of course misleading. She is a woman of genius. I do not conceal, I profess my admiration of her. There are times when, I confess, I require a Laetitia Dale to bring me out, give and take. I am indebted to her for the enjoyment of the duet few know, few can accord with, fewer still are allowed the privilege of playing with a human being. I am indebted, I own, and I feel deep gratitude; I own to a lively friendship for Miss Dale, but if she is displeasing in the sight of my bride by . . . by the breadth of an eyelash, then . . ."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.