Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Vixen. Volume II

Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

Vixen. Volume II

Брэддон М.

Vixen. Volume II / М. Брэддон — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

M. E. Braddon
Vixenx M. E. Braddon

CHAPTER I.
"Shall I tell you the Secret?"

For the rest of the way Violet walked with Mrs. Scobel, and at the garden-gate of the Vicarage Roderick Vawdrey wished them both good-night, and tramped off, with his basket on his back and his rod on his shoulder, for the long walk to Briarwood.

Here the children separated, and ran off to their scattered homes, dropping grateful bob-curtsies to the last – "louting," as they called it in their Forest dialect.

"You must come in and have some tea, Violet," said Mrs. Scobel. "You must be very tired."

"I am rather tired; but I think it's too late for tea. I had better get home at once."

"Ignatius shall see you home, my dear," cried Mrs. Scobel. At which the indefatigable Vicar, who had shouted himself hoarse in leading his choir, protested himself delighted to escort Miss Tempest.

The church clock struck ten as they went along the narrow forest-path between Beechdale and the Abbey House.

"Oh," cried Vixen, "I do hope mamma's people will have gone home."

A carriage rolled past them as they came out into the road.

"That's Mrs. Carteret's landau," said Vixen. "I breathe more freely. And there goes Mrs. Horwood's brougham; so I suppose everything is over. How nice it is when one's friends are so unanimous in their leave-taking."

"I shall try to remember that the next time I dine at the Abbey House," said Mr. Scobel laughing.

"Oh, please don't!" cried Violet. "You and Mrs. Scobel are different. I don't mind you; but those dreadful stiff old ladies mamma cultivates, who think of nothing but their dress and their own importance – a little of them goes a very long way."

"But, my dear Miss Tempest, the Carterets and the Horwoods are some of the best people in the neighbourhood."

"Of course they are," answered Vixen. "If they were not they would hardly venture to be so stupid. They take the full license of their acres and their quarterings. People with a coat-of-arms found yesterday, and no land to speak of, are obliged to make themselves agreeable."

"Like Captain Winstanley," suggested Mr. Scobel. "I don't suppose he has land enough to sod a lark. But he is excellent company."

"Very," assented Vixen, "for the people who like him."

They were at the gate by this time.

"You shan't come any further unless you are coming in to see mamma," protested Vixen.

"Thanks, no; it's too late to think of that."

"Then go home immediately, and have some supper," said Vixen imperatively. "You've had nothing but a cup of weak tea since two o'clock this afternoon. You must be worn out."

"On such an occasion as to-day a man must not think of himself," said the Vicar.

"I wonder when you ever do think of yourself," said Vixen.

And indeed Mr. Scobel, like many another Anglican pastor of modern times, led a life which, save for its liberty to go where he listed, and to talk as much as he liked, was but little less severe in its exactions upon the flesh and the spirit than that of the monks of La Trappe.

The Abbey House looked very quiet when Vixen went into the hall, whose doors stood open to the soft spring night. The servants were all at supper, treating themselves to some extra comforts on the strength of a dinner-party, and talking over the evening's entertainment and its bearings on their mistress's life. There was a feeling in the servants' hall that these little dinners, however seeming harmless, had a certain bent and tendency inimical to the household, and household peace.

"He was more particular in his manner to-night than hever," said the butler, as he dismembered a duck which had been "hotted up" after removal from the dining-room. "He feels hisself master of the whole lot of us already. I could see it in his hi. 'Is that the cabinet 'ock, Forbes?' he says to me, when I was a-filling round after the bait. 'No,' says I, 'it is not. We ain't got so much of our cabinet 'ocks that we can afford to trifle with 'em.' Of course I said it in a hundertone, confidential like; but I wanted him to know who was master of the cellar."

"There'll be nobody master but him when once he gets his foot inside these doors," said Mrs. Trimmer, the housekeeper, with a mournful shake of her head. "No, Porline, I'll have a noo pertater. Them canister peas ain't got no flaviour with them."

While they were enjoying themselves, with a certain chastening touch of prophetic melancholy, in the servants' hall, Violet was going slowly upstairs and along the corridor which led past her mother's rooms.

"I must go in and wish mamma good-night," she thought; "though I am pretty sure of a lecture for my pains."

Just at this moment a door opened, and a soft voice called "Violet," pleadingly.

"Dear mamma, I was just coming in to say good-night."

"Were you, darling? I heard your footstep, and I was afraid you were going by. And I want very particularly to see you to-night, Violet."

"Do you, mamma? I hope not to scold me for going with the school-children. They had such a happy afternoon; and ate! it was like a miracle. Not so little serving for so many, but so few devouring so much."

Pamela Tempest put her arm round her daughter, and kissed her, with more warmth of affection than she had shown since the sad days after the Squire's death. Violet looked at her mother wonderingly. She could hardly see the widow's fair delicate face in the dimly-lighted room. It was one of the prettiest rooms in the house – half boudoir half dressing-room, crowded with elegant luxuries and modern inventions, gipsy tables, book-stands, toy-cabinets of egg-shell china, a toilet table *à la* Pompadour, a writing-desk *à la* Sevigné. Such small things had made the small joys of Mrs. Tempest's life. When she mourned her kind husband, she lamented him as the someone who had bought her everything she wanted.

She had taken off her dinner-dress, and looked particularly fair and youthful in her soft muslin dressing-gown, trimmed with Mechlin lace which had cost as much as a small holding on the outskirts of the Forest. Even in that subdued light Violet could see that her mother's cheeks were pinker than usual, that her eyes were clouded with tears, and her manner anxiously agitated.

"Mamma," cried the girl, "there is something wrong, I know. Something has happened."

"There is nothing wrong, love. But something has happened. Something which I hope will not make you unhappy – for it has made me very happy."

"You are talking in enigmas, mamma, and I am too tired to be good at guessing riddles, just now," said Violet, becoming suddenly cold as ice.

A few moments ago she had been all gentleness and love, responding to the unwonted affection of her mother's caresses. Now she drew herself away and stood aloof, with her heart beating fast and furiously. She divined what was coming. She had guessed the riddle already.

"Come and sit by the fire, Violet, and I will tell you – everything," said Mrs. Tempest coaxingly, seating herself in the low semi-circular chair which was her especial delight.

"I can hear what you have to tell just as well where I am," answered Violet curtly, walking to the latticed window, which was open to the night. The moon was shining over the rise and fall of the woods; the scent of the flowers came stealing up from the garden. Without, all was calm and sweetness, within, fever and smothered wrath. "I can't think how you can endure a fire on such a night. The room is positively stifling."

"Ah Violet, you have not my sad susceptibility to cold."

"No, mamma. I don't keep myself shut up like an unset diamond in a jeweller's strong-box."

"I don't think I can tell you – the little secret I have to tell, Violet, unless you come over to me and sit by my side, and give me your hand, and let me feel as if you were really fond of me," pleaded Mrs. Tempest, with a little gush of piteousness. "You seem like an enemy, standing over there with your back to me, looking out at the sky."

"Perhaps there is no need for you to tell me anything, mamma," answered Violet, in a tone which, to that tremulous listener in the low seat by the fire, sounded as severe as the voice of a judge pronouncing sentence. "Shall I tell you the secret?"

There was no answer.

"Shall I, mamma?"

"I don't think you can, my love."

"Yes, I am afraid I can. The secret – which is no secret to me or to anyone else in the world, any more than the place where the ostrich has put his head is a secret when his body is sticking up out of the sand – the secret is that, after being for seventeen happy honourable years the wife of the best and truest of men – the kindest, most devoted, and most generous of husbands – you are going to take another husband, who comes to you with no better credentials than a smooth tongue and a carefully-drilled figure, and who will punish your want of faith and constancy to my dead father by making the rest of your life miserable – as you will deserve that it shall be. Yes, mother, I, your only child, say so. You will deserve to be wretched if you marry Captain Winstanley."

The widow gave a faint scream, half indignation, half terror. For the moment she felt as if some prophetic curse had been hurled upon her. The tall straight figure in the white gown, standing in the full flood of moonlight, looked awful as Cassandra, prophesying death and doom in the wicked house at Argos.

"It is too bad," sobbed Mrs. Tempest; "it is cruel, undutiful, disrespectful, positively wicked for a daughter to talk to a mother as you have talked to me to-night. How can Miss McCroke have brought you up, I wonder, that you are capable of using such language? Have you forgotten the Fifth Commandment?"

"No. It tells me to honour my father and my mother. I honour my dead father, I honour you, when I try to save you from the perdition of a second marriage."

"Perdition!" echoed Mrs. Tempest faintly, "what language!"

"I knew when that adventurer came here, that he intended to make himself master of this house – to steal my dead father's place," cried Vixen passionately.

"You have no right to call him an adventurer. He is an officer and a gentleman. You offer him a cruel, an unprovoked insult. You insult me still more deeply by your abuse of him. Am I so old, or so ugly, or so altogether horrid, that a man cannot love me for my own sake?"

"Not such a man as Captain Winstanley. He does not know what love means. He would have made me marry him if he could, because I am to have the estate by-and-bye. Failing that, he has made you accept him for your husband. Yes, he has conquered you, as a cat conquers a bird, fascinating the poor wretch with its hateful green eyes. You are quite young enough and pretty enough to win a good man's regard, if you were a penniless unprotected widow, needing a husband to shelter you and provide for you. But you are the natural victim of such a man as Captain Winstanley."

"You are altogether unjust and unreasonable," exclaimed Mrs. Tempest, weeping copiously. "Your poor dear father spoiled you. No one but a spoiled child would talk as you are talking. Who

made you a judge of Captain Winstanley? It is not true that he ever wanted to marry you. I don't believe it for an instant."

"Very well, mother. If you are wilfully blind – "

"I am not blind. I have lived twice as long as you have. I am a better judge of human nature than you can be."

"Not of your admirer's, your flatterer's nature," cried Vixen. "He has slavered you with pretty speeches and soft words, as the cobra slavers his victim, and he will devour you, as the cobra does. He will swallow up your peace of mind, your self-respect, your independence, your money – all good things you possess. He will make you contemptible in the eyes of all who know you. He will make you base in your own eyes."

"It is not true. You are blinded by prejudice."

"I want to save you from yourself, if I can."

"You are too late to save me, as you call it. Captain Winstanley has touched my heart by his patient devotion, I have not been so easily won as you seem to imagine. I have refused him three times. He knows that I had made up my mind never to marry again. Nothing was farther from my thoughts than a second marriage. I liked him as a companion and friend. That he knew. But I never intended that he should be more to me than a friend. He knew that. His patience has conquered me. Such devotion as he has given me has not often been offered to a woman. I do not think any woman living could resist it. He is all that is good and noble, and I am assured, Violet, that as a second father – "

Vixen interrupted her with a cry of horror.

"For God's sake, mamma, do not utter the word 'father' in conjunction with his name. He may become your husband – I have no power to prevent that evil – but he shall never call himself my father."

"What happiness can there be for any of us, Violet, when you start with such prejudices?" whimpered Mrs. Tempest.

"I do not expect there will be much," said Vixen. "Good-night, mamma."

"You are very unkind. You won't even stop to hear how it came about – how Conrad persuaded me to forego my determination."

"No, mamma. I don't want to hear the details. The fact is enough for me. If it would be any use for me to go down upon my knees and entreat you to give up this man, I would gladly do it; but I fear it would be no use."

"It would not. Violet," answered the widow, with modest resoluteness. "I have given Conrad my word. I cannot withdraw it."

"Then I have nothing more to say," replied Vixen, with her hand upon the door, "except good-night."

"You will not even kiss me?"

"Excuse me, mamma; I am not in a kissing humour."

And so Vixen left her.

Mrs. Tempest sat by the fading fire, and cried herself into a gentle slumber. It was very hard. She had longed to pour the story of this second courtship – its thrilling, unexpected joys, its wondrous surprises – into a sympathetic ear. And Violet, the natural recipient of these gentle confidences, had treated her so cruelly.

She felt herself sorely ill-used; and then came soothing thoughts about her *trousseau*, her wedding-dress, the dress in which she should start for her wedding-tour. All things would of course be chastened and subdued. No woman can be a bride twice in her life; but Mrs. Tempest meant that the *trousseau* should, in its way, be perfect. There should be no rush or excitement in the preparation; nothing should be scamped or hurried. Calmness, deliberation, and a faultless taste should pervade all things.

"I will have no trimming but Valenciennes for my under-linen," she decided; "it is the only lace that never offends. And I will have old English monograms in satin-stitch upon everything. My *peignoirs* will require a good deal of study; they admit of so much variety. I will have only a few dresses, but those shall be from Paris. Theodore must go over and get them from Worth. She knows what suits me better than I do myself. I am not going to be extravagant, but Conrad so appreciates elegance and taste; and of course he will wish me to be well dressed."

And so, comforted by these reflections, Mrs. Tempest sank into a gentle slumber, from which she was awakened by Pauline, who had discussed her mistress's foolishness over a hearty supper, and now came to perform the duties of the evening toilet.

"Oh Pauline," cried the widow, with a shiver, "I'm glad you awoke me. I've just had such an awful dream."

"Lor', ma'am! What about?"

"Oh, an awful dream. I thought Madame Theodore sent me home a *trousseau* and that there was not a single thing that would fit. I looked an object in every one of the dresses."

CHAPTER II.
Wedding Garments

After that night Vixen held her peace. There were no more bitter words between Mrs. Tempest and her daughter, but the mother knew that there was a wellspring of bitterness – a Marah whose waters were inexhaustible – in her daughter's heart; and that domestic happiness, under one roof, was henceforth impossible for these two.

There were very few words of any kind between Violet and Mrs. Tempest at this time. The girl kept herself as much as possible apart from her mother. The widow lived her languid drawing-room life, dawdling away long slow days that left no more impression behind them than the drift of rose-leaves across the velvet lawn before her windows. A little point-lace, deftly worked by slim white fingers flashing with gems; a little Tennyson; a little Owen Meredith; a little Browning – only half understood at best; a little scandal; a great deal of orange pekoe, sipped out of old Worcester teacups of royal blue or flowered Swansea; an hour's letter-writing on the last fashionable note-paper; elegantly-worded inanity, delicately penned in a flowing Italian hand, with long loops to the Y's and G's, and a serpentine curve at the end of every word.

No life could well have been more useless or vapid. Even Mrs. Tempest's charities – those doles of wine and soup, bread and clothing, which are looked for naturally from the mistress of a fine old mansion – were vicarious. Trimmer, the housekeeper, did everything. Indeed, in the eyes of the surrounding poor, Mrs. Trimmer was mistress of the Abbey House. It was to her they looked for relief; it was her reproof they feared; and to her they louted lowest. The faded beauty, reclining in her barouche, wrapped in white raiment of softest China crape, and whirling past them in a cloud of dust, was as remote as a goddess. They could hardly have realised that she was fashioned out of the same clay that made themselves.

Upon so smooth and eventless an existence Captain Winstanley's presence came like a gust of north wind across the sultry languor of an August noontide. His energy, his prompt, resolute manner of thinking and acting upon all occasions, impressed Mrs. Tempest with an extraordinary sense of his strength of mind and manliness. It seemed to her that she must always be safe where he was. No danger, no difficulty could assail her while his strong arm was there to ward it off. She felt very much as Mary Stuart may have done about Bothwell; when, moved to scornful aversion by the silken boy-profligate Darnley, her heart acknowledged its master in the dark freebooter who had slain him. There had been no Darnley in Pamela Tempest's life; but this resolute, clear-brained soldier was her Bothwell. She had the Mary Stuart temperament, the love of compliments and fine dresses, dainty needlework and luxurious living, without the Stuart craft. In Conrad Winstanley she had found her master, and she was content to be so mastered; willing to lay down her little sum of power at his feet, and live henceforward like a tame falcon at the end of a string. Her position, as a widow, was an excellent one. The Squire's will had been dictated in fullest confidence in his wife's goodness and discretion; and doubtless also with the soothing idea common to most hale and healthy men, that it must be a long time before their testamentary arrangements can come into effect. It was a holograph will, and the Squire's own composition throughout. "He would have no lawyer's finger in that pie," he had said. The disposal of his estate had cost him many hours of painful thought before he rang the bell for his bailiff and his butler, and executed it in their presence.

Mrs. Tempest was mistress of the Abbey House for her life; and at her death it was to become Violet's property. Violet was not to come of age until she was twenty-five, and in the meantime her mother was to be her sole guardian, and absolute mistress of everything. There was no question of an allowance for the maintenance of the heiress, no question as to the accumulation of income. Everything was to belong to Mrs. Tempest till Violet came of age. She had only to educate and

maintain her daughter in whatever manner she might think fit. At Violet's majority the estate was to pass into her possession, charged with an income of fifteen hundred a year, to be paid to the widow for her lifetime. Until her twenty-fifth birthday, therefore, Violet was in the position of a child, entirely dependent on her mother's liberality, and bound to obey her mother as her natural and only guardian. There was no court of appeal nearer than the Court of Chancery. There was no one to whom the two women could make their complaints or refer their differences.

Naturally, Captain Winstanley had long before this made himself acquainted with the particulars of the Squire's will. For six years he saw himself sole master of a very fine estate, and at the end of six years reduced to an income which seemed, comparatively, a pittance, and altogether inadequate for the maintenance of such a place as the Abbey House. Still, fifteen hundred a year and the Abbey House were a long way on the right side of nothing: and Captain Winstanley felt that he had fallen on his feet.

That was a dreary June for Vixen. She hugged her sorrow, and lived in a mental solitude which was almost awful in so young a soul. She made a confidante of no one, not even of kind-hearted Mrs. Scobel, who was quite ready to pity her and condole with her, and who was secretly indignant at the widow's folly.

The fact of Mrs. Tempest's intended marriage had become known to all her friends and neighbours, with the usual effect of such intelligence. Society said sweet things to her; and praised Captain Winstanley; and hoped the wedding would be soon; and opined that it would be quite a nice thing for Miss Tempest to have such an agreeable stepfather, with whom she could ride to hounds as she had done with the dear Squire. And the same society, driving away from the Abbey House in its landaus and pony-carriages, after half-an-hour's pleasant gossip and a cup of delicately flavoured tea, called Mrs. Tempest a fool, and her intended husband an adventurer.

Vixen kept aloof from all the gossip and tea-drinking. She did not even go near her old friends the Scobels, in these days of smothered wrath and slow consuming indignation. She deserted the schools, her old pensioners, even the little village children, to whom she had loved to carry baskets of good things, and pocketfuls of halfpence, and whose queer country dialect had seemed as sweet to her as the carolling of finches and blackbirds in the woods. Everything in the way of charity was left to Mrs. Trimmer now. Vixen took her long solitary rides in the Forest, roaming wherever there was a footway for her horse under the darkening beeches, dangerously near the swampy ground where the wet grass shone in the sunlight, the green reedy patches that meant peril; into the calm unfathomable depths of Mark Ash, or Queen's Bower; up to the wild heathy crest of Boldrewood; wherever there was loneliness and beauty.

Roderick had gone to London for the season, and was riding with Lady Mabel in the Row, or dancing attendance at garden-parties, exhibitions, and flower-shows.

"I wonder how he likes the dusty days, and the crowded rooms, the classical music, and high-art exhibitions?" thought Vixen savagely. "I wonder how he likes being led about like a Pomeranian terrier? I don't think I could endure it if I were a man. But I suppose when one is in love – "

And then Vixen thought of their last talk together, and how little of the lover's enthusiasm there was in Roderick's mention of his cousin.

"In the bottom of my heart I know that he is going to marry her for the sake of her estate, or because his mother wished it and urged it, and he was too weak-minded to go on saying No. I would not say it for the world, or let anyone else say it in my hearing, but, in my heart of hearts, I know he does not love her."

And then, after a thoughtful silence, she cried to the mute unresponsive woods:

"Oh, it is wicked, abominable, mad, to marry without love!"

The woods spoke to her of Roderick Vawdrey. How often she had ridden by his side beneath these spreading beech-boughs, dipping her childish head, just as she dipped it to-day, under the low

branches, steering her pony carefully between the prickly holly-bushes, plunging deep into the hollows where the dry leaves crackled under his hoofs.

"I fancied Rorie and I were to spend our lives together – somehow," she said to herself. "It seems very strange for us to be quite parted."

She saw Mr. Vawdrey's name in the fashionable newspapers, in the lists of guests at dinners and drums. London life suited him very well, no doubt. She heard that he was a member of the Four-in-hand Club, and turned out in splendid style at Hyde Park Corner. There was no talk yet of his going into Parliament. That was an affair of the future.

Since that evening on which Mrs. Tempest announced her intention of taking a second husband, Violet and Captain Winstanley had only met in the presence of other people. The Captain had tried to infuse a certain fatherly familiarity into his manner; but Vixen had met every attempt at friendliness with a sullen disdain, which kept even Captain Winstanley at arm's length.

"We shall understand each other better by-and-by," he said to himself, galled by this coldness. "It would be a pity to disturb these halcyon days by anything in the way of a scene. I shall know how to manage Miss Tempest – afterwards."

He spoke of her, and to her, always as Miss Tempest. He had never called her Violet since that night in the Pavilion garden.

These days before her wedding were indeed a halcyon season for Mrs. Tempest. She existed in an atmosphere of millinery and pretty speeches. Her attention was called away from a ribbon by the sweet distraction of a compliment, and oscillated between tender whispers and honiton lace. Conrad Winstanley was a delightful lover. His enemies would have said that he had done the same kind of thing so often, that it would have been strange if he had not done it well. His was assuredly no 'prentice hand in the art. Poor Mrs. Tempest lived in a state of mild intoxication, as dreamily delicious as the effects of opium. She was enchanted with her lover, and still better pleased with herself. At nine-and-thirty it was very sweet to find herself exercising so potent an influence over the Captain's strong nature. She could not help comparing herself to Cleopatra, and her lover to Antony. If he had not thrown away a world for her sake, he was at least ready to abandon the busy career which a man loves, and to devote his future existence to rural domesticity. He confessed that he had been hardened by much contact with the world, that he did not love now for the first time; but he told his betrothed that her influence had awakened feelings which had never before been called into life, that this love which he felt for her was to all intents and purposes a first love, the first pure and perfect affection that had subjugated and elevated his soul.

After that night in Mrs. Tempest's boudoir, it was only by tacit avoidance of her mother that Vixen showed the intensity of her disapproval. If she could have done any good by reproof or entreaty, by pleading or exhortation, she would assuredly have spoken; but she saw the Captain and her mother together every day, and she knew that, opposed to his influence, her words were like the idle wind which bloweth where it listeth. So she held her peace, and looked on with an aching angry heart, and hated the intruder who had come to steal her dead father's place. To take her father's place; that in Violet's mind was the unpardonable wrong. That any man should enter that house as master, and sit in the Squire's seat, and rule the Squire's servants, and ride the Squire's horses, was an outrage beyond endurance. She might have looked more leniently on her mother's folly, had the widow chosen a second husband with a house and home of his own, who would have carried off his wife to reign over his own belongings, and left the Abbey House desolate – a temple dedicated to the dead.

Mrs. Tempest's manner towards her daughter during this period was at once conciliatory and reproachful. She felt it a hard thing that Violet should have taken up such an obnoxious position. This complaint she repeated piteously, with many variations, when she discussed Violet's unkindness with her lover. She had no secrets from the Captain, and she told him all the bitter things Violet had said about him.

He heard her with firmly-set lips and an angry sparkle in his dark eyes, but his tone was full of paternal indulgence presently, when Mrs. Tempest had poured out all her woes.

"Is it not hard upon me, Conrad?" she asked in conclusion.

"My dear Pamela, I hope you are too strong-minded to distress yourself seriously about a wilful girl's foolishness. Your daughter has a noble nature, but she has been spoiled by too much indulgence. Even a race-horse – the noblest thing in creation – has to be broken in; not always without severe punishment. Miss Tempest and I will come to understand each other perfectly by-and-by."

"I know you will be a second father to her," said Mrs. Tempest tearfully.

"I will do my duty to her, dearest, be assured."

Still Mrs. Tempest went on harping upon the cruelty of her daughter's conduct. The consciousness of Violet's displeasure weighed heavily upon her.

"I dare not even show her my *trousseau*," she complained, "all confidence is at an end between us. I should like to have had her opinion about my dresses – though she is sadly deficient in taste, poor child! and has never even learnt to put on her gloves perfectly."

"And your own taste is faultless, love," replied the Captain soothingly. "What can you want with advice from an inexperienced girl, whose mind is in the stable?"

"It is not her advice I want, Conrad; but her sympathy. Fanny Scobel is coming this afternoon. I can show her my things. I really feel quite nervous about talking to Violet of her own dress. She must have a new dress for the wedding, you know; though she cannot be a bridesmaid. I think that is really unfair. Don't you, Conrad?"

"What is unfair, dearest?" asked the Captain, whose mind had scarcely followed the harmless meanderings of his lady's speech.

"That a widow is not allowed to have bridesmaids or orange-blossoms. It seems like taking the poetry out of a wedding, does it not?"

"Not to my mind, Pamela. The poetry of wedlock does not lie in these details – a sugared cake, and satin favours; a string of carriages, and a Brussels veil. The true poetry of marriage is in the devotion and fidelity of the two hearts it binds together."

Mrs Tempest sighed gently, and was almost resigned to be married without bridesmaids or orange-blossoms.

It was now within a month of the wedding, which was to be solemnised on the last day of August – a convenient season for a honeymoon tour in Scotland. Mrs. Tempest liked to travel when other people travelled. Mountain and flood would have had scarcely any charm for her "out of the season." The time had come when Violet's dress must be talked about, as Mrs. Tempest told the Vicar's wife solemnly. She had confided the secret of her daughter's unkindness to Mrs. Scobel, in the friendly hour of afternoon tea.

"It is very hard upon me," she repeated – "very hard that the only drawback to my happiness should come from my own child."

"Violet was so fond of her father," said Mrs. Scobel excusingly.

"But is that any reason she should treat me unkindly? Who could have been fonder of dear Edward than I was? I studied his happiness in everything. There never was an unkind word between us. I do not think anyone could expect me to go down to my grave a widow, in order to prove my affection for my dearest Edward. That was proved by every act of my married life. I have nothing to regret, nothing to atone for. I feel myself free to reward Captain Winstanley's devotion. He has followed me from place to place for the last two years; and has remained constant, in spite of every rebuff. He proposed to me three times before I accepted him."

Mrs. Scobel had been favoured with the history of these three separate offers more than once.

"I know, dear Mrs. Tempest," she said somewhat hurriedly, lest her friend should recapitulate the details. "He certainly seems very devoted. But, of course, from a worldly point of view, you are an excellent match for him."

"Do you think I would marry him if I thought that consideration had any weight with him?" demanded Mrs. Tempest indignantly. And Mrs. Scobel could say no more.

There are cases of physical blindness past the skill of surgery, but there is no blindness more incurable than that of a woman on the verge of forty who fancies herself beloved.

"But Violet's dress for the wedding," said Mrs. Scobel, anxious to get the conversation upon safer ground. "Have you really said nothing to her about it?"

"No. She is so headstrong and self-willed. I have been absolutely afraid to speak. But it must be settled immediately. Theodore is always so busy. It will be quite a favour to get the dress made at so short a notice, I daresay."

"Why not speak to Violet this afternoon?"

"While you are here? Yes, I might do that," replied Mrs. Tempest eagerly.

She felt she could approach the subject more comfortably in Mrs. Scobel's presence. There would be a kind of protection in a third person. She rang the bell.

"Has Miss Tempest come home from her ride?"

"Yes, ma'am. She has just come in."

"Send her to me at once then. Ask her not to stop to change her dress."

Mrs. Tempest and Mrs. Scobel were in the drawing-room, sitting at a gipsy table before an open window; the widow wrapped in a China-crape shawl, lest even the summer breeze should be too chill for her delicate frame, the Worcester cups and saucers, and antique silver tea pot and caddy and kettle set out before her, like a child's toys.

Violet came running in, flushed after her ride, her habit muddy.

"Bogged again!" cried Mrs. Tempest, with ineffable disgust. "That horse will be the death of you some day."

"I think not, mamma. How do you do, Mrs. Scobel?"

"Violet," said the Vicar's wife gravely, "why do you never come to our week-day services now?"

"I – I – don't know. I have not felt in the humour for coming to church. It's no use to come and kneel in a holy place with rebellious thoughts in my heart. I come on Sundays for decency's sake; but I think it is better to keep away from the week-day services till I am in a better temper."

"I don't think that's quite the way to recover your temper, dear."

Violet was silent, and there was a rather awkward pause.

"Will you have a cup of tea, dear?" asked Mrs. Tempest.

"No, thanks, mamma. I think, unless you have something very particular to say to me, I had better take my muddy habit off your carpet. I feel rather warm and dusty. I shall be glad to change my dress."

"But I have something very particular to say, Violet. I won't detain you long. You'd better have a cup of tea."

"Just as you please, mamma."

And forgetful of her clay-bespattered habit, Violet sank into one of the satin-covered chairs, and made a wreck of an antimacassar worked in crewels by Mrs. Tempest's own hands.

"I am going to write to Madame Theodore by this evening's post, Violet," said her mother, handing her a cup of tea, and making believe not to see the destruction of that exquisite antimacassar; "and I should like to order your dress – for – the wedding. I have been thinking that cream-colour and pale blue would suit you to perfection. A cream-coloured hat – the Vandyck shape – with a long blue ostrich – "

"Please don't take any trouble about it, mamma," said Vixen, whose cheek had paled at the word "wedding," and who now sat very erect in her chair, holding her cup and saucer firmly. "I am not going to be present at your wedding, so I shall not want a dress."

"Violet!" cried Mrs. Tempest, beginning to tremble. "You cannot mean what you say. You have been very unkind, very undutiful. You have made me perfectly miserable for the last seven weeks; but I cannot believe that you would – grossly insult me – by refusing to be present at my wedding."

"I do not wish to insult you, mamma. I am very sorry if I have pained you; but I cannot and will not be present at a marriage the very idea of which is hateful to me. If my presence could give any sanction to this madness of yours, that sanction shall not be given."

"Violet, have you thought what you are doing? Have you considered what will be said – by the world?"

"I think the world – our world – must have made up its mind about your second marriage already, mamma," Vixen answered quietly. "My absence from your wedding can make very little difference."

"It will make a very great difference; and you know it!" cried Mrs. Tempest, roused to as much passion as she was capable of feeling. "People will say that my daughter sets her face against my marriage – my daughter, who ought to sympathise with me, and rejoice that I have found a true friend and protector."

"I cannot either sympathise or rejoice, mamma. It is much better that I should stop away from your wedding. I should look miserable, and make other people uncomfortable."

"Your absence will humiliate and lower me in the sight of my friends. It will be a disgrace. And yet you take this course on purpose to wound and injure me. You are a wicked undutiful daughter."

"Oh, mamma!" cried Vixen, with grave voice and reproachful eyes – eyes before whose steady gaze the tearful widow drooped and trembled, "is duty so one-sided? Do I owe all to you, and you nothing to me? My father left us together, mother and daughter, to be all the world to each other. He left us mistresses of the dear old home we had shared with him. Do you think he meant a stranger to come and sit in his place – to be master over all he loved? Do you think it ever entered his mind that in three little years his place would be filled by the first-comer – his daughter asked to call another man father?"

"The first-comer!" whimpered Mrs. Tempest. "Oh, this it too cruel!"

"Violet!" exclaimed Mrs. Scobel reprovingly, "when you are calmer you will be sorry for having spoken so unkindly to your dear mamma."

"I shall not be sorry for having spoken the truth," said Violet. "Mamma has heard the truth too seldom in her life. She will not hear it from Captain Winstanley – yet awhile."

And after flinging this last poisoned dart, Vixen took up the muddy skirt of her habit and left the room.

"It was rather a pity that Arion and I did not go to the bottom of that bog and stay there," she reflected. "I don't think anybody wants us above ground."

"Did you ever know anything so humiliating, so shameful, so undutiful?" demanded Mrs. Tempest piteously, as the door closed on her rebellious daughter. "What will people say if Violet is not at my wedding?"

"It would be awkward, certainly; unless there were some good reason for her absence."

"People are so ill-natured. Nobody would believe in any excuse that was made. That cruel girl will disgrace me."

"She seems strongly prejudiced against Captain Winstanley. It is a great pity. But I daresay she will relent in time. If I were you, dear Mrs. Tempest, I should order the dress."

"Would you really, Fanny?"

"Yes; I should order the dress, and trust in Providence for the result. You may be able to bring her round somehow between now and the wedding."

"But I am not going to humiliate myself. I am not going to be trampled on by my daughter."

"Of course not; but you must have her at your wedding."

"If I were to tell Captain Winstanley what she has said this afternoon – "

"He would be very angry, no doubt. But I would not tell him if I were you."

"No, I shall not say anything about it."

Yet, before night, Captain Winstanley had heard every syllable that Vixen had said; with some trifling and unconscious exaggerations, hardly to be avoided by a woman of Mrs. Tempest's character, in the narration of her own wrongs.

CHAPTER III.
"I shall look like the wicked Fairy."

Nothing in Captain Winstanley's manner during the sultry summer days which went before his marriage betrayed his knowledge of Violet Tempest's rebellious spirit. He would not see that he was obnoxious to her. He spoke to her and looked at her as sweetly as if there had been the friendliest understanding between them. In all his conduct, in any act of his which approached the assumption of authority, he went to work with supreme gentleness. Yet he had his grip upon everything already, and was extending his arms in every direction, like an octopus. There were alterations being made in the garden which Violet knew were his, although Mrs. Tempest was supposed to have originated them. He had, in some measure, assumed dominion over the stables. His two hunters were already quartered there. Vixen saw them when she went her morning round with a basket of bread. They were long-bodied, hungry-looking animals; and the grooms reported them ravenous and insatiable in their feeding.

"When they've eat their corn they eats their 'ay, and when they've eat their 'ay they eats their bed, and then they takes and gnaws the wooden partitions. They'll eat up all the woodwork in the stable, before they've done. I never see such brutes," complained Bates, the head-groom.

Vixen fancied these animals were in some wise typical of their owner.

One morning when Vixen was leaning upon the half-door of Arion's loose-box, giving herself up to a quarter of an hour's petting of that much-beloved animal, Captain Winstanley came into the stable.

"Good-morning, Miss Tempest. Petting that pretty little bay of yours? I'm afraid you'll spoil him. You ought to hunt him next October."

"I shall never hunt again."

"Pshaw! At your age there's no such word as never. He's the neatest little hunter in the Forest. And on his by-days you might ride one of mine."

"Thanks," said Vixen, with a supercilious glance at the most leggy of the two hunters, "I shouldn't care to be up there. I should feel myself out of everything."

"Oh, by-the-way," said Captain Winstanley, opening the door of another loose-box, "what are we to do with this fellow?"

"This fellow" was a grand-looking bay, with herculean quarters, short legs, and a head like a war-horse. He snorted indignantly as the Captain slapped his flank, and reared his splendid crest, and seemed as if he said "Ha, ha!"

"I don't quite know of whom you are speaking when you say 'we,'" said Vixen, with an unsmiling countenance.

"Naturally of your mother and myself. I should like to include you in all our family arrangements, present or future; but you seem to prefer being left outside."

"Yes," replied Vixen, "I prefer to stand alone."

"Very well then. I repeat my question – though, as you decline to have any voice in our arrangements, it's hardly worth while to trouble you about it – what are we to do with this fellow?"

"Do with him? My father's horse!" exclaimed Vixen; "the horse he rode to his dying day! Why, keep him, of course!"

"Don't you think that is rather foolish? Nobody rides or drives him. It takes all one man's time to groom him and exercise him. You might just as well keep a white elephant in the stables."

"He was my father's favourite horse," said Vixen, with indignant tears clouding the bright hazel of her eyes; "I cannot imagine mamma capable of parting with him. Yet I ought not to say that, after my experience of the last few months," she added in an undertone.

"Well, my dear Miss Tempest, family affection is a very charming sentiment, and I can quite understand that you and your mamma would be anxious to secure your father's horse a good home and a kind master; but I cannot comprehend your mamma being so foolish as to keep a horse which is of no use to any member of her family. If the brute were of a little lighter build, I wouldn't mind riding him myself, and selling one of mine. But he's too much of a weight-carrier for me."

Vixen gave Arion a final hug, drying her angry tears upon his soft neck, and left the stable without another word. She went straight to her mother's morning-room, where the widow was sitting at a table covered with handkerchiefs-cases and glove-boxes, deeply absorbed in the study of their contents, assisted by the faithful Pauline, otherwise Polly, who had been wearing smarter gowns and caps ever since her mistress's engagement, and who was getting up a *trousseau* on her own account, in order to enter upon her new phase of existence with due dignity.

"We shall keep more company, I make no doubt, with such a gay young master as the Captain," she had observed in the confidences of Mrs. Trimmer's comfortable parlour.

"I can never bring myself to think Swedish gloves pretty," said Mrs. Tempest, as Vixen burst into the room, "but they are the fashion, and one must wear them."

"Mamma," cried Vixen, "Captain Winstanley wants you to sell Bullfinch. If you let him be sold, you will be the meanest of women."

And with this startling address Vixen left the room as suddenly as she had entered it, banging the door behind her.

Time, which brings all things, brought the eve of Mrs. Tempest's wedding. The small but perfect *trousseau*, subject of such anxious thoughts, so much study, was completed. The travelling-dresses were packed in two large oilskin-covered baskets, ready for the Scottish tour. The new travelling-bag, with monograms in pink coral on silver-gilt, a wedding present from Captain Winstanley, occupied the place of honour in Mrs. Tempest's dressing-room. The wedding-dress, of cream-coloured brocade and old point-lace, with a bonnet of lace and water-lilies, was spread upon the sofa. Everything in Mrs. Tempest's apartment bore witness to the impending change in the lady's life. Most of all, the swollen eyelids and pale cheeks of the lady, who, on this vigil of her wedding-day, had given herself up to weeping.

"Oh mum, your eyes will be so red to-morrow," remonstrated Pauline, coming into the room with another dainty little box, newly-arrived from the nearest railway-station, and surprising her mistress in tears. "Do have some red lavender. Or let me make you a cup of tea."

Mrs. Tempest had been sustaining nature with cups of tea all through the agitating day. It was a kind of drama drinking, and she was as much a slave of the teapot as the forlorn drunken drab of St. Giles's is a slave of the gin-bottle.

"Yes, you may get me another cup of tea, Pauline. I feel awfully low to-night."

"You seem so, mum. I'm sure if I didn't want to marry him, I wouldn't, if I was you. It's never too late for a woman to change her mind, not even when she's inside the church. I've known it done. I wouldn't have him, mum, if you feel your mind turn against him at the last," concluded the lady's-maid energetically.

"Not marry him, Pauline, when he is so good and noble, so devoted, so unselfish!"

Mrs. Tempest might have extended this list of virtues indefinitely, if her old servant had not pulled her up rather sharply.

"Well, mum, if he's so good and you're so fond of him, why cry?"

"You don't understand, Pauline. At such a time there are many painful feelings. I have been thinking, naturally, of my dear Edward, the best and most generous of husbands. Twenty years last June since we were married. What a child I was, Pauline, knowing nothing of the world. I had a lovely *trousseau;* but I daresay if we could see the dresses now we should think them absolutely ridiculous. And one's ideas of under-linen in those days were very limited. Those lovely satin-stitch monograms

only came in when the Princess of Wales was married. Dear Edward! He was one of the handsomest men I ever saw. How could Violet believe that I should sell his favourite horse?"

"Well, mum, hearing Captain Winstanley talk about it, she naturally – "

"Captain Winstanley would never wish me to do anything I did not like."

The Captain had not said a word about Bullfinch since that morning in the stable. The noble brute still occupied his loose-box, and was fed and petted daily by Vixen, and was taken for gallops in the dry glades of the Forest, or among the gorse and heath of Boldrewood.

Mrs. Tempest had dined – or rather had not dined – in her own room on this last day of her widowhood. Captain Winstanley had business in London, and was coming back to Hampshire by the last train. There had been no settlements. The Captain had nothing to settle, and Mrs. Tempest confided in her lover too completely to desire to fence herself round with legal protections and precautions. Having only a life interest in the estate, she had nothing to leave, except the multifarious ornaments, frivolities, and luxuries which the Squire had presented to her in the course of their wedded life.

It had been altogether a trying day, Mrs. Tempest complained: in spite of the diversion to painful thought which was continually being offered by the arrival of some interesting item of the *trousseau*, elegant trifles, ordered ever so long ago, which kept dropping in at the last moment. Violet and her mother had not met during the day, and now night was hurrying on. The owls were hooting in the Forest. Their monotonous cry sounded every now and then through the evening silence like a prophesy of evil. In less than twelve hours the wedding was to take place; and as yet Vixen had shown no sign of relenting.

The dress had come from Madame Theodore's. Pauline had thrown it over a chair, with an artistic carelessness which displayed the tasteful combination of cream colour and pale azure.

Mrs. Tempest contemplated it with a pathetic countenance.

"It is simply perfect!" she exclaimed. "Theodore has a most delicate mind. There is not an atom too much blue. And how exquisitely the drapery falls! It looks as if it had been blown together. The Vandyke hat too! Violet would look lovely in it. I do not think if I were a wicked mother I should take so much pains to select an elegant costume for her. But I have always studied her dress. Even when she was in pinafores I took care that she should be picturesque. And she rewards my care by refusing to be present at my wedding. It is very cruel."

The clock struck twelve. The obscure bird clamoured a little louder in his woodland haunt. The patient Pauline, who had packed everything and arranged everything, and borne with her mistress's dolefulness all day long, began to yawn piteously.

"If you'd let me brush your hair now, ma'am," she suggested at last, "I could get to bed. I should like to be fresh to-morrow morning."

"Are you tired?" exclaimed Mrs. Tempest, wonderingly.

"Well, mum, stooping over them dress-baskets is rather tiring, and it's past twelve."

"You can go. I'll brush my hair myself."

"No, mum, I wouldn't allow that anyhow. It would make your arms ache. You ought to get to bed as soon as ever you can, or you'll look tired and 'aggard to-morrow."

That word haggard alarmed Mrs. Tempest. She would not have objected to look pale and interesting on her wedding-day, like one who had spent the previous night in tears; but haggardness suggested age; and she wanted to look her youngest when uniting herself to a husband who was her junior by some years.

So Pauline was allowed to hurry on the evening toilet. The soft pretty hair, not so abundant as it used to be, was carefully brushed; the night-lamp was lighted; and Pauline left her mistress sitting by her dressing-table in her flowing white raiment, pale, graceful, subdued in colouring, like a classic figure in a faded fresco.

She sat with fixed eyes, deep in thought, for some time after Pauline had left her, then looked uneasily at the little gem of a watch dangling on its ormolu and jasper stand. A quarter to one. Violet must have gone to bed hours ago; unless, indeed, Violet were like her mother, too unhappy to be able to sleep. Mrs. Tempest was seized with a sudden desire to see her daughter.

"How unkind of her never to come near me to say good-night, on this night of all others!" she thought, "What has she been doing all day, I wonder? Riding about the Forest, I suppose, like a wild girl, making friends of dogs and horses, and gipsies, and fox-cubs, and charcoal-burners, and all kinds of savage creatures."

And then, after a pause, she asked herself, fretfully:

"What will people say if my own daughter is not at my wedding?"

The idea of possible slander stung her sharply. She got up and walked up and down the room, inwardly complaining against Providence for using her so badly. To have such a rebellious daughter! It was sharper than a serpent's tooth.

The time had not been allowed to go by without some endeavour being made to bring Violet to a better state of feeling. That was the tone taken about her by Mrs. Tempest and the Vicar's wife in their conferences. The headstrong misguided girl was to be brought to a better state of mind. Mrs. Scobel tackled her, bringing all her diplomacy to bear, but without avail. Vixen was rock. Then Mr. Scobel undertook the duty, and, with all the authority of his holy office, called upon Violet to put aside her unchristian prejudices, and behave as a meek and dutiful daughter.

"Is it unchristian to hate the man who has usurped my father's place?" Violet asked curtly.

"It is unchristian to hate anyone. And you have no right to call Captain Winstanley a usurper. You have no reason to take your mother's marriage so much to heart. There is nothing sinful, or even radically objectionable in a second marriage; though I admit that, to my mind, a woman is worthier in remaining faithful to her first love; like Anna the prophetess, who had been a widow fourscore-and-four years. Who shall say that her exceptional gift of prophecy may not have been a reward for the purity and fidelity of her life?"

Mr. Scobel's arguments were of no more effect than his wife's persuasion. His heart was secretly on Violet's side. He had loved the Squire, and he thought this marriage of Mrs. Tempest's a foolish, if not a shameful thing. There was no heartiness in the feeling with which he supervised the decoration of his pretty tittle church for the wedding.

"If she were only awake," thought Mrs. Tempest, "I would make a last appeal to her feelings, late as it is. Her heart cannot be stone."

She took her candle, and went through the dark silent house to Violet's room, and knocked gently.

"Come in," said the girl's clear voice with a wakeful sound.

"Ah!" thought Mrs. Tempest triumphantly, "obstinate as she is, she knows she is doing wrong. Conscience won't let her sleep."

Vixen was standing at her window, leaning with folded arms upon the broad wooden ledge, looking out at the dim garden, over which the pale stars were shining. There was a moon, but it was hidden by drifting clouds.

"Not in bed, Violet?" said her mother sweetly.

"No, mamma."

"What have you been doing all these hours?"

"I don't know – thinking,"

"And you never came to wish me good-night."

"I did not think you would want me. I thought you would be busy packing – for your honeymoon."

"That was not kind, Violet. You must have known that I should have many painful thoughts to-night."

"I did not know it. And if it is so I can only say it is a pity the painful thoughts did not come a little sooner."

"Violet, you are as hard as iron, as cold as ice!" cried Mrs. Tempest, with passionate fretfulness.

"No, I am not, mamma; I can love very warmly, where I love deeply. I have given this night to thoughts of my dead father, whose place is to be usurped in this house from to-morrow."

"I never knew anyone so obstinately unkind. I could not have believe it possible in my own daughter. I thought you had a good heart, Violet; and yet you do not mind making me intensely wretched on my wedding-day."

"Why should you be wretched, mamma, because I prefer not to be present at your wedding? If I were there, I should be like the bad fairy at the princess's christening. I should look at everything with a malevolent eye."

Mrs. Tempest flung herself into a chair and burst into tears.

The storm of grief which had been brooding over her troubled mind all day, broke suddenly in a tempest of weeping. She could have given no reason for her distress; but all at once, on the eve of that day which was to give a new colour to her life, panic seized her, and she trembled at the step she was about to take.

"You are very cruel to me, Violet," she sobbed. "I am a most miserable woman."

Violet knelt beside her and gently took her hand, moved to pity by wretchedness so abject.

"Dear mamma, why miserable?" she asked. "This thing which you are doing is your own choice. Or, if it is not – if you have yielded weakly to over-persuasion – it is not too late to draw back. No, dear mother, even now it is not too late. Indeed, it is not. Let us run away as soon as it is light, you and I, and go off to Spain, or Italy, anywhere, leaving a letter for Captain Winstanley, to say you have changed your mind. He could not do anything to us. You have a right to draw back, even at the last."

"Don't talk nonsense, Violet," cried Mrs. Tempest peevishly. "Who said I had changed my mind? I am as devoted to Conrad as he is to me. I should be a heartless wretch if I could throw him over at the last moment. But this has been a most agitating day. Your unkindness is breaking my heart."

"Indeed, mamma, I have no wish to be unkind – not to you. But my presence at your wedding would be a lie. It would seem to give my approval to an act I hate. I cannot bring myself to do that."

"And you will disgrace me by your absence? You do not care what people may say of me."

"Nobody will care about my absence. You will be the queen of the day."

"Everybody will care – everybody will talk. I know how malicious people are, even one's most intimate friends. They will say my own daughter turned her back upon me on my wedding-day."

"They can hardly say that, when I shall be here in your house!"

Mrs. Tempest went on weeping. She had reduced herself to a condition in which it was much easier to cry than to leave off crying. The fountain of her tears seemed inexhaustible.

"A pretty object I shall look to-morrow!" she murmured plaintively, and this was all she said for some time.

Violet walked up and down the room, sorely distressed, sorely perplexed. To see her mother's grief, and to be able to give comfort, and to refuse. That must be undutiful, undaughterly, rebellious. But had not her mother forfeited all right to her obedience? Were not their hearts and lives completely sundered by this marriage of to-morrow? To Violet's stronger nature it seemed as if she were the mother – offended, outraged by a child's folly and weakness. There sat the child, weeping piteously, yearning to be forgiven. It was a complete reversal of their positions.

Her heart was touched by the spectacle of her mother's weakness, by the mute appeal of those tears.

"What does it matter to me, after all, whether I am absent or present?" she argued at last. "I cannot prevent this man coming to take possession of my father's house. I cannot hinder the outrage to my father's memory. Mamma has been very kind to me – and I have no one else in the world to love."

She took a few more turns, and then stopped by her mother's chair.

"Will it really make you happier, mamma, if I am at your wedding?"

"It will make me quite happy."

"Very well then; it shall be as you please. But, remember, I shall look like the wicked fairy. I can't help that."

"You will look lovely. Theodore has sent you home the most exquisite dress. Come to my room and try it on," said Mrs. Tempest, drying her tears, and as quickly comforted as a child who has obtained its desire by means of copious weeping.

"No, dear mamma; not to-night, I'm too tired," sighed Violet.

"Never mind, dear. Theodore always fits you to perfection. Go to bed at once, love. The dress will be a pleasant surprise for you in the morning. Good-night, pet. You have made me so happy."

"I am glad of that, mamma."

"I wish you were going to Scotland with us." (Vixen shuddered.) "I'm afraid you'll be dreadfully dull here."

"No, mamma; I shall have the dogs and horses. I shall get on very well."

"You are such a curious girl. Well, good-night, darling. You are my own Violet again."

And with this they parted; Mrs. Tempest going back to her room with restored peace of mind.

She looked at the reflection of her tear-blotted face anxiously as she paused before the glass.

"I'm afraid I shall look an object to-morrow," she said, "The morning sunshine is so searching."

CHAPTER IV.
The Vow is vowed

Only a chosen few had been bidden to Mrs. Tempest's wedding. She had told all her friends that she meant everything to be done very quietly.

"There is so much that is saddening in my position," she said pensively. But she was resolved that those guests who were asked to lend their countenance to her espousals should be the very best people.

Lord and Lady Ellangowan had been asked, and had accepted, and their presence alone would lend dignity to the occasion. Colonel and Mrs. Carteret, from Copse Hall; the Chopnells, of Chopnell Park; and about half-a-dozen other representative landowners and commoners made up the list.

"There is such a satisfaction in knowing they are all the best people," Mrs. Tempest said to Captain Winstanley, when they went over the list together.

His own friends were but two, Major Pontorson, his best man, and a clerical cousin, with a portly figure and a portwiney nose, who was to assist Mr. Scobel in the marriage service.

It was a very pretty wedding, the neighbourhood declared unanimously; despite the absence of that most attractive feature in more youthful bridals – a string of girlish bridesmaids. The little church at Beechdale was a bower of summer flowers. The Abbey House conservatories had been emptied – the Ellangowans had sent a waggon-load of ferns and exotics. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of yellow roses and stephanotis.

Violet stood among the guests, no gleam of colour on her cheeks except the wavering hues reflected from the painted windows in the low Gothic chancel – the ruddy gold of her hair shining under the Vandyke hat with its sweeping azure feather. She was the loveliest thing in that crowded church, whither people had come from ten miles off to see Squire Tempest's widow married; but she had a spectral look in the faint light of the chancel, and seemed as strange an image at this wedding as the ghost of Don Ramiro at Donna Clara's bridal dance, in Heine's ghastly ballad.

Violet did not look like the malevolent fairy in the old story, but she had a look and air which told everyone that this marriage was distasteful to her.

When all was over, and the register had been signed in the vestry, Captain Winstanley came up to her, with both hands extended, before all the company.

"My dear Violet, I am your father now," he said. "You shall not find me wanting in my duty."

She drew back involuntarily; and then, seeing herself the focus of so many eyes, suffered him to touch the tips of her fingers.

"You are very kind," she said. "A daughter can have but one father, and mine is dead. I hope you will be a good husband to my mother. That is all I can desire of you."

All the best people heard this speech, which was spoken deliberately, in a low clear voice, and they decided inwardly that whatever kind of wife Captain Winstanley might have won for himself, he had found his match in his stepdaughter.

Now came the ride to the Abbey House, which had put on a festive air, and where smartly-dressed servants were lending their smiles to a day which they all felt to be the end of a peaceful and comfortable era, and the beginning of an age of uncertainty. It was like that day at Versailles when the Third Estate adjourned to the Tennis Court, and the French Revolution began. People smiled, and were pleased at the new movement and expectancy in their lives, knowing not what was coming.

"We are bound to be livelier, anyhow, with a military master," said Pauline.

"A little more company in the house wouldn't come amiss, certainly," said Mrs. Trimmer.

"I should like to see our champagne cellar better stocked," remarked Forbes the butler. "We're behind the times in our sparkling wines."

Captain Winstanley entered the old oak-panelled hall with his wife on his arm, and felt himself master of such a house as a man might dream of all his life and never attain. Money could not have bought it. Taste could not have created it. The mellowing hand of time, the birth and death of many generations, had made it beautiful.

The wedding breakfast was as other wedding feasts. People ate and drank and made believe to be intensely glad, and drank more sparkling wine than was good for them at that abnormal hour, and began to feel sleepy before the speeches, brief as they were, had come to an end. The August sun shone in upon the banquet, the creams and jellies languished and collapsed in the sultry air. The wedding-cake was felt to be a nuisance. The cracker-cake exploded faintly in the languid hands of the younger guests, and those ridiculous mottoes, which could hardly amuse anyone out of Earlswood Asylum, were looked at a shade more contemptuously than usual. The weather was too warm for enthusiasm. And Violet's pale set face was almost as disheartening as the skeleton at an Egyptian banquet. When Mrs. Tempest retired to put on her travelling-dress Violet went with her, a filial attention the mother had in no wise expected.

"Dear girl," she said, squeezing her daughter's hand, "to-day is not to make the slightest difference."

"I hope not, mamma," answered Violet gravely; "but one can never tell what is in the future. God grant you may be happy!"

"I'm sure it will be my own fault if I am not happy with Conrad," said the wife of an hour, "and oh, Violet! my constant prayer will be to see you more attached to him."

Violet made no reply, and here happily Pauline brought the fawn-coloured travelling-dress, embroidered with poppies and cornflowers in their natural colours, after the style of South Kensington, a dress so distractingly lovely that it instantly put an end to serious conversation. The whole costume had been carefully thought out, a fawn-coloured parasol, edged with ostrich feathers, a fawn-coloured bonnet, fawn-coloured Hessian boots, fawn-coloured Swedish gloves with ten buttons – all prepared for the edification of railway guards and porters, and Scotch innkeepers and their *valetaille*.

Verily there are some games which seem hardly worth the candle that lights the players. And there was once upon a time an eccentric nobleman who was accounted maddest in that he made his wife dress herself from head to foot in one colour. Other times, other manners.

Violet stayed with her mother to the last, receiving the last embrace – a fond and tearful one – and watched the carriage drive away from the porch amidst a shower of rice. And then all was over. The best people were bidding her a kindly good-bye. Carriages drove up quickly, and in a quarter of an hour everyone was gone except the Vicar and his wife. Vixen found herself standing between Mr. and Mrs. Scobel, looking blankly at the hearth, where an artistic group of ferns and scarlet geraniums replaced the friendly winter fire.

"Come and spend the evening with us, dear," said Mrs. Scobel kindly; "it will be so lonely for you here."

But Violet pleaded a headache, a plea which was confirmed by her pale cheeks and the dark rings round her eyes.

"I shall be better at home," she said. "I'll come and see you in a day or two, if I may."

"Come whenever you like, dear. I wish you would come and stay with us altogether. Ignatius and I have been so pleased with your conduct to-day; and we have felt for you deeply, knowing what a conquest you have made over yourself."

The Reverend Ignatius murmured his acquiescence.

"Poor mamma!" sighed Violet, "I am afraid I have been very unkind."

And then she looked absently round the old familiar hall, and her eye lighted on the Squire's favourite chair, which still stood in its place by the hearth. Her eyes filled with sudden tears. She

fancied she could see a shadowy figure sitting there. The Squire in his red coat, his long hunting whip across his knee, his honest loving face smiling at her.

She squeezed Mrs. Scobel's friendly hand, bade her and the Vicar a hurried good-bye, and ran out of the room, leaving them looking after her pityingly.

"Poor girl," said the Vicar's wife, "how keenly she feels it!"

"Ah!" sighed the Vicar, "I have never been in favour of second marriages. I can but think with St. Paul that the widow is happy if she so abide."

Vixen called Argus and went up to her room, followed by that faithful companion. When she had shut and locked the door, she flung herself on the ground, regardless of Madame Theodore's masterpiece, and clasped her arms round the dog's thick neck, and buried her face in his soft hide.

"Oh, Argus, I have not a friend in the world but you!" she sobbed.

CHAPTER V.
War to the Knife

A strange stillness came upon the Abbey House after Mrs. Tempest's wedding. Violet received a few invitations and morning calls from friends who pitied her solitude; but the best people were for the most part away from home in August and Septernber; some no farther than Bournemouth or Weymouth; others roaming the mountainous districts of Europe in search of the picturesque or the fashionable.

Violet did not want society. She made excuses for refusing all invitations. The solitude of her life did not afflict her. If it could have continued for ever, if Captain Winstanley and her mother could have wandered about the earth, and left her in peaceful possession of the Abbey House, with the old servants, old horses, old dogs, all things undisturbed as in her father's time, she would have been happy. It was the idea of change, a new and upstart master in her father's place, which tortured her. Any delay which kept off that evil hour was a blessed relief; but alas! the evil hour was close at hand, inevitable. That autumn proved exceptionally fine. Scotland cast aside her mantle of mist and cloud, and dressed herself in sunshine. The Trosachs blossomed as the rose. Gloomy gray glens and mountains put on an apparel of light. Mrs. Tempest wrote her daughter rapturous letters about the tour.

> "We move about very slowly," she said, "so as not to fatigue me. Conrad's attention is more than words can describe. I can see that even the waiters are touched by it. He telegraphs beforehand to all the hotels, so that we have always the best rooms. He thinks nothing too good for me. It is quite saddening to see a herd of travellers sent away, houseless, every evening. The fine weather is bringing crowds to the Highlands. We could not have travelled at a more favourable time. We have had only a few showers, but in one, on Loch Katrine, my poor fawn-coloured dress suffered. The scarlet of the poppies ran into the blue of the cornflowers. Is it not a pity? I was quite unconscious of what was going on at the time; and afterwards, when I discovered it, I could have shed tears.
>
> "I hope when you marry, darling, you will come to Scotland for your honeymoon. The mountains seem to appeal to one's highest feelings. There are ponies, too, for the ascent; which is a great comfort if one is wearing pretty boots. And you know, Violet, my idea that a woman should be essentially feminine in every detail. I never could bring myself to wear the horrid clump-soles which some women delight in. They seem to me to indicate that strong-minded and masculine character which I detest. Such women would want the suffrage, and to have the learned professions thrown open to them. I meet ladies or, at least, persons calling themselves such – in horrid waterproof costumes and with coarse cloth hats. Hideousness could go no farther. And though I regret the wreck of my fawn-colour, I can but remember with satisfaction what Theodore always says to me when she shows me one of her *chef-d'oeuvres:* 'Mrs. Tempest, it is a dress fit for a *lady*.' There are ill-natured people who declare that Theodore began life as kitchen-maid in an Irish inn, but I, for one, will never believe it. Such taste as hers indicates a refined progeniture."

With such letters as these did Mrs. Winstanley comfort her absent daughter. Vixen replied as best she might, with scraps of news about the neighbours, rich and poor, the dogs, horses, and gardens. It was hateful to her to have to direct her letters to Mrs. Winstanley.

The days went on. Vixen rode from early morning till noon, and rambled in the Forest for the best part of the afternoon. She used to take her books there, and sit for hours reading on a mossy

bank under one of the boughy beeches, with Argus at her feet. The dog was company enough for her. She wanted no one better. At home the old servants were more or less – their faces always pleasant to see. Some of them had lived with her grandfather; most of them had served her father from the time he had inherited his estate. The Squire had been the most conservative and indulgent of masters; always liking to see the old faces. The butler was old, and even on his underling's bullet-head the gray hairs were beginning to show. Mrs. Trimmer was at least sixty, and had been getting annually bulkier for the last twenty years. The kitchen-maid was a comfortable-looking person of forty. There was an atmosphere of domestic peace in the offices of the Abbey House which made everybody fat. It was only by watchfulness and tight-lacing that Pauline preserved to herself that grace of outline which she spoke of in a general way as "figure."

"And what a mite of a waist I had when I first went out to service," she would say pathetically.

But Pauline was now in Scotland, harassed by unceasing cares about travelling-bags, bonnet-boxes, and extra wraps, and under-valuing Ben Nevis as not worth half the trouble that was taken to go and look at him.

The gardeners were gray-headed, and remembered potting the first fuchsia-slips that ever came to the Forest. They had no gusto for new-fangled ideas about cordon fruit-trees or root-pruning. They liked to go their own way, as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them; and, with unlimited supplies of manure, they were able to produce excellent cucumbers by the first of May, or a fair dish of asparagus by about the same time. If their produce was late it was because nature went against them. They could not command the winds, or tell the sun that he must shine. The gardens at the Abbey House were beautiful, but nature had done more for them than the Squire's old gardeners. The same rose-trees budded and bloomed year after year; the same rhododendrons and azaleas opened their big bunches of bloom. Eden could have hardly owed less to culture. The noble old cedars, the mediaeval yews, needed no gardener's hand. There was a good deal of weeding, and mowing, and rolling done from week's end to week's end; and the borders were beautified by banks of geranium and golden calceolaria, and a few other old-fashioned flowers; but scientific horticulture there was none. Some alterations had been begun under Captain Winstanley's directions; but the work languished in his absence.

It was the twentieth of September, and the travellers were expected to return within a few days – the exact date of their arrival not being announced. The weather was glorious, warmer than it had been all through the summer; and Vixen spent her life out of doors. Sad thoughts haunted her less cruelly in the great wood. There was a brightness and life in the Forest which cheered her. It was pleasant to see Argus's enjoyment of the fair weather; his wild rushes in among the underwood; his pursuit of invisible vermin under the thick holly-bushes, the brambles, and bracken; his rapturous rolling in the dewy grass, where he flung himself at full length, and rolled over and over, and leaped as if he had been revelling in a bath of freshest water; pleasant to see him race up to a serious-minded hog, and scrutinise that stolid animal closely, and then leave him to his sordid researches after edible roots, with open contempt, as who should say: "Can the same scheme of creation include me and that vulgar brute?"

All things had been set in order for the return of the newly-married couple. Mrs. Trimmer had her dinner arranged and ready to be put in hand at a moment's notice. Violet felt that the end of her peaceful life was very near. How would she bear the change? How would she be able to behave herself decently? Well, she would try her best, Heaven giving her strength. That was her last resolve. She would not make the poor frivolous mother unhappy.

"Forgive me, beloved father, if I am civil to the usurper." she said. "It will be for my mother's sake. You were always tender and indulgent to her; you would not like to see her unhappy."

These were Vixen's thoughts this bright September morning, as she sat at her lonely little breakfast-table in the sunny window of her den, with Argus by her side, intensely watchful of every morsel of bread-and-butter she ate, though he had already been accommodated with half the loaf.

She was more amiably disposed than usual this morning. She had made up her mind to make the best of a painful position.

"I shall always hate him," she told herself, meaning Captain Winstanley; "but I will begin a career of Christianlike hypocrisy, and try to make other people believe that I like him. No, Argus," as the big paw tugged her arm pleadingly, "no; now really this is sheer greediness. You can't be hungry."

A piteous whine, as of a dog on the brink of starvation, seemed to gainsay her. Just then the door opened, and the middle-aged footman entered.

"Oh, if you please, miss, Bates says would you like to see Bullfinch?"

"To see Bullfinch," echoed Vixen. "What's the matter? Is he ill? Is he hurt?"

"No, miss; but Bates thought as how maybe you'd like to see 'un before he goes away. He's sold."

Vixen turned very pale. She started up, and stood for a few moments silent, with her strong young hands clenched, just as she gripped them on the reins sometimes when Arion was running away with her and there were bogs in front.

"I'll come," she said in a half-suffocated voice.

"He has sold my father's horse, after all," she said to herself, as she went towards the stables. "Then I shall hate him openly all my life. Yes, everybody shall know that I hate him."

She found the stables in some commotion. There were two strangers, groomy-looking men, standing in front of Bullfinch's loose-box, and all the stablemen had come out of their various holes, and were standing about.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.