Braddon Mary Elizabeth

John Marchmont's Legacy. Volume 2 of 3

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Содержание

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Mary Elizabeth
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VOLUME II.
CHAPTER I.
MARY'S LETTER

It was past twelve o'clock when Edward Arundel strolled into the dining-room. The windows were open, and the scent of the mignionette upon the terrace was blown in upon the warm summer breeze.

Mrs. Marchmont was sitting at one end of the long table, reading a newspaper. She looked up as Edward entered the room. She was pale, but not much paler than usual. The feverish light had faded out of her eyes, and they looked dim and heavy.

"Good morning, Livy," the young man said. "Mary is not up yet, I suppose?"

"I believe not."

"Poor little girl! A long rest will do her good after her first

ball. How pretty and fairy-like she looked in her white gauze dress, and with that circlet of pearls round her hair! Your taste, I suppose, Olivia? She looked like a snow-drop among all the other gaudy flowers, – the roses and tiger-lilies, and peonies and dahlias. That eldest Miss Hickman is handsome, but she's so terribly conscious of her attractions. That little girl from Swampington with the black ringlets is rather pretty; and Laura Filmer is a jolly, dashing girl; she looks you full in the face, and talks to you about hunting with as much gusto as an old whipper-in. I don't think much of Major Hawley's three tall sandy-haired daughters; but Fred Hawley's a capital fellow: it's a pity he's a civilian. In short, my dear Olivia, take it altogether, I think your ball was a success, and I hope you'll give us another in the hunting-season."

Mrs. Marchmont did not condescend to reply to her cousin's meaningless rattle. She sighed wearily, and began to fill the tea-pot from the old-fashioned silver urn. Edward loitered in one of the windows, whistling to a peacock that was stalking solemnly backwards and forwards upon the stone balustrade.

"I should like to drive you and Mary down to the seashore, Livy, after breakfast. Will you go?"

Mrs. Marchmont shook her head.

"I am a great deal too tired to think of going out to-day," she said ungraciously.

"And I never felt fresher in my life," the young man responded, laughing; "last night's festivities seem to have revivified me. I

wish Mary would come down," he added, with a yawn; "I could give her another lesson in billiards, at any rate. Poor little girl, I am afraid she'll never make a cannon."

Captain Arundel sat down to his breakfast, and drank the cup of tea poured out for him by Olivia. Had she been a sinful woman of another type, she would have put arsenic into the cup perhaps, and so have made an end of the young officer and of her own folly. As it was, she only sat by, with her own untasted breakfast before her, and watched him while he ate a plateful of raised pie, and drank his cup of tea, with the healthy appetite which generally accompanies youth and a good conscience. He sprang up from the table directly he had finished his meal, and cried out impatiently, "What can make Mary so lazy this morning? she is usually such an early riser."

Mrs. Marchmont rose as her cousin said this, and a vague feeling of uneasiness took possession of her mind. She remembered the white face which had blanched beneath the angry glare of her eyes, the blank look of despair that had come over Mary's countenance a few hours before.

"I will go and call her myself," she said. "N – no; I'll send Barbara." She did not wait to ring the bell, but went into the hall, and called sharply, "Barbara! Barbara!"

A woman came out of a passage leading to the housekeeper's room, in answer to Mrs. Marchmont's call; a woman of about fifty years of age, dressed in gray stuff, and with a grave inscrutable face, a wooden countenance that gave no token of its

owner's character. Barbara Simmons might have been the best or the worst of women, a Mrs. Fry or a Mrs. Brownrigg, for any evidence her face afforded against either hypothesis.

"I want you to go up-stairs, Barbara, and call Miss Marchmont," Olivia said. "Captain Arundel and I have finished breakfast."

The woman obeyed, and Mrs. Marchmont returned to the dining-room, where Edward was trying to amuse himself with the "Times" of the previous day.

Ten minutes afterwards Barbara Simmons came into the room carrying a letter on a silver waiter. Had the document been a death-warrant, or a telegraphic announcement of the landing of the French at Dover, the well-trained servant would have placed it upon a salver before presenting it to her mistress.

"Miss Marchmont is not in her room, ma'am," she said; "the bed has not been slept on; and I found this letter, addressed to Captain Arundel, upon the table."

Olivia's face grew livid; a horrible dread rushed into her mind. Edward snatched the letter which the servant held towards him.

"Mary not in her room! What, in Heaven's name, can it mean?" he cried.

He tore open the letter. The writing was not easily decipherable for the tears which the orphan girl had shed over it.

"MY OWN DEAR EDWARD, – I have loved you so dearly and so foolishly, and you have been so kind to me, that I have quite forgotten how unworthy I am of your affection. But I am

forgetful no longer. Something has happened which has opened my eyes to my own folly, – I know now that you did not love me; that I had no claim to your love; no charms or attractions such as so many other women possess, and for which you might have loved me. I know this now, dear Edward, and that all my happiness has been a foolish dream; but do not think that I blame any one but myself for what has happened. Take my fortune: long ago, when I was a little girl, I asked my father to let me share it with you. I ask you now to take it all, dear friend; and I go away for ever from a house in which I have learnt how little happiness riches can give. Do not be unhappy about me. I shall pray for you always, – always remembering your goodness to my dead father; always looking back to the day upon which you came to see us in our poor lodging. I am very ignorant of all worldly business, but I hope the law will let me give you Marchmont Towers, and all my fortune, whatever it may be. Let Mr. Paulette see this latter part of my letter, and let him fully understand that I abandon all my rights to you from this day. Good-bye, dear friend; think of me sometimes, but never think of me sorrowfully.

"MARY MARCHMONT."

This was all. This was the letter which the heart-broken girl had written to her lover. It was in no manner different from the letter she might have written to him nine years before in Oakley Street. It was as childish in its ignorance and inexperience; as

womanly in its tender self-abnegation.

Edward Arundel stared at the simple lines like a man in a dream, doubtful of his own identity, doubtful of the reality of the world about him, in his hopeless wonderment. He read the letter line by line again and again, first in dull stupefaction, and muttering the words mechanically as he read them, then with the full light of their meaning dawning gradually upon him.

Her fortune! He had never loved her! She had discovered her own folly! What did it all mean? What was the clue to the mystery of this letter, which had stunned and bewildered him, until the very power of reflection seemed lost? The dawning of that day had seen their parting, and the innocent face had been lifted to his, beaming with love and trust. And now – ? The letter dropped from his hand, and fluttered slowly to the ground. Olivia Marchmont stooped to pick it up. Her movement aroused the young man from his stupor, and in that moment he caught the sight of his cousin's livid face.

He started as if a thunderbolt had burst at his feet. An idea, sudden as some inspired revelation, rushed into his mind.

"Read that letter, Olivia Marchmont!" he said.

The woman obeyed. Slowly and deliberately she read the childish epistle which Mary had written to her lover. In every line, in every word, the widow saw the effect of her own deadly work; she saw how deeply the poison, dropped from her own envenomed tongue, had sunk into the innocent heart of the girl.

Edward Arundel watched her with flaming eyes. His tall

soldierly frame trembled in the intensity of his passion. He followed his cousin's eyes along the lines in Mary Marchmont's letter, waiting till she should come to the end. Then the tumultuous storm of indignation burst forth, until Olivia cowered beneath the lightning of her cousin's glance.

Was this the man she had called frivolous? Was this the boyish red-coated dandy she had despised? Was this the curled and perfumed representative of swelldom, whose talk never soared to higher flights than the description of a day's snipe-shooting, or a run with the Burleigh fox-hounds? The wicked woman's eyelids drooped over her averted eyes; she turned away, shrinking from this fearless accuser.

"This mischief is some of *your* work, Olivia Marchmont!" Edward Arundel cried. "It is you who have slandered and traduced me to my dead friend's daughter! Who else would dare accuse a Dangerfield Arundel of baseness? who else would be vile enough to call my father's son a liar and a traitor? It is you who have whispered shameful insinuations into this poor child's innocent ear! I scarcely need the confirmation of your ghastly face to tell me this. It is you who have driven Mary Marchmont from the home in which you should have sheltered and protected her! You envied her, I suppose, – envied her the thousands which might have ministered to your wicked pride and ambition; – the pride which has always held you aloof from those who might have loved you; the ambition that has made you a soured and discontented woman, whose gloomy face repels all natural

affection. You envied the gentle girl whom your dead husband committed to your care, and who should have been most sacred to you. You envied her, and seized the first occasion upon which you might stab her to the very core of her tender heart. What other motive could you have had for doing this deadly wrong? None, so help me Heaven!"

No other motive! Olivia Marchmont dropped down in a heap on the ground near her cousin's feet; not kneeling, but grovelling upon the carpeted floor, writhing convulsively, with her hands twisted one in the other, and her head falling forward on her breast. She uttered no syllable of self-justification or denial. The pitiless words rained down upon her provoked no reply. But in the depths of her heart sounded the echo of Edward Arundel's words: "The pride which has always held you aloof from those who might have loved you;.. a discontented woman, whose gloomy face repels all natural affection."

"O God!" she thought, "he might have loved me, then! He *might* have loved me, if I could have locked my anguish in my own heart, and smiled at him and flattered him."

And then an icy indifference took possession of her. What did it matter that Edward Arundel repudiated and hated her? He had never loved her. His careless friendliness had made as wide a gulf between them as his bitterest hate could ever make. Perhaps, indeed, his new-born hate would be nearer to love than his indifference had been, for at least he would think of her now, if he thought ever so bitterly.

"Listen to me, Olivia Marchmont," the young man said, while the woman still crouched upon the ground near his feet, self-confessed in the abandonment of her despair. "Wherever this girl may have gone, driven hence by your wickedness, I will follow her. My answer to the lie you have insinuated against me shall be my immediate marriage with my old friend's orphan child. *He* knew me well enough to know how far I was above the baseness of a fortune-hunter, and he wished that I should be his daughter's husband. I should be a coward and a fool were I to be for one moment influenced by such a slander as that which you have whispered in Mary Marchmont's ear. It is not the individual only whom you traduce. You slander the cloth I wear, the family to which I belong; and my best justification will be the contempt in which I hold your infamous insinuations. When you hear that I have squandered Mary Marchmont's fortune, or cheated the children I pray God she may live to bear me, it will be time enough for you to tell the world that your kinsman Edward Dangerfield Arundel is a swindler and a traitor."

He strode out into the hall, leaving his cousin on the ground; and she heard his voice outside the dining-room door making inquiries of the servants.

They could tell him nothing of Mary's flight. Her bed had not been slept in; nobody had seen her leave the house; it was most likely, therefore, that she had stolen away very early, before the servants were astir.

Where had she gone? Edward Arundel's heart beat wildly as

he asked himself that question. He remembered how often he had heard of women, as young and innocent as Mary Marchmont, who had rushed to destroy themselves in a tumult of agony and despair. How easily this poor child, who believed that her dream of happiness was for ever broken, might have crept down through the gloomy wood to the edge of the sluggish river, to drop into the weedy stream, and hide her sorrow under the quiet water. He could fancy her, a new Ophelia, pale and pure as the Danish prince's slighted love, floating past the weird branches of the willows, borne up for a while by the current, to sink in silence amongst the shadows farther down the stream.

He thought of these things in one moment, and in the next dismissed the thought. Mary's letter breathed the spirit of gentle resignation rather than of wild despair. "I shall always pray for you; I shall always remember you," she had written. Her lover remembered how much sorrow the orphan girl had endured in her brief life. He looked back to her childish days of poverty and self-denial; her early loss of her mother; her grief at her father's second marriage; the shock of that beloved father's death. Her sorrows had followed each other in gloomy succession, with only narrow intervals of peace between them. She was accustomed, therefore, to grief. It is the soul untutored by affliction, the rebellious heart that has never known calamity, which becomes mad and desperate, and breaks under the first blow. Mary Marchmont had learned the habit of endurance in the hard school of sorrow.

Edward Arundel walked out upon the terrace, and re-read the missing girl's letter. He was calmer now, and able to face the situation with all its difficulties and perplexities. He was losing time perhaps in stopping to deliberate; but it was no use to rush off in reckless haste, undetermined in which direction he should seek for the lost mistress of Marchmont Towers. One of the grooms was busy in the stables saddling Captain Arundel's horse, and in the mean time the young man went out alone upon the sunny terrace to deliberate upon Mary's letter.

Complete resignation was expressed in every line of that childish epistle. The heiress spoke most decisively as to her abandonment of her fortune and her home. It was clear, then, that she meant to leave Lincolnshire; for she would know that immediate steps would be taken to discover her hiding-place, and bring her back to Marchmont Towers.

Where was she likely to go in her inexperience of the outer world? where but to those humble relations of her dead mother's, of whom her father had spoken in his letter to Edward Arundel, and with whom the young man knew she had kept up an occasional correspondence, sending them many little gifts out of her pocket-money. These people were small tenant-farmers, at a place called Marlingford, in Berkshire. Edward knew their name and the name of the farm.

"I'll make inquiries at the Kemberling station to begin with," he thought. "There's a through train from the north that stops at Kemberling at a little before six. My poor darling may have easily

caught that, if she left the house at five."

Captain Arundel went back into the hall, and summoned Barbara Simmons. The woman replied with rather a sulky air to his numerous questions; but she told him that Miss Marchmont had left her ball-dress upon the bed, and had put on a gray cashmere dress trimmed with black ribbon, which she had worn as half-mourning for her father; a black straw bonnet, with a crape veil, and a silk mantle trimmed with crape. She had taken with her a small carpet-bag, some linen, – for the linen-drawer of her wardrobe was open, and the things scattered confusedly about, – and the little morocco case in which she kept her pearl ornaments, and the diamond ring left her by her father.

"Had she any money?" Edward asked.

"Yes, sir; she was never without money. She spent a good deal amongst the poor people she visited with my mistress; but I dare say she may have had between ten and twenty pounds in her purse."

"She will go to Berkshire," Edward Arundel thought: "the idea of going to her humble friends would be the first to present itself to her mind. She will go to her dead mother's sister, and give her all her jewels, and ask for shelter in the quiet farmhouse. She will act like one of the heroines in the old-fashioned novels she used to read in Oakley Street, the simple-minded damsels of those innocent story-books, who think nothing of resigning a castle and a coronet, and going out into the world to work for their daily bread in a white satin gown, and with a string of pearls to bind

their dishevelled locks."

Captain Arundel's horse was brought round to the terrace-steps, as he stood with Mary's letter in his hand, waiting to hurry away to the rescue of his sorrowful love.

"Tell Mrs. Marchmont that I shall not return to the Towers till I bring her stepdaughter with me," he said to the groom; and then, without stopping to utter another word, he shook the rein on his horse's neck, and galloped away along the gravelled drive leading to the great iron gates of Marchmont Towers.

Olivia heard his message, which had been spoken in a clear loud voice, like some knightly defiance, sounding trumpet-like at a castle-gate. She stood in one of the windows of the dining-room, hidden by the faded velvet curtain, and watched her cousin ride away, brave and handsome as any knight-errant of the chivalrous past, and as true as Bayard himself.

CHAPTER II.
A NEW PROTECTOR

Captain Arundel's inquiries at the Kemberling station resulted in an immediate success. A young lady – a young woman, the railway official called her – dressed in black, wearing a crape veil over her face, and carrying a small carpet-bag in her hand, had taken a second-class ticket for London, by the 5.50., a parliamentary train, which stopped at almost every station on the line, and reached Euston Square at half-past twelve.

Edward looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to two o'clock. The express did not stop at Kemberling; but he would be able to catch it at Swampington at a quarter past three. Even then, however, he could scarcely hope to get to Berkshire that night.

"My darling girl will not discover how foolish her doubts have been until to-morrow," he thought. "Silly child! has my love so little the aspect of truth that she *can* doubt me?"

He sprang on his horse again, flung a shilling to the railway porter who had held the bridle, and rode away along the Swampington road. The clocks in the gray old Norman turrets were striking three as the young man crossed the bridge, and paid his toll at the little toll-house by the stone archway.

The streets were as lonely as usual in the hot July afternoon; and the long line of sea beyond the dreary marshes was blue in the

sunshine. Captain Arundel passed the two churches, and the low-roofed rectory, and rode away to the outskirts of the town, where the station glared in all the brilliancy of new red bricks, and dazzling stuccoed chimneys, athwart a desert of waste ground.

The express-train came tearing up to the quiet platform two minutes after Edward had taken his ticket; and in another minute the clanging bell pealed out its discordant signal, and the young man was borne, with a shriek and a whistle, away upon the first stage of his search for Mary Marchmont.

It was nearly seven o'clock when he reached Euston Square; and he only got to the Paddington station in time to hear that the last train for Marlingford had just started. There was no possibility of his reaching the little Berkshire village that night. No mail-train stopped within a reasonable distance of the obscure station. There was no help for it, therefore, Captain Arundel had nothing to do but to wait for the next morning.

He walked slowly away from the station, very much disheartened by this discovery.

"I'd better sleep at some hotel up this way," he thought, as he strolled listlessly in the direction of Oxford Street, "so as to be on the spot to catch the first train to-morrow morning. What am I to do with myself all this night, racked with uncertainty about Mary?"

He remembered that one of his brother officers was staying at the hotel in Covent Garden where Edward himself stopped, when business detained him in London for a day or two.

"Shall I go and see Lucas?" Captain Arundel thought. "He's a good fellow, and won't bore me with a lot of questions, if he sees I've something on my mind. There may be some letters for me at E – 's. Poor little Polly!"

He could never think of her without something of that pitiful tenderness which he might have felt for a young and helpless child, whom it was his duty and privilege to protect and succour. It may be that there was little of the lover's fiery enthusiasm mingled with the purer and more tender feelings with which Edward Arundel regarded his dead friend's orphan daughter; but in place of this there was a chivalrous devotion, such as woman rarely wins in these degenerate modern days.

The young soldier walked through the lamp-lit western streets thinking of the missing girl; now assuring himself that his instinct had not deceived him, and that Mary must have gone straight to the Berkshire farmer's house, and in the next moment seized with a sudden terror that it might be otherwise: the helpless girl might have gone out into a world of which she was as ignorant as a child, determined to hide herself from all who had ever known her. If it should be thus: if, on going down to Marlingford, he obtained no tidings of his friend's daughter, what was he to do? Where was he to look for her next?

He would put advertisements in the papers, calling upon his betrothed to trust him and return to him. Perhaps Mary Marchmont was, of all people in this world, the least likely to look into a newspaper; but at least it would be doing something to

do this, and Edward Arundel determined upon going straight off to Printing-House Square, to draw up an appeal to the missing girl.

It was past ten o'clock when Captain Arundel came to this determination, and he had reached the neighbourhood of Covent Garden and of the theatres. The staring play-bills adorned almost every threshold, and fluttered against every door-post; and the young soldier, going into a tobacconist's to fill his cigar-case, stared abstractedly at a gaudy blue-and-red announcement of the last dramatic attraction to be seen at Drury Lane. It was scarcely strange that the Captain's thoughts wandered back to his boyhood, that shadowy time, far away behind his later days of Indian warfare and glory, and that he remembered the December night upon which he had sat with his cousin in a box at the great patent theatre, watching the consumptive supernumerary struggling under the weight of his banner. From the box at Drury Lane to the next morning's breakfast in Oakley Street, was but a natural transition of thought; but with that recollection of the humble Lambeth lodging, with the picture of a little girl in a pinafore sitting demurely at her father's table, and meekly waiting on his guest, an idea flashed across Edward Arundel's mind, and brought the hot blood into his face.

What if Mary had gone to Oakley Street? Was not this even more likely than that she should seek refuge with her kinsfolk in Berkshire? She had lived in the Lambeth lodging for years, and had only left that plebeian shelter for the grandeur of Marchmont

Towers. What more natural than that she should go back to the familiar habitation, dear to her by reason of a thousand associations with her dead father? What more likely than that she should turn instinctively, in the hour of her desolation, to the humble friends whom she had known in her childhood?

Edward Arundel was almost too impatient to wait while the smart young damsel behind the tobacconist's counter handed him change for the half-sovereign which he had just tendered her. He darted out into the street, and shouted violently to the driver of a passing hansom, – there are always loitering hansoms in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, – who was, after the manner of his kind, looking on any side rather than that upon which Providence had sent him a fare.

"Oakley Street, Lambeth," the young man cried. "Double fare if you get there in ten minutes."

The tall raw-boned horse rattled off at that peculiar pace common to his species, making as much noise upon the pavement as if he had been winning a metropolitan Derby, and at about twenty minutes past nine drew up, smoking and panting, before the dimly lighted windows of the Ladies' Wardrobe, where a couple of flaring tallow-candles illuminated the splendour of a foreground of dirty artificial flowers, frayed satin shoes, and tarnished gilt combs; a middle distance of blue gauzy tissue, embroidered with beetles' wings; and a background of greasy black silk. Edward Arundel flung back the doors of the hansom with a bang, and leaped out upon the pavement.

The proprietress of the Ladies' Wardrobe was lolling against the door-post, refreshing herself with the soft evening breezes from the roads of Westminster and Waterloo, and talking to her neighbour.

"Bless her pore dear innercent 'art!" the woman was saying; "she's cried herself to sleep at last. But you never hear any think so pitiful as she talked to me at fust, sweet love! – and the very picture of my own poor Eliza Jane, as she looked. You might have said it was Eliza Jane come back to life, only paler and more sickly like, and not that beautiful fresh colour, and ringlets curled all round in a crop, as Eliza Ja – " Edward Arundel burst in upon the good woman's talk, which rambled on in an unintermitting stream, unbroken by much punctuation.

"Miss Marchmont is here," he said; "I know she is. Thank God, thank God! Let me see her please, directly. I am Captain Arundel, her father's friend, and her affianced husband. You remember me, perhaps? I came here nine years ago to breakfast, one December morning. I can recollect you perfectly, and I know that you were always good to my poor friend's daughter. To think that I should find her here! You shall be well rewarded for your kindness to her. But take me to her; pray take me to her at once!"

The proprietress of the wardrobe snatched up one of the candles that guttered in a brass flat-candlestick upon the counter, and led the way up the narrow staircase. She was a good lazy creature, and she was so completely borne down by Edward's excitement, that she could only mutter disjointed sentences, to

the effect that the gentleman had brought her heart into her mouth, and that her legs felt all of a jelly; and that her poor knees was a'most giving way under her, and other incoherent statements concerning the physical effect of the mental shocks she had that day received.

She opened the door of that shabby sitting-room upon the first-floor, in which the crippled eagle brooded over the convex mirror, and stood aside upon the threshold while Captain Arundel entered the room. A tallow candle was burning dimly upon the table, and a girlish form lay upon the narrow horsehair sofa, shrouded by a woollen shawl.

"She went to sleep about half-an-hour ago, sir," the woman said, in a whisper; "and she cried herself to sleep, pore lamb, I think. I made her some tea, and got her a few creases and a French roll, with a bit of best fresh; but she wouldn't touch nothin', or only a few spoonfuls of the tea, just to please me. What is it that's drove her away from her 'ome, sir, and such a good 'ome too? She showed me a diamont ring as her pore par gave her in his will. He left me twenty pound, pore gentleman, – which he always acted like a gentleman bred and born; and Mr. Pollit, the lawyer, sent his clerk along with it and his compliments, – though I'm sure I never looked for nothink, having always had my rent faithful to the very minute: and Miss Mary used to bring it down to me so pretty, and – "

But the whispering had grown louder by this time, and Mary Marchmont awoke from her feverish sleep, and lifted her weary

head from the hard horsehair pillow and looked about her, half forgetful of where she was, and of what had happened within the last eighteen hours of her life. Her eyes wandered here and there, doubtful as to the reality of what they looked upon, until the girl saw her lover's figure, tall and splendid in the humble apartment, a tender half-reproachful smile upon his face, and his handsome blue eyes beaming with love and truth. She saw him, and a faint shriek broke from her tremulous lips, as she rose and fell upon his breast.

"You love me, then, Edward," she cried; "you do love me!"

"Yes, my darling, as truly and tenderly as ever woman was loved upon this earth."

And then the soldier sat down upon the hard bristly sofa, and with Mary's head still resting upon his breast, and his strong hand straying amongst her disordered hair, he reproached her for her foolishness, and comforted and soothed her; while the proprietress of the apartment stood, with the brass candlestick in her hand, watching the young lovers and weeping over their sorrows, as if she had been witnessing a scene in a play. Their innocent affection was unrestrained by the good woman's presence; and when Mary had smiled upon her lover, and assured him that she would never, never, never doubt him again, Captain Arundel was fain to kiss the soft-hearted landlady in his enthusiasm, and to promise her the handsomest silk dress that had ever been seen in Oakley Street, amongst all the faded splendours of silk and satin that ladies'-maids brought for her

consideration.

"And now my darling, my foolish run-away Polly, what is to be done with you?" asked the young soldier. "Will you go back to the Towers to-morrow morning?"

Mary Marchmont clasped her hands before her face, and began to tremble violently.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried; "don't ask me to do that, don't ask me to go back, Edward. I can never go back to that house again, while – "

She stopped suddenly, looking piteously at her lover.

"While my cousin Olivia Marchmont lives there," Captain Arundel said with an angry frown. "God knows it's a bitter thing for me to think that your troubles should come from any of my kith and kin, Polly. She has used you very badly, then, this woman? She has been very unkind to you?"

"No, no! never before last night. It seems so long ago; but it was only last night, was it? Until then she was always kind to me. I didn't love her, you know, though I tried to do so for papa's sake, and out of gratitude to her for taking such trouble with my education; but one can be grateful to people without loving them, and I never grew to love her. But last night – last night – she said such cruel things to me – such cruel things. O Edward, Edward!" the girl cried suddenly, clasping her hands and looking imploringly at Captain Arundel, "were the cruel things she said true? Did I do wrong when I offered to be your wife?"

How could the young man answer this question except by

clasping his betrothed to his heart? So there was another little love-scene, over which Mrs. Pimpernel, – the proprietress's name was Pimpernel – wept fresh tears, murmuring that the Capting was the sweetest young man, sweeter than Mr. Macready in Claude Melnock; and that the scene altogether reminded her of that "cutting" episode where the proud mother went on against the pore young man, and Miss Faucit came out so beautiful. They are a playgoing population in Oakley Street, and compassionate and sentimental like all true playgoers.

"What shall I do with you, Miss Marchmont?" Edward Arundel asked gaily, when the little love-scene was concluded. "My mother and sister are away, at a German watering-place, trying some unpronounceable Spa for the benefit of poor Letty's health. Reginald is with them, and my father's alone at Dangerfield. So I can't take you down there, as I might have done if my mother had been at home; I don't much care for the Mostyns, or you might have stopped in Montague Square. There are no friendly friars nowadays who will marry Romeo and Juliet at half-an-hour's notice. You must live a fortnight somewhere, Polly: where shall it be?"

"Oh, let me stay here, please," Miss Marchmont pleaded; "I was always so happy here!"

"Lord love her precious heart!" exclaimed Mrs. Pimpernel, lifting up her hands in a rapture of admiration. "To think as she shouldn't have a bit of pride, after all the money as her pore par come into! To think as she should wish to stay in her old lodgins,

where everythink shall be done to make her comfortable; and the air back and front is very 'ealthy, though you might not believe it, and the Blind School and Bedlam hard by, and Kennington Common only a pleasant walk, and beautiful and open this warm summer weather."

"Yes, I should like to stop here, please," Mary murmured. Even in the midst of her agitation, overwhelmed as she was by the emotions of the present, her thoughts went back to the past, and she remembered how delightful it would be to go and see the accommodating butcher, and the greengrocer's daughter, the kind butterman who had called her "little lady," and the disreputable gray parrot. How delightful it would be to see these humble friends, now that she was grown up, and had money wherewith to make them presents in token of her gratitude!

"Very well, then, Polly," Captain Arundel said, "you'll stay here. And Mrs. – "

"Pimpernel," the landlady suggested.

"Mrs. Pimpernel will take as good care of you as if you were Queen of England, and the welfare of the nation depended upon your safety. And I'll stop at my hotel in Covent Garden; and I'll see Richard Paulette, – he's my lawyer as well as yours, you know, Polly, – and tell him something of what has happened, and make arrangements for our immediate marriage."

"Our marriage!"

Mary Marchmont echoed her lover's last words, and looked up at him almost with a bewildered air. She had never thought

of an early marriage with Edward Arundel as the result of her flight from Lincolnshire. She had a vague notion that she would live in Oakley Street for years, and that in some remote time the soldier would come to claim her.

"Yes, Polly darling, Olivia Marchmont's conduct has made me decide upon a very bold step. It is evident to me that my cousin hates you; for what reason, Heaven only knows, since you can have done nothing to provoke her hate. When your father was a poor man, it was to me he would have confided you. He changed his mind afterwards, very naturally, and chose another guardian for his orphan child. If my cousin had fulfilled this trust, Mary, I would have deferred to her authority, and would have held myself aloof until your minority was passed, rather than ask you to marry me without your stepmother's consent. But Olivia Marchmont has forfeited her right to be consulted in this matter. She has tortured you and traduced me by her poisonous slander. If you believe in me, Mary, you will consent to be my wife. My justification lies in the future. You will not find that I shall sponge upon your fortune, my dear, or lead an idle life because my wife is a rich woman."

Mary Marchmont looked up with shy tenderness at her lover.

"I would rather the fortune were yours than mine, Edward," she said. "I will do whatever you wish; I will be guided by you in every thing."

It was thus that John Marchmont's daughter consented to become the wife of the man she loved, the man whose image she

had associated since her childhood with all that was good and beautiful in mankind. She knew none of those pretty stereotyped phrases, by means of which well-bred young ladies can go through a graceful fencing-match of hesitation and equivocation, to the anguish of a doubtful and adoring suitor. She had no notion of that delusive negative, that bewitching feminine "no," which is proverbially understood to mean "yes." Weary courses of Roman Emperors, South-Sea Islands, Sidereal Heavens, Tertiary and Old Red Sandstone, had very ill-prepared this poor little girl for the stern realities of life.

"I will be guided by you, dear Edward," she said; "my father wished me to be your wife; and if I did not love you, it would please me to obey him."

It was eleven o'clock when Captain Arundel left Oakley Street. The hansom had been waiting all the time, and the driver, seeing that his fare was young, handsome, dashing, and what he called "milingtary-like," demanded an enormous sum when he landed the soldier before the portico of the hotel in Covent Garden.

Edward took a hasty breakfast the next morning, and then hurried off to Lincoln's-Inn Fields. But here a disappointment awaited him. Richard Paulette had started for Scotland upon a piscatorial excursion. The elder Paulette was an octogenarian, who lived in the south of France, and kept his name in the business as a fiction, by means of which elderly and obstinate country clients were deluded into the belief that the solicitor who conducted their affairs was the same legal practitioner

who had done business for their fathers and grandfathers before them. Mathewson, a grim man, was away amongst the Yorkshire wolds, superintending the foreclosure of certain mortgages upon a bankrupt baronet's estate. A confidential clerk, who received clients, and kept matters straight during the absence of his employers, was very anxious to be of use to Captain Arundel: but it was not likely that Edward could sit down and pour his secrets into the bosom of a clerk, however trustworthy a personage that employé might be.

The young man's desire had been that his marriage with Mary Marchmont should take place at least with the knowledge and approbation of her dead father's lawyer: but he was impatient to assume the only title by which he might have a right to be the orphan girl's champion and protector; and he had therefore no inclination to wait until the long vacation was over, and Messrs. Paulette and Mathewson returned from their northern wanderings. Again, Mary Marchmont suffered from a continual dread that her stepmother would discover the secret of her humble retreat, and would follow her and reassume authority over her.

"Let me be your wife before I see her again, Edward," the girl pleaded innocently, when this terror was uppermost in her mind. "She could not say cruel things to me if I were your wife. I know it is wicked to be so frightened of her; because she was always good to me until that night: but I cannot tell you how I tremble at the thought of being alone with her at Marchmont Towers. I

dream sometimes that I am with her in the gloomy old house, and that we two are alone there, even the servants all gone, and you far away in India, Edward, – at the other end of the world."

It was as much as her lover could do to soothe and reassure the trembling girl when these thoughts took possession of her. Had he been less sanguine and impetuous, less careless in the buoyancy of his spirits, Captain Arundel might have seen that Mary's nerves had been terribly shaken by the scene between her and Olivia, and all the anguish which had given rise to her flight from Marchmont Towers. The girl trembled at every sound. The shutting of a door, the noise of a cab stopping in the street below, the falling of a book from the table to the floor, startled her almost as much as if a gunpowder-magazine had exploded in the neighbourhood. The tears rose to her eyes at the slightest emotion. Her mind was tortured by vague fears, which she tried in vain to explain to her lover. Her sleep was broken by dismal dreams, foreboding visions of shadowy evil.

For a little more than a fortnight Edward Arundel visited his betrothed daily in the shabby first-floor in Oakley Street, and sat by her side while she worked at some fragile scrap of embroidery, and talked gaily to her of the happy future; to the intense admiration of Mrs. Pimpernel, who had no greater delight than to assist in the pretty little sentimental drama that was being enacted on her first-floor.

Thus it was that, on a cloudy and autumnal August morning, Edward Arundel and Mary Marchmont were married in a great

empty-looking church in the parish of Lambeth, by an indifferent curate, who shuffled through the service at railroad speed, and with far less reverence for the solemn rite than he would have displayed had he known that the pale-faced girl kneeling before the altar-rails was undisputed mistress of eleven thousand a-year. Mrs. Pimpernel, the pew-opener, and the registrar who was in waiting in the vestry, and was beguiled thence to give away the bride, were the only witnesses to this strange wedding. It seemed a dreary ceremonial to Mrs. Pimpernel, who had been married at the same church five-and-twenty years before, in a cinnamon satin spencer, and a coal-scuttle bonnet, and with a young person in the dressmaking line in attendance upon her as bridesmaid.

It *was* rather a dreary wedding, no doubt. The drizzling rain dripped ceaselessly in the street without, and there was a smell of damp plaster in the great empty church. The melancholy street-cries sounded dismally from the outer world, while the curate was hurrying through those portentous words which were to unite Edward Arundel and Mary Marchmont until the final day of earthly separation. The girl clung shivering to her lover, her husband now, as they went into the vestry to sign their names in the marriage-register. Throughout the service she had expected to hear a footstep in the aisle behind her, and Olivia Marchmont's cruel voice crying out to forbid the marriage.

"I am your wife now, Edward, am I not?" she said, when she had signed her name in the register.

"Yes, my darling, for ever and for ever."

"And nothing can part us now?"

"Nothing but death, my dear."

In the exuberance of his spirits, Edward Arundel spoke of the King of Terrors as if he had been a mere nobody, whose power to change or mar the fortunes of mankind was so trifling as to be scarcely worth mentioning.

The vehicle in waiting to carry the mistress of Marchmont Towers upon the first stage of her bridal tour was nothing better than a hack cab. The driver's garments exhaled stale tobacco-smoke in the moist atmosphere, and in lieu of the flowers which are wont to bestrew the bridal path of an heiress, Miss Marchmont trod upon damp and mouldy straw. But she was happy, – happy, with a fearful apprehension that her happiness could not be real, – a vague terror of Olivia's power to torture and oppress her, which even the presence of her lover-husband could not altogether drive away. She kissed Mrs. Pimpernel, who stood upon the edge of the pavement, crying bitterly, with the slippery white lining of a new silk dress, which Edward Arundel had given her for the wedding, gathered tightly round her.

"God bless you, my dear!" cried the honest dealer in frayed satins and tumbled gauzes; "I couldn't take this more to heart if you was my own Eliza Jane going away with the young man as she was to have married, and as is now a widower with five children, two in arms, and the youngest brought up by hand. God bless your pretty face, my dear; and oh, pray take care of her, Captain Arundel, for she's a tender flower, sir, and truly needs

your care. And it's but a trifle, my own sweet young missy, for the acceptance of such as you, but it's given from a full heart, and given humbly."

The latter part of Mrs. Pimpernel's speech bore relation to a hard newspaper parcel, which she dropped into Mary's lap. Mrs. Arundel opened the parcel presently, when she had kissed her humble friend for the last time, and the cab was driving towards Nine Elms, and found that Mrs. Pimpernel's wedding-gift was a Scotch shepherdess in china, with a great deal of gilding about her tartan garments, very red legs, a hat and feathers, and a curly sheep. Edward put this article of *virtù* very carefully away in his carpet-bag; for his bride would not have the present treated with any show of disrespect.

"How good of her to give it me!" Mary said; "it used to stand upon the back-parlour chimney-piece when I was a little girl; and I was so fond of it. Of course I am not fond of Scotch shepherdesses now, you know, dear; but how should Mrs. Pimpernel know that? She thought it would please me to have this one."

"And you'll put it in the western drawing-room at the Towers, won't you, Polly?" Captain Arundel asked, laughing.

"I won't put it anywhere to be made fun of, sir," the young bride answered, with some touch of wifely dignity; "but I'll take care of it, and never have it broken or destroyed; and Mrs. Pimpernel shall see it, when she comes to the Towers, – if I ever go back there," she added, with a sudden change of manner.

"*If* you ever go back there!" cried Edward. "Why, Polly, my dear, Marchmont Towers is your own house. My cousin Olivia is only there upon sufferance, and her own good sense will tell her she has no right to stay there, when she ceases to be your friend and protectress. She is a proud woman, and her pride will surely never suffer her to remain where she must feel she can be no longer welcome."

The young wife's face turned white with terror at her husband's words.

"But I could never ask her to go, Edward," she said. "I wouldn't turn her out for the world. She may stay there for ever if she likes. I never have cared for the place since papa's death; and I couldn't go back while she is there, I'm so frightened of her, Edward, I'm so frightened of her."

The vague apprehension burst forth in this childish cry. Edward Arundel clasped his wife to his breast, and bent over her, kissing her pale forehead, and murmuring soothing words, as he might have done to a child.

"My dear, my dear," he said, "my darling Mary, this will never do; my own love, this is so very foolish."

"I know, I know, Edward; but I can't help it, I can't indeed; I was frightened of her long ago; frightened of her even the first day I saw her, the day you took me to the Rectory. I was frightened of her when papa first told me he meant to marry her; and I am frightened of her now; even now that I am your wife, Edward, I'm frightened of her still."

Captain Arundel kissed away the tears that trembled on his wife's eyelids; but she had scarcely grown quite composed even when the cab stopped at the Nine Elms railway station. It was only when she was seated in the carriage with her husband, and the rain cleared away as they advanced farther into the heart of the pretty pastoral country, that the bride's sense of happiness and safety in her husband's protection, returned to her. But by that time she was able to smile in his face, and to look forward with delight to a brief sojourn in that pretty Hampshire village, which Edward had chosen for the scene of his honeymoon.

"Only a few days of quiet happiness, Polly," he said; "a few days of utter forgetfulness of all the world except you; and then I must be a man of business again, and write to your stepmother and my father and mother, and Messrs. Paulette and Mathewson, and all the people who ought to know of our marriage."

CHAPTER III.
PAUL'S SISTER

Olivia Marchmont shut herself once more in her desolate chamber, making no effort to find the runaway mistress of the Towers; indifferent as to what the slanderous tongues of her neighbours might say of her; hardened, callous, desperate.

To her father, and to any one else who questioned her about Mary's absence, – for the story of the girl's flight was soon whispered abroad, the servants at the Towers having received no injunctions to keep the matter secret, – Mrs. Marchmont replied with such an air of cold and determined reserve as kept the questioners at bay ever afterwards.

So the Kemberling people, and the Swampington people, and all the country gentry within reach of Marchmont Towers, had a mystery and a scandal provided for them, which afforded ample scope for repeated discussion, and considerably relieved the dull monotony of their lives. But there were some questioners whom Mrs. Marchmont found it rather difficult to keep at a distance; there were some intruders who dared to force themselves upon the gloomy woman's solitude, and who *would* not understand that their presence was abhorrent to her.

These people were a surgeon and his wife, who had newly settled at Kemberling; the best practice in the village falling

into the market by reason of the death of a steady-going, gray-headed old practitioner, who for many years had shared with one opponent the responsibility of watching over the health of the Lincolnshire village.

It was about three weeks after Mary Marchmont's flight when these unwelcome guests first came to the Towers.

Olivia sat alone in her dead husband's study, – the same room in which she had sat upon the morning of John Marchmont's funeral, – a dark and gloomy chamber, wainscoted with blackened oak, and lighted only by a massive stone-framed Tudor window looking out into the quadrangle, and overshadowed by that cloistered colonnade beneath whose shelter Edward and Mary had walked upon the morning of the girl's flight. This wainscoted study was an apartment which most women, having all the rooms in Marchmont Towers at their disposal, would have been likely to avoid; but the gloom of the chamber harmonised with that horrible gloom which had taken possession of Olivia's soul, and the widow turned from the sunny western front, as she turned from all the sunlight and gladness in the universe, to come here, where the summer radiance rarely crept through the diamond-panes of the window, where the shadow of the cloister shut out the glory of the blue sky.

She was sitting in this room, – sitting near the open window, in a high-backed chair of carved and polished oak, with her head resting against the angle of the embayed window, and her handsome profile thrown into sharp relief by the dark green-

cloth curtain, which hung in straight folds from the low ceiling to the ground, and made a sombre background to the widow's figure. Mrs. Marchmont had put away all the miserable gew-gaws and vanities which she had ordered from London in a sudden excess of folly or caprice, and had reassumed her mourning-robes of lustreless black. She had a book in her hand, – some new and popular fiction, which all Lincolnshire was eager to read; but although her eyes were fixed upon the pages before her, and her hand mechanically turned over leaf after leaf at regular intervals of time, the fashionable romance was only a weary repetition of phrases, a dull current of words, always intermingled with the images of Edward Arundel and Mary Marchmont, which arose out of every page to mock the hopeless reader.

Olivia flung the book away from her at last, with a smothered cry of rage.

"Is there no cure for this disease?" she muttered. "Is there no relief except madness or death?"

But in the infidelity which had arisen out of her despair this woman had grown to doubt if either death or madness could bring her oblivion of her anguish. She doubted the quiet of the grave; and half-believed that the torture of jealous rage and slighted love might mingle even with that silent rest, haunting her in her coffin, shutting her out of heaven, and following her into a darker world, there to be her torment everlastingly. There were times when she thought madness must mean forgetfulness; but there were other moments when she shuddered, horror-stricken,

at the thought that, in the wandering brain of a mad woman, the image of that grief which had caused the shipwreck of her senses might still hold its place, distorted and exaggerated, – a gigantic unreality, ten thousand times more terrible than the truth. Remembering the dreams which disturbed her broken sleep, – those dreams which, in their feverish horror, were little better than intervals of delirium, – it is scarcely strange if Olivia Marchmont thought thus.

She had not succumbed without many struggles to her sin and despair. Again and again she had abandoned herself to the devils at watch to destroy her, and again and again she had tried to extricate her soul from their dreadful power; but her most passionate endeavours were in vain. Perhaps it was that she did not strive aright; it was for this reason, surely, that she failed so utterly to arise superior to her despair; for otherwise that terrible belief attributed to the Calvinists, that some souls are foredoomed to damnation, would be exemplified by this woman's experience. She could not forget. She could not put away the vengeful hatred that raged like an all-devouring fire in her breast, and she cried in her agony, "There is no cure for this disease!"

I think her mistake was in this, that she did not go to the right Physician. She practised quackery with her soul, as some people do with their bodies; trying their own remedies, rather than the simple prescriptions of the Divine Healer of all woes. Self-reliant, and scornful of the weakness against which her pride

revolted, she trusted to her intellect and her will to lift her out of the moral slough into which her soul had gone down. She said:

"I am not a woman to go mad for the love of a boyish face; I am not a woman to die for a foolish fancy, which the veriest schoolgirl might be ashamed to confess to her companion. I am not a woman to do this, and I*will* cure myself of my folly."

Mrs. Marchmont made an effort to take up her old life, with its dull round of ceaseless duty, its perpetual self-denial. If she had been a Roman Catholic, she would have gone to the nearest convent, and prayed to be permitted to take such vows as might soonest set a barrier between herself and the world; she would have spent the long weary days in perpetual and secret prayer; she would have worn deeper indentations upon the stones already hollowed by faithful knees. As it was, she made a routine of penance for herself, after her own fashion: going long distances on foot to visit her poor, when she might have ridden in her carriage; courting exposure to rain and foul weather; wearing herself out with unnecessary fatigue, and returning footsore to her desolate home, to fall fainting into the strong arms of her grim attendant, Barbara.

But this self-appointed penance could not shut Edward Arundel and Mary Marchmont from the widow's mind. Walking through a fiery furnace their images would have haunted her still, vivid and palpable even in the agony of death. The fatigue of the long weary walks made Mrs. Marchmont wan and pale; the exposure to storm and rain brought on a tiresome, hacking cough,

which worried her by day and disturbed her fitful slumbers by night. No good whatever seemed to come of her endeavours; and the devils who rejoiced at her weakness and her failure claimed her as their own. They claimed her as their own; and they were not without terrestrial agents, working patiently in their service, and ready to help in securing their bargain.

The great clock in the quadrangle had struck the half-hour after three; the atmosphere of the August afternoon was sultry and oppressive. Mrs. Marchmont had closed her eyes after flinging aside her book, and had fallen into a doze: her nights were broken and wakeful, and the hot stillness of the day had made her drowsy.

She was aroused from this half-slumber by Barbara Simmons, who came into the room carrying two cards upon a salver, – the same old-fashioned and emblazoned salver upon which Paul Marchmont's card had been brought to the widow nearly three years before. The Abigail stood halfway between the door and the window by which the widow sat, looking at her mistress's face with a glance of sharp scrutiny.

"She's changed since he came back, and changed again since he went away," the woman thought; "just as she always changed at the Rectory at his coming and going. Why didn't he take to her, I wonder? He might have known her fancy for him, if he'd had eyes to watch her face, or ears to listen to her voice. She's handsomer than the other one, and cleverer in book-learning; but she keeps 'em off – she seems allers to keep 'em off."

I think Olivia Marchmont would have torn the very heart out of this waiting-woman's breast, had she known the thoughts that held a place in it: had she known that the servant who attended upon her, and took wages from her, dared to pluck out her secret, and to speculate upon her suffering.

The widow awoke suddenly, and looked up with an impatient frown. She had not been awakened by the opening of the door, but by that unpleasant sensation which almost always reveals the presence of a stranger to a sleeper of nervous temperament.

"What is it, Barbara?" she asked; and then, as her eyes rested on the cards, she added, angrily, "Haven't I told you that I would not see any callers to-day? I am worn out with my cough, and feel too ill to see any one."

"Yes, Miss Livy," the woman answered; – she called her mistress by this name still, now and then, so familiar had it grown to her during the childhood and youth of the Rector's daughter; – "I didn't forget that, Miss Livy: I told Richardson you was not to be disturbed. But the lady and gentleman said, if you saw what was wrote upon the back of one of the cards, you'd be sure to make an exception in their favour. I think that was what the lady said. She's a middle-aged lady, very talkative and pleasant-mannered," added the grim Barbara, in nowise relaxing the stolid gravity of her own manner as she spoke.

Olivia snatched the cards from the salver.

"Why do people worry me so?" she cried, impatiently. "Am I not to be allowed even five minutes' sleep without being broken

in upon by some intruder or other?"

Barbara Simmons looked at her mistress's face. Anxiety and sadness dimly showed themselves in the stolid countenance of the lady's-maid. A close observer, penetrating below that aspect of wooden solemnity which was Barbara's normal expression, might have discovered a secret: the quiet waiting-woman loved her mistress with a jealous and watchful affection, that took heed of every change in its object.

Mrs. Marchmont examined the two cards, which bore the names of Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Kemberling. On the back of the lady's card these words were written in pencil:

"Will Mrs. Marchmont be so good as to see Lavinia Weston, Paul Marchmont's younger sister, and a connection of Mrs. M.'s?"

Olivia shrugged her shoulders, as she threw down the card.

"Paul Marchmont! Lavinia Weston!" she muttered; "yes, I remember he said something about a sister married to a surgeon at Stanfield. Let these people come to me, Barbara."

The waiting-woman looked doubtfully at her mistress.

"You'll maybe smooth your hair, and freshen yourself up a bit, before ye see the folks, Miss Livy," she said, in a tone of mingled suggestion and entreaty. "Ye've had a deal of worry lately, and it's made ye look a little fagged and haggard-like. I'd not like the Kemberling folks to say as you was ill."

Mrs. Marchmont turned fiercely upon the Abigail.

"Let me alone!" she cried. "What is it to you, or to any one,

how I look? What good have my looks done me, that I should worry myself about them?" she added, under her breath. "Show these people in here, if they want to see me."

"They've been shown into the western drawing-room, ma'am; – Richardson took 'em in there."

Barbara Simmons fought hard for the preservation of appearances. She wanted the Rector's daughter to receive these strange people, who had dared to intrude upon her, in a manner befitting the dignity of John Marchmont's widow. She glanced furtively at the disorder of the gloomy chamber. Books and papers were scattered here and there; the hearth and low fender were littered with heaps of torn letters, – for Olivia Marchmont had no tenderness for the memorials of the past, and indeed took a fierce delight in sweeping away the unsanctified records of her joyless, loveless life. The high-backed oaken chairs had been pushed out of their places; the green-cloth cover had been drawn half off the massive table, and hung in trailing folds upon the ground. A book flung here; a shawl there; a handkerchief in another place; an open secretaire, with scattered documents and uncovered inkstand, – littered the room, and bore mute witness of the restlessness of its occupant. It needed no very subtle psychologist to read aright those separate tokens of a disordered mind; of a weary spirit which had sought distraction in a dozen occupations, and had found relief in none. It was some vague sense of this that caused Barbara Simmons's anxiety. She wished to keep strangers out of this room, in which her mistress, wan,

haggard, and weary-looking, revealed her secret by so many signs and tokens. But before Olivia could make any answer to her servant's suggestion, the door, which Barbara had left ajar, was pushed open by a very gentle hand, and a sweet voice said, in cheery chirping accents,

"I am sure I may come in; may I not, Mrs. Marchmont? The impression my brother Paul's description gave me of you is such a very pleasant one, that I venture to intrude uninvited, almost forbidden, perhaps."

The voice and manner of the speaker were so airy and self-possessed, there was such a world of cheerfulness and amiability in every tone, that, as Olivia Marchmont rose from her chair, she put her hand to her head, dazed and confounded, as if by the too boisterous carolling of some caged bird. What did they mean, these accents of gladness, these clear and untroubled tones, which sounded shrill, and almost discordant, in the despairing woman's ears? She stood, pale and worn, the very picture of all gloom and misery, staring hopelessly at her visitor; too much abandoned to her grief to remember, in that first moment, the stern demands of pride. She stood still; revealing, by her look, her attitude, her silence, her abstraction, a whole history to the watchful eyes that were looking at her.

Mrs. Weston lingered on the threshold of the chamber in a pretty half-fluttering manner; which was charmingly expressive of a struggle between a modest poor-relation-like diffidence and an earnest desire to rush into Olivia's arms. The surgeon's

wife was a delicate-looking little woman, with features that seemed a miniature and feminine reproduction of her brother Paul's, and with very light hair, – hair so light and pale that, had it turned as white as the artist's in a single night, very few people would have been likely to take heed of the change. Lavinia Weston was eminently what is generally called a*lady-like* woman. She always conducted herself in that especial and particular manner which was exactly fitted to the occasion. She adjusted her behaviour by the nicest shades of colour and hair-breadth scale of measurement. She had, as it were, made for herself a homoeopathic system of good manners, and could mete out politeness and courtesy in the veriest globules, never administering either too much or too little. To her husband she was a treasure beyond all price; and if the Lincolnshire surgeon, who was a fat, solemn-faced man, with a character as level and monotonous as the flats and fens of his native county, was henpecked, the feminine autocrat held the reins of government so lightly, that her obedient subject was scarcely aware how very irresponsible his wife's authority had become.

As Olivia Marchmont stood confronting the timid hesitating figure of the intruder, with the width of the chamber between them, Lavinia Weston, in her crisp muslin-dress and scarf, her neat bonnet and bright ribbons and primly-adjusted gloves, looked something like an adventurous canary who had a mind to intrude upon the den of a hungry lioness. The difference, physical and moral, between the timid bird and the savage forest-queen

could be scarcely wider than that between the two women.

But Olivia did not stand for ever embarrassed and silent in her visitor's presence. Her pride came to her rescue. She turned sternly upon the polite intruder.

"Walk in, if you please, Mrs. Weston," she said, "and sit down. I was denied to you just now because I have been ill, and have ordered my servants to deny me to every one."

"But, my dear Mrs. Marchmont," murmured Lavinia Weston in soft, almost dove-like accents, "if you have been ill, is not your illness another reason for seeing us, rather than for keeping us away from you? I would not, of course, say a word which could in any way be calculated to give offence to your regular medical attendant, – you have a regular medical attendant, no doubt; from Swampington, I dare say, – but a doctor's wife may often be useful when a doctor is himself out of place. There are little nervous ailments – depression of spirits, mental uneasiness – from which women, and sensitive women, suffer acutely, and which perhaps a woman's more refined nature alone can thoroughly comprehend. You are not looking well, my dear Mrs. Marchmont. I left my husband in the drawing-room, for I was so anxious that our first meeting should take place without witnesses. Men think women sentimental when they are only impulsive. Weston is a good simple-hearted creature, but he knows as much about a woman's mind as he does of an Æolian harp. When the strings vibrate, he hears the low plaintive notes, but he has no idea whence the melody comes. It is thus with us,

Mrs. Marchmont. These medical men watch us in the agonies of hysteria; they hear our sighs, they see our tears, and in their awkwardness and ignorance they prescribe commonplace remedies out of the pharmacopoeia. No, dear Mrs. Marchmont, you do not look well. I fear it is the mind, the mind, which has been over-strained. Is it not so?"

Mrs. Weston put her head on one side as she asked this question, and smiled at Olivia with an air of gentle insinuation. If the doctor's wife wished to plumb the depths of the widow's gloomy soul, she had an advantage here; for Mrs. Marchmont was thrown off her guard by the question, which had been perhaps asked hap-hazard, or it may be with a deeply considered design. Olivia turned fiercely upon the polite questioner.

"I have been suffering from nothing but a cold which I caught the other day," she said; "I am not subject to any fine-ladylike hysteria, I can assure you, Mrs. Weston."

The doctor's wife pursed up her lips into a sympathetic smile, not at all abashed by this rebuff. She had seated herself in one of the high-backed chairs, with her muslin skirt spread out about her. She looked a living exemplification of all that is neat and prim and commonplace, in contrast with the pale, stern-faced woman, standing rigid and defiant in her long black robes.

"How very chy-arming!" exclaimed Mrs. Weston. "You are really *not* nervous. Dee-ar me; and from what my brother Paul said, I should have imagined that any one so highly organised must be rather nervous. But I really fear I am impertinent,

and that I presume upon our very slight relationship. It *is* a relationship, is it not, although such a very slight one?"

"I have never thought of the subject," Mrs. Marchmont replied coldly.

"I suppose, however, that my marriage with your brother's cousin – "

"And *my* cousin – "

"Made a kind of connexion between us. But Mr. Marchmont gave me to understand that you lived at Stanfield, Mrs. Weston."

"Until last week, positively until last week," answered the surgeon's wife. "I see you take very little interest in village gossip, Mrs. Marchmont, or you would have heard of the change at Kemberling."

"What change?"

"My husband's purchase of poor old Mr. Dawnfield's practice. The dear old man died a month ago, – you heard of his death, of course, – and Mr. Weston negotiated the purchase with Mrs. Dawnfield in less than a fortnight. We came here early last week, and already we are making friends in the neighbourhood. How strange that you should not have heard of our coming!"

"I do not see much society," Olivia answered indifferently, "and I hear nothing of the Kemberling people."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Weston; "and we hear so much of Marchmont Towers at Kemberling."

She looked full in the widow's face as she spoke, her stereotyped smile subsiding into a look of greedy curiosity; a look

whose intense eagerness could not be concealed.

That look, and the tone in which her last sentence had been spoken, said as plainly as the plainest words could have done, "I have heard of Mary Marchmont's flight."

Olivia understood this; but in the passionate depth of her own madness she had no power to fathom the meanings or the motives of other people. She revolted against this Mrs. Weston, and disliked her because the woman intruded upon her in her desolation; but she never once thought of Lavinia Weston's interest in Mary's movements; she never once remembered that the frail life of that orphan girl only stood between this woman's brother and the rich heritage of Marchmont Towers.

Blind and forgetful of everything in the hideous egotism of her despair, what was Olivia Marchmont but a fitting tool, a plastic and easily-moulded instrument, in the hands of unscrupulous people, whose hard intellects had never been beaten into confused shapelessness in the fiery furnace of passion?

Mrs. Weston had heard of Mary Marchmont's flight; but she had heard half a dozen different reports of that event, as widely diversified in their details as if half a dozen heiresses had fled from Marchmont Towers. Every gossip in the place had a separate story as to the circumstances which had led to the girl's running away from her home. The accounts vied with each other in graphic force and minute elaboration; the conversations that had taken place between Mary and her stepmother, between Edward Arundel and Mrs. Marchmont,

between the Rector of Swampington and nobody in particular, would have filled a volume, as related by the gossips of Kemberling; but as everybody assigned a different cause for the terrible misunderstanding at the Towers, and a different direction for Mary's flight, – and as the railway official at the station, who could have thrown some light on the subject, was a stern and moody man, who had little sympathy with his kind, and held his tongue persistently, – it was not easy to get very near the truth. Under these circumstances, then, Mrs. Weston determined upon seeking information at the fountain-head, and approaching the cruel stepmother, who, according to some of the reports, had starved and beaten her dead husband's child.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Marchmont," said Lavinia Weston, seeing that it was necessary to come direct to the point if she wished to wring the truth from Olivia; "yes, we hear of everything at Kemberling; and I need scarcely tell you, that we heard of the sad trouble which you have had to endure since your ball – the ball that is spoken of as the most chy-arming entertainment remembered in the neighbourhood for a long time. We heard of this sad girl's flight."

Mrs. Marchmont looked up with a dark frown, but made no answer.

"Was she – it really is such a very painful question, that I almost shrink from – but was Miss Marchmont at all – eccentric – a little mentally deficient? Pray pardon me, if I have given you pain by such a question; but – "

Olivia started, and looked sharply at her visitor. "Mentally deficient? No!" she said. But as she spoke her eyes dilated, her pale cheeks grew paler, her upper lip quivered with a faint convulsive movement. It seemed as if some idea presented itself to her with a sudden force that almost took away her breath.

"*Not* mentally deficient!" repeated Lavinia Weston; "dee-ar me! It's a great comfort to hear that. Of course Paul saw very little of his cousin, and he was not therefore in a position to judge, – though his opinions, however rapidly arrived at, are generally so *very* accurate; – but he gave me to understand that he thought Miss Marchmont appeared a little – just a little – weak in her intellect. I am very glad to find he was mistaken."

Olivia made no reply to this speech. She had seated herself in her chair by the window; she looked straight before her into the flagged quadrangle, with her hands lying idle in her lap. It seemed as if she were actually unconscious of her visitor's presence, or as if, in her scornful indifference, she did not even care to affect any interest in that visitor's conversation.

Lavinia Weston returned again to the attack.

"Pray, Mrs. Marchmont, do not think me intrusive or impertinent," she said pleadingly, "if I ask you to favour me with the true particulars of this sad event. I am sure you will be good enough to remember that my brother Paul, my sister, and myself are Mary Marchmont's nearest relatives on her father's side, and that we have therefore some right to feel interested in her?"

By this very polite speech Lavinia Weston plainly reminded

the widow of the insignificance of her own position at Marchmont Towers. In her ordinary frame of mind Olivia would have resented the ladylike slight, but to-day she neither heard nor heeded it; she was brooding with a stupid, unreasonable persistency over the words "mental deficiency," "weak intellect." She only roused herself by a great effort to answer Mrs. Weston's question, when that lady had repeated it in very plain words.

"I can tell you nothing about Miss Marchmont's flight," she said, coldly, "except that she chose to run away from her home. I found reason to object to her conduct upon the night of the ball; and the next morning she left the house, assigning no reason – to me, at any rate – for her absurd and improper behaviour."

"She assigned no reason to *you*, my dear Mrs. Marchmont; but she assigned a reason to somebody, I infer, from what you say?"

"Yes; she wrote a letter to my cousin, Captain Arundel."

"Telling him the reason of her departure?"

"I don't know – I forget. The letter told nothing clearly; it was wild and incoherent."

Mrs. Weston sighed, – a long-drawn, desponding sigh.

"Wild and incoherent!" she murmured, in a pensive tone. "How grieved Paul will be to hear of this! He took such an interest in his cousin – a delicate and fragile-looking young creature, he told me. Yes, he took a very great interest in her, Mrs. Marchmont, though you may perhaps scarcely believe me when I say so. He kept himself purposely aloof from this place; his sensitive nature led him to abstain from even revealing his

interest in Miss Marchmont. His position, you must remember, with regard to this poor dear girl, is a very delicate – I may say a very painful – one."

Olivia remembered nothing of the kind. The value of the Marchmont estates; the sordid worth of those wide-stretching farms, spreading far-away into Yorkshire; the pitiful, closely-calculated revenue, which made Mary a wealthy heiress, – were so far from the dark thoughts of this woman's desperate heart, that she no more suspected Mrs. Weston of any mercenary design in coming to the Towers, than of burglarious intentions with regard to the silver spoons in the plate-room. She only thought that the surgeon's wife was a tiresome woman, against whose pertinacious civility her angry spirit chafed and rebelled, until she was almost driven to order her from the room.

In this cruel weariness of spirit Mrs. Marchmont gave a short impatient sigh, which afforded a sufficient hint to such an accomplished tactician as her visitor.

"I know I have tired you, my dear Mrs. Marchmont," the doctor's wife said, rising and arranging her muslin scarf as she spoke, in token of her immediate departure. "I am so sorry to find you a sufferer from that nasty hacking cough; but of course you have the best advice, – Mr. Barlow from Swampington, I think you said?" – Olivia had said nothing of the kind; – "and I trust the warm weather will prevent the cough taking any hold of your chest. If I might venture to suggest flannels – so many young women quite ridicule the idea of flannels – but, as the wife

of a humble provincial practitioner, I have learned their value. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Marchmont. I may come again, may I not, now that the ice is broken, and we are so well acquainted with each other? Good-bye."

Olivia could not refuse to take at least *one* of the two plump and tightly-gloved hands which were held out to her with an air of frank cordiality; but the widow's grasp was loose and nerveless, and, inasmuch as two consentient parties are required to the shaking of hands as well as to the getting up of a quarrel, the salutation was not a very hearty one.

The surgeon's pony must have been weary of standing before the flight of shallow steps leading to the western portico, when Mrs. Weston took her seat by her husband's side in the gig, which had been newly painted and varnished since the worthy couple's hegira from Stanfield.

The surgeon was not an ambitious man, nor a designing man; he was simply stupid and lazy – lazy although, in spite of himself, he led an active and hard-working life; but there are many square men whose sides are cruelly tortured by the pressure of the round holes into which they are ill-advisedly thrust, and if our destinies were meted out to us in strict accordance with our temperaments, Mr. Weston should have been a lotus-eater. As it was, he was content to drudge on, mildly complying with every desire of his wife; doing what she told him, because it was less trouble to do the hardest work at her bidding than to oppose her. It would have been surely less painful for Macbeth to have finished

that ugly business of the murder than to have endured my lady's black contemptuous scowl, and the bitter scorn and contumely concentrated in those four words, "Give *me* the daggers."

Mr. Weston asked one or two commonplace questions about his wife's interview with John Marchmont's widow; but, slowly apprehending that Lavinia did not care to discuss the matter, he relapsed into meek silence, and devoted all his intellectual powers to the task of keeping the pony out of the deeper ruts in the rugged road between Marchmont Towers and Kemberling High Street.

"What is the secret of that woman's life?" thought Lavinia Weston during that homeward drive. "Has she ill-treated the girl, or is she plotting in some way or other to get hold of the Marchmont fortune? Pshaw! that's impossible. And yet she may be making a purse, somehow or other, out of the estate. Anyhow, there is bad blood between the two women."

CHAPTER IV.
A STOLEN HONEYMOON

The village to which Edward Arundel took his bride was within a few miles of Winchester. The young soldier had become familiar with the place in his early boyhood, when he had gone to spend a part of one bright midsummer holiday at the house of a schoolfellow; and had ever since cherished a friendly remembrance of the winding trout-streams, the rich verdure of the valleys, and the sheltering hills that shut in the pleasant little cluster of thatched cottages, the pretty white-walled villas, and the grey old church.

But to Mary, whose experiences of town and country were limited to the dingy purlieus of Oakley Street and the fenny flats of Lincolnshire, this Hampshire village seemed a rustic paradise, which neither trouble nor sorrow could ever approach. She had trembled at the thought of Olivia's coming in Oakley Street; but here she seemed to lose all terror of her stern stepmother, – here, sheltered and protected by her young husband's love, she fancied that she might live her life out happy and secure.

She told Edward this one sunny morning, as they sat by the young man's favourite trout-stream. Captain Arundel's fishing-tackle lay idle on the turf at his side, for he had been beguiled into forgetfulness of a ponderous trout he had been watching and

finessing with for upwards of an hour, and had flung himself at full length upon the mossy margin of the water, with his uncovered head lying in Mary's lap.

The childish bride would have been content to sit for ever thus in that rural solitude, with her fingers twisted in her husband's chestnut curls, and her soft eyes keeping timid watch upon his handsome face, – so candid and unclouded in its careless repose. The undulating meadow-land lay half-hidden in a golden haze, only broken here and there by the glitter of the brighter sunlight that lit up the waters of the wandering streams that intersected the low pastures. The massive towers of the cathedral, the grey walls of St. Cross, loomed dimly in the distance; the bubbling plash of a mill-stream sounded like some monotonous lullaby in the drowsy summer atmosphere. Mary looked from the face she loved to the fair landscape about her, and a tender solemnity crept into her mind – a reverent love and admiration for this beautiful earth, which was almost akin to awe.

"How pretty this place is, Edward!" she said. "I had no idea there were such places in all the wide world. Do you know, I think I would rather be a cottage-girl here than an heiress in Lincolnshire. Edward, if I ask you a favour, will you grant it?"

She spoke very earnestly, looking down at her husband's upturned face; but Captain Arundel only laughed at her question, without even caring to lift the drowsy eyelids that drooped over his blue eyes.

"Well, my pet, if you want anything short of the moon, I

suppose your devoted husband is scarcely likely to refuse it. Our honeymoon is not a fortnight old yet, Polly dear; you wouldn't have me turn tyrant quite as soon as this. Speak out, Mrs. Arundel, and assert your dignity as a British matron. What is the favour I am to grant?"

"I want you to live here always, Edward darling," pleaded the girlish voice. "Not for a fortnight or a month, but for ever and ever. I have never been happy at Marchmont Towers. Papa died there, you know, and I cannot forget that. Perhaps that ought to have made the place sacred to me, and so it has; but it is sacred like papa's tomb in Kemberling Church, and it seems like profanation to be happy in it, or to forget my dead father even for a moment. Don't let us go back there, Edward. Let my stepmother live there all her life. It would seem selfish and cruel to turn her out of the house she has so long been mistress of. Mr. Gormby will go on collecting the rents, you know, and can send us as much money as we want; and we can take that pretty house we saw to let on the other side of Milldale, – the house with the rookery, and the dovecotes, and the sloping lawn leading down to the water. You know you don't like Lincolnshire, Edward, any more than I do, and there's scarcely any trout-fishing near the Towers."

Captain Arundel opened his eyes, and lifted himself out of his reclining position before he answered his wife.

"My own precious Polly," he said, smiling fondly at the gentle childish face turned in such earnestness towards his own; "my

runaway little wife, rich people have their duties to perform as well as poor people; and I am afraid it would never do for you to hide in this out-of-the-way Hampshire village, and play absentee from stately Marchmont and all its dependencies. I love that pretty, infantine, unworldly spirit of yours, my darling; and I sometimes wish we were two grown-up babes in the wood, and could wander about gathering wild flowers, and eating blackberries and hazel-nuts, until the shades of evening closed in, and the friendly robins came to bury us. Don't fancy I am tired of our honeymoon, Polly, or that I care for Marchmont Towers any more than you do; but I fear the non-residence plan would never answer. The world would call my little wife eccentric, if she ran away from her grandeur; and Paul Marchmont the artist, – of whom your poor father had rather a bad opinion, by the way, – would be taking out a statute of lunacy against you."

"Paul Marchmont!" repeated Mary. "Did papa dislike Mr. Paul Marchmont?"

"Well, poor John had a sort of a prejudice against the man, I believe; but it was only a prejudice, for he freely confessed that he could assign no reason for it. But whatever Mr. Paul Marchmont may be, you must live at the Towers, Mary, and be Lady Bountiful-in-chief in your neighbourhood, and look after your property, and have long interviews with Mr. Gormby, and become altogether a woman of business; so that when I go back to India – "

Mary interrupted him with a little cry:

"Go back to India!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean, Edward?"

"I mean, my darling, that my business in life is to fight for my Queen and country, and not to spunge upon my wife's fortune. You don't suppose I'm going to lay down my sword at seven-and-twenty years of age, and retire upon my pension? No, Polly; you remember what Lord Nelson said on the deck of the *Victory* at Trafalgar. That saying can never be so hackneyed as to lose its force. I must do my duty, Polly – I must do my duty, even if duty and love pull different ways, and I have to leave my darling, in the service of my country."

Mary clasped her hands in despair, and looked piteously at her lover-husband, with the tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

"O Edward," she cried, "how cruel you are; how very, very cruel you are to me! What is the use of my fortune if you won't share it with me, if you won't take it all; for it is yours, my dearest – it is all yours? I remember the words in the Marriage Service, 'with all my goods I thee endow.' I have given you Marchmont Towers, Edward; nobody in the world can take it away from you. You never, never, never could be so cruel as to leave me! I know how brave and good you are, and I am proud to think of your noble courage and all the brave deeds you did in India. But you*have* fought for your country, Edward; you *have* done your duty. Nobody can expect more of you; nobody shall take you from me. O my darling, my husband, you promised to shelter and defend me while our lives last! You won't leave me – you won't

leave me, will you?"

Edward Arundel kissed the tears away from his wife's pale face, and drew her head upon his bosom.

"My love," he said tenderly, "you cannot tell how much pain it gives me to hear you talk like this. What can I do? To give up my profession would be to make myself next kin to a pauper. What would the world say of me, Mary? Think of that. This runaway marriage would be a dreadful dishonour to me, if it were followed by a life of lazy dependence on my wife's fortune. Nobody can dare to slander the soldier who spends the brightest years of his life in the service of his country. You would not surely have me be less than true to myself, Mary darling? For my honour's sake, I must leave you."

"O no, no, no!" cried the girl, in a low wailing voice. Unselfish and devoted as she had been in every other crisis of her young life, she could not be reasonable or self-denying here; she was seized with despair at the thought of parting with her husband. No, not even for his honour's sake could she let him go. Better that they should both die now, in this early noontide of their happiness.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.