

Oliphant Margaret, Barrie James Matthew

A Widow's Tale, and Other Stories



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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

I remember well my first meeting with Mrs Oliphant a dozen years ago, how she "ordered" me to Windsor where she was then living (I like to think that it was an order, and obeyed as such by her very loyal subject), and that I was as proud to go, and as nervous, as those must be who make the same journey by command of another lady resident in the same place. I have an odd recollection too of buying my first umbrella for this occasion – for no reason apparently except that I wanted to impress her.

They say she was not tall, but she seemed tremendous to me that day. I find an old letter in which I dwelt on the height of her and her grand manner, so that evidently the umbrella was of little avail. In her presence, I think, those whose manner is of to-day must always have felt suddenly boorish. She belonged to a politer age: you never knew it more surely than when she was putting you at your ease with a graciousness that had something of a command in it. Mrs Oliphant was herself the fine Scots gentlewoman she drew so incomparably in her books, most sympathetic when she unbent and a ramrod if she chose – the *grande dame* at one moment, almost a girl, it might be, the next (her sense of fun often made her a girl again), she gave you the impression of one who loved to finger beautiful things, and always wore rare caps and fine lace as if they were part of her. She could be almost fearsomely correct, and in the middle of it become audacious (for there was a dash of the Bohemian about her); her likes and dislikes were intense; in talk she was extremely witty without trying to be so (she was often, I think, amused and surprised to hear what she had just said); her eyes were so expressive, and such a humorous gleam leapt into them when you attempted to impress her (with anything more pretentious than an umbrella), that to catch sight of them must often to the grandiloquent have been to come to an abrupt stop; and, more noticeable perhaps than anything else, she was of an intellect so alert that one wondered she ever fell asleep. That was but a first impression, a photograph of externals, little to be read in it of the beautiful soul and most heroic woman who was the real Mrs Oliphant. The last time I saw her, which was shortly before her death, I knew her better. The wit had all gone out of her eyes, though not quite from her talk; her face had grown very sweet and soft, and what had started to be the old laugh often ended pitifully. The two sons who had been so much to her were gone, and for the rest of her days she never forgot it, I think, for the length of a smile. She was less the novelist now than a pathetic figure in a novel. She was as brave as ever, but she had less self-control; and so, I suppose it was, that the more exquisite part of her, which the Scotswoman's reserve had kept hidden, came to the surface and dwelt for that last year in her face, as if to let all those who looked on Mrs Oliphant know what she was before she bade them good-bye.

I wonder if there is among the younger Scottish novelists of to-day any one so foolish as to believe that he has a right to a stool near this woman, any one who has not experienced a sense of shame (and some rage at his heart) if he found that for the moment his little efforts were being taken more seriously than hers: I should like to lead the simple man by the ear down the long procession of her books. It is too long a procession, though there are so many fine figures in it – men and women and boys (the boy in 'Sir Tom' is surely among the best in fiction) in the earlier stories, nearly all women in the latest; but whether they would have been greater books had she revised one instead of beginning another is probably to be doubted. Not certainly because the best of them could not have been made better. That is obvious to almost any reader: there nearly always comes a point in Mrs Oliphant's novels where almost any writer of the younger school, without a sixth part of her capacity, could have stepped in with advantage. Often it is at the end of a fine scene, and what he would have

had to tell her was that it was the end, for she seldom seemed to know. Even 'Kirsteen,' which I take to be the best, far the best, story of its kind that has come out of Scotland for the last score of years, could have been improved by the comparative duffer. Condensation, a more careful choice of words, we all learn these arts in the schools nowadays – they are natural to the spirit of the age; but Mrs Oliphant never learned them, they were contrary to her genius (as to that of some other novelists greater than she), and they would probably have trammelled her so much that the books would have lost more than they gained. We must take her as she was, believing that she knew the medium which best suited her talents, though it was not the best medium.

Her short stories, of which this book is a sample, contain some of her finest work, – indeed nearly all of her deepest imaginings have appeared, as it happens, in this form. There is nothing in this volume that deserves to rank with, say, 'Old Lady Mary,' nor has it the rippling humour of the delicious 'Chronicles of Carlingford': its tale of the Fellow of his college who becomes a raving lunatic because society has discovered that his mother sells butter would be quite unworthy of inclusion were it not for the noble figure of the mother; yet the book has numberless flashes of insight, several of those women "no longer in the first flush of youth" of whom Mrs Oliphant wrote always with abundant sympathy, and latterly as if she loved them the best, and at least one sweet love story in "Mademoiselle" (Mademoiselle writes such a charming love letter, saying No, that if she had dropped it on the way to the post-office the first man who picked it up and read it would have rushed her to the registrar); and as if all this were not enough, she gives us in "Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond" as terrible and grim a picture of a man tired of fifty years of respectability as was ever written. One would have liked to be able to pitchfork the son out of the story, because he will talk, and, after the supreme situation, to drop the curtain on the analysis of Queen Eleanor's state of mind. But it is a story to set you thinking. Mrs Oliphant wrote so many short stories that she forgot their names and what they were about, but readers, I think, will not soon forget this one; and if not this, when shall their hearts grow cold and their admiration wane for the wonderful woman of whom it is but the thousandth part?

J. M. BARRIE.

A WIDOW'S TALE

CHAPTER I

The Bamptons were expecting a visitor that very afternoon: which made it all the more indiscreet that young Fitzroy should stay so long practising those duets with May. It was a summer afternoon, warm and bright, and the drawing-room was one of those pretty rooms which are as English as the landscape surrounding them – carefully carpeted, curtained, and cushioned against all the eccentricities of an English winter, yet with all the windows open, all the curtains put back, the soft air streaming in, the sunshine not too carefully shut out, the green lawn outside forming a sort of velvety extension of the mossy soft carpet in which the foot sank within. This combination is not common in other countries, where the sun is so hot that it has to be shut out in summer, and coolness is procured by the partial dismantling of the house. From the large open windows the trees on the lawn appeared like members of the party, only a little withdrawn from those more mobile figures which were presently coming to seat themselves round the pretty table shining with silver and china which was arranged under the acacia. Miss Bampton, who had been watching its arrangement, cast now and then an impatient glance at the piano where May sat, with Mr Fitzroy standing over her. He was not one of the county neighbours, but a young man from town, a visitor, who had somehow fallen into habits of intimacy it could scarcely be told why. And though he was visiting the Spencer-Jacksons, who were well known and sufficiently creditable people, nobody knew much about Mr Fitzroy. It is a good name: but then it is too good a name to belong to a person of whom it can be said that nobody knows who he is. A Fitzroy ought to be so very easily identified: it ought to be known at once to which of the families of that name he belongs – very distantly perhaps – as distantly as you please; but yet he must somehow belong to one of them.

This opinion Miss Bampton, who was a great genealogist, had stated over and over again, but without producing any conviction in her hearers. Her father asked hastily what they had to do with Fitzroy that they should insist on knowing to whom he belonged. And May turned round upon her little, much too high, heel and laughed. What did she care who he was? He had a delightful baritone, which "went" beautifully with her own soprano. He was very nice-looking. He had been a great deal abroad, and his manners were beautiful, with none of the stiffness of English manners. He did not stand and stare like Bertie Harcourt, or push between a girl and anything she wanted like the new curate. He knew exactly how to steer between these two extremes, to be always serviceable without being officious, and to insinuate a delightful compliment without saying it right out. This was May's opinion of the matter: and then he had such a delightful voice! So that this stranger had come into the very front of affairs at Bampton-Leigh, to the disturbance of the general balance of society, and of many matters much more important than an agreeable visitor, which were going on there. For example, Bertie Harcourt had almost been banished from the house: and he was a young squire of the neighbourhood with a good estate and very serious intentions; while the Spencer-Jacksons, with whom Mr Fitzroy was staying, were not above half pleased to have their novelty, their new man, absorbed in this way. Mrs Spencer-Jackson was a lively young woman who liked to have a cavalier on hand, whom she could lend, so to speak, to a favourite girl as a partner, whether at carpet dance or picnic, and dispose of according to her pleasure – an arrangement which Mr Fitzroy had much interfered with by devoting himself to Bampton-Leigh.

These things were being turned over in her mind by Miss Bampton, while she sat looking out upon the lawn where everything looked so fresh and cool under the trees. She was busy with her usual knitting, but this did not in any way interfere with the acuteness of her senses, or the course of her thoughts. Though May and she were spoken of as if on the same level, as the Miss Bamptons, this lady

was twenty years older than her sister, and had discharged for half of that time the functions of mother to that heedless little girl. May had made Julia old, indeed, when she had no right to be considered old. When the mother died she had been a handsome quiet young woman, thirty indeed, which is considered, though quite falsely, an unromantic age yet quite capable of being taken for twenty-eight, or even twenty-five, and with admirers and prospects of her own. After her mourning was over she had become Miss Bampton, the feminine head of the house, managing everything, receiving the few guests her father cared to see, who were almost all contemporaries of his own, as if she were as old as any of them – and had moved up to a totally different level of life. Such a transformation is not unusual in a widower's house. Miss Bampton took the position of her father's wife rather than of his daughter, and no one thought it strange. If she sacrificed any feelings of her own in doing so, no one found it out. She was a mother to May; she had found her position, it seemed, taken possession of her place in the world, at the head of a house which was her own house, though it was not her husband's but her father's. It was generally supposed that the position suited her admirably, and that she had never wished for any other: which indeed I agree was very probably the case, though in such matters no one can ever be confident. It was thus that she happened to be so absorbed in May, so watchful of this (she thought) undesirable interposition of Mr Fitzroy, of the partial withdrawal of Bertie Harcourt, and of many things of equal, or rather equally little, moment to the general world.

And this was the afternoon when Nelly Brunton, the little widowed cousin from India, was coming on her first visit since her return. It was true that a year had elapsed or more since the death of Nelly's husband: but Miss Bampton felt that to receive the poor little widow in the very midst of the laughter, the songs, the foolish conversation and excitement of a love affair, or at the least a strong flirtation, was the most inappropriate thing that could be conceived. Poor Nelly with her life ended, so soon – come back with all gaieties and gladness for ever shut out, the music silenced, the very sight of a man (Miss Bampton felt) made painful to her – to a life much more subdued and quiet than old-maidhood, she who had always been such a bright little thing, full of fun and nonsense! Good Julia figured her cousin to herself in a widow's cap (which, however, whatever people may say, is a most becoming head-dress to a young woman), pale, smiling quietly when her sympathy was called upon, shrinking aside a little from a laugh, thinking of nothing but her two little children, in whom she would, no doubt, poor thing, begin to live a subdued life by proxy – and whom she had called, in that very touching letter, the sole consolations of her life. Poor little Nelly! who would no doubt break down altogether when she came in to this old place, which she had known in the brightness of her youth – and who ought, at least, to be received by her relations alone, not in a stranger's presence. Miss Bampton grew very restless and unhappy as the time went on. She heard the pony carriage drive out, which May ought to have driven down to the station to meet her cousin. May had found time to run out to tell Johnson that he must go himself, that she could not be ready, and the sound of the wheels upon the gravel felt like a reproach to Julia, who was not in the least to blame. How dreadful to send only a servant to meet her – considering how much had come and gone since she last stopped at that station! When the carriage had gone, Miss Bampton, who felt it her duty, though she was not in the least wanted, to remain in the drawing-room while all this practising was going on, could not keep still. She went and came into the inner drawing-room, she took out books from the shelves and put them back again, she laid down her knitting and took it up, she looked at the clock first in one room, then in another, and compared them with her watch. Finally, she came up to the performers just as they came to the end of a song.

"That was very nice," Miss Bampton said. "I think you have it perfect. May, poor Nelly may be here at any moment; don't you think you should shut the piano before she comes in?"

"Why?" said May, swinging round upon her stool to look her sister in the face.

"Oh! well, dear, I don't know that I can explain. Nelly, that used to be so fond of all these things herself, coming home a widow, deprived of everything – I think that explains itself, dear."

"Is this lady, then, a statue of woe, covered with crape and white caps and streamers?" said Fitzroy.

"I think I see Nelly like that," cried May, with her fingers running up and down the keys. "We can manage this trio when Nelly comes. You know, Julia, she was always the merriest little thing, ready for any fun. What nonsense to try to make us frightened of Nelly!"

"In the first place, she is much older than you are," said Miss Bampton, with something as nearly like anger as she ever showed to her sister, "so how you can speak so confidently – I can't tell, I am sure, whether she may wear a widow's cap. They don't, I believe, in India; but I am very certain, May, that you should have gone down to the station to meet her, and that it will be a painful thing for her, poor dear, though I hope the feeling may not last – to come back to this house after her trouble, she that has been so happy here."

"Why does she come, then?" said May, with a pout. "If I had thought we were to give up everything to Nelly, and go sighing through all the house – "

"Weep upon her shoulder," suggested the young man, in a low tone.

"I must say," cried Miss Bampton, fluttering her feathers like a dove enraged, "that though this sort of talk may be funny and fashionable and all that, I find it in very bad taste. There is the carriage coming back, and if you have no real sympathy for your cousin, I hope you'll at least shut down the piano and meet her without a song on your lips and a grin on your face!"

This tremendous Parthian shaft Miss Bampton discharged as she hurried out, with an almost pleased consciousness, soon to be changed into remorse, of the force of the dart. A grin on May's face! To think that her laugh, which Mr Fitzroy compared to silver bells and all manner of pretty things, should be spoken of as a grin! May closed the piano with a noise like a blow.

"We shall have to stop, I suppose," she said, impatiently, "though I did want so much to try over that last again."

"And I suppose I ought to fly," said Fitzroy. "Must I? I should like to have one peep at this wonderful widow before I leave you, dissolved in tears – "

"Oh, don't talk nonsense!" said May, with the faintest little frown upon her forehead. It is one thing to laugh or jeer in your own person at your family arrangements, and quite another thing to have your laugh echoed by a stranger. "I suppose I must go and meet her," she added, quickly, and hurried out, leaving him alone by the piano.

If Mr Fitzroy had been a young man of delicate feelings, it is probable that he would have disappeared by the window, and delivered his friends from his unnecessary presence at such a moment. But his feelings were quite robust so far as other people were concerned, and his curiosity was piqued. He stood calmly, therefore, and waited till the party returned. He listened to Miss Bampton's little cries and exclamations, subdued by the distance but yet distinguishable. "Dear Nelly! dear Nelly! So glad, so glad to see you! Welcome back to us all! Welcome! oh, my dear, my dear!" Then a little sound of crying, then "Oh, Nelly, dear!" from May; and kisses, and a note or two of a new voice, "Dear old Ju! dear Maysey," different, not like the tones of the sisters, which resembled, much unlike as their personalities were. Then there sounded old Mr Bampton's tremulous bass. "Well, Nelly, my dear; glad to see you back again." To all this commotion Percy Fitzroy listened, amused at the self-revelation in the different tones. It was highly impertinent on his part to stay, and without reason; but his mind was not much disturbed by that.

Then the little procession streamed in, May first, pushing open the door, Miss Bampton after, with the new-comer's arm affectionately and tightly drawn through hers, Mr Bampton lumbering behind, with his heavy tread. The new-comer – ah! she was certainly worth a second look. She was covered with crape, with a long veil falling almost to her feet; but it was apparent to Fitzroy's very sharp and experienced eyes that the crape was rusty and brown, and probably *d'occasion*, put on for her first appearance and to impress her relations. I don't know what it was in Mrs Brunton's face which gave the young man of the world this impression. There are people who understand each other

without a word, at a glance. Mrs Brunton's face was a very pretty one, much prettier than May's, who had not much more than the *beauté de diable*, the first freshness and bloom of a country girl, to recommend her. The young widow had better features; she had a lurking something in the corners of her mouth, which looked like "a spice of wickedness" to the audacious stranger. She lifted her eyes with a little sentiment to survey "the dear old room," prepared to sigh; but caught, with a lightning glance, the unknown young man in it, with the faintest elevation of her eyebrows, postponing for a moment that "suspuration of forced breath," which, however, followed all the same, with only an infinitesimal delay. "The dear old room," said Nelly; "nothing changed except – " and then came the round, full, long-drawn sigh. Mr Fitzroy felt that he had done well to wait; there was fun to be anticipated here. He caught May's eyes slightly dubious, and elevated his own brows with a look that called back the smile to her face. Then he crossed the room to the door, under shadow of Mr Bampton's back, and giving a little pressure to her hand in parting, whispered "To-morrow?" as if it were for that question he had stayed. May gave him a smile and a nod, and he hastened away. What could be more discreet? Even Miss Bampton, full of wrath against him for his lingering, opened her mouth in surprise when she found he had disappeared so unobtrusively, and had nothing to say.

CHAPTER II

When Mrs Brunton's bonnet with the long veil was taken off, and her long cloak, which was half covered with crape, she presented a very agreeable figure in a well-fitting dress, which indeed was black, but in no special way gloomy, and pleasantly "threw up" her light brown hair and pretty complexion. The crape, which was rather shabby, was indeed more or less worn – if not for effect as Percy Fitzroy supposed – at least by way of response to a natural prejudice in favour of "deep" mourning, which Nelly knew to exist among the English kindred, apt as they were to forget that a long time had elapsed since that crape was a necessity and quite congenial to her feelings. The tears which had come to her eyes when she first saw her cousins, the sigh with which she had greeted the dear old room (though kept back for half a second by the unexpected sight of a stranger), were quite authentic and genuine. Much indeed had passed over her head since she had been last there, much since she had met the "dear old Ju" and little Maysey of her youthful recollections. The over-experienced young man who had fixed his cynical eyes upon Mrs Brunton set it all down as fictitious, with a wisdom which is still more ignorant and silly than foolishness. He took the smile of a buoyant nature which lay *perdu* about the corners of her mouth for an equally cynical amusement at the *rôle* she had to play. And he was entirely wrong, as such penetrating observers usually are. She was ready to smile whenever an occasion should arise, but at that moment she was very ready to cry. When they took her out upon the well-known lawn, and established her in the very same old chair which she remembered, before the same tea-things, the old silver teapot, the china which she would have recognised anywhere, Nelly burst out crying in spite of herself. "I don't believe there is a cup cracked of the whole set," she said; "and to think how many things have happened to me!" May, quite touched, threw herself down on her knees by Nelly's side and clasped her arms round her cousin's waist ("And I dared to think the child was unfeeling!" Miss Bampton, remorseful, said to herself), while Julia bent over her and kissed her, and even old Mr Bampton stroked her shoulder with his heavy hand, saying, "You must keep up your heart, Nelly – you must try to keep up your heart." And then presently they all dried their eyes, and sat down in comfortable chairs and took their tea.

It was all as natural as the sunshine and the rain. Mrs Brunton had not perhaps great cause to be an inconsolable widow; and she was not so. Her husband, had he been the bereaved person, would probably by this time have married again, and she had no thought of doing that. But she had felt his loss keenly, and the change in her life and all the unexpected differences in her lot which separated her from so many of her contemporaries to whom nothing had happened. Fortunately the unfortunates in this world often come to feel a certain superiority in their experience to those who have had no trouble, to whom nothing has happened, which modifies the great inequalities of the balance; and this had some share in Nelly's feelings. The cousins had been happy and at peace all the time during which she had "gone through" so much; but she felt herself on such a height of experience and development over their heads as no words could say. They had never known what trouble was – they were here with their old china, their old silver teapot, polished! as if that was the great business in life; not a cup was cracked, not a chair displaced, old Sinnett the butler stepping softly across the noiseless grass, with the cake basket, just as he had always done. After Nelly had cried with a full heart, she laughed, looking round, as she took her tea. "Does nothing ever happen over here?" she said; "are you all exactly as you used to be before I went away?"

"Ju has never gone off, you see; she can't bring any man to the point," said the old heavy father with a laugh.

"Oh, papa!" said the gentle Julia – "but Nelly knows your naughty ways."

"Yes, I know my uncle's naughty ways – and that he gives thanks on his knees night and morning that Julia has never brought any man to the point: for what would Bampton-Leigh do without her?" Nelly cried.

"Oh, there's me!" said May.

"That little thing!" said Mr Bampton; "she is in the other line, quite the other line. I can't go out for my walk in the morning but some young fellow or other comes trying to make up to me – I'm May's father, Nelly, nowadays: that's what I am to those young men."

"I saw one in the drawing-room," said Mrs Brunton; "I suppose it was one of them. It gave me quite a start to see a stranger there."

"And very bad taste of him," said Miss Bampton, reddening; "the very worst taste! I suppose he stopped to see whether you were nice-looking enough to please him, Nelly."

"Nothing of the sort!" cried May; "he stopped to finish a song we were practising. Julia is always saying disagreeable things of Mr Fitzroy."

Nelly had not the air of finding it very disagreeable that the young man had waited to see whether she was nice-looking. She smoothed back her hair, which curled a little on her forehead, and said with a smile: "That was why you couldn't come to meet me at the station, May."

"It is for a concert in the village," said May, with a great flush of colour.

"Oh!" said Julia hastily, "you must not think, Nelly, it was the child's fault. I gave all the hints I could, but we could not get him to go away. He is one of those society men, as people call them, who do exactly what they please and never mind what you say."

"Julia is so dreadfully prejudiced – she is nothing but a bundle of prejudices!"

"And is there nothing new but Mr Fitzroy? – if that is his name," Nelly said.

Then they began to tell her of all the vicissitudes of the country life, the people who had been married, the children who had been born, a point on which Nelly, being a mother herself, was very curious – and the sons who had gone away to seek their fortune. Mr Bampton by this time had taken his tea and gone in again, so that the ladies were alone with their gossip; and Mrs Brunton sat and listened with a smile, in the relief of having got the first meeting over, and the first shock of the old recollections. She felt at her ease now, not disturbed by any fear of criticism, or of meeting in Julia's eye a reminder that she ought to have had her hair covered by a cap. If truth must be told, it had wounded Julia's feelings much to see her cousin take off her bonnet so simply, without putting up her hand to her head and saying "But I have no cap!" as ladies who wear that article generally do. Miss Bampton, however, had still a hope that when Nelly dressed for the evening it might appear, covering her with the appropriate crown of sorrow. All was not lost as yet, though already indeed Julia had begun to feel a regret that the pretty hair should so covered up, and was in a state of mind to forgive Nelly if that outward and visible sign was not in her wardrobe at all.

When Nelly came down to dinner it was a shock, but not so great a shock as Miss Bampton, had she foreseen it, would have expected. She had no cap – but then her dress was in such very good taste! It was of very thin black stuff, almost transparent, faintly showing her shoulders and arms through, but made quite up to the throat and of a material which was very black and "deep," with no lustre or reflections in it, not even jet or any of the deadly-lively ornaments with which mourning is "lighted up." It made her look very slim, very young, very much like a girl – but poor Nelly could not help that. And nothing, Miss Bampton said to herself, could be nicer than Nelly was. She asked May about her concert that was coming off, and begged that she might be told what songs she was going to sing. "I might help you a little," she said; "I could play your accompaniments at least." And so she did, helping her, for Nelly was a good musician, and giving her a great many hints – as good as a lesson, May acknowledged. And later in the evening when Mr Bampton came in and asked if she could not sing for him that old-fashioned song she used to sing, Nelly, sighing a little, and smiling, and with a tear in her eyes, sang "My mother bids me bind my hair" with a pathos in her voice for Lubin who was away, that made the good Julia cry. She dashed off after that into another lighter song that meant nothing, to take away the taste of the first, she said, which was a little too much for her. Oh no, she had not given up her singing – but nobody had asked her for that old song for years.

"Shows what fools they are nowadays – in music as well as everything else," Mr Bampton said.

The next day Nelly offered most good-naturedly to help May and Mr Fitzroy with their accompaniments – and the next they tried the trio, which was accomplished with great success. She was a better musician and had a much finer voice than May – and before her visit was half over it was she who sang with Fitzroy, taking the leading part in all the concerted music. There were two or three small parties, and it was decided by everybody that it was with Nelly's soprano, not May's, that the baritone went so well. "Dear May's is a delicious little voice," said Mrs Spencer-Jackson, "so pure and so sweet; but Mrs Brunton has a great deal of execution, and she has been so well trained. It is what I call artificial singing, not sweet and child-like, like dear May's. But then so is Percy Fitzroy's – these are the two that go together." Perhaps there was a secret inclination on the part of Mrs Spencer-Jackson to give a little prick to the Bampton's, who had stolen her young man from her. But he was now more away from her than ever. He had always something that called him to Bampton-Leigh, and, if she had disliked to have him carried off by May, there was a still stronger reason for objecting to his entire absorption in Mrs Brunton. However, among most of the audience which listened to their music – whether in the continual rehearsal of which all but the singers were tired – or at the village concert where Nelly, "for such a good motive," was persuaded to lay aside her scruples and take a part – the same idea was prevalent. These were the two that went together. It had always been a delusion in respect to May Bampton. Her little chirp of a voice never could hold its place along with Mr Fitzroy's baritone: which shows how people deceive themselves when their own vanity is concerned. Thus the whole neighbourhood concurred in the verdict. And poor little May, much surprised, was left out of it without any preparation or softening to her of the event. Percy Fitzroy had never been her lover, so that there was nothing at all to blame him for. If the girl had taken foolish notions into her head, there was nobody to blame but herself.

May, for her part, was so much surprised when Fitzroy transferred his attentions to her cousin that she could not believe her eyes. He came as often as ever, and he was ready enough to throw her a crumb of kindness, a scrap of compliment, a morsel of conversation in something of the old tones. She was not jealous of Nelly, or what she and Julia called her strong voice; but when the little girl, new to all perfidies, perceived that the man who had hung about her and charmed her was turning all the artillery of whispers and glances in another direction, and that Nelly, in her black dress – Nelly, who was a widow, who ought to be entirely above the region of flirtation – was the object of these seductions, a cruel astonishment was the first feeling in her breast. She had been flattered and pleased and amused by the little *éclat* of Fitzroy's subjugation. She now stood by in amazement, and watched the change without understanding it. At first everybody had been so sorry for Nelly; and it was easy to imagine that Fitzroy, too, shared that admirable sentiment. A widow, so young! though, now that it came to this, May began secretly to count up Nelly's years, and to decide that at thirty Nelly was not so very young; that she had quite reached the shady side of life, when troubles were to be calculated upon. At twenty, thirty is a great age: it means more than maturity – it is the beginning of decadence. After all, why was Nelly so much to be pitied? And there was such a thing as carrying pity too far. May did not know how to account at first for the change in her own feelings towards her cousin, any more than for the change in her own position, so strangely brought about – the change from being the first, always considered, to being in a manner nobody at all.

CHAPTER III

Miss Bampton's sentiments during this sudden change of circumstances were more remarkable than those of May, for she was as much dismayed and startled as her sister, and much more angry, understanding the whole process better; while at the same time she was, in the midst of her indignation, more or less satisfied to see that Fitzroy's attentions, which had made her so uneasy, were coming to an end. This is a state of mind which it is very difficult to describe in so many words. The excellent Julia would have believed herself ready, before Nelly came, to welcome anything which should break the charm of the stranger's fascinations, and restore May to her previous much more trustworthy suitor; but when this deliverance came in the shape of Mrs Brunton, her anger and resentment and sense of downfall were quite unreasonable. That any one – any man in his senses – should turn from May to Nelly! that the fresh and delightful bloom of the girl should be left neglected for the attractions of the maturer woman; that May, in her *own house*, the young princess of everything, should be thrust into the second place, and Nelly —*Nelly*, whose day was over – made the principal attraction! This was almost more than Miss Bampton could bear. And to see May sitting by with her needlework, or pretending to read, while Nelly and Fitzroy sang, and turned over the music and talked to each other, as musical people do, "Do you remember that phrase?" "Oh, don't you recollect this?" with a few bars played on the piano, and how "the melody comes in here," and how "that cadenza was repeated there," and so forth and so forth, interspersed with exclamations of ecstatic admiration – produced in Julia's mind an exasperation which it was almost impossible to subdue. Even Mr Bampton, who took so little notice, had said once or twice, "Why isn't May singing?" when he came in for his cup of tea. And May, taking it all like the darling she was, not sulky at all, saying a word when there was any room for her to come in, making her first experience in life, but so sweetly, so patiently, through all her surprise.

This changed altogether, however, the character of the scene in the drawing-room at Bampton-Leigh, where now the two sisters, who were the mistresses of the place, pursued their occupations almost as if they had been alone, while the little vaudeville, operetta, genteel comedy, or whatever you please to call it, went on at the piano. Miss Bampton felt that she had no call whatever to provide the scenery, as it were – the good piano, the pretty room, the tea-table, with all its *agréments*– for this drama. When May was the heroine it was all befitting and natural – but for Nelly! Miss Bampton's fingers trembled over her knitting, as she sat bursting with indignation. The only thing to console her was that she had never in her life so admired her little sister. How beautifully May behaved! When Julia, in an access of that fury which sometimes moves the mildest, said fiercely, under her breath, to her sister working at the window, "I can't bear this much longer!" May lifted up pathetic eyes and cried, "Why? You used to like it well enough," said the young martyr, steadily, yet with a pale cheek, ignoring any change. Oh, what a darling she was! and set aside in her own house by that little Nelly, a widow, who ought to be thinking of very different things.

I do not know how to justify Nelly's conduct in these circumstances, and yet I do not think she was so much to blame as appears at a first glance. Mrs Brunton's spirit, much subdued and cast down for a time, had risen before she came to visit her relations in the country, by the natural movement of life and youth, and the sense that after all her existence was not over, though she had tried hard to persuade herself that it was. It was not at all over; it was very warm and lively in her veins, despite of everything she had gone through. Poor Jack was gone. She had been very faithful to Jack, suffering no one to say a word against him either living or dead. She had not blamed him for giving very little thought to the comfort of his wife and children after he was gone. But now that he was gone, and his grave green, and her crape rusty and worn out, it was not natural that she should continue to pose, like a statue of woe leaning upon an urn. That was not at all the *rôle* which she had felt herself to be capable of playing. And she had never felt herself the venerable matron which she appeared to

May. She was young; her blood was still running fast in her veins; her little children made no claim yet upon her for anything but kisses and smiles, and the cares which an excellent nurse made light. And Nelly, for a long time sequestered from every amusement, amused herself with relish as soon as it came within her reach. She was scarcely aware at first that she was taking May's admirer from her. Little Maysey! Why, she was only a child, not old enough for that sort of diversion. She had plunged into the music, into the fun, into that little excitement of flirtation which comes on so easily, without intention, without at all perceiving any other effect. And, indeed, she only awoke to what she had done quite suddenly one evening when there was a dinner-party at Bampton-Leigh, and when, after the gentlemen came back to the drawing-room, she had been called upon to sing with Mr Fitzroy for the delight of the party, and without waiting for any special entreaty had complied. When they sang one song they were asked for another, in the most natural way in the world.

"That is one of May's songs," said some one who was near the piano.

"Oh, is it?" cried Nelly. "I have sung it several times with Mr Fitzroy."

"But it is one of May's songs all the same," insisted this injudicious person. "I have heard her sing it very often, also with Mr Fitzroy."

"Yes," said young Harcourt, who was present, and who was still more angry than Julia to see May seated at the other end of the room talking to an old lady. "It is certainly one of May's songs: and nobody could sing it so sweetly," the young man added, with fire in his eyes.

"By the way," said the indiscreet person, "how is it, with so much music going on, that we have not had a song from May?"

"Oh, May – has not been singing much for some time," said Miss Bampton, with a little quiver in her voice.

And Mrs Brunton, startled, gave a sudden look round the room. She saw Fitzroy placing the music upon the piano in a deliberate, conscious way, which made it apparent to her suddenly awakened faculties that he was aware of the meaning in these words; and she caught young Harcourt's look fixed somewhat fiercely upon herself: and Julia, who had turned her head away and would not look at her at all: and May, in the background, smiling and talking to the old lady, talking very fast, smiling a little more than she meant, looking pale and "out of it" – that curious condition which is not to be described, but which betrays itself to a looker-on. All this Nelly saw with a sudden awakening to the real state of affairs, which ought, of course, to have occurred to her before. And for a moment shame and compunction were strong in her.

"I am so glad," she said. "It is far more suited to her voice than mine: and I want so much to hear her sing it. Please, Mr Harcourt, go and ask her. I hadn't sung for ever so long before I came here," she added, apologetically, to the little circle round the piano, "and they made me begin again; and I never know when to stop – so that I have scarcely heard May. Isn't it a dreadful confession to make?" she said, with an embarrassed laugh.

"You have so strong a voice," said Miss Bampton, melting a little. "May's voice is a little thing after yours."

"May herself is a little thing beside me," said Mrs Brunton, sitting down apart from the piano. "I am almost old enough to be her mother!" She felt that in saying this she had made fully the *amende honorable* to May.

But May would not sing, though she was entreated by all the company. She had her little dignity. "Oh, no," she said, "I could not sing after Nelly – Nelly has so much stronger a voice than I have. Oh, please no!"

"There is nobody who sings so sweetly as you do," said young Harcourt, delighted with the opportunity.

But May would not be persuaded. I don't know that Mrs Brunton was altogether pleased to hear her voice described as so "strong." That is not always a complimentary adjective, and it gave her an amusement tempered with annoyance to hear her organ thus classified. She could not help a little

half-angry smile, nor could she help meeting Fitzroy's eye, whose position at the piano, with no one to join him, was a little absurd. He was putting aside the music, looking exceedingly annoyed and rather fierce; but when their eyes met he, too, laughed. They understood each other at once, and when, after this little incident, the music was stopped altogether, he came and sat by her, anxious to communicate his feelings. "What a ridiculous business!" he said. "How silly! to put a stop to everything for the gratification of a little absurd jealousy!"

"Jealousy!" said Nelly; "that would be the most absurd of all – if there was any jealousy in it. There is very little reason for any one to be jealous of me."

"I do not think so," said Fitzroy, in a low voice.

And then Nelly felt again how very foolish it was to remark upon such simple incidents in this strain.

"You don't understand my cousins, I see," she said. "It is nothing of the kind; but it is extraordinarily foolish of me to have absorbed everything, and forgotten that May was not a child any longer. She always seems a child to me."

"She looks quite as old as you do," her companion said.

"Oh, nonsense! she is full ten years younger than I am. However, it does not matter so much, for I am going away."

"So soon?" murmured Fitzroy.

"Soon! I have been here a fortnight – away from my little children." Mrs Brunton found it expedient to quench his tone of devotion by putting all her disadvantages in the foreground. He looked at her with more meaning than he had ever felt in his life in his eyes.

"Would it be indiscreet to ask where you were going?" he said.

"Not at all; I am going home. I have a little house at Haven Green, where my children are."

"I am going, too," he said. "May I come and see you? I shall be for some time in town."

"Oh, if you are in the neighbourhood," said Mrs Brunton; and she turned aside to talk to some one on the other side, an old friend, with whom her colloquy was not conducted in such subdued tones. And soon the name of Haven Green, and the fact that her children were there awaiting her, and that she was going almost immediately, floated from one to another through the room. Miss Bampton heard it, and her heart rose; yet it smote her when she thought these incidents over to feel that she had herself been almost guilty of suggesting to Nelly that it would be better if she went away. As for May, she had seen the conversation, the two heads bent, the exchange of looks, the evidently subdued tone of the communications that passed between them. The poor girl scarcely knew how to behave when Fitzroy approached her some time after. She had been foolish about the song – she had shown her feelings, which is to a girl in such circumstances the worst of sins. Should she tell him she had a headache, or a sore throat, or anything that would excuse her? But he did not leave her the time to invent any excuse.

"I am so sorry," he said, carrying the war into the enemy's country, "that you would not sing with me to-night: for it will be, I fear, one of the last times, if not the very last, that I shall have the chance."

May's poor little heart seemed to cease to beat. What a sudden, dreadful punishment was this for her little gentle self-assertion! "The last time?" she cried. "Oh, are you going away?"

"I must, I fear," he said. "I have been idling too long, and I seem to have outstayed my welcome. I did think that you would have sung with me this last night."

"Oh, Mr Fitzroy!" was all that May could say. She had hard ado to keep the tears out of her eyes.

CHAPTER IV

Bampton-Leigh felt very blank and vacant when both these people who had troubled its peace went away. Had Nelly gone alone and Mr Fitzroy remained, it is possible that there might have been some consolation; indeed, May, in her inmost heart, had looked forward to that period as to a time of peace, when the disturbing element being removed – the "strong" voice of Nelly, and those amusing and enlivening social qualities in which it was natural that a matron of her age should excel a timid girl – things might return to their original condition, and Fitzroy once more hang over her, and encourage her exertions, and praise the sweetness of her voice, which "went" so well with his. Perhaps May had not been aware how eagerly she had been looking forward to this time: and the abyss into which she fell when her hopes came to an end so suddenly, the dull and dreadful vacancy, which was all that remained to her, was almost more than she could bear. It was her first experience of disappointment and deprivation. She had been the spoiled child all her life of her father's house. Whatever she had wanted had been got for her, had it been in any way possible to attain it: and May had never wished for anything that was quite unattainable, until she wished, yet would not for the world have expressed the wish, for the visits, the songs, the fascination of Percy Fitzroy's society, which had come to her without asking, without any action or desire of hers. This gives additional sharpness to the stab of such losses – that the thing which makes your life desolate when it is taken away, has come accidentally, as it were, unsought – to add to and then to annihilate the happiness of (as in this instance) a poor little girl, who had been quite happy without it, who had not wanted it when it originally appeared. Poor May felt that she had no share in bringing on this doom, which to her youthful consciousness seemed to have overwhelmed her for ever. She had not wanted Mrs Spencer-Jackson to invite him; she had not suggested to Julia to bring him to Bampton-Leigh; she had not even begun the singing, poor little May! She was a perfectly innocent victim. And now, alas! she could not bring back the happy unconscious state to which Percy Fitzroy was unknown. The afternoons did not return to her as they had existed before – full of cheerful occupations and amusements. They were blank, and vacant, and impoverished, full of a wistful longing. Oh, if he were but here! Oh, if she could but hear his voice, and join in his singing again! She spent hours at the piano, dreaming that he was by her side, murmuring over her part, recalling all the past delights. Poor little May! When the girls from the Rectory came to play tennis, which they did more often than usual, at Miss Bampton's instigation, instead of being glad to see them, May hated the sight of their well-known faces. She said to herself that she was sick, altogether sick, of her life.

And if May was thus miserable, it may be imagined how much more miserable was the elder sister, who suffered all that May suffered, and the additional burden of blaming herself for all the unthought-of steps that had brought it about. Why had she allowed Fitzroy to come at all? Why had she permitted all that singing, those constant attentions which stole May's heart away? Why, having done that, had she asked Nelly? Oh, what a fool, what a fool she had been all round! It was always she who was to blame whatever happened – she, with such a dear little sister to take care of! – she ought to be a dragon in respect to gentlemen, and never allow one to come near unless she knew his character and could trust him; and she knew nothing of Fitzroy's character. And then, when that harm was done by her fault, to think that she should go and invite Nelly, and throw everything into confusion! Was there ever so abominable, so wicked, a thing to do? Had she asked Nelly *at the first* (these italics were all Miss Bampton's, deeply, trebly underlined in her thoughts), everything would have been well; for then it would have been Nelly and this stranger, this unknown, untrustworthy man, who would have attracted each other, and May would have gone free. But no! if she had intended to make mischief, to make everything as bad as could be, she could not have managed better. It is all my fault, she said to herself – all, all, *my* fault. It was she, indeed, and not Percy Fitzroy, who had broken May's heart!

Thus it will be seen that these two persons left chaos and untold confusion behind them when they went away. Mrs Brunton looked very wistfully at her cousins when she took leave of them. She had the air of wishing to ask their pardon. But then it would have been an offence, an insult, to ask pardon – for what? for taking May's lover from her, for being preferred to May! Better to bear the stain of blackest guilt, to submit to an everlasting breach, than to insult May by suggesting that. And yet Nelly was very sorry and ashamed of herself, though supported underneath these two sentiments by a certain softening of complacency and gratified vanity, which she would not have acknowledged for the world. That she, poor Jack's widow, hardly out of her weeds (indeed she left Bampton-Leigh in the same crape bonnet, with the long veil, in which she had arrived), should have interfered with May's love affair, should have taken her place, and carried on something which she could not to herself deny to be very like a flirtation with her young cousin's admirer! How terrible, how treacherous, how shocking it was! At the bottom of her heart there remained that dreadful little guilty sense that there was pleasure in it; that to be still capable, amid all her disadvantages, of touching a man's heart, was something not disagreeable: but this she did not own to herself. She was very tender to May all that last morning, praising her and flattering her with the intention of making up a little for her fault; and she looked very wistfully in Julia's face, and would fain, very fain, have said something. But Miss Bampton was much on her dignity, and had a look which forbade all such effusions. "I hope you will like your new house," Miss Bampton said. "For my part, I think you would have been a great deal better in the country – not so near town."

"But it is quite in the country," said Nelly.

"Nothing which is within ten minutes of town by the railway can be called the country," said Julia, with great severity. "I *hope* it may be good for the children – of course it will be much livelier for yourself."

"Indeed, I don't see how it can be very lively for myself," cried Nelly, feeling this attack upon her. "I know nobody but the clergyman's family – and the society is not usually very lively in such places – if I wished for lively society," she added in an equally serious tone.

"Oh, my dear Nelly, you will wish for it!" cried her cousin. "It is not to be expected that you should shut yourself up for ever at your age. And then it will be so handy for town – you will have all your friends coming to see you from town."

And a look passed between these ladies which did away with the recollection of many years of love and friendship – a look which said on one side – You know that you have asked him to come to see you! – and on the other with a flash. Well! and what then! – notwithstanding that Julia's heart was full of charity, and Nelly's of compunction. But Mrs Brunton was stirred up to self-defence, and Miss Bampton had in her all the fury of the outraged dove.

"Well! she is gone," said Miss Bampton, coming back to May who stood at the window of the hall looking out very gravely at her cousin's departure. Julia did not recollect now how angry she had been with May for not driving to the station to meet Mrs Brunton. But neither of them thought of accompanying her when she went away. May stood at the hall window while Julia went out to the door, and they both looked after the disappearing carriage with a seriousness that was alarming to see. It might have been a funeral after which they were gazing, instead of Nelly in her mourning bonnet and with all her little boxes. "Well!" said Miss Bampton, "she is gone at last, and I am sure I am very glad. I never thought Nelly Bampton could have changed so in half a dozen years."

"Has she changed?" said May, with a quiet air of indifference, turning from the window. "And I don't see why you should say 'at last.' For, after all, she has only been a fortnight here."

"A fortnight too long," Miss Bampton said.

"You are such a very strange person, Julia, one never understands you," said her young sister. "Why in the name of wonder did you ask Nelly to come here, if she has been a fortnight too long? What absurdity that is! She thinks she had a most successful visit, I feel sure."

"If she calls that success!"

"What?" said May, looking fiercely into Miss Bampton's eyes.

But that was what the poor mother-sister dared not to say. If she had uttered the name of Percy Fitzroy, May would have turned upon her, with what angry disdain! "Mr Fitzroy! what could he possibly have to do with it?" May would have said. Miss Bampton did not venture to bring upon herself such a response as that.

"Oh, nothing!" she said. "I am always making mistakes. Nelly is – not at all what she used to be, dear. Matrimony is not good for some people, and ladies in India get dreadfully spoiled sometimes. They are accustomed to so much attention. There are not so many of them there as here, and they are never contented if they have not every man they see at their feet."

"I did not remark that in Nelly," said May, who was very pensive, and so wounded and sore in her poor little heart that it did her good to be disagreeable to Julia. "There was Bertie Harcourt, for instance, whom she took no notice of – and who, I am sure, was not at her feet."

"Ah, Bertie Harcourt!" cried Miss Bampton, "He" – she paused on the pronoun for greater emphasis, speaking with fervour – "He – is a heart of gold."

"Is he?" said May, indifferently; "you seem to imply that others are different – and indeed I think that it would be much more comfortable to have a heart like other people."

"Oh, May!"

"I wish you would stop all that," cried May, angrily; "when you get into one of your moods, Julia, you are intolerable. I wish you would let Nelly Brunton alone: I don't see anything remarkable about her," the girl said with a toss of her head, walking back into the drawing-room, where she flung the piano open, and began to sing in the most defiant manner. It was a wet day, the lawn swept by a white blast of rain, and all the trees cowering piteously as if running in for shelter. Poor Miss Bampton sat down in a deep chair to hide herself, feeling as if she had been the occasion of all that had happened, and that it was natural she should suffer accordingly. And when presently May ran singing up-stairs, and the door of her room was heard to shut upon her, poor Julia did not follow. She dared not follow; for the first time in her life poor little May, now finding out what it was to be grown up and a woman, had to bear her moment of bitterness by herself. I need not say that Julia cried silently all the time, sunk in the depths of the big chair, so that Mr Bampton when he came in, in quest of tea or something to break the dulness of the afternoon, saw nobody in the room, and went out again calling indignantly for Ju and Maysey, and demanding of the butler in angry tones whether this afternoon of all others, when no one could go out or do anything to amuse oneself, there was to be no tea.

CHAPTER V

Mrs Brunton was not, I think, at all comfortable in her mind as she left her cousin's house. It had been in some sort a trial visit. She had not gone anywhere, or seen anybody, except aunts and other uninteresting relations, since she had returned home. She had paid a long visit to her husband's family, with her children, where everything of course was mourning and seclusion, and where she was made more conscious of her widowhood than of any other condition in her life; then she had been in the country with her own people, where everything was subdued in order to be suitable for poor Nelly; and then she had been involved in the trouble of settling, finding a little house, which was nice and not too dear, which would be good for the children, and quiet, and yet sufficiently in the way to be accessible to those who were most interested in her. This had cost a great deal of trouble and kept her in full occupation, so that it was only when she had settled down, furnished the house, and arranged everything, and got her new address neatly printed upon her writing paper and her visiting cards (if she ever had any need for the latter, which she doubted), that she had consented to go for a fortnight to Bampton-Leigh, leaving the children under charge of their excellent nurse, who had assisted at their birth and was devoted to them – for her uncle Bampton could not bear children in the house. She had explained to her only friend at Haven Green, the clergyman's wife, and still more gravely she had explained to herself, that this was in every way a trial visit to see whether she could bear society again. Society, she said to herself, without Jack! without the consideration which is accorded to a woman who has her husband behind her. She did not know how it looked to a widow, who would naturally be shut out from some things, who might perhaps be pushed aside among the dowagers, who certainly would see everything from a different point of view. Should she be able to bear it?

Alas, Nelly had felt that she was but too able to bear society! She had gone into it with the elasticity and ease with which one glides into one's native element. The absence of Jack behind her, the position of a widow among the dowagers, had never once come into her mind. She had not even required time to bring her to the surface, but had risen at once to be, as she had always been, rather the ringleader than a follower – always in the front of everything, singing, talking. Nelly felt herself flush and burn all over, as she sat in the Bampton carriage on the way to the station with the windows shut between her and the pelting rain; and then she burst into a guilty yet irrestrainable laugh. Yes, she had proved to herself that she was quite able to bear society, and that the temptation to fall into her old ways was not in any way lessened by widowhood. She had done the same sort of thing before now, out of sheer high spirits and love of enjoying herself, when Jack was alive and looking on, and amused by his wife's pranks. She had always known that she was too fond of admiration, too fond of fun. It was not the first time, alas! – and this she had always known was wicked – that she had given some brother officer's *fiancée* a moment of alarm, a thrill of misery, by taking the man away, and boldly tying him to her own apron-strings for a week or so, for some occasion of festivity, "for fun," and to show what she could do, Nelly laughed, and then she cried, at some of the recollections thus evoked. Jack had even been brought to the point of scolding her – not on his own account, but on account of the lady on the other side. And then Nelly, as gaily as she had taken him up, had thrown over her prey.

All these naughty and wicked ways – of which she had been only able to say in self-defence that she meant no harm – were still in her, it appeared, though she was a widow and had believed that she never would be equal to society again. Oh, what a frivolous, unfeeling little wretch she must be! To think that she had plunged into it as if nothing had happened! The faces of her two cousins – one at the door, seeing her off with such warnings about her imprudence in settling so near town, and the other in such gloomy gravity at the window behind, watching her going – could not be remembered without compunction. And Nelly could not say to herself, as she had done before, that no harm was done, that the sinner would return and be forgiven. This man Fitzroy was different. He was not May's *fiancé*! Perhaps, Nelly said to herself, he never would have been. He was not a marrying man; he was

a man who amused himself, and whom to expose and show in his true light was a good thing for the girl. But this was mere casuistry, as Nelly knew; for May had given the man her heart, or, if not her real heart, at least her imagination, and she, Nelly, had wickedly taken him away.

It is difficult, however, to see the full enormity of one's own guilt in such a conjuncture. There is always a certain amusement in it to the culprit. It is fun – though it is so little fun to the other persons concerned. Nelly did not, however, feel herself at all responsible so far as Mr Fitzroy was concerned. She had not inspired him with a hopeless passion; she had probably only afforded him the means of extricating himself from a situation in which things were going too far. When Nelly was safely established in the railway compartment, restored completely to her own independence and individuality, with all her packages around her, a modest tip administered to Johnson, and the Bampton carriage out of sight, May indeed floated out of her thoughts; but Percy Fitzroy did not so disappear. Should she ever meet him again? she wondered. Would he seek her out, as he had said, at Haven Green? She felt that it was quite likely he might do so, being a man who was fond of his amusement; and if so, Nelly promised herself that the situation should certainly not be permitted to become strained, or the fun go too far. She had been more or less irresponsible, a free lance, under Julia Bampton's eyes; but in her own little house she would always remember that she was Jack's widow, a householder, the head of a family, a personage in her own right, very different from a girl protected by home – very different from a young wife thinking of nothing but a little fun, and with Jack, who understood all her ways, behind – oh, very different! She had her dignity to keep up, her position, her place in life. If this man insisted on coming, he should be made at once to see that a flirtation was entirely out of place in these circumstances. He might make a call – there was nothing to prevent any man making a call – he might even sing a song, or she might join him in a single duet: but no more – upon no pretence any more.

No later than the first Sunday after Mrs Brunton's return these fine sentiments were put to the test: for Mr Fitzroy appeared in the afternoon, early, with the full intention, as was evident, of staying as long as he should be permitted to stay. Nelly had not forgotten him at all in that little interval. He had intruded into her mind a number of times, to her annoyance and discomfiture. Why should she keep wondering whether he would come? Better that he had come and gone, and Nelly had never thrown a thought after him. Why should she think about this man, or whether she should ever see him again? But she did, in spite of herself, perhaps because he was the only figure visible on her way, where there had been once so many. Her house was a nice little house, made in a sort of imitation of that country house which is the English ideal. In France and other countries the better houses of the village are built like town houses – high, with rows of shuttered windows and a big staircase. But in England it is always the country house that is copied – windows opening upon a little lawn, mimic trees, shrubberies, conservatories, the walls covered with climbing plants and roses.

Nelly's villa had a little verandah on one side, a little hall, with a tiger skin – one of poor Jack's trophies – spread out in it; a drawing-room full of Indian curiosities. She went and came by the drawing-room window oftener than by the door, and so did her intimates the clergyman's wife and daughters, who would run round through the garden and tap at the pane. Of course Mr Fitzroy did not do this. He came decorously through the hall, ushered in by the maid, and was received with a little state by Mrs Brunton, who had her two children with her – little Jack, aged five, and Maysey, aged three. These little people remained playing in the room during the greater part of the interview, in which scarcely a word was said about music. Mr Fitzroy took the little girl on his knee, and patted the boy on the head, and asked them their names. "Ah, Maysey," he said, "the same as your cousin, Miss May Bampton." "Yes, the same: for they are called after the same person, a great authority in the family," answered Mrs Brunton. This was the unexceptionable character of their talk.

But that was only the first of a series of continual visits, during which, as was inevitable, the intimacy grew. The piano was opened on the third or fourth occasion, and after that the children no longer formed part of Mrs Brunton's *mise en scène*. She did not any longer feel it necessary to keep

them in the front, to keep herself and her visitor in continual remembrance of her widowhood and her responsibilities. When a friend comes two or three times in a week, you cannot be always in a state of preparation for him. You must occasionally fall off your guard, forget that there is anything in his presence that needs to be guarded against. The children came in whenever they pleased, but it was the hour for their walk, or they preferred to play in the garden, which was much better for them. And Nelly forgot: sometimes it seemed to her that she forgot everything, their very existence, and poor Jack who was dead, and India and all her experiences, and was for a moment now and then as she had been when Jack was a young lover, and she was nineteen – at home in the old days. It is curious how a woman, who has had a home of her own for many years, goes back to the time when her father's house was the only place that bore that name. "We used to do that at home," the matron will say, with a smile or a tear, realising in a moment the girl she used to be – with how much stronger reason when she is only parted from it by some half-dozen years. Nelly felt as if she were again a girl at home during many of those golden afternoons, as if nothing had ever happened, as if her life were as yet all to come. She forgot herself, and that position which had been so much impressed upon her by all her friends. Poor Nelly! It was very wrong for a woman who was a widow, and had been a widow not eighteen months; but she was young, and her heart was very light and elastic, rebounding from the deep gloom which was so unnatural to her character and to her age. For her character, I need not say, was not a solid and steady one, as that of the mother of these two little children ought to have been. And it was so sweet to be young again, to receive the homage which seemed so genuine, to have the companionship which was so entrancing, to sing with that other voice which was so suited to hers, to talk and smile, and be amused, and find the time fly. She did not know many people – nobody, indeed, but good Mrs Glynn and the girls, who were absorbed in parish work and mothers' meetings, in which they had hoped and expected Mrs Brunton would take her part. They had wanted her to take a district; they had set apart many things in which she ought to take an interest. But Nelly's interest had never been awakened in such things. She would have been dull, very dull, in her new home if it had not been for that very different kind of interest which was so much more in her way. It is impossible, when you have an excellent nurse who really knows much better what is right than you do, to occupy your whole time with a little boy of five and a little girl of three. Nelly gave Jack his little lesson every morning very punctually, and devoted to the children as much of the earlier part of the day as remained when they had taken their walk, and fulfilled the little routine of their existence. And then in the afternoon —

Well, in the afternoon Mrs Brunton found it dull. She went across to the rectory, and often found that the girls were all out about their parish work, or else playing tennis at the house of some neighbour whom she scarcely knew, or who did not venture to ask the young widow to appear at a garden party – so soon. And then Nellie would take a rather mournful, lonely walk. Is it wonderful that when she saw Mr Percy Fitzroy coming her heart gave a jump of pleasure, and her face grew bright with smiles? Not at first because he was Percy Fitzroy – but because he was life and movement and pleasure and fellowship, and because this was the kind of occupation and entertainment which she had been most used to in her former career.

CHAPTER VI

There is nothing in the world, as all the world knows, that can go on for any time at a given point without developments, and those probably of an unforeseen sort, especially not a kind of intercourse like this – the "friendship," as Nelly to herself stoutly and steadily called it. It was much remarked upon, as may be supposed, but not in any unkindly way. Though her neighbours scarcely knew her as yet, they knew, or thought they knew, that the young widow about whom they were all prepared to be so much interested would not, as was said, be a widow much longer. And her husband not yet a twelvemonth dead, some said, who were of the class who always hear the wrong version of a story. Others, who had called upon her and liked her, explained to each other apologetically that young Mrs Brunton was a sweet young woman, and of course could not be expected to make a recluse of herself at her age. Thus it was with charity, though clear-sightedness, that the village saw Mrs Brunton and her "friend" from town, followed by the children and the nurse, walking across the fields towards the river one September afternoon, the gentleman in boating costume. Mr Fitzroy himself was not perhaps so much touched by that procession as were Nelly's neighbours. He had come early, and proposed that, as the river was not far off, Mrs Brunton should go for a row, to which Nelly had replied with delight – half naturally, half to cover her own pleasure; for are not all things mingled in this world? – that little Jack had been crying to go on the river, and that it would be such a treat for the children. Young mothers have a way of doing this, on much less moving occasions, when the delight of the children is the last thing in the world of which their entertainers are thinking. Fitzroy had to make a great gulp and swallow the children, though he did not like it. The nurse sat behind him in the boat, and Nelly kept the two little ones beside her in the stern, and they were very well behaved. But Fitzroy felt that, had any of his friends seen him on the river in this patriarchal guise, the joke would have rung through all the clubs where his name was known. Happily, however, in September there are few people about of the club kind. When he came down another time in his flannels Mrs Brunton said nothing about the children. She hesitated a little, and the colour fluttered in her face. Oh, if she only knew what was the right thing! There was no harm in it, certainly. It was like walking along a public street with him, which was a thing no one could object to. And if she refused to go, what would he think? or, rather, what would he think that she was thinking? He would probably imagine that she was afraid of him, that she was giving a character to his friendly attentions which did not belong to them, thinking that he was in love with her. How silly and vain that would seem; how he would laugh in his sleeve to see that this was what she thought, like any silly girl – she, a woman whom he only considered as a friend!

This was the argument which made Nelly finally decide to go. And she enjoyed that row beyond anything she could remember. It was as if she had made an escapade as a girl, with some one who perhaps one day – But she never would have been allowed to make that escapade as a girl. Now, at her present age and in her position of dignity as a married person, what could there be wrong in it? And yet it was rather wrong. She was a little ashamed, a little self-conscious, hoping that nobody would see her. And the sunset was so glorious, and the river so golden, and the sense of a secret, intense companionship so sweet! There was very little said between them – nothing, Nelly protested to herself afterwards, that all the world might not have heard – but they came home across the fields in the misty lingering autumn twilight, with a bewildering sense of happiness and perfect communion. "I do not know," Fitzroy said, "when I have spent so happy an evening." "The river was so lovely," said Nelly, faltering a little. "Everything was lovely," he said. He was so delicate and considerate that he would not come in, but said good night to her at the gate, in the presence, so to speak, of all the world.

And this occurred a good many times, as long as the fine weather lasted. It would be such a pity, Fitzroy said, not to take advantage of it, and, indeed, Mrs Brunton thought so too. And once or twice he did come in, and there was a little supper, and he went off in good time for the half-

past nine train. Nobody could say that was late: and then, to be sure, if any one did say so, Nelly was not responsible to anybody for her actions. She was herself the best judge of what was befitting. Perhaps she was not quite so sure now that nothing was ever said that all the world might not hear. Things were said – about philosophical subjects, about the union of souls, about affinities, about the character of love metaphysically considered, whether a man or a woman could love twice, whether sometimes in early youth it was not more imagination than love that moved the heart, whether it did not require a little experience of life to make you really acquainted with the force of that sentiment. "There is no passion in the love of girls and boys," Fitzroy said, and he almost convinced Nelly that passion was the salt of life, the only thing really worth living for. These discussions perhaps were a little dangerous. But they were not personal – oh no! abstractions merely, the kind of subjects which promote conversation and which draw out the imaginative faculties. The thing that proved this was that there was not a suggestion of marriage ever made, nothing which approached that subject. Love-making from the point of view of an Englishwoman means marriage as a matter of course. And Fitzroy had never in the most distant way said to Nelly, "Will you marry me?" "Is it possible that you should one day become my wife?" He had talked, oh! a great deal about love in the abstract. He had said hurried things, phrases that seemed to escape him, about a man's "passion." And Nelly had felt many times, with a trembling of all her faculties, that he and she were on the eve of a crisis, that the moment must soon come in which these decisive words must be said.

But that crisis never did come, though certainly the excitement of the intercourse grew daily, and the suspense bewildered and overwhelmed her so that she was entirely absorbed in it, and no longer her own mistress. She had let the stream carry her away. From the time when she went out first alone, with something of the secret delight of a girl making an escapade, upon the river with her kind visitor in the early September, till now, scarcely a month later, what a change had occurred! Then she obeyed a pleasurable impulse, partly that he might not think she thought of anything beyond the pleasant intercourse of an hour or two; now she felt her whole existence, her life, her happiness, her credit with the world, hanging as it were on the breath of his lips. Would he say, or would he not say, the words which would make all clear? For a time after every meeting she felt as if she had barely escaped from that supreme scene, holding it off, according to a woman's instinct; and then a chill began to creep over Nelly when he went away without a word: and life and everything concerning her seemed to hang in that suspense. Poor Nelly! poor, foolish, unsuspecting creature! If she had ever been a cruel little flirt in her heedlessness, never meaning any harm, she was punished now.

One night – it was early in October – Fitzroy stayed late and shared Nelly's supper, and lingered after it, going back to the drawing-room with her, not taking leave of her in the little hall as he was in the habit of doing; and thus he missed the half-past nine train. But what did that matter? for there were two later, and an hour's delay could not, after all, make much difference. They were both full of emotion and suppressed excitement, and Nelly felt that the crisis could not be much longer delayed. She made, however, that invariable effort to keep it at arm's length, to talk of other things, which is one evidence that things have come to an alarming pass. She chattered, she laughed, flushed with feeling, with suspense and excitement, thinking every moment that the passion (certainly there was what he called "passion") in his eyes must burst forth. But still the suspense went on. Nelly's nerves and spirit were almost on the point of breaking down when she was suddenly roused by the chiming of the clock. "Oh," she cried, "eleven! you must run, you must fly! You have not a moment to lose for your train – the last train!"

He looked at her for a moment with unutterable things in his eyes. "Is it so very indispensable that I should catch the last train? Nelly! how can I leave you? How can you send me away, when you know how I love, how I adore – "

There came at this moment a sharp knock at the door.

"If you please, ma'am," said Nelly's excellent nurse, "there's just time for Mr Fitzroy to catch the last train."

And he had to go, seizing his hat, hurrying out with an apology for staying till the last moment, while Nelly, trembling, terrified, shrank back into the room where a little fire was still burning, though the night was warm. She went back to it with the chill of exhausted nerves, and held out her hands to the smouldering glow, while nurse locked and bolted the hall door with unnecessary noise and commotion. Then that excellent woman once more put her head into the room with a look which Nelly could not meet. "Is there anything I can get for you, ma'am, before I go to bed?" she said.

Nelly thanked her, hurriedly recalling her faculties. "How glad I am you came to warn Mr Fitzroy, nurse! I had told him, but he paid no attention. Gentlemen always think they can catch a train by a rush at the last moment." She felt that she was apologising to nurse, and was ashamed of doing so, though it was shame and uneasiness which had forced the words to her lips. Nurse did not commit herself to any approval or condonation of her mistress's behaviour. She said only "Yes, ma'am," and marched up-stairs with measured steps to bed.

Nelly sat down on a low chair in front of the smouldering fire. She was trembling all over, scarcely able to command herself, her cheeks burning with the heat of excitement, yet her teeth chattering with a nervous chill, her strength almost completely broken down. Now that she was alone the tension of her nerves gave way: the light went out of her eyes, her heart seemed to suffocate her, struggling in her breast. The agitation of her whole being prostrated her physically as well as mentally. She lay back upon her chair, as if its support were necessary to hold her together, and then she bent forward, holding her trembling hands to the fire. Had the crisis come, not as she had expected, but in a form that she did not understand? or was this strange interrupted climax a mere break in the stream, no end at all, a broken thread to be taken up again to-morrow and to-morrow indefinitely? Nelly was not capable of forming these questions in her mind, but they swept through the whirlwind within her, with a horror and alarm which she did not understand and knew not how to explain. What had he said? Why had he said that and not something else? What had she done that he had looked at her so? No, she did not ask herself all this; these questions only went whirling about in the wild commotion of her soul. She did not know how long she sat thus, incapable of movement. The fire sank lower, and she felt, without knowing whence it came, a chill draught from her right hand where the window was, but took no notice, perceiving it only, not in a condition of mind to account for it. But Mrs Brunton suddenly sat up erect, and all that tempest stopped in a moment, at the sound of a footstep outside and a tap on the window. What was it? Oh, heaven! what was it? She suddenly remembered in a moment that the window had been unfastened because the room was too warm. The shutters had been almost closed upon it, leaving only the smallest opening to give a little air, and Nelly had forgotten all about it, in her agitation and trouble. She sat for a moment motionless in her panic, thinking of burglars and robbery, not daring to stir. Then there came another tapping, and a low voice. "Mrs Brunton, I have lost my train; I remembered that the window was open; may I come in?"

The next moment, without waiting for any reply – which, indeed, Nelly in her consternation was unable to give – he pushed open the window quickly and came into the room. She stood petrified, staring at him, feeling as if she must have gone suddenly mad, and that all this was a hallucination, as he entered with a glow of triumph in his face.

"Nelly," he said, coming forward to her, dropping down on his knee by the side of her chair. "Darling, you left it open for me! You knew I would come back."

It all happened in a moment, and in a moment Nelly had to make her decision: her life, her fate, her good name, everything in the world worth thinking of, was in the turn of the scale. If he had not made that suggestion, heaven knows, in this prostration of her whole being, what poor Nelly might have done. But it gave her a sting of offence too sharp to bear.

"I left it open for you!" she cried, starting up. "You must be mad, Mr Fitzroy! What do you want? What do you want? Why have you come back here?"

He was startled by the terror, yet almost fury, in her eyes. "Forgive me," he said, starting up also, facing her, "I have lost my train. You know it is the last. What could I do but come back to the only house where I am known? and I thought you would not refuse me shelter for the night."

"Oh," she said almost wildly, "shelter – for the night!"

"May I close the window? It's rather cold, and you are shivering. If I have frightened you, forgive me, forgive me! Rather than that, I would have walked to London or sat down on a doorstep."

"I am not frightened," said Mrs Brunton with a gasp. Her senses came back to her; she felt that she must keep very cool, and make no scene. "It was a little alarming to see a man come in," she said. "It is very unfortunate that you should have lost your train. I am afraid you will not be very comfortable, but we will do the best we can for you."

He caught her sleeve as she was turning to the door. "Where are you going?" he cried.

"Only to call one of the maids to make a room ready for you."

"I want no room," he said. "An hour or two on the sofa will be luxury; and I shall be off in the morning by dawn of day, and disturb no one. Nobody need know: and you are not the sort of girl to think of Mrs Grundy. Nelly, my darling! stay, stay with me a bit! what is the use of taking me in if you leave me like this? Half an hour, just half an hour, to finish our talk!"

"When I have given my orders, perhaps," said Nelly. She would not stop even to forbid the familiarity of his address. She walked out of the room with composed steps, but as soon as she was outside flew up the dark staircase to the nursery, where nurse, an anxious and troubled woman, was not yet asleep. Mrs Brunton went in like a ghost to the room in which the night-light was burning, where the children were breathing softly in their cribs. "Nurse," she said, with all the composure she could command, "Mr Fitzroy has come back; he has lost his train. I want you to get up and prepare the spare room for him. I am sorry: but what else can we do?"

Nurse looked fixedly at her mistress in the light of the candle which Nelly had just lighted, and which came to life in a sudden glare upon her agitated face. "Yes, ma'am," she said quietly, beginning to dress.

What a strange agitated scene in the middle of the silent night! The man below could not have been more dismayed by the appearance of a band of soldiers than he was by the quiet, respectable, respectful maid-servant who came in with a candle to show him to his room, and whose polite determination to get rid of him, to put out the lamp and see that everything was safe for the night, was full of the most perfect calm. "I'll go up-stairs presently; but you need not wait," he said. "Oh, sir, I don't mind waiting; but my mistress likes me to see the lights out. I'll be in the next room when you are ready, sir, to show you the way."

He was moved at last to ask impatiently, "Is not Mrs Brunton coming down-stairs again?"

"Oh dear no, sir; my mistress is passing the night in the nursery, for Master Jack is a little feverish, and he never will part with his mamma when once he sees her. If she offered to go away he'd scream so, he'd raise the whole house."

Fitzroy glared at this guardian of the little helpless household – a very respectful, very obliging maid-servant – making light of the trouble a nocturnal visitor gave. He could no more have resisted or insulted this woman than if she had been a queen. He followed her quite humbly to his room, not daring to say a word. He might as well have been in a hotel, he said bitterly to himself.

When nurse went back she found poor Nelly sitting on the floor between the two little beds, her head leaning on one of them, holding fast the rail of the other, and weeping as if her heart would break.

Next morning Mr Fitzroy left the cottage early, without asking to see Mrs Brunton. It was, indeed, too early to disturb the lady of the house.

CHAPTER VII

Mrs Brunton woke next morning with an aching head and a confused mind, not knowing for a moment what had happened to her. Was it a nightmare? a dreadful dream? She had not slept till morning, and then had fallen into an unrestful torpor, full of the broken reminiscences of the night. A nightmare! that was most like what it was – until she came to herself all at once, and remembered everything.

Everything! and yet did not in the least understand. What had been the meaning of it all? It was more like a nightmare than ever as all the different incidents come back upon her mind. The lingering, the wild talk – the question, "Must I go away?" The cry "I love you. I adore – " and nurse coming in to save her mistress perhaps from wilder utterances still. "Was it indispensable that he should go by the last train?" What a question! Was it not indispensable – more! exacted by every feeling, by every necessity? "I love you, I adore – " Oh yes, these words made poor Nelly's heart beat; but they were not words a man should have said in the silence of the night to a woman without any protection, with a wild heart leaping and struggling in her bosom, and to whose code of possible existence something else, something very different, was needful. Was it indispensable? – oh! it was not, it was not *that*, a man should have asked. He might love her, but what kind of love was it to humble a woman in her own esteem, to make her ask herself, "What have I done, oh what have I done, that I should be spoken to so?" Nelly did not think of her reputation, of honour, or, as he dared to suggest, of what people might say. Mrs Grundy! That was all very well for the light follies that mean nothing, the laughing transgression of a formal rule. But the shock of his look, the horror of his return, struck at her very being. It seemed to her that she could die of shame only to remember it. And what could he think of her? Was it indispensable? Had not she left the window open for him? Had she not known he would come back?

O God, O God! These words, that come to us by instinct at the most dreadful moments, were not profane exclamations in poor Nelly's case. She sat up in her bed, and wrung her hands, and uttered that wild appeal – not a prayer, for her brain was too distracted for prayer – but only an appeal, a cry. The words he had said kept whirling through her mind, till they came to have no meaning except the one meaning of horror and pain: "indispensable," and "Mrs Grundy," and "you knew I would come back." Oh, what kind of woman must he have thought her to think that she knew he would come back, to leave the window open for him? The last train, was it indispensable? and the window left open – and Nelly had to seize herself, as it were, with both hands, to keep her reason, to stop the distracted rush of those words over and over and over again through her brain. There was a lull when nurse came in – nurse, who had been her saviour from she did not know what, who had cut the dreadful knot, but who must not, not even she, know the tempest which was going on in Nelly's being. She stopped that nervous wringing of her hands, pulled herself together, tried to smile. "How dreadfully late I am! How did I come to be so late?" she cried.

"It was the fright, ma'am, last night."

"I – I – was just trying to recall that, nurse. Mr Fitzroy" – she could not say his name without flushing scarlet all over to the tips of her fingers – "lost his train, and came back?"

"He did, ma'am," said nurse, with severe self-restraint.

"He ought not to have done it, nurse."

"Indeed, ma'am, he ought not to have done it." Nurse shut up her lips firmly, that other words might not burst forth.

"He – gave me – a terrible fright, nurse. I had forgotten that the window was open."

"Yes, Mrs Brunton." Poor Nelly looked so wistfully in the woman's face, not explaining further, not asking her support in words, but so clearly desiring it, that nurse's heart was deeply touched. "I think, ma'am," she said, "if you'll not be angry – " Nelly's face was heartrending to behold. She

expected nothing but condemnation, and how could she accept it, how defend herself against it, from her servant, her dependant, a woman who at least might have been expected to be on her side? If nurse had indeed condemned her, Nelly's pride might have been aroused, but now she sat with her eyes piteously fixed upon her, appealing to her as if against a sentence of death.

"If you won't be angry with me, ma'am," repeated nurse, "and if I may make so bold as to say it, I think you behaved just as a lady ought – not stopping to argue with him, but coming right away, and leaving the gentleman to me."

"O nurse!" cried Nelly, bursting into tears with a relief unspeakable. "O nurse! thank God that you think I did right."

"It was an awful trial for a lady, a young lady like you – oh, an awful trial, enough to drive you out of your senses!" Nelly had flung herself on the woman's shoulder and lay sobbing there, while nurse patted her tenderly, as if she had been one of the children. "Don't take on now, don't, there's a dear lady! Get up, ma'am, and dress quick, and don't spoil your eyes with crying. I saw Mrs Glynn at the Rectory door, looking as if she were coming here."

"O nurse! I cannot see her! You must say I have a headache."

"Not this morning, Mrs Brunton, oh, not this morning," cried nurse, "if I may make so bold as to say it. Come down and look your own self; and I would own to the fright, if I was you."

To say that Nelly was not half-angry at nurse's interference, which she had evoked, would scarcely have been true. She began to resent it the moment that she had most benefited by it, as was natural. But she also recognised its truth. And she dressed with as much care as possible, and did all she could to efface the signs of agitation and trouble from her face. Nelly was like most people in a dreadful social emergency; she forgot that Mrs Glynn was the kindest of women. She began to ask herself, with fictitious wrath, if this was indeed Mrs Grundy, the impertinent inquisitor, come to inquire into her private affairs, with which she had nothing to do – nothing! She immediately perceived, arrayed against her, an evil-speaking, evil-thinking world, making the worst of everything, accepting no explanation, incapable of understanding! When she walked down to the drawing-room it was not Nelly, the kind and confident girl-widow, nor was it Mrs Brunton, the young matron secure in her own right and the protection of her home and her children, feeble shields as these were against the world; it was rather an army with banners, spears flashing, and flags flying, which marched against the enemy, defying fate.

It was Mrs Glynn who looked pale and unhappy when Nelly went into the room. She was old enough to be Mrs Brunton's mother, and in the tenderness of her heart the Rector's wife felt something like it as the younger woman appeared. Her experienced glance showed her in a moment that Nelly was self-conscious and defiant, which meant, of course, that her information was correct, and that something dreadful had occurred. They bade each other good morning and kissed – as ladies do in the habit of intimacy, which generally means so little – Nelly meeting the salute with a little impatience, Mrs Glynn giving it with a marked and lingering tenderness, which also was to Mrs Brunton an offence; and then they talked for a moment or two about the beauty of the autumn morning, the health of the children, and various other small subjects of no immediate interest. Then Mrs Glynn was silent for a moment, and said softly, "Mrs Brunton!" and paused, hesitating, looking wistfully in Nelly's face.

"Yes."

"I am afraid you will be angry. I have come to say something – to ask you – Dear Mrs Brunton, you are very young – and I – knew your mother."

"Yes," said Nelly again, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Please tell me at once what it is. Have I – done anything wrong?" She gave a little, nervous laugh. An altogether innocent person would have been frightened, but Nelly knew every word that was going to be said, and steeled herself for the ordeal.

"The Rector," said Mrs Glynn, "came home by the last train last night; and he saw some one – a gentleman – go in at your gate. He was frightened – for you, my dear; and he stood still and watched, meaning to call a policeman if anything was wrong; and then he saw who it was, recognising him in the moonlight. Dear Mrs Brunton! Mr Glynn came home to me in great distress. We have done nothing all night but think, and think, what we ought to do. Oh, my dear girl, hear me out! You are so young, and you have been used to such different ways in India, such hospitality, and all that. We know it, and we know that people there keep a sort of open house, that friends are constantly visiting each other. But it's not so here, and you don't know how people talk, and I thought you would, perhaps, let me speak to you, warn you – "

"Of what?" said Nelly, with white lips. All sorts of plans and thoughts had rushed through her mind while this address was made to her – quick impulses, bad and good, to overwhelm her visitor with scorn, to refuse to answer, to turn the meddling woman out of her house. But oh, on the other hand, she wanted help so much! to throw herself upon this kind woman's breast, at her feet. For a moment this battle raged fiercely in her breast, and she herself knew not which side would win. "Mrs Grundy," she said, at length, with a smile upon her parched mouth, not able to articulate any more.

"Mrs Grundy!" said the Rector's wife. "Oh, my dear, I am not Mrs Grundy; I am a very anxious friend, anxious to help you, to do anything. Oh, let me help you! We are sure there must be an explanation."

"No," cried Nelly, "you are not Mrs Grundy, I know; I was a fool to say that."

"Thank you, my dear. You are so young, and a stranger – a stranger to our village ways, Mrs Brunton!" The good woman took Nelly's hand in both of hers, and looked at her with appealing eyes.

"I will tell you precisely how it was," said Nelly, hastily, as quickly turned to the good as to the bad impulse. "Nobody was to blame. Mr Fitzroy – " She grew red at the name, and then felt herself chill all over – chill to her very heart, turning as pale as she had been red, as if some ice wind had blown over her. The sensation made her pause for a moment. "Mr Fitzroy stayed a little too late last night; he left himself scarcely time to catch the train – men are so apt to do that. They think they can rush in a moment."

"I know," said Mrs Glynn, pressing her hand.

"And he lost it," said Nelly, faltering. "He came back; and he remembered that the drawing-room window had been left a little open, and he thought it better to come round by the garden instead of – instead of rousing the house."

"Tell me," said Mrs Glynn, "one moment; are you engaged to him, my dear?"

Nelly drooped her head. "Not yet," she said. "You shall know everything. He was – saying that – when nurse came to tell him he must fly for his train."

"Ah!" cried Mrs Glynn, pressing Nelly's hand in both hers, "now I begin to see! And he came back to have it out! Oh, how glad I am I came! Now I can see all the excuses for him. It was an error of judgment, but it was very natural. My dear, my dear; and then?"

"There was no more," Nelly said, raising her head. With what relief she heard that – excuses for him! even for *him*. "I was very much frightened," she added, with new confidence, "for I had forgotten the window was open, and I thought – I don't know what I thought. I ran up-stairs at once to bid nurse prepare a room for him – and I did not see him again."

"God bless you, my dear," cried the Rector's wife, taking Nelly into her arms and giving her a kiss. "That was the very best thing you could have done; unless you had sent him over to us to the Rectory, but of course you did not think of that. Oh, how glad I am I came! Oh, how pleased my husband will be! It was what I would have wished you to have done if you had been my own child. But what a situation for you! what a moment, my poor dear! It was wrong – it was very wrong – of him; he ought to have known better: but yet, a young man! and interrupted at the very moment when – He was wrong, but there were excuses for him, my dear."

Mrs Glynn stayed for some time, full of sympathy and consolation. "He has behaved very foolishly, my love. He ought not to have come, and, being here, he ought not to have gone away so soon. He ought to have left openly, like any other visitor, and settled everything before he went. But a young man in the height of passion – " It was a comfort to Nelly that good Mrs Glynn said "passion," too. "Of course, he will come back in the afternoon, and you will have your explanation," she added. "And then you will come to the Rectory, and bring him to see us; you will – you will, promise me you will? And, oh, God bless you, and make it a happy change for you, my dear!"

CHAPTER VIII

There were excuses for him; he had been interrupted, and he had come back to have it out, to tell his tale, to make his declaration. Mrs Glynn, who was quite cool and impartial, not bewildered by excitement like Nelly, thought so. But then she had not that heavy sense of something else – some things said that ought not to have been said – which crushed Nelly's heart like a stone. "Was it indispensable that he should catch the last train? Had she not expected him back – left the window open for him?" If Mrs Glynn had known of these words, would she have still thought there were excuses? Nelly's heart lay in her breast like a stone. The scientific people may say what they will – that the heart is a mere physical organ; not those who have felt it ache, who have felt it leap, who have felt it lie like a stone. There seemed no beating in it, no power of rising. She said to herself that she was relieved and comforted, and thanked God that, to a calm spectator, there were excuses for him. But her heart did not respond; it lay motionless in her breast, crushed, heavy as a stone.

She did not, however, leave the house all that day, expecting, yet not expecting, the visit which should put everything right, of which her friend had been so confident; but he did not come. Next morning there arrived a letter, full of agitation and bewilderment to Nelly. It was not the apology, the prayer for forgiveness, which she had expected. The letter took a totally different tone. He accused Nelly – poor Nelly, trembling and miserable – of distrust, which was an insult to him. What did she think of him that she had fled from him, turned him over to a servant? What horrible idea had she formed of him? What did she expect or imagine?

"I have often been told," he wrote, "that women in their imaginations jumped at things that would horrify a man; but I never believed it, least of all of you. What could be more simple or more natural than to go back to the house of my only friend – to one more dear to me than any other friend – instead of walking to London, which was my only alternative? What dreadful things have people put into your head? for they would not arise there of themselves, I feel sure. And now here we have come to a crisis which changes our relationship altogether. How are we to get over it? My first thought was to rush off at once – to put the Channel between us – so that you might feel safe; but something tugs at my heart, and I cannot put myself out of reach of you whatever you may think of me. O Nelly! where did you learn those suspicions that are so insulting to me? How can I come again with the recollection of all that in my mind? Do you wish me to come again? Do you want to cast me off? What is to happen between us? After the insult you have put upon me, it is for you to take the next step. I am here at your orders – to come or to stay."

Nelly was struck dumb by this letter. She did not know what to think or to say. A simple-minded person, not accustomed to knavery, has always the first impulse of believing what is said to her (or him), whatever she may know against it. How could she tell, a woman so little acquainted with life, whether he might not be in the right – whether he had not cause to feel insulted and offended? If his motives were so transparent and his action so simple as he thought, he had indeed good reason to be offended – and for a moment there was a sensation of relief and comfort indescribable in Nelly's heart. Ah! that these vile things which had given her so much pain had not risen again like straws upon an evil wind, and blown about her, confusing all her thoughts. Not indispensable that he should catch the last train – he who treated this incident now as so inevitable, so simple an occurrence! And had she not expected him to come back – left the window open for his stealthy entry, which was to disturb nobody? – he who now took so high a tone, and explained his coming as so entirely accidental and justifiable. Nelly did not know what to think. She was torn in two between the conviction which lay heavy at the bottom of her heart, and the easier, the delightful faith to which he invited her with that show of high-toned indignation. And even now he said no more: a dear friend, the dearest of all – but not a word of that which would smooth away all doubt, and make it possible for her to believe that her ears had deceived her, that he had never said anything to make her doubt him. Poor Nelly

was torn with trouble and perplexity. They had come to a crisis? Oh yes! and she had felt so long that the crisis was coming, but not – not in this guise! She sat all the evening alone, pondering how to reply, writing letter after letter, which she burned as soon as they were written. At last, after all these laborious attempts, she snatched her pen again, and wrote in great haste, taking no time to think: for the powers of thought were exhausted, and had nothing more to do in the matter. She wrote that it was best he should not come again – unless – And then, in greater haste still, with a countenance all glowing with shame, she scratched out that word "unless." Oh no, no! – not from her, whatever were the circumstances, could that suggestion come.

During the next two days a hot correspondence went on. Fitzroy wrote angrily that he respected her decision, and would not trouble her again. Then, almost before the ink was dry – before, at least, she had awakened out of the prostration of misery caused by reading this letter – there came another imploring her to reverse her judgment, to meet him, at least, somewhere, if she would not permit him to come; not to cast him off for ever, as she seemed disposed to do. Poor Nelly had very little desire to cast him off. She was brought to life by this hot protest against the severance which she felt would be death to her. She began to believe that, after all, there was nothing wanting on his part – that all he had not put into words was understood as involved in the words which he did employ. Poor Nelly! "It must be so," she said to herself – "it must be so!" A man in whose thoughts there was nothing but love and honour might never think it possible that he could be doubted – might feel that his truth and honesty were too certain to be questioned. "Women in their imaginations jump at things that would horrify a man." Was this true? Perhaps it was true. At what horror had Nelly's imagination jumped on that dreadful night? Dared she say to any one – dared she to put in words, even to herself – what she feared? Oh no, no! She had not known what she feared. She had feared nothing, she said to herself, her cheeks burning, her bosom panting – nothing! All that she was conscious of was that this was not what he ought to have done – that he had failed in respect, that he had not felt the delicacy of the tie between them. Was that all? Surely that, after all, was not a matter of life and death.

Nelly went on reasoning with herself that had she been a man it would have been the most natural thing in the world that he should have come back, having lost his train. Had her husband been living, had she been in her father's or her mother's house, of course he would have done so; and why should she think herself less protected by her own honour and good faith, by the presence of the children, than by these other safeguards? Nelly began to be ashamed of herself. "Women in their imaginations jump – " Was she so little sure of herself, she cried at last to herself with burning scorn, her heart beating loud, her countenance crimson, that she attributed to him ideas altogether alien to his thoughts – that she had fled to the help of nurse as if she wanted protection? After this argument with herself, which lasted long and went through more phases than I can follow, Nelly read Fitzroy's first letter over with feelings ever varying, ever deepening in force. Had she done him wrong? She had done him wrong – cruel wrong. He had acted with simplicity all through. She it was who had put meanings he never thought of into his mind. She it was – Oh! and she had thought herself a good woman! What horrors were those that filled a woman's imagination – things that would confound any man?

The result was that, with many a confused and trembling thought, Nelly granted to Fitzroy the interview he asked for. Something in her heart – a sick sensation of giddiness and bewilderment, as if everything had gone wrong in her life – prevented her from receiving him again at home; but she consented to meet him (of all places in the world) at the railway station – the noisy, bustling place where no quiet could be secured, where anybody might see them, where, indeed, it was impossible that they should not be seen. I wonder if any other pair ever walked about Paddington, rubbing shoulders with the calmest suburban folk, and all the daily commotion of the little commonplace trains, with such a subject between them. But we never know how often we touch tragedy as we walk about the world unconscious. They met, these two people, with such a question between them, with all the confused and incomprehensible intermediate atmosphere which veils two individual minds

from each other, in the midst of all the bustle and noise, in which, in their self-absorption, they were lost as in a desert. They walked about, round and round, in the darker corners of the great area, and at last, overcome with fatigue and excitement, sat down upon a bench a little out of the way, where few passengers came. I cannot tell what was in the man's mind – if he was conscious of wrong and acting a part, or conscious of right and only speaking as a man who felt himself to be under an unjust imputation might have a right to do. But it became very visible now if never before that he was a coarse-minded man, notwithstanding his outside of refinement, and that he no longer took the trouble to attempt to veil it as he had hitherto done. And Nelly, on the other hand, though keenly conscious of this, accepted it as if she had always known it. They had been together for nearly an hour, pacing up and down the gloomy background of the great noisy station, talking, talking; and yet she did not know with any more conviction than when they first met whether it was he or she that was in the wrong. Was he true – a man who had acted in all simplicity and honour – and she a woman with a bad imagination which, had jumped at something enough to horrify a man? Nelly's mind seemed to be enveloped in cobwebs and mists, so that she could make out nothing clearly, though sometimes there pierced through these mists a keen ray of light, like an arrow, which seemed to break them up for a moment and make all plain. Ah! but it came sometimes from one side, sometimes from another, that sudden arrow cleaving the confusion. Sometimes its effect was to make her heart leap; sometimes to make it drop, down, down into the depths. Oh, if she could but see into his heart! But there is no one who can do that – not into the heart of the dearest and most near our own – or be absolutely certain of those motives which bring the smile or the sigh.

There was one strange thing, however, that this strange incident had done – it had set the two upon a level of intimate acquaintance, of sincerity in speaking to each other, which all their previous intercourse had not accomplished. With what veils of flattering illusion that intercourse had been wrapped! It had never been mentioned between them that she expected or that he withheld any proposal, that the time had come for any decision, that there was any question between them greater than the question whether he might come again to-morrow. Now that pretence had blown away for ever. When they sat down upon that bench at the dreary end of the long platform, where once in a half-hour or so a railway porter went past, or a bewildered stray passenger, this was what Fitzroy said —

"The thing that has risen between us now is the brutal question of marriage, and nothing else, Nelly. Oh, you needn't cry out! I use the word 'brutal' in the French sense: all that belongs to the imagination or the fancy, all that's vague, seductive, and attractive is over. It *is* a brutal question – "

"Mr Fitzroy!" cried Nelly, springing to her feet.

"Don't 'Mr' me!" he cried, almost angrily, seizing her hand, drawing her to her seat again. "What good will all this commotion do? We must face the real question; and you know this is what it is. I should never have forced it upon you; but still, here it is, and there is nothing else for it now. Don't you think I see that as well as you do? It is the only thing, and I have made up my mind to it."

The colour that covered Nelly's face was more than a blush – it was a scorching fire. She drew farther from him, raising, with what pride she could, her abashed and shame-stricken head. "If you think that I – will permit any man to speak to me so – that to make up *your* mind is enough – "

Oh, the humiliation even of that protest, the deep destroying shame even of the resentment which was a kind of avowal! For here, at least, he was logically right and she helpless, dependent for so much upon the making up of his mind.

"I can't stop," he said, "after all that's past, Nelly, to pick my words. Here's the fact: I was an ass, I suppose, to go back that night. I was off my head; and you had not given me any reason to suppose you were a prude. I had not expected to find – the British matron up in arms, and an old witch of a duenna to watch over her mistress! What more harm is there in talking to a lady after midnight than before? I can't see it. But we needn't argue. After all this fuss, and the maid, and the vicarress, and so on, there's nothing, I say, but this brutal question of marriage. Can't you sit still, now, and hear me out?"

"You have no right," she said – "you have no right – to speak to me in that tone!"

"What tone? There is nothing particular that I know of in my tone. I haven't time to pick my tones any more than my words. Your train will be going soon, and the deuced affair must be settled somehow. Look here! it is horribly inconvenient for me to get married now. I have no money, and I have a lot of debts to pay. A marriage in St George's, published in the papers and all that, would simply make an end of me. These tradesmen fellows know everything; they would give each other the word: Married a widow with a family and with no money! By Jove! that would finish me."

"Mr Fitzroy!"

"I tell you not to 'Mr' me, Nelly. You know my name, I suppose. We are past all that. The question now is how to manage the one business without bursting up the other. Making a regular smash of my affairs can't do you any good, can it? We'll have to go abroad; and we can't, of course, take those chicks – dragging a nursery about with us all over the world. Keep still! you'll frighten that porter." He had seized and held her arm tightly, restraining her. "For goodness' sake be reasonable, now, Nelly. You don't suppose I mean you any harm? How could I?" he added, with a harsh laugh, "you're much too wide awake for that. Listen to what I say, Nelly."

"I cannot – I cannot endure this," she cried.

"We may neither of us like it," said Fitzroy, with composure, "but you ought to have thought of that a little sooner. There's nothing else for it now that I can see. Speak up if you know any other way. I don't want to ruin you; and you, I suppose, don't want to ruin me. There's no other way."

"There is the way – of parting here, and never seeing each other more!"

He held her fast, with her arm drawn closely through his. "That's the most impracticable of all," he said. "For one thing, I don't want to part and never see you more."

Oh, poor Nelly! poor Nelly! She was outraged in every point of pride and tenderness and feeling, and yet the softness of this tone sank into her heart, and carried, like a flood, all her bulwarks away.

"Well, and then it couldn't be done. You've gone too far, with your vicaress, and all that. I don't want to ruin you; and neither, I suppose, do you want to ruin me. Look here, Nelly: I've got a little money at present – by chance, as it happens. I'll buy a licence – it's all you'll have from me in the shape of wedding-present – and you'll run up to town to-morrow morning, and we'll be married at the registrar's office. Can't help it, Nelly; can't do anything better. It is no fault of mine."

There was silence for a moment. Nelly was not able to speak. Her heart was beating as if it would burst; her whole nature revolting, resisting, in a horror and conflict indescribable. At length she burst forth: "It is a brutal question, indeed, indeed – a brutal question!" she cried, scarcely able with her trembling lips to form the words.

"Well, didn't I say so? But we can't help it; there's nothing else left to do. I am not an infernal cad – altogether; and you're not – altogether – a fool. We may have been that – that last – both of us; but there's no use going over all that again. Nelly, compose yourself – compose yourself!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" she cried, struggling with that burst and flood of misery which is one of the shames and terrors of a woman. It had come to such a point that she could not compose herself, or resist the wild tide of passion that carried her away. Passion! ah, not of love – of shame, of horror, of self-disgust, of humiliation unspeakable. A woman who has had poor Nelly's experiences seldom retains a girl's dream of superlative womanhood, of the crown and the sceptre. But to endure to be spoken to like this – to feel the question to be not one between two lovers, but between a man who was not "an infernal cad" and a woman who was not "a fool"; to submit to all this because there was nothing else for it, to be obliged by her reason to acquiesce in it – was almost more than flesh and blood could bear. She kept in, by the exertion of all her strength, those heartrending sobs and cries within her own bosom as much as was possible. Even in the depth of her misery she was aware that to betray herself, to collect a crowd round, would be worse still, and must be avoided at any price. Finally, poor Nelly found herself, all wounded and bruised with the conflict, exhausted as if she were

going to die, alone in the railway carriage in which Fitzroy had placed her, kissing her openly in sight of the guard as he left her, and bidding her remember that he would meet her at eleven o'clock to-morrow. At eleven o'clock to-morrow! It seemed to ring in her ears all the way down, like a bell going on with the same chime. Eleven o'clock! Eleven o'clock to-morrow! – for why? for why?

CHAPTER IX

Thinking, thinking all the long night through did not seem to do poor Nelly any good. She had arrived at home so exhausted in mind and body, so chilled to the heart, that she was good for nothing but to retire to bed. She was scarcely able to see the children – the children, whom perhaps in a day or two – Oh! should she not secure every moment of them, every look of the innocent faces that were her own, lay up in her heart every innocent word, with that dreadful possibility before her? But the effect was exactly the reverse. The sight of them seemed to fill her with a sick horror. She could not meet their eyes, could not bear their caresses, turned from them with an awful sense that she had betrayed them. And then all the night through in the dark she lay awake thinking, thinking, listening to the clock striking – the vigilant clock, which watched and waited, measuring out the unhasting time, never forgetting, looking on whatever happened. It would strike eleven o'clock to-morrow in the calm little unalarmed house where nobody would suspect that the young mother, the smiling and loving guardian of the children, had come to her hour of doom. For a long time her mind held to this as if it were a sentence which had to be carried out. Eleven o'clock to-morrow, eleven o'clock! a thing which she could not alter, which had to be done. Then by-and-by, which was worse still, there flashed into her soul the thought that it was no sentence, but a thing subject to her own decision, which she might do – or not. Or not! She was free; it was for her to settle, to do it or not to do it. I don't know how to explain how much worse this was. To be held fast by a verdict, sentenced at a certain hour to do something which perhaps you would rather die than do, but which you must do, your dying or not dying being a matter of indifference – is a very terrible thing: yet even in this the *must* gives a certain support. But to be cast back again into a sea of doubt from which you have to get out as best you may, in which you must decide for yourself, choose – this or that, settle what to do, what not to do; the choice being not between pleasure and pain, between good and evil, as it used to be in the old days – but only of two tortures, which was the worst and which the best.

The result of this terrible night was at least to solve the question for eleven o'clock to-morrow: for she was too ill to stand, her limbs aching and her head aching when to-morrow came. It was dreadful to Nelly to have to call nurse, who already half knew so much, and to send her with the necessary telegram. "Too ill to move – postpone for a day or two" was, after long labour with her aching head and perturbed brain, all she could think of to say; and she had scarcely said it when it flashed upon her that the very word "postpone" was a kind of pledge, and committed her to an acceptance of everything he had settled upon, though even this did not hurt like the look which nurse gave her when she saw Fitzroy's name – a look, not of reproach, but of anxious curiosity. Before this time poor Nelly had begun to feel to her very soul the misery of having a confidant. It is a comfort in some cases: it relieves the full heart to speak, it sometimes gives support, the support of being understood in a difficult crisis. But it also gives to the person confided in a right to follow further developments, to know what happens after, to ask – to look. "You did not come as you promised, dear?" Mrs Glynn had said to her; "you did not bring him to see us." The Rector's wife doubted, but did not know certainly, that Fitzroy had not come. "No," Nelly had faltered, "I did not, I – could not." "But to-morrow! promise me, promise me faithfully that you will bring him to-morrow. Dear, let us have the comfort of seeing you two together." Nelly had only nodded her head, she could not trust her voice to speak. This was before the interview at Paddington. And Mrs Glynn had gone away sorrowing. She was very anxious about the poor young woman whose life was thus compromised by what might turn out to be a bad man. She could not comprehend why all was not settled by this time, and the lover ready to satisfy her friends. She took Nelly's hands in both hers, and kissed her, and looked wistfully in her face. Poor Nelly had felt as if she must sink into the ground. She could not meet her friend's eyes. She gave no sign of reply, no answering look: but dropped the kind hands that held hers, and turned back into the house, which was a refuge at least for the time.

But she was not safe even in her house, for nurse also had been her confidant, and had a half right to ask, an undoubted right to look. Her eyes when they flashed upon the name of Fitzroy in Nelly's telegram were terrible. Well-trained woman as she was, she raised those eyes instinctively to Nelly's face with a question in them before which Nelly's, hot with fever yet dim with tears, fell. Oh, if she had said nothing, if she had but kept the whole story to herself! But that had been impossible – he had made it impossible. When she had confided the telegram to nurse she gave instructions that she was not to be disturbed, and lay, with her blinds down, in the darkened room, trembling lest Mrs Glynn should force the *consigne*, and find the way to her bedside in spite of all precautions. It was bad enough to be questioned when she had nothing to reply; what would it be when her heart and mind were so full? Nelly lay there in the dark the whole day with her troubled thoughts. In an hour or two nurse came back, bringing the children from their walk, and told her mistress that they had walked as far as Deanham, a little neighbouring village, and that she had sent the telegram from that office, which she hoped would not matter. It mattered only so far as to send a fiery dart through Mrs Brunton, who divined at once that this was done to save her – that no local telegraph clerk might be able to betray the fact of her communication with Fitzroy. And Mrs Glynn called, and was repulsed, not without difficulty, and left her love, and a promise – which was to Nelly as a threat – of calling early to-morrow. And once more there came the night when all was silent, when there was no one even to look a question, when Nelly was left alone again to battle with her thoughts.

Alone, to battle with her thoughts. With this addition, that if she remained here and faced her trouble, and resolved to tread the stony path, to bear the penalty of her indiscretion, and cling to her children – she would have Mrs Glynn to meet in the morning, to explain to her that Mr Fitzroy had not come and was not coming, that all this stormy episode was over, and to endure her astonishment, her questions, perhaps her reproaches. And nurse, too, to nurse there would be due some explanation – nurse, who had seen everything, who had gone on the river with them, who had known of all his constant visits, before that last visit which had brought to a crisis the whole foolish, foolish story. Oh, how well everything had been before he ever came; how contented she had been with her children, how pleased with her little house, how much approved by everybody! Nelly believed in all good faith that she would have been quite contented and happy had Fitzroy never appeared to disturb her life, alone in her tranquillity with her children: but it may be doubted whether her confidence would have been justified. At all events, now, she shivered when she looked forward upon that life which would lie before her if this was to be the end. Alone, with the children. Oh, how dear the children were! But they were so little, such babies, not companions for a woman in the full tide and height of her life. Mrs Glynn would be kind, she knew, but a little suspicious of her. Nurse would watch her as if she were a giddy girl; she would not dare to open her doors to any one, to offer a curate a cup of tea! I don't say that Nelly was guilty of such thoughts as these in her musing – but they drifted through her desolate, solitary, abandoned soul, abandoned of all comfort and counsel. Whereas, on the other side —

In a great many histories of human experience it is taken for granted – and indeed, perhaps, before the reign of analysis began it was almost always taken for granted – that when man or woman of the nobler kind found that a lover was unworthy, their love died along with their respect. This has simplified matters in many a story. It is such a good way out of it, and saves so much trouble! The last great instance I can remember is that of the noble Romola and Tito her husband, whom, though he gives her endless trouble, she is able to drop out of her stronghold of love as soon as she knows how little worthy of it is the fascinating, delightful, false Greek. My own experience is all the other way. Life, I think, is not so easy as that comes to. Nelly understood a great deal more of Mr Fitzroy now than she might have done in other circumstances had she been married to him for years. She had seen him all round in a flash of awful reality and perception, and hated him – yet loved him all the same. She did not attempt to put these feelings in their order, to set so much on one side and so much on the other. She knew now, as she had never done before, what love could mean in some natures. How it could be base, and yet not all base, and how a man who was only not altogether a

cad, to use his own description, apprehended that passion. And yet it did not matter to her, it did not affect the depth of her heart, any more than it would have affected her had he lost his good looks or his beautiful voice. Ah yes! it did matter. It turned her very love, herself, her life, into things so different that they were scarcely recognisable. The elements of hate were in her love, an opposition and distrust ineradicable took possession of her being: and yet she belonged to him, and he to her, almost the more for this contradiction. These are mysteries which I do not attempt to explain.

Yet, notwithstanding all this terrible consciousness, when Nelly awoke next morning (for she was tired out and slept notwithstanding everything) and remembered all that lay before her, and the decision she had to make, the two things which immediately flashed upon her mind – small things of no real importance – were, the look which nurse would fix upon her, trying to read her thoughts, and the inevitable call of Mrs Glynn. They were not Mrs Grundy – oh, how little, how petty, how poor was anything that the frivolous call Mrs Grundy! They were women who were fond of her, who would stand for her and defend her, women who, alas! were her confidants. They had a right to know. Of all that stood in her way and made the crisis dreadful, there was nothing at this moment so dreadful as the glance of suppressed anxiety, the question, that did not venture to put itself into words, of nurse's look, and the more open, more unconcealed gaze of Mrs Glynn. She felt that she would not, could not, bear these, whatever she might have to bear.

I do not pretend to say that this was what finally turned the scale. Was there any doubt from the beginning how it would turn? She came down-stairs very early on that dreadful morning and breakfasted with the children, and dressed them with her own hands for their walk, fastening every little button, putting on each little glove. She kissed them again and again before she gave them over to nurse, who was waiting – and stood at the door looking after them until they had disappeared beyond the garden gate. Then she, who had seemed so full of leisure, all at once became nervous and hurried. She called the housemaid to her, who was busy with her work. "Mary," she said, "I have to run up to town by the half-past ten train. I have not a moment to lose; if Mrs Glynn should come you must tell her that I am gone, and I will slip out by the back door – for if she comes in I know I shall miss my train." "Yes, ma'am," said Mary, making no remark, but thinking all the more. Happily, however, Mrs Glynn did not come, and Mrs Brunton left the house in good time for the train, carrying her dressing-bag. "It is possible I may not get home again to-night," she said. "Give this to nurse, Mary. I forgot to give it to her; and if any one inquires, say I have gone to town for a few days." Mary never knew how she could have made so bold. She cried out: "Oh, ma'am, I hope as you are not going to leave us." "To leave you!" said Nelly. "What nonsense you are speaking! How could I leave you?" But she was not angry; she gave the girl a look which made Mary cry, though she could not have told why.

What was left for nurse was a letter with a cheque enclosed, imploring her to take the greatest care of the children till she could send for them. "I may tell you to satisfy you that I am going to be married," Nelly wrote. "We want to have no fuss. And I could not take the children; but as soon as – as we are settled I shall send for you to bring my little darlings. Oh, take care of them, take care of them!" And that was all; not an address, not an indication where she had gone. Nurse did not say a word to any one as long as her courage held out. When Mrs Glynn, after receiving her message from the housemaid, asked to see the more important servant, nurse made her face like a countenance cut out of wood. She could give no explanation. Mrs Brunton had gone to town for a few days. Perhaps she might be detained a little longer. It was on business she had gone. "But it was very sudden?" cried Mrs Glynn. "Yes, ma'am," said nurse. "And you don't know what day she will be back?" "No, ma'am," replied the faithful servant. There was nothing more to be learned from her.

She kept this up as long, I have said, as her courage held out; and indeed a week strained that courage very much. The servants all grew frightened left in the house alone. They did not know how to contain themselves, or to bear up in the unusual leisure and quiet. I think that nurse held out for ten days. And then she wrote to Mrs Brunton's married sister – for Nelly's mother was an old lady, and not to be disturbed. After this there ensued a whirl of agitation and trouble, in which the cook

and the housemaid found much satisfaction. The sister came, and then her husband, and after them a brother and uncle, all in consternation. Nelly's letter to nurse was read over and over, and much of what had passed before was elicited by anxious questioning. "Depend upon it, she has gone off with this man," said the uncle solemnly, and nobody contradicted him, the fact being self-evident. "Fitzroy – of what Fitzroys I wonder?" said the brother, who thought he knew society. Finally, Nelly's brother, who was young and impetuous, started off for the Continent in search of her, and the married sister took the children home.

Poor little children! they were so forlorn, and so ignorant, crying for mamma, such little things. Consoled by a box of chocolate, treated very kindly, oh very kindly! but not kings and queens, nurse said with tears, as in their own home. And the poor mother, poor Nelly – where was she? She was discussed by everybody, all her affairs, whether she were really married, or what dreadful thing had happened to her: how she could go away, for any man, and leave her children. All that she had kept most private to herself was raked up and gone over, and her conduct at Bampton-Leigh, and how all this had begun. Poor Nelly! all the world was in her secret now.

CHAPTER X

The children had been but a week at the house of Mrs Evans, Nelly's sister, when a letter arrived, first sent to Haven Green, then by various stages to their present habitation, to nurse, asking for news of them. It was rather a melancholy letter. "I cannot send for my darlings yet, and it is dreadful to be without any news. Mr Fitzroy and I are moving about so much that I can scarcely give you an address; but write at once, and if we are no longer here, I will leave word where we are going, and your letter can follow me;" and again a cheque was enclosed, signed with the name of Helen Fitzroy. "Say, if anybody inquires, that we may come back any day," she added in a postscript. It was evident that she had overestimated nurse's courage, that she had calculated upon her remaining quietly at home, until further orders: and the assumption made nurse feel exceedingly guilty, as if she had betrayed her mistress. A short time after, information came from the family solicitor that he had received Nelly's orders to sell all the property that Mrs Brunton had in her own power, and forward the money to her at another address, different from that given to nurse. It was not a sum which represented very much in the way of income, yet it was a large sum to be realised without a word of explanation, and roused the worst auguries in everybody's breast. Needless to say that both addresses were telegraphed at once to the impetuous brother who was roving about Europe, looking under every table in every hotel for Nelly. Needless also to add that she was found at last.

But here exact information fails. Her brother Herbert never described how he found her, or went into any unnecessary details. The pair, who were henceforward spoken of in the family as the Fitzroys, were at Monte Carlo when he came up with them; and it was evident enough that "my new brother-in-law," as Herbert called him, awakened no enthusiasm in the young man's breast. He acknowledged that he thought the fellow was in his proper place among the queer society there, though it was not much like Nelly; and there it appeared they meant to remain, on the ground that Nelly had showed some symptoms of delicate health, and it was thought expedient that she should winter in the south of France, which made it impossible for her to have the children with her, as she had intended. "So far as that goes, Nelly was silly," Herbert said; "how could she expect a fellow newly married to have another man's children dragging after him all over the place? And she knew they'd be safe with Susan." Susan Evans took this very quietly; but she knew that Nelly had not intended the children to be with her, but had meant to send for them, or to come back to them, leaving the issue to the decision of after events. Poor Nelly, she looked delicate, Herbert allowed. She was not like herself. He confessed, when he was alone with his sister, and had become confidential, walking about the room in the twilight when the changes of his countenance could not be remarked, that perhaps Nelly had made a mistake, and he was not sure that she had not found it out.

"Do you mean that he is unkind to her?" cried Susan, all aflame.

"I should just like," said Herbert, grimly, "to have seen any man unkind to her while I was there."

"Isn't he fond of her, then? Then why did he marry her? Do you mean that they're unhappy, Herbert? So soon, so soon!"

"Now, look here," said Herbert, "I won't be cross-examined; I say that I think Nelly has made a mistake, and I fear she thinks so too. I can't go into metaphysical questions why people did that, or why they did this. I'm not fond myself of Mr Percy Fitzroy – and we are not done with him yet," Herbert said.

"Done with him? and he Nelly's husband; I should hope not, indeed!" Mrs Evans cried.

"Then I promise you you'll have your wish," her brother replied.

And, indeed, for the next year or two there was a great deal heard of Mr Percy Fitzroy. One thing that developed itself in the further history of poor Nelly was a chronic want of money. She disposed of everything over which she had the least power. Her little house was, of course, sold and

everything in it. What was the good of keeping it up? and even the Indian curiosities, the little stock of plate, all the things of which Nelly Brunton had been proud. What did all that matter now? These trifles served to stop the wolf's mouth for a very short time, and then Herbert began to receive letters by every post, which he showed to nobody. He was the head of the family, and he was the only one who was fully acquainted with the affairs of the Fitzroys. He gained a prominent line on his forehead, which might have been called the Fitzroy wrinkle, from this constant traffic and anxiety, and nobody knew but himself how far these claims and applications went.

Meanwhile the poor little children remained in the nursery of Mrs Evans; not poor little children at all – much benefited, at least in Mrs Evans' opinion, by the superior discipline of a large family. Susan was of opinion that whoever suffered by Nelly's second marriage, to little Jack and Maysey all things had worked together for good. How much better it was for them to be brought up with a little wholesome neglect among a great number of nice children, who were very kind to their little cousins, than spoiled to the top of their bent by Nelly, who gave them everything they wanted, and kept up no discipline at all? And, indeed, there could not be a doubt that it was far better for them to be in the wholesome English nursery than dragging about through a series of hotels after their mother and their mother's husband. It was against her judgment that Mrs Evans kept nurse devoted to their special service; but she did so, for, though she thought a great deal of her own system, she was a kind woman, and very sorry for poor Nelly, thus separated from her children, though at the same time very angry and indignant with her for submitting to it. "I should like to see Henry, or any other man, try to keep me from my children!" Susan cried. But then Henry Evans, good man, had no such desire, nor naturally, in his lifetime, had any other man the right.

It need scarcely be said that the subject was discussed in all its aspects at Haven Green, where nobody knew anything, and there was the widest field for conjecture. Mrs Glynn, who never would allow an unkind word to be said of Mrs Brunton, now Mrs Fitzroy, in her hearing, blamed herself very much that she had not watched Nelly more closely and that the Rector had not interfered. "For if my husband had married them, even if it had been by special licence in her own drawing-room – though I disapprove of that sort of proceeding very much – yet not a word could have been said." "I suppose it was done at a registry office," said some ill-natured person. "We have none of us any right to suppose such a thing," Mrs Glynn replied. Well! there were dark whispers in corners that it might have been even worse than that – though, of course, now that the family had taken it up, it was clear that all must be right; but these whispers were not uttered in the presence of the Rector or of Mrs Glynn, who avowed boldly that she had been in Mrs Brunton's confidence all the time. You cannot do much harm, it may be proudly asserted, when you unbosom yourself to your clergyman's wife!

Among all poor Nelly's sympathisers and anxious supporters there was no one more anxious – no one, it may be said, so compunctious – as Julia Bampton. She said that she could never forgive herself, for it was she who had introduced dear Nelly to Percy Fitzroy. She it was, all unwitting of evil, who had thrown them together. Mrs Spencer-Jackson, indeed, had brought him into the county, but it was at Bampton-Leigh that he had been taken up most warmly and made most of. It was because of his voice – such a beautiful baritone voice; and Julia herself – Julia, who spoke with tears in her eyes, had thrown them together, made them sing together, brought it all on. She could never forgive herself for this, though she hoped with all her heart that poor Nelly, though she had been so imprudent, was happier than people said. By this time May had married Bertie Harcourt, and was the brightest of young matrons, with a handsome house and an adoring husband, and nothing but happiness about her. She, too, was very sorry for Nelly, and said she had always thought there was something queer, like a man in a book, about Mr Percy Fitzroy.

And thus it came about that the poor little Brunton children were a great deal at Bampton-Leigh, where there was no discipline at all, and which seemed to them the most delightful place in the world. They called Julia aunt, *en attendant* the arrival of Harcourt children who would have a right to address her by that title, and made up to her in such a surprising way for the absence of May

that their visits were the happiest portions of her life. Julia was seated with them in the drawing-room on an evening in October about two years after these events, telling them stories, Maysey's little figure buried in her lap (for the good Julia began to grow stout), and Jack leaning closely against her knee. It was growing dark, but the fire was bright and filled the room with ruddy gleams and fantastic shadows and reflections. She had come to a very touching point in the story, and Maysey had flung her arms round aunt Julia's neck in the thrill of the approaching catastrophe which the children both knew by heart, yet heard over and over again with undiminished delight and horror. They all heard the door open, but paid no attention, supposing it was the tea; and Julia had told the tale all out, and the nervous clasp of the child's arms had loosened, when, looking up, Miss Bampton saw – not in actual reality, but in the great mirror over the mantelpiece – a shadowy figure standing over them, a woman in a travelling cloak, with a great veil like a cloud hanging over her face. Julia gave a shriek that rang through the house, and the veiled figure dropped down upon the hearthrug on its knees, and encircled the whole group with eager arms. "O Nelly, Nelly, Nelly!" Julia cried, thinking at first that it was a ghost.

When the lights came it was visible that both things were true – that it was Nelly, and that she was little more than the ghost of herself. It was some time before the frightened children – who had forgotten her, and who were terrified by her paleness, and her cloak and her veil, and her sudden arrival – would acknowledge their mother. Oh, how different from the Nelly who had arrived there on that summer afternoon, and stopped the singing at the piano, and diverted (as Julia in the profoundest depths of her heart was aware) from May's path an evil fate. She bore all the traces of that evil fate upon her own worn countenance. She was very pale, worn, and thin: she was not like herself. But when she had rested from her journey, and recovered the confidence of her children, then the old house of her kindred became aware of another Nelly, who was not like the first, yet was a more distinct and remarkable personage than Nelly Brunton. She was dressed in all the elegance of the fashion, and she had an air which the country lady did not understand. Was it natural stateliness and nobility? Or was it only the tragedy of her unknown fate?

Nelly stayed and lingered in the calm of Bampton-Leigh. It seemed as if she never could separate herself from the children. It was with reluctance that she allowed them to be put to bed, or to go out for their play. She could not bear them out of her sight, and she never spoke of Mr Percy Fitzroy except when questions were put to her. When Mrs Spencer-Jackson came to see her, with effusive welcome, she received that lady with extreme coldness, holding her at arm's length. "My husband is quite well," was all she answered to a thousand inquiries. Letters came to her "from abroad" at rare intervals, and she herself wrote very seldom. She never looked as if she wanted to hear anything except about her little boy and girl.

And for anything I have heard she is there still, much wondered at, yet very kindly cherished, good Julia asking no questions, at Bampton-Leigh.

QUEEN ELEANOR AND FAIR ROSAMOND

CHAPTER I. THE FAMILY

Mr and Mrs Lycett-Landon were two middle-aged people in the fulness of life and prosperity. Though they belonged to the world of commerce, they were both well-born and well connected, which was not so common, perhaps, thirty years ago as it is now. He was the son of an Irish baronet; she was the daughter of a Scotch laird. He had never, perhaps, been the dashing young man suggested by his parentage, though he rode better than a business man has any call to ride, and had liked in moderation all his life the pleasures which business men generally can only afford themselves when they have grown very rich. Mr Lycett-Landon was not very rich in the Liverpool sense of the word, and he had never been very poor. He had accepted his destination in the counting-house of a distant relation, who was the first to connect the name of Landon with business, without any heartbreak or abandonment of brighter dreams. It had seemed to him from the beginning a sensible and becoming thing to do. The idea of becoming rich had afforded him a rational satisfaction. He had not envied his brothers their fox-hunting, their adventures in various parts of the world, their campaigning and colonising. Liverpool, indeed, was prosaic but very comfortable. He liked the comfort, the sensation of always having an easy balance at his bankers (bliss, indeed! and like every other kind of bliss, so out of reach to most of us), the everyday enjoyment of luxury and well-being, and was indifferent to the prosaic side of the matter. His marriage was in every sense of the word a good marriage; one which filled both families with satisfaction. She had money enough to help him in his business, and business connections in the West of Scotland (where the finest people have business connections), which helped him still more; and she was a good woman, full of accomplishments and good-humour and intelligence. In those days, perhaps, ladies cultivated accomplishments more than they do now. They did not give themselves up to music or to art with absorbing devotion, becoming semi- or more than semi-professional, but rather with a general sense that to do lovely things was their vocation in the world, pursued the graces tenderly all round, becoming perhaps excellent in some special branch because it was more congenial than the others, but no more. Thus while Mrs Lycett-Landon was far from equal to Mozart and Beethoven, and would have looked on Bach with alarm, and Brahms with consternation, in dance music, which her children demanded incessantly, she had no superior. The young people preferred her to any band. Her time was perfect, her spirit and fire contagious – nothing under five-and-twenty could keep still when she played, and not many above. And she was an admirable mistress of a house, which is the first of all the fine arts for a woman. What she might have been as a poor man's wife, with small means to make the best of, it is unnecessary to inquire, for this was fortunately not her *rôle* in life. With plenty of money and of servants, and a pretty house and everything that was necessary to keep it up, she was the most excellent manager in the world. Perhaps now and then she was a trifle hard upon other women who were not so well off as she, and saw the defects in their management, and believed that in their place she would have done better. But this is a fault that the most angelic might fall into, and which only becomes more natural and urgent the more benevolent the critic is, till sometimes she can scarcely keep her hands from meddling, so anxious is she to set the other right. It was to Mrs Lycett-Landon's credit, as it is to that of many like her, that she never meddled; though while she was silent, her heart burned to think how much better she would have done it. Her husband was somewhat of the same way of thinking in respect to men in business who did not get on. He said, "Now, if So-and-so would only see – " while his wife in her heart would so fain have taken the house out of the limp hands of Mrs So-and-so and

set everything right. It is a triumph of civilisation, and at the same time a great trial to benevolent and clear-sighted people, that according to the usages of society the So-and-so's must always be left to muddle along in their own way.

Lycett, Landon, Fareham, & Co. (Mr Lycett-Landon combined the names and succession of two former partners) had houses in Liverpool, Glasgow, and London, and a large business. I think they were cotton-brokers, without having any very clear idea what that means. But this will probably be quite unimportant to the reader. The Lycett-Landons had begun by living in one of the best parts of Liverpool, which in those days had not extended into luxurious suburbs as now, or at least had done so in a very much less degree; and when the children came, and it was thought expedient to live in the country, they established themselves on the other side of the Mersey, in a great house surrounded by handsome gardens and grounds overlooking the great river, which, slave of commerce as it is and was, was then a very noble sight, as no doubt it continues to be. To look out upon it in the darkening, or after night had fallen, to the line of lights opposite, when the darkness hid everything that was unlovely in the composition of the great town and its fringe of docks, and to watch the great ships lying in midstream with lights at their masts and bows, and the small sprites of attendant steam-boats, each carrying its little lamp, as they rustled to and fro, threading their way among the anchored giants, crossing and recrossing at a dozen different points, was an endless pleasure. I do not speak of the morning, of the sunshine, shining tranquil upon the majestic stream, flashing back from its miles of waters, glowing on the white spars and sails, the marvellous aërial cordage, the great ships resting from their labours, each one of them a picture, because that is a more common sight. But there are, or were, few things so grand, so varied, so full of interest and amusement, as the Mersey at night. There were times, indeed, when it was very cold, and rarer times when it was actually dangerous to cross the ferry; when the world was lost in a white fog, and a collision was possible at every moment. But these exciting occasions were few, and in ordinary cases the Lycett-Landons, great and small, thought the crossing a pleasant adjunct both to the business and pleasure which took them to vulgar Liverpool. Vulgar was the name they were fond of applying to it, with that sense of superiority which is almost inevitable in the circumstances, in people conscious of living out of it, and of making of it a point of view, a feature in the landscape. But yet there was a certain affection mingled with this contempt. They rather liked to talk of the innumerable masts, the miles of docks, and when their visitors fell into enthusiasm with the scene, felt both pleasure and pride as in an excellence which they had themselves some credit from – "A poor thing, sir, but mine own"; and they felt a little scorn of those who did not see how fine the Mersey was with its many ships, although they affected to despise it in their own persons. These were the affectations of the young. Mr Lycett-Landon himself had a solid satisfaction in Liverpool. He put all objections down at once with statistics and an intimation that people who did not respect the second seaport in the kingdom were themselves but little worthy of respect. His wife, however, was like the young people, and patronised the town.

At the time when the following incidents began to happen the family consisted of six children. These happy people had not been without their griefs, and there was more than one gap in the family. Horace was not the eldest, nor was little Julian the youngest of the children. But these times of grief had passed over, as they do, though no one can believe it, and scarcely disturbed the general history of happiness looking back upon it, though they added many experiences, made sad thoughts familiar, and gave to the mother at least a sanctuary of sorrow to which she retired often in the bustle of life, and was more strengthened than saddened, though she herself scarcely knew this. Horace was twenty, and his sister Millicent eighteen, the others descending by degrees to the age of six. There was a great deal of education going on in the family, into which Mrs Lycett-Landon threw herself with fervour, only regretting that she had not time to get up classics with the boys, and with great enthusiasm throwing herself into the music, the reading, all the forms of culture with which she had already a certain acquaintance. These pursuits filled up the days which had already seemed very fully occupied, and there were moments when papa, coming home after his business, declared that he felt himself

quite "out of it," and lingered in the dining-room after dinner and dozed instead of coming up-stairs. But there is nothing more common than that a man of fifty, a comfortable merchant, after a very comfortable dinner, should take a little nap over his wine, and nobody thought anything of it. Horace was destined for business, to take up the inheritance of his father, which was far too considerable to be let fall into other hands; and though the young man had his dreams like most young men, and now and then had gratified himself with the notion that he was making a sacrifice, for the sake of his family, of his highest aspirations, yet in reality he was by no means dissatisfied with his destination, and contemplated the likelihood of becoming a very rich man, and raising the firm into the highest regions of commercial enterprise, with pleasure and a sense of power which is always agreeable. Naturally, he thought that his father and old Fareham were a great deal too cautious, and did not make half enough of their opportunities; and, that when "new blood," meaning himself, came in, the greatness and the rank of merchant princes, to which they had never attained, would await the house. He had been a little shy at first to talk of this, feeling that ambition of a commercial kind was not heroic, and that his mother and Milly would be apt to gibe. But what ambition of an aspiring youth was ever gibed at by mother and sister? They found it a great and noble ambition when they discovered it. Milly's cheeks glowed and her eyes shone with the thought. She talked of old Venice, whose merchants were indeed princes, generals, and statesmen, all in one. There are a great many fine things ready existing to be said on this subject, and she made the fullest use of them. The father was rich and prosperous, and able to indulge in any luxury; but Horace should be great. A great merchant is as great as any other winner of heroic successes. Thus the young man was encouraged in his aspirations. Mr Lycett-Landon did not quite take the same view. "He'll do very well if he keeps up to what has been done before him," he said. "Don't put nonsense into his head. Yes; all that flummery about merchant princes and so forth is nonsense. If he goes to London with that idea in his head, there's no telling what mischief he may do."

"My dear," said Mrs Lycett-Landon, "it must always be well to have a high aim."

"A high fiddlestick!" said the father; "if he does as well as I have done, he'll do very well." And this sentiment was perhaps natural, too; for though there are indeed parents who rejoice in seeing their sons surpass them, there are many on the other side who, feeling their own work extremely meritorious, entertain natural sentiments of derision for the brags of the inexperienced boy who is going to do so much better. "Wait till he is as old as I am," Mr Lycett-Landon said.

"So long as he is not swept away into society," said the mother. "Of course, when he is known to be in town, he will be taken a great deal of notice of, and asked out –"

"Oh, to Windsor Castle, I daresay," said papa, and laughed. He was in one of his offensive moods, Milly said. It was very seldom he was offensive, but there are moments when a man must be so, against the united forces of youth and maternal sympathy with youth, in self-defence. Unless he means to let them have it all their own way he must be disagreeable from time to time. Mr Lycett-Landon asserted himself very seldom, but still he had to do it now and then; and though there was nothing in the world (except Milly) that he was more proud of than Horace, called him a young puppy, and wanted to know what anybody saw in him that he was to do so much better than his father. But the ladies, though they resented it for the moment, knew that there was not very much in this.

It was to the London house that Horace was destined. He was to spend a year in it "looking about him," picking up an acquaintance with the London variety of mercantile life, learning all the minutiae of business, and so forth. At present it was under the charge of a distant relative of Mr Fareham's, who, as soon as Horace should be able to go alone in the paths of duty, was destined to a very important post in the American house, which at present was small, but which Fareham's cousin was to make a great deal of. In the meantime, Mr Lycett-Landon himself paid frequent visits to town to see that all was going well, and would sometimes stay there for a fortnight, or even three weeks, much jested at by his wife and daughter when he returned.

"Papa finds he can do a great deal of business at the club," said Milly; "he meets so many people, you know. The London cotton-brokers go to all the theatres, and to the Row in the morning. It is so much nicer than at Liverpool."

"You monkey!" her father said with a laugh. He took it very good-humouredly for a long time. But a joke that is carried on too long gets disagreeable at the last, and after a while he became impatient. "There, that's enough of it," he would say, which at first was a little surprising, for Milly used, so far as papa was concerned, to have everything her own way.

CHAPTER II. THE LONDON OFFICE

"Again – so soon!"

This is what Mrs Lycett-Landon and Milly said in chorus as the head of the house, with something which might have been a little embarrassment, announced a third visit to London in the course of four months. There was an absence of his usual assured tone – a sort of apologetic accent, which neither of them identified, but which both were vaguely conscious of, as expressing something new.

"Robert," said his wife, "you are anxious about young Fareham; I feel sure of it. Things are not going as you like."

"Well, my dear, I didn't want to say anything about it, and you must not breathe a syllable of this to Fareham, who would be much distressed; but I am a little anxious about the young fellow. Discipline is very slack at the office. He goes and comes when he likes, not like a man of business. In short, I want to keep an eye upon him."

"Oh, papa," cried Milly, "what a dear you are! and I that have been making fun of you about the club and the Row!"

"Never mind, my dear," said her father, magnanimously; "your fun doesn't hurt. But now that you have surprised my little secret, you must take care of it. Not a word, not a hint, not so much as a look, to any of the Farehams. I would not have it known for the world. But, of course, we must not expose Horace to the risk of acquiring unbusiness-like habits."

"Oh, and most likely fast ways," cried Mrs Lycett-Landon, "for they seldom stop at unbusiness-like habits." She had grown a little pale with fright. "Oh, not for the world, Robert – our boy, who has never given us a moment's anxiety. I would rather go to London myself, or to the end of the world."

"Fortunately, that's not necessary," he said with a smile, "and you must not jump at the worst, as women are so fond of doing. I have no reason to suppose he is fast, only a little disorderly, and not exact as a business man should be – wants watching a little. For goodness sake, not a word to Fareham of all this. I would not for any consideration have him know."

"Don't you think perhaps he might have a good influence? he has been so kind to his nephew."

"That is just the very thing," said Mr Lycett-Landon. "He has been very kind (young Fareham is not his nephew, by the way, only a distant cousin), and, naturally, he would take a tone of authority, or preach, or take the after-all-I've-done-for-you tone, which would never do. No, a little watching – just the sense that there is an eye on him. He has a great many good qualities," said the head of the house with a little pomp of manner; "and I think – I really think – with a little care, that we'll pull him through."

"Papa, you are an old dear," said Milly with enthusiasm. Perhaps he did not like the familiarity of the address, or the rush she made at him to give him a kiss. At least, he put her aside somewhat hastily.

"There, there," he said, "that will do. I have got a great many things to look after. Have my things packed, my dear, and send them over to Lime Street Station to meet me. You can put in some light clothes, in case the weather should change. One never knows what turn it may take at this time of the year."

It was April, and the weather had been gloomy; it was quite likely it might change, as he said, though it was not so easy to tell what he could want with his grey suit in town. This, however, the ladies thought nothing of at the moment, being full of young Fareham and his sudden declension from the paths of duty. "And he was always so steady and so well behaved," cried Mrs Lycett-Landon. She saw after her husband's packing, which was a habit she had retained from the old days, when they

were not nearly so rich. "He was always a model young man; that was why I was so pleased to think of him as a companion for Horace."

"These model young men are just the ones that go wrong," said Milly, with that air of wisdom which is so diverting to older intelligences. Her mother laughed.

"Of course your experience is great," she said; "but I don't think that I am of that opinion. If a boy is steady till he is five-and-twenty, he is not very likely to break out after. Perhaps your father's prejudice in favour of business habits –"

"Mamma! It was you who said a young man seldom stopped there."

"Was it? Well, perhaps it was," said Mrs Lycett-Landon, with a little confusion. "I spoke without thought. One should not be too hard on young men. They can't all be made in the same mould. Your father was always so exact, never missing the boat once – and he cannot bear people who miss the boat; so, I hope, perhaps it is not so bad as he thinks."

"It would never do," said Milly, still with that air of solemnity, "to have Horace thrown in the way of any one who is not quite good and right."

At this her mother laughed, and said, "I am afraid he must be put out of the world then, Milly. I hope he has principles of his own."

Notwithstanding this sudden levity, Mrs Lycett-Landon fully agreed – later in the day, when the portmanteau had gone to the Lime Street Station, and she and her daughter had followed it and seen papa off by the train – that it was very important Horace should make his beginning in business under a prudent and careful guide; and that if there was any irregularity in young Fareham, it was very good of papa to take so much pains to put it right. Horace, who went home with them, was but partially let into the secret, lest, perhaps, he might be less careful than they were, and let some hint drop in the office as to the object of his father's journey. The ladies questioned him covertly, as ladies have a way of doing. What did the office think of young Mr Fareham in London? Was he liked? Was he thought to be a good man of business? What did Mr Pearce say, who was the head clerk and a great authority?

"I say," said Horace, "why do you ask so many questions about Dick Fareham? Does he want to marry Milly? Well, it looks like it, for you never took such notice of him before."

"To marry me!" said Milly, in a blaze of indignation. "I hope he is not quite so idiotic as that."

"He is not idiotic at all; he is a very nice fellow. You will be very well off if you get any one half as good."

"I think," said the mother, "that papa and I will make all the necessary investigations when it comes to marrying Milly. Now make haste, children, or we shall miss the first boat."

It was an April evening, still light and bright, though the air was shrewish, and the wind had some east in it, blighting the gardens and keeping the earth grey, but doing much less harm to the water, which was all ruffled into edges of white. The ten minutes' crossing was not enough to make these white crests anything but pleasant, and the big ships lay serenely in midstream, owning the force of the spring breeze by a universal strain at their anchors, but otherwise with a fine indifference to all its petty efforts. The little ferry steam-boat coasted along their big sides with much rustle and commotion, churning up the innocent waves. It was quite a considerable little party of friends and neighbours who crossed habitually in this particular boat, for the Lycett-Landons lived a little way up the river – not in bustling Birkenhead. They were all so used to this going and coming, and to constant meetings during this little voyage, that it was like a perpetually recurring water-party – a moment of holiday after the work of the day. The ladies had been shopping, the men had all escaped from their offices; they had the very last piece of news, and carried with them the evening papers, the new 'Punch' – everything that was new. If there was any little cloud upon the family after their parting with papa, it blew completely away in the fresh wind; but there was not, in reality, any cloud upon them, nor any cause for anxiety or trouble. Even the mother had no thought of anything of the

kind, no anticipation that was not pleasant. Life had gone so well with her that, except when one of the children was ailing, she had no fear.

Mr Lycett-Landon on this occasion was a long time in London. He did not return till nearly the end of May, and he came back in a very fretful, uncomfortable state of mind. He told his wife that he was more uneasy than ever; he did not blame young Fareham; he did not know whether it was he that was to be blamed; but things were going wrong somehow. "Perhaps it is only that he doesn't know how to keep up discipline," he said, "and that the real fault is with the clerks. I begin to doubt if it's safe to leave a lot of young fellows together. It will be far safer to keep Horace here under my own eye, and with old Fareham, who is exactitude itself. He will do a great deal better. I don't think I shall send him to London."

"Of course, Robert, I should prefer to keep him at home," she said, "but I am afraid, after all that has been said it will disappoint the boy."

"Oh, disappoint the boy! What does it matter about disappointing them at that age? They have plenty of time to work it out. It is at my time of life that disappointment tells."

"That is true, no doubt," said the mother; "but we are used to disappointment, and they are not."

He turned upon her almost savagely. "You! What disappointments have you ever had?" he cried, with such an air of contemptuous impatience as filled her with dismay.

"Oh, Robert!" She looked at him with eyes that filled with tears, "Disappointment is too easy a word," she said.

"You mean the – the children. What a way you women have of raking up the departed at every turn. I don't believe, in my view of the word, you ever had a disappointment in your life. You never desired anything very much and had it snatched from you just when you thought – " He stopped suddenly. "How odd," he said, with a strange laugh, "that I should be discussing these sort of things with you!"

"What sort of things? I can't tell you how much you astonish me, Robert. Did you ever desire anything so very much and I not know?"

Then he turned away with a shrug of his shoulders. "You are so matter of fact. You take everything *au pied de la lettre*," he said.

This conversation remained in Mrs Lycett-Landon's mind in spite of her efforts to represent to herself that it was only a way of speaking he had fallen into, and could mean nothing. How could it mean anything except business, or the good of the children, or some other perfectly legitimate desire? But yet, in none of these ways had he any disappointment to endure. The children were all well and vigorous, and, thank God, doing as well as heart could desire. Horace was as good a boy as ever was; and business was doing well. There was no failure, so far as she was aware, in any of her husband's hopes. It must be an exaggerated way of speaking. He must have allowed the disorder in the London office to get on his nerves; and he had the pallid, restless look of a man in suspense. He could not keep quiet. He was impatient for his letters, and dissatisfied when he had got them. He was irritable with the children, and even with herself, stopping her when she tried to consult him about anything. "What is it?" or "About those brats again?" he said, peevishly. This was when she wanted his opinion about a governess for little Fanny and Julian.

"What between Milly's balls and Fanny's governess you drive me distracted. Can't you settle these trifles yourself when you see how much occupied I am with more important things?"

"I never knew before that you thought anything more important than the children's welfare," she said.

"If there was any real question of the children's welfare," he answered, with more than equal sharpness.

It came almost to a quarrel between them. Mrs Lycett-Landon could not keep her indignation to herself. "Because the London office is not in good order!" she could not help saying to Milly.

"Oh! mamma, dear, something more than that must be bothering him," the girl said, and cried.

"I fear that we shall have to leave our nice home and settle in London. It is like a monomania. I believe your father thinks of nothing else night and day."

Mrs Lycett-Landon said this as if it were something very terrible; but, perhaps, it was scarcely to be expected that Milly would take it in the same way. "Settle in London!" she said; and a gleam of light came into her eyes. The father came into the room at the end of this consultation and heard these words.

"Who talks of settling in London?" he said.

"My dear Robert, it seems to me it must come to that; for if you are so uneasy about the office, and always thinking of it – "

"I suppose," he said, "it is part of your nature to take everything in that matter-of-fact way. I am annoyed about the London office; but rather than move you out of this house I would see the London office go to the dogs any day. I don't mind," he added, with a little vehemence, "the coming and going; but to break up this house, to transplant you to London, there is nothing in the world I would not sooner do."

She was a little surprised by his earnestness. "I am very glad you feel as I do on that point. We have all been so happy here. But I, for my part, would give up anything to make you more satisfied, my dear."

"That is the last thing in the world to make me satisfied. Whatever happens, I don't want to sacrifice you," he said, in a subdued tone.

"It would not be a sacrifice at all; what fun it would be: and then Horry need never leave us," cried Milly. "For my part, I should like it very much, papa."

"Don't let us hear another word of such nonsense," he said, angrily; and his face was so dark and his tone so sharp that Miss Milly did not find another word to say.

CHAPTER III. ALARMS

It was rather a relief to them all when the father went away again. They did not say so indeed in so many words, still keeping up the amiable domestic fiction that the house was not at all like itself when papa was away. But as a matter of fact there could be little doubt that the atmosphere was clear after he was gone. A certain sulphurous sense of something volcanic in the air, the alarm of a possible explosion, or at least of the heat and mutterings that precede storms, departed with him. He himself looked brighter when he went away. He was even gay as he waved his hand to them from the railway carriage, for they had gone very dutifully to see him off, as was the family custom. "Papa is quite delighted to get off to his beloved London," Milly said. "He feels that things go well when he is there," her mother replied, feeling a certain need to be explanatory. The household life was all the freer when he was gone. The young people had a great many engagements, and Mrs Lycett-Landon was very pleasantly occupied with these and with her younger children, and with all the manifold affairs of a large and full house. As happens so often, though the fundamental laws were not infringed, there was yet a little enlarging, a little loosening of bonds when the head of the house was not there. Mamma never objected to be "put out" for any summer pleasure that might arise. She did not mind changing the dinner-hour, or even dispensing with dinner altogether, to suit a country expedition, a garden-party, or a picnic, which was a thing impossible when papa's comfort was the first thing to be thought of. It was June, and life was full of such pleasures to the young people. Horace, indeed, would go dutifully to the office every morning, endeavouring to emulate the virtue of his father, and never miss the nine o'clock boat; though as this high effort cost him in most cases his breakfast, his mother was much perplexed on the subject, and not at all sure that such goodness did not cost more than it was worth. But he very often managed to be back for lunch, and the amusements for the afternoon were endless. Mr Lycett-Landon wrote very cheerfully when he got back to London: he told his wife that he thought he saw his way to establishing matters on a much better footing, and that, after all, Dick Fareham was not at all a bad fellow; but he would not send Horace there for some time, till everything was in perfect order, and in the meantime felt that his own eye and supervision were indispensable. "I shall hope by next year to get everything into working order," he said. The family were quite satisfied by these explanations. There was nothing impassioned in their affection for their father, and Mrs Lycett-Landon was happy with her children, and quite satisfied that her husband should do what he thought best. So long as he was well, and pleasing himself, she was not at all exacting. Marriage is a tie which is curiously elastic when youth is over and the reign of the sober everyday has come in. There is no such union, and yet there is no union that sits so lightly. People who are each other's only confidants, and cannot live without each other, yet feel a half-relief and sense of emancipation when accidentally and temporarily they are free of each other. A woman says to her daughter, "We will do so-and-so and so-and-so when your father is away," meaning no abatement of loyalty or love, but yet an unconscious, unaccustomed, not unenjoyable freedom. And the man no doubt feels it perhaps more warmly on his side. So it was not felt that there was anything to be uncomfortable about, or even to regret. The letters were not so frequent as the wife could have wished. She sent a detailed history of the family, and of everything that was going on, every second day; but her husband's replies were short, and there were much longer intervals between. Sometimes a week would elapse without any news; but so much was going on at home, and all minds were so fully occupied, that no particular notice was taken. Mrs Lycett-Landon asked, "How is it that you are so lazy about writing?" and there was an end of it. So long as he was perfectly well, as he said he was, what other danger could there be to fear?

There are times when the smallest matter awakens family anxiety, and there are other times when people are unaccountably, inconceivably easy in their minds, and will not take alarm whatever

indications of peril may arise. When real calamity is impending how often is this the case! Ears that are usually on the alert are deafened; eyes that look out the most eagerly, lose their power of vision. Little Julian had a whitlow on his finger, and his mother was quite unhappy about it; but as for her husband, she was at rest and feared nothing. When he wrote, after a long silence, that he felt one of his colds coming on and was going to nurse himself, then indeed she felt a momentary uneasiness. But his colds were never of a dangerous kind; they were colds that yielded at once to treatment. She wrote immediately, and bade him be sure and stay indoors for a day or two, and sent him Dr Moller's prescription, which always did him good. "If you want me, of course you know I will come directly," she wrote. To this letter he replied much more quickly than usual, begging her on no account to disturb herself, as he was getting rapidly well again. But after this there was a longer pause in the correspondence than had ever happened before.

On one of these evenings she met her husband's partner, old Fareham, as he was always called, at dinner, at a large sumptuous Liverpool party. There was to be a great ball that evening, and Mrs Lycett-Landon and her two eldest children had come "across" for the two entertainments, and were to stay all night. The luxury of the food and the splendour of the accompaniments I may leave to the imagination. It was such a dinner as is rarely to be seen out of commercial circles. The table groaned, not under good cheer, as used to be the case, but under silver of the highest workmanship, and the most costly flowers. The flowers alone cost as much as would have fed a street full of poor people, for they were not, I need scarcely say, common ones, things that any poor curate or even clerk might have on his table, but waxy and wealthy exotics, combinations of the chemist's skill with the gardener's, all the more difficult to be had in such profusion because the season was summer and the gardens full of Nature's easy production. Mr Fareham nodded to his partner's wife, catching her eye with difficulty between the piles of flowers. "Heard from London lately?" he said across the table, and nodded again several times when she answered, "Not for some days." Old Fareham was usually a jocose old gentleman, less perfect in his manners than the other member of the firm, and of much lower origin, though perhaps more congenial to the atmosphere in which he lived; but he was not at all jocose that evening. He had a cloud upon his face. When his genial host tried to rouse him to his usual "form" (for what can be more disappointing than an amusing man who will not do anything to amuse?) he would brighten up for a moment, and then relapse into dulness. As soon as he came into the drawing-room after dinner he made his way to his partner's wife.

"So you haven't been hearing regularly from London?" he said, taking up his post in front of her, and bending over her low chair.

"I didn't say that; I said not for a few days."

"Neither have we," said old Fareham, shaking his white head. "Not at all regular. D'ye think he is quite well? He has been a deal in town this year."

She could scarcely restrain a little indignation, thinking if old Fareham only knew the reason, and how it was to save his relative and set him right! But she answered in an easy tone, "Yes, he has thought it expedient – for various reasons." If he had the least idea of his nephew's irregularities, this, she thought, would make him wince.

But it did not. "Oh, for various reasons?" he said, lifting his shaggy eyebrows. "And did you think it expedient too?"

"You know I enter very little into business matters," she replied, with the calm she felt. "Of course we all miss him very much when he is away from home; but I never have put myself in Robert's way."

"You've been a very good wife to him," said the old man with a slight shake of the head, "an excellent wife; and you don't feel the least uneasy? Quite comfortable about his health, and all that sort of thing? I think I'd look him up if I were you."

"Have you heard anything about his health? Is Robert ill, Mr Fareham, and you are trying to break it to me?" she said, springing to her feet.

"No, no, nothing of the sort," he said, putting his hand on her arm to make her reseal herself. "Nothing of the sort; not a word! I know no more than you do – probably not half or quarter so much. No, no, my dear lady, not a word."

"Then why should you frighten me so?" she said, sitting down again with a flutter at her heart, but a faint smile; "you gave me a great fright. I thought you must have heard something that had been concealed from me."

"Not at all, not at all," said the old man. "I'm very glad you're not uneasy. Still it is a bad practice when they get to stay so long from home. I'd look him up if I were you."

"Do you know anything I don't know?" she said, with a recurrence of her first fear.

"No, no!" he cried – "nothing, nothing, I know nothing; but I don't think Landon should be so long absent. That's all; I'd look him up if I were you."

Mrs Lycett-Landon did not enjoy the ball that night. For some time indeed she hesitated about going. But Milly and Horace were much startled by this idea, and assailed her with questions – What had she heard? Was papa ill? Had anything happened? She was obliged to confess that nothing had happened, that she had heard nothing, but that old Fareham thought papa should not be so long away, and had asked if she were not uneasy about his health. What if he should be ill and concealing it from them? The children paled a little, then burst forth almost with laughter. Papa conceal it from them! he who always wanted so much taking care of when he was poorly. And why should he conceal it? This was quite unanswerable; for to be sure there was no reason in the world why he should not let his wife know, who would have gone to him at once, without an hour's delay. So they went to the ball, and spent the night in Liverpool, and next morning remembered nothing save that old Fareham was always disagreeable. "If he knew your father's real object in spending so much time in London!" Mrs Lycett-Landon said. It was her husband's generous wish to keep this anxiety from the old man; and how little such generous motives are appreciated in this world. It was evening before they returned home – for of course with so large a family there is always shopping to do, and the ladies waited till Horace left the office. But when they reached the Elms, as their house was called, there was a letter waiting which was not comfortable. It was directed in a hand which they could scarcely identify as papa's; not from his club as usual, nor on the office paper – with no date but London. And this was what it said: —

"My dear, – You must not be disappointed if I write only a few words. I have hurt my hand, which makes writing uncomfortable. It is not of the least importance, and you need not be uneasy: but accept the explanation if it should happen to be some days before you hear from me again. Love to the children. – Yours affectionately,
R. L. L."

Mrs Lycett-Landon grew pale as she read this note. "I see it all," she said; "there has been an accident, and Mr Fareham did not like to tell me of it. Horace, where is the book of the trains? I must go at once. Run, Milly, and put up a few things for me in my travelling-bag."

"What is it, mother? Hurt his hand? Oh, but that is not much," Horace said.

"It is not much perhaps; but to be so careful lest I should be anxious is not papa's way. 'If it should happen to be some days – ' Why, it is ten days since he wrote last. I am very anxious. Horry, my dear, don't talk to me, but go and see about the trains at once."

"I know very well about the trains," said Horace. "There is one at ten, but then it arrives in the middle of the night. Stop at all events till to-morrow morning. I will telegraph."

"I am going by that ten train," his mother said.

"Which arrives between three and four in the morning!"

"Never mind, I can go to the Euston, where papa always goes. Perhaps I shall find him there. He has never said where he was living."

"You may be sure," said Horace, "you will not find him at the Euston. No doubt he is in the old place in Jermyn Street. He only goes to the Euston when he is up for a day or two."

"I shall find him easily enough," Mrs Lycett-Landon said.

And then a little bustle and commotion ensued. Dinner was had which nobody could eat, though they all said it was probably nothing, and that papa would laugh when he knew the disturbance his letter had made. At least the children said this, their mother making little reply. Milly thought he would be much surprised to see mamma arrive in the early morning. He would like it, Milly thought. Papa was always disposed to find his own ailments very important, and thought it natural to make a fuss about them. She wanted to accompany her mother, but consented, not without a sense of dignity, that it was more necessary she should stay at home to look after the children and the house. But Horace insisted that he must go; and though Mrs Lycett-Landon had a strange disinclination to this which she herself could not understand, it seemed on the whole so right and natural that she could not stand out against it. "There is no occasion," she said. "I can look after myself quite well, and your father too." But Horace refused to hear reason, and Milly inquired what was the good of having a grown-up son if you did not make any use of him? Their minds were so free, that they both tittered a little at this, the title of grown-up son being unfamiliar and half absurd, in Milly's intention at least. She walked down with them to the boat in the soft summer night. The world was all aglow with softened lights – the moon in the sky, the lamps on the opposite bank, reflecting themselves in long lines in the still water, and every dim vessel in the roadway throwing up its little sea-star of colour. "I shouldn't wonder," said Milly, "if it is a touch of the gout, like that he had last year, and no accident at all."

"So much the more need for good nursing," her mother said, as she stepped into the boat.

Milly walked back again with Charley, her next brother, who was fifteen. They went up to the summer-house among the trees and watched the boat as it went rustling, bustling through the groups of shipping in the river, and made little bets between themselves as to whether it would beat the Birkenhead boat, or if the Seacombe would get there first of all. There were not so many ferry-boats as usual at this hour of the night, but one or two were returning both up and down the river which had been out with pleasure-parties, with music sounding softly on the water. "It is only that horrid old fiddle if we were near it," said Milly, "but it sounds quite melodious here," – for the soft night and the summer air, and the influence of the great water, made everything mellow. The doors and windows of the happy house were still all open. It was full of sleeping children and comfortable servants, and life and peace, though the master and the mistress were both away.

CHAPTER IV. GOING TO LOOK HIM UP

They reached London in the dawn of the morning, when the blue day was coming in over the housetops, before the ordinary stir of the waking world had begun. Of course, at that early hour it was impossible to do anything save to take refuge in the big hotel, and try to rest a little till it should be time for further proceedings. They found at once from the sleepy waiter who received them that Mr Lycett-Landon was not there. He remembered the gentleman; but they hadn't seen him not since last summer, the man said.

"I told you so, mamma," said Horace; "he is in Jermyn Street, of course. If he had been anywhere else, he would have put the address."

They drove together to Jermyn Street as soon as it was practicable, but he was not there; and the landlord of the house returned the same answer that the waiter at the Euston had done. Not since last summer, he said. He had been wondering in his own mind what had become of Mr Lycett-Landon, and asking himself if the rooms or the cooking had not given satisfaction. It was a thing that had never happened to him with any of his gentlemen, but he had been wondering, he allowed, if there was anything. He would have been pleased to make any alteration had he but known. Mrs Lycett-Landon and her son looked at each other somewhat blankly as they turned away from this door. She smiled and said, "It is rather funny that we should have to hunt your father in this way. One would think his movements would be well enough known. But I suppose it's this horrid London." She was a little angry and hurt at the horrid London which takes no particular note even of a merchant of high standing. In Liverpool he could not have been lost sight of, and even here it was ridiculous, a thing scarcely to be put up with.

"Oh, we'll soon find him at the club," Horace said; and they drove there accordingly, more indignant than anxious. It was still early, and the club servants had scarcely taken the trouble to wake up as yet. Club porters are not fond of giving addresses, knowing how uncertain it is whether a gentleman may wish to be pursued to their last stronghold. The porter in the present instance hesitated much. He said Mr Lycett-Landon had not been there for some time; that there was a heap of letters for him, which he took out of a pigeon-hole and turned over in his hands as he spoke, and among which Horace (with a jump of his heart) thought he could see some of his mother's; but nothing had been said about forwarding them, and he really couldn't take upon himself to say that he knewed the address.

"But I'm his son," said Horace.

The porter looked at him very knowingly. "That don't make me none the wiser, sir," he said with great reason.

The youth went out to his mother somewhat aghast. "They don't know anything of him here," he said; "they say he hasn't been for long. There's quite a pile of letters for him."

"Then we must go to the office," Mrs Lycett-Landon said. "He must have been very busy, or – or something."

That was an assertion which no one could dispute. When the cab drove off again she repeated the former speech with an angry laugh. "It is ridiculous, Horace, that you and I should have to run about like this from pillar to post, as if papa could slip out of sight like a – like a – mere clerk." The mercantile world does not make much account of clerks, and she did not feel that she could find anything stronger to say.

"Nobody would believe it," said Horace, "if we were to tell them; but in the City it will be different," he added, gravely.

In Liverpool it must be allowed the City was not thought very much of. It had not the same prestige as the great mercantile town of the north. The merchant princes were considered to belong

to the seaports, and the magnates of the City had an odour of city feasts and vulgarity about them; but in the present circumstances it had other attractions.

"The name of Lycett-Landon can't be unknown there," said the lad.

His mother was wounded even by this assertion. She drew herself up. "A Lycett-Landon has no right to be unknown anywhere," she said. "We don't need to take our importance from any firm, I hope. But London is insufferable; nobody is anybody that comes from what they are pleased to call the country 'here.'"

There was an indignant tone in Mrs Lycett-Landon's voice. But yet she too felt, though she would not acknowledge it, that for once the City would be the most congenial. They drove along through the crowded, noisy streets in a hansom, feeling, after all, a little more at home among people who were evidently going to business as the men did in their own town. The sight of a well-brushed, well-washed, gold-chained commercial magnate in a white waistcoat with a rose in his button-hole did them good. And thus they arrived at "the office," that one home-like spot amid all the desert of unaccustomed streets.

"Perhaps," the mother said, "we shall find him here, ready to laugh at us for this ridiculous expedition."

"Well, I hope not," said Horace, "for he will be angry. Papa doesn't like to be looked after."

This speech chilled Mrs Lycett-Landon a little, for it was quite true; and for her part she was not a woman who liked to be found fault with on account of silly curiosity. As a matter of fact, few women do. So that it was with a little check to their eagerness that they got out at the office door among all the press of people coming to their daily labour. Horace, though he had been intended to work there, scarcely knew the place; and his mother, though she had driven down three or four times to pick up her husband on the occasions when they were in town together, was but little better acquainted with it. And the clerks did not at all recognise these very unlikely visitors. Ladies appeared very seldom at the office, and at this early hour never.

"Your father, of course, would not be here so early," Mrs Lycett-Landon said as they went upstairs; "and I don't suppose young Mr Fareham either is the sort of person – but we must ask for Mr Fareham."

Remembering all that her husband had said, she did not in the least expect to find that young representative of the house. How curious it was to wait until she had been inspected by the clerk, to be asked who she was, to be requested to take a seat, till it was known if Mr Fareham was disengaged! An impulse which she could scarcely explain restrained her from giving her name, which would at once have gained her all the respect she could have desired; and for the first time in her life Mrs Lycett-Landon realised what it must be to come as a poor petitioner to such a place. The clerks made their observations on her and her son behind their glass screen. They decided that she must want a place in the office for the young fellow, but that Fareham would soon give her her answer. These young men did not think much of the personal appearance of Horace, who was clearly from the country – a lanky youth whom it would be difficult to make anything of. Their consternation was extreme when young Mr Fareham, coming out somewhat superciliously to see who wanted him, exclaimed suddenly, "Mrs Landon!" and went forward holding out his hands. "If I had known it was you!" he said. "I hope I have not kept you waiting. But some mistake must have been made, for I was not told your name."

"It was no mistake," she said, looking graciously at the young clerk, who stood by very nervous and abashed. "I did not give my name. We shall not detain you a moment, we only want an address."

While she spoke she had time to remark the perfectly correct and orthodox appearance of young Fareham, of whom it was almost impossible to believe that he had ever committed an irregularity of any description in the course of his life. He led the way into his room with all the respect which was due to the wife of the chief partner, and gave her a chair. "My time is entirely at your service," he said; "too glad to be able to be of any use."

Mrs Lycett-Landon sat down, and then there ensued a moment of such embarrassment as perhaps in all her life she had never known before. There was a certain surprise in the air with which he regarded her, and not the slightest appearance of any idea what she could possibly want him for at this time in the morning. And somehow this surprised unconsciousness on his part brought the most curious painful consciousness to her. She was silent; she looked at him with a kind of blank appeal. She half rose again to go away without putting her question. She seemed to be on the eve of a betrayal, of a family exposure. How foolish it was! She looked at Horace's easy-minded, tranquil countenance, and took courage.

"Do you expect," she said, "Mr Landon here to-day?" with a smile, yet a catch of her breath.

"Mr Landon!" The astonishment of young Fareham was extreme. "Is he in town? We have not seen him since May."

"Horace," said Mrs Lycett-Landon, half-rising from her chair and then falling back upon it. "Horace, your father must be very ill. He must have had – some operation – he must have thought I would be over-anxious –"

She became very pale as she uttered these broken words, and looked as if she were going to faint; and Horace, too, stared with bewildered eyes. Young Fareham began to be alarmed. He saw that his quick response was altogether unexpected, and that there was evidently some mystery.

"Let me see," he said, appearing to ponder, "perhaps I am making a mistake. Yes, I am sure he was here in May – he had just come back from the Continent. Wasn't it so? Oh, then, I must have misunderstood him. I thought he said – Now I remember, he certainly was here in town. Yes, came to tell me something about letters – what was it?"

"Perhaps where you were to send his letters," Mrs Landon said quickly. "That is what we want to know." While she was listening to him, her mind had been going through a great many questions, and she had brought herself summarily back to calm. If it should be serious illness, all her strength would be wanted. She must not waste her forces with foolish fainting or giving in, but husband them all.

Then there arose an inquiry in the office. One clerk after another was called in to be questioned. One said Mr Lycett-Landon's letters were all forwarded to the Liverpool house, or to the Elms, Rockferry, his private address; another, that they were sent to the club; and it was not till some time had been lost that one of the youngest remembered an address to which he had once been sent, to a lodging where Mr Landon was staying. He remembered all about it, for it was a pretty house, with a garden, very unlike Jermyn Street.

"It was just after Mr Landon came back from abroad," the youth said; and by degrees he remembered exactly where it was, and brought it written down, in a neat, clerkly hand, on an office envelope. It was a flowery address, a villa in a road, both of them fanciful with a cockney sentiment.

Mrs Lycett-Landon took the paper from him with a smile of thanks; but she was so bewildered and confused that she rose up and went out of the office without even saying good-morning to young Fareham.

"Mamma, mamma," cried Horace after her, "you have never said –"

"Oh, don't trouble her," said young Fareham; "I can see she is anxious. You'll come back, won't you, and let me know if you've found him? But I hope there is some mistake."

He did not say what kind of mistake he hoped for, nor did Horace say anything as he followed his mother. He, like Milly, thought it impossible that papa would have hidden himself thus to be ill. He was a little nervous of speaking to his mother when he saw how pale and preoccupied she looked.

"Shall I call a cab?" he said. "Mother, do you really think there is so much to fear?"

"He has never been on the Continent," was all his mother could say.

"No; that's true. They just have got that into their heads. It was no business of theirs where he went."

"It is everybody's business where a man goes – a man like him. I think I know what it is, Horace. He has been fretful for some time, and restless; he must have been ill, and he has been going through

an operation. Don't say anything; I feel sure of it. Perhaps there was danger in it, and he feared the fuss, and that I should be over-anxious."

"We always thought as children that papa liked to be made a fuss with," said simple Horace.

"You thought so in the nursery, because you liked it yourselves. Yes, we had better have a cab. How full the streets are! one cannot hear oneself talking."

Then she was silent a little till the hansom was called. It was a very noisy part of the City, where the traffic is continual, and it was very difficult to hear a woman's voice. She paused before she got into the cab.

"Now I think of it," she said, "you had better go and telegraph to Milly, for she will be anxious. Go back to the hotel and do it. Tell her that we have got to town all safe, and that you will send her word this evening how papa is."

"But, mother, you are not going without me! and it will be better to telegraph after we know."

"That is what I wish you to do, Horace. It might upset him. I think it a great deal better for me to go by myself. Just do what I tell you. Milly will want to know that we have arrived all right; and wait at the hotel till I send for you."

"You had much better let me come with you, mother."

The noise was so great that she only made a "No" with her mouth, shaking her head as she got into the cab, and gave him the address to show the cabman. Then, before Horace had awakened from his surprise, she was gone, and he was left, feeling very solitary, pushed about by all the passers-by upon the pavement. The youth was half angry, half astonished. To go back to the hotel was not a thing that tempted him, but he was so young that he obeyed by instinct, meaning to pour forth his indignation to Milly. Even in a telegram there is a possibility of easing one's heart.

CHAPTER V. THE HOUSE WITH THE FLOWERY NAME

Mrs Lycett-Landon drove off through the crowded City streets in a curious trace of excited feeling. She had a sense that something was going to happen to her; but how this was she could not have told. Nor could she have told why it was she had sent Horace away. Perhaps his father might not wish to see him, perhaps he might prefer to explain to her alone the cause of his absence. She felt the need of first seeing her husband alone, though she could not tell why. It was a very long drive. Out of the bustling City streets she came to streets more showy, less encumbered, though perhaps scarcely less crowded, and then to some which showed the lateness of the season by shut-up houses and diminished movement, and then to line after line of those dingy streets, all exactly like each other, which form the bulk of London. There are so many of them, and they are so indistinguishable. She looked out of the hansom and noted them all as she drove on – but yet as if she noted them not, as if it were they that glided by her, as in a dream. Then she reached the suburbs, the roads with the flowery names, houses buried in gardens, with trees appearing behind the high enclosing walls. This perhaps was the strangest of all. She could not think what he could want here, so far out of the world, until she recalled to herself the idea of an illness and an operation which had already faded out of her mind – for that, like every other explanation, was so strange, so much unlike all his habits. Her heart began to beat as the cab turned into the street, going slowly along to look for the special house, and she found herself on the point of arriving at her destination. Though she was so anxious to find her husband, she would now, if she could, have deferred the arrival, have called out to the driver that it was not here, and bidden him go on and on. But there could not be any mistake about it – there was the name of the house painted on the gate. It was a little gate in a wall, affording a glimpse of a pretty little garden shaded with trees inside. She would not let the cabman ring the bell, but got out first and paid him, and then, when she could not find any further excuse, rang it – so faintly at first that no sound followed. She waited, though she knew she could not have been heard, to leave time for an answer. Looking in under the little arch of roses to the smooth bit of lawn, the flowers in the borders, she said to herself that there was not very much taste displayed in the flowers – red geraniums and mignonette, the things that everybody had, and great yellow nasturtiums clustering behind – not very much taste or individuality, but yet a great deal of brightness, and the look as of a home; not lodgings, but a place where people lived. There were some garden-chairs about, and on a rustic table something that looked like a woman's work. How natural it all seemed, how peaceable! It was curious that he should be living in such a place. Perhaps, she said to herself, it was the house of some clerk of the better sort – some one who had known him in his early years, and had wished to be kind: and in good air, and out of the noise of the streets. She made all these explanations as she stood at the door waiting for some one to answer a ring which she knew very well could not have been heard – unable to understand her own strange pause, and the manner in which she dallied with her anxiety. But this could not last for ever. After she had waited more than the needful time she rang again, and presently the door was opened by an unseen spring, and she went in within the pretty enclosure. How pretty it was – only red geraniums and nasturtiums, it was true, but the soft odour of the mignonette, and the sunshine, and the silence – all so peaceful and so calm. There came over her a certain awe as she stepped across the threshold and closed behind her the garden-door. The windows were all open, the house-door open. Under the trees on the little lawn were two basket-chairs, and a white heap of muslin, which some woman must have been working at, on the table. Mrs Lycett-Landon felt like an intruder in this peaceful place. She said to herself at last that there must be some mistake, that it could not be here.

A housemaid, wiping her arms on her apron, came to the house-door – a round-faced, ruddy, wholesome young woman, just the sort of servant for such a place. No doubt there were two, cook

and housemaid, the visitor said to herself, just enough for needful service. The young woman was smiling and pleasant, no forbidding guardian. She did not advance to meet the stranger, but stood waiting, holding her own place in the doorway. Her honest, open face confirmed the expression of peace and comfort that was about the house. The intruder came up softly, not able to divest herself of that sense of awe.

"Does Mr Lycett-Landon live here?" she said, almost under her breath.

"Yes, ma'am, but he's rather poorly this morning," the housemaid said.

"He is at home then? Will you take me to him, please – "

"Oh, I don't think I can do that, ma'am. He's rather poorly; he's keeping his room. The doctor don't think that it's anything serious, but as master is not quite a young gentleman he says it's best to be on the safe side."

"Is Mr Lycett-Landon your master?"

"Yes, ma'am," with a little curtsy.

"Has he been ill long?"

"Oh, bless you, not at all. He has his 'ealth as well as could be wished; only a little bilious or that now and then, as gentlemen will be. They ain't so careful in what they eat and drink as ladies – that's what I always say."

"He is only bilious then – not ill? not long ill? there has been no – operation?"

"Oh, bless you, nothing of the sort!" the young woman said, with the most evident astonishment.

Mrs Lycett-Landon put all these questions in a kind of dream. Something kept her from saying who she was. She felt a curious anxiety to find out all the details before she announced herself.

"I think he will see me," she said, a little faintly. "I have come a long way to see him. Take me to him, please."

"Is it business, ma'am?" said the girl.

"Business? yes; you may say it is business. I am his – Take me to him at once, please."

"Oh dear, I can't do that. I ask your pardon, but the last thing the doctor said was that he mustn't be troubled with no business."

"But I must see him," Mrs Lycett-Landon said.

"You can't, ma'am, not to-day – it's not possible. To be sure," the girl added with a pleasant smile, "if Mrs Landon would do as well."

"Mrs – , whom – ?"

"Mrs Landon – Mrs Lycett-Landon, that's her full name. Oh, didn't you know as he was married? She'll be down in a moment if you'll step inside."

The woman outside the door felt herself turned to stone. She said faintly, "Yes, I think I will step inside."

"Do, ma'am: you don't look at all well; you've been standing in the sun. Missis will be fine and angry if she knows as I let you stand like that. Take a chair, ma'am, please. She'll be here in a moment," the cheerful maid-servant said.

She did not ask for the visitor's name – she was evidently not accustomed to visits of ceremony – but went up-stairs quickly, with her solid foot sounding on every step.

The visitor for her part sat down, not feeling able to keep upon her feet, and faintly looked round her, seeing everything, understanding nothing. What did it all mean? The room was furnished like that of a newly-married pair. Little decorations were about, newly-bound books, a new little desk all ormolu and velvet; albums, photograph-frames, trifles from Switzerland, carved and painted, like relics of a recent journey. Nothing was in absolute bad taste, but the fashion of the furnishing was not of the larger kind, which means wealth. It was slightly pretty, perhaps a little tawdry, yet not sufficiently worn to acquire that look as yet. Mingled with all this decoration, however, there was something else which had a curious effect upon the intruder, something that reminded her of her husband's library at home, a chair of the form he liked, a solid table or two, strangely out of

place amid the little low sofas and *étagères*. She saw all this, and took it into her mind at a glance, without making any of these observations upon it. She made no observations. She was unable even to think; the maid's words went through her head without any will of hers – "Didn't you know as he was married?" "If Mrs Landon would do as well." Mrs Landon! Who was this that bore her own name – who was the man up-stairs? She was not in any hurry to be enlightened. She seemed to herself rather grateful for the pause; glad to hold off any discovery that there might be to make with both hands, to keep it at arm's length. She sat quite still in this strange room, not thinking or able to think, wondering what was about to happen – what strange thing was coming to her.

At last she heard a footstep, a light step very different from the maid's, coming down-stairs. She rose up instinctively and took hold of the back of a chair to support herself. The door opened, and a young woman, pretty, timid, tall, in a white flowing gown, with a little cap upon her dark hair, and a pair of appealing eyes, came in. She had an uncertain look, as if not wholly accustomed to her position. She said with a pretty blush and shyness, "They tell me that you want to see my husband on business – but he is not well enough for business. Is it anything that I could do?"

"Will you tell me who you are?"

The new-comer looked a little surprised at the voice, which was hoarse and unnatural, of her visitor. She answered with a little dignity, drawing up her slight young figure. "I am Mrs Lycett-Landon," she said.

CHAPTER VI. PERPLEXITIES

What was she to do?

It is not often in life that a woman is brought to such an emergency without warning, without time for preparation. She did nothing at all at first, and felt capable of nothing but to stare blankly, almost stupidly, at her supplanter. She did not feel capable even of rising from the chair into which she had sunk in the utter blank of consternation. She could only gaze, interrogating not the face before her only, but heaven and earth. Was it true? Could it be true?

The young woman was evidently surprised by this pause. She too looked curiously at her visitor, waited for a minute, and then advancing a step, asked, with a tone in which there was some surprise and a faint shadow of impatience, "Is it anything that I can do?"

"Have you been married long?" This was all the visitor could say.

A pretty blush came over the other's face. "We were married in the end of April," she said. It still seemed quite natural to her that everybody should be interested in this great event. "We went abroad for a month. And we were so lucky as to find this house. You know my husband?"

"I think so – well; his Christian name is –"

"Robert is his Christian name. Oh, I am so glad to meet with any one who has known him!" She drew a chair with a pretty vivacious movement close to that on which her visitor sat. "I feel sure," she said, "you are a relation, and have come to find out about us."

There was something in the young creature's air so guileless, so assured in her innocence, that if there had been any fury in the other's heart, or on her tongue, it must have been arrested then; but there was no fury in her heart. After the first unspeakable shock of surprise there was nothing but a great pang, and that almost more for this young life blighted than for her own. "It is true," she said, "that I am a – connection. Is your mother alive?"

"Mamma?" cried the girl, with a laugh. "Oh yes, and she is here to-day. She does not live with us, you know. She would not. She says married people should be left to themselves, though I always told her Mr Landon was far too sensible to believe in that trash about mothers-in-law. Don't you think it is rubbish? Young men may believe it; but when a gentleman is experienced and knows the world –"

"Perhaps I could see your mother," said the old wife. She felt herself growing a little faint. The day was warm, and she had been travelling all night. Was not that enough to account for it? And this happy babble in her ear made her heart sick, which was more.

"Mamma? Oh yes, certainly she will be very glad to see you. She always wanted to see some of the relations. She said it was not natural; though, to be sure, at his age – Shall I go and tell her you want to see her – her and not me? But you must not take any prejudice against me. Don't, please, if you are his relation: and you look so nice too. I know I should love you if you would let me."

"Let me see your mother. I have no – prejudice." She scarcely knew what she was saying. The room was swimming in her eyes, the green of the closed blinds waving up and down, surrounding her with an uncertain mist of colour, through which she seemed to see a half-reproachful, wondering look. And then the white figure was gone. Mrs Lycett-Landon leant her head upon the back of the chair, and for a minute knew nothing more. Then the greenness became visible again, and gradually everything wavered and circled back into its place.

The little house was very still; there were hurried steps overhead, as if two people were moving about. It was the mother hastily being put in order for a visitor – her cap arranged, a clean collar put on, the young wife dancing about her in great excitement to make all nice. This process of decoration occupied some time, and as it went on the visitor came fully to herself. What should she do? As she recovered full command of herself she shrunk from inflicting such a blow even upon the mother. Should she go away before they came down? – disappear like a dream, take no notice, but leave the

strange little drama – what was it, comedy or tragedy? – to work itself out? Why should she interfere, after all? If he liked this best – and all the harm was now done that could be done – the best thing was to go away and take no more notice. She had risen with this intention to slip away, to let herself out, not to interfere, when another sound became audible – the sound of a door opening in the back part of the house. Then a voice called "Rose" – a voice which, in spite of herself, made the visitor's brain swim once more. She had to stop again perforce. And then a step came towards the room in which she was; a heavy step, with a little gouty limp in it – a step she knew so well. It came along the passage, accompanied by a running commentary of half-complaint. "Where are you? I want you." Then the door of the little drawing-room was pushed open. "Why don't you answer me?" He paused there in the doorway, seeing a stranger – with a quick apology – "I beg your pardon." Then suddenly there came from him a cry – a roar like that of a wounded animal – "Eleanor!"

Neither of the two ever forgot the appearance of the other. She saw him with the little passage and its stronger light opening behind him, his large figure relieved against it; the sudden look of consternation, horror, utter amaze in his face. Horror came first; and then everything yielded to the culprit's sense of unspeakable downfall, guilt self-convicted and without excuse. He fell back against the wall; his jaw dropped; his eyes seemed to turn upon themselves in a flicker of mortal dismay. The entire failure of all force and self-defence did not disarm his wife, as might have been supposed, but filled her with a blaze of sudden vehemence, passion which she could not contain. She had said his name as he said hers, in a quiet tone enough; but now stamped her foot and cried out, feeling it intolerable, insupportable. "Well!" she cried, "stand up for it like a man! Say you are sick of me, of your children, of living honestly these fifty years. Say something for yourself. Don't stand there like a whipped child."

But the man had nothing to say. He stood against the wall and looked at her as if he feared a personal assault. Then he said, "She is not to blame. She is as innocent as you are."

"I have seen her," said the injured wife. "Do you think you need to tell me that? But then, what are you?"

He made no reply. And the sight of him in the doorway was unbearable to the woman. If he had stood up for himself, made a fight of any kind, it would have been more tolerable. But the very sight of him was insupportable – something she could not endure. She turned her head away and went quickly past him towards the open door. "I meant to tell her mother." She scarcely knew whether she was speaking or only thinking. "I meant to tell her mother, but I cannot. You must manage it your own way."

Next moment she found herself out in the street, walking along under the shadow of the blank wall. She was conscious of having closed both doors behind her, that of the house and that of the garden. If she could but have closed the door of her own mind, and put it out of sight, and shut it up for ever! She hurried away, walking very quickly round one corner after another, through one street after another, of houses enclosed in walls and railings, withdrawn among flowers and trees. You may walk long through these quiet places without finding what she wanted – a cab to take her out of this strange, still, secluded town of villas. When she found one at last, she told the driver to take her back to the Euston, but first to drive round Hyde Park. He thought she must be mad. But that did not matter much so long as she was able to pay the fare. And then there followed what she had wanted, a long, endless progress through a confusion of streets, first quiet, full of gardens and retired houses; then the long bustling thoroughfares leading back into the noisy world of London; then the quiet streets on the north side of the park, the trees of Kensington Gardens, the old red palace, the endless line of railings and trees on the other side; the bustle of Piccadilly, so unlike the bustle of the other streets. Naturally the hansom could not go within the enclosure of the park, but only by the streets. But she did not care for that. She wanted movement, the air in her face, silence so that she might think.

So that she might think! But a woman can no more think when she wills than she can be happy when she wills. All that she thought was this, going over and over it, and back and back upon it,

putting it involuntarily into words and saying them to herself like a sort of dismal refrain. At fifty! After living honestly all these fifty years! Was it possible? was it in the heart of man? At fifty, after all these years! This wonder was so great that she could think of nothing else. And he had been a good man – kind, ready to help; not hard upon any one – fond of his family, liking to have them about him. And now at fifty! after living honestly – She did not think of it as a matter affecting herself, and she could not think of what she was to do, which was the thing she had intended to think of, when she bade the man drive to the other end of the world. When she perceived, as she did dimly in the confusion of her mind, that she was approaching the end of her long round, she would but for very shame have gone over it all again. But by this time she had begun to see that little would be gained by staving it off for another hour, and that sooner or later she must descend from that abstract wandering, which had been more like a wild flight into space than anything else, and meet the realities of her position. Ah heavens! the realities of her position were – first of all, Horace, her boy – her grown-up boy: no longer a child to whom a family misfortune could be slurred over, but a man, able to understand, old enough to know. Her very heart died within her as this suddenly flashed upon her deadened intelligence. Horace and Milly – a young man and a young woman. How was she to tell them what their father had done? At fifty! after all these years!

She was told at the hotel that the young gentleman had gone out – for which she was deeply thankful – but would be back immediately. Oh, if he might but be detained; if something would but happen to keep him away! She came up the great vulgar common stairs which so many people trod, some perhaps with hearts as heavy as hers, few surely with such a problem to resolve. How to tell her boy that his father – oh God! his father, whom he loved and looked up to; his kind father, who never grudged him anything; a man so well known; a good man, of whom everybody spoke well – to tell him that his father – She locked the door of her room instinctively, as if that would keep Horace out, and keep her secret concealed.

It was one of those terrible hotel rooms, quite comfortable and wholly unsympathetic, in which many of the sorest hours of life are passed, where parents come to part with their children, to receive back their prodigals, to look for the missing, to receive tidings of the worse than dead; where many a reconciliation has to be accomplished, and arrangement made that breaks the heart. Strange and cold and miserable was the unaccustomed place, with no associations or soothing, no rest or softness in it. She walked about it up and down, and then stopped, though the movement gave her a certain relief, lest Horace should come to the door, hear her, and call out in his hearty young voice to be admitted. She had not been able to think before for the recurrence of that dismal chorus, "At fifty!" and now she could not think for thinking that any moment Horace might come to the door. She was more afraid of her boy than of all the world beside: had some one come to tell her that an accident had happened, that he had broken an arm or a leg, it seemed to her that she would have been glad, – anything rather than let him know. And yet he would have to know. The eldest son, a man grown, after his father the head of his family, the one who would have to take care of the children. How would it be possible to keep this from him? And how could it be told? His mother, who had prided herself on her son's spotless youth, and rejoiced in the thought that a wanton word was as impossible from the lips of Horace as from those of Milly, reddened and felt her very heart burn with shame. How could she tell him? She could not tell him. It was impossible; it was beyond her power.

And then she shrank into the corner of her seat and held her breath: for who could this be but Horace, with a foot that scarcely seemed to touch the ground, rushing with an anxious heart to hear news of his father, up the echoing empty stair?

CHAPTER VII. EXPLANATION

"Mother! are you there? Let me in. Mother! open the door."

"In a moment, Horace; in a moment." It could not be postponed any longer. She rose up slowly and looked at herself in the glass to see if it was written in her face. She had not taken off her bonnet or made any change in her outdoor dress, and she was very pale, almost ghastly, with all the lines deepened and drawn in her face, looking ten years older, she thought. She put her bonnet straight with a woman's instinct, and then slowly, reluctantly, opened the door. He came in eager and impatient, not knowing what to think.

"Did you want to keep me out, mother! Were you vexed not to find me waiting? And how about papa?"

"No, Horace, not at all vexed."

"I went a little farther than I intended. I don't know my way about. But, mother, what of papa?"

"Not very much, my dear," she said, turning away. "It must be nearly time for lunch."

"Yes, it is quite time for lunch; and you had no breakfast. I told them to get it ready as I came up. But you don't answer me. Of course you found him. Is he really ill? What does he mean by it? Why didn't he come with you? Mother dear, is it anything serious? How pale you are! Oh, you needn't turn away; you can't hide anything from me. What is the matter, mamma?"

"It is serious, and yet it isn't serious, Horace. He is not ill, which is the most important thing. Only a little – seedy, as you call it. That's a word, you know, that always exasperates me."

"Is that all?" the youth said, looking at her with incredulous eyes.

She had turned her back upon him, and was standing before the glass, with a pretence of taking off her bonnet. It was easier to speak without looking at him. "No, my dear, that is not all. You will think it very strange what I am going to say. Papa and I have had a quarrel, Horace."

"Mother!"

"You may well be startled, but it is true. Our first quarrel," she said, turning half round with the ghost of a smile. It was the suggestion of the moment, at which she had caught to make up for the impossibility of thinking how she was to do it. "They say, you know, that the longer one puts off a thing of this kind the more badly one has it, don't you know? – measles and other natural complaints. We have been a long time without quarrelling, and now we have done it badly." She turned round with a faint smile; but Horace did not smile. He looked at her very gravely, with an astonishment beyond words.

"I cannot understand," he said, almost severely, "what you can mean."

"Well, perhaps it is a little difficult; but still such things do happen. You must not jump at the conclusion that it is all my fault."

Horace came up to her with his serious face, and put his arm round her, turning her towards him. "I was not thinking of any fault, mother; but surely I may know more than this? You and he don't quarrel for nothing, and I am not a child. You must tell me. Mother, what is the matter?" he said, with great alarm. For she was overdone in every way, worn out both body and mind, and when she felt her son's arm round her nature gave way. She leant her head upon his young shoulder, and fell into that convulsive sobbing which it is so alarming to bear. It was some time before she could command herself enough to reply —

"Oh, that is true – that is true! not for nothing. But, dear Horry, you can't be the judge, can you, between your father and mother? Oh no! Leave it a little; only leave it. It will perhaps come right of itself."

"Mother, of course I can't be the judge; but still, I'm not a child. May I go, then, and see papa?"

"Oh no," she cried, involuntarily clasping his arm tight – "oh no! not for the world."

The youth grew very grave: he withdrew his arm from her almost unconsciously, and said, "Either it is a great deal more serious than you say, or else – "

"It is very serious, Horace. I don't deceive you," she said. "It may come to *that*– that we shall never – be together any more. But still I implore you, don't go to your father – oh! not now, my dear. He would not wish it. You must give me your word not to go."

She could not bear the scrutiny of his eyes. She turned and went away from him, putting off her light cloak, pulling open drawers as if in a search for something; but he stood where she had left him, full of perplexity and trouble. A quarrel between his parents was incredible to Horace; and the idea of a rupture, a public scandal, a thing that could be talked about! He stood still, overwhelmed by sudden trouble and distress, though without the slightest guess of the real tragedy. "I can't think what you could quarrel about," he said. "It seems a mere impossibility. Whatever it is, you must make it up, mother, for our sakes."

"My dear, anything that can be done, you may be sure will be done, for your sakes."

"But it is impossible, you know. A quarrel! between you and papa! It is out of the question. Nobody would believe it. I think you must be joking all the time," he said, with an abrupt laugh. But his laugh seemed so strange, even to himself, that he became silent suddenly with a look of confusion and irritation. Never in his life had he met with anything so extraordinary before.

"I am not joking," she said; "but, perhaps, after a while – Come and have your luncheon, Horace. I know you want it. And perhaps after a time – "

"You are worn out too, mother; that is what it is. One feels irritable when one is tired. After you have eaten something and rested yourself, let me go to papa. And we'll have a jolly dinner together and make it all up."

And she had the heroism to say no more, but went down with him, and pretended to eat, and saw him make a hearty meal. While she sat thus smiling at her boy, she could not but wonder to herself what *he* was doing. Was he smiling too, keeping up a cheerful face for the sake of the unfortunate girl not much older than Horace? God help her whom he had destroyed! She kept imagining that other scene while she enacted her own. Afterwards she persuaded Horace with some difficulty to let everything stand over till next day, telling him that she had great need of rest (which was true enough) and would lie down; and that next evening would be time enough for any further steps. She insisted so upon her need of rest, that he remembered that Dick Fareham had asked him to dine with him at his club, and go to the theatre if he had nothing better to do – a plan which she caught at eagerly.

"But how can I go and leave you alone in a hotel?" he said.

"My dear, I am going to bed," she replied, which was unanswerable. And after many attempts to know more, and many requests to be allowed to go to his father, Horace at last yielded, dressed, and went off to the early dinner which precedes a play. He had brought his dress clothes with him, though there had been so little time for feasting, confident that even a few days in London must bring pleasure of some kind. And already the utterly absurd suggestion that his father and mother could have had a deadly quarrel began to lose its power in his mind. It was impossible. His mother was worn out, and had been irritable; and his father, especially when he had a touch of gout, was, as Horace well knew, irritable also. To-morrow all that would have blown away, and they would both be ashamed of themselves. Thus he consoled himself as he went out; and as the youth never had known what family strife or misfortune meant, and in his heart felt anything of the kind to be impossible, it did not take much to drive that incomprehensible spectre away.

Mrs Lycett-Landon was at length left alone to deal with it by herself. What was she to do? She had a fire lighted in the blank room, though it was the height of summer, for agitation and misery had made her cold, and sat over it trembling, and trying to collect her thoughts. Oh, if it could be but possible to do nothing, to say no word to any one, to forget the episode of this morning altogether! "If I had not known," she said to herself, "it would have done me no harm." This modern Eleanor, who had fallen so innocently into Rosamond's bower, had no thought of vengeance in her heart. She had no

wish to kill or injure the unhappy girl who had come between her and her husband. What good would that do? Were Rosamond made an end of in a moment, how would it change the fact? What could ever alter that? The ancients did not take this view of the subject. They took it for granted that when the intruder was removed life went on again in the same lines, and that nothing was irremediable. But to Mrs Lycett-Landon life could never go on again. It had all come to a humiliating close; confusion had taken the place of order, and all that had been, as well as all that was to be, had grown suddenly impossible. Had she not stopped herself with an effort, her troubled mind would have begun again that painful refrain which had filled her mind in the morning, which was perhaps better than the chaos which now reigned there. So far as he was concerned she could still wonder and question, but for herself everything was shattered. She could neither identify what was past nor face what was to come. Everything surged wildly about her, and she found no footing. What was to be done? These words intensify all the miseries of life – they make death more terrible, since it so often means the destruction of all settled life for the living, as well as the end of mortal troubles for the dead – they have to be asked at moments when the answer is impossible. This woman could find no reply as she sat miserable over her fire. She was not suffering the tortures of jealousy, nor driven frantic with the thought that all the tenderness which ever was hers was transferred to another. Perhaps her sober age delivered her from such reflections; they found no place at all in the tumult of her thoughts; the questions involved to her were wholly different: what she was to do; how she was to satisfy her children without shaming their youth and her own mature purity of matronhood which had protected them from any suggestion of such evil? How they were ever to be silenced and contented without overthrowing for ever in their minds their father and the respect they owed him? This was the treble problem which was before her – by degrees the all-absorbing one which banished every other from her thoughts. What could she say to Horace and Milly? How were they to be kept from this shame? Had they been both boys or both girls, it seemed to their mother that the question would have been less terrible; but boy and girl, young man and young woman, how were they ever to be told? How were they to be deceived and not told? Their mother's powers gave way and all her strength in face of this question. How was she to do it? How was she to refrain from doing it? That pretext of a quarrel, how was it to be kept up? and in what other way – in what other way, oh heaven! was she to explain to them that their father and she could meet under the same roof no more? She covered her face with her hands, and wept in the anguish of helplessness and incapacity; then dried her eyes, and tried again to plan what she could do. Oh that she had the wings of a dove, that she might flee away and be at rest! – but whither could she flee? She thought of pretending some sudden loss of money, some failure of fortune, and rushing away with the children to America, to Australia, to the end of the world; but if she did so, what then? Would it become less necessary, more easy to explain? Alas! no; nothing could change that horrible necessity. The best thing of all, she said to herself, if she were equal to it, would be to return home, to live there as long as it was possible, with her heart shut up, holding her peace, saying nothing – as long as it was possible! – until circumstances should force upon her the explanation which would have to be made. Let it be put off for weeks, for months, even for years, it would have to be made at last.

Thus she sat pondering, turning over everything, considering and rejecting a thousand plans; and then, after all, acted upon a sudden impulse, a sudden rising in her of intolerable loneliness and insufficiency. She felt as if her brain were giving way, her mind becoming blank, before this terrible emergency, which must be decided upon at once. Horace was safe for a few hours, separated from all danger, but how to meet his anxious face in the light of another day his mother did not know. She sprang up from her seat, and reached towards the table, on which there were pens and ink, and wrote a telegram quickly, eagerly, without pausing to think. The young ones were in the habit of laughing at old Fareham. She herself had joined in the laugh before now, and allowed that he was methodical and tedious and tiresome. He was all these, and yet he was an old friend, the oldest friend she had, one who had known her father, who had seen her married, who had guided her husband's first steps in

the way of business. He was the only person to whom she could say anything. And he was a merciful old man: when troubles arose – when clerks went wrong or debtors failed – Mr Fareham's opinion was always on the side of mercy. This was one of the reasons why they called him an old fogey in the office; always – always he had been merciful. And it was this now which came into her mind. She wrote her telegram hastily, and sent it off at once, lest she should repent, directing it not to the office, where it might be opened by some other hand than his, but to his house. "Come to me directly if you can. I have great need of your advice and help. Tell no one," was what she said. She liked, like all women, to get the full good of the permitted space.

CHAPTER VIII. EXPEDIENTS

His mother was in bed and asleep when Horace returned from his play – or at least so he thought. He opened her door and found the room dark, and said, "Are you asleep, mamma?" and got no answer, which he thought rather strange, as she was such a light sleeper. But, to be sure, last night had been so disturbed, she had not slept at all, and the day had been fatiguing and exciting. No doubt she was very tired. He retired on tiptoe, making, as was natural, far more noise than when he had come in without any precaution at all. But she made no sign; he did not wake her, where she lay, very still, with her eyes closed in the dark, holding her very breath that he might not suspect. Horace had enjoyed his evening. The play had been amusing, the dinner good. Dick Fareham, indeed, had asked a few questions.

"I suppose you found the governor all right?" he said.

"I didn't," said Horace; "the mother did."

"And he's all right, I hope?"

"I can't tell you," said Horace, shortly; "I said I hadn't seen him."

The conversation had ended thus for the moment, but young Fareham was too curious to leave it so. He asked Horace when he was coming to the London office. "I know I'm only a warming-pan," he said, "keeping the place warm for you. I suppose that will be settled while you are here."

"I don't know anything about it," said Horace. "We heard you were all at sixes and sevens in the office."

"I at sixes and sevens!"

"Oh, I don't mean to be disagreeable. We heard so," said Horace, "and that the governor had his hands full."

"I'd like to know who told you that," said the young man. "I'd like to punch his head, whoever said it. In the first place, it is not true, and your father is not the man to put such a story about."

Now Horace had not been told this as the reason of his father's absence, but had found it out, as members of a family find out what has been talked of in the house, the persons in the secret falling off their guard as time goes on. He was angry at the resentment with which he was met, but a little at a loss for a reply.

"Perhaps you think I have put it about?" he said, indignant. "It has not been put about at all, but we heard it somehow. That was why my father –"

"I think I can see how it was – I think I can understand," said young Fareham. "That was what called your father up to London. By Jove!"

And after that he was not so pleasant a companion for the rest of the evening. But the play was amusing, and Horace partially forgot this *contretemps*. When he found his mother's room shut up and quiet, he went to his own without any burden on his mind. He was not so anxious about "the governor" as perhaps Milly in his place might have been. It was highly unpleasant that the mother and he should have quarrelled, and quite incomprehensible. But Horace went to bed philosophically, and the trouble in his mind was not enough to keep him from sleep.

Young Fareham, on his side, wrote an indignant letter to his uncle, demanding to know if his mind too had been poisoned by false reports. The young man was very angry. He was being made the scapegoat; he was the excuse for old Landon's absence, who had not been near the office for months, and he called upon his own particular patron to vindicate him. Had his private morals been attacked he might have borne it; but to talk of the office as at sixes and sevens! this was more than he could bear.

Next morning, before anybody else was awake, an early housemaid stole into Mrs Lycett-Landon's room, and told her that a gentleman had arrived who wanted to see her. The poor lady had slept a little towards the morning, and was waked by this message. She thought it must be her

husband, and after a moment of dolorous hesitation got up hastily and dressed herself, and went to the sitting-room, which was still in the disorder of last night, and looking, if that were possible, still more wretched, raw, and unhomelike than in its usual trim. She found, with a great shock and sense of discouragement, old Mr Fareham, pale after his night's journey, with all the wrinkles about his eyes more pronounced, and the slight tremor in his head more visible than ever. He came forward to meet her, holding out both his hands.

"What can I do for you?" he said. "What has happened? I came off, you see, by the first train."

"Oh, Mr Fareham, I never expected this! You must have thought me mad. I think, indeed, I must have been off my head a little last night. I telegraphed, did I? – I scarcely knew what I was doing – "

"You have not found him, then?"

She covered her face with her hands. To meet the old man's eyes in the light of day and tell her story was impossible. Why had not she gone away, buried herself somewhere, and never said a word?

"I have seen Mr Landon, Mr Fareham; he is not – ill: but Horace knows nothing," she said, hastily.

"My dear lady, if I am to do anything for you I must know."

"I don't think there is anything to be done. We have had a – serious disagreement; but Horace knows nothing," she repeated again. He looked at her, and she could not bear his eyes. "I am very sorry to have given you so much trouble – "

"The trouble is nothing," he said. "I have known you almost all your life. It would be strange if I could not take a little trouble. I think I know what you mean. You were distracted last night, and sent for me. But now in the calm of the morning things do not look so bad, and you think you have been too hasty. I can understand that, if that is what you mean."

She could not bear his eye. She sank down in the chair where she had sat last night and talked to Horace. *In the calm of the morning!* It was only now, when she felt that she had begun to live again, that all her problems came back to her, full awake, and fell upon her like harpies. *Things do not look so bad!*

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