Wilfrid Cumbermede

George MacDonald

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Opening pages

With 14 Full Page Black-And-White Illustrations By F.A. Fraser.

[Illustration: One Day, As We Were Walking Over The Fields, I Told Him The Whole Story Of The Loss Of The Weapon At Moldwarp Hall.]

WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.

INTRODUCTION.

I am--I will not say how old, but well past middle age. This much I feel compelled to mention, because it has long been my opinion that no man should attempt a history of himself until he has set foot upon the border land where the past and the future begin to blend in a consciousness somewhat independent of both, and hence interpreting both. Looking westward, from this vantage-ground, the setting sun is not the less lovely to him that he recalls a merrier time when the shadows fell the other way. Then they sped westward before him, as if to vanish, chased by his advancing footsteps, over the verge of the world. Now they come creeping towards him, lengthening as they come. And they are welcome. Can it be that he would ever have chosen a world without shadows? Was not the trouble of the shadowless noon the dreariest of all? Did he not then long for the curtained queen--the all-shadowy night? And shall he now regard with dismay the setting sun of his earthly life? When he looks back, he sees the farthest cloud of the sun-deserted east alive with a rosy hue. It is the prophecy of the sunset concerning the dawn. For the sun itself is ever a rising sun, and the morning will come though the night should be dark.

In this ‘season of calm weather,’ when the past has receded so far that he can behold it as in a picture, and his share in it as the history of a man who had lived and would soon die; when he can confess his faults without the bitterness of shame, both because he is humble, and because the faults themselves have dropped from him; when his good deeds look poverty-stricken in his eyes, and he would no more claim consideration for them than expect knighthood because he was no thief; when he cares little for his reputation, but much for his character--little for what has gone beyond his control, but endlessly much for what yet remains in his will to determine; then, I think, a man may do well to write his own life.

‘So,’ I imagine my reader interposing, ‘you profess to have arrived at this high degree of perfection yourself?’

I reply that the man who has attained this kind of indifference to the past, this kind of hope in the future, will be far enough from considering it a high degree of perfection. The very idea is to such a man ludicrous. One may eat bread without claiming the honours of an athlete; one may desire to be honest and not count himself a saint. My object in thus shadowing out what seems to me my present condition of mind, is merely to render it intelligible to my reader how an autobiography might come to be written without rendering the writer justly liable to the charge of that overweening, or self-conceit, which might be involved in the mere conception of the idea.

In listening to similar recitals from the mouths of elderly people, I have observed that many things which seemed to the persons principally concerned ordinary enough, had to me a wonder and a significance they did not perceive. Let me hope that some of the things I am about to relate may fare similarly, although, to be honest, I must confess I could not have undertaken the task, for a task it is, upon this chance alone: I do think some of my history worthy of being told, just for the facts’ sake. God knows I have had small share of that worthiness. The weakness of my life has been that I would ever do some great thing; the saving of my life has been my utter failure. I have never done a great deed. If I had, I know that one of my temperament could not have escaped serious consequences. I have had more pleasure when a grown man in a certain discovery concerning the ownership of an apple of which I had taken the ancestral bite when a boy, than I can remember to have resulted from any action of my own during my whole existence. But I detest the notion of puzzling my reader in order to enjoy her fancied surprise, or her possible praise of a worthless ingenuity of concealment. If I ever appear to behave thus, it is merely that I follow the course of my own knowledge of myself and my affairs, without any desire to give either the pain or the pleasure

of suspense, if indeed I may flatter myself with the hope of interesting her to such a degree that suspense should become possible.

When I look over what I have written, I find the tone so sombre--let me see: what sort of an evening is it on which I commence this book? Ah! I thought so: a sombre evening. The sun is going down behind a low bank of grey cloud, the upper edge of which he tinges with a faded yellow. There will be rain before morning. It is late Autumn, and most of the crops are gathered in. A bluish fog is rising from the lower meadows. As I look I grow cold. It is not, somehow, an interesting evening. Yet if I found just this evening well described in a novel, I should enjoy it heartily. The poorest, weakest drizzle upon the window-panes of a dreary roadside inn in a country of slate-quarries, possesses an interest to him who enters it by the door of a book, hardly less than the pouring rain which threatens to swell every brook to a torrent. How is this? I think it is because your troubles do not enter into the book and its troubles do not enter into you, and therefore nature operates upon you unthwarted by the personal conditions which so often counteract her present influences. But I will rather shut out the fading west, the gathering mists, and the troubled consciousness of nature altogether, light my fire and my pipe, and then try whether in my first chapter I cannot be a boy again in such fashion that my companion, that is, my reader, will not be too impatient to linger a little in the meadows of childhood ere we pass to the corn-fields of riper years.

CHAPTER I.

WHERE I FIND MYSELF.

No wisest chicken, I presume, can recall the first moment when the chalk-oval surrounding it gave way, and instead of the cavern of limestone which its experience might have led it to expect, it found a world of air and movement and freedom and blue sky--with kites in it. For my own part, I often wished, when a child, that I had watched while God was making me, so that I might have remembered how he did it. Now my wonder is whether, when I creep forth into ‘that new world which is the old,’ I shall be conscious of the birth, and enjoy the whole mighty surprise, or whether I shall become gradually aware that things are changed and stare about me like the new-born baby. What will be the candle-flame that shall first attract my new-born sight? But I forget that speculation about the new life is not writing the history of the old.

I have often tried how far back my memory could go. I suspect there are awfully ancient shadows mingling with our memories; but, as far as I can judge, the earliest definite memory I have is the discovery of how the wind is made; for I saw the process going on before my very eyes, and there could be, and there was, no doubt of the relation of cause and effect in the matter. There were the trees swaying themselves about after the wildest fashion, and there was the wind in consequence visiting my person somewhat too roughly. The trees were blowing in my face. They made the wind, and threw it at me. I used my natural senses, and this was what they told me. The discovery impressed me so deeply that even now I cannot look upon trees without a certain indescribable and, but for this remembrance, unaccountable awe. A grove was to me for many years a fountain of winds, and, in the stillest day, to look into a depth of gathered stems filled me with dismay; for the whole awful assembly might, writhing together in earnest and effectual contortion, at any moment begin their fearful task of churning the wind.

There were no trees in the neighbourhood of the house where I was born. It stood in the midst of grass, and nothing but grass was to be seen for a long way on every side of it. There was not a gravel path or a road near it. Its walls, old and rusty, rose immediately from the grass. Green blades and a few heads of daisies leaned trustingly against the brown stone, all the sharpness of whose fractures had long since vanished, worn away by the sun and the rain, or filled up by the slow lichens, which I used to think were young stones growing out of the wall. The ground was part of a very old dairy-farm, and my uncle, to whom it belonged, would not have a path about the place. But then the grass was well subdued by the cows, and, indeed, I think, would never have grown very long, for it was of that delicate sort which we see only on downs and in parks and on old grazing farms. All about the house--as far, at least, as my lowly eyes could see--the ground was perfectly level, and this lake of greenery, out of which it rose like a solitary rock, was to me an unfailing mystery and delight. This will sound strange in the ears of those who consider a mountainous, or at least an undulating, surface essential to beauty; but nature is altogether independent of what is called fine scenery. There are other organs than the eyes, even if grass and water and sky were not of the best and loveliest of nature’s shows.

The house, I have said, was of an ancient-looking stone, grey and green and yellow and brown. It looked very hard; yet there were some attempts at carving about the heads of the narrow windows. The carving had, however, become so dull and shadowy that I could not distinguish a single form or separable portion of design: still some ancient thought seemed ever flickering across them. The house, which was two stories in height, had a certain air of defence about it, ill to explain. It had no eaves, for the walls rose above the edge of the roof; but the hints at battlements were of the merest. The roof, covered with grey slates, rose very steep, and had narrow, tall dormer windows in it. The edges of the gables rose, not in a slope, but in a succession of notches, like stairs. Altogether, the

shell to which, considered as a crustaceous animal, I belonged--for man is every animal according as you choose to contemplate him--had an old-world look about it--a look of the time when men had to fight in order to have peace, to kill in order to live. Being, however, a crustaceous animal, I, the heir of all the new impulses of the age, was born and reared in closest neighbourhood with strange relics of a vanished time. Humanity so far retains its chief characteristics that the new generations can always flourish in the old shell.

The dairy was at some distance, so deep in a hollow that a careless glance would not have discovered it. I well remember my astonishment when my aunt first took me there; for I had not even observed the depression of surface: all had been a level green to my eyes. Beyond this hollow were fields divided by hedges, and lanes, and the various goings to and fro of a not unpeopled although quiet neighbourhood. Until I left home for school, however, I do not remember to have seen a carriage of any kind approach our solitary dwelling. My uncle would have regarded it as little short of an insult for any one to drive wheels over the smooth lawny surface in which our house dwelt like a solitary island in the sea.

Before the threshold lay a brown patch, worn bare of grass, and beaten hard by the descending feet of many generations. The stone threshold itself was worn almost to a level with it. A visitor’s first step was into what would, in some parts, be called the house-place, a room which served all the purposes of a kitchen, and yet partook of the character of an old hall. It rose to a fair height, with smoke-stained beams above; and was floored with a kind of cement, hard enough, and yet so worn that it required a good deal of local knowledge to avoid certain jars of the spine from sudden changes of level. All the furniture was dark and shining, especially the round table, which, with its bewildering, spider-like accumulation of legs, waited under the mullioned, lozenged window until meal-times, when, like an animal roused from its lair, it stretched out those legs, and assumed expanded and symmetrical shape in front of the

fire in Winter, and nearer the door in Summer. It recalls the vision of my aunt, with a hand at each end of it, searching empirically for the level--feeling for it, that is, with the creature's own legs--before lifting the hanging-leaves, and drawing out the hitherto supernumerary legs to support them; after which would come a fresh adjustment of level, another hustling to and fro, that the new feet likewise might settle on elevations of equal height; and then came the snowy cloth or the tea-tray, deposited cautiously upon its shining surface.

The walls of this room were always whitewashed in the Spring, occasioning ever a sharpened contrast with the dark-brown ceiling. Whether that was even swept I do not know; I do not remember ever seeing it done. At all events, its colour remained unimpaired by paint or whitewash. On the walls hung various articles, some of them high above my head, and attractive for that reason if for no other. I never saw one of them moved from its place--not even the fishing-rod, which required the whole length betwixt the two windows: three rusty hooks hung from it, and waved about when a wind entered ruder than common. Over the fishing-rod hung a piece of tapestry, about a yard in width, and longer than that. It would have required a very capable constructiveness indeed to supply the design from what remained, so fragmentary were the forms, and so dim and faded were the once bright colours. It was there as an ornament; for that which is a mere complement of higher modes of life, becomes, when useless, the ornament of lower conditions: what we call great virtues are little regarded by the saints. It was long before I began to think how the tapestry could have come there, or to what it owed the honour given it in the house.

On the opposite wall hung another object, which may well have been the cause of my carelessness about the former--attracting to itself all my interest. It was a sword, in a leather sheath. From the point, half way to the hilt, the sheath was split all along the edge of the weapon. The sides of the wound gaped, and the blade was visible to my prying eyes. It was

with rust almost as dark a brown as the scabbard that infolded it. But the under parts of the hilt, where dust could not settle, gleamed with a faint golden shine. That sword was to my childish eyes the type of all mystery, a clouded glory, which for many long years I never dreamed of attempting to unveil. Not the sword Excalibur, had it been ‘stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings,’ could have radiated more marvel into the hearts of young knights than that sword radiated into mine. Night after night I would dream of danger drawing nigh--crowds of men of evil purpose--enemies to me or to my country; and ever in the beginning of my dream, I stood ready, foreknowing and waiting; for I had climbed and had taken the ancient power from the wall, and had girded it about my waist--always with a straw rope, the sole band within my reach; but as it went on, the power departed from the dream: I stood waiting for foes who would not come; or they drew near in fury, and when I would have drawn my weapon, old blood and rust held it fast in its sheath, and I tugged at it in helpless agony; and fear invaded my heart, and I turned and fled, pursued by my foes until I left the dream itself behind, whence the terror still pursued me.

There were many things more on those walls. A pair of spurs, of make modern enough, hung between two pewter dish-covers. Hanging book-shelves came next; for although most of my uncle’s books were in his bed-room, some of the commoner were here on the wall, next to an old fowling-piece, of which both lock and barrel were devoured with rust. Then came a great pair of shears, though how they should have been there I cannot yet think, for there was no garden to the house, no hedges or trees to clip. I need not linger over these things. Their proper place is in the picture with which I would save words and help understanding if I could.

Of course there was a great chimney in the place; chiefly to be mentioned from the singular fact that just round its corner was a little door opening on a rude winding stair of stone. This appeared to be constructed within

the chimney; but on the outside of the wall, was a half-rounded projection, revealing that the stair was not indebted to it for the whole of its accommodation. Whither the stair led, I shall have to disclose in my next chapter. From the opposite end of the kitchen, an ordinary wooden staircase, with clumsy balustrade, led up to the two bed-rooms occupied by my uncle and my aunt; to a large lumber-room, whose desertion and almost emptiness was a source of uneasiness in certain moods; and to a spare bed-room, which was better furnished than any of ours, and indeed to my mind a very grand and spacious apartment. This last was never occupied during my childhood; consequently it smelt musty notwithstanding my aunt's exemplary housekeeping. Its bedsteads must have been hundreds of years old. Above these rooms again were those to which the dormer windows belonged, and in one of them I slept. It had a deep closet in which I kept my few treasures, and into which I used to retire when out of temper or troubled, conditions not occurring frequently, for nobody quarrelled with me, and I had nobody with whom I might have quarrelled.

When I climbed upon a chair, I could seat myself on the broad sill of the dormer window. This was the watch-tower whence I viewed the world. Thence I could see trees in the distance--too far off for me to tell whether they were churning wind or not. On that side those trees alone were between me and the sky.

One day when my aunt took me with her into the lumber-room, I found there, in a corner, a piece of strange mechanism. It had a kind of pendulum; but I cannot describe it because I had lost sight of it long before I was capable of discovering its use, and my recollection of it is therefore very vague--far too vague to admit of even a conjecture now as to what it could have been intended for. But I remember well enough my fancy concerning it, though when or how that fancy awoke I cannot tell either. It seems to me as old as the finding of the instrument. The fancy was that if I could keep that pendulum wagging long enough, it would set

all those trees going too; and if I still kept it swinging, we should have such a storm of wind as no living man had ever felt or heard of. That I more than half believed it, will be evident from the fact that, although I frequently carried the pendulum, as I shall call it, to the window sill, and set it in motion by way of experiment, I had not, up to the time of a certain incident which I shall very soon have to relate, had the courage to keep up the oscillation beyond ten or a dozen strokes; partly from fear of the trees, partly from a dim dread of exercising power whose source and extent were not within my knowledge. I kept the pendulum in the closet I have mentioned, and never spoke to any one of it.

CHAPTER II.

MY UNCLE AND AUNT.

We were a curious household. I remembered neither father nor mother; and the woman I had been taught to call *auntie* was no such near relation. My uncle was my father's brother, and my aunt was his cousin, by the mother's side. She was a tall, gaunt woman, with a sharp nose and eager eyes, yet sparing of speech. Indeed, there was very little speech to be heard in the house. My aunt, however, looked as if she could have spoken. I think it was the spirit of the place that kept her silent, for there were those eager eyes. She might have been expected also to show a bad temper, but I never saw a sign of such. To me she was always kind; chiefly, I allow, in a negative way, leaving me to do very much as I pleased. I doubt if she felt any great tenderness for me, although I had been dependent upon her care from infancy. In after-years I came to the conclusion that she was in love with my uncle; and perhaps the sense that he was indifferent to her save after a brotherly fashion, combined with the fear of betraying herself and the consciousness of her unattractive appearance, to produce the contradiction between her looks and her behaviour.

Every morning, after our early breakfast, my uncle walked away to the farm, where he remained until dinner-time. Often, when busy at my own invented games in the grass, I have caught sight of my aunt, standing motionless with her hand over her eyes, watching for the first glimpse of my uncle ascending from the hollow where the farm-buildings lay; and occasionally, when something had led her thither as well, I would watch them returning together over the grass, when she would keep glancing up in his face at almost regular intervals, although it was evident they were not talking, but he never turned his face or lifted his eyes from the ground a few yards in front of him.

He was a tall man of nearly fifty, with grey hair, and quiet meditative blue eyes. He always looked as if he were thinking. He had been intended for the Church, but the means for the prosecution of his studies failing, he had turned his knowledge of rustic affairs to account, and taken a subordinate position on a nobleman's estate, where he rose to be bailiff. When my father was seized with his last illness, he returned to take the management of the farm. It had been in the family for many generations. Indeed that portion of it upon which the house stood, was our own property. When my mother followed my father, my uncle asked his cousin to keep house for him. Perhaps she had expected a further request, but more had not come of it.

When he came in, my uncle always went straight to his room; and having washed his hands and face, took a book and sat down in the window. If I were sent to tell him that the meal was ready, I was sure to find him reading. He would look up, smile, and look down at his book again; nor, until I had formally delivered my message, would he take further notice of me. Then he would rise, lay his book carefully aside, take my hand, and lead me down-stairs.

To my childish eyes there was something very grand about my uncle. His face was large-featured and handsome; he was tall, and stooped meditatively. I think my respect for him was founded a good deal upon the reverential way in which my aunt regarded him. And there was great wisdom, I came to know, behind that countenance, a golden speech behind that silence.

My reader must not imagine that the prevailing silence of the house oppressed me. I had been brought up in it, and never felt it. My own thoughts, if thoughts those conditions of mind could be called, which were chiefly passive results of external influences--whatever they were--thoughts or feelings, sensations, or dim, slow movements of mind--they filled the great pauses of speech; and besides, I could read the

faces of both my uncle and aunt like the pages of a well-known book. Every shade of alteration in them I was familiar with, for their changes were not many.

Although my uncle's habit was silence, however, he would now and then take a fit of talking to me. I remember many such talks; the better, perhaps, that they were divided by long intervals. I had perfect confidence in his wisdom, and submission to his will. I did not much mind my aunt. Perhaps her deference to my uncle made me feel as if she and I were more on a level. She must have been really kind, for she never resented any petulance or carelessness. Possibly she sacrificed her own feeling to the love my uncle bore me; but I think it was rather that, because he cared for me, she cared for me too.

Twice during every meal she would rise from the table with some dish in her hand, open the door behind the chimney, and ascend the winding stair.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE TOP OF THE CHIMNEY-STAIR.

I fear my reader may have thought me too long occupied with the explanatory foundations of my structure: I shall at once proceed to raise its walls of narrative. Whatever further explanations may be necessary, can be applied as buttresses in lieu of a broader base.

One Sunday--it was his custom of a Sunday--I fancy I was then somewhere about six years of age--my uncle rose from the table after our homely dinner, took me by the hand, and led me to the dark door with the long arrow-headed hinges, and up the winding stone stair which I never ascended except with him or my aunt. At the top was another rugged door, and within that, one covered with green baize. The last opened on what had always seemed to me a very paradise of a room. It was old-fashioned enough; but childhood is of any and every age, and it was not old-fashioned to me--only intensely cosy and comfortable. The first thing my eyes generally rested upon was an old bureau, with a book-case on the top of it, the glass-doors of which were lined with faded red silk. The next thing I would see was a small tent-bed, with the whitest of curtains, and enchanting fringes of white ball-tassels. The bed was covered with an equally charming counterpane of silk patchwork. The next object was the genius of the place, in a high, close, easy-chair, covered with some dark stuff, against which her face, surrounded with its widow’s cap, of ancient form, but dazzling whiteness, was strongly relieved. How shall I describe the shrunken, yet delicate, the gracious, if not graceful form, and the face from which extreme old age had not wasted half the loveliness? Yet I always beheld it with an indescribable sensation, one of whose elements I can isolate and identify as a faint fear. Perhaps this arose partly from the fact that, in going up the stair, more

than once my uncle had said to me, ‘You must not mind what grannie says, Willie, for old people will often speak strange things that young people cannot understand. But you must love grannie, for she is a very good old lady.’

‘Well, grannie, how are you to-day?’ said my uncle, as we entered, this particular Sunday.

I may as well mention at once that my uncle called her *grannie* in his own right and not in mine, for she was in truth my great-grandmother.

‘Pretty well, David, I thank you; but much too long out of my grave,’ answered grannie; in no sepulchral tones, however, for her voice, although weak and uneven, had a sound in it like that of one of the upper strings of a violin. The plaintiveness of it touched me, and I crept near her--nearer than, I believe, I had ever yet gone of my own will--and laid my hand upon hers. I withdrew it instantly, for there was something in the touch that made me--not shudder, exactly--but creep. Her hand was smooth and soft, and warm too, only somehow the skin of it seemed dead. With a quicker movement than belonged to her years, she caught hold of mine, which she kept in one of her hands, while she stroked it with the other. My slight repugnance vanished for the time, and I looked up in her face, grateful for a tenderness which was altogether new to me.

‘What makes you so long out of your grave, grannie?’ I asked.

‘They won’t let me into it, my dear.’

‘Who won’t let you, grannie?’

‘My own grandson there, and the woman down the stair.’

‘But you don’t really want to go--do you, grannie?’

‘I do want to go, Willie. I ought to have been there long ago. I am very old; so old that I’ve forgotten how old I am. How old am I?’ she asked, looking up at my uncle.

‘Nearly ninety-five, grannie; and the older you get before you go the better we shall be pleased, as you know very well.’

‘There! I told you,’ she said with a smile, not all of pleasure, as she turned her head towards me. ‘They won’t let me go. I want to go to my grave, and they won’t let me! Is that an age at which to keep a poor woman from her grave?’

‘But it’s not a nice place, is it, grannie?’ I asked, with the vaguest ideas of what *the grave* meant. ‘I think somebody told me it was in the churchyard.’

But neither did I know with any clearness what the church itself meant, for we were a long way from church, and I had never been there yet.

‘Yes, it is in the churchyard, my dear.’

‘Is it a house?’ I asked.

‘Yes, a little house; just big enough for one.’

‘I shouldn’t like that.’

‘Oh yes, you would.’

‘Is it a nice place, then?’

‘Yes, the nicest place in the world, when you get to be so old as I am. If they would only let me die!’

‘Die, grannie!’ I exclaimed. My notions of death as yet were derived only from the fowls brought from the farm, with their necks hanging down long and limp, and their heads wagging hither and thither.

‘Come, grannie, you mustn’t frighten our little man,’ interposed my uncle, looking kindly at us both.

‘David!’ said grannie, with a reproachful dignity, ‘*you* know what I mean well enough. You know that until I have done what I have to do, the grave that is waiting for me will not open its mouth to receive me. If you will only allow me to do what I have to do, I shall not trouble you long. Oh dear! oh dear!’ she broke out, moaning and rocking herself to and fro, ‘I am too old to weep, and they will not let me to my bed. I want to go to bed. I want to go to sleep.’

She moaned and complained like a child. My uncle went near and took her hand.

‘Come, come, dear grannie!’ he said, ‘you must not behave like this. You know all things are for the best.’

‘To keep a corpse out of its grave!’ retorted the old lady, almost fiercely, only she was too old and weak to be fierce. ‘Why should you keep a soul that’s longing to depart and go to its own people, lingering on in the coffin? What better than a coffin is this withered body? The child is old enough to understand me. Leave him with me for half an hour, and I shall trouble you no longer. I shall at least wait my end in peace. But I think I should die before the morning.’

Ere grannie had finished this sentence, I had shrunk from her again and retreated behind my uncle.

‘There!’ she went on, ‘you make my own child fear me. Don’t be frightened, Willie dear; your old mother is not a wild beast; she loves you dearly. Only my grand-children are so undutiful! They will not let my own son come near me.’

How I recall this I do not know, for I could not have understood it at the time. The fact is that during the last few years I have found pictures of

the past returning upon me in the most vivid and unaccountable manner, so much so as almost to alarm me. Things I had utterly forgotten--or so far at least that when they return, they must appear only as vivid imaginations, were it not for a certain conviction of fact which accompanies them--are constantly dawning out of the past. Can it be that the decay of the observant faculties allows the memory to revive and gather force? But I must refrain, for my business is to narrate, not to speculate.

My uncle took me by the hand, and turned to leave the room. I cast one look at grannie as he led me away. She had thrown her head back on her chair, and her eyes were closed; but her face looked offended, almost angry. She looked to my fancy as if she were trying but unable to lie down. My uncle closed the doors very gently. In the middle of the stair he stopped, and said in a low voice,

‘Willie, do you know that when people grow very old they are not quite like other people?’

‘Yes. They want to go to the churchyard,’ I answered.

‘They fancy things,’ said my uncle. ‘Grannie thinks you are her own son.’

‘And ain’t I?’ I asked innocently.

‘Not exactly,’ he answered. ‘Your father was her son’s son. She forgets that, and wants to talk to you as if you were your grandfather. Poor old grannie! I don’t wish you to go and see her without your aunt or me: mind that.’

Whether I made any promise I do not remember; but I know that a new something was mingled with my life from that moment. An air as it were of the tomb mingled henceforth with the homely delights of my life. Grannie wanted to die, and uncle would not let her. She longed for her

grave, and they would keep her above-ground. And from the feeling that grannie ought to be buried, grew an awful sense that she was not alive--not alive, that is, as other people are alive, and a gulf was fixed between her and me which for a long time I never attempted to pass, avoiding as much as I could all communication with her, even when my uncle or aunt wished to take me to her room. They did not seem displeased, however, when I objected, and not always insisted on obedience. Thus affairs went on in our quiet household for what seemed to me a very long time.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PENDULUM.

It may have been a year after this, it may have been two, I cannot tell, when the next great event in my life occurred. I think it was towards the close of an Autumn, but there was not so much about our house as elsewhere to mark the changes of the seasons, for the grass was always green. I remember it was a sultry afternoon. I had been out almost the whole day, wandering hither and thither over the grass, and I felt hot and oppressed. Not an air was stirring. I longed for a breath of wind, for I was not afraid of the wind itself, only of the trees that made it. Indeed, I delighted in the wind, and would run against it with exuberant pleasure, even rejoicing in the fancy that I, as well as the trees, could make the wind by shaking my hair about as I ran. I must run, however; whereas the trees, whose prime business it was, could do it without stirring from the spot. But this was much too hot an afternoon for me, whose mood was always more inclined to the passive than the active, to run about and toss my hair, even for the sake of the breeze that would result therefrom. I bethought myself. I was nearly a man now; I would be afraid of things no more; I would get out my pendulum, and see whether that would not help me. Not this time would I flinch from what consequences might follow. Let them be what they might, the pendulum should wag, and have a fair chance of doing its best.

[Illustration: “I SAT AND WATCHED IT WITH GROWING AWE.”]

I went up to my room, a sense of high emprise filling my little heart. Composedly, yea solemnly, I set to work, even as some enchanter of old might have drawn his circle, and chosen his spell out of his iron-clasped volume. I strode to the closet in which the awful instrument dwelt. It stood in the furthest corner. As I lifted it, something like a groan invaded my ear. My notions of locality were not then sufficiently developed to let me know that grannie’s room was on the other side of that closet. I

almost let the creature, for as such I regarded it, drop. I was not to be deterred, however. I bore it carefully to the light, and set it gently on the window sill, full in view of the distant trees towards the west. I left it then for a moment, as if that it might gather its strength for its unwonted labours, while I closed the door, and, with what fancy I can scarcely imagine now, the curtains of my bed as well. Possibly it was with some notion of having one place to which, if the worst came to the worst, I might retreat for safety. Again I approached the window, and after standing for some time in contemplation of the pendulum, I set it in motion, and stood watching it.

It swung slower and slower. It wanted to stop. It should not stop. I gave it another swing. On it went, at first somewhat distractedly, next more regularly, then with slowly retarding movement. But it should not stop.

I turned in haste and got from the side of my bed the only chair in the room, placed it in the window, sat down before the reluctant instrument, and gave it a third swing. Then, my elbows on the sill, I sat and watched it with growing awe, but growing determination as well. Once more it showed signs of refusal; once more the forefinger of my right hand administered impulse.

Something gave a crack inside the creature: away went the pendulum, swinging with a will. I sat and gazed, almost horror-stricken. Ere many moments had passed, the feeling of terror had risen to such a height that, but for the very terror, I would have seized the pendulum in a frantic grasp. I did not. On it went, and I sat looking. My dismay was gradually subsiding.

I have learned since that a certain ancestor--or was he only a great-uncle?--I forget--had a taste for mechanics, even to the craze of the perpetual motion, and could work well in brass and iron. The creature was probably some invention of his. It was a real marvel how, after so many years of idleness, it could now go as it did. I confess, as I

contemplate the thing, I am in a puzzle, and almost fancy the whole a dream. But let it pass. At worst, something of which this is the sole representative residuum, wrought an effect on me which embodies its cause thus, as I search for it in the past. And why should not the individual life have its misty legends as well as that of nations? From them, as from the golden and rosy clouds of morning, dawns at last the true sun of its unquestionable history. Every boy has his own fables, just as the Romes and the Englands of the world have their Romuli and their Arthurs, their suckling wolves and their granite-sheathed swords. Do they not reflect each other? I tell the tale as ‘tis left in me.

How long I sat thus gazing at the now self-impelled instrument, I cannot say. The next point in the progress of the legend, is a gust of wind rattling the window in whose recess I was seated. I jumped from my chair in terror. While I had been absorbed in the pendulum, the evening had closed in; clouds had gathered over the sky, and all was gloomy about the house. It was much too dark to see the distant trees, but there could be no doubt they were at work. The pendulum had roused them. Another, a third, and a fourth gust rattled and shook the rickety frame. I had done it at last! The trees were busy away there in the darkness. I and my pendulum could make the wind.

The gusts came faster and faster, and grew into blasts which settled into a steady gale. The pendulum went on swinging to and fro, and the gale went on increasing in violence. I sat half in terror, half in delight, at the awful success of my experiment. I would have opened the window to let in the coveted air, but that was beyond my knowledge and strength. I could make the wind blow, but, like other magicians, I could not share in its benefits. I would go out and meet it on the open plain. I crept down the stair like a thief--not that I feared detention, but that I felt such a sense of the important, even the dread, about myself and my instrument, that I was not in harmony with souls reflecting only the common affairs of life. In a moment I was in the middle of a storm--for storm it very

nearly was and soon became. I rushed to and fro in the midst of it, lay down and rolled in it, and laughed and shouted as I looked up to the window where the pendulum was swinging, and thought of the trees at work away in the dark. The wind grew stronger and stronger. What if the pendulum should not stop at all, and the wind went on and on, growing louder and fiercer, till it grew mad and blew away the house? Ah, then, poor grannie would have a chance of being buried at last! Seriously, the affair might grow serious.

Such thoughts were passing in my mind, when all at once the wind gave a roar which made me spring to my feet and rush for the house. I must stop the pendulum. There was a strange sound in that blast. The trees themselves had had enough of it, and were protesting against the creature's tyranny. Their master was working them too hard. I ran up the stair on all fours: it was my way when I was in a hurry. Swinging went the pendulum in the window, and the wind roared in the chimney. I seized hold of the oscillating thing, and stopped it; but to my amaze and consternation, the moment I released it, on it went again. I must sit and hold it. But the voice of my aunt called me from below, and as I dared not explain why I would rather not appear, I was forced to obey. I lingered on the stair, half minded to return.

'What a rough night it is!' I heard my aunt say, with rare remark.

'It gets worse and worse,' responded my uncle. 'I hope it won't disturb grannie; but the wind must roar fearfully in her chimney.'

I stood like a culprit. What if they should find out that I was at the root of the mischief, at the heart of the storm!

'If I could believe all that I have been reading to-night about the Prince of the Power of the Air, I should not like this storm at all,' continued my uncle, with a smile. 'But books are not always to be trusted because they

are old,' he added with another smile. 'From the glass, I expected rain and not wind.'

'Whatever wind there is, we get it all,' said my aunt. 'I wonder what Willie is about. I thought I heard him coming down. Isn't it time, David, we did something about his schooling? It won't do to have him idling about this way all day long.'

'He's a mere child,' returned my uncle. 'I'm not forgetting him. But I can't send him away yet.'

'You know best,' returned my aunt.

Send me away! What could it mean? Why should I--where should I go? Was not the old place a part of me, just like my own clothes on my own body? This was the kind of feeling that woke in me at the words. But hearing my aunt push back her chair, evidently with the purpose of finding me, I descended into the room.

'Come along, Willie,' said my uncle. 'Hear the wind how it roars!'

'Yes, uncle; it does roar,' I said, feeling a hypocrite for the first time in my life. Knowing far more about the roaring than he did, I yet spoke like an innocent!

'Do you know who makes the wind, Willie?'

'Yes. The trees,' I answered.

My uncle opened his blue eyes very wide, and looked at my aunt. He had had no idea what a little heathen I was. The more a man has wrought out his own mental condition, the readier he is to suppose that children must be able to work out theirs, and to forget that he did not work out his information, but only his conclusions. My uncle began to think it was time to take me in hand.

'No, Willie,' he said. 'I must teach you better than that.'

I expected him to begin by telling me that God made the wind; but, whether it was that what the old book said about the Prince of the Power of the Air returned upon him, or that he thought it an unfitting occasion for such a lesson when the wind was roaring so as might render its divine origin questionable, he said no more. Bewildered, I fancy, with my ignorance, he turned, after a pause, to my aunt.

‘Don’t you think it’s time for him to go to bed, Jane?’ he suggested.

My aunt replied by getting from the cupboard my usual supper--a basin of milk and a slice of bread; which I ate with less circumspection than usual, for I was eager to return to my room. As soon as I had finished, Nannie was called, and I bade them good-night.

‘Make haste, Nannie,’ I said. ‘Don’t you hear how the wind is roaring?’

It was roaring louder than ever, and there was the pendulum swinging away in the window. Nannie took no notice of it, and, I presume, only thought I wanted to get my head under the bed-clothes, and so escape the sound of it. Anyhow, she did make haste, and in a very few minutes I was, as she supposed, snugly settled for the night. But the moment she shut the door I was out of bed, and at the window. The instant I reached it, a great dash of rain swept against the panes, and the wind howled more fiercely than ever. Believing I had the key of the position, inasmuch as, if I pleased, I could take the pendulum to bed with me, and stifle its motions with the bed-clothes--for this happy idea had dawned upon me while Nannie was undressing me--I was composed enough now to press my face to a pane, and look out. There was a small space amidst the storm dimly illuminated from the windows below, and the moment I looked--out of the darkness into this dim space, as if blown thither by the wind, rushed a figure on horseback, his large cloak flying out before him, and the mane of the animal he rode streaming out over his ears in the fierceness of the blast. He pulled up right under my window, and I thought he looked up, and made threatening gestures at me; but I believe

now that horse and man pulled up in sudden danger of dashing against the wall of the house. I shrank back, and when I peeped out again he was gone. The same moment the pendulum gave a click and stopped; one more rattle of rain against the windows, and then the wind stopped also. I crept back to my bed in a new terror, for might not this be the Prince of the Power of the Air, come to see who was meddling with his affairs? Had he not come right out of the storm, and straight from the trees? He must have something to do with it all! Before I had settled the probabilities of the question, however, I was fast asleep.

I awoke--how long after, I cannot tell--with the sound of voices in my ears. It was still dark. The voices came from below. I had been dreaming of the strange horseman, who had turned out to be the awful being concerning whom Nannie had enlightened me as going about at night to buy little children from their nurses, and make bagpipes of their skins. Awaked from such a dream, it was impossible to lie still without knowing what those voices down below were talking about. The strange one must belong to the being, whatever he was, whom I had seen come out of the storm; and of whom could they be talking but me? I was right in both conclusions.

With a fearful resolution I slipped out of bed, opened the door as noiselessly as I might, and crept on my bare, silent feet down the creaking stair, which led, with open balustrade, right into the kitchen, at the end furthest from the chimney. The one candle at the other end could not illuminate its darkness, and I sat unseen, a few steps from the bottom of the stair, listening with all my ears, and staring with all my eyes. The stranger’s huge cloak hung drying before the fire, and he was drinking something out of a tumbler. The light fell full upon his face. It was a curious, and certainly not to me an attractive face. The forehead was very projecting, and the eyes were very small, deep set, and sparkling. The mouth--I had almost said muzzle--was very projecting likewise, and the lower jaw shot in front of the upper. When the man smiled the light was

reflected from what seemed to my eyes an inordinate multitude of white teeth. His ears were narrow and long, and set very high upon his head. The hand which he every now and then displayed in the exigencies of his persuasion, was white, but very large, and the thumb was exceedingly long. I had weighty reasons for both suspecting and fearing the man; and, leaving my prejudices out of the question, there was in the conversation itself enough besides to make me take note of dangerous points in his appearance. I never could lay much claim to physical courage, and I attribute my behaviour on this occasion rather to the fascination of terror than to any impulse of self-preservation: I sat there in utter silence, listening like an ear-trumpet. The first words I could distinguish were to this effect:--

‘You do not mean,’ said the enemy, ‘to tell me, Mr Cumbermede, that you intend to bring up the young fellow in absolute ignorance of the decrees of fate?’

‘I pledge myself to nothing in the matter,’ returned my uncle, calmly, but with something in his tone which was new to me.

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed the other. ‘Excuse me, sir, but what right can you have to interfere after such a serious fashion with the young gentleman’s future?’

‘It seems to me,’ said my uncle, ‘that you wish to interfere with it after a much more serious fashion. There are things in which ignorance may be preferable to knowledge.’

‘But what harm could the knowledge of such a fact do him?’

‘Upset all his notions, render him incapable of thinking about anything of importance, occasion an utter--’

But *can* anything be more important?’ interrupted the visitor.

My uncle went on without heeding him.

‘Plunge him over head and ears in--’

‘Hot water, I grant you,’ again interrupted the enemy, to my horror; ‘but it wouldn’t be for long. Only give me your sanction, and I promise you to have the case as tight as a drum before I ask you to move a step in it.’

‘But why should you take so much interest in what is purely our affair?’ asked my uncle.

‘Why, of course you would have to pay the piper,’ said the man.

This was too much! *Pay* the man that played upon me after I was made into bagpipes! The idea was too frightful.

‘I must look out for business, you know; and, by Jove! I shall never have such a chance, if I live to the age of Methuselah.’

‘Well, you shall not have it from me.’

‘Then,’ said the man, rising, ‘you are more of a fool than I took you for.’

‘Sir!’ said my uncle.

‘No offence; no offence, I assure you. But it is provoking to find people so blind--so wilfully blind--to their own interest. You may say I have nothing to lose. Give me the boy, and I’ll bring him up like my own son; send him to school and college, too--all on the chance of being repaid twice over by--’

I knew this was all a trick to get hold of my skin. The man said it on his way to the door, his ape-face shining dim as he turned it a little back in the direction of my uncle, who followed with the candle. I lost the last part of the sentence in the terror which sent me bounding up the stair in my usual four-footed fashion. I leaped into my bed, shaking with cold and agony combined. But I had the satisfaction presently of hearing the *thud* of the horse’s hoofs upon the sward, dying away in the direction whence they had come. After that I soon fell asleep.

I need hardly say that I never set the pendulum swinging again. Many years after, I came upon it when searching for a key, and the thrill which vibrated through my whole frame announced a strange and unwelcome presence long before my memory could recall its origin.

It must not be supposed that I pretend to remember all the conversation I have just set down. The words are but the forms in which, enlightened by facts which have since come to my knowledge, I clothe certain vague memories and impressions of such an interview as certainly took place.

In the morning, at breakfast, my aunt asked my uncle who it was that paid such an untimely visit the preceding night.

‘A fellow from Minstercombe’ (the county town), ‘an attorney--what did he say his name was? Yes, I remember. It was the same as the steward’s over the way. Coningham, it was.’

‘Mr Coningham has a son there--an attorney too, I think,’ said my aunt.

My uncle seemed struck by the reminder, and became meditative.

‘That explains his choosing such a night to come in. His father is getting an old man now. Yes, it must be the same.’

‘He’s a sharp one, folk say,’ said my aunt, with a pointedness in the remark which showed some anxiety.

‘That he cannot conceal, sharp as he is,’ said my uncle, and there the conversation stopped.

The very next evening my uncle began to teach me. I had a vague notion that this had something to do with my protection against the machinations of the man Coningham, the idea of whom was inextricably associated in my mind with that of the Prince of the Power of the Air, darting from the midst of the churning trees, on a horse whose streaming

mane and flashing eyes indicated no true equine origin. I gave myself with diligence to the work my uncle set me.

CHAPTER V.

I HAVE LESSONS.

It is a simple fact that up to this time I did not know my letters. It was, I believe, part of my uncle's theory of education that as little pain as possible should be associated with merely intellectual effort: he would not allow me, therefore, to commence my studies until the task of learning should be an easy one. Henceforth, every evening, after tea, he took me to his own room, the walls of which were nearly covered with books, and there taught me.

One peculiar instance of his mode I will give, and let it stand rather as a pledge for the rest of his system than an index to it. It was only the other day it came back to me. Like Jean Paul, he would utter the name of God to a child only at grand moments; but there was a great difference in the moments the two men would have chosen. Jean Paul would choose a thunder-storm, for instance; the following will show the kind of my uncle's choice. One Sunday evening he took me for a longer walk than usual. We had climbed a little hill: I believe it was the first time I ever had a wide view of the earth. The horses were all loose in the fields; the cattle were gathering their supper as the sun went down; there was an indescribable hush in the air, as if Nature herself knew the seventh day; there was no sound even of water, for here the water crept slowly to the far-off sea, and the slant sunlight shone back from just one bend of a canal-like river; the hay-stacks and ricks of the last year gleamed golden in the farmyards; great fields of wheat stood up stately around us, the glow in their yellow brought out by the red poppies that sheltered in the forest of their stems; the odour of the grass and clover came in pulses; and the soft blue sky was flecked with white clouds tinged with pink, which deepened until it gathered into a flaming rose in the west, where the sun was welling out oceans of liquid red.

I looked up in my uncle's face. It shone in a calm glow, like an answering rosy moon. The eyes of my mind were opened: I saw that he felt something, and then I felt it too, His soul, with the glory for an interpreter, kindled mine.

He, in turn, caught the sight of my face, and his soul broke forth in one word:--

God! Willie; God!' was all he said; and surely it was enough.

It was only then in moments of strong repose that my uncle spoke to me of God.

Although he never petted me, that is, never showed me any animal affection, my uncle was like a father to me in this, that he was about and above me, a pure benevolence. It is no wonder that I should learn rapidly under his teaching, for I was quick enough, and possessed the more energy that it had not been wasted on unpleasant tasks.

Whether from indifference or intent I cannot tell, but he never forbade me to touch any of his books. Upon more occasions than one he found me on the floor with a folio between my knees; but he only smiled and said--

'Ah, Willie! mind you don't crumple the leaves.'

About this time also I had a new experience of another kind, which impressed me almost with the force of a revelation.

I had not yet explored the boundaries of the prairie-like level on which I found myself. As soon as I got about a certain distance from home, I always turned and ran back. Fear is sometimes the first recognition of freedom. Delighting in liberty, I yet shrunk from the unknown spaces around me, and rushed back to the shelter of the home-walls. But as I grew older I became more adventurous; and one evening, although the shadows were beginning to lengthen, I went on and on until I made a

discovery. I found a half-spherical hollow in the grassy surface. I rushed into its depth as if it had been a mine of marvels, threw myself on the ground, and gazed into the sky as if I had now for the first time discovered its true relation to the earth. The earth was a cup, and the sky its cover.

There were lovely daisies in this hollow--not too many to spoil the grass--and they were red-tipped daisies. There was besides, in the very heart of it, one plant of the finest pimpernels I have ever seen, and this was my introduction to the flower. Nor were these all the treasures of the spot. A late primrose, a tiny child, born out of due time, opened its timid petals in the same hollow. Here then we regathered red-tipped daisies, large pimpernels, and one tiny primrose. I lay and looked at them in delight--not at all inclined to pull them, for they were where I loved to see them. I never had much inclination to gather flowers. I see them as a part of a whole, and rejoice in them in their own place without any desire to appropriate them. I lay and looked at these for a long time. Perhaps I fell asleep. I do not know. I have often waked in the open air. All at once I looked up and saw a vision.

My reader will please to remember that up to this hour I had never seen a lady. I cannot by any stretch call my worthy aunt a lady; and my grandmother was too old, and too much an object of mysterious anxiety, to produce the impression, of a lady upon me. Suddenly I became aware that a lady was looking down on me. Over the edge of my horizon, the circle of the hollow that touched the sky, her face shone like a rising moon. Sweet eyes looked on me, and a sweet mouth was tremulous with a smile. I will not attempt to describe her. To my childish eyes she was much what a descended angel must have been to eyes of old, in the days when angels did descend, and there were Arabs or Jews on the earth who could see them. A new knowledge dawned in me. I lay motionless, looking up with worship in my heart. As suddenly she vanished. I lay far into the twilight, and then rose and went home, half bewildered, with a

sense of heaven about me which settled into the fancy that my mother had come to see me. I wondered afterwards that I had not followed her; but I never forgot her, and, morning, midday, or evening, whenever the fit seized me, I would wander away and lie down in the hollow, gazing at the spot where the lovely face had arisen, in the fancy, hardly in the hope, that my moon might once more arise and bless me with her vision.

Hence I suppose came another habit of mine, that of watching in the same hollow, and in the same posture, now for the sun, now for the moon, but generally for the sun. You might have taken me for a fire-worshipper, so eagerly would I rise when the desire came upon me, so hastily in the clear grey of the morning would I dress myself, lest the sun should be up before me, and I fail to catch his first lance-like rays dazzling through the forest of grass on the edge of my hollow world. Bare-footed I would scud like a hare through the dew, heedless of the sweet air of the morning, heedless of the few bird-songs about me, heedless even of the east, whose saffron might just be burning into gold, as I ran to gain the green hollow whence alone I would greet the morning. Arrived there, I shot into its shelter, and threw myself panting on the grass, to gaze on the spot at which I expected the rising glory to appear. Ever when I recall the custom, that one lark is wildly praising over my head, for he sees the sun for which I am waiting. He has his nest in the hollow beside me. I would sooner have turned my back on the sun than disturbed the home of his high-priest, the lark. And now the edge of my horizon begins to burn; the green blades glow in their tops; they are melted through with light; the flashes invade my eyes; they gather; they grow, until I hide my face in my hands. The sun is up. But on my hands and my knees I rush after the retreating shadow, and, like a child at play with its nurse, hide in its curtain. Up and up comes the peering sun; he will find me; I cannot hide from him; there is in the wide field no shelter from his gaze. No matter then. Let him shine into the deepest corners of my heart, and shake the cowardice and the meanness out of it.

I thus made friends with Nature. I had no great variety even in her, but the better did I understand what I had. The next Summer I began to hunt for glow-worms, and carry them carefully to my hollow, that in the warm, soft, moonless nights they might illumine it with a strange light. When I had been very successful, I would call my uncle and aunt to see. My aunt tried me by always having something to do first. My uncle, on the other hand, would lay down his book at once, and follow me submissively. He could not generate amusement for me, but he sympathized with what I could find for myself.

‘Come and see my cows,’ I would say to him.

I well remember the first time I took him to see them. When we reached the hollow, he stood for a moment silent. Then he said, laying his hand on my shoulder,

‘Very pretty, Willie! But why do you call them cows?’

‘You told me last night,’ I answered, ‘that the road the angels go across the sky is called the milky way--didn’t you, uncle?’

‘I never told you the angels went that way, my boy.’

‘Oh! didn’t you? I thought you did.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Oh! I remember now: I thought if it was a way, and nobody but the angels could go in it, that must be the way the angels did go.’

‘Yes, yes, I see! But what has that to do with the glow-worms?’

‘Don’t you see, uncle? If it be the milky way, the stars must be the cows. Look at my cows, uncle. Their milk is very pretty milk, isn’t it?’

‘Very pretty, indeed, my dear--rather green.’

‘Then I suppose if you could put it in auntie’s pan, you might make another moon of it?’

‘That’s being silly now,’ said my uncle; and I ceased, abashed.

‘Look, look, uncle!’ I exclaimed, a moment after; ‘they don’t like being talked about, my cows.’

For as if a cold gust of wind had passed over them, they all dwindled and paled. I thought they were going out.

‘Oh dear, oh dear!’ I cried, and began dancing about with dismay. The next instant the glow returned, and the hollow was radiant.

‘Oh, the dear light!’ I cried again. ‘Look at it, uncle! Isn’t it lovely?’

He took me by the hand. His actions were always so much more tender than his words!

‘Do you know who is the light of the world, Willie?’

‘Yes, well enough. I saw him get out of bed this morning.’

My uncle led me home without a word more. But next night he began to teach me about the light of the world, and about walking in the light. I do not care to repeat much of what he taught me in this kind, for like my glow-worms it does not like to be talked about. Somehow it loses colour and shine when one talks.

I have now shown sufficiently how my uncle would seize opportunities for beginning things. He thought more of the beginning than of any other part of a process.

‘All’s well that begins well,’ he would say. I did not know what his smile meant as he said so.

I sometimes wonder how I managed to get through the days without being weary. No one ever thought of giving me toys. I had a turn for

using my hands; but I was too young to be trusted with a knife. I had never seen a kite, except far away in the sky: I took it for a bird. There were no rushes to make water-wheels of, and no brooks to set them turning in. I had neither top nor marbles. I had no dog to play with. And yet I do not remember once feeling weary. I knew all the creatures that went creeping about in the grass, and although I did not know the proper name for one of them, I had names of my own for them all, and was so familiar with their looks and their habits, that I am confident I could in some degree interpret some of the people I met afterwards by their resemblances to these insects. I have a man in my mind now who has exactly the head and face, if face it can be called, of an ant. It is not a head, but a helmet. I knew all the butterflies--they were mostly small ones, but of lovely varieties. A stray dragon-fly would now and then delight me; and there were hunting-spiders and wood-lice, and queerer creatures of which I do not yet know the names. Then there were grasshoppers, which for some time I took to be made of green leaves, and I thought they grew like fruit on the trees till they were ripe, when they jumped down, and jumped for ever after. Another child might have caught and caged them; for me, I followed them about, and watched their ways.

In the Winter, things had not hitherto gone quite so well with me. Then I had been a good deal dependent upon Nannie and her stories, which were neither very varied nor very well told. But now that I had begun to read, things went better. To be sure, there were not in my uncle's library many books such as children have now-a-days; but there were old histories, and some voyages and travels, and in them I revelled. I am perplexed sometimes when I look into one of these books--for I have them all about me now--to find how dry they are. The shine seems to have gone out of them. Or is it that the shine has gone out of the eyes that used to read them? If so, it will come again some day. I do not find that the shine has gone out of a beetle's back; and I can read *The Pilgrim's Progress* still.

CHAPTER VI.

I COBBLE.

All this has led me, after a roundabout fashion, to what became for some time the chief delight of my Winters--an employment, moreover, which I have taken up afresh at odd times during my life. It came about thus. My uncle had made me a present of an old book with pictures in it. It was called *The Preceptor*--one of Dodsley's publications. There were wonderful folding plates of all sorts in it. Those which represented animals were of course my favourites. But these especially were in a very dilapidated condition, for there had been children before me somewhere; and I proceeded, at my uncle's suggestion, to try to mend them by pasting them on another piece of paper. I made bad work of it at first, and was so dissatisfied with the results, that I set myself in earnest to find out by what laws of paste and paper success might be secured. Before the Winter was over, my uncle found me grown so skilful in this manipulation of broken leaves--for as yet I had not ventured further in any of the branches of repair--that he gave me plenty of little jobs of the sort, for amongst his books there were many old ones. This was a source of great pleasure. Before the following Winter was over, I came to try my hand at repairing bindings, and my uncle was again so much pleased with my success that one day he brought me from the county town some sheets of parchment with which to attempt the fortification of certain vellum-bound volumes which were considerably the worse for age and use. I well remember how troublesome the parchment was for a long time; but at last I conquered it, and succeeded very fairly in my endeavours to restore to tidiness the garments of ancient thought.

But there was another consequence of this pursuit which may be considered of weight in my history. This was the discovery of a copy of the Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*--much in want of skilful patching, from the title-page, with its boar smelling at the rose-bush, to the

graduated lines and the *Finis*. This book I read through from boar to finis--no small undertaking, and partly, no doubt, under its influences, I became about this time conscious of a desire after honour, as yet a notion of the vaguest. I hardly know how I escaped the taking for granted that there were yet knights riding about on war-horses, with couched lances and fierce spurs, everywhere as in days of old. They might have been roaming the world in all directions, without my seeing one of them. But somehow I did not fall into the mistake. Only with the thought of my future career, when I should be a man and go out into the world, came always the thought of the sword which hung on the wall. A longing to handle it began to possess me, and my old dream returned. I dared not, however, say a word to my uncle on the subject. I felt certain that he would slight the desire, and perhaps tell me I should hurt myself with the weapon; and one whose heart glowed at the story of the battle between him on the white horse with carnation mane and tail, in his armour of blue radiated with gold, and him on the black-spotted brown, in his dusky armour of despair, could not expose himself to such an indignity.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SWORD ON THE WALL.

Where possession was impossible, knowledge might yet be reached: could I not learn the story of the ancient weapon? How came that which had more fitly hung in the hall of a great castle, here upon the wall of a kitchen? My uncle, however, I felt, was not the source whence I might hope for help. No better was my aunt. Indeed I had the conviction that she neither knew nor cared anything about the useless thing. It was her tea-table that must be kept bright for honour's sake. But there was grannie!

My relations with her had continued much the same. The old fear of her lingered, and as yet I had had no inclination to visit her room by myself. I saw that my uncle and aunt always behaved to her with the greatest kindness and much deference, but could not help observing also that she cherished some secret offence, receiving their ministrations with a certain condescension which clearly enough manifested its origin as hidden cause of complaint and not pride. I wondered that my uncle and aunt took no notice of it, always addressing her as if they were on the best possible terms; and I knew that my uncle never went to his work without visiting her, and never went to bed without reading a prayer by her bedside first. I think Nannie told me this.

She could still read a little, for her sight had been short, and had held out better even than usual with such. But she cared nothing for the news of the hour. My uncle had a weekly newspaper, though not by any means regularly, from a friend in London, but I never saw it in my grandmother's hands. Her reading was mostly in the *Spectator*, or in one of De Foe's works. I have seen her reading Pope.

The sword was in my bones, and as I judged that only from grannie could I get any information respecting it, I found myself beginning to inquire

why I was afraid to go to her. I was unable to account for it, still less to justify it. As I reflected, the kindness of her words and expressions dawned upon me, and I even got so far as to believe that I had been guilty of neglect in not visiting her oftener and doing something for her. True, I recalled likewise that my uncle had desired me not to visit her except with him or my aunt, but that was ages ago, when I was a very little boy and might have been troublesome. I could even read to her now if she wished it. In short, I felt myself perfectly capable of entering into social relations with her generally. But if there was any flow of affection towards her, it was the sword that had broken the seal of its fountain.

One morning at breakfast I had been sitting gazing at the sword on the wall opposite me. My aunt had observed the steadiness of my look.

‘What are you staring at, Willie?’ she said. ‘Your eyes are fixed in your head. Are you choking?’

The words offended me. I got up and walked out of the room. As I went round the table I saw that my uncle and aunt were staring at each other very much as I had been staring at the sword. I soon felt ashamed of myself, and returned, hoping that my behaviour might be attributed to some passing indisposition. Mechanically I raised my eyes to the wall. Could I believe them? The sword was gone--absolutely gone! My heart seemed to swell up into my throat; I felt my cheeks burning. The passion grew within me, and might have broken out in some form or other, had I not felt that would at once betray my secret. I sat still with a fierce effort, consoling and strengthening myself with the resolution that I would hesitate no longer, but take the first chance of a private interview with grannie. I tried hard to look as if nothing had happened, and when breakfast was over, went to my own room. It was there I carried on my pasting operations. There also at this time I drank deep in the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress;’ there were swords, and armour, and giants, and demons there: but I had no inclination for either employment now.

My uncle left for the farm as usual, and to my delight I soon discovered that my aunt had gone with him. The ways of the house were as regular as those of a bee-hive. Sitting in my own room I knew precisely where any one must be at any given moment; for although the only clock we had was oftener standing than going, a perfect instinct of time was common to the household, Nannie included. At that moment she was sweeping up the hearth and putting on the kettle. In half an hour she would have tidied up the kitchen, and would have gone to prepare the vegetables for cooking: I must wait. But the sudden fear struck me that my aunt might have taken the sword with her--might be going to make away with it altogether. I started up, and rushed about the room in an agony. What could I do? At length I heard Nannie's pattens clatter out of the kitchen to a small outhouse where she pared the potatoes. I instantly descended, crossed the kitchen, and went up the winding stone stair. I opened grannie's door, and went in.

She was seated in her usual place. Never till now had I felt how old she was. She looked up when I entered, for although she had grown very deaf, she could feel the floor shake. I saw by her eyes, which looked higher than my head, that she had expected a taller figure to follow me. When I turned from shutting the door, I saw her arms extended with an eager look, and could see her hands trembling ere she folded them about me, and pressed my head to her bosom.

'O Lord!' she said, 'I thank thee. I will try to be good now. O Lord, I have waited, and thou hast heard me. I will believe in thee again!'

From that moment I loved my grannie, and felt I owed her something as well as my uncle. I had never had this feeling about my aunt.

'Grannie!' I said, trembling from a conflict of emotions; but before I could utter my complaint, I had burst out crying.

‘What have they been doing to you, child?’ she asked, almost fiercely, and sat up straight in her chair. Her voice, although feeble and quavering, was determined in tone. She pushed me back from her and sought the face I was ashamed to show. ‘What have they done to you, my boy?’ she repeated, ere I could conquer my sobs sufficiently to speak.

‘They have taken away the sword that--’

‘What sword?’ she asked quickly. ‘Not the sword that your great-grandfather wore when he followed Sir Marmaduke?’

‘I don’t know, grannie.’

‘Don’t know, boy? The only thing your father took when he--. Not the sword with the broken sheath? Never! They daren’t do it! I will go down myself. I must see about it at once.’

‘Oh, grannie, don’t!’ I cried in terror, as she rose from her chair. ‘They’ll not let me ever come near you again, if you do.’

She sat down again. After seeming to ponder for a while in silence, she said:--

‘Well, Willie, my dear, you’re more to me than the old sword. But I wouldn’t have had it handled with disrespect for all that the place is worth. However, I don’t suppose they can--. What made them do it, child? They’ve not taken it down from the wall?’

‘Yes, grannie. I think it was because I was staring at it too much, grannie. Perhaps they were afraid I would take it down and hurt myself with it. But I was only going to ask you about it. Tell me a story about it, grannie.’

All my notion was some story, I did not think whether true or false, like one of Nannie’s stories.

‘That I will, my child--all about it--all about it. Let me see.’

Her eyes went wandering a little, and she looked perplexed.

‘And they took it from you, did they? Poor child! Poor child!’

‘They didn’t take it from me, grannie. I never had it in my hands.’

‘Wouldn’t give it you then? Oh dear! Oh dear!’

I began to feel uncomfortable--grannie looked so strange and lost. The old feeling that she ought to be buried because she was dead returned upon me; but I overcame it so far as to be able to say:

‘Won’t you tell me about it then, grannie? I want so much to hear about the battle.’

‘What battle, child? Oh yes! I’ll tell you all about it some day, but I’ve forgot now, I’ve forgot it all now.’

She pressed her hand to her forehead, and sat thus for some time, while I grew very frightened. I would gladly have left the room and crept down-stairs, but I stood fascinated, gazing at the withered face half-hidden by the withered hand. I longed to be anywhere else, but my will had deserted me, and there I must remain. At length grannie took her hand from her eyes, and seeing me, started.

‘Ah, my dear!’ she said,’ I had forgotten you. You wanted me to do something for you: what was it?’

‘I wanted you to tell me about the sword, grannie.’

‘Oh yes, the sword!’ she returned, putting her hand again to her forehead. ‘They took it away from you, did they? Well, never mind. I will give you something else--though I don’t say it’s as good as the sword.’

She rose, and taking an ivory-headed stick which leaned against the side of the chimney-piece, walked with tottering steps towards the bureau. There she took from her pocket a small bunch of keys, and having, with

some difficulty from the trembling of her hands, chosen one and unlocked the sloping cover, she opened a little drawer inside, and took out a gold watch with a bunch of seals hanging from it. Never shall I forget the thrill that went through my frame. Did she mean to let me hold it in my own hand? Might I have it as often as I came to see her? Imagine my ecstasy when she put it carefully in the two hands I held up to receive it, and said:

‘There, my dear! You must take good care of it, and never give it away for love or money. Don’t you open it--there’s a good boy, till you’re a man like your father. He *was* a man! He gave it to me the day we were married, for he had nothing else, he said, to offer me. But I would not take it, my dear. I liked better to see him with it than have it myself. And when he left me, I kept it for you. But you must take care of it, you know.’

‘Oh, thank you, grannie!’ I cried, in an agony of pleasure. ‘I *will* take care of it--indeed I will. Is it a real watch, grannie--as real as uncle’s?’

‘It’s worth ten of your uncle’s, my dear. Don’t you show it him, though. He might take that away too. Your uncle’s a very good man, my dear, but you mustn’t mind everything he says to you. He forgets things. I never forget anything. I have plenty of time to think about things. I never forget.’

‘Will it go, grannie?’ I asked, for my uncle was a much less interesting subject than the watch.

‘It won’t go without being wound up; but you might break it. Besides, it may want cleaning. It’s several years since it was cleaned last. Where will you put it now?’

‘Oh! I know where to hide it safe enough, grannie,’ I exclaimed. ‘I’ll take care of it. You needn’t be afraid, grannie.’

The old lady turned, and with difficulty tottered to her seat. I remained where I was, fixed in contemplation of my treasure. She called me. I went and stood by her knee.

‘My child, there is something I want very much to tell you, but you know old people forget things--’

‘But you said just now that you never forgot anything, grannie.’

‘No more I do, my dear; only I can’t always lay my hands upon a thing when I want it.’

‘It was about the sword, grannie,’ I said, thinking to refresh her memory.

‘No, my dear; I don’t think it was about the sword exactly--though that had something to do with it. I shall remember it all by-and-by. It will come again. And so must you, my dear. Don’t leave your old mother so long alone. It’s weary, weary work, waiting.’

‘Indeed I won’t, grannie,’ I said. ‘I will come the very first time I can. Only I mustn’t let auntie see me, you know.--You don’t want to be buried now, do you, grannie?’ I added; for I had begun to love her, and the love had cast out the fear, and I did not want her to wish to be buried.

‘I am very, very old; much too old to live, my dear. But I must do you justice before I can go to my grave. *Now* I know what I wanted to say. It’s gone again. Oh dear! Oh dear! If I had you in the middle of the night, when everything comes back as if it had been only yesterday, I could tell you all about it from beginning to end, with all the ins and outs of it. But I can’t now--I can’t now.’

She moaned and rocked herself to and fro.

‘Never mind, grannie,’ I said cheerfully, for I was happy enough for all eternity with my gold watch; ‘I will come and see you again as soon as ever I can.’ And I kissed her on the white cheek.

‘Thank you, my dear. I think you had better go now. They may miss you, and then I should never see you again--to talk to, I mean.’

‘Why won’t they let me come, and see you, grannie?’ I asked.

‘That’s what I wanted to tell you, if I could only see a little better,’ she answered, once more putting her hand to her forehead. ‘Perhaps I shall be able to tell you next time. Go now, my dear.’

I left the room, nothing loth, for I longed to be alone with my treasure. I could not get enough of it in grannie’s presence even. Noiseless as a bat I crept down the stair. When I reached the door at the foot I stood and listened. The kitchen was quite silent. I stepped out. There was no one there. I scudded across and up the other stair to my own room, carefully shutting the door behind me. Then I sat down on the floor on the other side of the bed, so that it was between me and the door, and I could run into the closet with my treasure before any one entering should see me.

The watch was a very thick round one. The back of it was crowded with raised figures in the kind of work called *repoussée*. I pored over these for a long time, and then turned to the face. It was set all round with shining stones--diamonds, though I knew nothing of diamonds then. The enamel was cracked, and I followed every crack as well as every figure of the hours. Then I began to wonder what I could do with it next. I was not satisfied. Possession I found was not bliss: it had not rendered me content. But it was as yet imperfect: I had not seen the inside. Grannie had told me not to open it: I began to think it hard that I should be denied thorough possession of what had been given to me, I believed I should be quite satisfied if I once saw what made it go. I turned it over and over, thinking I might at least find how it was opened. I have little doubt if I had discovered the secret of it, my virtue would have failed me. All I did find, however, was the head of a curious animal engraved on the handle. This was something. I examined it as carefully as the rest, and then finding I had for the time exhausted the pleasures of the watch, I turned

to the seals. On one of them was engraved what looked like letters, but I could not read them. I did not know that they were turned the wrong way. One of them was like a W. On the other seal--there were but two and a curiously-contrived key--I found the same head as was engraved on the handle--turned the other way of course. Wearied at length, I took the precious thing into the dark closet, and laid it in a little box which formed one of my few possessions. I then wandered out into the field, and went straying about until dinner-time, during which I believe I never once lifted my eyes to the place where the sword had hung, lest even that action should betray the watch.

From that day my head, and as much of my heart as might be, were filled with the watch. And, alas! I soon found that my bookmending had grown distasteful to me, and for the satisfaction of employment, possession was a poor substitute. As often as I made the attempt to resume it, I got weary, and wandered almost involuntarily to the closet to feel for my treasure in the dark, handle it once more, and bring it out into the light. Already I began to dree the doom of riches, in the vain attempt to live by that which was not bread. Nor was this all. A certain weight began to gather over my spirit--a sense almost of wrong. For although the watch had been given me by my grandmother, and I never doubted either her right to dispose of it or my right to possess it, I could not look my uncle in the face, partly from a vague fear lest he should read my secret in my eyes, partly from a sense of something out of joint between him and me. I began to fancy, and I believe I was right, that he looked at me sometimes with a wistfulness I had never seen in his face before. This made me so uncomfortable that I began to avoid his presence as much as possible. And although I tried to please him with my lessons, I could not learn them as hitherto.

One day he asked me to bring him the book I had been repairing.

‘It’s not finished yet, uncle,’ I said.

‘Will you bring it me just as it is. I want to look for something in it.’

I went and brought it with shame. He took it, and having found the passage he wanted, turned the volume once over in his hands, and gave it me back without a word.

Next day I restored it to him finished and tidy. He thanked me, looked it over again, and put it in its place. But I fairly encountered an inquiring and somewhat anxious gaze. I believe he had a talk with my aunt about me that night.

The next morning, I was seated by the bedside, with my secret in my hand, when I thought I heard the sound of the door-handle, and glided at once into the closet. When I came out in a flutter of anxiety, there was no one there. But I had been too much startled to return to what I had grown to feel almost a guilty pleasure.

The next morning after breakfast, I crept into the closet, put my hand unerringly into the one corner of the box, found no watch, and after an unavailing search, sat down in the dark on a bundle of rags, with the sensations of a ruined man. My world was withered up and gone. How the day passed, I cannot tell. How I got through my meals, I cannot even imagine. When I look back and attempt to recall the time, I see but a cloudy waste of misery crossed by the lightning-streaks of a sense of injury. All that was left me now was a cat-like watching for the chance of going to my grandmother. Into her ear I would pour the tale of my wrong. She who had been as a haunting discomfort to me, had grown to be my one consolation.

My lessons went on as usual. A certain pride enabled me to learn them tolerably for a day or two; but when that faded, my whole being began to flag. For some time my existence was a kind of life in death. At length one evening my uncle said to me, as we finished my lessons far from satisfactorily--

‘Willie, your aunt and I think it better you should go to school. We shall be very sorry to part with you, but it will be better. You will then have companions of your own age. You have not enough to amuse you at home.’

He did not allude by a single word to the affair of the watch. Could my aunt have taken it, and never told him? It was not likely.

I was delighted at the idea of any change, for my life had grown irksome to me.

‘Oh, thank you, uncle!’ I cried, with genuine expression.

I think he looked a little sad; but he uttered no reproach.

My aunt and he had already arranged everything. The next day but one, I saw, for the first time, a carriage drive up to the door of the house. I was waiting for it impatiently. My new clothes had all been packed in a little box. I had not put in a single toy: I cared for nothing I had now. The box was put up beside the driver. My aunt came to the door where I was waiting for my uncle.

‘Mayn’t I go and say good-bye to grannie?’ I asked.

‘She’s not very well to-day,’ said my aunt. ‘I think you had better not. You will be back at Christmas, you know.’

I was not so much grieved as I ought to have been. The loss of my watch had made the thought of grannie painful again.

‘Your uncle will meet you at the road,’ continued my aunt, seeing me still hesitate. ‘Good-bye.’

I received her cold embrace without emotion, clambered into the chaise, and looking out as the driver shut the door, wondered what my aunt was holding her apron to her eyes for, as she turned away into the house. My uncle met us and got in, and away the chaise rattled, bearing me towards

an utterly new experience; for hardly could the strangest region in foreign lands be more unknown to the wandering mariner than the faces and ways of even my own kind were to me. I had never played for one half-hour with boy or girl. I knew nothing of their play-things or their games. I hardly knew what boys were like, except, outwardly, from the dim reflex of myself in the broken mirror in my bed-room, whose lustre was more of the ice than the pool, and, inwardly, from the partly exceptional experiences of my own nature, with which even I was poorly enough acquainted.

CHAPTER VIII.

I GO TO SCHOOL, AND GRANNIE LEAVES IT.

It is an evil thing to break up a family before the natural period of its dissolution. In the course of things, marriage, the necessities of maintenance, or the energies of labour guiding ‘to fresh woods and pastures new,’ are the ordered causes of separation.

Where the home is happy, much injury is done the children in sending them to school, except it be a day-school, whither they go in the morning as to the labours of the world, but whence they return at night as to the heaven of repose. Conflict through the day, rest at night, is the ideal. A day-school will suffice for the cultivation of the necessary public or national spirit, without which the love of the family may degenerate into a merely extended selfishness, but which is itself founded upon those family affections. At the same time, it must be confessed that boarding-schools are, in many cases, an antidote to some of the evil conditions which exist at home.

To children whose home is a happy one, the exile to a school must be bitter. Mine, however, was an unusual experience. Leaving aside the specially troubled state in which I was when thus carried to the village of Aldwick, I had few of the finer elements of the ideal home in mine. The love of my childish heart had never been drawn out. My grandmother had begun to do so, but her influence had been speedily arrested. I was, as they say of cats, more attached to the place than the people, and no regrets whatever interfered to quell the excitement of expectation, wonder, and curiosity which filled me on the journey. The motion of the vehicle, the sound of the horses’ hoofs, the travellers we passed on the road--all seemed to partake of the exuberant life which swelled and overflowed in me. Everything was as happy, as excited, as I was.

When we entered the village, behold it was a region of glad tumult! Were there not three dogs, two carts, a maid carrying pails of water, and several groups of frolicking children in the street--not to mention live ducks, and a glimpse of grazing geese on the common? There were also two mothers at their cottage-doors, each with a baby in her arms. I knew they were babies, although I had never seen a baby before. And when we drove through the big wooden gate, and stopped at the door of what had been the manor-house but was now Mr Elder's school, the aspect of the building, half-covered with ivy, bore to me a most friendly look. Still more friendly was the face of the master's wife, who received us in a low dark parlour, with a thick soft carpet and rich red curtains. It was a perfect paradise to my imagination. Nor did the appearance of Mr Elder at all jar with the vision of coming happiness. His round, rosy, spectacled face bore in it no premonitory suggestion of birch or rod, and although I continued at his school for six years, I never saw him use either. If a boy required that kind of treatment, he sent him home. When my uncle left me, it was in more than contentment with my lot. Nor did anything occur to alter my feeling with regard to it. I soon became much attached to Mrs Elder. She was just the woman for a schoolmaster's wife--as full of maternity as she could hold, but childless. By the end of the first day I thought I loved her far more than my aunt. My aunt had done her duty towards me; but how was a child to weigh that? She had taken no trouble to make me love her; she had shown me none of the signs of affection, and I could not appreciate the proofs of it yet.

I soon perceived a great difference between my uncle's way of teaching and that of Mr Elder. My uncle always appeared aware of something behind which pressed upon, perhaps hurried, the fact he was making me understand. He made me feel, perhaps too much, that it was a mere step towards something beyond. Mr Elder, on the other hand, placed every point in such a strong light that it seemed in itself of primary consequence. Both were, if my judgment after so many years be correct,

admirable teachers--my uncle the greater, my school-master the more immediately efficient. As I was a manageable boy to the very verge of weakness, the relations between us were entirely pleasant.

There were only six more pupils, all of them sufficiently older than myself to be ready to pet and indulge me. No one who saw me mounted on the back of the eldest, a lad of fifteen, and driving four of them in hand, while the sixth ran alongside as an outrider--could have wondered that I should find school better than home. Before the first day was over, the sorrows of the lost watch and sword had vanished utterly. For what was possession to being possessed? What was a watch, even had it been going, to the movements of life? To peep from the wicket in the great gate out upon the village street, with the well in the middle of it, and a girl in the sunshine winding up the green dripping bucket from the unknown depths of coolness, was more than a thousand watches. But this was by no means the extent of my new survey of things. One of the causes of Mr Elder's keeping no boy who required chastisement was his own love of freedom, and his consequent desire to give the boys as much liberty out of school hours as possible. He believed in freedom. 'The great end of training,' he said to me many years after, when he was quite an old man, 'is liberty; and the sooner you can get a boy to be a law to himself, the sooner you make a man of him. This end is impossible without freedom. Let those who have no choice, or who have not the same end in view, do the best they can with such boys as they find: I chose only such as could bear liberty. I never set up as a reformer--only as an educator. For that kind of work others were more fit than I. It was not my calling.' Hence Mr Elder no more allowed labour to intrude upon play, than play to intrude upon labour. As soon as lessons were over, we were free to go where we would and do what we would, under certain general restrictions, which had more to do with social proprieties than with school regulations. We roamed the country from tea-time till sun-down; sometimes in the Summer long after that. Sometimes also on

moonlit nights in Winter, occasionally even when the stars and the snow gave the only light, we were allowed the same liberty until nearly bedtime. Before Christmas came, variety, exercise, and social blessedness had wrought upon me so that when I returned home, my uncle and aunt were astonished at the change in me. I had grown half a head, and the paleness, which they had considered a peculiar accident of my appearance, had given place to a rosy glow. My flitting step too had vanished: I soon became aware that I made more noise than my aunt liked, for in the old house silence was in its very temple. My uncle, however, would only smile and say--

‘Don’t bring the place about our ears, Willie, my boy. I should like it to last my time.’

‘I’m afraid,’ my aunt would interpose, ‘Mr Elder doesn’t keep very good order in his school.’

Then I would fire up in defence of the master, and my uncle would sit and listen, looking both pleased and amused.

I had not been many moments in the house before I said--

‘Mayn’t I run up and see grannie, uncle?’

‘I will go and see how she is,’ my aunt said, rising.

She went, and presently returning, said

‘Grannie seems a little better. You may come. She wants to see you.’

I followed her. When I entered the room and looked expectantly towards her usual place, I found her chair empty. I turned to the bed. There she was, and I thought she looked much the same; but when I came nearer, I perceived a change in her countenance. She welcomed me feebly, stroked my hair and my cheeks, smiled sweetly, and closed her eyes. My aunt led me away.

When bedtime came, I went to my own room, and was soon fast asleep. What roused me I do not know, but I awoke in the midst of the darkness, and the next moment I heard a groan. It thrilled me with horror. I sat up in bed and listened, but heard no more. As I sat listening, heedless of the cold, the explanation dawned upon me, for my powers of reflection and combination had been developed by my enlarged experience of life. In our many wanderings, I had learned to choose between roads and to make conjectures from the *lie* of the country. I had likewise lived in a far larger house than my home. Hence it now dawned upon me, for the first time, that grannie's room must be next to mine, although approached from the other side, and that the groan must have been hers. She might be in need of help. I remembered at the same time how she had wished to have me by her in the middle of the night, that she might be able to tell me what she could not recall in the day. I got up at once, dressed myself, and stole down the one stair, across the kitchen, and up the other. I gently opened grannie's door and peeped in. A fire was burning in the room. I entered and approached the bed. I wondered how I had the courage; but children more than grown people are moved by unlikely impulses. Grannie lay breathing heavily. I stood for a moment. The faint light flickered over her white face. It was the middle of the night, and the tide of fear inseparable from the night began to rise. My old fear of her began to return with it. But she lifted her lids, and the terror ebbed away. She looked at me, but did not seem to know me. I went nearer.

'Grannie,' I said, close to her ear, and speaking low; 'you wanted to see me at night--that was before I went to school. I'm here, grannie.'

The sheet was folded back so smooth that she could hardly have turned over since it had been arranged for the night. Her hand was lying upon it. She lifted it feebly and stroked my cheek once more. Her lips murmured something which I could not hear, and then came a deep sigh, almost a groan. The terror returned when I found she could not speak to me.

‘Shall I go and fetch auntie?’ I whispered.

She shook her head feebly, and looked wistfully at me. Her lips moved again. I guessed that she wanted me to sit beside her. I got a chair, placed it by the bedside, and sat down. She put out her hand, as if searching for something. I laid mine in it. She closed her fingers upon it and seemed satisfied. When I looked again, she was asleep and breathing quietly. I was afraid to take my hand from hers lest I should wake her. I laid my head on the side of the bed, and was soon fast asleep also.

I was awaked by a noise in the room. It was Nannie laying the fire. When she saw me she gave a cry of terror.

‘Hush, Nannie!’ I said; ‘you will wake grannie:’ and as I spoke I rose, for I found my hand was free.

‘Oh, Master Willie!’ said Nannie, in a low voice; ‘how did you come here? You sent my heart into my mouth.’

‘Swallow it again, Nannie,’ I answered, ‘and don’t tell auntie. I came to see grannie, and fell asleep. I’m rather cold. I’ll go to bed now. Auntie’s not up, is she?

‘No. It’s not time for anybody to be up yet.’

Nannie ought to have spent the night in grannie’s room, for it was her turn to watch; but finding her nicely asleep as she thought, she had slipped away for just an hour of comfort in bed. The hour had grown to three. When she returned the fire was out.

When I came down to breakfast the solemn look upon my uncle’s face caused me a foreboding of change.

‘God has taken grannie away in the night, Willie,’ said he, holding the hand I had placed in his.

‘Is she dead?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he answered.

‘Oh, then, you will let her go to her grave now, won’t you?’ I said--the recollection of her old grievance coming first in association with her death, and occasioning a more childish speech than belonged to my years.

‘Yes. She’ll get to her grave now,’ said my aunt, with a trembling in her voice I had never heard before.

‘No,’ objected my uncle. ‘Her body will go to the grave, but her soul will go to heaven.’

‘Her soul!’ I said. ‘What’s that?’

‘Dear me, Willie! don’t you know that?’ said my aunt. ‘Don’t you know you’ve got a soul as well as a body?’

‘I’m sure *I* haven’t,’ I returned. ‘What was grannie’s like?’

‘That I can’t tell you,’ she answered.

‘Have you got one, auntie?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is yours like then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘But,’ I said, turning to my uncle, ‘if her body goes to the grave, and her soul to heaven, what’s to become of poor grannie--without either of them, you see?’

My uncle had been thinking while we talked.

‘That can’t be the way to represent the thing, Jane; it puzzles the child. No, Willie; grannie’s body goes to the grave, but grannie herself is gone to heaven. What people call her soul is just grannie herself.’

‘Why don’t they say so, then?’

My uncle fell a-thinking again. He did not, however, answer this last question, for I suspect he found that it would not be good for me to know the real cause--namely, that people hardly believed it, and therefore did not say it. Most people believe far more in their bodies than in their souls. What my uncle did say was--

‘I hardly know. But grannie’s gone to heaven anyhow.’

‘I’m so glad!’ I said. ‘She will be more comfortable there. She was too old, you know, uncle.’

He made no reply. My aunt’s apron was covering her face, and when she took it away, I observed that those eager almost angry eyes were red with weeping. I began to feel a movement at my heart, the first fluttering physical sign of a waking love towards her. ‘Don’t cry, auntie,’ I said. ‘I don’t see anything to cry about. Grannie has got what she wanted.’

She made me no answer, and I sat down to my breakfast. I don’t know how it was, but I could not eat it. I rose and took my way to the hollow in the field. I felt a strange excitement, not sorrow. Grannie was actually dead at last. I did not quite know what it meant. I had never seen a dead body. Neither did I know that she had died while I slept with my hand in hers. Nannie, seeing something peculiar, had gone to her the moment I left the room, and had found her quite cold. Had we been a talking family, I might have been uneasy until I had told the story of my last interview with her; but I never thought of saying a word about it. I cannot help thinking now that I was waked up and sent to the old woman, my great-grandmother, in the middle of the night, to help her to die in comfort. Who knows? What we can neither prove nor comprehend forms, I suspect, the infinitely larger part of our being.

When I was taken to see what remained of grannie, I experienced nothing of the dismay which some children feel at the sight of death. It was as if

she had seen something just in time to leave the look of it behind her there, and so the final expression was a revelation. For a while there seems to remain this one link between some dead bodies and their living spirits. But my aunt, with a common superstition, would have me touch the face. That, I confess, made me shudder: the cold of death is so unlike any other cold! I seemed to feel it in my hand all the rest of the day.

I saw what seemed grannie--I am too near death myself to consent to call a dead body the man or the woman--laid in the grave for which she had longed, and returned home with a sense that somehow there was a barrier broken down between me and my uncle and aunt. I felt as near my uncle now as I had ever been. That evening he did not go to his own room, but sat with my aunt and me in the kitchen-hall. We pulled the great high-backed oaken settle before the fire, and my aunt made a great blaze, for it was very cold. They sat one in each corner, and I sat between them, and told them many things concerning the school. They asked me questions and encouraged my prattle, seeming well pleased that the old silence should be broken. I fancy I brought them a little nearer to each other that night. It was after a funeral, and yet they both looked happier than I had ever seen them before.

CHAPTER IX.

I SIN AND REPENT.

The Christmas holidays went by more rapidly than I had expected. I betook myself with enlarged faculty to my book-mending, and more than ever enjoyed making my uncle's old volumes tidy. When I returned to school, it was with real sorrow at parting from my uncle; and even towards my aunt I now felt a growing attraction.

I shall not dwell upon my school history. That would be to spin out my narrative unnecessarily. I shall only relate such occurrences as are guide-posts in the direction of those main events which properly constitute my history.

I had been about two years with Mr Elder. The usual holidays had intervened, upon which occasions I found the pleasures of home so multiplied by increase of liberty and the enlarged confidence of my uncle, who took me about with him everywhere, that they were now almost capable of rivalling those of school. But before I relate an incident which occurred in the second Autumn, I must say a few words about my character at this time.

My reader will please to remember that I had never been driven, or oppressed in any way. The affair of the watch was quite an isolated instance, and so immediately followed by the change and fresh life of school that it had not left a mark behind. Nothing had yet occurred to generate in me any fear before the face of man. I had been vaguely uneasy in relation to my grandmother, but that uneasiness had almost vanished before her death. Hence the faith natural to childhood had received no check. My aunt was at worst cold; she had never been harsh; while over Nannie I was absolute ruler. The only time that evil had threatened me, I had been faithfully defended by my guardian uncle. At school, while I found myself more under law, I yet found myself

possessed of greater freedom. Every one was friendly and more than kind. From all this the result was that my nature was unusually trusting.

We had a whole holiday, and, all seven, set out to enjoy ourselves. It was a delicious morning in Autumn, clear and cool, with a great light in the east, and the west nowhere. Neither the autumnal tints nor the sharpening wind had any sadness in those young years which we call the old years afterwards. How strange it seems to have--all of us--to say with the Jewish poet: I have been young, and now am old! A wood in the distance, rising up the slope of a hill, was our goal, for we were after hazel-nuts. Frolicking, scampering, leaping over stiles, we felt the road vanish under our feet. When we gained the wood, although we failed in our quest we found plenty of amusement; that grew everywhere. At length it was time to return, and we resolved on going home by another road--one we did not know.

After walking a good distance, we arrived at a gate and lodge, where we stopped to inquire the way. A kind-faced woman informed us that we should shorten it much by going through the park, which, as we seemed respectable boys, she would allow us to do. We thanked her, entered, and went walking along a smooth road, through open sward, clumps of trees and an occasional piece of artful neglect in the shape of rough hillocks covered with wild shrubs, such as brier and broom. It was very delightful, and we walked along merrily. I can yet recall the individual shapes of certain hawthorn trees we passed, whose extreme age had found expression in a wild grotesqueness which would have been ridiculous but for a dim, painful resemblance to the distortion of old age in the human family.

After walking some distance, we began to doubt whether we might not have missed the way to the gate of which the woman had spoken. For a wall appeared, which, to judge from the tree-tops visible over it, must surround a kitchen garden or orchard; and from this we feared we had

come too nigh the house. We had not gone much further before a branch, projecting over the wall, from whose tip, as if the tempter had gone back to his old tricks, hung a rosy-cheeked apple, drew our eyes and arrested our steps. There are grown people who cannot, without an effort of the imagination, figure to themselves the attraction between a boy and an apple; but I suspect there are others the memories of whose boyish freaks will render it yet more difficult for them to understand a single moment's contemplation of such an object without the endeavour to appropriate it. To them the boy seems made for the apple, and the apple for the boy. Rosy, round-faced, spectacled Mr Elder, however, had such a fine sense of honour in himself that he had been to a rare degree successful in developing a similar sense in his boys, and I do believe that not one of us would, under any circumstances, except possibly those of terrifying compulsion, have pulled that apple. We stood in rapt contemplation for a few moments, and then walked away. But although there are no degrees in Virtue, who will still demand her uttermost farthing, there are degrees in the virtuousness of human beings.

As we walked away, I was the last, and was just passing from under the branch when something struck the ground at my heel. I turned. An apple must fall some time, and for this apple that some time was then. It lay at my feet. I lifted it and stood gazing at it--I need not say with admiration. My mind fell a-working. The adversary was there, and the angel too. The apple had dropped at my feet; I had not pulled it. There it would lie wasting, if some one with less right than I--said the prince of special pleaders--was not the second to find it. Besides, what fell in the road was public property. Only this was not a public road, the angel reminded me. My will fluttered from side to side, now turning its ear to my conscience, now turning away and hearkening to my impulse. At last, weary of the strife, I determined to settle it by a just contempt of trifles--and, half in desperation, bit into the ruddy cheek.

The moment I saw the wound my teeth had made, I knew what I had done, and my heart died within me. I was self-condemned. It was a new and an awful sensation--a sensation that could not be for a moment endured. The misery was too intense to leave room for repentance even. With a sudden resolve born of despair, I shoved the type of the broken law into my pocket and followed my companions. But I kept at some distance behind them, for as yet I dared not hold further communication with respectable people. I did not, and do not now, believe that there was one amongst them who would have done as I had done. Probably also not one of them would have thought of my way of deliverance from unendurable self-contempt. The curse had passed upon me, but I saw a way of escape.

A few yards further, they found the road we thought we had missed. It struck off into a hollow, the sides of which were covered with trees. As they turned into it they looked back and called me to come on. I ran as if I wanted to overtake them, but the moment they were out of sight, left the road for the grass, and set off at full speed in the same direction as before. I had not gone far before I was in the midst of trees, overflowing the hollow in which my companions had disappeared, and spreading themselves over the level above. As I entered their shadow, my old awe of the trees returned upon me--an awe I had nearly forgotten, but revived by my crime. I pressed along, however, for to turn back would have been more dreadful than any fear. At length, with a sudden turn, the road left the trees behind, and what a scene opened before me! I stood on the verge of a large space of greensward, smooth and well-kept as a lawn, but somewhat irregular in surface. From all sides it rose towards the centre. There a broad, low rock seemed to grow out of it, and upon the rock stood the lordliest house my childish eyes had ever beheld. Take situation and all, and I have scarcely yet beheld one to equal it. Half castle, half old English country seat, it covered the rock with a huge square of building, from various parts of which rose towers, mostly

square also, of different heights. I stood for one brief moment entranced with awful delight. A building which has grown for ages, the outcome of the life of powerful generations, has about it a majesty which, in certain moods, is overpowering. For one brief moment I forgot my sin and its sorrow. But memory awoke with a fresh pang. To this lordly place I, poor miserable sinner, was a debtor by wrong and shame. Let no one laugh at me because my sin was small: it was enough for me, being that of one who had stolen for the first time, and that without previous declension, and searing of the conscience. I hurried towards the building, anxiously looking for some entrance.

I had approached so near that, seated on its rock, it seemed to shoot its towers into the zenith, when, rounding a corner, I came to a part where the height sank from the foundation of the house to the level by a grassy slope, and at the foot of the slope espied an elderly gentleman, in a white hat, who stood with his hands in his breeches-pockets, looking about him. He was tall and stout, and carried himself in what seemed to me a stately manner. As I drew near him I felt somewhat encouraged by a glimpse of his face, which was rubicund and, I thought, good-natured; but, approaching him rather from behind, I could not see it well. When I addressed him he started,

‘Please, sir,’ I said, ‘is this your house?’

‘Yes, my man; it is my house,’ he answered, looking down on me with bent neck, his hands still in his pockets.

‘Please, sir,’ I said, but here my voice began to tremble, and he grew dim and large through the veil of my gathering tears. I hesitated.

‘Well, what do you want?’ he asked, in a tone half jocular, half kind.

I made a great effort and recovered my self-possession.

‘Please, sir,’ I repeated, ‘I want you to box my ears.’

‘Well, you are a funny fellow! What should I box your ears for, pray?’

‘Because I’ve been very wicked,’ I answered; and, putting my hand into my pocket, I extracted the bitten apple, and held it up to him.

‘Ho! ho!’ he said, beginning to guess what I must mean, but hardly the less bewildered for that; ‘is that one of my apples?’

‘Yes, sir. It fell down from a branch that hung over the wall. I took it up, and--and--I took a bite of it, and--and--I’m so sorry!’

Here I burst into a fit of crying which I choked as much as I could. I remember quite well how, as I stood holding out the apple, my arm would shake with the violence of my sobs.

‘I’m not fond of bitten apples,’ he said. ‘You had better eat it up now.’

This brought me to myself. If he had shown me sympathy, I should have gone on crying.

‘I would rather not. Please box my ears.’

‘I don’t want to box your ears. You’re welcome to the apple. Only don’t take what’s not your own another time.’ ‘But, please, sir, I’m so miserable!’

‘Home with you! and eat your apple as you go,’ was his unconsoling response.

‘I can’t eat it; I’m so ashamed of myself.’

‘When people do wrong, I suppose they must be ashamed of themselves. That’s all right, isn’t it?’

‘Why won’t you box my ears, then?’ I persisted.

[Illustration: “HERE IS A YOUNG GENTLEMAN, MRS. WILSON, WHO SEEMS TO HAVE LOST HIS WAY.”]

It was my sole but unavailing prayer. He turned away towards the house. My trouble rose to agony. I made some wild motion of despair, and threw myself on the grass. He turned, looked at me for a moment in silence, and then said in a changed tone--

‘My boy, I am sorry for you. I beg you will not trouble yourself any more. The affair is not worth it. Such a trifle! What can I do for you?’

I got up. A new thought of possible relief had crossed my mind.

‘Please, sir, if you won’t box my ears, will you shake hands with me?’

‘To be sure I will,’ he answered, holding out his hand, and giving mine a very kindly shake. ‘Where do you live?’

‘I am at school at Aldwick, at Mr Elder’s.’

‘You’re a long way from home!’

‘Am I, sir? Will you tell me how to go? But it’s of no consequence. I don’t mind anything now you’ve forgiven me. I shall soon run home.’

‘Come with me first. You must have something to eat.’

I wanted nothing to eat, but how could I oppose anything he said? I followed him at once, drying my eyes as I went. He led me to a great gate which I had passed before, and opening a wicket, took me across a court, and through another building where I saw many servants going about; then across a second court, which was paved with large flags, and so to a door which he opened, calling--

‘Mrs Wilson! Mrs Wilson! I want you a moment.’

‘Yes, Sir Giles,’ answered a tall, stiff-looking elderly woman who presently appeared descending, with upright spine, a corkscrew staircase of stone.

‘Here is a young gentleman, Mrs Wilson, who seems to have lost his way. He is one of Mr Elder’s pupils at Aldwick. Will you get him something to eat and drink, and then send him home?’

‘I will, Sir Giles.’

‘Good-bye, my man,’ said Sir Giles, again shaking hands with me. Then turning anew to the housekeeper, for such I found she was, he added:

‘Couldn’t you find a bag for him, and fill it with some of those brown pippins? They’re good eating, ain’t they?’

‘With pleasure, Sir Giles.’

Thereupon Sir Giles withdrew, closing the door behind him, and leaving me with the sense of life from the dead.

‘What’s your name, young gentleman?’ asked Mrs Wilson, with, I thought, some degree of sternness.

‘Wilfrid Cumbermede,’ I answered.

She stared at me a little, with a stare which would have been a start in most women. I was by this time calm enough to take a quiet look at her. She was dressed in black silk, with a white neckerchief crossing in front, and black mittens on her hands. After gazing at me fixedly for a moment or two, she turned away and ascended the stair, which went up straight from the door, saying--

‘Come with me, Master Cumbermede. You must have some tea before you go.’

I obeyed, and followed her into a long, low-ceiled room, wainscotted all over in panels, with a square moulding at the top, which served for a cornice. The ceiling was ornamented with plaster reliefs. The windows looked out, on one side into the court, on the other upon the park. The floor was black and polished like a mirror, with bits of carpet here and

there, and a rug before the curious, old-fashioned grate, where a little fire was burning and a small kettle boiling fiercely on the top of it. The tea-tray was already on the table. She got another cup and saucer, added a pot of jam to the preparations, and said:

‘Sit down and have some bread and butter, while I make the tea.’

She cut me a great piece of bread, and then a great piece of butter, and I lost no time in discovering that the quality was worthy of the quantity. Mrs Wilson kept a grave silence for a good while. At last, as she was pouring out the second cup, she looked at me over the teapot, and said--

‘You don’t remember your mother, I suppose, Master Cumbermede?’

‘No, ma’am. I never saw my mother.’

‘Within your recollection, you mean. But you must have seen her, for you were two years old when she died.’

‘Did you know my mother, then, ma’am?’ I asked, but without any great surprise, for the events of the day had been so much out of the ordinary that I had for the time almost lost the faculty of wonder.

She compressed her thin lips, and a perpendicular wrinkle appeared in the middle of her forehead, as she answered--

‘Yes; I knew your mother.’

‘She was very good, wasn’t she, ma’am?’ I said, with my mouth full of bread and butter.

‘Yes. Who told you that?’

‘I was sure of it. Nobody ever told me.’

‘Did they never talk to you about her?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘So you are at Mr Elder’s, are you?’ she said, after another long pause, during which I was not idle, for my trouble being gone I could now be hungry.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘How did you come here, then?’

‘I walked with the rest of the boys; but they are gone home without me.’

Thanks to the kindness of Sir Giles, my fault had already withdrawn so far into the past, that I wished to turn my back upon it altogether. I saw no need for confessing it to Mrs Wilson; and there was none.

‘Did you lose your way?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘What brought you here, then? I suppose you wanted to see the place.’

‘The woman at the lodge told us the nearest way was through the park.’

I quite expected she would go on cross-questioning me, and then all the truth would have had to come out. But to my great relief, she went no further, only kept eyeing me in a manner so oppressive as to compel me to eat bread and butter and strawberry jam with self-defensive eagerness. I presume she trusted to find out the truth by-and-by. She contented herself in the mean time with asking questions about my uncle and aunt, the farm, the school, and Mr and Mrs Elder, all in a cold, stately, refraining manner, with two spots of red in her face--one on each cheek-bone, and a thin rather peevish nose dividing them. But her forehead was good, and when she smiled, which was not often, her eyes shone. Still, even I, with my small knowledge of womankind, was dimly aware that she was feeling her way with me, and I did not like her much.

‘Have you nearly done?’ she asked at length.

‘Yes, quite, thank you,’ I answered.

‘Are you going back to school to-night?’

‘Yes, ma’am; of course.’

‘How are you going?’

‘If you will tell me the way--’

‘Do you know how far you are from Aldwick?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Eight miles,’ she answered; ‘and it’s getting rather late.’

I was seated opposite the windows to the park, and, looking up, saw with some dismay that the air was getting dusky. I rose at once, saying--

‘I must make haste. They will think I am lost.’

‘But you can never walk so far, Master Cumbermede.’

‘Oh, but I must! I can’t help it. I must get back as fast as possible.’

‘You never can walk such a distance. Take another bit of cake while I go and see what can be done.’

Another piece of cake being within the bounds of possibility, I might at least wait and see what Mrs Wilson’s design was. She left the room, and I turned to the cake. In a little while she came back, sat down, and went on talking. I was beginning to get quite uneasy, when a maid put her head in at the door, and said--

‘Please, Mrs Wilson, the dog-cart’s ready, ma’am.’

‘Very well,’ replied Mrs Wilson, and turning to me, said--more kindly than she had yet spoken--

‘Now, Master Cumbermede, you must come and see me again. I’m too busy to spare much time when the family is at home; but they are all going away the week after next, and if you will come and see me then, I shall be glad to show you over the house.’

As she spoke she rose and led the way from the room, and out of the court by another gate from that by which I had entered. At the bottom of a steep descent, a groom was waiting with the dog-cart.

‘Here, James,’ said Mrs Wilson, ‘take good care of the young gentleman, and put him down safe at Mr Elder’s. Master Wilfrid, you’ll find a hamper of apples underneath. You had better not eat them all yourself, you know. Here are two or three for you to eat by the way.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Wilson. No; I’m not quite so greedy as that,’ I answered gaily, for my spirits were high at the notion of a ride in the dog-cart instead of a long and dreary walk.

When I was fairly in, she shook hands with me, reminding me that I was to visit her soon, and away went the dog-cart behind a high-stepping horse. I had never before been in an open vehicle of any higher description than a cart, and the ride was a great delight. We went a different road from that which my companions had taken. It lay through trees all the way till we were out of the park.

‘That’s the land-steward’s house,’ said James.

‘Oh, is it?’ I returned, not much interested. ‘What great trees those are all about it.’

‘Yes; they’re the finest elms in all the county those,’ he answered. ‘Old Coningham knew what he was about when he got the last baronet to let him build his nest there. Here we are at the gate!’

We came out upon a country road, which ran between the wall of the park and a wooden fence along a field of grass. I offered James one of my apples, which he accepted.

‘There, now!’ he said, ‘there’s a field!--A right good bit o’ grass that! Our people has wanted to throw it into the park for hundreds of years. But they won’t part with it for love or money. It ought by rights to be ours, you see, by the lie of the country. It’s all one grass with the park. But I suppose them as owns it ain’t of the same mind.--Cur’ous old box!’ he added, pointing with his whip a long way off. ‘You can just see the roof of it.’

I looked in the direction he pointed. A rise in the ground hid all but an ancient, high-peaked roof. What was my astonishment to discover in it the roof of my own home! I was certain it could be no other. It caused a strange sensation, to come upon it thus from the outside, as it were, when I thought myself miles and miles away from it, I fell a-pondering over the matter; and as I reflected, I became convinced that the trees from which we had just emerged were the same which used to churn the wind for my childish fancies. I did not feel inclined to share my feelings with my new acquaintance; but presently he put his whip in the socket and fell to eating his apple. There was nothing more in the conversation he afterwards resumed deserving of record. He pulled up at the gate of the school, where I bade him good-night and rang the bell.

There was great rejoicing over me when I entered, for the boys had arrived without me a little while before, having searched all about the place where we had parted company, and come at length to the conclusion that I had played them a trick in order to get home without them, there having been some fun on the road concerning my local stupidity. Mr Elder, however, took me to his own room, and read me a lecture on the necessity of not abusing my privileges. I told him the whole affair from beginning to end, and thought he behaved very oddly.

He turned away every now and then, blew his nose, took off his spectacles, wiped them carefully, and replaced them before turning again to me.

‘Go on, go on, my boy. I’m listening,’ he would say.

I cannot tell whether he was laughing or crying. I suspect both. When I had finished, he said, very solemnly--

‘Wilfrid, you have had a narrow escape. I need not tell you how wrong you were about the apple, for you know that as well as I do. But you did the right thing when your eyes were opened. I am greatly pleased with you, and greatly obliged to Sir Giles. I will write and thank him this very night.’

‘Please, sir, ought I to tell the boys? I would rather not.’

‘No. I do not think it necessary.’

He rose and rang the bell.

‘Ask Master Fox to step this way.’

Fox was the oldest boy, and was on the point of leaving.

‘Fox,’ said Mr Elder, ‘Cumbermede has quite satisfied me. Will you oblige me by asking him no questions. I am quite aware such a request must seem strange, but I have good reasons for making it,’

‘Very well, sir,’ said Fox, glancing at me.

‘Take him with you, then, and tell the rest. It is as a favour to myself that I put it, Fox.’

‘That is quite enough, sir.’

Fox took me to Mrs Elder, and had a talk with the rest before I saw them. Some twenty years after, Fox and I had it out. I gave him a full

explanation, for by that time I could smile over the affair. But what does the object matter?--an apple, or a thousand pounds? It is but the peg on which the act hangs. The act is everything.

To the honour of my school-fellows I record that not one of them ever let fall a hint in the direction of the mystery. Neither did Mr or Mrs Elder once allude to it. If possible they were kinder than before.

CHAPTER X.

I BUILD CASTLES.

My companions had soon found out, and I think the discovery had something to do with the kindness they always showed me, that I was a good hand at spinning a yarn: the nautical phrase had got naturalized in the school. We had no chance, if we would have taken it, of spending any part of school-hours in such a pastime; but it formed an unfailing amusement when weather or humour interfered with bodily exercises. Nor were we debarred from the pleasure after we had retired for the night,--only, as we were parted in three rooms, I could not have a large audience then. I well remember, however, one occasion on which it was otherwise. The report of a super-excellent invention having gone abroad, one by one they came creeping into my room, after I and my companion were in bed, until we lay three in each bed, all being present but Fox. At the very heart of the climax, when a spectre was appearing and disappearing momently with the drawing in and sending out of his breath, so that you could not tell the one moment where he might show himself the next, Mr Elder walked into the room with his chamber-candle in his hand, straightway illuminating six countenances pale with terror--for I took my full share of whatever emotion I roused in the rest. But instead of laying a general interdict on the custom, he only said,

‘Come, come, boys! it’s time you were asleep. Go to your rooms directly.’

‘Please, sir,’ faltered one--Moberly by name--the dullest and most honourable boy, to my thinking, amongst us, ‘mayn’t I stay where I am? Cumbermede has put me all in a shiver.’

Mr Elder laughed, and turning to me, asked with his usual good-humour,

‘How long will your story take, Cumbermede?’

‘As long as you please, sir,’ I answered.

‘I can’t let you keep them awake all night, you know.’

‘There’s no fear of that, sir,’ I replied. ‘Moberly would have been asleep long ago if it hadn’t been a ghost. Nothing keeps him awake but ghosts.’

‘Well, is the ghost nearly done with?’

‘Not quite, sir. The worst is to come yet.’

‘Please, sir,’ interposed Moberly, ‘if you’ll let me stay where I am, I’ll turn round on my deaf ear, and won’t listen to a word more of it. It’s awful, I do assure you, sir.’ Mr Elder laughed again.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Make haste and finish your story, Cumbermede, and let them go to sleep. You, Moberly, may stay where you are for the night, but I can’t have this made a practice of.’

‘No, no, sir,’ said several at once.

‘But why don’t you tell your stories by daylight, Cumbermede? I’m sure you have time enough for them then.’

‘Oh, but he’s got one going for the day and another for the night.’

‘Then do you often lie three in a bed?’ asked Mr Elder with some concern.

‘Oh no, sir. Only this is an extra good one, you see.’

Mr Elder laughed again, bade us good-night, and left us. The horror, however, was broken. I could not call up one ‘shiver more, and in a few minutes Moberly, as well as his two companions, had slipped away to roomier quarters.

The material of the tales I told my companions was in part supplied from some of my uncle’s old books, for in his little library there were more

than the *Arcadia* of the same sort. But these had not merely afforded me the stuff to remodel and imitate; their spirit had wrought upon my spirit, and armour and war-horses and mighty swords were only the instruments with which faithful knights wrought honourable deeds.

I had a tolerably clear perception that such deeds could not be done in our days; that there were no more dragons lying in the woods: and that ladies did not now fall into the hands of giants. But I had the witness of an eternal impulse in myself that noble deeds had yet to be done, and therefore might be done, although I knew not how. Hence a feeling of the dignity of ancient descent, as involving association with great men and great actions of old, and therefore rendering such more attainable in the future, took deep root in my mind. Aware of the humbleness of my birth, and unrestrained by pride in my parents--I had lost them so early--I would indulge in many a day-dream of what I would gladly have been. I would ponder over the delights of having a history, and how grand it would be to find I was descended from some far-away knight who had done deeds of high emprise. In such moods the recollection of the old sword that had vanished from the wall would return: indeed the impression it had made upon me may have been at the root of it all. How I longed to know the story of it! But it had gone to the grave with grannie. If my uncle or aunt knew it, I had no hope of getting it from either of them; for I was certain they had no sympathy with any such fancies as mine. My favourite invention, one for which my audience was sure to call when I professed incompetence, and which I enlarged and varied every time I returned to it, was of a youth in humble life who found at length he was of far other origin then he had supposed. I did not know then, that the fancy, not uncommon with boys, has its roots in the deepest instincts of our human nature. I need not add that I had not yet read Jean Paul's *Titan, or Hesperus, or Comet*.

This tendency of thought-received a fresh impulse from my visit to Moldwarp Hall, as I choose to name the great house whither my

repentance had led me. It was the first I had ever seen to wake the sense of the mighty antique. My home was, no doubt, older than some parts of the hall; but the house we are born in never looks older than the last generation until we begin to compare it with others. By this time, what I had learned of the history of my country, and the general growth of the allied forces of my intellect, had rendered me capable of feeling the hoary eld of the great Hall. Henceforth it had a part in every invention of my boyish imagination.

I was therefore not undesirous of keeping the half-engagement I had made with Mrs Wilson, but it was not she that drew me. With all her kindness, she had not attracted me, for cupboard-love is not the sole, or always the most powerful, operant on the childish mind: it is in general stronger in men than in either children or women. I would rather not see Mrs Wilson again--she had fed my body, she had not warmed my heart. It was the grand old house that attracted me. True, it was associated with shame, but rather with the recovery from it than with the fall itself; and what memorials of ancient grandeur and knightly ways must lie within those walls, to harmonize with my many dreams!

On the next holiday, Mr Elder gave me a ready permission to revisit Moldwarp Hall. I had made myself acquainted with the nearest way by crossroads and footpaths, and full of expectation, set out with my companions. They accompanied me the greater part of the distance, and left me at a certain gate, the same by which they had come out of the park on the day of my first visit. I was glad when they were gone, for I could then indulge my excited fancy at will. I heard their voices draw away into the distance. I was alone on a little footpath which led through a wood. All about me were strangely tall and slender oaks; but as I advanced into the wood, the trees grew more various, and in some of the opener spaces great old oaks, short and big-headed, stretched out their huge shadow-filled arms in true oak-fashion. The ground was uneven, and the path led up and down over hollow and hillock, now crossing a swampy

bottom, now climbing the ridge of a rocky eminence. It was a lovely forenoon, with grey-blue sky and white clouds. The sun shone plentifully into the wood, for the leaves were thin. They hung like clouds of gold and royal purple above my head, layer over layer, with the blue sky and the snowy clouds shining through. On the ground it was a world of shadows and sunny streaks, kept ever in interfluent motion by such a wind as John Skelton describes:

‘There blew in that gardynge a soft piplyng cold Enbrethyng of Zepherus with his pleasant wynde.’

I went merrily along. The birds were not singing, but my heart did not need them. It was Spring-time there, whatever it might be in the world. The heaven of my childhood wanted no lark to make it gay. Had the trees been bare, and the frost shining on the ground, it would have been all the same. The sunlight was enough.

I was standing on the root of a great beech-tree, gazing up into the gulf of its foliage, and watching the broken lights playing about in the leaves and leaping from twig to branch, like birds yet more golden than the leaves, when a voice startled me.

‘You’re not looking for apples in a beech-tree, hey? it said.

I turned instantly, with my heart in a flutter. To my great relief I saw that the speaker was not Sir Giles, and that probably no allusion was intended. But my first apprehension made way only for another pang, for, although I did not know the man, a strange dismay shot through me at sight of him. His countenance was associated with an undefined but painful fact that lay crouching in a dusky hollow of my memory. I had no time now to entice it into the light of recollection. I took heart and spoke.

‘No,’ I answered; ‘I was only watching the sun on the leaves.’

‘Very pretty, ain’t it? Ah, it’s lovely! It’s quite beautiful--ain’t it now? You like good timber, don’t you? Trees, I mean?’ he explained, aware, I suppose, of some perplexity on my countenance.

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘I like big old ones best.’

‘Yes, yes,’ he returned, with an energy that sounded strange and jarring to my mood; ‘big old ones, that have stood for ages--the monarchs of the forest. Saplings ain’t bad things either, though. But old ones are best. Just come here, and I’ll show you one worth looking at. *It* wasn’t planted yesterday, *I* can tell you.’

I followed him along the path, until we came out of the wood. Beyond us the ground rose steep and high, and was covered with trees; but here in the hollow it was open. A stream ran along between us and the height. On this side of the stream stood a mighty tree, towards which my companion led me. It was an oak, with such a bushy head and such great roots rising in serpent rolls and heaves above the ground, that the stem looked stunted between them.

‘There!’ said my companion; ‘there’s a tree! there’s something like a tree! How a man must feel to call a tree like that his own! That’s Queen Elizabeth’s oak. It is indeed. England is dotted with would-be Queen Elizabeth’s oaks; but there is the very oak which she admired so much that she ordered luncheon to be served under it.... Ah! she knew the value of timber--did good Queen Bess. *That’s* now--now--let me see--the year after the Armada--nine from fifteen--ah well, somewhere about two hundred and thirty years ago.’

‘How lumpy and hard it looks!’ I remarked.

‘That’s the breed and the age of it,’ he returned. ‘The wonder to me is they don’t turn to stone and last for ever, those trees. Ah! there’s something to live for now!’

He had turned away to resume his walk, but as he finished the sentence, he turned again towards the tree, and shook his finger at it, as if reproaching it for belonging to somebody else than himself.

‘Where are you going now?’ he asked, wheeling round upon me sharply, with a keen look in his magpie-eyes, as the French would call them, which hardly corresponded with the bluntness of his address.

‘I’m going to the Hall,’ I answered, turning away.

‘You’ll never get there that way. How are you to cross the river?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never been this way before.’

‘You’ve been to the Hall before, then? Whom do you know there?’

‘Mrs Wilson,’ I answered.

‘H’m! Ah! You know Mrs Wilson, do you? Nice woman, Mrs Wilson!’

He said this as if he meant the opposite.

‘Here,’ he went on--‘come with me. I’ll show you the way.’

I obeyed, and followed him along the bank of the stream.

‘What a curious bridge!’ I exclaimed, as we came in sight of an ancient structure lifted high in the middle on the point of a Gothic arch.

‘Yes, ain’t it? he said. ‘Curious? I should think so! And well it may be! It’s as old as the oak there at least. There’s a bridge now for a man like Sir Giles to call his own!’

‘He can’t keep it though,’ I said, moralizing; for, in carrying on the threads of my stories, I had come to see that no climax could last for ever.

‘Can’t keep it! He could carry off every stone of it if he liked.’

‘Then it wouldn’t be the bridge any longer.’

‘You’re a sharp one,’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered, truly enough. I seemed to myself to be talking sense, that was all.

‘Well, I do. What do you mean by saying he couldn’t keep it?’

‘It’s been a good many people’s already, and it’ll be somebody else’s some day,’ I replied.

He did not seem to relish the suggestion, for he gave a kind of grunt, which gradually broke into a laugh as he answered,

‘Likely enough! likely enough!’

We had now come round to the end of the bridge, and I saw that it was far more curious than I had perceived before.

‘Why is it so narrow?’ I asked, wonderingly, for it was not three feet wide, and had a parapet of stone about three feet high on each side of it.

‘Ah!’ he replied, ‘that’s it, you see. As old as the hills. It was built, *this* bridge was, before ever a carriage was made--yes, before ever a carrier’s cart went along a road. They carried everything then upon horses’ backs. They call this the pack-horse bridge. You see there’s room for the horses’ legs, and their loads could stick out over the parapets. That’s the way they carried everything to the Hall then. That was a few years before *you* were born, young gentleman.’

‘But they couldn’t get their legs--the horses, I mean--couldn’t get their legs through this narrow opening,’ I objected; for a flat stone almost blocked up each end.

‘No; that’s true enough. But those stones have been up only a hundred years or so. They didn’t want it for pack-horses any more then, and the stones were put up to keep the cattle, with which at some time or other I

suppose some thrifty owner had stocked the park, from crossing to this meadow. That would be before those trees were planted up there.'

When we had crossed the stream, he stopped at the other end of the bridge and said,

'Now, you go that way--up the hill. There's a kind of path, if you can find it, but it doesn't much matter. Good morning.'

He walked away down the bank of the stream, while I struck into the wood.

When I reached the top, and emerged from the trees that skirted the ridge, there stood the lordly Hall before me, shining in autumnal sunlight, with gilded vanes and diamond-paned windows, as if it were a rock against which the gentle waves of the sea of light rippled and broke in flashes. When you looked at its foundation, which seemed to have torn its way up through the clinging sward, you could not tell where the building began and the rock ended. In some parts indeed the rock was wrought into the walls of the house; while in others it was faced up with stone and mortar. My heart beat high with vague rejoicing. Grand as the aged oak had looked, here was a grander growth--a growth older too than the oak, and inclosing within it a thousand histories.

I approached the gate by which Mrs Wilson had dismissed me. A flight of rude steps cut in the rock led to the portcullis, which still hung, now fixed in its place in front of the gate; for though the Hall had no external defences, it had been well fitted for the half-sieges of troublous times. A modern mansion stands, with its broad sweep up to the wide door, like its hospitable owner in full dress and broad-bosomed shirt on his own hearth-rug: this ancient house stood with its back to the world, like one of its ancient owners, ready to ride, in morion, breast-plate, and jack-boots--yet not armed *cap-à-pie*, not like a walled castle, that is.

I ascended the steps, and stood before the arch--filled with a great iron-studded oaken gate--which led through a square tower into the court. I stood gazing for some minutes before I rang the bell. Two things in particular I noticed. The first was--over the arch of the doorway, amongst others--one device very like the animal's head upon the watch and the seal which my great-grandmother had given me. I could not be sure it was the same, for the shape--both in the stone and in my memory--was considerably worn. The other interested me far more. In the great gate was a small wicket, so small that there was hardly room for me to pass without stooping. A thick stone threshold lay before it. The spot where the right foot must fall in stepping out of the wicket was worn into the shape of a shoe, to the depth of between three and four inches I should judge, vertically into the stone. The deep foot-mould conveyed to me a sense of the coming and going of generations, such as I could not gather from the age-worn walls of the building.

A great bell-handle at the end of a jointed iron-rod hung down by the side of the wicket. I rang. An old woman opened the wicket, and allowed me to enter. I thought I remembered the way to Mrs Wilson's door well enough, but when I ascended the few broad steps, curved to the shape of the corner in which the entrance stood, and found myself in the flagged court, I was bewildered, and had to follow the retreating portress for directions. A word set me right, and I was soon in Mrs Wilson's presence. She received me kindly, and expressed her satisfaction that I had kept what she was pleased to consider my engagement.

After some refreshment and a little talk, Mrs Wilson said,

'Now, Master Cumbermede, would you like to go and see the gardens, or take a walk in the park and look at the deer?'

'Please, Mrs Wilson,' I returned, 'you promised to show me the house.'

'You would like that, would you?'

‘Yes,’ I answered,--‘better than anything.’

‘Come, then,’ she said, and took a bunch of keys from the wall. ‘Some of the rooms I lock up when the family’s away.’

It was a vast place. Roughly it may be described as a large oblong which the great hall, with the kitchen and its offices, divided into two square courts--the one flagged, the other gravelled. A passage dividing the hall from the kitchen led through from the one court to the other. We entered this central portion through a small tower; and, after a peep at the hall, ascended to a room above the entrance, accessible from an open gallery which ran along two sides of the hall. The room was square, occupying the area-space of the little entrance tower. To my joyous amazement, its walls were crowded with swords, daggers--weapons in endless variety, mingled with guns and pistols, for which I cared less. Some which had hilts curiously carved and even jewelled, seemed of foreign make. Their character was different from that of the rest; but most were evidently of the same family with the one sword I knew. Mrs Wilson could tell me nothing about them. All she knew was that this was the armoury, and that Sir Giles had a book with something written in it about every one of the weapons. They were no chance collection: each had a history. I gazed in wonder and delight. Above the weapons hung many pieces of armour--no entire suits, however; of those there were several in the hall below. Finding that Mrs Wilson did not object to my handling the weapons within my reach, I was soon so much absorbed in the examination of them that I started when she spoke.

‘You shall come again, Master Cumbermede,’ she said. ‘We must go now.’ I replaced a Highland broadsword, and turned to follow her. She was evidently pleased with the alacrity of my obedience, and for the first time bestowed on me a smile as she led the way from the armoury by another door. To my enhanced delight this door led into the library. Gladly would I have lingered, but Mrs Wilson walked on, and I followed

through rooms and rooms, low-pitched, and hung with tapestry, some carpeted, some floored with black polished oak, others with some kind of cement or concrete, all filled with ancient furniture whose very aspect was a speechless marvel. Out of one into another, along endless passages, up and down winding stairs, now looking from the summit of a lofty tower upon terraces and gardens below--now lost in gloomy arches, again out upon acres of leads, and now bathed in the sweet gloom of the ancient chapel with its stained windows of that old glass which seems nothing at first, it is so modest and harmonious, but which for that very reason grows into a poem in the brain: you see it last and love it best--I followed with unabating delight.

When at length Mrs Wilson said I had seen the whole, I begged her to let me go again into the library, for she had not given me a moment to look at it. She consented.

It was a part of the house not best suited for the purpose, connected with the armoury by a descent of a few steps. It lay over some of the housekeeping department, was too near the great hall, and looked into the flagged court. A library should be on the ground-floor in a quiet wing, with an outlook on grass, and the possibility of gaining it at once without going through long passages. Nor was the library itself, architecturally considered, at all superior to its position. The books had greatly outgrown the space allotted to them, and several of the neighbouring rooms had been annexed as occasion required; hence it consisted of half-a-dozen rooms, some of them merely closets intended for dressing-rooms, and all very ill lighted. I entered it however in no critical spirit, but with a feeling of reverential delight. My uncle’s books had taught me to love books. I had been accustomed to consider his five hundred volumes a wonderful library; but here were thousands--as old, as musty, as neglected, as dilapidated, therefore as certainly full of wonder and discovery, as man or boy could wish.--Oh the treasures of a house that has been growing for ages! I leave a whole roomful of lethal weapons, to descend three steps

into six roomfuls of books--each ‘the precious life-blood of a master-spirit’--for as yet in my eyes all books were worthy! Which did I love best? Old swords or old books? I could not tell! I had only the grace to know which I *ought* to love best.

As we passed from the first room into the second, up rose a white thing from the corner of the window-seat, and came towards us. I started. Mrs Wilson exclaimed:

‘La! Miss Clara! how ever--?

The rest was lost in the abyss of possibility.

‘They told me you were somewhere about, Mrs Wilson, and I thought I had better wait here. How do you do?’

‘La, child, you’ve given me such a turn!’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘You might have been a ghost if it had been in the middle of the night.’

[Illustration: SHE WAS A YEAR OR TWO OLDER THAN MYSELF, I THOUGHT, AND THE LOVLIEST CREATURE I HAD EVER SEEN.]

‘I’m very sorry, Mrs Wilson,’ said the girl merrily. ‘Only you see if it had been a ghost it couldn’t have been me.’

‘How’s your papa, Miss Clara?’

‘Oh! he’s always quite well.’

‘When did you see him?’

‘To-day. He’s at home with grandpapa now.’

‘And you ran away and left him?’

‘Not quite that. He and grandpapa went out about some business--to the copse at Deadman’s Hollow, I think. They didn’t want my advice--they never do; so I came to see you, Mrs Wilson.’

By this time I had been able to look at the girl. She was a year or two older than myself, I thought, and the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She had large blue eyes of the rare shade called violet, a little round perhaps, but the long lashes did something to rectify that fault; and a delicate nose--turned up a little of course, else at her age she could not have been so pretty. Her mouth was well curved, expressing a full share of Paley's happiness; her chin was something large and projecting, but the lines were fine. Her hair was a light brown, but dark for her eyes, and her complexion would have been enchanting to any one fond of the 'sweet mixture, red and white.' Her figure was that of a girl of thirteen, undetermined--but therein I was not critical. 'An exceeding fair forehead,' to quote Sir Philip Sidney, and plump, white, dimple-knuckled hands complete the picture sufficiently for the present. Indeed it would have been better to say only that I was taken with her, and then the reader might fancy her such as he would have been taken with himself. But I was not fascinated. It was only that I was a boy and she was a girl, and there being no element of decided repulsion, I felt kindly disposed towards her.

Mrs Wilson turned to me.

'Well, Master Cumbermede, you see I am able to give you more than I promised.'

'Yes,' I returned; 'you promised to show me the old house--'

'And here,' she interposed, 'I show you a young lady as well.'

'Yes, thank you,' I said simply. But I had a feeling that Mrs Wilson was not absolutely well-pleased.

I was rather shy of Miss Clara--not that I was afraid of her, but that I did not exactly know what was expected of me, and Mrs Wilson gave us no further introduction to each other. I was not so shy, however, as not to wish Mrs Wilson would leave us together, for then, I thought, we should

get on well enough; but such was not her intent. Desirous of being agreeable, however--as far as I knew how, and remembering that Mrs Wilson had given me the choice before, I said to her--

‘Mightn’t we go and look at the deer, Mrs Wilson?’

‘You had better not,’ she answered. ‘They are rather ill-tempered just now. They might run at you. I heard them fighting last night, and knocking their horns together dreadfully.’

‘Then we’d better not,’ said Clara. ‘They frightened me very much yesterday.’

We were following Mrs Wilson from the room. As we passed the hall-door, we peeped in.

‘Do you like such great high places?’ asked Clara.

‘Yes, I do,’ I answered. ‘I like great high places. It makes you gasp somehow.’

‘Are you fond of gasping? Does it do you good?’ she asked, with a mock-simplicity which might be humour or something not so pleasant.

‘Yes, I think it does,’ I answered. ‘It pleases me.’

‘I don’t like it. I like a quiet snug place like the library--not a great wide place like this, that looks as if it had swallowed you and didn’t know it.’

‘What a clever creature she is!’ I thought. We turned away and followed Mrs Wilson again.

I had expected to spend the rest of the day with her, but the moment we reached her apartment, she got out a bottle of her home-made wine and some cake, saying it was time for me to go home. I was much disappointed--the more that the pretty Clara remained behind; but what could I do? I strolled back to Aldwick with my head fuller than ever of

fancies new and old. But Mrs Wilson had said nothing of going to see her again, and without an invitation I could not venture to revisit the Hall.

In pondering over the events of the day, I gave the man I had met in the wood a full share in my meditations.

CHAPTER XI.

A TALK WITH MY UNCLE.

When I returned home for the Christmas holidays, I told my uncle, amongst other things, all that I have just recorded; for although the affair seemed far away from me now, I felt that he ought to know it. He was greatly pleased with my behaviour in regard to the apple. He did not identify the place, however, until he heard the name of the housekeeper: then I saw a cloud pass over his face. It grew deeper when I told him of my second visit, especially while I described the man I had met in the wood.

‘I have a strange fancy about him, uncle,’ I said. ‘I think he must be the same man that came here one very stormy night--long ago--and wanted to take me away.’

‘Who told you of that?’ asked my uncle startled.

I explained that I had been a listener.

‘You ought not to have listened.’

‘I know that now; but I did not know then. I woke frightened, and heard the voices.’

‘What makes you think he was the same man?’

‘I can’t be sure, you know. But as often as I think of the man I met in the wood, the recollection of that night comes back to me.’

‘I dare say. What was he like?’

I described him as well as I could.

‘Yes,’ said my uncle, ‘I dare say. He is a dangerous man.’

‘What did he want with me?’

‘He wanted to have something to do with your education. He is an old friend--acquaintance I ought to say--of your father’s. I should be sorry you had any intercourse with him. He is a very worldly kind of man. He believes in money and rank and getting on. He believes in nothing else that, I know.’

‘Then I am sure I shouldn’t like him,’ I said.

‘I am pretty sure you wouldn’t,’ returned my uncle.

I had never before heard him speak so severely of any one. But from this time he began to talk to me more as if I had been a grown man. There was a simplicity in his way of looking at things, however, which made him quite intelligible to a boy as yet uncorrupted by false aims or judgments. He took me about with him constantly, and I began to see him as he was, and to honour and love him more than ever.

Christmas-day this year fell on a Sunday. It was a model Christmas-day. My uncle and I walked to church in the morning. When we started, the grass was shining with frost, and the air was cold; a fog hung about the horizon, and the sun shone through it with red rayless countenance. But before we reached the church, which was some three miles from home, the fog was gone, and the frost had taken shelter with the shadows; the sun was dazzling without being clear, and the golden cock on the spire was glittering keen in the moveless air.

‘What do they put a cock on the spire for, uncle?’ I asked.

‘To end off with an ornament, perhaps,’ he answered.

‘I thought it had been to show how the wind blew.’

‘Well, it wouldn’t be the first time great things--I mean the spire, not the cock--had been put to little uses.’

‘But why should it be a cock,’ I asked, ‘more than any other bird?’

‘Some people--those to whom the church is chiefly historical--would tell you it is the cock that rebuked St Peter. Whether it be so or not, I think a better reason for putting it there would be that the cock is the first creature to welcome the light, and tell people that it is coming. Hence it is a symbol of the clergyman.’

‘But our clergyman doesn’t wake the people, uncle. I’ve seen him send *you* to sleep sometimes.’

My uncle laughed.

‘I dare say there are some dull cocks too,’ he answered.

‘There’s one at the farm,’ I said, ‘which goes on crowing every now and then all night--in his sleep--Janet says. But it never wakes till all the rest are out in the yard.’

My uncle laughed again. We had reached the churchyard, and by the time we had visited grannie’s grave--that was the only one I thought of in the group of family mounds--the bells had ceased, and we entered.

I at least did not sleep this morning; not however because of the anti-somnolence of the clergyman--but that, in a pew not far off from me, sat Clara. I could see her as often as I pleased to turn my head half-way round. Church is a very favourable place for falling in love. It is all very well for the older people to shake their heads and say you ought to be minding the service--that does not affect the fact stated--especially when the clergyman is of the half-awake order who take to the church as a gentleman-like profession. Having to sit so still, with the pretty face so near, with no obligation to pay it attention, but with perfect liberty to look at it, a boy in the habit of inventing stories could hardly help fancying himself in love with it. Whether she saw me or not, I cannot tell. Although she passed me close as we came out, she did not look my way, and I had not the hardihood to address her.

As we were walking home, my uncle broke the silence.

‘You would like to be an honourable man, wouldn’t you, Willie?’ he said.

‘Yes, that I should, uncle.’

‘Could you keep a secret now?’

‘Yes, uncle.’

‘But there are two ways of keeping a secret.’

‘I don’t know more than one.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Not to tell it.’

‘Never to show that you knew it, would be better still.’

‘Yes, it would--’

‘But, suppose a thing:--suppose you knew that there was a secret; suppose you wanted very much to find it out, and yet would not try to find it out: wouldn’t that be another way of keeping it?’

‘Yes, it would. If I knew there was a secret, I should like to find it out.’

‘Well, I am going to try you. There is a secret. I know it; you do not. You have a right to know it some day, but not yet. I mean to tell it you, but I want you to learn a great deal first. I want to keep the secret from hurting you. Just as you would keep things from a baby which would hurt him, I have kept some things from you.’

‘Is the sword one of them, uncle?’ I asked.

‘You could not do anything with the secret if you did know it,’ my uncle went on, without heeding my question; ‘but there may be designing

people who would make a tool of you for their own ends. It is far better you should be ignorant. Now will you keep my secret?--or, in other words, will you trust me?' I felt a little frightened. My imagination was at work on the formless thing. But I was chiefly afraid of the promise--lest I should anyway break it.

'I will try to keep the secret--keep it from myself, that is--ain't it, uncle?'

'Yes. That is just what I mean.'

'But how long will it be for, uncle?'

'I am not quite sure. It will depend on how wise and sensible you grow. Some boys are men at eighteen--some not at forty. The more reasonable and well-behaved you are, the sooner shall I feel at liberty to tell it you.'

He ceased, and I remained silent. I was not astonished. The vague news fell in with all my fancies. The possibility of something pleasant, nay even wonderful and romantic, of course suggested itself, and the hope which thence gilded the delay tended to reconcile me to my ignorance.

'I think it better you should not go back to Mr Elder's, Willie,' said my uncle.

I was stunned at the words. Where could a place be found to compare for blessedness with Mr Elder's school? Not even the great Hall, with its acres of rooms and its age-long history, could rival it.

Some moments passed before I could utter a faltering 'Why?'

'That is part of my secret, Willie,' answered my uncle. 'I know it will be a disappointment to you, for you have been very happy with Mr Elder.'

'Yes, indeed,' I answered. It was all I could say, for the tears were rolling down my cheeks, and there was a great lump in my throat.

'I am very sorry indeed to give you pain, Willie,' he said kindly.

‘It’s not my blame, is it, uncle?’ I sobbed.

‘Not in the least, my boy.’

‘Oh! then, I don’t mind it so much.’

‘There’s a brave boy! Now the question is, what to do with you.’

‘Can’t I stop at home, then?’

‘No, that won’t do either, Willie. I must have you taught, and I haven’t time to teach you myself. Neither am I scholar enough for it now; my learning has got rusty. I know your father would have wished to send you to college, and although I do not very well see how I can manage it, I must do the best I can. I’m not a rich man, you see, Willie, though I have a little laid by. I never could do much at making money, and I must not leave your aunt unprovided for.’

‘No, uncle. Besides, I shall soon be able to work for myself and you too.’

‘Not for a long time if you go to college, Willie. But we need not talk about that yet.’

In the evening I went to my uncle’s room. He was sitting by his fire reading the New Testament.

‘Please, uncle,’ I said, ‘will you tell me something about my father and mother?’

‘With pleasure, my boy,’ he answered, and after a moment’s thought began to give me a sketch of my father’s life, with as many touches of the man himself as he could at the moment recall. I will not detain my reader with the narrative. It is sufficient to say that my father was a simple honourable man, without much education, but a great lover of plain books. His health had always been delicate; and before he died he had been so long an invalid that my mother’s health had given way in nursing him, so that she very soon followed him. As his narrative closed my

uncle said: ‘Now, Willie, you see, with a good man like that for your father, you are bound to be good and honourable! Never mind whether people praise you or not; you do what you ought to do. And don’t be always thinking of your rights. There are people who consider themselves very grand because they can’t bear to be interfered with. They think themselves lovers of justice, when it is only justice to themselves they care about. The true lover of justice is one who would rather die a slave than interfere with the rights of others. To wrong any one is the most terrible thing in the world. Injustice *to* you is not an awful thing like injustice *in* you. I should like to see you a great man, Willie. Do you know what I mean by a great man?’

‘Something else than I know, I’m afraid, uncle,’ I answered.

‘A great man is one who will try to do right against the devil himself: one who will not do wrong to please anybody or to save his life.’

I listened, but I thought with myself a man might do all that, and be no great man. I would do something better--some fine deed or other--I did not know what now, but I should find out by-and-by. My uncle was too easily pleased: I should demand more of a great man. Not so did the knights of old gain their renown. I was silent.

‘I don’t want you to take my opinions as yours, you know, Willie,’ my uncle resumed. ‘But I want you to remember what my opinion is.’

As he spoke, he went to a drawer in the room, and brought out something which he put in my hands. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was the watch grannie had given me.

‘There,’ he said, ‘is your father’s watch. Let it keep you in mind that to be good is to be great.’

‘Oh, thank you, uncle!’ I said, heeding only my recovered treasure. ‘But didn’t it belong to somebody before my father? Grannie gave it me as if it had been hers.’

‘Your grandfather gave it to your father; but when he died, your great-grandmother took it. Did she tell you anything about it?’

‘Nothing particular. She said it was her husband’s.’

‘So it was, I believe.’

‘She used to call him my father.’

‘Ah, you remember that!’

‘I’ve had so much time to think about things, uncle!’

‘Yes. Well--I hope you will think more about things yet.’

‘Yes, uncle. But there’s something else I should like to ask you about.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The old sword.’

My uncle smiled, and rose again, saying, ‘Ah! I thought as much. Is that anything like it?’ he added, bringing it from the bottom of a cupboard.

I took it from his hands with awe. It was the same. If I could have mistaken the hilt, I could not mistake the split sheath.

‘Oh, uncle!’ I exclaimed, breathless with delight.

‘That’s it--isn’t it?’ he said, enjoying my enjoyment.

‘Yes, that it is! Now tell me all about it, please.’

‘Indeed I can tell you very little. Some ancestor of ours fought with it somewhere. There was a story about it, but I have forgot it. You may have it if you like.’

‘No, uncle! May I? To take away with me?’

‘Yes. I think you are old enough now not to do any mischief with it.’

I do not believe there was a happier boy in England that night. I did not mind where I went now. I thought I could even bear to bid Mrs Elder farewell. Whether therefore possession had done me good, I leave my reader to judge. But happily for our blessedness, the joy of possession soon palls, and not many days had gone by before I found I had a heart yet. Strange to say, it was my aunt who touched it.

I do not yet know all the reasons which brought my uncle to the resolution of sending me abroad: it was certainly an unusual mode of preparing one for the university; but the next day he disclosed the plan to me. I was pleased with the notion. But my aunt’s apron went up to her eyes. It was a very hard apron, and I pitied those eyes although they were fierce.

‘Oh, auntie!’ I said, ‘what are you crying for? Don’t you like me to go?’

‘It’s too far off, child. How am I to get to you if you should be taken ill?’

Moved both by my own pleasure and her grief, I got up and threw my arms round her neck. I had never done so before. She returned my embrace and wept freely.

As it was not a fit season for travelling, and as my uncle had not yet learned whither it would be well to send me, it was after all resolved that I should return to Mr Elder’s for another half-year. This gave me unspeakable pleasure; and I set out for school again in such a blissful mood as must be rare in the experience of any life.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE-STEWARD.

My uncle had had the watch cleaned and repaired for me, so that, notwithstanding its great age, it was yet capable of a doubtful sort of service. Its caprices were almost human, but they never impaired the credit of its possession in the eyes of my school-fellows; rather they added to the interest of the little machine, inasmuch as no one could foretell its behaviour under any circumstances. We were far oftener late now, when we went out for a ramble. Heretofore we had used our faculties and consulted the sky--now we trusted to the watch, and indeed acted as if it could regulate the time to our convenience, and carry us home afterwards. We regarded it, in respect Of time, very much as some people regard the Bible in respect of eternity. And the consequences were similar. We made an idol of it, and the idol played us the usual idol-pranks.

But I think the possession of the sword, in my own eyes too a far grander thing than the watch, raised me yet higher in the regard of my companions. We could not be on such intimate terms with the sword, for one thing, as with the watch. It was in more senses than one beyond our sphere--a thing to be regarded with awe and reverence. Mr Elder had most wisely made no objection to my having it in our bed-room; but he drove two nails into the wall and hung it high above my reach, saying the time had not come for my handling it. I believe the good man respected the ancient weapon, and wished to preserve it from such usage as it might have met with from boys. It was the more a constant stimulus to my imagination, and I believe insensibly to my moral nature as well, connecting me in a kind of dim consciousness with foregone ancestors who had, I took it for granted, done well on the battle-field. I had the sense of an inherited character to sustain in the new order of things. But

there was more in its influence which I can hardly define--the inheritance of it even gave birth to a certain sense of personal dignity.

Although I never thought of visiting Moldwarp Hall again without an invitation, I took my companions more than once into the woods which lay about it: thus far I used the right of my acquaintance with the housekeeper. One day in Spring, I had gone with them to the old narrow bridge. I was particularly fond of visiting it. We lingered a long time about Queen Elizabeth's oak; and by climbing up on each other's shoulders, and so gaining some stumps of vanished boughs, had succeeded in clambering, one after another, into the wilderness of its branches, where the young buds were now pushing away the withered leaves before them, as the young generations of men push the older into the grave. When my turn came, I climbed and climbed until I had reached a great height in its top.

Then I sat down, holding by the branch over my head, and began to look about me. Below was an entangled net, as it seemed--a labyrinth of boughs, branches, twigs, and shoots. If I had fallen I could hardly have reached the earth. Through this environing mass of lines, I caught glimpses of the country around--green fields, swelling into hills, where the fresh foliage was bursting from the trees; and below, the little stream was pursuing its busy way by a devious but certain path to its unknown future. Then my eyes turned to the tree-clad ascent on the opposite side: through the topmost of its trees, shone a golden spark, a glimmer of yellow fire. It was the vane on the highest tower of the Hall. A great desire seized me to look on the lordly pile once more. I descended in haste, and proposed to my companions that we should climb through the woods, and have a peep at the house. The eldest, who was in a measure in charge of us--his name was Bardsley, for Fox was gone--proposed to consult my watch first. Had we known that the faithless thing had stopped for an hour and a half, and then resumed its onward course as if nothing had happened, we should not have delayed our return. As it was,

off we scampered for the pack-horse bridge, which we left behind us only after many frog-leaps over the obstructing stones at the ends. Then up through the wood we went like wild creatures, abstaining however from all shouting and mischief, aware that we were on sufferance only. At length we stood on the verge of the descent, when to our surprise we saw the sun getting low in the horizon. Clouds were gathering overhead, and a wailful wind made one moaning sweep through the trees behind us in the hollow. The sun had hidden his shape, but not his splendour, in the skirts of the white clouds which were closing in around him. Spring as it was, I thought I smelled snow in the air. But the vane which had drawn me shone brilliant against a darkening cloud, like a golden bird in the sky. We looked at each other, not in dismay exactly, but with a common feeling that the elements were gathering against us. The wise way would of course have been to turn at once and make for home; but the watch had to be considered. Was the watch right, or was the watch wrong? Its health and conduct were of the greatest interest to the commonweal. That question must be answered. We looked from the watch to the sun, and back from the sun to the watch. Steady to all appearance as the descending sun itself, the hands were trotting and crawling along their appointed way, with a look of unconscious innocence, in the midst of their diamond coronet. I volunteered to settle the question: I would run to the Hall, ring the bell, and ask leave to go as far into the court as to see the clock on the central tower. The proposition was applauded. I ran, rang, and being recognized by the portress, was at once admitted. In a moment I had satisfied myself of the treachery of my bosom-friend, and was turning to leave the court, when a lattice opened, and I heard a voice calling my name. It was Mrs Wilson's. She beckoned me. I went up under the window.

'Why don't you come and see me, Master Cumbermede?' she said.

'You didn't ask me, Mrs Wilson. I should have liked to come very much.'

‘Come in, then, and have tea with me now.’

‘No, thank you,’ I answered. ‘My schoolfellows are waiting for me, and we are too late already. I only came to see the clock.’

‘Well, you must come soon, then.’

‘I will, Mrs Wilson. Good-night,’ I answered, and away I ran, opened the wicket for myself, set my foot in the deep shoe-mould, then rushed down the rough steps and across the grass to my companions.

When they heard what time it was, they turned without a word, and in less than a minute we were at the bottom of the hill and over the bridge. The wood followed us with a moan which was gathering to a roar. Down in the meadow it was growing dark. Before we reached the lodge, it had begun to rain, and the wind, when we got out upon the road, was blowing a gale. We were seven miles from home. Happily the wind was in our back, and, wet to the skin, but not so weary because of the aid of the wind, we at length reached Aldwick. The sole punishment we had for being so late--and that was more a precaution than a punishment--was that we had to go to bed immediately after a hurried tea. To face and fight the elements is, however, an invaluable lesson in childhood, and I do not think those parents do well who are over-careful to preserve all their children from all inclemencies of weather or season.

When the next holiday drew near, I once more requested and obtained permission to visit Moldwarp Hall. I am now puzzled to understand why my uncle had not interdicted it, but certainly he had laid no injunctions upon me in regard thereto. Possibly he had communicated with Mrs Wilson: I do not know. If he had requested Mr. Elder to prevent me, I could not have gone. So far, however, must this have been from being the case that, on the eve of the holiday, Mr Elder said to me:

‘If Mrs Wilson should ask you to stay all night, you may.’

I suspect he knew more about some things than I did. The notion of staying all night seemed to me, however, out of the question. Mrs Wilson could not be expected to entertain me to that extent. I fancy, though, that she had written to make the request. My schoolfellows accompanied me as far as the bridge, and there left me. Mrs Wilson received me with notable warmth, and did propose that I should stay all night, to which I gladly agreed, more, it must be confessed, from the attraction of the old house than the love I bore to Mrs Wilson.

‘But what is that you are carrying?’ she asked.

It was my sword. This requires a little explanation.

It was natural enough that on the eve of a second visit, as I hoped, to the armoury, I should, on going up to bed, lift my eyes with longing look to my own sword. The thought followed--what a pleasure it would be to compare it with the other swords in the armoury. If I could only get it down and smuggle it away with me! It was my own. I believed Mr Elder would not approve of this, but at the same time he had never told me not to take it down: he had only hung it too high for any of us to reach it--almost close to the ceiling, in fact. But a want of enterprise was not then a fault of mine, and the temptation was great. So, when my chum was asleep, I rose, and by the remnant of a fading moon got together the furniture--no easy undertaking when the least noise would have betrayed me. Fortunately there was a chest of drawers not far from under the object of my ambition, and I managed by half inches to move it the few feet necessary. On the top of this I hoisted the small dressing-table, which, being only of deal, was very light. The chest of drawers was large enough to hold my small box beside the table. I got on the drawers by means of a chair, then by means of the box I got on the table, and so succeeded in getting down the sword. Having replaced the furniture, I laid the weapon under my bolster, and was soon fast asleep. The moment I woke I got up, and before the house was stirring had deposited the

sword in an outbuilding whence I could easily get it off the premises. Of course my companions knew, and I told them all my design. Moberly hinted that I ought to have asked Mr Elder, but his was the sole remark in that direction.

‘It is my sword, Mrs Wilson,’ I answered.

‘How do you come to have a sword?’ she asked. ‘It is hardly a fit plaything for you.’

I told her how it had been in the house since long before I was born, and that I had brought it to compare with some of the swords in the armoury.

‘Very well,’ she answered. ‘I dare say we can manage it; but when Mr Close is at home it is not very easy to get into the armoury. He’s so jealous of any one touching his swords and guns!’

‘Who is Mr Close, then?’

‘Mr Close is the house-steward.’

‘But they’re not his, then, are they?’

‘It’s quite enough that he thinks so. He has a fancy for that sort of thing. I’m sure I don’t see anything so precious in the rusty old rubbish.’

I suspected that, as the saying is, there was no love lost between Mrs Wilson and Mr Close. I learned afterwards that he had been chaplain to a regiment of foot, which, according to rumour, he had had to leave for some misconduct. This was in the time of the previous owner of Moldwarp Hall, and nobody now knew the circumstances under which he had become house-steward--a position in which Sir Giles, when he came to the property, had retained his services.

‘We are going to have company, and a dance, this evening,’ continued Mrs Wilson. ‘I hardly know what to do with you, my hands are so full.’

This was not very consistent with her inviting me to stay all night, and confirms my suspicion that she had made a request to that purport of Mr. Elder, for otherwise, surely, she would have sent me home.

‘Oh! never mind me, Mrs Wilson,’ I said. ‘If you will let me wander about the place, I shall be perfectly comfortable.’

‘Yes; but you might get in the way of the family, or the visitors,’ she said.

‘I’ll take good care of that,’ I returned. ‘Surely there is room in this huge place without running against any one.’

‘There ought to be,’ she answered.

After a few minutes’ silence, she resumed.

‘We shall have a good many of them staying all night’, but there will be room for you, I dare say. What would you like to do with yourself till they begin to come?’

‘I should like to go to the library,’ I answered, thinking, I confess, of the adjacent armoury as well. ‘Should I be in the way there?’

‘No; I don’t think you would,’ she replied, thoughtfully. ‘It’s not often any one goes there.’

‘Who takes charge of the books?’ I asked.

‘Oh! books don’t want much taking care of,’ she replied. ‘I have thought of having them down and dusting the place out, but it would be such a job! and the dust don’t signify upon old books. They ain’t of much count in this house. Nobody heeds them.’

‘I wish Sir Giles would let me come and put them in order in the holidays,’ I said, little knowing how altogether unfit I yet was for such an undertaking.

‘Ah well! we’ll see. Who knows?’

‘You don’t think he would!’ I exclaimed.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps he might. But I thought you were going abroad soon.’

I had not said anything to her on the subject. I had never had an opportunity.

‘Who told you that, Mrs Wilson?’

‘Never you mind. A little bird. Now you had better go to the library. I dare say you won’t hurt anything, for Sir Giles, although he never looks at the books, would be dreadfully angry if he thought anything were happening to them.’

‘I’ll take as good care of them as if they were my uncle’s. He used to let me handle his as much as I liked. I used to mend them up for him. I’m quite accustomed to books, I assure you, Mrs Wilson.’

‘Come, then; I will show you the way,’ she said.

‘I think I know the way,’ I answered. For I had pondered so much over the place, and had, I presume, filled so many gaps of recollection with creations of fancy, that I quite believed I knew my way all about the house.

‘We shall see,’ she returned with a smile. ‘I will take you the nearest way, and you shall tell me on your honour if you remember it.’

She led the way, and I followed. Passing down the stone stair and through several rooms, mostly plain bedrooms, we arrived at a wooden staircase, of which there were few in the place. We ascended a little way, crossed one or two rooms more, came out on a small gallery open to the air, a sort of covered bridge across a gulf in the building, re-entered, and

after crossing other rooms, tapestried, and to my eyes richly furnished, arrived at the first of those occupied by the library.

‘Now did you know the way, Wilfrid?’

‘Not in the least,’ I answered. ‘I cannot think how I could have forgotten it so entirely. I am ashamed of myself.’

‘You have no occasion,’ she returned. ‘You never went that way at all.’

‘Oh, dear me!’ I said; ‘what a place it is! I might lose myself in it for a week.’

‘You would come out somewhere, if you went on long enough, I dare say. But you must not leave the library till I come and fetch you. You will want some dinner before long.’

‘What time do you dine?’ I asked, putting my hand to my watch-pocket.

‘Ah! you’ve got a watch--have you? But indeed, on a day like this, I dine when I can. You needn’t fear. I will take care of you.’

‘Mayn’t I go into the armoury?’

‘If you don’t mind the risk of meeting Mr Close. But he’s not likely to be there to-day.’

She left me with fresh injunctions not to stir till she came for me. But I now felt the place to be so like a rabbit-warren, that I dared not leave the library, if not for the fear of being lost, then for the fear of intruding upon some of the family. I soon nestled in a corner, with books behind, books before, and books all around me. After trying several spots, like a miner searching for live lodes, and finding nothing auriferous to my limited capacities and tastes, I at length struck upon a rich vein, instantly dropped on the floor, and, with my back against the shelves, was now immersed in ‘The Seven Champions of Christendom.’ As I read, a ray of light, which had been creeping along the shelves behind me, leaped upon

my page. I looked up. I had not yet seen the room so light. Nor had I perceived before in what confusion and with what disrespect the books were heaped upon the shelves. A dim feeling awoke in me that to restore such a world to order would be like a work of creation; but I sank again forthwith in the delights of a feast provided for an imagination which had in general to feed itself. I had here all the delight of invention without any of its effort.

At length I became aware of some weariness. The sunbeam had vanished, not only from the page, but from the room. I began to stretch my arms. As the tension of their muscles relaxed, my hand fell upon the sword which I had carried with me and laid on the floor by my side. It awoke another mental nerve. I would go and see the armoury.

I rose, and wandered slowly through room after room of the library, dragging my sword after me. When I reached the last, there, in the corner next the outer wall of the house, rose the three stone steps leading to the little door that communicated with the treasury of ancient strife. I stood at the foot of the steps irresolute for a moment, fearful lest my black man, Mr Close, should be within, polishing his weapons perhaps, and fearful in his wrath. I ascended the steps, listened at the door, heard nothing, lifted the old, quaintly-formed latch, peeped in, and entered. There was the whole collection, abandoned to my eager gaze and eager hands! How long I stood, taking down weapon after weapon, examining each like an old book, speculating upon modes of use, and intention of varieties in form, poring over adornment and mounting, I cannot tell. Historically the whole was a sealed book; individually I made a thorough acquaintance with not a few, noting the differences and resemblances between them and my own, and instead of losing conceit of the latter, finding more and more reasons for holding it dear and honourable. I was poising in one hand, with the blade upright in the air--for otherwise I could scarcely have held it in both--a huge two-handed, double-hilted sword with serrated double edge, when I heard a step approaching, and before I had

well replaced the sword, a little door in a corner which-I had scarcely noticed--the third door to the room--opened, and down the last steps of the narrowest of winding stairs a little man in black screwed himself into the armoury. I was startled, but not altogether frightened. I felt myself grasping my own sword somewhat nervously in my left hand, as I abandoned the great one, and let it fall back with a clang into its corner.

‘By the powers!’ exclaimed Mr Close, revealing himself an Irishman at once in the surprise of my presence, ‘and whom have we here?’

I felt my voice tremble a little as I replied,

‘Mrs Wilson allowed me to come, sir. I assure you I have not been hurting anything.’

‘Who’s to tell that? Mrs Wilson has no business to let any one come here. This is my quarters. There--you’ve got one in your hand now! You’ve left finger-marks on the blade, I’ll be bound. Give it me.’

He stretched out his hand. I drew back.

‘This one is mine,’ I said.

‘Ho, ho, young gentleman! So you’re a collector--are you? Already too! Nothing like beginning in time. Let me look at the thing, though.’

He was a little man, as I have said, dressed in black, with a frock coat and a deep white neckcloth. His face would have been vulgar, especially as his nose was a traitor to his mouth, revealing in its hue the proclivities of its owner, but for a certain look of the connoisseur which went far to redeem it. The hand which he stretched out to take my weapon, was small and delicate--like a woman’s indeed. His speech was that of a gentleman. I handed him the sword at once.

He had scarcely glanced at it when a strange look passed over his countenance. He tried to draw it, failed, and looking all along the sheath,

saw its condition. Then his eyes flashed. He turned from me abruptly, and went up the stair he had descended. I waited anxiously for what seemed to me half an hour: I dare say it was not more than ten minutes. At last I heard him revolving on his axis down the corkscrew staircase. He entered and handed me my sword, saying--

‘There! I can’t get it out of the sheath. It’s in a horrid state of rust. Where did you fall in with it?’

I told him all I knew about it. If he did not seem exactly interested, he certainly behaved with some oddity. When I told him what my grandmother had said about some battle in which an ancestor had worn it, his arm rose with a jerk, and the motions of his face, especially of his mouth, which appeared to be eating its own teeth, were for a moment grotesque. When I had finished, he said, with indifferent tone, but eager face--

‘Well, it’s a rusty old thing, but I like old weapons. I’ll give you a bran new officer’s sword, as bright as a mirror, for it--I will. There now! Is it a bargain?’

‘I could not part with it, sir--not for the best sword in the country,’ I answered. ‘You see it has been so long in our family.’

‘Hm! hm! you’re quite right, my boy. I wouldn’t if I were you. But as I see you know how to set a right value on such a weapon, you may stay and look at mine as long as you like. Only if you take any of them from their sheaths, you must be very careful how you put them in again. Don’t use any force. If there is any one you can’t manage easily, just lay it on the window-sill, and I will attend to it. Mind you don’t handle--I mean touch--the blades at all. There would be no end of rust-spots before morning.’

I was full of gratitude for the confidence he placed in me.

‘I can’t stop now to tell you about them all, but I will--some day.’

So saying he disappeared once more up the little staircase, leaving me like Aladdin in the jewel-forest. I had not been alone more than half an hour or so, however, when he returned, and taking down a dagger, said abruptly,

‘There, that is the dagger with which Lord Harry Rolleston’--I think that was the name, but knowing nothing of the family or its history, I could not keep the names separate--‘stabbed his brother Gilbert. And there is--’

He took down one after another, and with every one he associated some fact--or fancy perhaps, for I suspect now that he invented not a few of his incidents.

‘They have always been fond of weapons in this house,’ he said. ‘There now is one with the strangest story! It’s in print--I can show it you in print in the library there. It had the reputation of being a magic sword--’

‘Like King Arthur’s Excalibur?’ I asked, for I had read a good deal of the history of Prince Arthur.

‘Just so,’ said Mr Close. ‘Well, that sword had been in the family for many years--I may say centuries. One day it disappeared, and there was a great outcry. A lackey had been discharged for some cause or other, and it was believed he had taken it. But before they found him, the sword was in its place upon the wall. Afterwards the man confessed that he had taken it, out of revenge, for he knew how it was prized. But in the middle of the next night, as he slept in a roadside inn, a figure dressed in ancient armour had entered the room, taken up the sword, and gone away with it. I dare say it was all nonsense. His heart had failed him when he found he was followed, and he had contrived by the help of some fellow-servant to restore it. But there are very queer stories about old weapons--swords in particular. I must go now,’ he concluded, ‘for we have company to-night, and I have a good many things to see to.’

So saying he left me. I remained a long time in the armoury, and then returned to the library, where I seated myself in the same corner as before, and went on with my reading--lost in pleasure.

All at once I became aware that the light was thickening, and that I was very hungry. At the same moment I heard a slight rustle in the room, and looked round, expecting to see Mrs Wilson come to fetch me. But there stood Miss Clara--not now in white, however, but in a black silk frock. She had grown since I saw her last, and was prettier than ever. She started when she saw me.

‘You here!’ she exclaimed, as if we had known each other all our lives. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Reading,’ I answered, and rose from the floor, replacing the book as I rose. ‘I thought you were Mrs Wilson come to fetch me.’

‘Is she coming here?’

‘Yes. She told me not to leave the library till she came for me.’

‘Then I must get out of the way.’

‘Why so, Miss Clara?’ I asked.

‘I don’t mean her to know I am here. If you tell, I shall think you the meanest--’

‘Don’t trouble yourself to find your punishment before you’ve found your crime,’ I said, thinking of my own processes of invention. What a little prig I must have been!

‘Very well, I will trust you,’ she returned, holding out her hand.--‘I didn’t give it you to keep, though,’ she added, finding that, with more of country manners than tenderness, I fear, I retained it in my boyish grasp.

I felt awkward at once, and let it go.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Now, when do you expect Mrs. Wilson?’

‘I don’t know at all. She said she would fetch me for dinner. There she comes, I do believe.’

Clara turned her head like a startled forest creature that wants to listen, but does not know in what direction, and moved her feet as if she were about to fly.

‘Come back after dinner,’ she said: ‘you had better!’ and darting to the other side of the room, lifted a piece of hanging tapestry, and vanished just in time, for Mrs Wilson’s first words crossed her last.

‘My dear boy--Master Cumbermede, I should say, I am sorry I have not been able to get to you sooner. One thing after another has kept me on my legs till I’m ready to drop. The cook is as tiresome as cooks only can be. But come along; I’ve got a mouthful of dinner for you at last, and a few minutes to eat my share of it with you, I hope.’

I followed without a word, feeling a little guilty, but only towards Mrs Wilson, not towards myself, if my reader will acknowledge the difference--for I did not feel that I ought to betray Miss Clara. We returned as we came; and certainly whatever temper the cook might be in, there was nothing amiss with the dinner. Had there been, however, I was far too hungry to find fault with it.

‘Well, how have you enjoyed yourself, Master Wilfrid? Not very much, I am afraid. But really I could not help it,’ said Mrs Wilson.

‘I couldn’t have enjoyed myself more,’ I answered. ‘If you will allow me, I’ll go back to the library as soon as I’ve done my dinner.’

‘But it’s almost dark there now.’

‘You wouldn’t mind letting me have a candle, Mrs Wilson?’

‘A candle, child! It would be of no use. The place wouldn’t light up with twenty candles.’

‘But I don’t want it lighted up. I could read by one candle as well as by twenty.’

‘Very well. You shall do as you like. Only be careful, for the old house is as dry as tinder, and if you were to set fire to anything, we should be all in a blaze in a moment.’

‘I will be careful, Mrs Wilson. You may trust me. Indeed you may.’

She hurried me a little over my dinner. The bell in the court rang loudly.

‘There’s some of them already! That must be the Simmonses. They’re always early, and they always come to that gate--I suppose because they haven’t a carriage of their own, and don’t like to drive into the high court in a chaise from the George and Pudding.’

‘I’ve quite done, ma’am: may I go now?’

‘Wait till I get you a candle.’

She took one from a press in the room, lighted it, led me once more to the library, and there left me with a fresh injunction not to be peeping out and getting in the way of the visitors.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LEADS.

The moment Mrs Wilson was gone, I expected to see Clara peep out from behind the tapestry in the corner; but as she did not appear, I lifted it, and looked in. There was nothing behind but a closet almost filled with books, not upon shelves, but heaped up from floor to ceiling. There had been just room, and no more, for Clara to stand between the tapestry and the books. It was of no use attempting to look for her--at least I said so to myself, for as yet the attraction of an old book was equal to that of a young girl. Besides, I always enjoyed waiting--up to a certain point. Therefore I resumed my place on the floor, with the *Seven Champions* in one hand, and my chamber-candlestick in the other.

I had for the moment forgotten Clara in the adventures of St. Andrew of Scotland, when the *silking* of her frock aroused me. She was at my side.

‘Well, you’ve had your dinner? Did she give you any dessert?’

‘This is my dessert,’ I said, holding up the book. ‘It’s far more than--’

‘Far more than your desert,’ she pursued, ‘if you prefer it to me.’

‘I looked for you first,’ I said defensively.

‘Where?’

‘In the closet there.’

‘You didn’t think I was going to wait there, did you? Why the very spiders are hanging dead in their own webs in there. But here’s some dessert for you--if you’re as fond of apples as most boys,’ she added, taking a small rosy-cheeked beauty from her pocket.

I accepted it, but somehow did not quite relish being lumped with boys in that fashion. As I ate it, which I should have felt bound to do even had it been less acceptable in itself, she resumed--

‘Wouldn’t you like to see the company arrive? That’s what I came for. I wasn’t going to ask Goody Wilson.’

‘Yes, I should,’ I answered; ‘but Mrs Wilson told me to keep here, and not get in their way.’

‘Oh! I’ll take care of that. We shan’t go near them. I know every corner of the place--a good deal better than Mrs Wilson. Come along, Wilfrid--that’s your name, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is. Am I to call you Clara?’

‘Yes, if you are good--that is, if you like. I don’t care what you call me. Come along.’

I followed. She led me into the armoury. A great clang of the bell in the paved court fell upon our ears.

‘Make haste,’ she said, and darted to the door at the foot of the little stair. ‘Mind how you go,’ she went on. ‘The steps are very much worn. Keep your right shoulder foremost.’

I obeyed her directions, and followed her up the stair. We passed the door of a room over the armoury, and ascended still, to creep out at last through a very low door on to the leads of the little square tower. Here we could on the one side look into every corner of the paved court, and on the other, across the roof of the hall, could see about half of the high court, as they called it, into which the carriages drove; and from this post of vantage, we watched the arrival of a good many parties. I thought the ladies tripping across the paved court, with their gay dresses lighting up the Spring twilight, and their sweet voices rippling its almost pensive silence, suited the time and the place much better than the carriages

dashing into the other court, fine as they looked with their well-kept horses and their servants in gay liveries. The sun was down, and the moon was rising--near the full, but there was too much light in the sky to let her make much of herself yet. It was one of those Spring evenings which you could not tell from an Autumn one except for a certain something in the air appealing to an undefined sense--rather that of smell than any other. There were green buds and not withering leaves in it--life and not death; and the voices of the gathering guests were of the season, and pleasant to the soul. Of course Nature did not then affect me so definitely as to make me give forms of thought to her influences. It is now first that I turn them into shapes and words.

As we stood, I discovered that I had been a little mistaken about the position of the Hall. I saw that, although from some points in front it seemed to stand on an isolated rock, the ground rose behind it, terrace upon terrace, the uppermost of which terraces were crowned with rows of trees. Over them, the moon was now gathering her strength.

‘It is rather cold; I think we had better go in,’ said Clara, after we had remained there for some minutes without seeing any fresh arrivals.

‘Very well,’ I answered. ‘What shall we do? Shall you go home?’

‘No, certainly not. We must see a good deal more of the fun first.’

‘How will you manage that? You will go to the ball-room, I suppose. You can go where you please, of course.’

‘Oh no! I’m not grand enough to be invited. Oh, dear no! At least I am not old enough.’

‘But you will be some day.’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps. We’ll see. Meantime we must make the best of it. What are *you* going to do?’

‘I shall go back to the library.’

‘Then I’ll go with you--till the music begins; and then I’ll take you where you can see a little of the dancing. It’s great fun.’

‘But how will you manage that?’

‘You leave that to me.’

We descended at once to the armoury, where I had left my candle; and thence we returned to the library.

‘Would you like me to read to you?’ I asked.

‘I don’t mind--if it’s anything worth hearing.’

‘Well, I’ll read you a bit of the book I was reading when you came in.’

‘What! that musty old book! No, thank you. It’s enough to give one the horrors--the very sight of it is enough. How can you like such frumpy old things?’

‘Oh! you mustn’t mind the look of it,’ I said. ‘It’s *very* nice inside!’

‘I know where there is a nice one,’ she returned. ‘Give me the candle.’

I followed her to another of the rooms, where she searched for some time. At length--‘There it is!’ she said, and put into my hand *The Castle of Otranto*. The name promised well. She next led the way to a lovely little bay window, forming almost a closet, which looked out upon the park, whence, without seeing the moon, we could see her light on the landscape, and the great deep shadows cast over the park from the towers of the Hall. There we sat on the broad window-sill, and I began to read. It was delightful. Does it indicate loss of power, that the grown man cannot enjoy the book in which the boy delighted? Or is it that the realities of the book, as perceived by his keener eyes, refuse to blend with what imagination would supply if it might?

No sooner however did the first notes of the distant violins enter the ear of my companion than she started to her feet.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked, looking up from the book.

‘Don’t you hear the music?’ she said, half-indignantly.

‘I hear it now,’ I answered; ‘but why--?’

‘Come along,’ she interrupted, eagerly. ‘We shall just be in time to see them go across from the drawing-room to the ball-room. Come, come. Leave your candle.’

I put down my book with some reluctance. She led me into the armoury, and from the armoury out on the gallery half-encompassing the great hall, which was lighted up, and full of servants. Opening another door in the gallery, she conducted me down a stair which led almost into the hall, but, ascending again behind it, landed us in a little lobby, on one side of which was the drawing-room, and on the other the ball-room, on another level, reached by a few high, semi-circular steps.

‘Quick! quick!’ said Clara, and turning sharply round, she opened another door, disclosing a square-built stone staircase. She pushed the door carefully against the wall, ran up a few steps, I following in some trepidation, turned abruptly, and sat down. I did as she did, questioning nothing: I had committed myself to her superior knowledge.

The quick ear of my companion had caught the first sounds of the tuning of the instruments, and here we were, before the invitation to dance, a customed observance at Moldwarp Hall, had begun to play. In a few minutes thereafter, the door of the drawing-room opened; when, pair after pair, the company, to the number of over a hundred and fifty, I should guess, walked past the foot of the stair on which we were seated, and ascended the steps into the ball-room. The lobby was dimly lighted,

except from the two open doors, and there was little danger of our being seen.

I interrupt my narrative to mention the odd fact that so fully was my mind possessed with the antiquity of the place, which it had been the pride of generation after generation to keep up, that now, when I recall the scene, the guests always appear dressed not as they were then, but in a far more antique style with which after knowledge supplied my inner vision.

Last of all came Lady Brotherton, Sir Giles's wife, a pale, delicate-looking woman, leaning on the arm of a tall, long-necked, would-be-stately, yet insignificant-looking man. She gave a shiver as, up the steps from the warm drawing-room, she came at once opposite our open door.

'What a draught there is here!' she said, adjusting her rose-coloured scarf about her shoulders. 'It feels quite wintry. Will you oblige me, Mr Mellon, by shutting that door? Sir Giles will not allow me to have it built up. I am sure there are plenty of ways to the leads besides that.'

'This door, my lady?' asked Mr Mellon.

I trembled lest he should see us.

'Yes. Just throw it to. There's a spring lock on it. I can't think--'

The slam and echoing bang of the closing door cut off the end of the sentence. Even Clara was a little frightened, for her hand stole into mine for a moment before she burst out laughing.

'Hush! hush!' I said. 'They will hear you.'

'I almost wish they would,' she said. 'What a goose I was to be frightened, and not speak! Do you know where we are?'

'No,' I answered; 'how should I? Where are we?'

My fancy of knowing the place had vanished utterly by this time. All my mental charts of it had got thoroughly confused, and I do not believe I could have even found my way back to the library.

‘Shut out on the leads,’ she answered. ‘Come along. We may as well go to meet our fate.’

I confess to a little palpitation of the heart as she spoke, for I was not yet old enough to feel that Clara’s companionship made the doom a light one. Up the stairs we went--here no twisting corkscrew, but a broad flight enough, with square turnings. At the top was a door, fastened only with a bolt inside--against no worse housebreakers than the winds and rains. When we emerged, we found ourselves in the open night.

‘Here we are in the moon’s drawing-room!’ said Clara.

The scene was lovely. The sky was all now--the earth only a background or pedestal for the heavens. The river, far below, shone here and there in answer to the moon, while the meadows and fields lay as in the oblivion of sleep, and the wooded hills were only dark formless masses. But the sky was the dwelling-place of the moon, before whose radiance, penetratingly still, the stars shrunk as if they would hide in the flowing skirts of her garments. There was scarce a cloud to be seen, and the whiteness of the moon made the blue thin. I could hardly believe in what I saw. It was as if I had come awake without getting out of the dream.

We were on the roof of the ball-room. We felt the rhythmic motion of the dancing feet shake the building in time to the music. ‘A low melodious thunder’ buried beneath--above, the eternal silence of the white moon!

We passed to the roof of the drawing-room. From it, upon one side, we could peep into the great gothic window of the hall, which rose high above it. We could see the servants passing and repassing, with dishes for the supper which was being laid in the dining-room under the drawing-room, for the hall was never used for entertainment now, except

on such great occasions as a coming of age, or an election-feast, when all classes met.

‘We mustn’t stop here,’ said Clara. ‘We shall get our deaths of cold.’

‘What shall we do, then?’ I asked.

‘There are plenty of doors,’ she answered--‘only Mrs Wilson has a foolish fancy for keeping them all bolted. We must try, though.’

Over roof after roof we went; now descending, now ascending a few steps; now walking along narrow gutters, between battlement and sloping roof; now crossing awkward junctions--trying doors many in tower and turret--all in vain! Every one was bolted on the inside. We had grown quite silent, for the case looked serious.

‘This is the last door,’ said Clara--‘the last we can reach. There are more in the towers, but they are higher up. What *shall* we do? Unless we go down a chimney, I don’t know what’s to be done.’ Still her voice did not falter, and my courage did not give way. She stood for a few moments, silent. I stood regarding her, as one might listen for a doubtful oracle.

‘Yes. I’ve got it!’ she said at length. ‘Have you a good head, Wilfrid?’

‘I don’t quite know what you mean,’ I answered.

‘Do you mind being on a narrow place, without much to hold by?’

‘High up?’ I asked with a shiver.

‘Yes.’

For a moment I did not answer. It was a special weakness of my physical nature, one which my imagination had increased tenfold--the absolute horror I had of such a transit as she was evidently about to propose. My worst dreams--from which I would wake with my heart going like a fire-engine--were of adventures of the kind. But before a woman, how

could I draw back? I would rather lie broken at the bottom of the wall. And if the fear should come to the worst, I could at least throw myself down and end it so.

‘Well?’ I said, as if I had only been waiting for her exposition of the case.

‘Well!’ she returned.--‘Come along then.’

I did go along--like a man to the gallows; only I would not have turned back to save my life. But I should have hailed the slightest change of purpose in her, with such pleasure as Daniel must have felt when he found the lions would rather not eat him. She retraced our steps a long way--until we reached the middle of the line of building which divided the two courts.

‘There!’ she said, pointing to the top of the square tower over the entrance to the hall, from which we had watched the arrival of the guests: it rose about nine feet only above where we now stood in the gutter--‘I *know* I left the door open when we came down. I did it on purpose. I hate Goody Wilson. Lucky, you see!--that is if you have a head. And if you haven’t, it’s all the same: I have.’

So saying, she pointed to a sort of flying buttress which sprung sideways, with a wide span, across the angle the tower made with the hall, from an embrasure of the battlement of the hall to the outer corner of the tower, itself more solidly buttressed. I think it must have been made to resist the outward pressure of the roof of the hall; but it was one of those puzzling points which often occur--and oftenest in domestic architecture--where additions and consequent alterations have been made from time to time. Such will occasion sometimes as much conjecture towards their explanation as a disputed passage in Shakspere or Aeschylus.

Could she mean me to cross that hair-like bridge? The mere thought was a terror. But I would not blench. Fear I confess--cowardice if you will:--poltroonery, not.

‘I see,’ I answered. ‘I will try. If I fall, don’t blame me. I will do my best.’

‘You don’t think,’ she returned, ‘I’m going to let you go alone! I should have to wait hours before you found a door to let me down--unless indeed you went and told Goody Wilson, and I had rather die where I am. No, no. Come along. I’ll show you how.’

With a rush and a scramble, she was up over the round back of the buttress before I had time to understand that she meant as usual to take the lead. If she could but have sent me back a portion of her skill, or lightness, or nerve, or whatever it was, just to set me off with a rush like that! But I stood preparing at once and hesitating. She turned and looked over the battlements of the tower.

‘Never mind, Wilfrid,’ she said; ‘I’ll fetch you presently.’

‘No, no,’ I cried. ‘Wait for me. I’m coming.’

I got astride of the buttress, and painfully forced my way up. It was like a dream of leap-frog, prolonged under painfully recurring difficulties. I shut my eyes, and persuaded myself that all I had to do was to go on leap-frogging. At length, after more trepidation and brain-turning than I care to dwell upon, lest even now it should bring back a too keen realization of itself, I reached the battlement, seizing which with one shaking hand, and finding the other grasped by Clara, I tumbled on the leads of the tower.

‘Come along!’ she said. ‘You see, when the girls like, they can beat the boys--even at their own games. We’re all right now.’

‘I did my best,’ I returned, mightily relieved. ‘*I’m* not an angel, you know. I can’t fly like you.’

She seemed to appreciate the compliment.

‘Never mind. I’ve done it before. It was game of you to follow.’

Her praise elated me. And it was well.

‘Come along,’ she added.

She seemed to be always saying *Come along*.

I obeyed, full of gratitude and relief. She skipped to the tiny turret which rose above our heads, and lifted the door-latch. But, instead of disappearing within, she turned and looked at me in white dismay. The door was bolted. Her look roused what there was of manhood in me. I felt that, as it had now come to the last gasp, it was mine to comfort her.

‘We are no worse than we were,’ I said. ‘Never mind.’

‘I don’t know that,’ she answered mysteriously.--‘Can *you* go back as you came? *I* can’t.’

I looked over the edge of the battlement where I stood. There was the buttress crossing the angle of moonlight, with its shadow lying far down on the wall. I shuddered at the thought of renewing my unspeakable dismay. But what must be must.

[Illustration: SHE BENT OVER THE BATTLEMENT, STOOPED HER FACE TOWARD ME, AND KISSED ME.]

Besides, Clara had praised me for creeping where she could fly: now I might show her that I could creep where she could not fly.

‘I will try,’ I returned, putting one leg through an embrasure, and holding on by the adjoining battlement.

‘Do take care, Wilfrid,’ she cried, stretching out her hands, as if to keep me from falling.

A sudden pulse of life rushed through me. All at once I became not only bold, but ambitious.

‘Give me a kiss,’ I said, ‘before I go.’

‘Do you make so much of it?’ she returned, stepping back a pace.--How much a woman she was even then!

Her words roused something in me which to this day I have not been able quite to understand. A sense of wrong had its share in the feeling; but what else I can hardly venture to say. At all events, an inroad of careless courage was the consequence. I stepped at once upon the buttress, and stood for a moment looking at her--no doubt with reproach. She sprang towards me.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said.

The end of the buttress was a foot or two below the level of the leads, where Clara stood. She bent over the battlement, stooped her face towards me, and kissed me on the mouth. My only answer was to turn and walk down the buttress, erect; a walk which, as the arch of the buttress became steeper, ended in a run and a leap on to the gutter of the hall. There I turned, and saw her stand like a lady in a ballad leaning after me in the moonlight. I lifted my cap and sped away, not knowing whither, but fancying that out of her sight I could make up my mind better. Nor was I mistaken. The moment I sat down, my brains began to go about, and in another moment I saw what might be attempted.

In going from roof to roof, I had seen the little gallery along which I had passed with Mrs Wilson on my way to the library. It crossed what might be called an open shaft in the building. I thought I could manage, roofed as it was, to get in by the open side. It was some time before I could find it again; but when I did come upon it at last, I saw that it might be done. By the help of a projecting gargoyle, curiously carved in the days when the wall to which it clung had formed part of the front of the building, I got my feet upon the wooden rail of the gallery, caught hold of one of the small pillars which supported the roof, and *slewed* myself in. I was

almost as glad as when I had crossed the buttress, for below me was a paved bottom, between high walls, without any door, like a dry well in the midst of the building.

My recollection of the way to the armoury, I found, however, almost obliterated. I knew that I must pass through a bedroom at the end of the gallery, and that was all I remembered. I opened the door, and found myself face to face with a young girl with wide eyes. She stood staring and astonished, but not frightened. She was younger than Clara, and not so pretty. Her eyes looked dark, and also the hair she had been brushing. Her face would have been quite pale, but for the rosy tinge of surprise. She made no exclamation, only stared with her brush in her hand, and questions in her eyes. I felt far enough from comfortable; but with a great effort I spoke.

‘I beg your pardon. I had to get off the roof, and this was the only way. Please do not tell Mrs Wilson.’

‘No,’ she said at once, very quietly; ‘but you must go away.’

‘If I could only find the library!’ I said. ‘I am so afraid of going into more rooms where I have no business.’

‘I will show you the way,’ she returned with a smile; and laying down her brush, took up a candle, and led me from the room.

In a few moments I was safe. My conductor vanished at once. The glimmer of my own candle in a further room guided me, and I was soon at the top of the corkscrew staircase. I found the door very slightly fastened: Clara must herself have unwittingly moved the bolt when she shut it. I found her standing, all eagerness, waiting me. We hurried back to the library, and there I told her how I had effected an entrance, and met with a guide.

‘It must have been little Polly Osborne,’ she said. ‘Her mother is going to stay all night, I suppose. She’s a good-natured little goose, and won’t tell.--Now come along. We’ll have a peep from the picture-gallery into the ball-room. That door is sure to be open.’

‘If you don’t mind, Clara, I would rather stay where I am. I oughtn’t to be wandering over the house when Mrs Wilson thinks I am here.’

‘Oh, you little coward!’ said Clara.

I thought I hardly deserved the word, and it did not make me more inclined to accompany her.

‘You can go alone,’ I said. ‘You did not expect to find me when you came.’

‘Of course I can. Of course not. It’s quite as well too. You won’t get me into any more scrapes.’

‘*Did* I get you into the scrape, Clara?’

‘Yes, you did,’ she answered laughing, and walked away.

I felt a good deal hurt, but comforted myself by saying she could not mean it, and sat down again to the *Seven Champions*.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GHOST.

I saw no more of Clara, but sat and read until I grew cold and tired, and wished very much that Mrs. Wilson would come. I thought she might have forgot me in the hurry, and there I should have to stay all night. After my recent escape, however, from a danger so much worse, I could regard the prospect with some composure. A full hour more must have passed; I was getting sleepy, and my candle had burned low, when at length Mrs Wilson did make her appearance, and I accompanied her gladly.

‘I am sure you want your tea, poor boy!’ she said.

‘Tea! Mrs. Wilson,’ I rejoined. ‘It’s bed I want. But when I think of it, I *am* rather hungry.’

‘You shall have tea and bed both,’ she answered kindly. ‘I’m sorry you’ve had such a dull evening, but I could *not* help it.’

‘Indeed, I’ve not been dull at all,’ I answered--‘till just the last hour or so.’

I longed to tell her all I had been about, for I felt guilty; but I would not betray Clara.

‘Well, here we are!’ she said, opening the door of her own room. ‘I hope I shall have peace enough to see you make a good meal.’

I did make a good meal. When I had done, Mrs Wilson took a rushlight and led the way. I took my sword and followed her. Into what quarter of the house she conducted me I could not tell. There was a nice fire burning in the room, and my night-apparel was airing before it. She set the light on the floor, and left me with a kind good-night. I was soon

undressed and in bed, with my sword beside me on the coverlet of silk patchwork.

But, from whatever cause, sleepy as I had been a little while before, I lay wide awake now, staring about the room. Like many others in the house, it was hung with tapestry, which was a good deal worn and patched--notably in one place, where limbs of warriors and horses came to an untimely end, on all sides of a certain oblong piece quite different from the rest in colour and design. I know now that it was a piece of *Gobelins,* in the midst of ancient needlework. It looked the brighter of the two, but its colours were about three, with a good deal of white; whereas that which surrounded it had had many and brilliant colours, which, faded and dull and sombre, yet kept their harmony. The guard of the rushlight cast deeper and queerer shadows, as the fire sank lower. Its holes gave eyes of light to some of the figures in the tapestry, and as the light wavered, the eyes wandered about in a ghostly manner, and the shadows changed and flickered and heaved uncomfortably.

How long I had lain thus I do not know; but at last I found myself watching the rectangular patch of newer tapestry. Could it be that it moved? It *could* be only the effect of the wavering shadows. And yet I could not convince myself that it did not move. It *did* move. It came forward. One side of it did certainly come forward. A kind of universal cramp seized me--a contraction of every fibre of my body. The patch opened like a door--wider and wider; and from behind came a great helmet peeping. I was all one terror, but my nerves held out so far that I lay like a watching dog--watching for what horror would come next. The door opened wider, a mailed hand and arm appeared, and at length a figure, armed cap-à-pie, stepped slowly down, stood for a moment peering about, and then began to walk through the room, as if searching for something. It came nearer and nearer to the bed. I wonder now, when I think of it, that the cold horror did not reach my heart. I cannot have been so much a coward, surely, after all! But I suspect it was only that

general paralysis prevented the extreme of terror, just as a man in the clutch of a wild beast is hardly aware of suffering. At last the figure stooped over my bed, and stretched out a long arm. I remember nothing more.

I woke in the grey of the morning. Could a faint have passed into a sleep? or was it all a dream? I lay for some time before I could recall what made me so miserable. At length my memory awoke, and I gazed fearful about the room. The white ashes of the burnt-out fire were lying in the grate; the stand of the rushlight was on the floor; the wall with its tapestry was just as it had been; the cold grey light had annihilated the fancied visions: I had been dreaming and was now awake. But I could not lie longer in bed. I must go out. The morning air would give me life; I felt worn and weak. Vision or dream, the room was hateful to me. With a great effort I sat up, for I still feared to move, lest I should catch a glimpse of the armed figure. Terrible as it had been in the night, it would be more terrible now. I peered into every corner. Each was vacant. Then first I remembered that I had been reading the *Castile of Otranto* and the *Seven Champions of Christendom* the night before. I jumped out of bed and dressed myself, growing braver and braver as the light of the lovely Spring morning swelled in the room. Having dipped my head in cold water, I was myself again. I opened the lattice and looked out. The first breath of air was a denial to the whole thing. I laughed at myself. Earth and sky were alive with Spring. The wind was the breath of the coming Summer: there were flakes of sunshine and shadow in it. Before me lay a green bank with a few trees on its top. It was crowded with primroses growing through the grass. The dew was lying all about, shining and sparkling in the first rays of the level sun, which itself I could not see. The tide of life rose in my heart and rushed through my limbs. I would take my sword and go for a ramble through the park. I went to my bedside, and stretched across to find it by the wall. It must have slipped down at the back of the bed. No. Where could it be? In a word, I searched

everywhere, but my loved weapon had vanished. The visions of the night returned, and for a moment I believed them all. The night once again closed around me, darkened yet more with the despair of an irreparable loss. I rushed from the room and through a long passage, with the blind desire to get out. The stare of an unwashed maid, already busy with her pail and brush, brought me to my senses.

‘I beg your pardon,’ I said; ‘I want to get out.’

She left her implements, led me down a stair close at hand, opened a door at its foot, and let me out into the high court. I gazed about me. It was as if I had escaped from a prison-cell into the chamber of torture: I stood the centre of a multitude of windows--the eyes of the house all fixed upon me. On one side was the great gate, through which, from the roof, I had seen the carriages drive the night before; but it was closed. I remembered, however, that Sir Giles had brought me in by a wicket in that gate. I hastened to it. There was but a bolt to withdraw, and I was free.

But all was gloomy within, and genial nature could no longer enter. Glittering jewels of sunlight and dew were nothing but drops of water upon blades of grass. Fresh-bursting trees were no more than the deadest of winter-bitten branches. The great eastern window of the universe, gorgeous with gold and roses, was but the weary sun making a fuss about nothing. My sole relief lay in motion. I roamed I knew not whither, nor how long.

At length I found myself on a height eastward of the Hall, overlooking its gardens, which lay in deep terraces beneath. Inside a low wall was the first of them, dark with an avenue of ancient trees, and below was the large oriel window in the end of the ball-room. I climbed over the wall, which was built of cunningly fitted stones, with mortar only in the top row; and drawn by the gloom, strolled up and down the avenue for a long time. At length I became aware of a voice I had heard before. I could see

no one; but, hearkening about, I found it must come from the next terrace. Descending by a deep flight of old mossy steps, I came upon a strip of smooth sward, with yew trees, dark and trim, on each side of it. At the end of the walk was an arbour, in which I could see the glimmer of something white. Too miserable to be shy, I advanced and peeped in. The girl who had shown me the way to the library was talking to her mother.

‘Mamma!’ she said, without showing any surprise, ‘here is the boy who came into our room last night.’

‘How do you do?’ said the lady kindly, making room for me on the bench beside her.

I answered as politely as I could, and felt a strange comfort glide from the sweetness of her countenance.

‘What an adventure you had last night!’ she said. ‘It was well you did not fall.’

‘That wouldn’t have been much worse than having to stop where we were,’ I answered.

The conversation thus commenced went on until I had told them all my history, including my last adventure.

‘You must have dreamed it,’ said the lady.

‘So I thought, ma’am,’ I answered, ‘until I found that my sword was gone.’

‘Are you sure you looked everywhere?’ she asked.

‘Indeed, I did.’

‘It does not follow however that the ghost took it. It is more likely Mrs Wilson came in to see you after you were asleep, and carried it off.’

‘Oh yes!’ I cried, rejoiced at the suggestion; ‘that must be it. I shall ask her.’

‘I am sure you will find it so. Are you going home soon?’

‘Yes--as soon as I’ve had my breakfast. It’s a good walk from here to Aldwick.’

‘So it is.--We are going that way too?’ she added thinkingly.

‘Mr. Elder is a great friend of papa’s--isn’t he, mamma?’ said the girl.

‘Yes, my dear. They were friends at college.’

‘I have heard Mr Elder speak of Mr Osborne,’ I said. ‘Do you live near us?’

‘Not very far off--in the next parish, where my husband is rector,’ she answered. ‘If you could wait till the afternoon, we should be happy to take you there. The pony-carriage is coming for us.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ I answered; ‘but I ought to go immediately after breakfast. You won’t mention about the roof, will you? I oughtn’t to get Clara into trouble.’

‘She is a wild girl,’ said Mrs Osborne; ‘but I think you are quite right.’

‘How lucky it was I knew the library!’ said Mary, who had become quite friendly, from under her mother’s wing.

‘That it was! But I dare say you know all about the place,’ I answered.

‘No, indeed!’ she returned. ‘I know nothing about it. As we went to our room, mamma opened the door and showed me the library, else I shouldn’t have been able to help you at all.’

‘Then you haven’t been here often?’

‘No; and I never shall be again.--I’m going away to school,’ she added; and her voice trembled.

‘So am I,’ I said. ‘I’m going to Switzerland in a month or two. But then I haven’t a mamma to leave behind me.’ She broke down at that, and hid her head on her mother’s bosom. I had unawares added to her grief, for her brother Charley was going to Switzerland too.

I found afterwards that Mr Elder, having been consulted by Mr Osborne, had arranged with my uncle that Charley Osborne and I should go together.

Mary Osborne--I never called her Polly as Clara did--continued so overcome by her grief, that her mother turned to me and said,

‘I think you had better go, Master Cumbermede.’

I bade her good morning, and made my way to Mrs Wilson’s apartment. I found she had been to my room, and was expecting me with some anxiety, fearing I had set off without my breakfast. Alas! she knew nothing about the sword, looked annoyed, and, I thought, rather mysterious; said she would have a search, make inquiries, do what she could, and such like, but begged I would say nothing about it in the house. I left her with a suspicion that she believed the ghost had carried it away, and that it was of no use to go searching for it.

Two days after, a parcel arrived for me. I concluded it was my sword; but, to my grievous disappointment, found it was only a large hamper of apples and cakes, very acceptable in themselves, but too plainly indicating Mrs Wilson’s desire to console me for what could not be helped. Mr Elder never missed the sword. I rose high in the estimation of my schoolfellows because of the adventure, especially in that of Moberly, who did not believe in the ghost, but ineffectually tasked his poor brains to account for the disappearance of the weapon. The best light was thrown upon it by a merry boy of the name of Fisher, who

declared his conviction that the steward had carried it off to add to his collection.

CHAPTER XV.

AWAY.

Will not linger longer over this part of my history--already, I fear, much too extended for the patience of my readers. My excuse is that, in looking back, the events I have recorded appear large and prominent, and that certainly they have a close relation with my after-history.

The time arrived when I had to leave England for Switzerland. I will say nothing of my leave-taking. It was not a bitter one. Hope was strong, and rooted in present pleasure. I was capable of much happiness--keenly responsive to the smallest agreeable impulse from without or from within. I had good health, and life was happiness in itself. The blowing of the wind, the shining of the sun, or the glitter of water, was sufficient to make me glad; and I had self-consciousness enough to increase the delight by the knowledge that I was glad.

The fact is I was coming in for my share in the spiritual influences of Nature, so largely poured on the heart and mind of my generation. The prophets of the new blessing, Wordsworth and Coleridge, I knew nothing of. Keats was only beginning to write. I had read a little of Cowper, but did not care for him. Yet I was under the same spell as they all. Nature was a power upon me. I was filled with the vague recognition of a present soul in Nature--with a sense of the humanity everywhere diffused through her and operating upon ours. I was but fourteen, and had only feelings, but something lay at the heart of the feelings, which would one day blossom into thoughts.

At the coach-office in the county-town, I first met my future companion, with his father, who was to see us to our destination. My uncle accompanied me no further, and I soon found myself on the top of a coach, with only one thing to do--make the acquaintance of Charles Osborne. His father was on the box-seat, and we two sat behind; but we

were both shy, and for some time neither spoke. Charles was about my own age, rather like his sister, only that his eyes were blue, and his hair a lightish brown. A tremulousness about the mouth betrayed a nervous temperament. His skin was very fair and thin, showing the blue veins. As he did not speak, I sat for a little while watching him, without, however, the least speculation concerning him, or any effort to discover his character. I had not even yet reached the point of trying to find people out. I take what time and acquaintance disclose, but never attempt to forestall, which may come partly from trust, partly from want of curiosity, partly from a disinclination to unnecessary mental effort. But as I watched his face, half-unconsciously, I could not help observing that now and then it would light up suddenly and darken again almost instantly. At last his father turned round, and with some severity, said:

‘You do not seem to be making any approaches to mutual acquaintance. Charles, why don’t you address your companion?’

The words were uttered in the slow tone of one used to matters too serious for common speech. The boy cast a hurried glance at me, smiled uncertainly, and moved uneasily on his seat. His father turned away and made a remark to the coachman.

Mr Osborne was a very tall, thin, yet square-shouldered man, with a pale face, and large features of delicate form. He looked severe, pure, and irritable. The tone of his voice, although the words were measured and rather stilted, led me to this last conclusion quite as much as the expression of his face; for it was thin and a little acrid. I soon observed that Charley started slightly, as often as his father addressed him; but this might be because his father always did so with more or less of abruptness. At times there was great kindness in his manner, seeming, however, less the outcome of natural tenderness than a sense of duty. His being was evidently a weight upon his son’s, and kept down the natural movements of his spirit. A number of small circumstances only led me to

these conclusions; for nothing remarkable occurred to set in any strong light their mutual relation. For his side Charles was always attentive and ready, although with a promptitude that had more in it of the mechanical impulse of habit than of pleased obedience. Mr Osborne spoke kindly to me--I think the more kindly that I was not his son, and he was therefore not so responsible for me. But he looked as if the care of the whole world lay on his shoulders; as if an awful destruction were the most likely thing to happen to every one, and to him were committed the toilsome chance of saving some. Doubtless he would not have trusted his boy so far from home, but that the clergyman to whom he was about to hand him over was an old friend, of the same religious opinions as himself.

I could well, but must not, linger over the details of our journey, full to me of most varied pleasure. The constant change, not so rapid as to prevent the mind from reposing a little upon the scenes which presented themselves; the passing vision of countries and peoples, manners and modes of life, so different from our own, did much to arouse and develop my nature. Those flashes of pleasure came upon Charles's pale face more and more frequently; and ere the close of the first day we had begun to talk with some degree of friendliness. But it became clear to me that with his father ever blocking up our horizon, whether he sat with his broad back in front of us on the coach-box, or paced the deck of a vessel, or perched with us under the hood on the top of a diligence, we should never arrive at any freedom of speech. I sometimes wondered, long after, whether Mr Osborne had begun to discover that he was overlaying and smothering the young life of his boy, and had therefore adopted the plan, so little to have been expected from him, of sending his son to foreign parts to continue his education.

I have no distinct recollection of dates, or even of the exact season of the year. I believe it was the early Summer, but in my memory the whole journey is now a mass of confused loveliness and pleasure. Not that we had the best of weather all the way. I well recollect pouring rains, and

from the fact that I distinctly remember my first view of an Alpine height, I am certain we must have had days of mist and rain immediately before. That sight, however, to me more like an individual revelation or vision than the impact of an object upon the brain, stands in my mind altogether isolated from preceding and following impressions--alone, a thing to praise God for, if there be a God to praise. If there be not, then was the whole thing a grand and lovely illusion, worthy, for grandeur and loveliness, of a world with a God at the heart of it. But the grandeur and the loveliness spring from the operation of natural laws; the laws themselves are real and true--how could the false result from them? I hope yet, and will hope, that I am not a bubble filled with the mocking breath of a Mephistopheles, but a child whom his infinite Father will not hardly judge because he could not believe in him so much as he would. I will tell how the vision came.

Although comparatively few people visited Switzerland in those days, Mr Osborne had been there before, and for some reason or other had determined on going round by Interlachen. At Thun we found a sail-boat, which we hired to take us and our luggage. At starting, an incident happened which would not be worth mentioning, but for the impression it made upon me. A French lady accompanied by a young girl approached Mr Osborne--doubtless perceiving he was a clergyman, for, being an *Evangelical* of the most pure, honest, and narrow type, he was in every point and line of his countenance marked a priest and apart from his fellow-men--and asked him to allow her and her daughter to go in the boat with us to Interlachen. A glow of pleasure awoke in me at sight of his courtly behaviour, with lifted hat and bowed head; for I had never been in the company of such a gentleman before. But the wish instantly followed that his son might have shared in his courtesy. We partook freely of his justice and benevolence, but he showed us no such grace as he showed the lady. I have since observed that sons are endlessly grateful for courtesy from their fathers.

The lady and her daughter sat down in the stern of the boat; and therefore Charley and I, not certainly to our discomfiture, had to go before the mast. The men rowed out into the lake, and then hoisted the sail. Away we went careering before a pleasant breeze. As yet it blew fog and mist, but the hope was that it would soon blow it away.

An unspoken friendship by this time bound Charley and me together, silent in its beginnings and slow in its growth--not the worst pledges of endurance. And now for the first time in our journey, Charley was hidden from his father: the sail came between them. He glanced at me with a slight sigh, which even then I took for an involuntary sigh of relief. We lay leaning over the bows, now looking up at the mist blown in never-ending volumed sheets, now at the sail swelling in the wind before which it fled, and again down at the water through which our boat was ploughing its evanescent furrow. We could see very little. Portions of the shore would now and then appear, dim like reflections from a tarnished mirror, and then fade back into the depths of cloudy dissolution. Still it was growing lighter, and the man who was on the outlook became less anxious in his forward gaze, and less frequent in his calls to the helmsman. I was lying half over the gunwale, looking into the strange-coloured water, blue dimmed with undissolved white, when a cry from Charles made me start and look up. It was indeed a God-like vision. The mist yet rolled thick below, but away up, far away and far up, yet as if close at hand, the clouds were broken into a mighty window, through which looked in upon us a huge mountain peak swathed in snow. One great level band of darker cloud crossed its breast, above which rose the peak, triumphant in calmness, and stood unutterably solemn and grand, in clouds as white as its own whiteness. It had been there all the time! I sunk on my knees in the boat and gazed up. With a sudden sweep the clouds curtained the mighty window, and the Jungfrau withdrew into its Holy of Holies. I am painfully conscious of the helplessness of my speech. The vision vanishes from the words as it vanished from the

bewildered eyes. But from the mind it glorified it has never vanished. I have *been* more ever since that sight. To have beheld a truth is an apotheosis. What the truth was I could not tell; but I had seen something which raised me above my former self and made me long to rise higher yet. It awoke worship, and a belief in the incomprehensible divine; but admitted of being analysed no more than, in that transient vision, my intellect could--ere dawning it vanished--analyse it into the deserts of rock, the gulfs of green ice and flowing water, the savage solitudes of snow, the mysterious miles of draperied mist, that went to make up the vision, each and all essential thereto.

I had been too much given to the attempted production in myself of effects to justify the vague theories towards which my inborn prepossessions carried me. I had felt enough to believe there was more to be felt; and such stray scraps of verse of the new order as, floating about, had reached me, had set me questioning and testing my own life and perceptions and sympathies by what these awoke in me at second-hand. I had often doubted, oppressed by the power of these, whether I could myself see, or whether my sympathy with Nature was not merely inspired by the vision of others. Ever after this, if such a doubt returned, with it arose the Jungfrau, looking into my very soul.

‘Oh Charley!’ was all I could say. Our hands met blindly, and clasped each other. I burst into silent tears.

When I looked up, Charley was staring into the mist again. His eyes, too, were full of tears, but some troubling contradiction prevented their flowing: I saw it by the expression of that mobile but now firmly-closed mouth.

Often ere we left Switzerland I saw similar glories: this vision remains alone, for it was the first.

I will not linger over the tempting delight of the village near which we landed, its houses covered with quaintly-notched wooden scales like those of a fish, and its river full to the brim of white-blue water, rushing from the far-off bosom of the glaciers. I had never had such a sense of exuberance and plenty as this river gave me--especially where it filled the planks and piles of wood that hemmed it in like a trough. I might agonize in words for a day and I should not express the delight. And, lest my readers should apprehend a diary of a tour, I shall say nothing more of our journey, remarking only that if Switzerland were to become as common to the mere tourist mind as Cheapside is to a Londoner, the meanest of its glories would be no whit impaired thereby. Sometimes, I confess, in these days of overcrowded cities, when, in periodical floods, the lonely places of the earth are from them inundated, I do look up to the heavens and say to myself that there at least, between the stars, even in thickest of nebulous constellations, there is yet plenty of pure, unadulterated room--not even a vapour to hang a colour upon; but presently I return to my better mind and say that any man who loves his fellow will yet find he has room enough and to spare.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ICE-CAVE.

During our journey, Mr Osborne had seldom talked to us, and far more seldom in speech sympathetic. If by chance I came out with anything I thought or felt, even if he did not disapprove altogether, he would yet first lay hold of something to which he could object, coming round only by degrees, and with differences, to express consent. Evidently with him objection was the first step in instruction. It was better in his eyes to say you were wrong than to say you were right, even if you should be much more right than wrong. He had not the smallest idea of siding with the truth in you, of digging about it and watering it until it grew a great tree in which all your thought-birds might nestle and sing their songs; but he must be ever against the error--forgetting that the only antagonist of the false is the true. ‘What,’ I used to think in after-years, ‘is the use of battering the walls to get at the error, when the kindly truth is holding the postern open for you to enter, and pitch it out of window.’

The evening before we parted, he gave us a solemn admonishment on the danger of being led astray by what men called the beauties of Nature--for the heart was so desperately wicked that, even of the things God had made *to show his power*, it would make snares for our destruction. I will not go on with his homily, out of respect for the man; for there was much earnestness in him, and it would utterly shame me if I were supposed to hold that up to the contempt which the forms it took must bring upon it. Besides, he made such a free use of the most sacred of names, that I shrink from representing his utterance. A good man I do not doubt he was; but he did the hard parts of his duty to the neglect of the genial parts, and therefore was not a man to help others to be good. His own son revived the moment he took his leave of us--began to open up as the little red flower called the Shepherd’s Hour-Glass opens when the cloud withdraws. It is a terrible thing when the father is the cloud, and not the

sun, of his child's life. If Charley had been like the greater number of boys I have known, all this would only have hardened his mental and moral skin by the natural process of accommodation. But his skin would not harden, and the evil wrought the deeper. From his father he had inherited a conscience of abnormal sensibility; but he could not inherit the religious dogmas by means of which his father had partly deadened, partly distorted his; and constant pressure and irritation had already generated a great soreness of surface.

When he began to open up, it was after a sad fashion at first. To resume my simile of the pimpernel--it was to disclose a heart in which the glowing purple was blanched to a sickly violet. What happiness he had, came in fits and bursts, and passed as quickly, leaving him depressed and miserable. He was always either wishing to be happy, or trying to be sure of the grounds of the brief happiness he had. He allowed the natural blessedness of his years hardly a chance: the moment its lobes appeared above ground, he was handling them, examining them, and trying to pull them open. No wonder they crept underground again! It may seem hardly credible that such should be the case with a boy of fifteen, but I am not mistaken in my diagnosis. I will go a little further. Gifted with the keenest perceptions, and a nature unusually responsive to the feelings of others, he was born to be an artist. But he was content neither with his own suggestions, nor with understanding those of another; he must, by the force of his own will, generate his friend's feeling in himself, not perceiving the thing impossible. This was one point at which we touched, and which went far to enable me to understand him. The original in him was thus constantly repressed, and he suffered from the natural consequences of repression. He suffered also on the physical side from a tendency to disease of the lungs inherited from his mother.

Mr Forest's house stood high on the Grindelwald side of the Wengern Alp, under a bare grassy height full of pasture both Summer and Winter. In front was a great space, half meadow, half common, rather poorly

covered with hill-grasses. The rock was near the surface, and in places came through, when the grass was changed for lichens and mosses. Through this rocky meadow now roamed, now rushed, now tumbled one of those Alpine streams the very thought of whose ice-born plenitude makes me happy yet. Its banks were not abrupt, but rounded gently in, and grassy down to the water's brink. The larger torrents of Winter wore the channel wide, and the sinking of the water in Summer let the grass grow within it. But peaceful as the place was, and merry with the constant rush of this busy stream, it had, even in the hottest Summer day, a memory of the Winter about it, a look of suppressed desolation; for the only trees upon it were a score of straggling pines--all dead, as if blasted by lightning, or smothered by snow. Perhaps they were the last of the forest in that part, and their roots had reached a stratum where they could not live. All I know is that there they stood, blasted and dead every one of them.

Charley could never bear them, and even disliked the place because of them. His father was one whom a mote in his brother's eye repelled. The son suffered for this in twenty ways--one of which was that a single spot in the landscape was to him enough to destroy the loveliness of exquisite surroundings.

A good way below lay the valley of the Grindelwald. The Eiger and the Matterhorn were both within sight. If a man has any sense of the infinite, he cannot fail to be rendered capable of higher things by such embodiments of the high. Otherwise, they are heaps of dirt, to be scrambled up and conquered, for scrambling and conquering's sake. They are but warts, Pelion and Ossa and all of them. They seemed to oppress Charley at first.

'Oh, Willie,' he said to me one day, 'if I could but believe in those mountains, how happy I should be! But I doubt, I doubt they are but rocks and snow.'

I only half understood him. I am afraid I never did understand him more than half. Later I came to the conclusion that this was not the fit place for him, and that if his father had understood him, he would never have sent him there.

It was some time before Mr Forest would take us any mountain ramble. He said we must first get accustomed to the air of the place, else the precipices would turn our brains. He allowed us, however, to range within certain bounds.

One day soon after our arrival, we accompanied one of our schoolfellows down to the valley of the Grindelwald, specially to see the head of the snake-glacier, which having crept thither can creep no further. Somebody had even then hollowed out a cave in it. We crossed a little brook which issued from it constantly, and entered. Charley uttered a cry of dismay, but I was too much delighted at the moment to heed him. For the whole of the white cavern was filled with blue air, so blue that I saw the air which filled it. Perfectly transparent, it had no substance, only blueness, which deepened and deepened as I went further in. All down the smooth white walls evermore was stealing a thin veil of dissolution; while here and there little runnels of the purest water were tumbling in tiny cataracts from top to bottom. It was one of the thousand birthplaces of streams, ever creeping into the day of vision from the unlike and the unknown, unrolling themselves like the fronds of a fern out of the infinite of God. Ice was all around, hard and cold and dead and white; but out of it and away went the water babbling and singing in the sunlight.

‘Oh, Charley!’ I exclaimed, looking round in my transport for sympathy. It was now my turn to cry out, for Charley’s face was that of a corpse. The brilliant blue of the cave made us look to each other most ghastly and fearful.

‘Do come out, Wilfrid,’ he said; ‘I cannot bear it.’

I put my arm in his, and we walked into the sunlight. He drew a deep breath of relief, and turned to me with an attempt at a smile, but his lip quivered.

‘It’s an awful place, Wilfrid. I don’t like it. Don’t go in again. I should stand waiting to see you come out in a winding-sheet. I think there’s something wrong with my brain. That blue seems to have got into it. I see everything horribly dead.’

On the way back he started several times, and looked, round as if with involuntary apprehension, but mastered himself with an effort, and joined again in the conversation. Before we reached home he was much fatigued, and complaining of head-ache, went to bed immediately on our arrival.

We slept in the same room. When I went up at the usual hour, he was awake.

‘Can’t you sleep, Charley?’ I said.

‘I’ve been asleep several times,’ he answered, ‘but I’ve had such a horrible dream every time! We were all corpses that couldn’t get to sleep, and went about pawing the slimy walls of our marble sepulchre--so cold and wet! It was that horrible ice-cave, I suppose. But then you know that’s just what it is, Wilfrid.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I said, instinctively turning from the subject, for the glitter of his blue eyes looked bodeful. I did not know then how like he and I were, or how like my fate might have been to his, if, instead of finding at once a fit food for my fancy, and a safety-valve for its excess, in those old romances, I had had my regards turned inwards upon myself, before I could understand the phenomena there exhibited. Certainly I too should have been thus rendered miserable, and body and soul would have mutually preyed on each other.

I sought to change the subject. I could never talk to him about his father, but he had always been ready to speak of his mother and his sister. Now, however, I could not rouse him. ‘Poor mamma!’ was all the response he made to some admiring remark; and when I mentioned his sister Mary, he only said, ‘She’s a good girl, our Mary,’ and turned uneasily towards the wall. I went to bed. He lay quiet, and I fell asleep.

When I woke in the morning, I found him very unwell. I suppose the illness had been coming on for some time. He was in a low fever. As the doctor declared it not infectious, I was allowed to nurse him. He was often delirious, and spoke the wildest things. Especially, he would converse with the Saviour after the strangest fashion.

He lay ill for some weeks. Mr Forest would not allow me to sit up with him at night, but I was always by his bedside early in the morning, and did what I could to amuse and comfort him through the day. When at length he began to grow better, he was more cheerful than I had known him hitherto; but he remained very weak for some time. He had grown a good deal during his illness, and indeed never looked a boy again.

CHAPTER XVII.

AMONG THE MOUNTAINS.

One summer morning we all got up very early, except Charley, who was unfit for the exertion, to have a ramble in the mountains, and see the sun rise. The fresh friendly air, full of promise, greeting us the moment we crossed the threshold; the calm light which, without visible source, lay dream-like on the hills; the brighter space in the sky whence ere long the spring of glory would burst forth triumphant; the dull white of the snow-peaks, dwelling so awful and lonely in the mid heavens, as if nothing should ever comfort them or make them acknowledge the valleys below; the sense of adventure with which we climbed the nearer heights as familiar to our feet on ordinary days as the stairs to our bedrooms; the gradual disappearance of the known regions behind us, and the dawning sense of the illimitable and awful, folding in its bosom the homely and familiar--combined to produce an impression which has never faded. The sun rose in splendour, as if nothing more should hide in the darkness for ever; and yet with the light came a fresh sense of mystery, for now that which had appeared smooth was all broken and mottled with shadows innumerable. Again and again I found myself standing still to gaze in a rapture of delight which I can only recall, not express; again and again was I roused by the voice of the master in front, shouting to me to come on, and warning me of the danger of losing sight of the rest of the company; and again and again I obeyed, but without any perception of the peril.

The intention was to cross the hills into the valley of the Lauterbrunnen, not, however, by the path now so well known, but by another way, hardly a path, with which the master and some of the boys were familiar enough. It was my first experience of anything like real climbing. As we passed rapidly over a moorland space, broken with huge knolls and solitary rocks, something hurt my foot, and taking off my shoe, I found

that a small chiropodical operation was necessary, which involved the use of my knife. It slipped, and cut my foot, and I bound the wound with a strip from my pocket-handkerchief. When I got up, I found that my companions had disappeared. This gave me little trouble at the moment, for I had no doubt of speedily overtaking them; and I set out briskly in the direction, as I supposed, in which we had been going. But I presume that, instead of following them, I began at once to increase the distance between us. At all events, I had not got far before a pang of fear shot through me--the first awaking doubt. I called--louder--and louder yet; but there was no response, and I knew I was alone.

Invaded by sudden despair, I sat down, and for a moment did not even think. All at once I became aware of the abysses which surrounded the throne of my isolation. Behind me the broken ground rose to an unseen height, and before me it sloped gently downwards, without a break to the eye, yet I felt as if, should I make one wavering movement, I must fall down one of the frightful precipices which Mr Forest had told me as a warning lay all about us. I actually clung to the stone upon which I sat, although I could not have been in more absolute safety for the moment had I been dreaming in bed. The old fear had returned upon me with a tenfold feeling of reality behind it. I presume it is so all through life: it is not what is, but what may be, that oftenest blanches the cheek and paralyzes the limbs; and oftenest gives rise to that sense of the need of a God which we are told nowadays is a superstition, and which he whom we call the Saviour acknowledged and justified in telling us to take no thought for the morrow, inasmuch as God took thought for it. I strove to master my dismay, and forced myself to get up and run about; and in a few minutes the fear had withdrawn into the background, and I felt no longer an unseen force dragging me towards a frightful gulf. But it was replaced by a more spiritual horror. The sense of loneliness seized upon me, and the first sense of absolute loneliness is awful. Independent as a man may fancy himself in the heart of a world of men, he is only to be

convinced that there is neither voice nor hearing, to know that the face from which he most recoils is of a kind essential to his very soul. Space is not room; and when we complain of the over-crowding of our fellows, we are thankless for that which comforts us the most, and desire its absence in ignorance of our deepest nature.

Not even a bird broke the silence. It lay upon my soul as the sky and the sea lay upon the weary eye of the ancient mariner. It is useless to attempt to convey the impression of my misery. It was not yet the fear of death, or of hunger or thirst, for I had as yet no adequate idea of the vast lonelinesses that lie in a mountain land: it was simply the being alone, with no ear to hear and no voice to answer me--a torture to which the soul is liable in virtue of the fact that it was not made to be alone, yea, I think, I hope, never *can* be alone; for that which could be fact could not be such horror. Essential horror springs from an idea repugnant to the *nature* of the thinker, and which therefore in reality could not be.

My agony rose and rose with every moment of silence. But when it reached its height, and when, to save myself from bursting into tears, I threw myself on the ground, and began gnawing at the plants about me--then first came help: I had a certain *experience*, as the Puritans might have called it. I fear to build any definite conclusions upon it, from the dread of fanaticism and the danger of attributing a merely physical effect to a spiritual cause. But are matter and spirit so far asunder? It is my will moves my arm, whatever first moves my will. Besides, I do not understand how, unless another influence came into operation, the extreme of misery and depression should work round into such a change as I have to record.

But I do not know how to describe the change. The silence was crushing or rather sucking my life out of me--up into its own empty gulfs. The horror of the great stillness was growing deathly, when all at once I rose to my feet, with a sense of power and confidence I had never had before.

It was as if something divine within me awoke to outface the desolation. I felt that it was time to act, and that I could act. There is no cure for terror like action: in a few moments I could have approached the verge of any precipice--at least without abject fear. The silence--no longer a horrible vacancy--appeared to tremble with unuttered thinkings. The manhood within me was alive and awake. I could not recognize a single landmark, or discover the least vestige of a path. I knew upon which hand the sun was when we started; and took my way with the sun on the other side. But a cloud had already come over him.

I had not gone far before I saw in front of me, on the other side of a little hillock, something like the pale blue grey fog that broods over a mountain lake. I ascended the hillock, and started back with a cry of dismay: I was on the very verge of an awful gulf. When I think of it, I marvel yet that I did not lose my self-possession altogether. I only turned and strode in the other direction--the faster for the fear. But I dared not run, for I was haunted by precipices. Over every height, every mound, one might be lying--a trap for my destruction. I no longer looked out in the hope of recognizing some feature of the country; I could only regard the ground before me, lest at any step I might come upon an abyss.

I had not walked far before the air began to grow dark. I glanced again at the sun. The clouds had gathered thick about him. Suddenly a mountain wind blew cold in my face. I never yet can read that sonnet of Shakspere's,

Full many a glorious morning I have seen Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye, Kissing with golden face the meadows green, Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy; Anon permit the basest clouds to ride With ugly rack on his celestial face, And from the forlorn world his visage hide, Stealing unseen to west with his disgrace,--

without recalling the gladness when I started from home and the misery that so soon followed. But my new spirits did not yet give way. I trudged

on. The wind increased, and in it came by-and-by the trailing skirts of a cloud. In a few moments more I was wrapped in mist. It was as if the gulf from which I had just escaped had sent up its indwelling demon of fog to follow and overtake me. I dared hardly go on even with the greatest circumspection. As I grew colder, my courage declined. The mist wetted my face and sank through my clothes, and I began to feel very wretched, I sat down, not merely from dread of the precipices, but to reserve my walking powers when the mist should withdraw. I began to shiver, and was getting utterly hopeless and miserable when the fog lifted a little, and I saw what seemed a great rock near me. I crept towards it. Almost suddenly it dwindled, and I found but a stone, yet one large enough to afford me some shelter. I went to the leeward side of it, and nestled at its foot. The mist again sank, and the wind blew stronger, but I was in comparative comfort, partly because my imagination was wearied. I fell fast asleep.

I awoke stiff with cold. Rain was falling in torrents, and I was wet to the skin; but the mist was much thinner, and I could see a good way. For awhile I was very heartless, what with the stiffness, and the fear of having to spend the night on the mountains. I was hungry too, not with the appetite of desire but of need. The worst was that I had no idea in what direction I ought to go. Downwards lay precipices--upwards lay the surer loneliness. I knelt, and prayed the God who dwelt in the silence to help me; then strode away I knew not whither--up the hill in the faint hope of discovering some sign to direct me. As I climbed the hill rose. When I surmounted what had seemed the highest point, away beyond rose another. But the slopes were not over-steep, and I was able to get on pretty fast. The wind being behind me, I hoped for some shelter over the highest brow, but that, for anything I knew, might be miles away in the regions of ice and snow.

[Illustration: I FELL FAST ASLEEP.]

I had been walking I should think about an hour, when the mist broke away from around me, and the sun, in the midst of clouds of dull orange and gold, shone out upon the wet hill. It was like a promise of safety, and woke in me courage to climb the steep and crumbling slope which now lay before me. But the fear returned. People had died in the mountains of hunger, and I began to make up my mind to meet the worst. I had not learned that the approach of any fate is just the preparation for that fate. I troubled myself with the care of that which was not impending over me. I tried to contemplate the death-struggle with equanimity, but could not. Had I been wearier and fainter, it would have appeared less dreadful. Then, in the horror of the slow death of hunger, strange as it may appear, that which had been the special horror of my childish dreams returned upon me changed into a thought of comfort: I could, ere my strength failed me utterly, seek the verge of a precipice, lie down there, and when the suffering grew strong enough to give me courage, roll myself over the edge, and cut short the agony.

At length I gained the brow of the height, and at last the ground sank beyond. There was no precipice to terrify, only a somewhat steep descent into a valley large and wide. But what a vision arose on the opposite side of that valley!--an upright wilderness of rocks, slopes, precipices, snow, glaciers, avalanches! Weary and faint as I was, I was filled with a glorious awe, the terror of which was the opposite of fear, for it lifted instead of debasing the soul. Not a pine-tree softened the haggard waste; not a single stray sheep of the wind’s flock drew one trail of its thin-drawn wool behind it; all was hard and bare. The glaciers lay like the skins of cruel beasts, with the green veins yet visible, nailed to the rocks to harden in the sun; and the little streams which ran down from their claws looked like the knife-blades they are, keen and hard and shining, sawing away at the bones of the old mountain. But although the mountain looked so silent, there came from it every now and then a thunderous sound. At first I could not think what it was, but gazing at its surface

more steadily, upon the face of a slope I caught sight of what seemed a larger stream than any of the rest; but it soon ceased to flow, and after came the thunder of its fall: it *was* a stream, but a solid one--an avalanche. Away up in the air the huge snow-summit glittered in the light of the Afternoon sun. I was gazing on the Maiden in one of her most savage moods--or to speak prose--I was regarding one of the wildest aspects of the many-sided Jungfrau.

Half way down the hill, almost right under my feet, rose a slender column of smoke, I could not see whence. I hastened towards it, feeling as strong as when I started in the morning. I zig-zagged down the slope, for it was steep and slippery with grass, and arrived at length at a good-sized cottage, which faced the Jungfrau. It was built of great logs laid horizontally one above the other, all with notches half through near the end, by which notches, lying into each other, the sides of the house were held together at the corners. I soon saw it must be a sort of roadside inn. There was no one about the place, but passing through a dark vestibule, in which were stores of fodder and various utensils, I came to a room in which sat a mother and her daughter, the former spinning, the latter making lace on a pillow. In at the windows looked the great Jungfrau. The room was lined with planks; the floor was boarded; the ceiling, too, was of boards--pine-wood all around.

The women rose when I entered. I knew enough of German to make them understand my story, and had learned enough of their *patois* to understand them a little in return. They looked concerned, and the older woman passing her hands over my jacket, turned to her daughter and commenced a talk much too rapid and no doubt idiomatic for me to follow. It was in the end mingled with much laughter, evidently at some proposal of the mother. Then the daughter left the room, and the mother began to heap wood on the fire. In a few minutes the daughter returned, still laughing, with some garments, which the mother took from her. I was watching everything from a corner of the hearth, where I had seated

myself wearily. The mother came up to me, and, without speaking, put something over my head, which I found to be a short petticoat such as the women wore; then told me I must take off my clothes, and have them dried at the fire. She laid other garments on a chair beside me.

‘I don’t know how to put them on,’ I objected.

‘Put on as many as you can,’ she said laughing, ‘and I will help you with the rest.’

I looked about. There was a great press in the room. I went behind it and pulled off my clothes; and having managed to put on some of the girl’s garments, issued from my concealment. The kindly laughter was renewed, and mother and daughter busied themselves in arranging my apparel, evidently seeking to make the best of me as a girl, an attempt favoured by my pale face. When I seemed to myself completely arrayed, the girl said to her mother what I took to mean, ‘Let us finish what we have begun;’ and leaving the room, returned presently with the velvet collar embroidered with silver and the pendent chains which the women of most of the cantons wear, and put it on me, hooking the chains and leaving them festooned under my arms. The mother was spreading out my clothes before the fire to dry.

Neither was pretty, but both looked womanly and good. The daughter had the attraction of youth and bright eyes; the mother of goodwill and experience; but both were sallow, and the mother very wrinkled for what seemed her years.

‘Now,’ I said, summoning my German, ‘you’ve almost finished your work. Make my short hair as like your long hair as you can, and then I shall be a Swiss girl.’

I was but a boy, and had no scruple concerning a bit of fun of which I might have been ashamed a few years later. The girl took a comb from her own hair and arranged mine. When she had finished, ‘One girl may

kiss another,' I said; and doubtless she understood me, for she returned my kiss with a fresh laugh. I sat down by the fire, and as its warmth crept into my limbs, I rejoiced over comforts which yesterday had been a matter of course.

Meantime they were busy getting me something to eat. Just as they were setting it on the table, however, a loud call outside took them both away. In a few moments two other guests entered, and then first I found myself ashamed of my costume. With them the mother re-entered, calling behind her, 'There's nobody at home; you must put the horses up yourself, Annel.' Then she moved the little table towards me, and proceeded to set out the meal.

'Ah! I see you have got something to eat,' said one of the strangers, in a voice I fancied I had heard before.

'Will you please to share it?' returned the woman, moving the table again towards the middle of the room.

I thought with myself that, if I kept silent, no one could tell I was not a girl; and, the table being finally adjusted, I moved my seat towards it. Meantime the man was helping his companion to take off her outer garments, and put them before the fire. I saw the face of neither until they approached the table and sat down. Great was my surprise to discover that the man was the same I had met in the wood on my way to Moldwarp Hall, and that the girl was Clara--a good deal grown--in fact, looking almost a woman. From after facts, the meeting became less marvellous in my eyes than it then appeared.

I felt myself in an awkward position--indeed, I felt almost guilty, although any notion of having the advantage of them never entered my head. I was more than half inclined to run out and help Annel with the horses, but I was very hungry, and not at all willing to postpone my meal, simple as it was--bread and butter, eggs, cheese, milk, and a bottle of the

stronger wine of the country, tasting like a coarse sherry. The two--father and daughter evidently--talked about their journey, and hoped they should reach the Grindelwald without more rain.

‘By the way,’ said the gentleman, ‘it’s somewhere not far from here young Cumbermede is at school. I know Mr Forest well enough--used to know him, at least. We may as well call upon him.’

‘Cumbermede,’ said Clara; ‘who is he?’

‘A nephew of Mrs Wilson’s--no, not nephew--second or third cousin--or something of the sort, I believe.--Didn’t somebody tell me you met him at the Hall one day?’

‘Oh, that boy--Wilfrid. Yes; I told you myself. Don’t you remember what a bit of fun we had the night of the ball? We were shut out on the leads, you know.’

‘Yes, to be sure, you did tell me. What sort of a boy is he?’

‘Oh! I don’t know. Much like other boys. I did think he was a coward at first, but he showed some pluck at last. I shouldn’t wonder if he turns out a good sort of fellow! We *were* in a fix!’

‘You’re a terrible madcap, Clara! If you don’t settle down as you grow, you’ll be getting yourself into worse scrapes.’

‘Not with you to look after me, papa dear,’ answered Clara, smiling. ‘It was the fun of cheating old Goody Wilson, you know!’

Her father grinned with his whole mouthful of teeth, and looked at her with amusement--almost sympathetic roguery, which she evidently appreciated, for she laughed heartily.

Meantime I was feeling very uncomfortable. Something within told me I had no right to overhear remarks about myself; and, in my slow way, I was meditating how to get out of the scrape.

‘What a nice-looking girl that is!’ said Clara, without lifting her eyes from her plate--‘I mean for a Swiss, you know. But I do like the dress. I wish you would buy me a collar and chains like those, papa.’

‘Always wanting to get something out of your old dad, Clara! Just like the rest of you, always wanting something--eh?’

‘No, papa; it’s you gentlemen always want to keep everything for yourselves. We only want you to share.’

‘Well, you shall have the collar, and I shall have the chains.--Will that do?’

‘Yes, thank you, papa,’ she returned, nodding her head. ‘Meantime, hadn’t you better give me your diamond pin? It would fasten this troublesome collar so nicely!’

‘There, child!’ he answered, proceeding to take it from his shirt. ‘Anything else?’

‘No, no, papa dear. I didn’t want it. I expected you, like everybody else, to decline carrying out your professed principles.’

‘What a nice girl she is,’ I thought, ‘after all!’

‘My love,’ said her father, ‘you will know some day that I would do more for you even than give you my pet diamond. If you are a good girl, and do as I tell you, there will be grander things than diamond pins in store for you. But you may have this if you like.’

He looked fondly at her as he spoke.

‘Oh no, papa!--not now at least. I should not know what to do with it. I should be sure to lose it.’

If my clothes had been dry, I would have slipped away, put them on, and appeared in my proper guise. As it was, I was getting more and more

miserable--ashamed of revealing who I was, and ashamed of hearing what the speakers supposed I did not understand. I sat on irresolute. In a little while, however, either the wine having got into my head, or the food and warmth having restored my courage, I began to contemplate the bolder stroke of suddenly revealing myself by some unexpected remark. They went on talking about the country, and the road they had come.

‘But we have hardly seen anything worth calling a precipice,’ said Clara.

‘You’ll see hundreds of them if you look out of the window,’ said her father.

‘Oh! but I don’t mean that,’ she returned. ‘It’s nothing to look at them like that. I mean from the top of them--to look down, you know.’

‘Like from the flying buttress at Moldwarp Hall, Clara?’ I said.

The moment I began to speak, they began to stare. Clara’s hand was arrested on its way towards the bread, and her father’s wine-glass hung suspended between the table and his lips. I laughed.

‘By Jove!’ said Mr Coningham--and added nothing, for amazement, but looked uneasily at his daughter, as if asking whether they had not said something awkward about me.

‘It’s Wilfrid!’ exclaimed Clara, in the tone of one talking in her sleep. Then she laid down her knife, and laughed aloud.

‘What a guy you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘Who would have thought of finding you in a Swiss girl? Really it was too bad of you to sit there and let us go on as we did. I do believe we were talking about your precious self! At least papa was.’

Again her merry laugh rang out. She could not have taken a better way of relieving us.

‘I’m very sorry,’ I said; ‘but I felt so awkward in this costume that I couldn’t bring myself to speak before. I tried very hard.’

‘Poor boy!’ she returned, rather more mockingly than I liked, her violets swimming in the dews of laughter.

By this time Mr Coningham had apparently recovered his self-possession. I say *apparently*, for I doubt if he had ever lost it. He had only, I think, been running over their talk in his mind to see if he had said anything unpleasant, and now, re-assured, I think, he stretched his hand across the table.

‘At all events, Mr Cumbermede,’ he said, ‘*we* owe *you* an apology. I am sure we can’t have said anything we should mind you hearing; but--’

‘Oh!’ I interrupted, ‘you have told me nothing I did not know already, except that Mrs Wilson was a relation, of which I was quite ignorant.’

‘It is true enough, though.’

‘What relation is she, then?’

‘I think, when I gather my recollections of the matter--I think she was first cousin to your mother--perhaps it was only second cousin.’

‘Why shouldn’t she have told me so, then?’

‘She must explain that herself. *I* cannot account for that. It is very extraordinary.’

‘But how do you know so well about me, sir--if you don’t mind saying?’

‘Oh! I am an old friend of the family. I knew your father better than your uncle, though. Your uncle is not over-friendly, you see.’

‘I am sorry for that.’

‘No occasion at all. I suppose he doesn’t like me. I fancy, being a Methodist--’

‘My uncle is not a Methodist, I assure you. He goes to the parish church regularly.’

‘Oh! it’s all one. I only meant to say that, being a man of somewhat peculiar notions, I supposed he did not approve of my profession. Your good people are just as ready as others, however, to call in the lawyer when they fancy their rights invaded. Ha! ha! But no one has a right to complain of another because he doesn’t choose to like him. Besides, it brings grist to the mill. If everybody liked everybody, what would become of the lawsuits? And that would unsuit us--wouldn’t it, Clara?’

‘You know, papa dear, what mamma would say?’

‘But she ain’t here, you know.’

‘But *I* am, papa; and I don’t like to hear you talk shop,’ said Clara coaxingly.

‘Very well; we won’t then. But I was only explaining to Mr Cumbermede how I supposed it was that his uncle did not like me. There was no offence in that, I hope, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Certainly not,’ I answered. ‘I am the only offender. But I was innocent enough as far as intention goes. I came in drenched and cold, and the good people here amused themselves dressing me like a girl. It is quite time I were getting home now. Mr Forest will be in a way about me. So will Charley Osborne.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Coningham, ‘I remember hearing you were at school together somewhere in this quarter. But tell us all about it. Did you lose your way?’

I told them my story. Even Clara looked grave when I came to the incident of finding myself on the verge of the precipice.

‘Thank God, my boy!’ said Mr Coningham kindly. ‘You have had a narrow escape. I lost myself once in the Cumberland hills, and hardly got off with my life. Here it is a chance you were ever seen again, alive or dead. I wonder you’re not knocked up.’

I was, however, more so than I knew.

‘How are you going to get home?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know any way but walking,’ I answered.

‘Are you far from home?’

‘I don’t know. I dare say the people here will be able to tell me. But I think you said you were going down into the Grindelwald. I shall know where I am there. Perhaps you will let me walk with you. Horses can’t go very fast along these roads.’

‘You shall have my horse, my boy.’

‘No. I couldn’t think of that.’

‘You must. I haven’t been wandering all day like you. You can ride, I suppose?’

‘Yes, pretty well.’

‘Then you shall ride with Clara, and I’ll walk with the guide. I shall go and see after the horses presently.’

It was indeed a delightful close to a dreadful day. We sat and chatted a while, and then Clara and I went out to look at the Jungfrau. She told me they had left her mother at Interlaken, and had been wandering about the Bernese Alps for nearly a week.

‘I can’t think what should have put it in papa’s head,’ she added; ‘for he does not care much for scenery. I fancy he wants to make the most of poor me, and so takes me the grand tour. He wanted to come without mamma, but she said we were not to be trusted alone. She had to give in when we took to horseback, though.’

It was getting late, and Mr Coningham came out to find us.

‘It is quite time we were going,’ he said. ‘In fact we are too late now. The horses are ready, and your clothes are dry, Mr Cumbermede. I have felt them all over.’

‘How kind of you, sir!’ I said.

‘Nonsense! Why should any one want another to get his death of cold? If you are to keep alive, it’s better to keep well as long as ever you can. Make haste, though, and change your clothes.’

I hurried away, followed by Clara’s merry laugh at my clumsy gait. In a few moments I was ready. Mr Coningham had settled my bill for me. Mother and daughter gave me a kind farewell, and I exhausted my German in vain attempts to let them know how grateful I was for their goodness. There was not much time, however, to spend even on gratitude. The sun was nearly down, and I could see Clara mounted and waiting for me before the window. I found Mr Coningham rather impatient.

‘Come along, Mr Cumbermede; we must be off,’ he said. ‘Get up there.’

‘You *have* grown, though, after all,’ said Clara. ‘I thought it might be only the petticoats that made you look so tall.’

I got on the horse which the guide, a half-witted fellow from the next valley, was holding for me, and we set out. The guide walked beside my horse, and Mr Coningham beside Clara’s. The road was level for a little

way, but it soon turned up on the hill where I had been wandering, and went along the steep side of it.

‘Will this do for a precipice, Clara?’ said her father.

‘Oh! dear no,’ she answered; ‘it’s not worth the name. It actually slopes outward.’

‘Before we got down to the next level stretch it began again to rain. A mist came on, and we could see but a little way before us. Through the mist came the sound of the bells of the cattle upon the hill. Our guide trudged carefully but boldly on. He seemed to know every step of the way. Clara was very cool, her father a little anxious, and very attentive to his daughter, who received his help with a never-failing merry gratitude, making light of all annoyances. At length we came down upon the better road, and travelled on with more comfort.

‘Look, Clara!’ I said, ‘will that do?’

‘What is it?’ she asked, turning her head in the direction in which I pointed.

On our right, through the veil, half of rain, half of gauzy mist, which filled the air, arose a precipice indeed--the whole bulk it was of the Eiger mountain, which the mist brought so near that it seemed literally to overhang the road. Clara looked up for a moment, but betrayed no sign of awe.

‘Yes, I think that will do,’ she said.

‘Though you are only at the foot of it?’ I suggested.

‘Yes, though I am only at the foot of it,’ she repeated.

‘What does it remind you of?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. I never saw anything it could remind me of,’ she answered.

‘Nor read anything?’

‘Not that I remember.’

‘It reminds me of Mount Sinai in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*. You remember Christian was afraid because the side of it which was next the wayside did hang so much over that he thought it would fall on his head.’

‘I never read the *Pilgrim’s Progress*,’ she returned, in a careless if not contemptuous tone.

‘Didn’t you? Oh, you would like it so much!’

‘I don’t think I should. I don’t like religious books.’ ‘But that is such a good story!’

‘Oh! it’s all a trap--sugar on the outside of a pill! The sting’s in the tail of it. They’re all like that. *I* know them.’

This silenced me, and for a while we went on without speaking.

The rain ceased; the mist cleared a little; and I began to think I saw some landmarks I knew. A moment more, and I perfectly understood where we were.

‘I’m all right now, sir,’ I said to Mr Coningham. ‘I can find my way from here.’

As I spoke I pulled up and proceeded to dismount.

‘Sit still,’ he said. ‘We cannot do better than ride on to Mr Forest’s. I don’t know him much, but I have met him, and in a strange country all are friends, I dare say he will take us in for the night. Do you think he could house us?’

‘I have no doubt of it. For that matter, the boys could crowd a little.’

‘Is it far from here?’

‘Not above two miles, I think.’

‘Are you sure you know the way?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘Then you take the lead.’

I did so. He spoke to the guide, and Clara and I rode on in front.

‘You and I seem destined to have adventures together, Clara,’ I said.

‘It seems so. But this is not so much of an adventure as that night on the leads,’ she answered.

‘You would not have thought so if you had been with me in the morning.’

‘Were you very much frightened?’

‘I was. And then to think of finding you!’

‘It was funny, certainly.’

When we reached the house, there was great jubilation over me, but Mr Forest himself was very serious. He had not been back more than half an hour, and was just getting ready to set out again, accompanied by men from the village below. Most of the boys were quite knocked up, for they had been looking for me ever since they missed me. Charley was in a dreadful way. When he saw me he burst into tears, and declared he would never let me go out of his sight again. But if he had been with me, it would have been death to both of us: I could never have got him over the ground.

Mr and Mrs Forest received their visitors with the greatest cordiality, and invited them to spend a day or two with them, to which, after some deliberation, Mr Coningham agreed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AGAIN THE ICE-CAVE.

The next morning he begged a holiday for me and Charley, of whose family he knew something, although he was not acquainted with them. I was a little disappointed at Charley's being included in the request, not in the least from jealousy, but because I had set my heart on taking Clara to the cave in the ice, which I knew Charley would not like. But I thought we could easily arrange to leave him somewhere near until we returned. I spoke to Mr Coningham about it, who entered into my small scheme with the greatest kindness. Charley confided to me afterwards that he did not take to him--he was too like an ape, he said. But the impression of his ugliness had with me quite worn off; and for his part, if I had been a favourite nephew, he could not have been more complaisant and hearty.

I felt very stiff when we set out, and altogether not quite myself; but the discomfort wore off as we went. Charley had Mr Coningham's horse, and I walked by the side of Clara's, eager after any occasion, if but a pretence, of being useful to her. She was quite familiar with me, but seemed shy of Charley. He looked much more of a man than I; for not only, as I have said, had he grown much during his illness, but there was an air of troubled thoughtfulness about him which made him look considerably older than he really was; while his delicate complexion and large blue eyes had a kind of mystery about them that must have been very attractive.

When we reached the village, I told Charley that we wanted to go on foot to the cave, and hoped he would not mind waiting our return. But he refused to be left, declaring he should not mind going in the least; that he was quite well now, and ashamed of his behaviour on the former occasion; that, in fact, it must have been his approaching illness that caused it. I could not insist, and we set out. The footpath led us through fields of corn, with a bright sun overhead, and a sweet wind blowing. It

was a glorious day of golden corn, gentle wind, and blue sky--with great masses of white snow, whiter than any cloud, held up in it.

We descended the steep bank; we crossed the wooden bridge over the little river; we crunched under our feet the hail-like crystals lying rough on the surface of the glacier; we reached the cave, and entered its blue abyss. I went first into the delicious, yet dangerous-looking blue. The cave had several sharp angles in it. When I reached the furthest corner I turned to look behind me. I was alone. I walked back and peeped round the last corner. Between that and the one beyond it stood Clara and Charley--staring at each other with faces of ghastly horror.

Clara's look certainly could not have been the result of any excess of imagination. But many women respond easily to influences they could not have originated. My conjecture is that the same horror had again seized upon Charley when he saw Clara; that it made his face, already deathlike, tenfold more fearful; that Clara took fright at his fear, her imagination opening like a crystal to the polarized light of reflected feeling; and thus they stood in the paralysis of a dismay which ever multiplied itself in the opposed mirrors of their countenances.

I too was in terror--for Charley, and certainly wasted no time in speculation. I went forward instantly, and put an arm round each. They woke up, as it were, and tried to laugh. But the laugh was worse than the stare. I hurried them out of the place.

We came upon Mr Coningham round the next corner, amusing himself with the talk of the half-silly guide.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Out again,' I answered. 'The air is oppressive.'

'Nonsense!' he said merrily. 'The air is as pure as it is cold. Come, Clara; I want to explore the penetralia of this temple of Isis.'

I believe he intended a pun.

Clara turned with him; Charley and I went out into the sunshine.

‘You should not have gone, Charley. You have caught a chill again,’ I said.

‘No, nothing of the sort,’ he answered. ‘Only it was too dreadful. That lovely face! To see it like that--and know that is what it is coming to!’

‘You looked as horrid yourself,’ I returned.

‘I don’t doubt it. We all did. But why?’

‘Why, just because of the blueness,’ I answered.

‘Yes--the blueness, no doubt. That was all. But there it was, you know.’

Clara came out smiling. All her horror had vanished. I was looking into the hole as she turned the last corner. When she first appeared, her face was ‘like one that hath been seven days drowned;’ but as she advanced, the decay thinned, and the life grew, until at last she stepped from the mouth of the sepulchre in all the glow of her merry youth. It was a dumb show of the resurrection.

As we went back to the inn, Clara, who was walking in front with her father, turned her head and addressed me suddenly.

‘You see it was all a sham, Wilfrid!’ she said.

‘What was a sham? I don’t know what you mean,’ I rejoined.

‘Why that,’ she returned, pointing with her hand. Then addressing her father, ‘Isn’t that the Eiger,’ she asked--‘the same we rode under yesterday?’

‘To be sure it is,’ he answered.

She turned again to me.

‘You see it is all a sham! Last night it pretended to be on the very edge of the road and hanging over our heads at an awful height. Now it has gone a long way back, is not so very high, and certainly does not hang over. I ought not to have been satisfied with that precipice. It took me in.’

I did not reply at once. Clara’s words appeared to me quite irreverent, and I recoiled from the very thought that there could be any sham in nature; but what to answer her I did not know. I almost began to dislike her; for it is often incapacity for defending the faith they love which turns men into persecutors.

Seeing me foiled, Charley advanced with the doubtful aid of a sophism to help me.

‘Which is the sham, Miss Clara?’ he asked.

‘That Eiger mountain there.’

‘Ah! so I thought.’

‘Then you are of my opinion, Mr Osborne?’

‘You mean the mountain is shamming, don’t you--looking far off when really it is near?’

‘Not at all. When it looked last night as if it hung right over our heads, it was shamming. See it now--far away there!’

‘But which, then, is the sham, and which is the true? It *looked* near yesterday, and now it *looks* far away. Which is which?’

‘It must have been a sham yesterday; for although it looked near, it was very dull and dim, and you could only see the sharp outline of it.’

‘Just so I argue on the other side. The mountain must be shamming now, for although it looks so far off, it yet shows a most contradictory clearness--not only of outline but of surface.’

‘Aha!’ thought I, ‘Miss Clara has found her match. They both know he is talking nonsense, yet she can’t answer him. What she was saying was nonsense too, but I can’t answer it either--not yet.’

I felt proud of both of them, but of Charley especially, for I had had no idea he could be so quick.

‘What ever put such an answer into your head, Charley?’ I exclaimed.

‘Oh! it’s not quite original,’ he returned. ‘I believe it was suggested by two or three lines I read in a review just before we left home. They took hold of me rather.’

He repeated half of the now well-known little poem of Shelley, headed *Passage of the Apennines*. He had forgotten the name of the writer, and it was many years before I fell in with the lines myself.

‘The Apennine in the light of day Is a mighty mountain dim and gray, Which between the earth and sky doth lay; But when night comes, a chaos dread On the dim starlight then is spread, And the Apennine walks abroad with the storm.’

In the middle of it I saw Clara begin to titter, but she did not interrupt him. When he had finished, she said with a grave face, too grave for seriousness:

‘Will you repeat the third line--I think it was, Mr Osborne?’

He did so.

‘What kind of eggs did the Apennine lay, Mr Osborne?’ she asked, still perfectly serious.

Charley was abashed to find she could take advantage of probably a provincialism to turn into ridicule such fine verses. Before he could recover himself, she had planted another blow’ or two.

‘And where is its nest?’ Between the earth and the sky is vague. But then to be sure it must want a good deal of room. And after all, a mountain is a strange fowl, and who knows where it might lay? Between earth and sky is quite definite enough? Besides, the bird-nesting boys might be dangerous if they knew where it was. It would be such a find for them!’

My champion was defeated. Without attempting a word in reply, he hung back and dropped behind. Mr Coningham must have heard the whole, but he offered no remark. I saw that Charley’s sensitive nature was hurt, and my heart was sore for him.

‘That’s too bad of you, Clara,’ I said.

‘What’s too bad of me, Wilfrid?’ she returned.

I hesitated a moment, then answered--

‘To make game of such verses. Any one with half a soul must see they were fine.’

‘Very wrong of you, indeed, my dear,’ said Mr Coningham from behind, in a voice that sounded as if he were smothering a laugh; but when I looked round, his face was grave.

‘Then I suppose that half soul I haven’t got,’ returned Clara.

‘Oh! I didn’t mean that,’ I said, lamely enough. ‘But there’s no logic in that kind of thing, you know.’

‘You see, papa,’ said Clara, ‘what you are accountable for. Why didn’t you make them teach me logic?’

Her father smiled a pleased smile. His daughter’s naiveté would in his eyes make up for any lack of logic.

‘Mr Osborne,’ continued Clara, turning back, ‘I beg your pardon. I am a woman, and you men don’t allow us to learn logic. But at the same time

you must confess you were making a bad use of yours. You know it was all nonsense you were trying to pass off on me for wisdom.'

He was by her side the instant she spoke to him. A smile grew upon his face; I could see it growing, just as you see the sun growing behind a cloud. In a moment it broke out in radiance.

'I confess,' he said. 'I thought you were too hard on Wilfrid; and he hadn't anything at hand to say for himself.'

'And you were too hard upon me, weren't you? Two to one is not fair play--is it now?'

'No; certainly not.'

'And that justified a little false play on my part?'

'No, it did *not*,' said Charley, almost fiercely. 'Nothing justifies false play.'

'Not even yours, Mr Osborne?' replied Clara, with a stately coldness quite marvellous in one so young; and leaving him, she came again to my side. I peeped at Mr Coningham, curious to see how he regarded all this wrangling with his daughter. He appeared at once amused and satisfied. Clara's face was in a glow, clearly of anger at the discourteous manner in which Charley had spoken.

'You mustn't be angry with Charley, Clara,' I said.

'He is very rude,' she replied indignantly.

'What he said was rude, I allow, but Charley himself is anything but rude. I haven't looked at him, but I am certain he is miserable about it already.'

'So he ought to be. To speak like that to a lady, when her very friendliness put her off her guard! I never was treated so in all my life.'

She spoke so loud that she must have meant Charley to hear her. But when I looked back, I saw that he had fallen a long way behind, and was coming on very slowly, with dejected look and his eyes on the ground. Mr Coningham did not interfere by word or sign.

When we reached the inn he ordered some refreshment, and behaved to us both as if we were grown men. Just a touch of familiarity was the sole indication that we were not grown men. Boys are especially grateful for respect from their superiors, for it helps them to respect themselves; but Charley sat silent and gloomy. As he would not ride back, and Mr Coningham preferred walking too, I got into the saddle and rode by Clara's side.

As we approached the house, Charley crept up the other side of Clara's horse, and laid his hand on his mane. When he spoke Clara started, for she was looking the other way and had not observed his approach.

'Miss Clara,' he said, 'I am very sorry I was so rude. Will you forgive me?'

Instead of being hard to reconcile, as I had feared from her outburst of indignation, she leaned forward and laid her hand on his. He looked up in her face, his own suffused with a colour I had never seen in it before. His great blue eyes lightened with thankfulness, and began to fill with tears. How she looked, I could not see. She withdrew her hand, and Charley dropped behind again. In a little while he came up to my side, and began talking. He soon got quite merry, but Clara in her turn was silent.

I doubt if anything would be worth telling but for what comes after. History itself would be worthless but for what it cannot tell, namely, its own future. Upon this ground my reader must excuse the apparent triviality of the things I am now relating.

When we were alone in our room that night--for ever since Charley's illness we two had had a room to ourselves--Charley said,

‘I behaved like a brute this morning, Wilfrid.’

‘No, Charley; you were only a little rude from being over-eager. If she had been seriously advocating dishonesty, you would have been quite right to take it up so; and you thought she was.’

‘Yes; but it was very silly of me. I dare say it was because I had been so dishonest myself just before. How dreadful it is that I am always taking my own side, even when I do what I am ashamed of in another! I suppose I think I have got my horse by the head, and the other has not.’

‘I don’t know. That may be it,’ I answered. ‘I’m afraid I can’t think about it to-night, for I don’t feel well. What if it should be your turn to nurse me now, Charley?’

He turned quite pale, his eyes opened wide, and he looked at me anxiously.

Before morning I was aching all over: I had rheumatic fever.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHARLEY NURSES ME.

I saw no more of Clara. Mr Coningham came to bid me good-bye, and spoke very kindly. Mr Forest would have got a nurse for me, but Charley begged so earnestly to be allowed to return the service I had done for him that he yielded.

I was in great pain for more than a week. Charley's attentions were unremitting. In fact he nursed me more like a woman than a boy; and made me think with some contrition how poor my ministrations had been. Even after the worst was over, if I but moved, he was at my bedside in a moment. Certainly no nurse could have surpassed him. I could bear no one to touch me but him: from any one else I dreaded torture; and my medicine was administered to the very moment by my own old watch, which had been brought to do its duty at least respectably.

One afternoon, finding me tolerably comfortable, he said, 'Shall I read something to you, Wilfrid?'

He never called me Willie, as most of my friends did.

'I should like it,' I answered.

'What shall I read?' he asked.

'Hadn't you something in your head,' I rejoined, 'when you proposed it?'

'Well, I had; but I don't know if you would like it.'

'What did you think of, then?'

'I thought of a chapter in the New Testament.'

'How could you think I should not like that?'

'Because I never saw you say your prayers.'

‘That is quite true. But you don’t think I never say my prayers, although you never see me do it?’

The fact was, my uncle, amongst his other peculiarities, did not approve of teaching children to say their prayers. But he did not therefore leave me without instruction in the matter of praying--either the idlest or the most availing of human actions. He would say, ‘When you want anything, ask for it, Willie; and if it is worth your having, you will have it. But don’t fancy you are doing God any service by praying to him. He likes you to pray to him because he loves you, and wants you to love him. And whatever you do, don’t go saying a lot of words you don’t mean. If you think you ought to pray, say your Lord’s Prayer, and have done with it.’ I had no theory myself on the matter; but when I was in misery on the wild mountains, I had indeed prayed to God; and had even gone so far as to hope, when I got what I prayed for, that he had heard my prayer.

Charley made no reply.

‘It seems to me better that sort of thing shouldn’t be seen, Charley,’ I persisted.

‘Perhaps, Wilfrid; but I was taught to say my prayers regularly.’ ‘I don’t think much of that either,’ I answered. ‘But I’ve said a good many prayers since I’ve been here, Charley. I can’t say I’m sure it’s of any use, but I can’t help trying after something--I don’t know what--something I want, and don’t know how to get.’

‘But it’s only the prayer of faith that’s heard--do you believe, Wilfrid?’

‘I don’t know. I daren’t say I don’t. I wish I could say I do. But I dare say things will be considered.’

‘Wouldn’t it be grand if it was true, Wilfrid?’

‘What, Charley?’

‘That God actually let his creatures see him--and--all that came of it, you know?’

‘It would be grand indeed! But supposing it true, how could we be expected to believe it like them that saw him with their own eyes? *I* couldn’t be required to believe just as if I could have no doubt about it. It wouldn’t be fair. Only--perhaps we haven’t got the clew by the right end.’

‘Perhaps not. But sometimes I hate the whole thing. And then again I feel as if I *must* read all about it; not that I care for it exactly, but because a body must do something--because--I don’t know how to say it--because of the misery, you know.’

‘I don’t know that I do know--quite. But now you have started the subject, I thought that was great nonsense Mr Forest was talking about the authority of the Church the other day.’

‘Well, *I* thought so, too. I don’t see what right they have to say so and so, if they didn’t hear him speak. As to what he meant, they may be right or they may be wrong. If they *have* the gift of the Spirit, as they say--how am I to tell they have? All impostors claim it as well as the true men. If I had ever so little of the same gift myself, I suppose I could tell; but they say no one has till he believes--so they may be all humbugs for anything I can possibly tell; or they may be all true men, and yet I may fancy them all humbugs, and can’t help it.’

I was quite as much astonished to hear Charley talk in this style as some readers will be doubtful whether a boy could have talked such good sense. I said nothing, and a silence followed.

‘Would you like me to read to you, then?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I should; for, do you know, after all, I don’t think there’s anything like the New Testament.’

‘Anything like it!’ he repeated. ‘I should think not! Only I wish I did know what it all meant. I wish I could talk to my father as I would to Jesus Christ if I saw *him*. But if I could talk to my father, he wouldn’t understand me. He would speak to me as if I were the very scum of the universe for daring to have a doubt of what *he* told me.’

‘But he doesn’t mean *himself*,’ I said.

‘Well, who told him?’

‘The Bible.’

‘And who told the Bible?’

‘God, of course.’

‘But how am I to know that? I only know that they say so. Do you know, Wilfrid--I *don’t* believe my father is quite sure himself, and that is what makes him in such a rage with anybody who doesn’t think as he does. He’s afraid it mayn’t be true after all.’

I had never had a father to talk to, but I thought something must be wrong when a boy *couldn’t* talk to his father. My uncle was a better father than that came to.

Another pause followed, during which Charley searched for a chapter to fit the mood. I will not say what chapter he found, for, after all, I doubt if we had any real notion of what it meant. I know, however, that there were words in it which found their way to my conscience; and, let men of science or philosophy say what they will, the rousing of a man’s conscience is the greatest event in his existence. In such a matter, the consciousness of the man himself is the sole witness. A Chinese can expose many of the absurdities and inconsistencies of the English: it is their own Shakspere who must bear witness to their sins and faults, as well as their truths and characteristics.

After this we had many conversations about such things, one of which I shall attempt to report by-and-by. Of course, in any such attempt all that can be done is to put the effect into fresh conversational form. What I have just written must at least be more orderly than what passed between us; but the spirit is much the same, and mere fact is of consequence only as it affects truth.

CHAPTER XX.

A DREAM.

The best immediate result of my illness was that I learned to love Charley Osborne dearly. We renewed an affection resembling from afar that of Shakspere for his nameless friend; we anticipated that informing *In Memoriam*. Lest I be accused of infinite arrogance, let me remind my reader that the sun is reflected in a dewdrop as in the ocean.

One night I had a strange dream, which is perhaps worth telling for the involution of its consciousness.

I thought I was awake in my bed, and Charley asleep in his. I lay looking into the room. It began to waver and change. The night-light enlarged and receded; and the walls trembled and waved. The light had got behind them, and shone through them.

‘Charley! Charley!’ I cried; for I was frightened.

‘I heard him move: but before he reached me, I was lying on a lawn, surrounded by trees, with the moon shining through them from behind. The next moment Charley was by my side.

‘Isn’t it prime?’ he said. ‘It’s all over.’

‘What do you mean, Charley?’ I asked.

‘I mean that we’re both dead now. It’s not so very bad--is it?’

‘Nonsense, Charley!’ I returned; ‘*I*‘m not dead. I’m as wide alive as ever I was. Look here.’

So saying, I sprung to my feet, and drew myself up before him.

‘Where’s your worst pain?’ said Charley, with a curious expression in his tone.

‘Here,’ I answered. ‘No; it’s not; it’s in my back. No, it isn’t. It’s nowhere. I haven’t got any pain.’

Charley laughed a low laugh, which sounded as sweet as strange. It was to the laughter of the world ‘as moonlight is to sunlight,’ but not ‘as water is to wine,’ for what it had lost in sound it had gained in smile.

‘Tell me now you’re not dead!’ he exclaimed triumphantly.

‘But,’ I insisted, ‘don’t you see I’m alive? *You* may be dead for anything I know--but I *am not*--I know that.’

‘You’re just as dead as I am,’ he said. ‘Look here.’

A little way off, in an open plot by itself, stood a little white rose tree, half mingled with the moonlight. Charley went up to it, stepped on the topmost twig, and stood: the bush did not even bend under him.

‘Very well,’ I answered. ‘You are dead, I confess. But now, look you here.’

I went to a red rose-bush which stood at some distance, blanched in the moon, set my foot on the top of it, and made as if I would ascend, expecting to crush it, roses and all, to the ground. But behold! I was standing on my red rose opposite Charley on his white.

‘I told you so,’ he cried, across the moonlight, and his voice sounded as if it came from the moon far away.

‘Oh Charley!’ I cried, ‘I’m so frightened!’

‘What are you frightened at?’

‘At you. You’re dead, you know.’

‘It is a good thing, Wilfrid,’ he rejoined, in a tone of some reproach, ‘that I am not frightened at you for the same reason; for what would happen then?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose you would go away and leave me alone in this ghostly light.’

‘If I were frightened at you as you are at me, we should not be able to see each other at all. If you take courage the light will grow.’

‘Don’t leave me, Charley,’ I cried, and flung myself from my tree towards his. I found myself floating, half reclined on the air. We met midway each in the other’s arms.

‘I don’t know where I am, Charley.’

‘That is my father’s rectory.’

He pointed to the house, which I had not yet observed. It lay quite dark in the moonlight, for not a window shone from within.

‘Don’t leave me, Charley.’

‘Leave you! I should think not, Wilfrid. I have been long enough without you already.’

‘Have you been long dead, then, Charley?’

‘Not very long. Yes, a long time. But, indeed, I don’t know. We don’t count time as we used to count it.--I want to go and see my father. It is long since I saw *him*, anyhow. Will you come?’

‘If you think I might--if you wish it,’ I said, for I had no great desire to see Mr Osborne. ‘Perhaps he won’t care to see me.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Charley, with another low silvery laugh. ‘Come along.’

We glided over the grass. A window stood a little open on the second floor. We floated up, entered, and stood by the bedside of Charley’s father. He lay in a sound sleep.

‘Father! father!’ said Charley, whispering in his ear as he lay--‘it’s all right. You need not be troubled about me any more.’

Mr Osborne turned on his pillow.

‘He’s dreaming about us now,’ said Charley. ‘He sees us both standing by his bed.’

But the next moment Mr Osborne sat up, stretched out his arms towards us with the open palms outwards, as if pushing us away from him, and cried,

‘Depart from me, all evil-doers. O Lord! do I not hate them that hate thee?’

He followed with other yet more awful words which I never could recall. I only remember the feeling of horror and amazement they left behind. I turned to Charley. He had disappeared, and I found myself lying in the bed beside Mr Osborne. I gave a great cry of dismay--when there was Charley again beside me, saying,

‘What’s the matter, Wilfrid? Wake up. My father’s not here.’

I did wake, but until I had felt in the bed I could not satisfy myself that Mr Osborne was indeed not there.

‘You’ve been talking in your sleep. I could hardly get you waked,’ said Charley, who stood there in his shirt.

‘Oh Charley!’ I cried, ‘I’ve had such a dream!’

‘What was it, Wilfrid?’

‘Oh! I can’t talk about it yet,’ I answered.

I never did tell him that dream; for even then I was often uneasy about him--he was so sensitive. The affections of my friend were as hoops of steel; his feelings a breath would ripple. Oh, my Charley! if ever we meet

in that land so vaguely shadowed in my dream, will you not know that I loved you heartily well? Shall I not hasten' to lay bare my heart before you--the priest of its confessional? Oh, Charley! when the truth is known, the false will fly asunder as the Autumn leaves in the wind; but the true, whatever their faults, will only draw together the more tenderly that they have sinned against each other.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FROZEN STREAM.

Before the Winter arrived, I was well, and Charley had recovered from the fatigue of watching me. One holiday, he and I set out alone to accomplish a scheme we had cherished from the first appearance of the frost. How it arose I hardly remember; I think it came of some remark Mr Forest had made concerning the difference between the streams of Switzerland and England--those in the former country being emptiest, those in the latter fullest in the Winter. It was--when the frost should have bound up the sources of the beck which ran almost by our door, and it was no longer a stream, but a rope of ice--to take that rope for our guide, and follow it as far as we could towards the secret recesses of its Summer birth.

Along the banks of the stream, we followed it up and up, meeting a varied loveliness which it would take the soul of a Wordsworth or a Ruskin to comprehend or express. To my poor faculty the splendour of the ice-crystals remains the one memorial thing. In those lonely water-courses the sun was gloriously busy, with none to praise him except Charley and me.

Where the banks were difficult we went down into the frozen bed, and there had story above story of piled-up loveliness, with opal and diamond cellars below. Spikes and stars crystalline radiated and refracted and reflected marvellously. But we did not reach the primary source of the stream by miles; we were stopped by a precipitous rock, down the face of which one half of the stream fell, while the other crept out of its foot, from a little cavernous opening about four feet high. Charley was a few yards ahead of me, and ran stooping into the cavern. I followed. But when I had gone as far as I dared for the darkness and the down-sloping roof, and saw nothing of him, I grew dismayed, and called him. There was no answer. With a thrill of horror my dream returned upon me. I got

on my hands and knees and crept forward. A short way further the floor sank--only a little, I believe, but from the darkness I took the descent for an abyss into which Charley had fallen. I gave a shriek of despair, and scrambled out of the cave howling. In a moment he was by my side. He had only crept behind a projection for a trick. His remorse was extreme. He begged my pardon in the most agonized manner.

‘Never mind, Charley,’ I said; ‘you didn’t mean it.’

‘Yes, I did mean it,’ he returned. ‘The temptation came, and I yielded; only I did not know how dreadful it would be to you.’

‘Of course not. You wouldn’t have done it if you had.’

‘How am I to know that, Wilfrid? I might have done it. Isn’t it frightful that a body may go on and on till a thing is done, and then wish he hadn’t done it? I am a despicable creature. Do you know, Wilfrid, I once shot a little bird--for no good, but just to shoot at something. It wasn’t that I didn’t think of it--don’t say that. I did think of it. I knew it was wrong. When I had levelled my gun, I thought of it quite plainly, and yet drew the trigger. It dropped, a heap of ruffled feathers. I shall never get that little bird out of my head. And the worst of it is that to all eternity I can never make any atonement.’

‘But God will forgive you, Charley.’

‘What do I care for that,’ he rejoined, almost fiercely, ‘when the little bird cannot forgive me?--I would go on my knees to the little bird, if I could, to beg its pardon and tell it-what a brute I was, and it might shoot me if it would, and I should say “Thank you.”’

He laughed almost hysterically, and the tears ran down his face.

I have said little about my uncle’s teaching, lest I should bore my readers. But there it came in, and therefore here it must come in. My uncle had, by no positive instruction, but by occasional observations, not one of

which I can recall, generated in me a strong hope that the life of the lower animals was terminated at their death no more than our own. The man who believes that thought is the result of brain, and not the growth of an unknown seed whose soil is the brain, may well sneer at this, for he is to himself but a peck of dust that has to be eaten by the devouring jaws of Time; but I cannot see how the man who believes in soul at all, can say that the spirit of a man lives, and that the spirit of his horse dies. I do not profess to believe anything for *certain sure* myself, but I do think that he who, if from merely philosophical considerations, believes the one, ought to believe the other as well. Much more must the theosophist believe it. But I had never felt the need of the doctrine until I beheld the misery of Charley over the memory of the dead sparrow. Surely that sparrow fell not to the ground without the Father's knowledge.

'Charley! how do you know,' I said, 'that you can never beg the bird's pardon? If God made the bird, do you fancy with your gun you could destroy the making of his hand? If he said, "Let there be," do you suppose you could say, "There shall not be"?' (Mr Forest had read that chapter of first things at morning prayers.) 'I fancy myself that for God to put a bird all in the power of a silly thoughtless boy--'

'Not thoughtless! not thoughtless! There is the misery!' said Charley.

But I went on--

'--would be worse than for you to shoot it.'

A great glow of something I dare not attempt to define grew upon Charley's face. It was like what I saw on it when Clara laid her hand on his. But presently it died out again, and he sighed--

'If there *were* a God--that is, if I were sure there was a God, Wilfrid!'

I could not answer. How could I? *I* had never seen God, as the old story says Moses did on the clouded mountain. All I could return was,

‘Suppose there should be a God, Charley!--Mightn’t there be a God!’

‘I don’t know,’ he returned. ‘How should *I* know whether there *might* be a God?’

‘But *may* there not be a *might be?*’ I rejoined.

‘There may be. How should I say the other thing?’ said Charley.

I do not mean this was exactly what he or I said. Unable to recall the words themselves, I put the sense of the thing in as clear a shape as I can.

We were seated upon a stone in the bed of the stream, off which the sun had melted the ice. The bank rose above us, but not far. I thought I heard a footstep. I jumped up, but saw no one. I ran a good way up the stream to a place where I could climb the bank; but then saw no one. The footstep, real or imagined, broke our conversation at that point, and we did not resume it. All that followed was--

‘If I were the sparrow, Charley, I would not only forgive you, but haunt you for ever out of gratitude that you were sorry you had killed me.’

‘Then you *do* forgive me for frightening you?’ he said eagerly.

Very likely Charley and I resembled each other too much to be the best possible companions for each other. There was, however, this difference between us--that he had been bored with religion and I had not. In other words, food had been forced upon him, which had only been laid before me.

We rose and went home. A few minutes after our entrance, Mr Forest came in--looking strange, I thought. The conviction crossed my mind that it was his footstep we had heard over our heads as we sat in the channel of the frozen stream. I have reason to think that he followed us for a chance of listening. Something had set him on the watch--most likely the fact that we were so much together, and did not care for the society of the

rest of our schoolfellows. From that time, certainly, he regarded Charley and myself with a suspicious gloom. We felt it, but beyond talking to each other about it, and conjecturing its cause, we could do nothing. It made Charley very unhappy at times, deepening the shadow which brooded over his mind; for his moral skin was as sensitive to changes in the moral atmosphere as the most sensitive of plants to those in the physical. But unhealthy conditions in the smallest communities cannot last long without generating vapours which result in some kind of outburst.

The other boys, naturally enough, were displeased with us for holding so much together. They attributed it to some fancy of superiority, whereas there was nothing in it beyond the simplest preference for each other's society. We were alike enough to understand each other, and unlike enough to interest and aid each other. Besides, we did not care much for the sports in which boys usually explode their superfluous energy. I preferred a walk and a talk with Charley to anything else.

I may here mention that these talks had nearly cured me of castle-building. To spin yarns for Charley's delectation would have been absurd. He cared for nothing but the truth. And yet he could never assure himself that anything was true. The more likely a thing looked to be true, the more anxious was he that it should be unassailable; and his fertile mind would in as many moments throw a score of objections at it, looking after each with eager eyes as if pleading for a refutation. It was the very love of what was good that generated in him doubt and anxiety.

When our schoolfellows perceived that Mr Forest also was dissatisfied with us, their displeasure grew to indignation; and we did not endure its manifestations without a feeling of reflex defiance.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN EXPLOSION.

One Spring morning we had got up early and sauntered out together. I remember perfectly what our talk was about. Charley had started the question: ‘How could it be just to harden Pharaoh’s heart and then punish him for what came of it?’ I who had been brought up without any superstitious reverence for the Bible, suggested that the narrator of the story might be accountable for the contradiction, and simply that it was not true that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Strange to say, Charley was rather shocked at this. He had as yet received the dogma of the infallibility of the Bible without thinking enough about it to question it. Nor did it now occur to him what a small affair it was to find a book fallible, compared with finding the God of whom the book spoke fallible upon its testimony--for such was surely the dilemma. Men have been able to exist without a Bible: if there be a God it must be in and through Him that all men live; only if he be not true, then in Him, and not in the first Adam, all men die.

We were talking away about this, no doubt after a sufficiently crude manner, as we approached the house, unaware that we had lingered too long. The boys were coming out from breakfast for a game before school.

Amongst them was one of the name of Home, who considered himself superior, from his connection with the Scotch Homes. He was a big, strong, pale-faced, handsome boy, with the least bit of a sneer always hovering upon his upper lip. Charley was half a head shorter than he, and I was half a head shorter than Charley. As we passed him, he said aloud, addressing the boy next him--

‘There they go--a pair of sneaks!’

Charley turned upon him at once, his face in a glow.

‘Home,’ he said, ‘no gentleman would say so.’

‘And why not?’ said Home, turning and striding up to Charley in a magnificent manner.

‘Because there is no ground for the assertion,’ said Charley.

‘Then you mean to say I am a liar?’

‘I mean to say,’ returned Charley, with more promptitude than I could have expected of him, ‘that if you are a gentleman, you will be sorry for it.’

‘There is my apology, then!’ said Home, and struck Charley a blow on the head which laid him on the ground. I believe he repented it the moment he had done it.

I caught one glimpse of the blood pouring over the transparent blue-veined skin, and rushed at Home in a transport of fury.

I never was brave one step beyond being able to do what must be done and bear what must be borne; and now it was not courage that inspired me, but a righteous wrath.

I did my best, got a good many hard blows, and planted not one in return, for I had never fought in my life. I do believe Home spared me, conscious of wrong. Meantime some of them had lifted Charley and carried him into the house.

Before I was thoroughly mauled, which must have been the final result, for I would not give in, the master appeared, and in a voice such as I had never heard from him before, ordered us all into the school-room.

‘Fighting like bullies!’ he said. ‘I thought my pupils were gentlemen at least!’

Perhaps dimly aware that he had himself given some occasion to this outbreak, and imagining in his heart a show of justice, he seized Home by the collar, and gave him a terrible cut with the riding-whip which he had caught up in his anger. Home cried out, and the same moment Charley appeared, pale as death.

‘Oh, sir!’ he said, laying his hand on the master’s arm appealingly, ‘I was to blame too.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ returned Mr Forest. ‘I shall settle with you presently. Get away!’

‘Now, sir,’ he continued, turning to me--and held the whip suspended, as if waiting a word from me to goad him on. He looked something else than a gentleman himself just then. It was a sudden outbreak of the beast in him. ‘Will you tell me why you punish me, sir, if you please? What have I done?’ I said.

His answer was such a stinging blow that for a moment I was bewildered, and everything reeled about me. But I did not cry out--I know that, for I asked two of the fellows after.

‘You prate about justice!’ he said. ‘I will let you know what justice means--to you at least.’

And down came a second cut as bad as the first. My blood was up.

‘If this is justice, then there *is* no God,’ I said.

He stood aghast. I went on.

‘If there be a God--’

‘*If* there be a God!’ he shrieked, and sprang towards me.

I did not move a step.

‘I hope there is,’ I said, as he seized me again; ‘for you are unjust.’

I remember only a fierce succession of blows. With Voltaire and the French revolution present to his mind in all their horror, he had been nourishing in his house a toad of the same spawn! He had been remiss, but would now compel those whom his neglect had injured to pay off his arrears! A most orthodox conclusion! but it did me little harm: it did not make me think that God was unjust, for my uncle, not Mr Forest, was my type of Christian. The harm it did was of another sort--and to Charley, not to me.

Of course, while under the hands of the executioner, I could not observe what was going on around me. When I began to awake from the absorption of my pain and indignation, I found myself in my room. I had been ordered thither, and had mechanically obeyed. I was on my bed, staring at the door, at which I had become aware of a gentle tapping.

‘Come in,’ I said; and Charley--who, although it was his room as much as mine, never entered when he thought I was there without knocking at the door--appeared, with the face of a dead man. Sore as I was, I jumped up.

‘The brute has not been thrashing *you*, Charley!’ I cried, in a wrath that gave me the strength of a giant. With that terrible bruise above his temple from Home’s fist, none but a devil could have dared to lay hands upon him!

‘No, Wilfrid,’ he answered; ‘no such honour for me! I am disgraced for ever!’

He hid his wan face in his thin hands.

‘What do you mean, Charley?’ I said. ‘You cannot have told a lie!’

‘No, Wilfrid. But it doesn’t matter now. I don’t care for myself any more.’

‘Then, Charley, what *have* you done?’

‘You are always so kind, Wilfrid!’ he returned, with a hopelessness which seemed almost coldness.

‘Charley,’ I said, ‘if you don’t tell me what has happened--’

‘Happened!’ he cried. ‘Hasn’t that man been lashing at you like a dog, and I *didn’t* rush at him, and if I couldn’t fight, being a milksop, then bite and kick and scratch, and take my share of it? O God!’ he cried, in agony, ‘if I had but a chance again! But nobody ever has more than one chance in this world. He may damn me now when he likes: I don’t care!’

‘Charley! Charley!’ I cried; ‘you’re as bad as Mr Forest. Are you to say such things about God, when you know nothing of him? He may be as good a God, after all, as even we should like him to be.’

‘But Mr Forest is a clergyman.’

‘And God was the God of Abraham before ever there was a clergyman to take his name in vain,’ I cried; for I was half mad with the man who had thus wounded my Charley. ‘*I* am content with you, Charley. You are my best and only friend. That is all nonsense about attacking Forest. What could you have done, you know? Don’t talk such rubbish.’

‘I might have taken my share with you,’ said Charley, and again buried his face in his hands.

‘Come, Charley,’ I said, and at the moment a fresh wave of manhood swept through my soul; ‘you and I will take our share together a hundred times yet. I have done my part now; yours will come next.’

‘But to think of not sharing your disgrace, Wilfrid!’

‘Disgrace!’ I said, drawing myself up, ‘where was that?’

‘You’ve been beaten,’ he said.

‘Every stripe was a badge of honour,’ I said, ‘for I neither deserved it nor cried out against it. I feel no disgrace.’

‘Well, I’ve missed the honour,’ said Charley; ‘but that’s nothing, so you have it. But not to share your disgrace would have been mean. And it’s all one; for I thought it was disgrace, and I did not share it. I am a coward for ever, Wilfrid.’

‘Nonsense! He never gave you a chance. *I* never thought of striking back: how should *you?*’

‘I will be your slave, Wilfrid! You are *so* good, and I am *so* unworthy.’

He put his arms round me, laid his head on my shoulder, and sobbed. I did what more I could to comfort him, and gradually he grew calm. At length he whispered in my ear--

‘After all, Wilfrid, I do believe I was horror-struck, and it *wasn’t* cowardice pure and simple.’

‘I haven’t a doubt of it,’ I said. ‘I love you more than ever.’

‘Oh, Wilfrid! I should have gone mad by this time but for you. Will you be my friend whatever happens?--Even if I should be a coward after all?’

‘Indeed I will, Charley.--What do you think Forest will do next?’

We resolved not to go down until we were sent for; and then to be perfectly quiet, not speaking to any one unless we were spoken to; and at dinner we carried out our resolution.

When bed-time came, we went as usual to make our bow to Mr Forest.

‘Cumbermede,’ he said sternly, ‘you sleep in No. 5 until further orders.’

‘Very well, sir,’ I said, and went, but lingered long enough to hear the fate of Charley.

‘Home,’ said Mr Forest, ‘you go to No. 3.’

That was our room.

‘Home,’ I said, having lingered on the stairs until he appeared, ‘you don’t bear me a grudge, do you?’

‘It was my fault,’ said Home. ‘I had no right to pitch into you. Only you’re such a cool beggar! But, by Jove! I didn’t think Forest would have been so unfair. If you forgive me, I’ll forgive you.’

‘If I hadn’t stood up to you, I couldn’t,’ I returned. ‘I knew I hadn’t a chance. Besides, I hadn’t any breakfast.’

‘I was a brute,’ said Home.

‘Oh, I don’t mind for myself; but there’s Osborne! I wonder you could hit *him*.’

‘He shouldn’t have jawed me,’ said Home.

‘But you did first.’

We had reached the door of the room which had been Home’s and was now to be mine, and went in together.

‘Didn’t you now?’ I insisted.

‘Well, I did; I confess I did. And it was very plucky of him.’

‘Tell him that, Home,’ I said. ‘For God’s sake tell him that. It will comfort him. You must be kind to him, Home. We’re not so bad as Forest takes us for.’

‘I will,’ said Home.

And he kept his word.

We were never allowed to share the same room again, and school was not what it had been to either of us.

Within a few weeks Charley's father, to our common dismay, suddenly appeared, and the next morning took him away. What he said to Charley I do not know. He did not take the least notice of me, and I believe would have prevented Charley from saying good-bye to me. But just as they were going Charley left his father's side, and came up to me with a flush on his face and a flash in his eye that made him look more manly and handsome than I had ever seen him, and shook hands with me, saying--

'It's all right--isn't it, Wilfrid?'

'It *is* all right, Charley, come what will,' I answered.

'Good-bye then, Wilfrid.'

'Good-bye, Charley.'

And so we parted.

I do not care to say one word more about the school. I continued there for another year and a half. Partly in misery, partly in growing eagerness after knowledge, I gave myself to my studies with more diligence. Mr Forest began to be pleased with me, and I have no doubt plumed himself on the vigorous measures by which he had nipped the bud of my infidelity. For my part I drew no nearer to him, for I could not respect or trust him after his injustice. I did my work for its own sake, uninfluenced by any desire to please him. There was, in fact, no true relation between us any more.

I communicated nothing of what had happened to my uncle, because Mr Forest's custom was to read every letter before it left the house. But I longed for the day when I could tell the whole story to the great, simple-hearted man.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONLY A LINK.

Before my return to England, I found that familiarity with the sights and sounds of a more magnificent nature had removed my past life to a great distance. What had interested my childhood had strangely dwindled, yet gathered a new interest from its far-off and forsaken look. So much did my past wear to me now the look of something read in a story, that I am haunted with a doubt whether I may not have communicated too much of this appearance to my description of it, although I have kept as true as my recollections would enable me. The outlines must be correct: if the colouring be unreal, it is because of the haze which hangs about the memories of the time.

The revisiting of old scenes is like walking into a mausoleum. Everything is a monument of something dead and gone. For we die daily. Happy those who daily come to life as well!

I returned with a clear conscience, for not only had I as yet escaped corruption, but for the greater part of the time at least I had worked well. If Mr Forest's letter which I carried to my uncle contained any hint intended to my disadvantage, it certainly fell dead on his mind; for he treated me with a consideration and respect which at once charmed and humbled me.

One day as we were walking together over the fields, I told him the whole story of the loss of the weapon at Moldwarp Hall. Up to the time of my leaving for Switzerland I had shrunk from any reference to the subject, so painful was it to me, and so convinced was I that his sympathy would be confined to a compassionate smile and a few words of condolence.

But glancing at his face now and then as I told the tale, I discovered more of interest in the play of his features than I had expected; and when he

learned that it was absolutely gone from me, his face flushed with what seemed anger. For some moments after I had finished he was silent. At length he said,

‘It is a strange story, Wilfrid, my boy. There must be some explanation of it, however.’

He then questioned me about Mr Close, for suspicion pointed in his direction. I was in great hopes he would follow my narrative with what he knew of the sword, but he was still silent, and I could not question him, for I had long suspected that its history had to do with the secret which he wanted me to keep from myself.

The very day of my arrival I went up to my grandmother’s room, which I found just as she had left it. There stood her easy-chair, there her bed, there the old bureau. The room looked far less mysterious now that she was not there; but it looked painfully deserted. One thing alone was still as it were enveloped in its ancient atmosphere--the bureau. I tried to open it--with some trembling, I confess; but only the drawers below were unlocked, and in them I found nothing but garments of old-fashioned stuffs, which I dared not touch.

But the day of childish romance was over, and life itself was too strong and fresh to allow me to brood on the past for more than an occasional half-hour. My thoughts were full of Oxford, whither my uncle had resolved I should go; and I worked hard in preparation.

‘I have not much money to spare, my boy,’ he said; ‘but I have insured my life for a sum sufficient to provide for your aunt, if she should survive me; and after her death it will come to you. Of course the old house and the park, which have been in the family for more years than I can tell, will be yours at my death. A good part of the farm was once ours too, but not for these many years. I could not recommend you to keep on the farm; but I confess I should be sorry if you were to part with our own

little place, although I do not doubt you might get a good sum for it from Sir Giles, to whose park it would be a desirable addition. I believe at one time, the refusal to part with our poor little vineyard of Naboth was cause of great offence, even of open feud between the great family at the Hall and the yeomen who were your ancestors; but poor men may be as unwilling as rich to break one strand of the cord that binds them to the past. But of course when you come into the property, you will do as you see fit with your own.'

'You don't think, uncle, I would sell this house, or the field it stands in, for all the Moldwarp estate? I too have my share of pride in the family, although as yet I know nothing of its history.'

'Surely, Wilfrid, the feeling for one's own people who have gone before is not necessarily pride!'

'It doesn't much matter what you call it, uncle.'

'Yes, it does, my boy. Either you call it by the right name or by the wrong name. If your feeling *is* pride, then I am not objecting to the name, but the thing. If your feeling is not pride, why call a good thing by a bad name? But to return to our subject: my hope is that, if I give you a good education, you will make your own way. You might, you know, let the park, as we call it, for a term of years.'

'I shouldn't mind letting the park,' I answered, 'for a little while; but nothing should ever make me let the dear old house. What should I do if I wanted it to die in?'

The old man smiled, evidently not ill-pleased.

'What do you say to the bar?' he asked.

'I would rather not,' I answered.

'Would you prefer the Church?' he asked, eyeing me a little doubtfully.

‘No, certainly, uncle,’ I answered. ‘I should want to be surer of a good many things before I dared teach them to other people.’

‘I am glad of that, my boy. The fear did cross my mind for a moment that you might be inclined to take to the Church as a profession, which seems to me the worst kind of infidelity. A thousand times rather would I have you doubtful about what is to me the highest truth, than regarding it with the indifference of those who see in it only the prospect of a social position and livelihood. Have you any plan of your own?’

‘I have heard,’ I answered, circuitously, ‘that many barristers have to support themselves by literary work, for years before their own profession begin to show them favour. I should prefer going in for the writing at once.’

‘It must be a hard struggle either way,’ he replied; ‘but I should not leave you without something to fall back upon. Tell me what makes you think you could be an author?’

‘I am afraid it is presumptuous,’ I answered, ‘but as often as I think of what I am to do, that is the first thing that occurs to me. I suppose,’ I added, laughing, ‘that the favour with which my school-fellows at Mr Elder’s used to receive my stories is to blame for it. I used to tell them by the hour together.’

‘Well,’ said my uncle, ‘that proves, at least, that, if you had anything to say, you might be able to say it; but I am afraid it proves nothing more.’

‘Nothing more, I admit. I only mentioned it to account for the notion.’

‘I quite understand you, my boy. Meantime, the best thing in any case will be Oxford. I will do what I can to make it an easier life for you than I found it.’

Having heard nothing of Charley Osborne since he left Mr Forest’s, I went one day, very soon after my return, to call on Mr Elder, partly in the

hope of learning something about him. I found Mrs Elder unchanged, but could not help fancying a difference in Mr Elder's behaviour, which, after finding I could draw nothing from him concerning Charley, I attributed to Mr Osborne's evil report, and returned foiled and vexed. I told my uncle, with some circumstance, the whole story: explaining how, although unable to combat the doubts which occasioned Charley's unhappiness, I had yet always hung to the side of believing.

'You did right to do no more, my boy,' said my uncle; 'and it is clear you have been misunderstood--and ill-used besides. But every wrong will be set right some day.'

My aunt showed me now far more consideration--I do not say--than she had *felt* before. A curious kind of respect mingled with her kindness, which seemed a slighter form of the observance with which she constantly regarded my uncle.

My study was pretty hard and continuous. I had no tutor to direct me or take any of the responsibility off me.

I walked to the Hall one morning to see Mrs Wilson. She was kind, but more stiff even than before. From her I learned two things of interest. The first, which beyond measure delighted me, was, that Charley was at Oxford--had been there for a year. The second was that Clara was at school in London. Mrs Wilson shut her mouth very primly after answering my question concerning her; and I went no further in that direction. I took no trouble to ask her concerning the relationship of which Mr Coningham had spoken. I knew already from my uncle that it was a fact, but Mrs Wilson did not behave in such a manner as to render me inclined to broach the subject. If she wished it to remain a secret from me, she should be allowed to imagine it such.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHARLEY AT OXFORD.

I have no time in this selection and combination of the parts of my story which are more especially my history, to dwell upon that portion of it which refers to my own life at Oxford. I was so much of a student of books while there, and had so little to do with any of the men except Charley, that, save as it bore upon my intellect, Oxford had little special share in what life has made of me, and may in the press of other matter be left out. Had I time, however, to set forth what I know of my own development more particularly, I could not pass over the influence of external Oxford, the architecture and general surroundings of which I recognized as affecting me more than anything I had yet met, with the exception of the Swiss mountains, pine-woods, and rivers. It is, however, imperative to set forth the peculiar character of my relation to and intercourse with Charley, in order that what follows may be properly understood.

For no other reason than that my uncle had been there before me, I went to Corpus Christi, while Charley was at Exeter. It was some days before we met, for I had twice failed in my attempts to find him. At length, one afternoon, as I entered the quadrangle to make a third essay, there he was coming towards the gate with a companion.

When he caught sight of me, he advanced with a quick yet hesitating step--a step with a question in it: he was not quite sure of me. He was now approaching six feet in height, and of a graceful though not exactly dignified carriage. His complexion remained as pale and his eyes as blue as before. The pallor flushed and the blue sparkled as he made a few final and long strides towards me. The grasp of the hand he gave me was powerful, but broken into sudden almost quivering relaxations and compressions. I could not help fancying also that he was using some little effort to keep his eyes steady upon mine. Altogether, I was not quite

satisfied with our first meeting, and had a strong impression that, if our friendship was to be resumed, it was about to begin a new course, not building itself exactly on the old foundations, but starting afresh. He looked almost on the way to become a man of the world. Perhaps, however, the companionship he was in had something to do with this, for he was so nervously responsive, that he would unconsciously take on, for the moment, any appearance characterizing those about him.

His companion was a little taller and stouter-built than he; with a bearing and gait of conscious importance, not so marked as to be at once offensive. The upper part of his face was fine, the nose remarkably so, while the lower part was decidedly coarse, the chin too large, and the mouth having little form, except in the first movement of utterance, when an unpleasant curl took possession of the upper lip, which I afterwards interpreted as a doubt disguising itself in a sneer. There was also in his manner a degree of self-assertion which favoured the same conclusion. His hands were very large, a pair of merely blanched plebeian fists, with thumbs much turned back--and altogether ungainly. He wore very tight gloves, and never shook hands when he could help it. His feet were scarcely so bad in form: still by no pretence could they be held to indicate breeding. His manner, where he wished to conciliate, was pleasing; but to me it was overbearing and unpleasant. He Was the only son of Sir Giles Brotherton of Moldwarp Hall. Charley and he did not belong to the same college, but, unlike as they were, they had somehow taken to each other. I presume it was the decision of his manner that attracted the wavering nature of Charley, who, with generally active impulses, was yet always in doubt when a moment requiring action arrived.

Charley, having spoken to me, turned and introduced me to his friend. Geoffrey Brotherton merely nodded.

‘We were at school together in Switzerland,’ said Charley.

‘Yes,’ said Geoffrey, in a half-interrogatory, half-assenting tone.

‘Till I found your card in my box, I never heard of your coming,’ said Charley.

‘It was not my fault,’ I answered. ‘I did what I could to find out something about you, but all in vain.’

‘Paternal precaution, I believe,’ he said, with something that approached a grimace.

Now, although I had little special reason to love Mr Osborne, and knew him to be a tyrant, I knew also that my old Charley could not have thus coolly uttered a disrespectful word of him, and I had therefore a painful though at the same time an undefined conviction that some degree of moral degeneracy must have taken place before he could express himself as now. To many, such a remark will appear absurd, but I am confident that disrespect for the preceding generation, and especially for those in it nearest to ourselves, is a sure sign of relaxing dignity, and, in any extended manifestation, an equally sure symptom of national and political decadence. My reader knows, however, that there was much to be said in excuse of Charley.

His friend sauntered away, and we went on talking. My heart longed to rest with his for a moment on the past.

‘I had a dreary time of it after you left, Charley,’ I said.

‘Not so dreary as I had, Wilfrid, I am certain. You had at least the mountains to comfort you. Anywhere is better than at home, with a meal of Bible oil and vinegar twice a day for certain, and a wine-glassful of it now and then in between. Damnation’s better than a spoony heaven. To be away from home is heaven enough for me.’

‘But your mother, Charley!’ I ventured to say.

‘My mother is an angel. I could almost be good for her sake. But I never could, I never can get near her. My father reads every letter she writes

before it comes to me--I know that by the style of it; and I'm equally certain he reads every letter of mine before it reaches her.'

'Is your sister at home?'

'No. She's at school at Clapham--being sand-papered into a saint, I suppose.'

His mouth twitched and quivered. He was not pleased with himself for talking as he did.

'Your father means it for the best,' I said.

'I know that. He means *his* best. If I thought it *was* the best, I should cut my throat and have done with it.'

'But, Charley, couldn't we do something to find out, after all?'

'Find out what, Wilfrid?'

'The best thing, you know; what we are here for.'

'I'm sick of it all, Wilfrid. I've tried till I am sick of it. If you should find out anything, you can let me know. I am busy trying not to think. I find that quite enough. If I were to think, I should go mad.'

'Oh, Charley! I can't bear to hear you talk like that,' I exclaimed; but there was a glitter in his eye which I did not like, and which made me anxious to change the subject.--'Don't you like being here?' I asked, in sore want of something to say.

'Yes, well enough,' he replied. 'But I don't see what's to come of it, for I can't work. Even if my father were a millionnaire, I couldn't go on living on him. The sooner that is over, the better!'

He was looking down, and gnawing at that tremulous upper lip. I felt miserable.

‘I wish we were at the same college, Charley!’ I said.

‘It’s better as it is,’ he rejoined. ‘I should do you no good. You go in for reading, I suppose?’

‘Well, I do. I mean my uncle to have the worth of his money.’

Charley looked no less miserable than I felt. I saw that his conscience was speaking, and I knew he was the last in the world to succeed in excusing himself. But I understood him better than he understood himself, and believed that his idleness arose from the old unrest, the weariness of that never satisfied questioning which the least attempt at thought was sure to awaken. Once invaded by a question, Charley *must* answer it, or fail and fall into a stupor. Not an ode of Horace could he read without finding himself plunged into metaphysics. Enamoured of repose above all things, he was from every side stung to inquiry which seldom indeed afforded what seemed solution. Hence, in part at least, it came that he had begun to study not merely how to avoid awakening the Sphinx, but by what opiates to keep her stretched supine with her lovely woman face betwixt her fierce lion-paws. This also, no doubt, had a share in his becoming the associate of Geoffrey Brotherton, from whose company, if he had been at peace with himself, he would have recoiled upon the slightest acquaintance. I am at some loss to imagine what could have made Geoffrey take such a liking to Charley; but I presume it was the confiding air characterizing all Charley’s behaviour that chiefly pleased him. He seemed to look upon him with something of the tenderness a coarse man may show for a delicate Italian greyhound, fitted to be petted by a lady.

That same evening Charley came to my rooms. His manner was constrained, and yet suggested a whole tide of pent-up friendship which, but for some undeclared barrier, would have broken out and overflowed our intercourse. After this one evening, however, it was some time before I saw him again. When I called upon him next he was not at home, nor

did he come to see me. Again I sought him, but with like failure. After a third attempt I desisted, not a little hurt, I confess, but not in the least inclined to quarrel with him. I gave myself the more diligently to my work.

And now Oxford began to do me harm. I saw so much idleness, and so much wrong of all kinds about me, that I began to consider myself a fine exception. Because I did my poor duty--no better than any honest lad must do it--I became conceited; and the manner in which Charley's new friend treated me not only increased the fault, but aided in the development of certain other stems from the same root of self-partiality. He never saluted me with other than what I regarded as a supercilious nod of the head. When I met him in company with Charley, and the latter stopped to speak to me, he would walk on without the least change of step. The indignation which this conduct aroused drove me to think as I had never thought before concerning my social position. I found it impossible to define. As I pondered, however, a certainty dawned upon me, rather than was arrived at by me, that there was some secret connected with my descent, upon which bore the history of the watch I carried, and of the sword I had lost. On the mere possibility of something, utterly forgetful that, if the secret existed at all, it might be of a very different nature from my hopes, I began to build castles innumerable. Perceiving, of course, that one of a decayed yeoman family could stand no social comparison with the heir to a rich baronetcy, I fell back upon absurd imaginings; and what with the self-satisfaction of doing my duty, what with the vanity of my baby manhood, and what with the mystery I chose to believe in and interpret according to my desires, I was fast sliding into a moral condition contemptible indeed.

But still my heart was true to Charley. When, after late hours of hard reading, I retired at last to my bed, and allowed my thoughts to wander where they would, seldom was there a night on which they did not turn as of themselves towards the memory of our past happiness. I vowed,

although Charley had forsaken me, to keep his chamber in my heart ever empty, and closed against the entrance of another. If ever he pleased to return, he should find he had been waited for. I believe there was much of self-pity, and of self-approval as well, mingling with my regard for him; but the constancy was there notwithstanding, and I regarded the love I thus cherished for Charley as the chief saving element in my condition at the time.

One night--I cannot now recall with certainty the time or season--I only know it was night, and I was reading alone in my room--a knock came to the door, and Charley entered. I sprang from my seat and bounded to meet him.

‘At last, Charley!’ I exclaimed.

But he almost pushed me aside, left me to shut the door he had opened, sat down in a chair by the fire, and began gnawing the head of his cane. I resumed my seat, moved the lamp so that I could see him, and waited for him to speak. Then first I saw that his face was unnaturally pale and worn, almost even haggard. His eyes were weary, and his whole manner as of one haunted by an evil presence of which he is ever aware.

‘You are an enviable fellow, Wilfrid,’ he said at length, with something between a groan and a laugh.

‘Why do you say that, Charley?’ I returned. ‘Why am I enviable?’

‘Because you can work. I hate the very sight of a book. I am afraid I shall be plucked. I see nothing else for it. And what will the old man say? I have grace enough left to be sorry for him. But he will take it out in sour looks and silences.’

‘There’s time enough yet. I wish you were not so far ahead of me: we might have worked together.’

‘I can’t work, I tell you. I hate it. It will console my father, I hope, to find his prophecies concerning me come true. I’ve heard him abuse me to my mother.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk so of your father, Charley. It’s not like you. I can’t bear to hear it.’

‘It’s not like what I used to be, Wilfrid. But there’s none of that left. What do you take me for--honestly now?’

He hung his head low, his eyes fixed on the hearth-rug, not on the fire, and kept gnawing at the head of his cane.

‘I don’t like some of your companions,’ I said. ‘To be sure I don’t know much of them.’

‘The less you know, the better! If there be a devil, that fellow. Brotherton will hand me over to him--bodily, before long.’

‘Why don’t you give him up?’ said I.

‘It’s no use trying. He’s got such a hold of me. Never let a man you don’t know to the marrow pay even a toll-gate for you, Wilfrid.’

‘I am in no danger, Charley. Such people don’t take to me,’ I said, self-righteously. ‘But it can’t be too late to break with him. I know my uncle would--I could manage a five-pound note now, I think.’

‘My dear boy, if I had borrowed--. But I have let him pay for me again and again, and I don’t know how to rid the obligation. But it don’t signify. It’s too late anyhow.’

‘What have you done, Charley? Nothing very wrong, I trust.’

The lost look deepened.

‘It’s all over, Wilfrid,’ he said. ‘But it don’t matter. I can take to the river when I please.’

‘But then you know you might happen to go right through the river, Charley.’

‘I know what you mean,’ he said, with a defiant sound like nothing I had ever heard.

‘Charley!’ I cried, ‘I can’t bear to hear you. You can’t have changed so much already as not to trust me. I will do all I can to help you. What have you done?’

‘Oh, nothing!’ he rejoined, and tried to laugh: it was a dreadful failure. ‘But I can’t bear to think of that mother of mine! I wish I could tell you all; but I can’t. How Brotherton would laugh at me now! I can’t be made quite like other people, Wilfrid! *You* would never have been such a fool.’

‘You are more delicately made than most people, Charley--“touched to finer issues,” as Shakspere says.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I think a great deal about you. That is all you have left me.’

‘I’ve been a brute, Wilfrid. But you’ll forgive me, I know.’

‘With all my heart, if you’ll only put it in my power to serve you. Come, trust me, Charley, and tell me all about it. I shall not betray you.’

‘I’m not afraid of that,’ he answered, and sunk into silence once more.

I look to myself presumptuous and priggish in the memory. But I did mean truly by him. I began to question him, and by slow degrees, in broken hints, and in jets of reply, drew from him the facts. When at length he saw that I understood, he burst into tears, hid his face in his hands, and rocked himself to and fro.

‘Charley! Charley! don’t give in like that,’ I cried. ‘Be as sorry as you like; but don’t go on as if there was no help. Who has not failed and been forgiven--in one way if not in another?’

‘Who is there to forgive me? My father would not. And if he would, what difference would it make? I have done it all the same.’

‘But God, Charley--’ I suggested, hesitating.

‘What of him? If he should choose to pass a thing by and say nothing about it, that doesn’t undo it. It’s all nonsense. God himself can’t make it that I didn’t do what I did do.’

But with what truthful yet reticent words can I convey the facts of Charley’s case? I am perfectly aware it would be to expose both myself and him to the laughter of men of low development who behave as if no more *self-possession* were demanded of a man than of one of the lower animals. Such might perhaps feel a certain involuntary movement of pitifulness at the fate of a woman first awaking to the consciousness that she can no more hold up her head amongst her kind: but that a youth should experience a similar sense of degradation and loss, they would regard as a degree of silliness and effeminacy below contempt, if not beyond belief. But there is a sense of personal purity belonging to the man as well as to the woman; and although I dare not say that in the most refined of masculine natures it asserts itself with the awful majesty with which it makes its presence known in the heart of a woman, the man in whom it speaks with most authority is to be found amongst the worthiest; and to a youth like Charley the result of actual offence against it might be utter ruin. In his case, however, it was not merely a consciousness of personal defilement which followed; for, whether his companions had so schemed it or not, he supposed himself more than ordinarily guilty.

‘I suppose I must marry the girl,’ said poor Charley with a groan.

Happily I saw at once that there might be two sides to the question, and that it was desirable to know more ere I ventured a definite reply.

I had grown up, thanks to many things, with a most real although vague adoration of women; but I was not so ignorant as to be unable to fancy it possible that Charley had been the victim. Therefore, after having managed to comfort him a little, and taken him home to his rooms, I set about endeavouring to get further information.

I will not linger over the affair--as unpleasant to myself as it can be to any of my readers. It had to be mentioned, however, not merely as explaining how I got hold of Charley again, but as affording a clue to his character, and so to his history. Not even yet can I think without a gush of anger and shame of my visit to Brotherton. With what stammering confusion I succeeded at last in making him understand the nature of the information I wanted, I will not attempt to describe; nor the roar of laughter which at length burst bellowing--not from himself only, but from three or four companions as well to whom he turned and communicated the joke. The fire of jests, and proposals, and interpretations of motive which I had then to endure, seems yet to scorch my very brain at the mere recollection. From their manner and speech, I was almost convinced that they had laid a trap for Charley, whom they regarded as a simpleton, to enjoy his consequent confusion. With what I managed to find out elsewhere, I was at length satisfied, and happily succeeded in convincing Charley, that he had been the butt of his companions, and that he was far the more injured person in any possible aspect of the affair.

I shall never forget the look or the sigh of relief which proved that at last his mind had opened to the facts of the case.

‘Wilfrid,’ he said, ‘you have saved me. We shall never be parted more. See if I am ever false to you again!’

And yet it never was as it had been. I am sure of that now. Henceforth, however, he entirely avoided his former companions. Our old friendship was renewed. Our old talks arose again, And now that he was not alone in them, the perplexities under which he had broken down when left to encounter them by himself were not so overwhelming as to render him helpless. We read a good deal together, and Charley helped me much in the finer affairs of the classics, for his perceptions were as delicate as his feelings. He would brood over an Horatian phrase as Keats would brood over a sweet pea or a violet; the very tone in which he would repeat it would waft me from it an aroma unperceived before. When it was his turn to come to my rooms, I would watch for his arrival almost as a lover for his mistress.

For two years more our friendship grew; in which time Charley had recovered habits of diligence. I presume he said nothing at home of the renewal of his intimacy with me: I shrunk from questioning him. As if he had been an angel who who had hurt his wing and was compelled to sojourn with me for a time, I feared to bring the least shadow over his face, and indeed fell into a restless observance of his moods. I remember we read *Comus* together. How his face would glow at the impassioned praises of virtue! and how the glow would die into a grey sadness at the recollection of the near past! I could read his face like a book.

At length the time arrived when we had to part, he to study for the Bar, I to remain at Oxford another year, still looking forward to a literary life.

When I commenced writing my story, I fancied myself so far removed from it that I could regard it as the story of another, capable of being viewed on all sides, and conjectured and speculated upon. And so I found it as long as the regions of childhood and youth detained me. But as I approach the middle scenes, I begin to fear the revival of the old torture; that, from the dispassionate reviewer, I may become once again the suffering actor. Long ago I read a strange story of a man condemned at

periods unforeseen to act again, and yet again, in absolute verisimilitude each of the scenes of his former life: I have a feeling as if I too might glide from the present into the past without a sign to warn me of the coming transition.

One word more ere I pass to the middle events, those for the sake of which the beginning is and the end shall be recorded. It is this--that I am under endless obligations to Charley for opening my eyes at this time to my overweening estimate of myself. Not that he spoke--Charley could never have reproved even a child. But I could tell almost any sudden feeling that passed through him. His face betrayed it. What he felt about me I saw at once. From the signs of his mind, I often recognized the character of what was in my own; and thus seeing myself through him, I gathered reason to be ashamed; while the refinement of his criticism, the quickness of his perception, and the novelty and force of his remarks, convinced me that I could not for a moment compare with him in mental gifts. The upper hand of influence I had over him I attribute to the greater freedom of my training, and the enlarged ideas which had led my uncle to avoid enthralling me to his notions. He believed the truth could afford to wait until I was capable of seeing it for myself; and that the best embodiments of truth are but bonds and fetters to him who cannot accept them as such. When I could not agree with him, he would say with one of his fine smiles, ‘We’ll drop it, then, Willie. I don’t believe you have caught my meaning. If I am right, you will see it some day, and there’s no hurry.’ How could it be but Charlie and I should be different, seeing we had fared so differently! But, alas! my knowledge of his character is chiefly the result of after-thought.

I do not mean this manuscript to be read until after my death; and even then--although partly from habit, partly that I dare not trust myself to any other form of utterance, I write as if for publication--even then, I say, only by one. I am about to write what I should not die in peace if I thought she would never know; but which I dare not seek to tell her now

for the risk of being misunderstood. I thank God for that blessed invention, Death, which of itself must set many things right, and gives a man a chance of justifying himself where he would not have been heard while alive. Lest my manuscript should fall into other hands, I have taken care that not a single name in it should contain even a side-look or hint at the true one; but she will be able to understand the real person in every case.

CHAPTER XXV.

MY WHITE MARE.

I passed my final examinations with credit, if not with honour. It was not yet clearly determined what I should do next. My goal was London, but I was unwilling to go thither empty-handed. I had been thinking as well as reading a good deal; a late experience had stimulated my imagination; and at spare moments I had been writing a tale. It had grown to be a considerable mass of manuscript, and I was anxious, before going, to finish it. Hence, therefore, I returned home with the intention of remaining there quietly for a few months before setting-out to seek my fortune.

Whether my uncle in his heart quite favoured the plan, I have my doubts, but it would have been quite inconsistent with his usual grand treatment of me to oppose anything not wrong on which I had set my heart. Finding now that I took less exercise than he thought desirable, and kept myself too much to my room, he gave me a fresh proof of his unvarying kindness, He bought me a small grey mare of strength and speed. Her lineage was unknown; but her small head, broad fine chest, and clean limbs indicated Arab blood at no great remove. Upon her I used to gallop over the fields, or saunter along the lanes, dreaming and inventing.

And now certain feelings, too deeply rooted in my nature for my memory to recognize their beginnings, began to assume colour and condensed form, as if about to burst into some kind of blossom. Thanks to my education and love of study, also to a self-respect undefined yet restraining, nothing had occurred to wrong them. In my heart of hearts I worshipped the idea of womanhood. I thank Heaven, if ever I do thank for anything, that I still worship thus. Alas! how many have put on the acolyte’s robe in the same temple, who have ere long cast dirt upon the statue of their divinity, *then* dragged her as defiled from her lofty pedestal, and left her lying dishonoured at its foot! Instead of feeding

with holy oil the lamp of the higher instinct, which would glorify and purify the lower, they feed the fire of the lower with vile fuel, which sends up its stinging smoke to becloud and blot the higher.

One lovely Spring morning, the buds half out, and the wind blowing fresh and strong, the white clouds scudding across a blue gulf of sky, and the tall trees far away swinging as of old, when they churned the wind for my childish fancy, I looked up from my book and saw it all. The gladness of nature entered into me, and my heart swelled so in my bosom that I turned with distaste from all further labour. I pushed my papers from me, and went to the window. The short grass all about was leaning away from the wind, shivering and showing its enamel. Still, as in childhood, the wind had a special power over me. In another moment I was out of the house and hastening to the farm for my mare. She neighed at the sound of my step. I saddled and bridled her, sprung on her back, and galloped across the grass in the direction of the trees.

In a few moments I was within the lodge gates, walking my mare along the gravelled drive, and with the reins on the white curved neck before me, looking up at those lofty pines, whose lonely heads were swinging in the air like floating but fettered islands. My head had begun to feel dizzy with the ever-iterated, slow, half-circular sweep, when, just opposite the lawn stretching from a low wire fence up to the door of the steward’s house, my mare shied, darted to the other side of the road, and flew across the grass. Caught thus lounging on my saddle, I was almost unseated. As soon as I had pulled her up, I turned to see what had startled her, for the impression of a white flash remained upon my mental sensorium. There, leaning on the little gate, looking much diverted, stood the loveliest creature, in a morning dress of white, which the wind was blowing about her like a cloud. She had no hat on, and her hair, as if eager to join in the merriment of the day, was flying like the ribbons of a tattered sail. A humanized Dryad!--one that had been caught young, but in whom the forest-sap still asserted itself in wild affinities with the wind

and the swaying branches, and the white clouds careering across! Could it be Clara? How could it be any other than Clara? I rode back.

I was a little short-sighted, and had to get pretty near before I could be certain; but she knew me, and waited my approach. When I came near enough to see them, I could not mistake those violet eyes.

I was now in my twentieth year, and had never been in love. Whether I now fell in love or not, I leave to my reader.

Clara was even more beautiful than her girlish loveliness had promised. ‘An exceeding fair forehead,’ to quote Sir Philip Sidney; eyes of which I have said enough; a nose more delicate than symmetrical; a mouth rather thin-lipped, but well curved; a chin rather small, I confess;--but did any one ever from the most elaborated description acquire even an approximate idea of the face intended? Her person was lithe and graceful; she had good hands and feet; and the fairness of her skin gave her brown hair a duskier look than belonged to itself.

Before I was yet near enough to be certain of her, I lifted my hat, and she returned the salutation with an almost familiar nod and smile.

‘I am very sorry,’ she said, speaking first--in her old half-mocking way, ‘that I so nearly cost you your seat.’

‘It was my own carelessness,’ I returned. ‘Surely I am right in taking you for the lady who allowed me, in old times, to call her Clara? How I could ever have had the presumption I cannot imagine.’

‘Of course that is a familiarity not to be thought of between full-grown people like us, Mr Cumbermede,’ she rejoined, and her smile became a laugh.

‘Ah, you do recognize me, then?’ I said, thinking her cool, but forgetting the thought the next moment.

‘I guess at you. If you had been dressed as on one occasion, I should not have got so far as that.’

Pleased at this merry reference to our meeting on the Wengern Alp, I was yet embarrassed to find that nothing more suggested itself to be said. But while I was quieting my mare, which happily afforded me some pretext at the moment, another voice fell on my ear--hoarse, but breezy and pleasant.

‘So, Clara, you are no sooner back to old quarters than you give a rendezvous at the garden-gate--eh, girl?’

‘Rather an ill-chosen spot for the purpose, papa,’ she returned, laughing, ‘especially as the gentleman has too much to do with his horse to get off and talk to me.’

‘Ah! our old friend Mr Cumbermede, I declare! Only rather more of him!’ he added, laughing, as he opened the little gate in the wire fence, and coming up to me, shook hands heartily. ‘Delighted to see you, Mr Cumbermede. Have you left Oxford for good?’

‘Yes,’ I answered--‘some time ago.’

‘And may I ask what you’re turning your attention to now?’

‘Well, I hardly like to confess it, but I mean to have a try at--something in the literary way.’

‘Plucky enough! The paths of literature are not certainly the paths of pleasantness or of peace even--so far as ever I heard. Somebody said you were going in for the law.’

‘I thought there were too many lawyers already. One so often hears of barristers with nothing to do, and glad to take to the pen, that I thought it might be better to begin with what I should most probably come to at last.’

‘Ah! but, Mr Cumbermede, there are other departments of the law which bring quicker returns than the bar. If you would put yourself in my hands now, you should be earning your bread at least within a couple of years or so.’

‘You are very kind,’ I returned, heartily, for he spoke as if he meant what he said; ‘but you see I have a leaning to the one and not to the other. I should like to have a try first, at all events.’

‘Well, perhaps it’s better to begin by following your bent. You may find the road take a turn, though.’

‘Perhaps. I will go on till it does, though.’

While we talked, Clara had followed her father, and was now patting my mare’s neck with a nice, plump, fair-fingered hand. The creature stood with her arched neck and small head turned lovingly towards her.

‘What a nice white thing you have got to ride!’ she said. ‘I hope it is your own.’

‘Why do you hope that?’ I asked.

‘Because it’s best to ride your own horse, isn’t it?’ she answered, looking up naïvely.

‘Would *you* like to ride her? I believe she has carried a lady, though not since she came into my possession.’

Instead of answering me, she looked round at her father, who stood by smiling benignantly. Her look said--

‘If papa would let me.’

He did not reply, but seemed waiting. I resumed.

‘Are you a good horsewoman, Miss--Clara?’ I said, with a feel after the recovery of old privileges.

‘I must not sing my own praises, Mr--Wilfrid,’ she rejoined, ‘but I *have* ridden in Rotten Row, and I believe without any signal disgrace.’

‘Have you got a side-saddle?’ I asked, dismounting.

Mr Coningham spoke now.

‘Don’t you think Mr Cumbermede’s horse a little too frisky for you, Clara? I know so little about you, I can’t tell what you’re fit for.--She used to ride pretty well as a girl,’ he added, turning to me.

‘I’ve not forgotten that,’ I said. ‘I shall walk by her side, you know.’

‘Shall you?’ she said, with a sly look.

‘Perhaps,’ I suggested, ‘your grandfather would let me have his horse, and then we might have a gallop across the park.’

‘The best way,’ said Mr Coningham, ‘will be to let the gardener take your horse, while you come in and have some luncheon. We’ll see about the mount after that. My horse has to carry me back in the evening, else I should be happy to join you. She’s a fine creature, that of yours.’

‘She’s the handiest creature!’ I said--‘a little skittish, but very affectionate, and has a fine mouth. Perhaps she ought to have a curb-bit for you, though, Miss Clara.’

‘We’ll manage with a snaffle,’ she answered, with, I thought, another sly glance at me, out of eyes sparkling with suppressed merriment and expectation! Her father had gone to find the gardener, and as we stood waiting for him she still stroked the mare’s neck.

‘Are you not afraid of taking cold,’ I said, ‘without your bonnet?’

‘I never had a cold in my life,’ she returned.

‘That is saying much. You would have me believe you are not made of the same clay as other people.’

‘Believe anything you like,’ she answered carelessly.

‘Then I do believe it,’ I rejoined.

She looked me in the face, took her hand from the mare’s neck, stepped back half-a-foot and looked round, saying--

‘I wonder where that man can have got to. Oh, here he comes, and papa with him!’

We went across the trim little lawn, which lay waiting for the warmer weather to burst into a profusion of roses, and through a trellised porch entered a shadowy little hall, with heads of stags and foxes, an old-fashioned glass-doored bookcase, and hunting and riding whips, whence we passed into a low-pitched drawing-room, redolent of dried rose-leaves and fresh hyacinths. A little pug-dog, which seemed to have failed in swallowing some big dog’s tongue, jumped up barking from the sheep-skin mat, where he lay before the fire.

‘Stupid pug!’ said Clara. ‘You never know friends from foes! I wonder where my aunt is.’

She left the room. Her father had not followed us. I sat down on the sofa, and began turning over a pretty book bound in red silk, one of the first of the *annual* tribe, which lay on the table. I was deep in one of its eastern stories when, hearing a slight movement, I looked up, and there sat Clara in a low chair by the window, working at a delicate bit of lace with a needle. She looked somehow as if she had been there an hour at least. I laid down the book with some exclamation.

‘What is the matter, Mr Cumbermede?’ she asked, with the slightest possible glance up from the fine meshes of her work.

‘I had not the slightest idea you were in the room.’

‘Of course not. How could a literary man, with a *Forget-me-not* in his hand, be expected to know that a girl had come into the room?’

‘Have you been at school all this time?’ I asked, for the sake of avoiding a silence.

‘All what time?’

‘Say, since we parted in Switzerland.’

‘Not quite. I have been staying with an aunt for nearly a year. Have you been at college all this time?’

‘At school and college. When did you come home?’

‘This is not my home, but I came here yesterday.’

‘Don’t you find the country dull after London?’

‘I haven’t had time yet.’

‘Did they give you riding lessons at school?’

‘No. But my aunt took care of my morals in that respect. A girl might as well not be able to dance as ride now-a-days.’

‘Who rode with you in the park? Not the riding-master?’

With a slight flush on her face she retorted,

‘How many more questions are you going to ask me? I should like to know, that I may make up my mind how many of them to answer.’

‘Suppose we say six.’

‘Very well,’ she replied. ‘Now I shall answer your last question and count that the first. About nine o’clock, one--day--’

‘Morning or evening?’ I asked.

‘Morning of course--I walked out of--the house--’

‘Your aunt’s house?’

‘Yes, of course, my aunt’s house. Do let me go on with my story. It was getting a little dark--’

‘Getting dark at nine in the morning?’

‘In the evening, I said.’

‘I beg your pardon, I thought you said the morning.’

‘No, no, the evening; and of course I was a little frightened, for I was not accustomed--’

‘But you were never out alone at that hour,--in London?’

‘Yes, I was quite alone. I had promised to meet--a friend at the corner of----You know that part, do you?’

‘I beg your pardon. What part?’

‘Oh--Mayfair. You know Mayfair, don’t you?’

‘You were going to meet a gentleman at the corner of Mayfair--were you?’ I said, getting quite bewildered.

She jumped up, clapping her hands as gracefully as merrily, and crying--

‘I wasn’t going to meet any gentleman. There! Your six questions are answered. I won’t answer a single other you choose to ask, unless I please, which is not in the least likely.’

She made me a low half merry, half mocking courtesy and left the room.

The same moment her father came in, following old Mr Coningham, who gave me a kindly welcome, and said his horse was at my service, but he hoped I would lunch with him first. I gratefully consented, and soon

luncheon was announced. Miss Coningham, Clara's aunt, was in the dining-room before us. A dry, antiquated woman, she greeted me with unexpected frankness. Lunch was half over before Clara entered--in a perfectly fitting habit, her hat on, and her skirt thrown over her arm.

'Soho, Clara!' cried her father; 'you want to take us by surprise--coming out all at once a town-bred lady, eh?'

'Why, where ever did you get that riding-habit, Clara?' said her aunt.

'In my box, aunt,' said Clara.

'My word, child, but your father has kept you in pocket-money!' returned Miss Coningham.

'I've got a town aunt as well as a country one,' rejoined Clara, with an expression I could not quite understand, but out of which her laugh took only half the sting.

Miss Coningham reddened a little. I judged afterwards that Clara had been diplomatically allowing her just to feel what sharp claws she had for use if required.

But the effect of the change from loose white muslin to tight dark cloth was marvellous, and I was bewitched by it. So slight, yet so round, so trim, yet so pliant--she was grace itself. It seemed as if the former object of my admiration had vanished, and I had found another with such surpassing charms that the loss could not be regretted. I may just mention that the change appeared also to bring out a certain look of determination which I now recalled as having belonged to her when a child.

'Clara!' said her father, in a very marked tone; whereupon it was Clara's turn to blush and be silent.

I started some new subject, in the airiest manner I could command. Clara recovered her composure, and I flattered myself she looked a little

grateful when our eyes met. But I caught her father's eyes twinkling now and then as if from some secret source of merriment, and could not help fancying he was more amused than displeased with his daughter.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A RIDING LESSON.

By the time luncheon was over, the horses had been standing some minutes at the lawn-gate, my mare with a side-saddle. We hastened to mount, Clara's eyes full of expectant frolic. I managed, as I thought, to get before her father, and had the pleasure of lifting her to the saddle. She was up ere I could feel her weight on my arm. When I gathered her again with my eyes, she was seated as calmly as if at her lace-needlework, only her eyes were sparkling. With the slightest help, she had her foot in the stirrup, and with a single movement had her skirt comfortable. I left her, to mount the horse they had brought me, and when I looked from his back, the white mare was already flashing across the boles of the trees, and Clara's dark skirt flying out behind like the drapery of a descending goddess in an allegorical picture. With a pang of terror I fancied the mare had run away with her, and sat for a moment afraid to follow, lest the sound of my horse's feet on the turf should make her gallop the faster. But the next moment she turned in her saddle, and I saw a face alive with pleasure and confidence. As she recovered her seat, she waved her hand to me, and I put my horse to his speed. I had not gone far, however, before I perceived a fresh cause of anxiety. She was making straight for a wire fence. I had heard that horses could not see such a fence, and if Clara did not see it, or should be careless, the result would be frightful. I shouted after her, but she took no heed. Fortunately, however, there was right in front of them a gate, which I had not at first observed, into the bars of which had been wattled some brushwood. 'The mare will see that,' I said to myself. But the words were hardly through my mind, before I saw them fly over it like a bird.

On the other side, she pulled up, and waited for me.

Now I had never jumped a fence in my life. I did not know that my mare could do such a thing, for I had never given her the chance. I was not, and

never have become, what would be considered an accomplished horseman. I scarcely know a word of stable-slang. I have never followed the hounds more than twice or three times in the course of my life. Not the less am I a true lover of horses--but I have been their companion more in work than in play. I have slept for miles on horseback, but even now I have not a sure seat over a fence.

I knew nothing of the animal I rode, but I was bound, at least, to make the attempt to follow my leader. I was too inexperienced not to put him to his speed instead of going gently up to the gate; and I had a bad habit of leaning forward in my saddle, besides knowing nothing of how to incline myself backwards as the horse alighted. Hence when I found myself on the other side, it was not on my horse's back, but on my own face. I rose uninjured, except in my self-esteem. I fear I was for the moment as much disconcerted as if I had been guilty of some moral fault. Nor did it help me much towards regaining my composure that Clara was shaking with suppressed laughter. Utterly stupid from mortification, I laid hold of my horse, which stood waiting for me beside the mare, and scrambled upon his back. But Clara, who, with all her fun, was far from being ill-natured, fancied from my silence that I was hurt. Her merriment vanished. With quite an anxious expression on her face, she drew to my side, saying--

'I hope you are not hurt?'

'Only my pride,' I answered.

'Never mind that,' she returned gaily. 'That will soon be itself again.'

'I'm not so sure,' I rejoined. 'To make such a fool of myself before *you*!'

'Am I such a formidable person?' she said.

'Yes,' I answered. 'But I never jumped a fence in my life before.'

'If you had been afraid,' she said, 'and had pulled up, I might have despised you. As it was, I only laughed at you. Where was the harm?

You shirked nothing. You followed your leader. Come along, I will give you a lesson or two before we get back.'

'Thank you,' I said, beginning to recover my spirits a little; 'I shall be a most obedient pupil. But how did you get so clever, Clara?'

I ventured the unprotected name, and she took no notice of the liberty.

'I told you I had had a riding-master. If you are not afraid, and mind what you are told, you will always come right somehow.'

'I suspect that is good advice for more than horsemanship.'

'I had not the slightest intention of moralizing. I am incapable of it,' she answered, in a tone of serious self-defence.

'I had as little intention of making the accusation,' I rejoined. 'But will you really teach me a little?'

'Most willingly. To begin, you must sit erect. You lean forward.'

'Thank you. Is this better?'

'Yes, better. A little more yet. You ought to have your stirrups shorter. It is a poor affectation to ride like a trooper. Their own officers don't. You can tell any novice by his long leathers, his heels down and his toes in his stirrups. Ride home, if you want to ride comfortably.'

The phrase was new to me, but I guessed what she meant; and without dismounting, pulled my stirrup-leathers a couple of holes shorter, and thrust my feet through to the instep. She watched the whole proceeding.

'There! you look more like riding now,' she said. 'Let us have another canter. I will promise not to lead you over any more fences without due warning.'

'And due admonition as well, I trust, Clara.'

She nodded, and away we went. I had never been so proud of my mare. She showed to much advantage, with the graceful figure on her back, which she carried like a feather.

‘Now there’s a little fence,’ she said, pointing where a rail or two protected a clump of plantation. ‘You must mind the young wood though, or we shall get into trouble. Mind you throw yourself back a little--as you see me do.’

I watched her, and following her directions, did better this time, for I got over somehow and recovered my seat.

‘There! You improve,’ said Clara. ‘Now we’re pounded, unless you can jump again, and it is not quite so easy from this side.’

When we alighted, I found my saddle in the proper place.

‘Bravo!’ she cried. ‘I entirely forgive your first misadventure. You do splendidly.’

‘I would rather you forgot it, Clara,’ I cried, ungallantly.

‘Well, I will be generous,’ she returned. ‘Besides, I owe you something for such a charming ride. I *will* forget it.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, and drawing closer would have laid my left hand on her right.

Whether she foresaw my intention, I do not know; but in a moment she was yards away, scampering over the grass. My horse could never have overtaken hers.

By the time she drew rein and allowed me to get alongside of her once more, we were in sight: of Moldwarp Hall. It stood with one corner towards us, giving the perspective of two sides at once. She stopped her mare, and said,

‘There, Wilfrid! What would you give to call a place like that your own? What a thing to have a house like that to live in!’

[Illustration: “NOW THERE’S A LITTLE FENCE,” SHE SAID.]

‘I know something I should like better,’ I said.

I assure my reader I was not so silly as to be on the point of making her an offer already. Neither did she so misunderstand me. She was very near the mark of my meaning when she rejoined--

‘Do you? I don’t. I suppose you would prefer being called a fine poet, or something of the sort.’

I was glad she did not give me time to reply, for I had not intended to expose myself to her ridicule. She was off again at a gallop towards the Hall, straight for the less accessible of the two gates, and had scrambled the mare up to the very bell-pull and rung it before I could get near her. When the porter appeared in the wicket--

‘Open the gate, Jansen,’ she said. ‘I want to see Mrs Wilson, and I don’t want to get down.’

‘But horses never come in here, Miss,’ said the man.

‘I mean to make an exception in favour of this mare,’ she answered.

The man hesitated a moment, then retreated--but only to obey, as we understood at once by the creaking of the dry hinges, which were seldom required to move.

‘You won’t mind holding her for me, will you?’ she said, turning to me.

I had been sitting mute with surprise both at the way in which she ordered the man, and at his obedience. But now I found my tongue.

‘Don’t you think, Miss Coningham,’ I said--for the man was within hearing, ‘we had better leave them both with the porter, and then we

could go in together? I'm not sure that those flags, not to mention the steps, are good footing for that mare.'

'Oh! you're afraid of your animal, are you?' she rejoined. 'Very well.'

'Shall I hold your stirrup for you?'

Before I could dismount, she had slipped off, and begun gathering up her skirt. The man came and took the horses. We entered by the open gate together.

'How can you be so cruel, Clara?' I said. 'You *will* always misinterpret me! I was quite right about the flags. Don't you see how hard they are, and how slippery therefore for iron shoes?'

'You might have seen by this time that I know quite as much about horses as you do,' she returned, a little cross, I thought.

'You can ride ever so much better,' I answered; 'but it does not follow you know more about horses than I do. I once saw a horse have a frightful fall on just such a pavement. Besides, does one think *only* of the horse when there's an angel on his back?'

It was a silly speech, and deserved rebuke.

'I'm not in the least fond of *such* compliments,' she answered.

By this time we had reached the door of Mrs Wilson's apartment. She received us rather stiffly, even for her. After some commonplace talk, in which, without departing from facts, Clara made it appear that she had set out for the express purpose of paying Mrs Wilson a visit, I asked if the family was at home, and finding they were not, begged leave to walk into the library.

'We'll go together,' she said, apparently not caring about a tête-à-tête with Clara. Evidently the old lady liked her as little as ever.

We left the house, and entering again by a side door, passed on our way through the little gallery, into which I had dropped from the roof.

‘Look, Clara, that is where I came down,’ I said.

She merely nodded. But Mrs Wilson looked very sharply, first at the one, then at the other of us. When we reached the library, I found it in the same miserable condition as before, and could not help exclaiming with some indignation,

‘It *is* a shame to see such treasures mouldering there! I am confident there are many valuable books among them, getting ruined from pure neglect. I wish I knew Sir Giles. I would ask him to let me come and set them right.’

‘You would be choked with dust and cobwebs in an hour’s time,’ said Clara. ‘Besides, I don’t think Mrs Wilson would like the proceeding.’

‘What do you ground that remark upon, Miss Clara?’ said the housekeeper in a dry tone.

‘I thought you used them for firewood occasionally,’ answered Clara, with an innocent expression both of manner and voice.

The most prudent answer to such an absurd charge would have been a laugh; but Mrs Wilson vouchsafed no reply at all, and I pretended to be too much occupied with its subject to have heard it.

After lingering a little while, during which I paid attention chiefly to Mrs Wilson, drawing her notice to the state of several of the books, I proposed we should have a peep at the armoury. We went in, and, glancing over the walls I knew so well, I scarcely repressed an exclamation: I could not be mistaken in my own sword! There it hung, in the centre of the principal space--in the same old sheath, split half-way up from the point! To the hilt hung an ivory label with a number upon it. I suppose I made some inarticulate sound, for Clara fixed her eyes upon

me. I busied myself at once with a gorgeously hiked scimitar, which hung near, for I did not wish to talk about it then, and so escaped further remark. From the armoury we went to the picture-gallery, where I found a good many pictures had been added to the collection. They were all new and mostly brilliant in colour. I was no judge, but I could not help feeling how crude and harsh they looked beside the mellowed tints of the paintings, chiefly portraits, among which they had been introduced.

‘Horrid!--aren’t they?’ said Clara, as if she divined my thoughts; but I made no direct reply, unwilling to offend Mrs Wilson.

When we were once more on horseback, and walking across the grass, my companion was the first to speak.

‘Did you ever see such daubs!’ she said, making a wry face as at something sour enough to untune her nerves. ‘Those new pictures are simply frightful. Any one of them would give me the jaundice in a week, if it were hung in our drawing-room.’

‘I can’t say I admire them,’ I returned. ‘And at all events they ought not to be on the same walls with those stately old ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Parvenus,’ said Clara. ‘Quite in their place. Pure Manchester taste--educated on calico-prints.’

‘If that is your opinion of the family, how do you account for their keeping everything so much in the old style? They don’t seem to change anything.’

‘All for their own honour and glory! The place is a testimony to the antiquity of the family of which they are a shoot run to seed--and very ugly seed too! It’s enough to break one’s heart to think of such a glorious old place in such hands. Did you ever see young Brotherton?’

‘I knew him a little at college. He’s a good-looking fellow!’

‘Would be if it weren’t for the bad blood in him. That comes out unmistakeably. He’s vulgar.’

‘Have you seen much of him, then?’

‘Quite enough. I never heard him say anything vulgar, or saw him do anything vulgar, but vulgar he is, and vulgar is every one of the family. A man who is always aware of how rich he will be, and how good-looking he is, and what a fine match he would make, would look vulgar lying in his coffin.’

‘You are positively caustic, Miss Coningham.’

‘If you saw their house in Cheshire! But blessings be on the place!--it’s the safety-valve for Moldwarp Hall. The natural Manchester passion for novelty and luxury finds a vent there, otherwise they could not keep their hands off it; and what was best would be sure to go first. Corchester House ought to be secured to the family by Act of Parliament.’

‘Have you been to Corchester, then?’

‘I was there for a week once.’

‘And how did you like it?’

‘Not at all. I was not comfortable. I was always feeling too well-bred. You never saw such colours in your life. Their drawing-rooms are quite a happy family of the most quarrelsome tints.’

‘How ever did they come into this property?’

‘They’re of the breed somehow--a long way off though. Shouldn’t I like to see a new claimant come up and oust them after all! They haven’t had it above five-and-twenty years or so. Wouldn’t you?’

‘The old man was kind to me once.’

‘How was that? I thought it was only through Mrs Wilson you knew anything of them.’

I told her the story of the apple.

‘Well, I do rather like old Sir Giles,’ she said, when I had done. ‘There’s a good deal of the rough country gentleman about him. He’s a better man than his son anyhow. Sons will succeed their fathers, though, unfortunately.’

‘I don’t care who may succeed him, if only I could get back my sword. It’s too bad, with an armoury like that, to take my one little ewe-lamb from me.’

Here I had another story to tell. After many interruptions in the way of questions from my listener, I ended it with these words--

‘And--will you believe me?--I saw the sword hanging in that armoury this afternoon--close by that splendid hilt I pointed out to you.’

‘How could you tell it among so many?’

‘Just as you could tell that white creature from this brown one. I know it, hilt and scabbard, as well as a human face.’

‘As well as mine, for instance?’

‘I am surer of it than I was of you this morning. It hasn’t changed like you.’

Our talk was interrupted by the appearance of a gentleman on horseback approaching us. I thought at first it was Clara’s father, setting out for home, and coming to bid us good-bye; but I soon saw I was mistaken. Not, however, until he came quite close, did I recognize Geoffrey Brotherton. He took off his hat to my companion, and reined in his horse.

‘Are you going to give us in charge for trespassing, Mr Brotherton?’ said Clara.

‘I should be happy to *take* you in charge on any pretence, Miss Coningham. This is indeed an unexpected pleasure.’

Here he looked in my direction.

‘Ah!’ he said, lifting his eyebrows, ‘I thought I knew the old horse! What a nice cob *you*‘ve got, Miss Coningham.’

He had not chosen to recognize me, of which I was glad, for I hardly knew how to order my behaviour to him. I had forgotten nothing. But, ill as I liked him, I was forced to confess that he had greatly improved in appearance--and manners too, notwithstanding his behaviour was as supercilious as ever to me.

‘Do you call her a cob, then?’ said Clara. ‘I should never have thought of calling her a cob.--She belongs to Mr Cumbermede.’

‘Ah!’ he said again, arching his eyebrows as before, and looking straight at me as if he had never seen me in his life.

I think I succeeded in looking almost unaware of his presence. At least so I tried to look, feeling quite thankful to Clara for defending my mare: to hear her called a cob was hateful to me.

After listening to a few more of his remarks upon her, made without the slightest reference to her owner, who was not three yards from her side, Clara asked him, in the easiest manner--

‘Shall you be at the county ball?’

‘When is that?’

‘Next Thursday.’

‘Are you going?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Then will you dance the first waltz with me?’

‘No, Mr Brotherton.’

‘Then I am sorry to say I shall be in London.’

‘When do you rejoin your regiment?’

‘Oh! I’ve got a month’s leave.’

‘Then why won’t you be at the ball?’

‘Because you won’t promise me the first waltz.’

‘Well--rather than the belles of Minstercombe should--ring their sweet changes in vain, I suppose I must indulge you.’

‘A thousand thanks,’ he said, lifted his hat, and rode on.

My blood was in a cold boil--if the phrase can convey an idea. Clara rode on homewards without looking round, and I followed, keeping a few yards behind her, hardly thinking at all, my very brain seeming cold inside my skull.

There was small occasion as yet, some of my readers may think. I cannot help it--so it was. When we had gone in silence a couple of hundred yards or so, she glanced round at me with a quick sly half-look, and burst out laughing. I was by her side in an instant: her laugh had dissolved the spell that bound me. But she spoke first.

‘Well, Mr Cumbermede?’ she said, with a slow interrogation.

‘Well, Miss Coningham?’ I rejoined, but bitterly, I suppose.

‘What’s the matter?’ she retorted sharply, looking up at me, full in the face, whether in real or feigned anger I could not tell.

‘How could you talk *of* that fellow as you did, and then talk so *to* him?’

‘What right have you to put such questions to me? I am not aware of any intimacy to justify it.’

‘Then I beg your pardon. But my surprise remains the same.’

‘Why, you silly boy!’ she returned, laughing aloud, ‘don’t you know he is, or will be, my feudal lord. I am bound to be polite to him. What would become of poor grandpapa if I were to give him offence? Besides, I have been in the house with him for a week. He’s not a Crichton; but he dances well. Are *you* going to the ball?’

‘I never heard of it. I have not for weeks thought of anything but--but--my writing, till this morning. Now I fear I shall find it difficult to return to it. It looks ages since I saddled the mare!’

‘But if you’re ever to be an author, it won’t do to shut yourself up. You ought to see as much of the world as you can. I should strongly advise you to go to the ball.’

‘I would willingly obey you--but--but--I don’t know how to get a ticket.’

‘Oh! if you would like to go, papa will have much pleasure in managing that. I will ask him.’

‘I’m much obliged to you,’ I returned. ‘I should enjoy seeing Mr Brotherton dance.’

She laughed again, but it was an oddly constrained laugh.

‘It’s quite time I were at home,’ she said, and gave the mare the rein, increasing her speed as we approached the house. Before I reached the little gate she had given her up to the gardener, who had been on the look-out for us.

‘Put on her own saddle, and bring the mare round at once, please,’ I called to the man, as he led her and the horse away together.

‘Won’t you come in, Wilfrid?’ said Clara, kindly and seriously.

‘No, thank you,’ I returned; for I was full of rage and jealousy. To do myself justice, however, mingled with these was pity that such a girl should be so easy with such a man. But I could not tell her what I knew of him. Even if I *could* have done so, I dared not; for the man who shows himself jealous must be readily believed capable of lying, or at least misrepresenting.

‘Then I must bid you good-evening,’ she said, as quietly as if we had been together only five minutes. ‘I am *so* much obliged to you for letting me ride your mare!’

She gave me a half-friendly, half-stately little bow, and walked into the house. In a few moments the gardener returned with the mare, and I mounted and rode home in anything but a pleasant mood. Having stabled her, I roamed about the fields till it was dark, thinking for the first time in my life I preferred woods to open grass. When I went in at length I did my best to behave as if nothing had happened. My uncle must, however, have seen that something was amiss, but he took no notice, for he never forced or even led up to confidences. I retired early to bed, and passed an hour or two of wretchedness, thinking over everything that had happened---the one moment calling her a coquette, and the next ransacking a fresh corner of my brain to find fresh excuse for her. At length I was able to arrive at the conclusion that I did not understand her, and having given in so far, I soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

I trust it will not be regarded as a sign of shallowness of nature that I rose in the morning comparatively calm. Clara was to me as yet only the type of general womanhood, around which the amorphous loves of my manhood had begun to gather, not the one woman whom the individual man in me had chosen and loved. How could I *love* that which I did not yet know: she was but the heroine of my objective life, as projected from me by my imagination--not the love of my being. Therefore, when the wings of sleep had fanned the motes from my brain, I was cool enough, notwithstanding an occasional tongue of indignant flame from the ashes of last night's fire, to sit down to my books, and read with tolerable attention my morning portion of Plato. But when I turned to my novel, I found I was not master of the situation. My hero too was in love and in trouble; and after I had written a sentence and a half, I found myself experiencing the fate of Heine when he roused the Sphinx of past love by reading his own old verses:--

Lebendig ward das Marmorbild, Der Stein begann zu ächzen.

In a few moments I was pacing up and down the room, eager to burn my moth-wings yet again in the old fire. And by the way, I cannot help thinking that the moths enjoy their fate, and die in ecstasies. I was, however, too shy to venture on a call that very morning: I should both feel and look foolish. But there was no more work to be done then. I hurried to the stable, saddled my mare, and set out for a gallop across the farm, but towards the high road leading to Minstercombe, in the opposite direction, that is, from the Hall, which I flattered myself was to act in a strong-minded manner. There were several fences and hedges between, but I cleared them all without discomfiture. The last jump was into a lane. We, that is my mare and I, had scarcely alighted, when my ears were invaded by a shout. The voice was the least welcome I could have

heard, that of Brotherton. I turned and saw him riding up the hill, with a lady by his side.

‘Hillo!’ he cried, almost angrily, ‘you don’t deserve to have such a cob.’ (He *would* call her a cob.) ‘You don’t know-how to use her. To jump her on to the hard like that!’

It was Clara with him!--on the steady stiff old brown horse! My first impulse was to jump my mare over the opposite fence, and take no heed, of them, but clearly it was not to be attempted, for the ground fell considerably on the other side. My next thought was to ride away and leave them. My third was one which some of my readers will judge Quixotic, but I have a profound reverence for the Don--and that not merely because I have so often acted as foolishly as he. This last I proceeded to carry out, and lifting-my hat, rode to meet them. Taking no notice whatever of Brotherton, I addressed Clara--in what I fancied a distant and dignified manner, which she might, if she pleased, attribute to the presence of her companion.

‘Miss Coningham,’ I said, ‘will you allow me the honour of offering you my mare? She will carry you better.’

‘You are very kind, Mr Cumbermede,’ she returned in a similar tone, but with a sparkle in her eyes. ‘I am greatly obliged to you. I cannot pretend to prefer old crossbones to the beautiful creature which gave me so much pleasure yesterday.’

I was off and by her side in a moment, helping her to dismount. I did not even look at Brotherton, though I felt he was staring like an equestrian statue. While I shifted the saddles Clara broke the silence, which I was in too great an inward commotion to heed, by asking--

‘What is the name of your beauty, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Lilith,’ I answered.

‘What a pretty name! I never heard it before. Is it after any one--any public character, I mean?’

‘Quite a public character,’ I returned--‘Adam’s first wife.’

‘I never heard he had two,’ she rejoined, laughing.

‘The Jews say he had. She is a demon now, and the pest of married women and their babies.’

‘What a horrible name to give your mare!’

‘The name is pretty enough. And what does it matter what the woman was, so long as she was beautiful.’

‘I don’t quite agree with you there,’ she returned, with what I chose to consider a forced laugh.

By this time her saddle was firm on Lilith, and in an instant she was mounted. Brotherton moved to ride on, and the mare followed him. Clara looked back.

‘You will catch us up in a moment,’ she said, possibly a little puzzled between us.

I was busy tightening my girths, and fumbled over the job more than was necessary. Brotherton was several yards ahead, and she was walking the mare slowly after him. I made her no answer, but mounted, and rode in the opposite direction; It was rude of course, but I did it. I could not have gone with them, and was afraid, if I told her so, she would dismount and refuse the mare.

In a tumult of feeling I rode on without looking behind me, careless whither--how long I cannot tell, before I woke up to find I did not know where I was. I must ride on till I came to some place I knew, or met some one who could tell me. Lane led into lane, buried betwixt deep banks and lofty hedges, or passing through small woods, until I ascended a rising

ground, whence I got a view of the country. At once its features began to dawn upon me: I was close to the village of Aldwick, where I had been at school, and in a few minutes I rode into its wide straggling street. Not a mark of change had passed upon it. There were the same dogs about the doors, and the same cats in the windows. The very ferns in the chinks of the old draw-well appeared the same; and the children had not grown an inch since first I drove into the place marvelling at its wondrous activity.

The sun was hot, and my horse seemed rather tired. I was in no mood to see any one, and besides had no pleasant recollections of my last visit to Mr Elder, so I drew up at the door of the little inn, and having sent my horse to the stable for an hour's rest and a feed of oats, went into the sanded parlour, ordered a glass of ale, and sat staring at the china shepherdesses on the chimney-piece. I see them now, the ugly things, as plainly as if that had been an hour of the happiest reflections. I thought I was miserable, but I know now that, although I was much disappointed, and everything looked dreary and uninteresting about me, I was a long way off misery. Indeed, the passing vision of a neat unbonneted village girl on her way to the well was attractive enough still to make me rise and go to the window. While watching, as she wound up the long chain, for the appearance of the familiar mossy bucket, dripping diamonds, as it gleamed out of the dark well into the sudden sunlight, I heard the sound of horse's hoofs, and turned to see what kind of apparition would come. Presently it appeared, and made straight for the inn. The rider was Mr Coningham! I drew back to escape his notice, but his quick eye had caught sight of me, for he came into the room with outstretched hand.

'We are fated to meet, Mr Cumbermede,' he said. 'I only stopped to give my horse some meal and water, and had no intention of dismounting. Ale? I'll have a glass of ale too,' he added, ringing the bell. 'I think I'll let him have a feed, and have a mouthful of bread and cheese myself.'

He went out, and had I suppose gone to see that his horse had his proper allowance of oats, for when he returned he said merrily:

‘What have you done with my daughter, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Why should you think me responsible for her, Mr Conningham?’ I asked, attempting a smile.

No doubt he detected the attempt in the smile, for he looked at me with a sharpened expression of the eyes, as he answered--still in a merry tone--

‘When I saw her last, she was mounted on your horse, and you were on my father’s. I find you still on my father’s horse, and your own--with the lady--nowhere. Have I made out a case of suspicion?’

‘It is I who have cause of complaint,’ I returned--‘who have neither lady nor mare--unless indeed you imagine I have in the case of the latter made a good exchange.’

‘Hardly that, I imagine, if yours is half so good as she looks. But, seriously, have you seen Clara to-day?’

I told him the facts as lightly as I could. When I had finished, he stared at me with an expression which for the moment I avoided attempting to interpret.

‘On horseback with Mr Brotherton?’ he said, uttering the words as if every syllable had been separately italicized.

‘You will find it as I say,’ I replied, feeling offended.

‘My dear boy--excuse my freedom,’ he returned--‘I am nearly three times your age--you do not imagine I doubt a hair’s breadth of your statement! But--the giddy goose!--how could you be so silly? Pardon me again. Your unselfishness is positively amusing! To hand over your horse to her, and then ride away all by yourself on that--respectable stager!’

‘Don’t abuse the old horse,’ I returned. ‘He *is* respectable, and has been more in his day.’

‘Yes, yes. But for the life of me I cannot understand it. Mr Cumbermede, I am sorry for you. I should not advise you to choose the law for a profession. The man who does not regard his own rights will hardly do for an adviser in the affairs of others.

‘You were not going to consult me, Mr Coningham, were you?’ I said, now able at length to laugh without effort.

‘Not quite that,’ he returned, also laughing. ‘But a right, you know, is one of the most serious things in the world.’

It seemed irrelevant to the trifling character of the case. I could not understand why he should regard the affair as of such importance.

‘I have been in the way of thinking,’ I said, ‘that one of the advantages of having rights was that you could part with them when you pleased. You’re not bound to insist on your rights, are you?’

‘Certainly you would not subject yourself to a criminal action by foregoing them, but you might suggest to your friends a commission of lunacy. I see how it is. That is your uncle all over! *He* was never a man of the world.’

‘You are right there, Mr Coningham. It is the last epithet any one would give my uncle.’

‘And the first any one would give *me*, you imply, Mr Cumbermede.’

‘I had no such intention,’ I answered. ‘That would have been rude.’

‘Not in the least. *I* should have taken it as a compliment. The man who does not care about his rights, depend upon it, will be made a tool of by those that do. If he is not a spoon already, he will become one. I shouldn’t have *iffed* it at all if I hadn’t known you.’

‘And you don’t want to be rude to me.’

‘I don’t. A little experience will set *you* all right; and that you are in a fair chance of getting if you push your fortune as a literary man. But I must be off. I hope we may have another chat before long.’

He finished his ale, rose, bade me good-bye, and went to the stable. As soon as he was out of sight, I also mounted and rode homewards.

By the time I reached the gate of the park, my depression had nearly vanished. The comforting power of sun and shadow, of sky and field, of wind and motion, had restored me to myself. With a side glance at the windows of the cottage as I passed, and the glimpse of a bright figure seated in the drawing-room window, I made for the stable, and found my Lilith waiting me. Once more I shifted my saddle, and rode home, without even another glance at the window as I passed.

A day or two after, I received from Mr Coningham a ticket for the county ball, accompanied by a kind note. I returned it at once with the excuse that I feared incapacitating myself for work by dissipation.

Henceforward I avoided the park, and did not again see Clara before leaving for London. I had a note from her, thanking me for Lilith, and reproaching me for having left her to the company of Mr Brotherton, which I thought cool enough, seeing they had set out together without the slightest expectation of meeting me. I returned a civil answer, and there was an end of it.

I must again say for myself that it was not mere jealousy of Brotherton that led me to act as I did. I could not and would not get over the contradiction between the way in which she had spoken *of* him, and the way in which she spoke *to* him, followed by her accompanying him in the long ride to which the state of my mare bore witness. I concluded that, although she might mean no harm, she was not truthful. To talk of a man with such contempt, and then behave to him with such frankness,

appeared to me altogether unjustifiable. At the same time their mutual familiarity pointed to some foregone intimacy, in which, had I been so inclined, I might have found some excuse for her, seeing she might have altered her opinion of him, and might yet find it very difficult to alter the tone of their intercourse.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN LONDON.

My real object being my personal history in relation to certain facts and events, I must, in order to restrain myself from that discursiveness the impulse to which is an urging of the historical as well as the artistic Satan, even run the risk of appearing to have been blind to many things going on around me which must have claimed a large place had I been writing an autobiography instead of a distinct portion of one.

I set out with my manuscript in my portmanteau, and a few pounds in my pocket, determined to cost my uncle as little as I could.

I well remember the dreariness of London, as I entered it on the top of a coach, in the closing darkness of a late Autumn afternoon. The shops were not yet all lighted, and a drizzly rain was falling. But these outer influences hardly got beyond my mental skin, for I had written to Charley, and hoped to find him waiting for me at the coach-office. Nor was I disappointed, and in a moment all discomfort was forgotten. He took me to his chambers in the New Inn.

I found him looking better, and apparently, for him, in good spirits. It was soon arranged, at his entreaty, that for the present I should share his sitting-room, and have a bed put up for me in a closet he did not want. The next day I called upon certain publishers and left with them my manuscript. Its fate is of no consequence here, and I did not then wait to know it, but at once began to fly my feather at lower game, writing short papers and tales for the magazines. I had a little success from the first; and although the surroundings of my new abode were dreary enough, although, now and then, especially when the Winter sun shone bright into the court, I longed for one peep into space across the field that now itself lay far in the distance, I soon settled to my work, and found the life an enjoyable one. To work beside Charley the most of the day, and go with

him in the evening to some place of amusement, or to visit some of the men in chambers about us, was for the time a satisfactory mode of existence.

I soon told him the story of my little passage with Clara. During the narrative he looked uncomfortable, and indeed troubled, but as soon as he found I had given up the affair, his countenance brightened.

‘I’m very glad you’ve got over it so well,’ he said.

‘I think I’ve had a good deliverance,’ I returned.

He made no reply. Neither did his face reveal his thoughts, for I could not read the confused expression it bore.

That he should not fall in with my judgment would never have surprised me, for he always hung back from condemnation, partly, I presume, from being even morbidly conscious of his own imperfections, and partly that his prolific suggestion supplied endless possibilities to explain or else perplex everything. I had been often even annoyed by his use of the most refined invention to excuse, as I thought, behaviour the most palpably wrong. I believe now it was rather to account for it than to excuse it.

‘Well, Charley,’ I would say in such a case, ‘I am sure *you* would never have done such a thing.’

‘I cannot guarantee my own conduct for a moment,’ he would answer; or, taking the other tack, would reply: ‘Just for that reason I cannot believe the man would have done it.’

But the oddity in the present case was that he said nothing. I should, however, have forgotten all about it, but that after some time I began to observe that as often as I alluded to Clara--which was not often--he contrived to turn the remark aside, and always without saying a syllable about her. The conclusion I came to was that, while he shrunk from

condemnation, he was at the same time unwilling to disturb the present serenity of my mind by defending her conduct.

Early in the Spring, an unpleasant event occurred, of which I might have foreseen the possibility. One morning I was alone, working busily, when the door opened.

‘Why, Charley--back already!’ I exclaimed, going on to finish my sentence.

Receiving no answer, I looked up from my paper, and started to my feet. Mr Osborne stood before me, scrutinizing me with severe grey eyes. I think he knew me from the first, but I was sufficiently altered to make it doubtful.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said coldly--‘I thought these were Charles Osborne’s chambers.’ And he turned to leave the room.

‘They *are* his chambers, Mr Osborne,’ I replied, recovering myself with an effort, and looking him in the face.

‘My son had not informed me that he shared them with another.’

‘We are very old friends, Mr Osborne.’

He made no answer, but stood regarding me fixedly.

‘You do not remember me, sir,’ I said. ‘I am Wilfrid Cumbermede.’

‘I have cause to remember you.’

‘Will you not sit down, sir? Charley will be home in less than an hour--I quite expect.’

Again he turned his back as if about to leave me.

‘If my presence is disagreeable to you,’ I said, annoyed at his rudeness, ‘I will go.’

‘As you please,’ he answered.

I left my papers, caught up my hat, and went out of the room and the house. I said *good morning*, but he made no return.

Not until nearly eight o’clock did I re-enter. I had of course made up my mind that Charley and I must part. When I opened the door, I thought at first there was no one there. There were no lights, and the fire had burned low.

‘Is that you, Wilfrid?’ said Charley.

He was lying on the sofa.

‘Yes, Charley,’ I returned.

‘Come in, old fellow. The avenger of blood is not behind me,’ he said, in a mocking tone, as he rose and came to meet me. ‘I’ve been having such a dose of damnation--all for your sake!’

‘I’m very sorry, Charley. But I think we are both to blame. Your father ought to have been told. You see day after day went by, and--somehow--’

‘Tut, tut! never mind. What *does* it matter--except that it’s a disgrace to be dependent on such a man? I wish I had the courage to starve.’

‘He’s your father, Charley. Nothing can alter that.’

‘That’s the misery of it. And then to tell people God is their father! If he’s like mine, he’s done us a mighty favour in creating us! I can’t say I feel grateful for it. I must turn out to-morrow.’

‘No, Charley. The place has no attraction for me without you, and it was yours first. Besides, I can’t afford to pay so much. I will find another to-morrow. But we shall see each other often, and perhaps get through more work apart. I hope he didn’t insist on your never seeing me.’

‘He did try it on; but there I stuck fast, threatening to vanish and scramble for my living as I best might. I told him you were a far better man than I, and did me nothing but good. But that only made the matter worse, proving your influence over me. Let’s drop it. It’s no use. Let’s go to the Olympic.’

The next day I looked for a lodging in Camden Town, attracted by the probable cheapness, and by the grass in the Regent’s Park; and having found a decent place, took my things away while Charley was out. I had not got them, few as they were, in order in my new quarters before he made his appearance; and as long as I was there few days passed on which we did not meet.

One evening he walked in, accompanied by a fine-looking young fellow, whom I thought I must know, and presently recognized as Home, our old school-fellow, with whom I had fought in Switzerland. We had become good friends before we parted, and Charley and he had met repeatedly since.

‘What are you doing now, Home?’ I asked him.

‘I’ve just taken deacon’s orders,’ he answered. ‘A friend of my father’s has promised me a living. I’ve been hanging-about quite long enough now. A fellow ought to do something for his existence.’

‘I can’t think how a strong fellow like you can take to mumbling prayers and reading sermons,’ said Charley.

‘It ain’t nice,’ said Home, ‘but it’s a very respectable profession. There are viscounts in it, and lots of honourables.’

‘I dare say,’ returned Charley, with drought. ‘But a nerveless creature like me, who can’t even hit straight from the shoulder, would be good enough for that. A giant like you, Home!’

‘Ah! by-the-by, Osborne,’ said Home, not in love with the prospect, and willing to turn the conversation, ‘I thought you were a church-calf yourself.’

‘Honestly, Home, I don’t know whether it isn’t the biggest of all big humbugs.’

‘Oh, but--Osborne!--it ain’t the thing, you know, to talk like that of a profession adopted by so many great men fit to honour any profession,’ returned Home, who was not one of the brightest of mortals, and was jealous for the profession just in as much as it was destined for his own.

‘Either the profession honours the men, or the men dishonour themselves,’ said Charley. ‘I believe it claims to have been founded by a man called Jesus Christ, if such a man ever existed except in the fancy of his priesthood.’

‘Well, really,’ expostulated Home, looking, I must say, considerably shocked, ‘I shouldn’t have expected that from the son of a clergyman!’

‘I couldn’t help my father. I wasn’t consulted,’ said Charley, with an uncomfortable grin. ‘But, at any rate, my father fancies he believes all the story. I fancy I don’t.’

‘Then you’re an infidel, Osborne.’

‘Perhaps. Do you think that so very horrible?’

‘Yes, I do. Tom Paine, and all the rest of them, you know!’

‘Well, Home, I’ll tell you one thing I think worse than being an infidel.’

‘What is that?’

‘Taking to the Church for a living.’

‘I don’t see that.’

‘Either the so-called truths it advocates are things to live and die for, or they are the veriest old wives’ fables going. Do you know who was the first to do what you are about now?’

‘No. I can’t say. I’m not up in Church history yet.’

‘It was Judas.’

I am not sure that Charley was right, but that is what he said. I was taking no part in the conversation, but listening eagerly, with a strong suspicion that Charley had been leading Home to this very point.

‘A man must live,’ said Home.

‘That’s precisely what I take it Judas said: for my part I don’t see it.’

‘Don’t see what?’

‘That a man must live. It would be a far more incontrovertible assertion that a man must die--and a more comfortable one, too.’

‘Upon my word, I don’t understand you, Osborne! You make a fellow feel deuced queer with your remarks.’

‘At all events, you will allow that the first of them--they call them apostles, don’t they?--didn’t take to preaching the gospel for the sake of a living. What a satire on the whole kit of them that word *living*, so constantly in all their mouths, is! It seems to me that Messrs Peter and Paul and Matthew, and all the rest of them, forsook their livings for a good chance of something rather the contrary.’

‘Then it *was* true--what they said about you at Forest’s?’

‘I don’t know what they said,’ returned Charley; ‘but before I would pretend to believe what I didn’t--’

‘But I *do* believe it, Osborne.’

‘May I ask on what grounds?’

‘Why--everybody does.’

‘That would be no reason, even if it were a fact, which it is not. You believe it, or rather, choose to think you believe it, because you’ve been told it. Sooner than pretend to teach what I have never learned, and be looked up to as a pattern of godliness, I would ‘list in the ranks. There, at least, a man might earn an honest living.’

‘By Jove! You do make a fellow feel uncomfortable!’ repeated Home. ‘You’ve got such a--such an uncompromising way of saying things--to use a mild expression.’

‘I think it’s a sneaking thing to do, and unworthy of a gentleman.’

‘I don’t see what right you’ve got to bully me in that way,’ said Home, getting angry.

It was time to interfere.

‘Charley is so afraid of being dishonest, Home,’ I said, ‘that he is rude.--You are rude now, Charley.’

‘I beg your pardon, Home,’ exclaimed Charley at once.

‘Oh, never mind!’ returned Home with gloomy good-nature.

‘You ought to make allowance, Charley,’ I pursued. ‘When a man has been accustomed all his life to hear things spoken of in a certain way, he cannot help having certain notions to start with.’

‘If I thought as Osborne does,’ said Home, ‘I *would* sooner ‘list than go into the Church.’

‘I confess,’ I rejoined, ‘I do not see how any one can take orders, unless he not only loves God with all his heart, but receives the story of the New

Testament as a revelation of him, precious beyond utterance. To the man who accepts it so, the calling is the noblest in the world.'

The others were silent, and the conversation turned away. From whatever cause, Home did not go into the Church, but died fighting in India.

He soon left us--Charley remaining behind.

'What a hypocrite I am!' he exclaimed;--'following a profession in which I must often, if I have any practice at all, defend what I know to be wrong, and seek to turn justice from its natural course.'

'But you can't always know that your judgment is right, even if it should be against your client. I heard an eminent barrister say once that he had come out of the court convinced by the arguments of the opposite counsel.'

'And having gained the case?'

'That I don't know.'

'He went in believing his own side anyhow, and that made it all right for him.'

'I don't know that either. His private judgment was altered, but whether it was for or against his client, I do not remember. The fact, however, shows that one might do a great wrong by refusing a client whom he judged in the wrong.'

'On the contrary, to refuse a brief on such grounds would be best for all concerned. Not believing in it, you could not do your best, and might be preventing one who would believe in it from taking it up.'

'The man might not get anybody to take it up.'

'Then there would be little reason to expect that a jury charged under ordinary circumstances would give a verdict in his favour.'

‘But it would be for the barristers to constitute themselves the judges.’

‘Yes--of their own conduct--only that. There I am again! The finest ideas about the right thing--and going on all the same, with open eyes running my head straight into the noose! Wilfrid, I’m one of the weakest animals in creation. What if you found at last that I had been deceiving *you*! What would you say?’

‘Nothing, Charley--to any one else.’

‘What would you say to yourself, then?’

‘I don’t know. I know what I should do.’

‘What?’

‘Try to account for it, and find as many reasons as I could to justify you. That is, I would do just as you do for every one but yourself.’

He was silent--plainly from emotion, which I attributed to his pleasure at the assurance of the strength of my friendship.

‘Suppose you could find none?’ he said, recovering himself a little.

‘I should still believe there *were* such. *Tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner*, you know.’

He brightened at this.

‘You *are* a friend, Wilfrid! What a strange condition mine is!--for ever feeling I could do this and that difficult thing, were it to fall in my way, and yet constantly failing in the simplest duties--even to that of common politeness. I behaved like a brute to Home. He’s a fine fellow, and only wants to see a thing to do it. *I* see it well enough, and don’t do it. Wilfrid, I shall come to a bad end. When it comes, mind I told you so, and blame nobody but myself. I mean what I say.

‘Nonsense, Charley! It’s only that you haven’t active work enough, and get morbid with brooding over the germs of things.’

‘Oh, Wilfrid, how beautiful a life might be! Just look at that one in the New Testament! Why shouldn’t *I* be like that? *I* don’t know why. I feel as if I could. But I’m not, you see--and never shall be. I’m selfish, and ill-tempered, and--’

‘Charley! Charley! There never was a less selfish or better-tempered fellow in the world.’

‘Don’t make me believe that, Wilfrid, or I shall hate the world as well as myself. It’s all my hypocrisy makes you think so. Because I am ashamed of what I am, and manage to hide it pretty well, you think me a saint. That is heaping damnation on me.’

‘Take a pipe, Charley, and shut up. That’s rubbish!’ I said. I doubt much if it was what I ought to have said, but I was alarmed for the consequences of such brooding. ‘I wonder what the world would be like if every one considered himself acting up to his own ideal!’

‘If he was acting so, then it would do the world no harm that he knew it.’

‘But his ideal must then be a low one, and that would do himself and everybody the worst kind of harm. The greatest men have always thought the least of themselves.’

‘Yes, but that was because they *were* the greatest. A man may think little of himself just for the reason that he *is* little, and can’t help knowing it.’

‘Then it’s a mercy he does know it! for most small people think much of themselves.’

‘But to know it--and to feel all the time you ought to be and could be something very different, and yet never get a step nearer it! That is to be miserable. Still it is a mercy to know it. There is always a last help.’

I mistook what he meant, and thought it well to say no more. After smoking a pipe or two, he was quieter, and left me with a merry remark. One lovely evening in Spring, I looked from my bed-room window, and saw the red sunset burning in the thin branches of the solitary poplar that graced the few feet of garden behind the house. It drew me out to the park, where the trees were all in young leaf, each with its shadow stretching away from its foot, like its longing to reach its kind across dividing space. The grass was like my own grass at home, and I went wandering over it in all the joy of the new Spring, which comes every year to our hearts as well as to their picture outside. The workmen were at that time busy about the unfinished botanical gardens, and I wandered thitherward, lingering about, and pondering and inventing, until the sun was long withdrawn, and the shades of night had grown very brown.

I was at length sauntering slowly home to put a few finishing touches to a paper I had been at work upon all day, when something about a young couple in front of me attracted my attention. They were walking arm in arm, talking eagerly, but so low that I heard only a murmur. I did not quicken my pace, yet was gradually gaining upon them, when suddenly the conviction started up in my mind that the gentleman was Charley. I could not mistake his back, or the stoop of his shoulders as he bent towards his companion. I was so certain of him that I turned at once from the road, and wandered away across the grass: if he did not choose to tell me about the lady, I had no right to know. But I confess to a strange trouble that he had left me out. I comforted myself, however, with the thought that perhaps when we next met he would explain, or at least break, the silence.

After about an hour, he entered, in an excited mood, merry but uncomfortable. I tried to behave as if I knew nothing, but could not help feeling much disappointed when he left me without a word of his having had a second reason for being in the neighbourhood.

What effect the occurrence might have had, whether the cobweb veil of which I was now aware between us would have thickened to opacity or not, I cannot tell. I dare not imagine that it might. I rather hope that by degrees my love would have got the victory, and melted it away. But now came a cloud which swallowed every other in my firmament. The next morning brought a letter from my aunt, telling me that my uncle had had a stroke, as she called it, and at that moment was lying insensible. I put my affairs in order at once, and Charley saw me away by the afternoon coach.

It was a dreary journey. I loved my uncle with perfect confidence and profound veneration, a result of the faithful and open simplicity with which he had always behaved towards me. If he were taken away, and already he might be gone, I should be lonely indeed, for on whom besides could I depend with anything like the trust which I reposed in him? For, conceitedly or not, I had always felt that Charley rather depended on me--that I had rather to take care of him than to look for counsel from him.

The weary miles rolled away. Early in the morning we reached Minstercombe. There I got a carriage, and at once continued my journey.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHANGES.

I met no one at the house-door, or in the kitchen, and walked straight up the stair to my uncle's room. The blinds were down, and the curtains were drawn, and I could but just see the figure of my aunt seated beside the bed. She rose, and, without a word of greeting, made way for me to approach the form which lay upon it stretched out straight and motionless. The conviction that I was in the presence of death seized me; but instead of the wretchedness of heart and soul which I had expected to follow the loss of my uncle, a something deeper than any will of my own asserted itself, and as it were took the matter from me. It was as if my soul avoided the sorrow of separation by breaking with the world of material things, asserting the shadowy nature of all the visible, and choosing its part with the something which had passed away. It was as if my deeper self said to my outer consciousness: 'I too am of the dead--one with them, whether they live or are no more. For a little while I am shut out from them, and surrounded with things that seem: let me gaze on the picture while it lasts; dream or no dream, let me live in it according to its laws, and await what will come next; if an awaking, it is well: if only a perfect because dreamless sleep, I shall not be able to lament the endless separation--but while I know myself, I will hope for something better.' Like this, at least, was the blossom into which, under my after-brooding, the bud of that feeling broke.

I laid my hand upon my uncle's forehead. It was icy cold, just like my grannie's when my aunt had made me touch it. And I knew that my uncle was gone, that the slow tide of the eternal ocean had risen while he lay motionless within the wash of its waves, and had floated him away from the shore of our world. I took the hand of my aunt, who stood like a statue behind me, and led her from the room.

'He is gone, aunt,' I said, as calmly as I could.

She made no reply, but gently withdrew her hand from mine, and returned into the chamber. I stood a few moments irresolute, but reverence for her sorrow prevailed, and I went down the stair and seated myself by the fire. There the servant told me that my uncle had never moved since they laid him in his bed. Soon after the doctor arrived, and went up-stairs; but returned in a few minutes, only to affirm the fact. I went again to the room, and found my aunt lying with her face on the bosom of the dead man. She allowed me to draw her away, but when I would have led her down, she turned aside and sought her own chamber, where she remained for the rest of the day.

I will not linger over that miserable time. Greatly as I revered my uncle, I was not prepared to find how much he had been respected, and was astonished at the number of faces I had never seen which followed to the churchyard. Amongst them were the Coninghams, father and son; but except by a friendly grasp of the hand, and a few words of condolence, neither interrupted the calm depression rather than grief in which I found myself. When I returned home, there was with my aunt a married sister, whom I had never seen before. Up to this time she had shown an arid despair, and been regardless of everything about her; but now she was in tears. I left them together, and wandered for hours up and down the lonely playground of my childhood, thinking of many things--most of all, how strange it was that, if there were a *hereafter* for us, we should know positively nothing concerning it; that not a whisper should cross the invisible line; that the something which had looked from its windows so lovingly should have in a moment withdrawn, by some back-way unknown either to itself or us, into a region of which all we can tell is that thence no prayers and no tears will entice it to lift for an instant again the fallen curtain, and look out once more. Why should not God, I thought, if a God there be, permit one single return to each, that so the friends left behind in the dark might be sure that death was not the end, and so live in the world as not of the world?

[Illustration: I went again to the room, and found my aunt lying with her face on the bosom of the dead man]

When I re-entered, I found my aunt looking a little cheerful. She was even having something to eat with her sister--an elderly country-looking woman, the wife of a farmer in a distant shire. Their talk had led them back to old times, to their parents and the friends of their childhood; and the memory of the long dead had comforted her a little over the recent loss; for all true hearts death is a uniting, not a dividing power.

‘I suppose you will be going back to London, Wilfrid?’ said my aunt, who had already been persuaded to pay her sister a visit.

‘I think I had better,’ I answered. ‘When I have a chance of publishing a book, I should like to come and write it, or at least finish it, here, if you will let me.’

‘The place is your own, Wilfrid. Of course I shall be very glad to have you here.’

‘The place is yours as much as mine, aunt,’ I replied. ‘I can’t bear to think that my uncle has no right over it still. I believe he has, and therefore it is yours just the same--not to mention my own wishes in the matter.’

She made no reply, and I saw that both she and her sister were shocked either at my mentioning the dead man, or at my supposing he had any earthly rights left. The next day they set out together, leaving in the house the wife of the head man at the farm, to attend to me until I should return to town. I had purposed to set out the following morning, but I found myself enjoying so much the undisturbed possession of the place, that I remained there for ten days; and when I went, it was with the intention of making it my home as soon as I might: I had grown enamoured of the solitude so congenial to labour. Before I left I arranged my uncle’s papers, and in doing so found several early sketches which satisfied me

that he might have distinguished himself in literature if his fate had led him thitherward.

Having given the house in charge to my aunt’s deputy, Mrs Herbert, I at length returned to my lodging in Camden Town. There I found two letters waiting me, the one announcing the serious illness of my aunt, and the other her death. The latter was two days old. I wrote to express my sorrow, and excuse my apparent neglect, and having made a long journey to see her also laid in the earth, I returned to my old home, in order to make fresh arrangements.

CHAPTER XXX.

PROPOSALS.

Mrs Herbert attended me during the forenoon, but left me after my early dinner. I made my tea for myself, and a tankard filled from a barrel of ale of my uncle's brewing, with a piece of bread and cheese, was my unvarying supper. The first night I felt very lonely, almost indeed what the Scotch call *eerie*. The place, although inseparably interwoven with my earliest recollections, drew back and stood apart from me--a thing to be thought about; and, in the ancient house, amidst the lonely field, I felt like a ghost condemned to return and live the vanished time over again. I had had a fire lighted in my own room; for, although the air was warm outside, the thick stone walls seemed to retain the chilly breath of the last Winter. The silent rooms that filled the house forced the sense of their presence upon me. I seemed to see the forsaken things in them staring at each other, hopeless and useless, across the dividing space, as if saying to themselves, 'We belong to the dead, are mouldering to the dust after them, and in the dust alone we meet.' From the vacant rooms my soul seemed to float out beyond, searching still--to find nothing but loneliness and emptiness betwixt me and the stars; and beyond the stars more loneliness and more emptiness still--no rest for the sole of the foot of the wandering Psyche--save--one mighty saving--an exception which, if true, must be the one all-absorbing rule. 'But,' I was saying to myself, 'love unknown is not even equal to love lost,' when my reverie was broken by the dull noise of a horse's hoofs upon the sward. I rose and went to the window. As I crossed the room, my brain rather than myself suddenly recalled the night when my pendulum drew from the churning trees the unwelcome genius of the storm. The moment I reached the window--there through the dim Summer twilight, once more from the trees, now as still as sleep, came the same figure.

Mr Coningham saw me at the fire-lighted window, and halted.

‘May I be admitted?’ he asked ceremoniously.

I made a sign to him to ride round to the door, for I could not speak aloud: it would have been rude to the memories that haunted the silent house.

‘May I come in for a few minutes, Mr Cumbermede?’ he asked again, already at the door by the time I had opened it.

‘By all means, Mr Coningham,’ I replied. ‘Only you must tie your horse to this ring, for we--I--have no stable here.’

‘I’ve done this before,’ he answered, as he made the animal fast. ‘I know the ways of the place well enough. But surely you’re not here in absolute solitude?’

‘Yes, I am. I prefer being alone at present.’

‘Very unhealthy, I must say! You will grow hypochondriacal if you mope in this fashion,’ he returned, following me up-stairs to my room.

‘A day or two of solitude now and then would, I suspect, do most people more good than harm,’ I answered. ‘But you must not think I intend leading a hermit’s life. Have you heard that my aunt--?’

‘Yes, yes.--You are left alone in the world. But relations are not a man’s only friends--and certainly not always his best friends.’

I made no reply, thinking of my uncle.

‘I did not know you were down,’ he resumed. ‘I was calling at my father’s, and seeing your light across the park, thought it possible you might be here, and rode over to see. May I take the liberty of asking what your plans are?’ he added, seating himself by the fire.

‘I have hardly had time to form new ones; but I mean to stick to my work, anyhow.’

‘You mean your profession?’

‘Yes, if you will allow me to call it such. I have had success enough already to justify me in going on.’

‘I am more pleased than surprised to hear it,’ he answered.

‘But what will you do with the old nest?’

‘Let the old nest wait for the old bird, Mr Coningham--keep it to die in.’

‘I don’t like to hear a young fellow talking that way,’ he remonstrated. ‘You’ve got a long life to live yet--at least I hope so. But if you leave the house untenanted till the period to which you allude, it will be quite unfit by that time even for the small service you propose to require of it. Why not let it--for a term of years? I could find you a tenant, I make no doubt.’

‘I won’t let it. I shall meet the world all the better if I have a place of my own to take refuge in.’

‘Well, I can’t say but there’s good in that fancy. To have any spot of your own, however small--freehold, I mean--must be a comfort. At the same time, what’s the world for, if you’re to meet it in that half-hearted way? I don’t mean that every young man--there are exceptions--must sow just so many bushels of *avena fatua*. There are plenty of enjoyments to be got without leading a wild life--which I should be the last to recommend to any young man of principle. Take my advice, and let the place. But pray don’t do me the injustice to fancy I came to look after a job. I shall be most happy to serve you.’

‘I am exceedingly obliged to you,’ I answered. ‘If you could let the farm for me for the rest of the lease, of which there are but a few years to run, that would be of great consequence to me. Herbert, my uncle’s foreman, who has the management now, is a very good fellow, but I doubt if he will do more than make both ends meet without my aunt, and the accounts would bother me endlessly.’

‘I shall find out whether Lord Inglewold would be inclined to resume the fag-end. In such case, as the lease has been a long one, and land has risen much, he would doubtless pay a part of the difference. Then there’s the stock, worth a good deal, I should think. I’ll see what can be done. And then there’s the stray bit of park?’

‘What do you mean by that?’ I asked. ‘We have been in the way of calling it the *park*, though why I never could tell. I confess it does look like a bit of Sir Giles’s that had wandered beyond the gates.’

‘There *is* some old story or other about it, I believe. The possessors of the Moldwarp estate have, from time immemorial, regarded it as properly theirs. I know that.’

‘I am much obliged to them, certainly. *I* have been in the habit of thinking differently.’

‘Of course, of course,’ he rejoined, laughing. ‘But there may have been some--mistake somewhere. I know Sir Giles would give five times its value for it.’

‘He should not have it if he offered the Moldwarp estate in exchange,’ I cried indignantly; and the thought flashed across me that this temptation was what my uncle had feared from the acquaintance of Mr Coningham.

‘Your sincerity will not be put to so great a test as that,’ he returned, laughing quite merrily. ‘But I am glad you have such a respect for real property. At the same time--how many acres are there of it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I answered, curtly and truly.

‘It is of no consequence. Only if you don’t want to be tempted, don’t let Sir Giles or my father broach the subject. You needn’t look at me. *I* am not Sir Giles’s agent. Neither do my father and I run in double harness. He hinted, however, this very day, that he believed the old fool wouldn’t stick at £500 an acre for this bit of grass--if he couldn’t get it for less.’

‘If that is what you have come about, Mr Coningham,’ I rejoined, haughtily I dare say, for something I could not well define made me feel as if the dignity of a thousand ancestors were perilled in my own,’ I beg you will not say another word on the subject, for sell this land I *will not*.’

He was looking at me strangely. His eye glittered with what, under other circumstances, I might have taken for satisfaction; but he turned his face away and rose, saying with a curiously altered tone, as he took up his hat,

‘I’m very sorry to have offended you, Mr Cumbermede. I sincerely beg your pardon. I thought our old--friendship may I not call it?--would have justified me in merely reporting what I had heard. I see now that I was wrong. I ought to have shown more regard for your feelings at this trying time. But again I assure you I was only reporting, and had not the slightest intention of making myself a go-between in the matter. One word more: I have no doubt I could *let* the field for you--at good grazing rental. That I think you can hardly object to.’

‘I should be much obliged to you,’ I replied--‘for a term of not more than seven years--but without the house, and with the stipulation expressly made that I have right of way in every direction through it.’

‘Reasonable enough,’ he answered.

‘One thing more,’ I said: ‘all these affairs must be pure matters of business between us.’

‘As you please,’ he returned, with, I fancied, a shadow of disappointment, if not of displeasure, on his countenance. ‘I should have been more gratified if you had accepted a friendly office; but I will do my best for you, notwithstanding.’

‘I had no intention of being unfriendly, Mr Coningham,’ I said. ‘But when I think of it, I fear I may have been rude, for the bare proposal of selling this Naboth’s vineyard of mine would go far to make me rude to

any man alive. It sounds like an invitation to dishonour myself in the eyes of my ancestors.'

'Ah! you do care about your ancestors?' he said, half musingly, and looking into his hat.

'Of course I do. Who is there does not?'

'Only some ninety-nine hundredths of the English nation.'

'I cannot well forget,' I returned, 'what my ancestors have done for me.'

'Whereas most people only remember that their ancestors can do no more for them. I declare I am almost glad I offended you. It does one good to hear a young man speak like that in these degenerate days, when a buck would rather be the son of a rich brewer than a decayed gentleman. I will call again about the end of the week--that is if you will be here--and report progress.'

His manner, as he took his leave, was at once more friendly and more respectful than it had yet been--a change which I attributed to his having discovered in me more firmness than he had expected, in regard, if not of my rights, at least of my social position.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ARRANGEMENTS.

My custom at this time, and for long after I had finally settled down in the country, was to rise early in the morning--often, as I used when a child, before sunrise, in order to see the first burst of the sun upon the new-born world. I believed then, as I believe still, that, lovely as the sunset is, the sunrise is more full of mystery, poetry, and even, I had almost said, pathos. But often ere he was well up I had begun to imagine what the evening would be like, and with what softly mingled, all but imperceptible, gradations it would steal into night. Then, when the night came, I would wander about my little field, vainly endeavouring to picture the glory with which the next day's sun would rise upon me. Hence the morning and evening became well known to me; and yet I shrink from saying it, for each is endless in the variety of its change. And the longer I was alone, I became the more enamoured of solitude, with the labour to which, in my case, it was so helpful; and began, indeed, to be in some danger of losing sight of my relation to 'a world of men,' for with that world my imagination and my love for Charley were now my sole recognizable links.

In the fore-part of the day I read and wrote; and in the after-part found both employment and pleasure in arranging my uncle's books, amongst which I came upon a good many treasures, whereof I was now able in some measure to appreciate the value--thinking often, amidst their ancient dust and odours, with something like indignant pity, of the splendid collection, as I was sure it must be, mouldering away in utter neglect at the neighbouring Hall.

I was on my knees in the midst of a pile which I had drawn from a cupboard under the shelves, when Mrs Herbert showed Mr Coningham in. I was annoyed, for my uncle's room was sacred; but as I was about to

take him to my own, I saw such a look of interest upon his face that it turned me aside, and I asked him to take a seat.

‘If you do not mind the dust,’ I said.

‘Mind the dust!’ he exclaimed, ‘--of old books! I count it almost sacred. I am glad you know how to value them.’

What right had he to be glad? How did he know I valued them? How could I but value them? I rebuked my offence, however, and after a little talk about them, in which he revealed much more knowledge than I should have expected, it vanished. He then informed me of an arrangement he and Lord Inglewold’s factor had been talking over in respect of the farm; also of an offer he had had for my field. I considered both sufficiently advantageous in my circumstances, and the result was that I closed with both.

A few days after this arrangement I returned to London, intending to remain for some time. I had a warm welcome from Charley, but could not help fancying an unacknowledged something dividing us. He appeared, notwithstanding, less oppressed, and, in a word, more like other people. I proceeded at once to finish two or three papers and stories, which late events had interrupted. But within a week London had grown to me stifling and unendurable, and I longed unspeakably for the free air of my field and the loneliness of my small castle. If my reader regard me as already a hypochondriac, the sole disproof I have to offer is, that I was then diligently writing what some years afterwards obtained a hearty reception from the better class of the reading public. Whether my habits were healthy or not, whether my love of solitude was natural or not, I cannot but hope from this that my modes of thinking were. The end was that, after finishing the work I had on hand, I collected my few belongings, gave up my lodging, bade Charley good-bye, receiving from him a promise to visit me at my own house if possible, and took my farewell of London for a season, determined not to return until I had

produced a work which my now more enlarged judgment might consider fit to see the light. I had laid out all my spare money upon books, with which, in a few heavy trunks, I now went back to my solitary dwelling. I had no care upon my mind, for my small fortune, along with the rent of my field, was more than sufficient for my maintenance in the almost anchoretic seclusion in which I intended to live, and hence I had every advantage for the more definite projection and prosecution of a work which had been gradually shaping itself in my mind for months past.

Before leaving for London, I had already spoken to a handy lad employed upon the farm, and he had kept himself free to enter my service when I should require him. He was the more necessary to me that I still had my mare Lilith, from which nothing but fate should ever part me. I had no difficulty in arranging with the new tenant for her continued accommodation at the farm; while, as Herbert still managed its affairs, the services of his wife were available as often as I required them. But my man soon made himself capable of doing everything for me, and proved himself perfectly trustworthy.

I must find a name for my place--for its own I will not write: let me call it The Moat: there were signs, plain enough to me after my return from Oxford, that there had once been a moat about it, of which the hollow I have mentioned as the spot where I used to lie and watch for the sun’s first rays, had evidently been a part. But the remains of the moat lay at a considerable distance from the house, suggesting a large area of building at some former period, proof of which, however, had entirely vanished, the house bearing every sign of a narrow completeness.

The work I had undertaken required a constantly recurring reference to books of the sixteenth century; and although I had provided as many as I thought I should need, I soon found them insufficient. My uncle’s library was very large for a man in his position, but it was not by any means equally developed; and my necessities made me think often of the old

library at the Hall, which might contain somewhere in its ruins every book I wanted. Not only, however, would it have been useless to go searching in the formless mass for this or that volume, but, unable to grant Sir Giles the desire of his heart in respect of my poor field, I did not care to ask of him the comparatively small favour of being allowed to burrow in his dust-heap of literature.

I was sitting, one hot noon, almost in despair over a certain little point concerning which I could find no definite information, when Mr Coningham called. After some business matters had been discussed, I mentioned, merely for the sake of talk, the difficulty I was in--the sole disadvantage of a residence in the country as compared with London, where the British Museum was the unfailing resort of all who required such aid as I was in want of.

‘But there is the library at Moldwarp Hall,’ he said.

‘Yes, *there* it is; but there is not *here*.’

‘I have no doubt Sir Giles would make you welcome to borrow what books you wanted. He is a good-natured man, Sir Giles.’

I explained my reason for not troubling him.

‘Besides,’ I added, ‘the library is in such absolute chaos, that I might with less loss of time run up to London, and find any volume I happened to want among the old-book-shops. You have no idea what a mess Sir Giles’s books are in--scarcely two volumes of the same book to be found even in proximity. It is one of the most painful sights I ever saw.’

He said little more, but from what followed, I suspect either he or his father spoke to Sir Giles on the subject; for, one day, as I was walking past the park-gates, which I had seldom entered since my return, I saw him just within, talking to old Mr Coningham. I saluted him in passing, and he not only returned the salutation in a friendly manner, but made a

step towards me as if he wished to speak to me. I turned and approached him. He came out and shook hands with me.

‘I know who you are, Mr Cumbermede, although I have never had the pleasure of speaking to you before,’ he said frankly.

‘There you are mistaken, Sir Giles,’ I returned; ‘but you could hardly be expected to remember the little boy who, many years ago, having stolen one of your apples, came to you to comfort him.’

He laughed heartily.

‘I remember the circumstance well,’ he said. ‘And you were that unhappy culprit? Ha! ha! ha! To tell the truth, I have thought of it many times. It was a remarkably fine thing to do.’

‘What! steal the apple, Sir Giles?’

‘Make the instant reparation you did.’

‘There was no reparation in asking you to box my ears.’

‘It was all you could do, though.’

‘To ease my own conscience, it was. There is always a satisfaction, I suppose, in suffering for your sins. But I have thought a thousand times of your kindness in shaking hands with me instead. You treated me as the angels treat the repentant sinner, Sir Giles.’

‘Well, I certainly never thought of it in that light,’ he said; then, as if wishing to change the subject,--‘Don’t you find it lonely now your uncle is gone?’ he said.

‘I miss him more than I can tell.’

‘A very worthy man he was--too good for this world, by all accounts.’

‘He’s not the worse off for that now, Sir Giles, I trust.’ ‘No; of course not,’ he returned quickly, with the usual shrinking from the slightest allusion to what is called the other world.--‘Is there anything I can do for you? You are a literary man, they tell me. There are a good many books of one sort and another lying at the Hall. Some of them might be of use to you. They are at your service. I am sure you are to be trusted even with mouldy books, which, from what I hear, must be a greater temptation to you now than red-cheeked apples,’ he added with another merry laugh.

‘I will tell you what,’ Sir Giles, I answered. ‘It has often grieved me to think of the state of your library. It would be scarcely possible for me to find a book in it now. But if you would trust me, I should be delighted, in my spare hours, of which I can command a good many, to put the whole in order for you.’

‘I should be under the greatest obligation. I have always intended having some capable man down from London to arrange it. I am no great reader myself, but I have the highest respect for a good library. It ought never to have got into the condition in which I found it.’

‘The books are fast going to ruin, I fear.’

‘Are they indeed?’ he exclaimed, with some consternation. ‘I was not in the least aware of that. I thought so long as I let no one meddle with them, they were safe enough.’

‘The law of the moth and rust holds with books as well as other unused things,’ I answered.

‘Then, pray, my dear sir, undertake the thing at once,’ he said, in a tone to which the uneasiness of self-reproach gave a touch of imperiousness. ‘But really,’ he added, ‘it seems trespassing on your goodness much too far. Your time is valuable. Would it be a long job?’

‘It would doubtless take some months; but the pleasure of seeing order dawn from confusion would itself repay me. And I *might* come upon certain books of which I am greatly in want. You will have to allow me a carpenter though, for the shelves are not half sufficient to hold the books; and I have no doubt those there are stand in need of repair.’

‘I have a carpenter amongst my people. Old houses want constant attention. I shall put him under your orders with pleasure. Come and dine with me to-morrow, and we’ll talk it all over.’

‘You are very kind,’ I said. ‘Is Mr Brotherton at home?’

‘I am sorry to say he is not.’

‘I heard the other day that he had sold his commission.’

‘Yes--six months ago. His regiment was ordered to India, and--and--his mother----But he does not give us much of his company,’ added the old man. ‘I am sorry he is not at home, for he would have been glad to meet you.’

Instead of responding, I merely made haste to accept Sir Giles’s invitation. I confess I did not altogether relish having anything to do with the future property of Geoffrey Brotherton; but the attraction of the books was great, and in any case I should be under no obligation to him; neither was the nature of the service I was about to render him such as would awaken any sense of obligation in a mind like his.

I could not help recalling the sarcastic criticisms of Clara when I entered the drawing-room of Moldwarp Hall--a long, low-ceiled room, with its walls and stools and chairs covered with tapestry, some of it the work of the needle, other some of the Gobelin loom; but although I found Lady Brotherton a common enough old lady, who showed little of the dignity of which she evidently thought much, and was more condescending to her yeoman neighbour than was agreeable, I did not at once discover

ground for the severity of those remarks. Miss Brotherton, the eldest of the family, a long-necked lady, the flower of whose youth was beginning to curl at the edges, I found well-read, but whether in books or the reviews of them, I had to leave an open question as yet. Nor was I sufficiently taken with her not to feel considerably dismayed when she proffered me her assistance in arranging the library. I made no objection at the time, only hinting that the drawing up of a catalogue afterwards might be a fitter employment for her fair fingers; but I resolved to create such a fearful pother at the very beginning, that her first visit should be her last. And so I doubt not it would have fallen out, but for something else. The only other person who dined with us was a Miss Pease--at least so I will call her--who, although the law of her existence appeared to be fetching and carrying for Lady Brotherton, was yet, in virtue of a poor-relationship, allowed an uneasy seat at the table. Her obedience was mechanically perfect. One wondered how the mere nerves of volition could act so instantaneously upon the slightest hint. I saw her more than once or twice withdraw her fork when almost at her lips, and, almost before she had laid it down, rise from her seat to obey some half-whispered, half-nodded behest. But her look was one of injured meekness and self-humbled submission. Sir Giles now and then gave her a kind or merry word, but she would reply to it with almost abject humility. Her face was grey and pinched, her eyes were very cold, and she ate as if she did not know one thing from another.

Over our wine Sir Giles introduced business. I professed myself ready, with a housemaid and carpenter at my orders when I should want them, to commence operations the following afternoon. He begged me to ask for whatever I might want, and after a little friendly chat, I took my leave, elated with the prospect of the work before me. About three o’clock the next afternoon I took my way to the Hall, to assume the temporary office of creative librarian.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PREPARATIONS.

It was a lovely afternoon, the air hot, and the shadows of the trees dark upon the green grass. The clear sun was shining sideways on the little oriel window of one of the rooms in which my labour awaited me. Never have I seen a picture of more stately repose than the huge pile of building presented, while the curious vane on the central square tower glittered like the outburning flame of its hidden life. The only objection I could find to it was that it stood isolated from its own park, although the portion next it was kept as trim as the smoothest lawn. There was not a door anywhere to be seen, except the two gateway entrances, and not a window upon the ground-floor. All the doors and low windows were either within the courts, or opened on the garden, which, with its terraced walks and avenues and one tiny lawn, surrounded the two further sides of the house, and was itself enclosed by walls.

I knew the readiest way to the library well enough: once admitted to the outer gate, I had no occasion to trouble the servants. The rooms containing the books were amongst the bed-rooms, and after crossing the great hall, I had to turn my back on the stair which led to the ball-room and drawing-room, and ascend another to the left, so that I could come and go with little chance of meeting any of the family.

The rooms, I have said, were six, none of them of any great size, and all ill-fitted for the purpose. In fact, there was such a sense of confinement about the whole arrangement as gave me the feeling that any difficult book read there would be unintelligible. Order, however, is only another kind of light, and would do much to destroy the impression. Having with practical intent surveyed the situation, I saw there was no space for action. I must have at least the temporary use of another room.

Observing that the last of the suite of book-rooms furthest from the armoury had still a door into the room beyond, I proceeded to try it, thinking to know at a glance whether it would suit me, and whether it was likely to be yielded for my purpose. It opened, and, to my dismay, there stood Clara Coningham, fastening her collar. She looked sharply round, and made a half-indignant step towards me. ‘I beg your pardon a thousand times, Miss Coningham,’ I exclaimed. ‘Will you allow me to explain, or must I retreat unheard?’

I was vexed indeed, for, notwithstanding a certain flutter at the heart, I had no wish to renew my acquaintance with her.

‘There must be some fatality about the place, Mr Cumbermede!’ she said, almost with her old merry laugh. ‘It frightens me.’

‘Precisely my own feeling, Miss Coningham. I had no idea you were in the neighbourhood.’

‘I cannot say so much as that, for I had heard you were at The Moat; but I had no expectation of seeing you--least of all in this house. I suppose you are on the scent of some musty old book or other,’ she added, approaching the door, where I stood with the handle in my hand.

‘My object is an invasion rather than a hunt,’ I said, drawing back that she might enter.

‘Just as it was the last time you and I were here!’ she went on, with scarcely a pause, and as easily as if there had never been any misunderstanding between us. I had thought myself beyond any further influence from her fascinations, but when I looked in her beautiful face, and heard her allude to the past with so much friendliness, and such apparent unconsciousness of any reason for forgetting it, a tremor ran through me from head to foot. I mastered myself sufficiently to reply, however.

‘It is the last time you will see it so,’ I said; ‘for here stands the Hercules of the stable--about to restore it to cleanliness, and what is of far more consequence in a library--to order.’

‘You don’t mean it!’ she exclaimed with genuine surprise. ‘I’m so glad I’m here!’

‘Are you on a visit, then?’

‘Indeed I am; though how it came about I don’t know. I dare say my father does. Lady Brotherton has invited me, stiffly of course, to spend a few weeks during their stay. Sir Giles must be in it: I believe I am rather a favourite with the good old man. But I have another fancy: my grandfather is getting old; I suspect my father has been making himself useful, and this invitation is an acknowledgment. Men always buttress their ill-built dignities by keeping poor women in the dark; by which means you drive us to infinite conjecture. That is how we come to be so much cleverer than you at putting two and two together, and making five.’

‘But,’ I ventured to remark, ‘under such circumstances, you will hardly enjoy your visit.’

‘Oh! sha’n’t I? I shall get fun enough out of it for that. They are--all but Sir Giles--they are great fun. Of course they don’t treat me as an equal, but I take it out in amusement. You will find you have to do the same.’

‘Not I. I have nothing to do with them. I am here as a skilled workman--one whose work is his sufficient reward. There is nothing degrading in that--is there? If I thought there was, of course I shouldn’t come.’

‘You *never* did anything you felt degrading?’

‘No.’

‘Happy mortal!’ she said, with a sigh--whether humorous or real, I could not tell.

‘I have had no occasion,’ I returned.

‘And yet, as I hear, you have made your mark in literature?’

‘Who says that? I should not.’

‘Never mind,’ she rejoined, with, as I fancied, the look of having said more than she ought. ‘But,’ she added, ‘I wish you would tell me in what periodicals you write.’

‘You must excuse me. I do not wish to be first known in connection with fugitive things. When first I publish a book, you may be assured my name will be on the title-page. Meantime, I must fulfil the conditions of my *entrée*.’

‘And I must go and pay my respects to Lady Brotherton. I have only just arrived.’

‘Won’t you find it dull? There’s nobody of man-kind at home but Sir Giles.’

‘You are unjust. If Mr Brotherton had been here, I shouldn’t have come. I find him troublesome.’

I thought she blushed, notwithstanding the air of freedom with which she spoke.

‘If he should come into the property to-morrow,’ she went on, ‘I fear you would have little chance of completing your work.’

‘If he came into the property this day six months, I fear he would find it unfinished. Certainly what was to do should remain undone.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that. He might win you over. He can talk.’

‘I should not be so readily pleased as another might.’

She bent towards me, and said in an almost hissing whisper--

‘Wilfrid, I hate him!’

I started. She looked what she said. The blood shot to my heart, and again rushed to my face. But suddenly she retreated into her own room, and noiselessly closed the door. The same moment I heard that of a further room open, and presently Miss Brotherton peeped in.

‘How do you do, Mr Cumbermede?’ she said. ‘You are already hard at work, I see.’

I was, in fact, doing nothing. I explained that I could not make a commencement without the use of another room.

‘I will send the housekeeper, and you can arrange with her,’ she said, and left me.

In a few minutes Mrs Wilson entered. Her manner was more stiff and formal than ever. We shook hands in a rather limp fashion.

‘You’ve got your will at last, Mr Cumbermede,’ she said, ‘I suppose the thing’s to be done!’

‘It is, Mrs Wilson, I am happy to say. Sir Giles kindly offered me the use of the library, and I took the liberty of representing to him that there was no library until the books were arranged.’

‘Why couldn’t you take a book away with you and read it in comfort at home?’

‘How could I take the book home if I couldn’t find it?’

‘You could find something worth reading, if that were all you wanted.’

‘But that is not all. I have plenty of reading.’

‘Then I don’t see what’s the good of it.’

‘Books are very much like people, Mrs Wilson. There are not so many you want to know all about; but most could tell you things you don’t know. I want certain books in order to question them about certain things.’

‘Well, all I know is, it’ll be more trouble than it’s worth.’

‘I am afraid it will--to you, Mrs Wilson; but though I am taking a thousand times your trouble, I expect to be well repaid for it.’

‘I have no doubt of that. Sir Giles is a liberal gentleman.’

‘You don’t suppose *he* is going to pay me, Mrs Wilson?’ ‘Who else should?’

‘Why, the books themselves, of course.’

Evidently she thought I was making game of her, for she was silent.

‘Will you show me which room I can have?’ I said. ‘It must be as near this one as possible. Is the next particularly wanted?’ I asked, pointing to the door which led into Clara’s room.

She went to it quickly, and opened it far enough to put her hand in and take the key from the other side, which she then inserted on my side, turned in the lock, drew out, and put in her pocket.

‘That room is otherwise engaged,’ she said. ‘You must be content with one across the corridor.’

‘Very well--if it is not far. I should make slow work of it, if I had to carry the books a long way.’

‘You can have one of the footmen to help you,’ she said, apparently relenting.

‘No, thank you,’ I answered. ‘I will have no one touch the books but myself.’

‘I will show you one which I think will suit your purpose,’ she said, leading the way.

It was nearly opposite--a bed-room, sparely furnished.

‘Thank you. This will do--if you will order all the things to be piled in that corner.’

She stood silent for a few moments, evidently annoyed, then turned and left the room, saying,

‘I will see to it, Mr Cumbermede.’

Returning to the books and pulling off my coat, I had soon compelled such a cloud of very ancient and smothering dust, that when Miss Brotherton again made her appearance, her figure showed dim through the thick air, as she stood--dismayed, I hoped--in the doorway. I pretended to be unaware of her presence, and went on beating and blowing, causing yet thicker volumes of solid vapour to clothe my presence. She withdrew without even an attempt at parley.

Having heaped several great piles near the door, each composed of books of nearly the same size, the first rudimentary approach to arrangement, I crossed to the other room to see what progress had been made. To my surprise and annoyance, I found nothing had been done. Determined not to have my work impeded by the remissness of the servants, and seeing I must place myself at once on a proper footing in the house, I went to the drawing-room to ascertain, if possible, where Sir Giles was. I had of course put on my coat, but having no means of ablution at hand, I must have presented a very unpresentable appearance when I entered. Lady Brotherton half rose, in evident surprise at my intrusion, but at once

resumed her seat, saying, as she turned her chair half towards the window where the other two ladies sat,

‘The housekeeper will attend to you, Mr Cumbermede--or the butler.’

I could see that Clara was making some inward merriment over my appearance and reception.

‘Could you tell me, Lady Brotherton,’ I said, ‘where I should be likely to find Sir Giles?’

‘I can give you no information on that point,’ she answered, with consummate stiffness.

‘I know where he is,’ said Clara, rising. ‘I will take you to him. He is in the study.’

She took no heed of the glance broadly thrown at her, but approached the door.

I opened it, and followed her out of the room. As soon as we were beyond hearing, she burst out laughing. ‘How dared you show your workman’s face in that drawing-room?’ she said. ‘I am afraid you have much offended her ladyship.’

‘I hope it is for the last time. When I am properly attended to, I shall have no occasion to trouble her.’

She led me to Sir Giles’s study. Except newspapers and reports of companies, there was in it nothing printed. He rose when we entered, and came towards us.

‘Looking like your work already, Mr Cumbermede?’ he said, holding out his hand.

‘I must not shake hands with you this time, Sir Giles,’ I returned. ‘But I am compelled to trouble you. I can’t get on for want of attendance. I *must* have a little help.’

I told him how things were. His rosy face grew rosier, and he rang the bell angrily. The butler answered it.

‘Send Mrs Wilson here. And I beg, Hurst, you will see that Mr Cumbermede has every attention.’

Mrs Wilson presently made her appearance, and stood with a flushed face before her master.

‘Let Mr Cumbermede’s orders be attended to *at once*, Mrs Wilson.’

‘Yes, Sir Giles,’ she answered, and waited.

‘I am greatly obliged to you for letting me know,’ he added, turning to me. ‘Pray insist upon proper attention.’

‘Thank you, Sir Giles. I shall not scruple.’

‘That will do, Mrs Wilson. You must not let Mr Cumbermede be hampered in his kind labours for my benefit by the idleness of my servants.’

The housekeeper left the room, and after a little chat with Sir Giles, I went back to the books. Clara had followed Mrs Wilson, partly, I suspect, for the sake of enjoying her confusion.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ASSISTANCE.

I returned to my solitary house as soon as the evening began to grow too dark for my work, which, from the lowness of the windows and the age of the glass, was early. All the way as I went, I was thinking of Clara. Not only had time somewhat obliterated the last impression she had made upon me, but I had, partly from the infection of Charley's manner, long ago stumbled upon various excuses for her conduct. Now I said to myself that she had certainly a look of greater sedateness than before. But her expression of dislike to Geoffrey Brotherton had more effect upon me than anything else, inasmuch as there Vanity found room for both the soles of her absurdly small feet; and that evening, when I went wandering, after my custom, with a volume of Dante in my hand, the book remained unopened, and from the form of Clara flowed influences mingling with and gathering fresh power from those of Nature, whose feminine front now brooded over me half-withdrawn in the dim, starry night. I remember that night so well! I can recall it now with a calmness equal to its own. Indeed in my memory it seems to belong to my mind as much as to the outer world; or rather the night filled both, forming the space in which my thoughts moved, as well as the space in which the brilliant thread of the sun-lighted crescent hung clasping the earth-lighted bulk of the moon. I wandered in the grass until midnight was long by, feeling as quietly and peacefully at home as if my head had been on the pillow and my soul out in a lovely dream of cool delight. We lose much even by the good habits we form. What tender and glorious changes pass over our sleeping heads unseen! What moons rise and set in rippled seas of cloud, or behind hills of stormy vapour, while we are blind! What storms roll thundering across the airy vault, with no eyes for their keen lightnings to dazzle, while we dream of the dead who will not speak to us! But ah! I little thought to what a dungeon of gloom this lovely night was the jasmine-grown porch!

The next morning I was glad to think that there was no wolf at my door, howling *work---work!* Moldwarp Hall drew me with redoubled attraction; and instead of waiting for the afternoon, which alone I had intended to occupy with my new undertaking, I set out to cross the park the moment I had finished my late breakfast. Nor could I conceal from myself that it was quite as much for the chance of seeing Clara now and then as from pleasure in the prospect of an ordered library that I repaired thus early to the Hall. In the morning light, however, I began to suspect, as I walked, that, although Clara's frankness was flattering, it was rather a sign that she was heart-whole towards me than that she was careless of Brotherton. I began to doubt also whether, after our first meeting, which she had carried off so well--cool even to kindness--she would care to remember that I was in the house, or derive from it any satisfaction beyond what came of the increased chances of studying the Brothertons from a humorous point of view. Then, after all, why was she there?--and apparently on such familiar terms with a family socially so far superior to her own? The result of my cogitations was the resolution to take care of myself. But it had vanished utterly before the day was two hours older. A youth's wise talk to himself will not make him a wise man, any more than the experience of the father will serve the son's need.

I was hard at work in my shirt-sleeves, carrying an armful of books across the corridor, and thinking whether I had not better bring my servant with me in the afternoon, when Clara came out of her room.

'Here already, Wilfrid!' she exclaimed. 'Why don't you have some of the servants to help you? You're doing what any one might as well do for you.'

'If these were handsomely bound,' I answered, 'I should not so much mind; but being old and tattered, no one ought to touch them who does not love them.'

‘Then, I suppose, you wouldn’t trust me with them either, for I cannot pretend to anything beyond a second-hand respect for them.’

‘What do you mean by a second-hand respect?’ I asked.

‘I mean such respect as comes from seeing that a scholar like you respects them.’

‘Then I think I could accord you a second-hand sort of trust--under my own eye, that is,’ I answered, laughing. ‘But you can scarcely leave your hostess to help me.’

‘I will ask Miss Brotherton to come too. She will pretend all the respect you desire.’

‘I made three times the necessary dust in order to frighten her away yesterday.’

‘Ah! that’s a pity. But I shall manage to overrule her objections--that is, if you would really like two tolerably educated housemaids to help you.’

‘I will gladly endure one of them for the sake of the other,’ I replied.

‘No compliments, please,’ she returned, and left the room.

In about half an hour she re-appeared, accompanied by Miss Brotherton. They were in white wrappers, with their dresses shortened a little, and their hair tucked under mob caps. Miss Brotherton looked like a lady’s-maid, Clara like a lady acting a lady’s-maid. I assumed the command at once, pointing out to what heaps in the other room those I had grouped in this were to be added, and giving strict injunctions as to carrying only a few at once, and laying them down with care in regularly ordered piles. Clara obeyed with a mock submission, Miss Brotherton with a reserve which heightened the impression of her dress. I was instinctively careful how I spoke to Clara, fearing to compromise her, but she seemed all at once to change her *rôle*, and began to propose, object,

and even insist upon her own way, drawing from me the threat of immediate dismission from my service, at which her companion laughed with an awkwardness showing she regarded the pleasantry as a presumption. Before one o'clock, the first room was almost empty. Then the great bell rang, and Clara, coming from the auxiliary chamber, put her head in at the door.

'Won't you come to luncheon?' she said, with a sly archness, looking none the less bewitching for a smudge or two on her lovely face, or the blackness of the delicate hands which she held up like two paws for my admiration.

'In the servants' hall? Workmen don't sit down with ladies and gentlemen. Did Miss Brotherton send you to ask me?'

She shook her head.

'Then you had better come and lunch with me.'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'I hope you will *some* day honour my little fragment of a house. It is a curious old place,' I said.

'I don't like musty old places,' she replied.

'But I have heard you speak with no little admiration of the Hall: some parts of it are older than my sentry-box.'

'I can't say I admire it at all as a place to live in,' she answered curtly.

'But I was not asking you to live in mine,' I said--foolishly arguing.

She looked annoyed, whether with herself or me I could not tell, but instantly answered,

'Some day--when I can without--But I must go and make myself tidy, or Miss Brotherton will be fancying I have been talking to you!'

‘And what have you been doing, then?’

‘Only asking you to come to lunch.’

‘Will you tell her that?’

‘Yes--if she says anything.’

‘Then you *had* better make haste, and be asked no questions.’

She glided away. I threw on my coat, and re-crossed the park.

But I was so eager to see again the fair face in the mob cap, that, although not at all certain of its reappearance, I told my man to go at once and bring the mare. He made haste, and by the time I had finished my dinner she was at the door. I gave her the rein, and two or three minutes brought me back to the Hall, where, having stabled her, I was at my post again, I believe, before they had finished luncheon. I had a great heap of books ready in the second room to carry into the first, and had almost concluded they would not come, when I heard their voices--and presently they entered, but not in their mob caps.

‘What an unmerciful master you are!’ said Clara, looking at the heap. ‘I thought you had gone home to lunch.’

‘I went home to dinner,’ I said. ‘I get more out of the day by dining early.’

‘How is that, Mr Cumbermede?’ asked Miss Brotherton, with a nearer approach to cordiality than she had yet shown.

‘I think the evening the best part of the day--too good to spend in eating and drinking.’

‘But,’ said Clara, quite gravely, ‘are not those the chief ends of existence?’ ‘Your friend is satirical, Miss Brotherton,’ I remarked.

‘At least, you are not of her opinion, to judge by the time you have taken,’ she returned.

‘I have been back nearly an hour,’ I said. ‘Workmen don’t take long over their meals.’

‘Well, I suppose you don’t want any more of us now,’ said Clara. ‘You will arrange the books you bring from the next room upon these empty shelves, I presume?’

‘No, not yet. I must not begin that until I have cleared the very last, got it thoroughly cleaned, the shelves seen to, and others put up.’

‘What a tremendous labour you have undertaken, Mr Cumbermede!’ said Miss Brotherton. ‘I am quite ashamed you should do so much for us.’

‘I, on the contrary, am delighted to be of any service to Sir Giles.’

‘But you don’t expect us to slave all day as we did in the morning?’ said Clara.

‘Certainly not, Miss Coningham. I am too grateful to be exacting.’

‘Thank you for that pretty speech. Come, then, Miss Brotherton, we must have a walk. We haven’t been out-of-doors to-day.’

‘Really, Miss Coningham, I think the least we can do is to help Mr Cumbermede to our small ability.’

‘Nonsense!’--(Miss Brotherton positively started at the word.) ‘Any two of the maids or men would serve his purpose better, if he did not affect fastidiousness. We sha’n’t be allowed to come to-morrow if we overdo it to-day.’

Miss Brotherton was evidently on the point of saying something indignant, but yielded notwithstanding, and I was left alone once more. Again I laboured until the shadows grew thick around the gloomy walls.

As I galloped home, I caught sight of my late companions coming across the park; and I trust I shall not be hardly judged if I confess that I did sit straighter in my saddle, and mind my seat better. Thus ended my second day’s work at the library of Moldwarp Hall.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN EXPOSTULATION.

Neither of the ladies came to me the next morning. As far as my work was concerned, I was in considerably less need of their assistance, for it lay only between two rooms opening into each other. Nor did I feel any great disappointment, for so long as a man has something to do, expectation is pleasure enough, and will continue such for a long time. It is those who are unemployed to whom expectation becomes an agony. I went home to my solitary dinner almost resolved to return to my original plan of going only in the afternoons.

I was not thoroughly in love with Clara; but it was certainly the hope of seeing her, and not the pleasure of handling the dusty books, that drew me back to the library that afternoon. I had got rather tired of the whole affair in the morning. It was very hot, and the dust was choking, and of the volumes I opened as they passed through my hands, not one was of the slightest interest to me. But for the chance of seeing Clara I should have lain in the grass instead.

No one came. I grew weary, and for a change retreated into the armoury. Evidently, not the slightest heed was paid to the weapons now, and I was thinking with myself that, when I had got the books in order, I might give a few days to furbishing and oiling them, when the door from the gallery opened, and Clara entered.

‘What! a truant?’ she said.

‘You take accusation at least by the forelock, Clara. Who is the real truant now--if I may suggest a mistake?’

‘*I* never undertook anything. How many guesses have you made as to the cause of your desertion to-day?’

‘Well, three or four.’

‘Have you made one as to the cause of Miss Brotherton’s graciousness to you yesterday?’

‘At least I remarked the change.’

‘I will tell you. There was a short notice of some of your writings in a certain magazine which I contrived should fall in her way.’

‘Impossible!’ I exclaimed. ‘I have never put my name to anything.’

‘But you have put the same name to all your contributions.’

‘How should the reviewer know it meant me?’

‘Your own name was never mentioned.’

I thought she looked a little confused as she said this.

‘Then how should Miss Brotherton know it meant me?’

She hesitated a moment--then answered:

‘Perhaps from internal evidence.--I suppose I must confess I told her.’

‘Then how did *you* know?

‘I have been one of your readers for a long time.’

‘But how did you come to know my work?’

‘That has oozed out.’

‘Some one must have told you,’ I said.

‘That is my secret,’ she replied, with the air of making it a mystery in order to tease me.

‘It must be all a mistake,’ I said. ‘Show me the magazine.’

‘As you won’t take my word for it, I won’t.’

‘Well, I shall soon find out. There is but one could have done it. It is very kind of him, no doubt; but I don’t like it. That kind of thing should come of itself--not through friends.’

‘Who do you fancy has done it?’

‘If you have a secret, so have I.’

My answer seemed to relieve her, though I could not tell what gave me the impression.

‘You are welcome to yours, and I will keep mine,’ she said. ‘I only wanted to explain Miss Brotherton’s condescension yesterday.’

‘I thought you were going to explain why you didn’t come to-day.’

‘That is only a re-action. I have no doubt she thinks she went too far yesterday.’

‘That is absurd. She was civil; that was all.’

‘In reading your thermometer, you must know its zero first,’ she replied sententiously. ‘Is the sword you call yours there still?’

‘Yes, and I call it mine still.’

‘Why don’t you take it, then? I should have carried it off long ago.’

‘To steal my own would be to prejudice my right,’ I returned. ‘But I have often thought of telling Sir Giles about it.’

‘Why don’t you, then?’

‘I hardly know. My head has been full of other things, and any time will do. But I should like to see it in its own place once more.’

I had taken it from the wall, and now handed it to her.

‘Is this it?’ she said carelessly.

‘It is--just as it was carried off my bed that night.’

‘What room were you in?’ she asked, trying to draw it from the sheath.

‘I can’t tell. I’ve never been in it since.’

‘You don’t seem to me to have the curiosity natural to a--’

‘To a woman--no,’ I said.

‘To a man of spirit,’ she retorted, with an appearance of indignation. ‘I don’t believe you can tell even how it came into your possession!’

‘Why shouldn’t it have been in the family from time immemorial?’

‘So!--And you don’t care either to recover it, or to find out how you lost it!’

‘How can I? Where is Mr Close?’

‘Why, dead, years and years ago.’

‘So I understood. I can’t well apply to him, then, and I am certain no one else knows.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that. Perhaps Sir Giles--’

‘I am positive Sir Giles knows nothing about it.’

‘I have reason to think the story is not altogether unknown in the family.’

‘Have you told it, then?’

‘No, but I *have* heard it alluded to.’

‘By Sir Giles?’

‘No.’

‘By whom, then?’

‘I will answer no more questions.’

‘Geoffrey, I suppose?’

‘You are not polite. Do you suppose I am bound to tell you all I know?’

‘Not by any means. Only, you oughtn’t to pique a curiosity you don’t mean to satisfy.’

‘But if I’m not at liberty to say more?--All I meant to say was that, if I were you, I *would* get back that sword.’

‘You hint at a secret, and yet suppose I could carry off its object as I might a rusty nail, which any passer-by would be made welcome to!’

‘You might take it first, and mention the thing to Sir Giles afterwards.’

‘Why not mention it first?’

‘Only on the supposition you had not the courage to claim it.’

‘In that case I certainly shouldn’t have the courage to avow the deed afterwards. I don’t understand you, Clara.’

She laughed.

‘That is always your way,’ she said. ‘You take everything so seriously! Why couldn’t I make a proposition without being supposed to mean it?’

[Illustration: “Glued,” she echoed, “What do you mean?”]

I was not satisfied. There was something short of uprightness in the whole tone of her attempted persuasion--which indeed I could hardly believe to have been so lightly intended as she now suggested. The effect of my feeling for her was that of a slight frost on the Spring blossoms.

She had been examining the hilt with a look of interest, and was now for the third time trying to draw the blade from the sheath.

‘It’s no use, Clara,’ I said. ‘It has been too many years glued to the scabbard.’

‘Glued!’ she echoed. ‘What do you mean?’

I did not reply. An expression almost of horror shadowed her face, and at the same moment, to my astonishment, she drew it half-way.

‘Why! You enchantress!’ I exclaimed. ‘I never saw so much of it before. It is wonderfully bright--when one thinks of the years it has been shut in darkness.’

She handed it to me as it was, saying,

‘If that weapon was mine, I should never rest until I had found out everything concerning it.’

‘That is easily said, Clara; but how can I? My uncle knew nothing about it. My grandmother did, no doubt, but almost all I can remember her saying was something about my great-grandfather and Sir Marmaduke.’

As I spoke, I tried to draw it entirely, but it would yield no further. I then sought to replace it, but it would not move. That it yielded to Clara’s touch gave it a fresh interest and value.

‘I was sure it had a history,’ said Clara. ‘Have you no family papers? Your house you say is nearly as old as this: are there no papers of *any* kind in it?’

‘Yes, a few,’ I answered--‘the lease of the farm--and--’

‘Oh! rubbish!’ she said. ‘Isn’t the house your own?’

‘Yes.’

‘And have you ever thoroughly searched it?’

‘I haven’t had time yet.’

‘Not had time!’ she repeated, in a tone of something so like the uttermost contempt that I was bewildered.

‘I mean some day or other to have a rummage in the old lumber-room,’ I said.

‘Well, I do think that is the least you can do--if only out of respect to your ancestors. Depend on it, they don’t like to be forgotten any more than other people.’

The intention I had just announced was, however, but just born of her words. I had never yet searched even my grandmother’s bureau, and had but this very moment fancied there might be papers in some old chest in the lumber-room. That room had already begun to occupy my thoughts from another point of view, and hence, in part, no doubt the suggestion. I was anxious to have a visit from Charley. He might bring with him some of our London friends. There was absolutely no common room in the house except the hall-kitchen. The room we had always called the lumber-room was over it, and nearly as large. It had a tall stone chimney-piece, elaborately carved, and clearly had once been a room for entertainment. The idea of restoring it to its original dignity arose in my mind; and I hoped that, furnished after as antique a fashion as I could compass, it would prove a fine room. The windows were small, to be sure, and the pitch rather low, but the whitewashed walls were pannelled, and I had some hopes of the ceiling.

‘Who knows,’ I said to myself, as I walked home that evening, ‘but I may come upon papers? I do remember something in the furthest corner that looks like a great chest.’

Little more had passed between us, but Clara left me with the old Dissatisfaction beginning to turn itself, as if about to awake once more. For the present I hung the half-naked blade upon the wall, for I dared not force it lest the scabbard should go to pieces.

When I reached home, I found a letter from Charley, to the effect that, if convenient, he would pay me a visit the following week. His mother and sister, he said, had been invited to Moldwarp Hall. His father was on the continent for his health. Without having consulted them on the matter, which might involve them in after-difficulty, he would come to me, and so have an opportunity of seeing them in the sunshine of his father's absence. I wrote at once that I should be delighted to receive him.

The next morning I spent with my man in the lumber-room; and before mid-day the rest of the house looked like an old curiosity shop--it was so littered with odds and ends of dust-bloomed antiquity. It was hard work, and in the afternoon I found myself disinclined for more exercise of a similar sort. I had Lilith out, and took a leisurely ride instead. The next day, and the next also, I remained at home. The following morning I went again to Moldwarp Hall. I had not been busy more than an hour or so when Clara, who, I presume, had in passing heard me at work, looked in.

'Who is a truant now?' she said. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Here has Miss Brotherton been almost curious concerning your absence, and Sir Giles more than once on the point of sending to inquire after you!'

'Why didn't he, then?'

'Oh! I suppose he was afraid it might look like an assertion of--of--of baronial rights, or something of the sort. How *could* you behave in such an inconsiderate fashion!'

'You must allow me to have *some* business of my own.'

‘Certainly. But with so many anxious friends, you ought to have given a hint of your intentions.’

‘I had none, however.’

‘Of which? Friends or intentions?’

‘Either.’

‘What! No friends? I verily surprised Miss Pease in the act of studying her “Cookery for Invalids”--in the hope of finding a patient in you, no doubt. She wanted to come and nurse you, but daren’t propose it.’

‘It was very kind of her.’

‘No doubt. But then you see she’s ready to commit suicide any day, poor old thing, but for lack of courage!’

‘It must be dreary for her!’

‘Dreary! I should poison the old dragon.’

‘Well, perhaps I had better tell you, for Miss Pease’s sake, who is evidently the only one that cares a straw about *me* in the matter, that possibly I shall be absent a good many days this week, and perhaps the next too.’

‘Why, then--if I may ask--Mr Absolute?’

‘Because a friend of mine is going to pay me a visit. You remember Charley Osborne, don’t you? Of course you do. You remember the ice-cave, I am sure.’

‘Yes, I do--quite well,’ she answered.

I fancied I saw a shadow cross her face.

‘When do you expect him?’ she asked, turning away, and picking a book from the floor.

‘In a week or so, I think. He tells me his mother and sister are coming here on a visit.’

‘Yes--so I believe--to-morrow, I think. I wonder if I ought to be going. I don’t think I will. I came to please them--at all events not to please myself; but as I find it pleasanter than I expected, I won’t go without a hint and a half at least.’

‘Why should you? There is plenty of room.’

‘Yes; but don’t you see?--so many inferiors in the house at once might be too much for Madame Dignity. She finds one quite enough, I suspect.’

‘You do not mean that she regards the Osbornes as inferiors?’

‘Not a doubt of it. Never mind. I can take care of myself. Have you any work for me to-day?’

‘Plenty, if you are in a mood for it.’

‘I will fetch Miss Brotherton.’

‘I can do without *her*.’

She went, however, and did not return. As I walked home to dinner, she and Miss Brotherton passed me in the carriage, on their way, as I learned afterwards, to fetch the Osborne ladies from the rectory, some ten miles off. I did not return to Moldwarp Hall, but helped Styles in the lumber-room, which before night we had almost emptied.

The next morning I was favoured with a little desultory assistance from the two ladies, but saw nothing of the visitors. In the afternoon, and both the following days, I took my servant with me, who got through more work than the two together, and we advanced it so far that I was able to leave the room next the armoury in the hands of the carpenter and the housemaid, with sufficient directions, and did not return that week.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TALK WITH CHARLEY.

The following Monday, in the evening, Charley arrived, in great spirits, more excited indeed than I liked to see him. There was a restlessness in his eye which made me especially anxious, for it raised a doubt whether the appearance of good spirits was not the result merely of resistance to some anxiety. But I hoped my companionship, with the air and exercise of the country, would help to quiet him again. In the late twilight we took a walk together up and down my field.

‘I suppose you let your mother know you were coming, Charley?’ I said.

‘I did not,’ he answered. ‘My father must have nothing to lay to their charge in case he should hear of our meeting.’

‘But he has not forbidden you to go home, has he?’

‘No, certainly. But he as good as told me I was not to go home while he was away. He does not wish me to be there without his presence to counteract my evil influences. He seems to regard my mere proximity as dangerous. I sometimes wonder whether the severity of his religion may not have affected his mind. Almost all madness, you know, turns either upon love or religion.’

‘So I have heard. I doubt it--with men. It may be with women.--But you won’t surprise them? It might startle your mother too much. She is not strong, you say. Hadn’t I better tell Clara Coningham? She can let them know you are here.’

‘It would be better.’

‘What do you say to going there with me to-morrow? I will send my man with a note in the morning.’

He looked a little puzzled and undetermined, but said at length,

‘I dare say your plan is the best. How long has Miss Coningham been here?’

‘About ten days, I think.’

He looked thoughtful and made no answer.

‘I see, you are afraid of my falling in love with her again,’ I said. ‘I confess I like her much better than I did, but I am not quite sure about her yet. She is very bewitching anyhow, and a little more might make me lose my heart to her. The evident dislike she has to Brotherton would of itself recommend her to any friend of yours or mine.’

He turned his face away.

‘Do not be anxious about me,’ I went on. ‘The first shadowy conviction of any untruthfulness in her, if not sufficient to change my feelings at once, would at once initiate a backward movement in them.’

He kept his face turned away, and I was perplexed. After a few moments of silence, he turned it towards me again, as if relieved by some resolution suddenly formed, and said with a smile under a still clouded brow,

‘Well, old fellow, we’ll see. It’ll all come right, I dare say. Write your note early, and we’ll follow it. How glad I *shall* be to have a glimpse of that blessed mother of mine without her attendant dragon!’

‘For God’s sake don’t talk of your father so! Surely, after all, he is a good man!’

‘Then I want a new reading of the word.’

‘He loves God, at least.’

‘I won’t stop to inquire--’ said Charley, plunging at once into argument--‘what influence for good it might or might not have to love a non-existence: I will only ask--Is it a good God he loves or a bad one? If the latter, he can hardly be called good for loving him.’

‘But if there be a God at all, he must be a good God.’

‘Suppose the true God to be the good God, it does not follow that my father worships *him*. There is such a thing as worshipping a false God. At least the Bible recognizes it. For my part, I find myself compelled to say--either that the true God is not a good God, or that my father does not worship the true God. If you say he worships the God of the Bible, I either admit or dispute the assertion, but set it aside as altering nothing; for if I admit it, the argument lies thus: my father worships a bad God; my father worships the God of the Bible: therefore the God of the Bible is a bad God; and if I admit the authority of the Bible, then the true God is a bad God. If, however, I dispute the assertion that he worships the God of the Bible, I am left to show, if I can, that the God of the Bible is a good God, and, if I admit the authority of the Bible, to worship another than my father’s God. If I do not admit the authority of the Bible, there may, for all that, be a good God, or, which is next best to a perfectly good God, there may be no God at all.’

‘Put like a lawyer, Charley: and yet I would venture to join issue with your first assertion--on which the whole argument is founded--that your father worships a bad God.’

‘Assuredly what he asserts concerning his God is bad.’

‘Admitted; but does he assert *only* bad things of his God?’

‘I daren’t say that. But God is one. You will hardly dare the proposition that an infinite being may be partly good and partly bad.’

‘No. I heartily hold that God must be *one*--a proposition far more essential than that there is one God--so far, at least, as my understanding can judge. It is only in the limited human nature that good and evil can co-exist. But there is just the point: we are not speaking of the absolute God, but of the idea of a man concerning that God. You could suppose yourself utterly convinced of a good God long before your ideas of goodness were so correct as to render you incapable of attributing anything wrong to that God. Supposing such to be the case, and that you came afterwards to find that you had been thinking something wrong about him, do you think you would therefore grant that you had been believing either in a wicked or in a false God?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then you must give your father the same scope. He attributes what we are absolutely certain are bad things to his God--and yet he may believe in a good God, for the good in his idea of God is that alone in virtue of which he is able to believe in him. No mortal can believe in the bad.’

‘He puts the evil foremost in his creed and exhortations.’

‘That may be. Few people know their own deeper minds. The more potent a power in us, I suspect it is the more hidden from our scrutiny.’

‘If there be a God, then, Wilfrid, he is very indifferent to what his creatures think of him.’

‘Perhaps very patient and hopeful, Charley--who knows? Perhaps he will not force himself upon them, but help them to grow into the true knowledge of him. Your father may worship the true God, and yet have only a little of that knowledge.’

A silence followed. At length--‘Thank you for my father,’ said Charley.

‘Thank my uncle,’ I said.

‘For not being like my father?--I do,’ he returned.

It was the loveliest evening that brooded round us as we walked. The moon had emerged from a rippled sea of grey cloud, over which she cast her dull opaline halo. Great masses and banks of cloud lay about the rest of the heavens, and, in the dark rifts between, a star or two were visible, gazing from the awful distance.

‘I wish I could let it into me, Wilfrid,’ said Charley, after we had been walking in silence for some time along the grass.

‘Let what into you, Charley?’

‘The night and the blue and the stars.’

‘Why don’t you, then?’

‘I hate being taken in. The more pleasant a self-deception, the less I choose to submit to it.’

‘That is reasonable. But where lies the deception?’

‘I don’t say it’s a deception. I only don’t know that it isn’t.’

‘Please explain.’

‘I mean what you call the beauty of the night.’

‘Surely there can be little question of that?’

‘Ever so little is enough. Suppose I asked you wherein its beauty consisted: would you be satisfied if I said--In the arrangement of the blue and the white, with the sparkles of yellow, and the colours about the scarce visible moon?’

‘Certainly not. I should reply that it lay in the gracious peace of the whole--troubled only with the sense of some lovely secret behind, of

which itself was but the half-modelled representation, and therefore the reluctant outcome.'

'Suppose I rejected the latter half of what you say, admitting the former, but judging it only the fortuitous result of the half-necessary, half-fortuitous concurrences of nature. Suppose I said:--The air which is necessary to our life, happens to be blue; the stars can't help shining through it and making it look deep; and the clouds are just there because they must be somewhere till they fall again; all which is more agreeable to us than fog because we feel more comfortable in weather of the sort, whence, through complacency and habit, we have got to call it beautiful:--suppose I said this, would you accept it?'

'Such a theory would destroy my delight in nature altogether.'

'Well, isn't it the truth?'

'It would be easy to show that the sense of beauty does not spring from any amount of comfort; but I do not care to pursue the argument from that starting-point.--I confess when you have once waked the questioning spirit, and I look up at the clouds and the stars with what I may call sharpened eyes--eyes, that is, which assert their seeing, and so render themselves incapable for the time of submitting to impressions, I am as blind as any Sadducee could desire. I see blue, and white, and gold, and, in short, a tent-roof somewhat ornate. I dare say if I were in a miserable mood, having been deceived and disappointed like Hamlet, I should with him see there nothing but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. But I know that when I am passive to its powers, I am aware of a presence altogether different--of a something at once soothing and elevating, powerful to move shame--even contrition and the desire of amendment.'

'Yes, yes,' said Charley hastily. 'But let me suppose further--and, perhaps you will allow, better--that this blueness--I take a part for the

whole--belongs essentially and of necessity to the atmosphere, itself so essential to our physical life; suppose also that this blue has essential relation to our spiritual nature--taking for the moment our spiritual nature for granted--suppose, in a word, all nature so related, not only to our physical but to our spiritual nature, that it and we form an organic whole full of action and reaction between the parts--would that satisfy you? Would it enable you to look on the sky this night with absolute pleasure? would you want nothing more?'

I thought for a little before I answered.

'No, Charley,' I said at last--'it would not satisfy me. For it would indicate that beauty might be, after all, but the projection of my own mind--the name I gave to a harmony between that around me and that within me. There would then be nothing absolute in beauty. There would be no such thing in itself. It would exist only as a phase of me when I was in a certain mood; and when I was earthly-minded, passionate, or troubled, it would be *no*where. But in my best moods I feel that in nature lies the form and fashion of a peace and grandeur so much beyond anything in me, that they rouse the sense of poverty and incompleteness and blame in the want of them.'

'Do you perceive whither you are leading yourself?'

'I would rather hear you say.'

'To this then--that the peace and grandeur of which you speak must be a mere accident, therefore an unreality and pure *appearance*, or the outcome and representation of a peace and grandeur which, not to be found in us, yet exist, and make use of this frame of things to set forth and manifest themselves in order that we may recognize and desire them.'

'Granted--heartily.'

‘In other words--you lead yourself inevitably to a God manifest in nature--not as a powerful being--that is a theme absolutely without interest to me--but as possessed in himself of the original pre-existent beauty, the counterpart of which in us we call art, and who has fashioned us so that we must fall down and worship the image of himself which he has set up.’

‘That’s good, Charley. I’m so glad you’ve worked that out!’

‘It doesn’t in the least follow that I believe it. I cannot even say I wish I did:--for what I know, that might be to wish to be deceived. Of all miseries--to believe in a lovely thing and find it not true--that must be the worst.’

‘You might never find it out, though,’ I said. ‘You might be able to comfort yourself with it all your life.’

‘I was wrong,’ he cried fiercely. ‘Never to find it out would be the hell of all hells. Wilfrid, I am ashamed of you!’

‘So should I be, Charley, if I had meant it. I only wanted to make you speak. I agree with you entirely. But I *do* wish we could be *quite* sure of it; for I don’t believe any man can ever be sure of a thing that is not true.’

‘My father is sure that the love of nature is not only a delusion, but a snare. I should have no right to object, were he not equally sure of the existence of a God who created and rules it. By the way, if I believed in a God, I should say *create*s not *create*d. I told him once, not long ago, when he fell out upon nature--he had laid hands on a copy of *Endymion* belonging to me--I don’t know how the devil he got it--I asked him whether he thought the devil made the world. You should have seen the white wrath he went into at the question! I told him it was generally believed one or the other did make the world. He told me God made the world, but sin had unmade it. I asked him if it was sin that made it so beautiful. He said it was sin that made me think it so beautiful. I

remarked how very ugly it must have looked when God had just finished it! He called me a blasphemer, and walked to the door. I stopped him for a moment by saying that I thought, after all, he must be right, for according to geologists the world must have been a horrible place, and full of the most hideous creatures, before sin came and made it lovely. When he saw my drift, he strode up to me like--well, very like his own God, I should think--and was going to strike me. I looked him in the eyes without moving, as if he had been a madman. He turned and left the room. I left the house, and went back to London the same night.'

'Oh! Charley, Charley, that was too bad!'

'I knew it, Wilfrid, and yet I did it! But if your father had made a downright coward of you, afraid to speak the truth, or show what you were thinking, you also might find that, when anger gave you a fictitious courage, you could not help breaking out. It's only another form of cowardice, I know; and I am as much ashamed of it as you could wish me to be.'

'Have you made it up with him since?'

'I've never seen him since.'

'Haven't you written, then?'

'No. Where's the use? He never would understand me. He knows no more of the condition of my mind than he does of the other side of the moon. If I offered such, he would put aside all apology for my behaviour to him--repudiating himself, and telling me it was the wrath of an offended God, not of an earthly parent, I had to deprecate. If I told him I had only spoken against his false God--how far would that go to mend the matter, do you think?'

'Not far, I must allow. But I am very sorry.'

‘I wouldn’t care if I could be sure of anything--or even sure that, if I were sure, I shouldn’t be mistaken.’

‘I’m afraid you’re very morbid, Charley.’

‘Perhaps. But you cannot deny that my father is sure of things that you believe utterly false.’

‘I suspect, however, that, if we were able to get a bird’s-eye view of his mind and all its workings, we should discover that what he called assurance was not the condition you would call such. You would find it was not the certainty you covet.’

‘I *have* thought of that, and it is my only comfort. But I am sick of the whole subject. See that cloud! Isn’t it like Death on the pale horse? What fun it must be for the cherubs, on such a night as this, to go blowing the clouds into fantastic shapes with their trumpet cheeks!’

Assurance was ever what Charley wanted, and unhappily the sense of intellectual insecurity weakened his moral action.

Once more I reveal a haunting uneasiness in the expression of a hope that the ordered character of the conversation I have just set down may not render it incredible to my reader. I record the result alone. The talk itself was far more desultory, and in consequence of questions, objections, and explanations, divaricated much from the comparatively direct line I have endeavoured to give it here. In the hope of making my reader understand both Charley and myself, I have sought to make the winding and rough path straight and smooth.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TAPESTRY.

Having heard what I was about at the Hall, Charley expressed a desire to take a share in my labours, especially as thereby he would be able to see more of his mother and sister. I took him straight to the book-rooms, and we were hard at work when Clara entered.

‘Here is your old friend Charley Osborne,’ I said. ‘You remember Miss Coningham, Charley, I know.’

He advanced in what seemed a strangely embarrassed--indeed, rather sheepish manner, altogether unlike his usual bearing. I attributed it to a doubt whether Clara would acknowledge their old acquaintance. On her part, she met him with some frankness, but I thought also a rather embarrassed look, which was the more surprising as I had let her know he was coming. But they shook hands, and in a little while we were all chatting comfortably.

‘Shall I go and tell Mrs Osborne you are here?’ she asked.

‘Yes, if you please,’ said Charley, and she went.

In a few minutes Mrs Osborne and Mary entered. The meeting was full of affection, but to my eye looked like a meeting of the living and the dead in a dream--there was such an evident sadness in it, as if each was dimly aware that they met but in appearance, and were in reality far asunder. I could not doubt that however much they loved him, and however little they sympathized with his father’s treatment of him, his mother and sister yet regarded him as separated from them by a great gulf--that of culpable unbelief. But they seemed therefore only the more anxious to please and serve him--their anxiety revealing itself in an eagerness painfully like the service offered to one whom the doctors had given up, and who may now have any indulgence he happens to fancy.

‘I say, mother,’ said Charley, who seemed to strive after an airier manner even than usual--‘couldn’t you come and help us? It would be so jolly!’

‘No, my dear; I mustn’t leave Lady Brotherton. That would be rude, you know. But I dare say Mary might.’

‘Oh, please, mamma! I should like it so much--especially if Clara would stop! But perhaps Mr Cumbermede--we ought to have asked him first.’

‘Yes--to be sure--he’s the foreman,’ said Charley. ‘But he’s not a bad fellow, and won’t be disobliging. Only you must do as he tells you, or it’ll be the worse for us all. *I* know him.’

‘I shall be delighted,’ I said. ‘I can give both the ladies plenty to do. Indeed I regard Miss Coningham as one of my hands already. Won’t Miss Brotherton honour us to-day, Miss Coningham?’

‘I will go and ask her,’ said Clara.

They all withdrew. In a little while I had four assistants, and we got on famously. The carpenter had been hard at work, and the room next the armoury, the oak-panelling of which had shown considerable signs of decay, had been repaired, and the shelves, which were in tolerable condition, were now ready to receive their burden, and reflect the first rays of a dawning order.

Plenty of talk went on during the dusting and arranging of the books by their size, which was the first step towards a cosmos. There was a certain playful naïveté about Charley’s manner and speech, when he was happy, which gave him an instant advantage with women, and even made the impression of wit where there was only grace. Although he was perfectly capable, however, of engaging to any extent in the *badinage* which has ever been in place between young men and women since dawning humanity was first aware of a lovely difference, there was always a certain indescribable dignity about what he said which I now see could

have come only from a *believing* heart. I use the word advisedly, but would rather my reader should find what I mean than require me to explain it fully. Belief, to my mind, lies chiefly in the practical recognition of the high and pure.

Miss Brotherton looked considerably puzzled sometimes, and indeed out of her element. But her dignity had no chance with so many young people, and was compelled to thaw visibly; and while growing more friendly with the others, she could not avoid unbending towards me also, notwithstanding I was a neighbour and the son of a dairy-farmer.

Mary Osborne took little part in the fun beyond a smile, or in the more solid conversation beyond an assent or an ordinary remark. I did not find her very interesting. An onlooker would probably have said she lacked expression. But the stillness upon her face bore to me the shadow of a reproof. Perhaps it was only a want of sympathy with what was going on around her. Perhaps her soul was either far withdrawn from its present circumstances, or not yet awake to the general interests of life. There was little in the form or hue of her countenance to move admiration, beyond a complexion without spot. It was very fair and delicate, with little more colour in it than in the white rose, which but the faintest warmth redeems from dead whiteness. Her features were good in form, but in no way remarkable; her eyes were of the so-called hazel, which consists of a mingling of brown and green; her figure was good, but seemed unelastic, and she had nothing of her brother's gaiety or grace of movement or expression. I do not mean that either her motions or her speech was clumsy--there was simply nothing to remark in them beyond the absence of anything special. In a word, I did not find her interesting, save as the sister of my delightful Charley, and the sharer of his mother's griefs concerning him.

‘If I had as good help in the afternoon,’ I said, ‘we should have all the books on the shelves to-night, and be able to set about assorting them to-morrow.’

‘I am sorry I cannot come this afternoon,’ said Miss Brotherton. ‘I should have been most happy if I could. It is really very pleasant notwithstanding the dust. But Mrs Osborne and mamma want me to go with them to Minstercombe. You will lunch with us to-day, won’t you?’ she added, turning to Charley.

‘Thank you, Miss Brotherton,’ he replied; ‘I should have been delighted, but I am not my own master--I am Cumbermede’s slave at present, and can eat and drink only when and where he chooses.’

‘You *must* stay with your mother, Charley,’ I said. ‘You cannot refuse Miss Brotherton.’

She could thereupon scarcely avoid extending the invitation to me, but I declined it on some pretext or other, and I was again, thanks to Lilith, back from my dinner before they had finished luncheon. The carriage was at the door when I rode up, and the moment I heard it drive away, I went to the dining-room to find my coadjutors. The only person there was Miss Pease. A thought struck me.

‘Won’t you come and help us, Miss Pease?’ I said. ‘I have lost one of my assistants, and I am very anxious to get the room we are at now so far finished to-night.’

A smile found its way to her cold eyes, and set the blue sparkling for one briefest moment.

‘It is very kind of you, Mr Cumbermede, but--’

‘Kind!’ I exclaimed--‘I want your help, Miss Pease.’

‘I’m afraid--’

‘Lady Brotherton can’t want you now. Do oblige me. You will find it fun.’

She smiled outright--evidently at the fancy of any relation between her and fun.

‘Do go and put a cap on, and a cotton dress, and come,’ I persisted.

Without another word she left the room. I was still alone in the library when she came to me, and having shown her what I wanted, we were already busy when the rest arrived.

‘Oh, Peasey! Are you there?’ said Clara, as she entered--not unkindly.

‘I have got a substitute for Miss Brotherton, you see, Clara--Miss Coningham--I beg your pardon.’

‘There’s no occasion to beg my pardon. Why shouldn’t you call me Clara if you like? It *is* my name.’

‘Charley might be taking the same liberty,’ I returned, extemporizing a reason.

‘And why *shouldn’t* Charley take the same liberty?’ she retorted.

‘For no reason that I know,’ I answered, a trifle hurt, ‘if it be agreeable to the lady.’

‘And the gentleman,’ she amended.

‘And the gentleman,’ I added.

‘Very well. Then we are all good boys and girls. Now, Peasey, I’m very glad you’re come. Only mind you get back to your place before the ogress returns, or you’ll have your head snapped off.’

Was I right, or was it the result of the slight offence I had taken? Was the gracious, graceful, naïve, playful, daring woman--or could she be--or had

she been just the least little bit vulgar? I am afraid I was then more sensitive to vulgarity in a woman, real or fancied, than even to wickedness--at least I thought I was. At all events, the first *conviction* of anything common or unrefined in a woman would at once have placed me beyond the sphere of her attraction. But I had no time to think the suggestion over now; and in a few minutes--whether she saw the cloud on my face I cannot tell--Clara had given me a look and a smile which banished the possibility of my thinking about it for the present.

Miss Pease worked more diligently than any of the party. She seldom spoke, and when she did, it was in a gentle, subdued, almost mournful tone; but the company of the young people, without the restraint of her mistress, was evidently grateful to what of youth yet remained in her oppressed being.

Before it was dark we had got the books all upon the shelves, and leaving Charley with the ladies, I walked home.

I found Styles had got everything out of the lumber-room except a heavy oak chest in the corner, which, our united strength being insufficient to displace it, I concluded was fixed to the floor. I collected all the keys my aunt had left behind her, but sought the key of this chest in vain. For my uncle, I never saw a key in his possession. Even what little money he might have in the house, was only put away at the back of an open drawer. For the present, therefore, we had to leave it undisturbed.

When Charley came home we went to look at it together. It was of oak, and somewhat elaborately carved.

I was very restless in bed that night. The air was close and hot, and as often as I dropped half asleep I woke again with a start. My thoughts kept stupidly running on the old chest. It had mechanically possessed me. I felt no disturbing curiosity concerning its contents; I was not annoyed at the want of the key; it was only that, like a nursery rhyme that keeps

repeating itself over and over in the half-sleeping brain, this chest kept rising before me till I was out of patience with its intrusiveness. It brought me wide awake at last; and I thought, as I could not sleep, I would have a search for the key. I got out of bed, put on my dressing-gown and slippers, lighted my chamber-candle, and made an inroad upon the contents of the closet in my room, which had apparently remained undisturbed since the morning when I missed my watch. I believe I had never entered it since. Almost the first thing I came upon was the pendulum, which woke a strange sensation for which I could not account, until by slow degrees the twilight memory of the incidents connected with it half dawned upon me. I searched the whole place, but not a key could I find.

I started violently at the sound of something like a groan, and for the briefest imaginable moment forgot that my grannie was dead, and thought it must come from her room. It may be remembered that such a sound had led me to her in the middle of the night on which she died. Whether I really heard the sound, or only fancied I heard it--by some half-mechanical action of the brain, roused by the association of ideas--I do not even yet know. It may have been changed or expanded into a groan, from one of those innumerable sounds heard in every old house in the stillness of the night; for such, in the absence of the correction given by other sounds, assume place and proportion as it were at their pleasure. What lady has not at midnight mistaken the trail of her own dress on the carpet, in a silent house, for some tumult in a distant room? Curious to say, however, it now led to the same action as the groan I had heard so many years before; for I caught up my candle at once, and took my way down to the kitchen, and up the winding stair behind the chimney to grannie’s room. Strange as it may seem, I had not been in it since my return; for my thoughts had been so entirely occupied with other things, that, although I now and then looked forward with considerable expectation to a thorough search of the place, especially of the bureau, I

kept it up as a *bonne bouche*, the anticipation of which was consolation enough for the postponement.

I confess it was with no little quavering of the spirit that I sought this chamber in the middle of the night. For, by its association with one who had from my earliest recollection seemed like something forgotten and left behind in the onward rush of life, it was, far more than anything else in the house, like a piece of the past embedded in the present--a fragment that had been, by some eddy in the stream of time, prevented from gliding away down its course, and left to lie for ever in a cranny of the solid shore of unmoving space. But although subject to more than the ordinary tremor at the thought of unknown and invisible presences, I must say for myself that I had never yielded so far as to allow such tremor to govern my actions. Even in my dreams I have resisted ghostly terrors, and can recall one in which I so far conquered a lady-ghost who took every means of overcoming me with terror, that at length she fell in love with me, whereupon my fear vanished utterly--a conceited fancy, and as such let it fare.

I opened the door then with some trembling, half expecting to see first the white of my grannie’s cap against the tall back of her dark chair. But my senses were sound, and no such illusion seized me. All was empty, cheerless, and musty. Grannie’s bed, with its white curtains, looked as if it were mouldering away after her. The dust lay thick on the counterpane of patchwork silk. The bureau stood silent with all its secrets. In the fire-place was the same brushwood and coals which Nannie laid the morning of grannie’s death: interrupted by the discovery of my presence, she had left it, and that fire had never been lighted. Half for the sake of companionship, half because the air felt sepulchral and I was thinly clad, I put my candle to it and it blazed up. My courage revived, and after a little more gazing about the room, I ventured to sit down in my grannie’s chair and watch the growing fire. Warned, however, by the shortness of

my candle, I soon rose to proceed with my search, and turned towards the bureau.

Here, however, the same difficulty occurred. The top of the bureau was locked as when I had last tried it, and not one of my keys would fit it. At a loss what to do or where to search, I dropped again into the chair by the fire, and my eyes went roving about the room. They fell upon a black dress which hung against the wall. At the same moment I remembered that, when she gave me the watch, she took the keys of the bureau from her pocket. I went to the dress and found a pocket, not indeed in the dress, but hanging under it from the same peg. There her keys were! It would have been a marvel to me how my aunt came to leave them undisturbed all those years, but for the instant suggestion that my uncle must have expressed a wish to that effect. With eager hand I opened the bureau. Besides many trinkets in the drawers, some of them of exceedingly antique form, and, I fancied, of considerable value, I found in the pigeon-holes what I was far more pleased to discover--a good many letters, carefully tied in small bundles, with ribbon which had lost all determinable colour. These I reserved to take an early opportunity of reading, but replaced for the present, and, having come at last upon one hopeful-looking key, I made haste to return before my candle, which was already flickering in the socket, should go out altogether, and leave me darkling. When I reached the kitchen, however, I found the grey dawn already breaking. I retired once more to my chamber, and was soon fast asleep.

In the morning, my first care was to try the key. It fitted. I oiled it well, and then tried the lock. I had to use considerable force, but at last there came a great clang that echoed through the empty room. When I raised the lid, I knew by the weight it was of iron. In fact, the whole chest was iron with a casing of oak. The lock threw eight bolts, which laid hold of a rim that ran all round the lip of the chest. It was full of ‘very ancient and fish-like’ papers and parchments. I do not know whether my father or

grandfather had ever disturbed them, but I am certain my uncle never had, for, as far back as I can remember, the part of the room where it stood was filled with what had been, at one time and another, condemned as lumber.

Charley was intensely interested in the discovery, and would have sat down at once to examine the contents of the chest, had I not persuaded him to leave them till the afternoon, that we might get on with our work at the Hall.

The second room was now ready for the carpenter, but, having had a peep of tapestry behind the shelves, a new thought had struck me. If it was in good preservation, it would be out of the question to hide it behind books.

I fear I am getting tedious. My apology for diffuseness in this part of my narrative is that some threads of the fringe of my own fate show every now and then in the record of these proceedings. I confess also that I hang back from certain things which are pressing nearer with their claim for record.

When we reached the Hall, I took the carpenter with me, and had the bookshelves taken down. To my disappointment we found that an oblong piece of some size was missing from the centre of the tapestry on one of the walls. That which covered the rest of the room was entire. It was all of good Gobelins work--somewhat tame in colour. The damaged portion represented a wooded landscape with water and reedy flowers and aquatic fowl, towards which in the distance came a hunter with a crossbow in his hand, and a queer, lurcher-looking dog bounding uncouthly at his heel; the edge of the vacant space cut off the dog’s tail and the top of the man’s crossbow.

I went to find Sir Giles. He was in the dining-room, where they had just finished breakfast.

‘Ah, Mr Cumbermede!’ he said, rising as I entered, and holding out his hand--‘here already?’

‘We have uncovered some tapestry, Sir Giles, and I want you to come and look at it, if you please.’

‘I will,’ he answered. ‘Would any of you ladies like to go and see it?’

His daughter and Clara rose. Lady Brotherton and Mrs Osborne sat still. Mary, glancing at her mother, remained seated also.

‘Won’t you come, Miss Pease?’ I said.

She looked almost alarmed at the audacity of the proposal, and murmured, ‘No, thank you,’ with a glance at Lady Brotherton, which appeared as involuntary as it was timid.

‘Is my son with you?’ asked Mrs Osborne.

I told her he was.

‘I shall look in upon you before the morning is over,’ she said quietly.

They were all pleased with the tapestry, and the ladies offered several conjectures as to the cause of the mutilation.

‘It would be a shame to cover it up again--would it not, Sir Giles?’ I remarked.

‘Indeed it would,’ he assented.

‘If it weren’t for that broken piece,’ said Clara. ‘That spoils it altogether. *I* should have the books up again as soon as possible.’

‘It does look shabby,’ said Charley. ‘I can’t say I should enjoy having anything so defective always before my eyes.’

‘We must have it taken down very carefully, Hobbes,’ said Sir Giles, turning to the carpenter.

‘*Must* it come down, Sir Giles?’ I interposed. ‘I think it would be risky. No one knows how long it has been there, and though it might hang where it is for a century yet, and look nothing the worse, it can’t be strong, and at best we could not get it down without some injury, while it is a great chance if it would fit any other place half as well.’

‘What do you propose, then?’

‘This is the largest room of the six, and the best lighted--with that lovely oriel window: I would venture to propose, Sir Giles, that it should be left clear of books and fitted up as a reading-room.’

‘But how would you deal with that frightful *lacuna* in the tapestry?’ said Charley.

‘Yes,’ said Sir Giles; ‘it won’t look handsome, I fear--do what you will.’

‘I think I know how to manage it,’ I said. ‘If I succeed to your satisfaction, will you allow me to carry out the project?’

‘But what are we to do with the books, then? We shan’t have room for them.’

‘Couldn’t you let me have the next room beyond?’

‘You mean to turn me out, I suppose,’ said Clara.

‘Is there tapestry on your walls?’ I asked.

‘Not a thread--all wainscot--painted.’

‘Then your room would be the very thing.’

‘It is much larger than any of these,’ she said.

‘Then do let us have it for the library, Sir Giles,’ I entreated.

‘I will see what Lady Brotherton says,’ he replied, and left the room.

In a few minutes we heard his step returning.

‘Lady Brotherton has no particular objection to giving up the room you want,’ he said. ‘Will you see Mrs Wilson, Clara, and arrange with her for your accommodation?’

‘With pleasure. I don’t mind where I’m put--unless it be in Lord Edward’s room--where the ghost is.’

‘You mean the one next to ours? There is no ghost there, I assure you,’ said Sir Giles, laughing, as he again left the room with short, heavy steps. ‘Manage it all to your own mind, Mr Cumbermede. I shall be satisfied,’ he called back as he went.

‘Until further notice,’ I said, with grandiloquence, ‘I request that no one may come into this room. If you are kind enough to assort the books we put up yesterday, oblige me by going through the armoury. I must find Mrs Wilson.’

‘I will go with you,’ said Clara. ‘I wonder where the old thing will want to put me. I’m not going where I don’t like, I can tell her,’ she added, following me down the stair and across the hall and the court.

We found the housekeeper in her room. I accosted her in a friendly way. She made but a bare response.

‘Would you kindly show me where I slept that night I lost my sword, Mrs Wilson?’ I said.

‘I know nothing about your sword, Mr Cumbermede,’ she answered, shaking her head and pursing up her mouth.

‘I don’t ask you anything about it, Mrs Wilson; I only ask you where I slept the night I lost it.’

‘Really, Mr Cumbermede, you can hardly expect me to remember in what room a visitor slept--let me see--it must be twelve or fifteen years ago! I do not take it upon me.’

‘Oh! never mind, then. I referred to the circumstances of that night, thinking they might help you to remember the room; but it is of no consequence; I shall find it for myself. Miss Coningham will, I hope, help me in the search. She knows the house better than I do.’

‘I must attend to my own business first, if you please, sir,’ said Clara. ‘Mrs Wilson, I am ordered out of my room by Mr Cumbermede. You must find me fresh quarters, if you please.’

Mrs Wilson stared.

‘Do you mean, miss, that you want your things moved to another bed-room?’

‘That *is* what I mean, Mrs Wilson.’

‘I must see what Lady Brotherton says to it, miss.’

‘Do, by all means.’

I saw that Clara was bent on annoying her old enemy, and interposed.

‘Sir Giles and Lady Brotherton have agreed to let me have Miss Coningham’s room for an addition to the library, Mrs Wilson,’ I said.

She looked very grim, but made no answer. We turned and left her. She stood for a moment as if thinking, and then, taking down her bunch of keys, followed us.

‘If you will come this way,’ she said, stopping just behind us at another door in the court, ‘I think I can show you the room you want. But really, Mr Cumbermede, you are turning the place upside down. If I had thought it would come to this--’

‘I hope to do so a little more yet, Mrs Wilson,’ I interrupted. ‘But I am sure you will be pleased with the result.’

She did not reply, but led the way up a stair, across the little open gallery, and by passages I did not remember, to the room I wanted. It was in precisely the same condition as when I occupied it.

‘This is the room, I believe,’ she said, as she unlocked and threw open the door. ‘Perhaps it would suit you, Miss Coningham?’

‘Not in the least,’ answered Clara. ‘Who knows which of my small possessions might vanish before the morning!’

The housekeeper’s face grew turkey-red with indignation.

‘Mr Cumbermede has been filling your head with some of his romances, I see, Miss Clara!’

I laughed, for I did not care to show myself offended with her rudeness.

‘Never you mind,’ said Clara; ‘I am *not* going to sleep there.’

‘Very good,’ said Mrs Wilson, in a tone of offence severely restrained.

‘Will you show me the way to the library?’ I requested.

‘I will,’ said Clara; ‘I know it as well as Mrs Wilson--every bit.’

‘Then that is all I want at present, Mrs Wilson,’ I said, as we came out of the room. ‘Don’t lock the door, though, please,’ I added. ‘Or, if you do, give me the key.’

She left the door open, and us in the passage. Clara led me to the library. There we found Charley waiting our return.

‘Will you take that little boy to his mother, Clara?’ I said. ‘I don’t want him here to-day. We’ll have a look over those papers in the evening, Charley.’

‘That’s right,’ said Clara. ‘I hope Charley will help you to a little rational interest in your own affairs. I am quite bewildered to think that an author, not to say a young man, the sole remnant of an ancient family, however humble, shouldn’t even know whether he had any papers in the house or not.’

‘We’ve come upon a glorious nest of such addled eggs, Clara. Charley and I are going to blow them to-night,’ I said.

‘You never know when such eggs are addled,’ retorted Clara. ‘You’d better put them under some sensible fowl or other first,’ she added, looking back from the door as they went.

I turned to the carpenter’s tool-basket, and taking from it an old chisel, a screw-driver, and a pair of pincers, went back to the room we had just left.

There could be no doubt about it. There was the tip of the dog’s tail, and the top of the hunter’s crossbow.

But my reader may not have retained in her memory the facts to which I implicitly refer. I would therefore, to spare repetition, beg her to look back to chapter xiv., containing the account of the loss of my sword.

In the consternation caused me by the discovery that this loss was no dream of the night, I had never thought of examining the wall of the chamber, to see whether there was in it a door or not; but I saw now at once plainly enough that the inserted patch did cover a small door. Opening it, I found within, a creaking wooden stair, leading up to another low door, which, fashioned like the door of a companion, opened upon the roof:--nowhere, except in the towers, had the Hall more than two stories. As soon as I had drawn back the bolt and stepped out, I found myself standing at the foot of an ornate stack of chimneys, and remembered quite well having tried the door that night Clara and I were shut out on the leads--the same night on which my sword was stolen.

For the first time the question now rose in my mind whether Mrs Wilson could have been in league with Mr Close. Was it likely I should have been placed in a room so entirely fitted to his purposes by accident? But I could not imagine any respectable woman running such a risk of terrifying a child out of his senses, even if she could have connived at his being robbed of what she might well judge unsuitable for his possession.

Descending again to the bed-room, I set to work with my tools. The utmost care was necessary, for the threads were weak with old age. I had only one or two slight mishaps, however, succeeding on the whole better than I had expected. Leaving the door denuded of its covering, I took the patch on my arm, and again sought the library. Hobbes's surprise, and indeed pleasure, when he saw that my plunder not only fitted the gap, but completed the design, was great. I directed him to get the whole piece down as carefully as he could, and went to extract, if possible, a favour from Lady Brotherton.

She was of course very stiff--no doubt she would have called it dignified; but I did all I could to please her, and perhaps in some small measure succeeded. After representing, amongst other advantages, what an addition a suite of rooms filled with a valuable library must be to the capacity of the house for the reception and entertainment of guests, I ventured at last to beg the services of Miss Pease for the repair of the bit of the tapestry.

She rang the bell, sent for Miss Pease, and ordered her, in a style of the coldest arrogance, to put herself under my direction. She followed me to the door in the meekest manner, but declined the arm I offered. As we went I explained what I wanted, saying I could not trust it to any hands but those of a lady, expressing a hope that she would not think I had taken too great a liberty, and begging her to say nothing about the work itself, as I wished to surprise Sir Giles and my assistants. She said she would be most happy to help me, but when she saw how much was

wanted, she did look a little dismayed. She went and fetched her work-basket at once, however, and set about it, tacking the edges to a strip of canvas, in preparation for some kind of darning, which would not, she hoped, be unsightly.

For a whole week she and the carpenter were the only persons I admitted, and while she gave to her darning every moment she could redeem from her attendance on Lady Brotherton, the carpenter and I were busy--he cleaning and polishing, and I ranging the more deserted parts of the house to find furniture suitable for our purpose. In Clara’s room was an old Turkey-carpet which we appropriated, and when we had the tapestry up again, which Miss Pease had at length restored in a marvellous manner--surpassing my best hopes, and more like healing than repairing--the place was to my eyes a very nest of dusky harmonies.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE OLD CHEST.

I cannot help dwelling for a moment on the scene, although it is not of the slightest consequence to my story, when Sir Giles and Lady Brotherton entered the reading-room of the resuscitated library of Moldwarp Hall. It was a bright day of Autumn. Outside all was brilliant. The latticed oriel looked over the lawn and the park, where the trees had begun to gather those rich hues which could hardly be the heralds of death if it were the ugly thing it appears. Beyond the fading woods rose a line of blue heights meeting the more ethereal blue of the sky, now faded to a colder and paler tint. The dappled skins of the fallow deer glimmered through the trees, and the whiter ones among them cast a light round them in the shadows. Through the trees that on one side descended to the meadow below, came the shine of the water where the little brook had spread into still pools. All without was bright with sunshine and clear air. But when you turned, all was dark, sombre, and rich, like an Autumn ten times faded. Through the open door of the next room on one side, you saw the shelves full of books, and from beyond, through the narrow uplifted door, came the glimmer of the weapons on the wall of the little armoury. Two ancient tapestry-covered settees, in which the ravages of moth and worm had been met by a skilful repair of chisel and needle, a heavy table of oak, with carved sides as black as ebony, and a few old, straight-backed chairs, were the sole furniture.

Sir Giles expressed much pleasure, and Lady Brotherton, beginning to enter a little into my plans, was more gracious than hitherto.

‘We must give a party as soon as you have finished, Mr Cumbermede,’ she said; ‘and--’

‘That will be some time yet,’ I interrupted, not desiring the invitation she seemed about to force herself to utter; ‘and I fear there are not many in

this neighbourhood who will appreciate the rarity and value of the library--if the other rooms should turn out as rich as that one.'

'I believe old books *are* expensive now-a-days,' she returned. 'They are more sought after, I understand.'

We resumed our work with fresh vigour, and got on faster. Both Clara and Mary were assiduous in their help.

To go back for a little to my own old chest--we found it, as I said, full of musty papers. After turning over a few, seeming, to my uneducated eye, deeds and wills and such like, out of which it was evident I could gather no barest meaning without a labour I was not inclined to expend on them--for I had no pleasure in such details as involved nothing of the picturesque--I threw the one in my hand upon the heap already taken from the box, and to the indignation of Charley, who was absorbed in one of them, and had not spoken a word for at least a quarter of an hour, exclaimed--

'Come, Charley; I'm sick of the rubbish. Let's go and have a walk before supper.'

'Rubbish!' he repeated; 'I am ashamed of you!'

'I see Clara has been setting you on. I wonder what she's got in her head. I am sure I have quite a sufficient regard for family history and all that.'

'Very like it!' said Charley--'calling such a chestful as this rubbish!'

'I am pleased enough to possess it,' I said; 'but if they had been such books as some of those at the Hall--'

'Look here, then,' he said, stooping over the chest, and with some difficulty hauling out a great folio which he had discovered below, but had not yet examined--'just see what you can make of that.'

I opened the title-page rather eagerly. I stared. Could I believe my eyes? First of all on the top of it, in the neatest old hand, was written--‘Guilfrid Combremead His Boke. 1630.’ Then followed what I will not write, lest this MS. should by any accident fall into the hands of book-hunters before my death. I jumped to my feet, gave a shout that brought Charley to his feet also, and danced about the empty room hugging the folio. ‘Have you lost your senses?’ said Charley; but when he had a peep at the title-page, he became as much excited as myself, and it was some time before he could settle down to the papers again. Like a bee over a flower-bed, I went dipping and sipping at my treasure. Every word of the well-known lines bore a flavour of ancient verity such as I had never before perceived in them. At length I looked up, and finding him as much absorbed as I had been myself--

‘Well, Charley, what are you finding there?’ I asked.

‘Proof perhaps that you come of an older family than you think,’ he answered; ‘proof certainly that some part at least of the Moldwarp property was at one time joined to the Moat, and that you are of the same stock, a branch of which was afterwards raised to the present baronetage. At least I have little doubt such is the case, though I can hardly say I am yet prepared to prove it.’

‘You don’t mean I’m of the same blood as--as Geoffrey Brotherton!’ I said. ‘I would rather not, if it’s the same to you, Charley.’

‘I can’t help it: that’s the way things point,’ he answered, throwing down the parchment. ‘But I can’t read more now. Let’s go and have a walk. I’ll stop at home to-morrow and take a look over the whole set.’

‘I’ll stop with you.’

[Illustration: “Well. Charley. What are you finding there?” I asked.]

‘No, you won’t. You’ll go and get on with your library. I shall do better alone. If I could only get a peep at the Moldwarp chest as well!’

‘But the place may have been bought and sold many times. Just look here, though,’ I said, as I showed him the crest on my watch and seal. ‘Mind you look at the top of your spoon the next time you eat soup at the Hall.’

‘That is unnecessary, quite. I recognise the crest at once. How strangely these cryptographs come drifting along the tide, like the gilded ornaments of a wreck after the hull has gone down!’

‘Or, like the mole or squint that re-appears in successive generations, the legacy of some long-forgotten ancestor,’ I said--and several things unexplained occurred to me as possibly having a common solution.

‘I find, however,’ said Charley, ‘that the name of Cumbermede is not mentioned in your papers more than about a hundred years back--as far as I have yet made out.’

‘That is odd,’ I returned, ‘seeing that in the same chest we find that book with my name, surname and Christian, and the date 1630.’

‘It is strange,’ he acquiesced, ‘and will perhaps require a somewhat complicated theory to meet it.’

We began to talk of other matters, and, naturally enough, soon came to Clara.

Charley was never ready to talk of her--indeed, avoided the subject in a way that continued to perplex me.

‘I confess to you, Charley,’ I said, ‘there is something about her I do not and cannot understand. It seems to me always as if she were--I will not say underhand--but as if she had some object in view--some design upon you--’

‘Upon me!’ exclaimed Charley, looking at me suddenly and with a face from which all the colour had fled.

‘No, no, Charley, not that,’ I answered, laughing. ‘I used the word impersonally. I will be more cautious. One would think we had been talking about a witch--or a demon-lady--you are so frightened at the notion of her having you in her eye.’

He did not seem altogether relieved, and I caught an uneasy glance seeking my countenance.

‘But isn’t she charming?’ I went on. ‘It is only to you I could talk about her so. And after all it may be only a fancy.’

He kept his face downwards and aside, as if he were pondering and coming to no conclusion. The silence grew and grew until expectation ceased, and when I spoke again it was of something different.

My reader may be certain from all this that I was not in love with Clara. Her beauty and liveliness, with a gaiety which not seldom assumed the form of grace, attracted me much, it is true; but nothing interferes more with the growth of any passion than a spirit of questioning, and, that once roused, love begins to cease and pass into pain. Few, perhaps, could have arrived at the point of admiration I had reached without falling instantly therefrom into an abyss of absorbing passion; but with me, inasmuch as I searched every feeling in the hope of finding in it the everlasting, there was in the present case a reiterated check, if not indeed recoil; for I was not and could not make myself sure that Clara was upright;--perhaps the more commonplace word *straightforward* would express my meaning better.

Anxious to get the books arranged before they all left me, for I knew I should have but little heart for it after they were gone, I grudged Charley the forenoon he wanted amongst my papers, and prevailed upon him to go with me the next day as usual. Another fortnight, which was almost

the limit of their stay, would, I thought, suffice; and giving up everything else, Charley and I worked from morning till night, with much though desultory assistance from the ladies. I contrived to keep the carpenter and housemaid in work, and by the end of the week began to see the inroads of order ‘scattering the rear of darkness thin.’

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MARY OSBORNE.

All this time the acquaintance between Mary Osborne and myself had not improved. Save as the sister of my friend I had not, I repeat, found her interesting. She did not seem at all to fulfil the promise of her childhood. Hardly once did she address me; and, when I spoke to her, would reply with a simple, dull directness which indicated nothing beyond the fact of the passing occasion. Rightly or wrongly, I concluded that the more indulgence she cherished for Charley, the less she felt for his friend--that to him she attributed the endlessly sad declension of her darling brother. Once on her face I surprised a look of unutterable sorrow resting on Charley's; but the moment she saw that I observed her, the look died out, and her face stiffened into its usual dulness and negation. On me she turned only the unenlightened disc of her soul. Mrs Osborne, whom I seldom saw, behaved with much more kindness, though hardly more cordiality. It was only that she allowed her bright indulgence for Charley to cast the shadow of his image over the faults of his friend; and except by the sadness that dwelt in every line of her sweet face, she did not attract me. I was ever aware of an inward judgment which I did not believe I deserved, and I would turn from her look with a sense of injury which greater love would have changed into keen pain.

Once, however, I did meet a look of sympathy from Mary. On the second Monday of the fortnight I was more anxious than ever to reach the end of my labours, and was in the court, accompanied by Charley, as early as eight o'clock. From the hall a dark passage led past the door of the dining-room to the garden. Through the dark tube of the passage we saw the bright green of a lovely bit of sward, and upon it Mary and Clara, radiant in white morning dresses. We joined them.

'Here come the slave-drivers!' remarked Clara.

‘Already!’ said Mary, in a low voice, which I thought had a tinge of dismay in its tone.

‘Never mind, Polly,’ said her companion--‘we’re not going to bow to their will and pleasure. We’ll have our walk in spite of them.’

As she spoke she threw a glance at us which seemed to say--‘You may come if you like;’ then turned to Mary with another which said--‘We shall see whether they prefer old books or young ladies.’

Charley looked at me--interrogatively.

‘Do as you like, Charley,’ I said.

‘I will do as you do,’ he answered.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I have no right--’

‘Oh! bother!’ said Clara. ‘You’re so magnificent always with your rights and wrongs! Are you coming, or are you not?’

‘Yes, I’m coming,’ I replied, convicted by Clara’s directness, for I was quite ready to go.

We crossed the court, and strolled through the park, which was of great extent, in the direction of a thick wood, covering a rise towards the east. The morning air was perfectly still; there was a little dew on the grass, which shone rather than sparkled; the sun was burning through a light fog, which grew deeper as we approached the wood; the decaying leaves filled the air with their sweet, mournful scent. Through the wood went a wide opening or glade, stretching straight and far towards the east, and along this we walked, with that exhilaration which the fading Autumn so strangely bestows. For some distance the ground ascended softly, but the view was finally closed in by a more abrupt swell, over the brow of which the mist hung in dazzling brightness.

Notwithstanding the gaiety of animal spirits produced by the season, I felt unusually depressed that morning. Already, I believe, I was beginning to feel the home-born sadness of the soul whose wings are weary and whose foot can find no firm soil on which to rest. Sometimes I think the wonder is that so many men are never sad. I doubt if Charley would have suffered so but for the wrongs his father's selfish religion had done him; which perhaps were therefore so far well, inasmuch as otherwise he might not have cared enough about religion even to doubt concerning it. But in my case now, it may have been only the unsatisfying presence of Clara, haunted by a dim regret that I could not love her more than I did. For with regard to her my soul was like one who in a dream of delight sees outspread before him a wide river, wherein he makes haste to plunge that he may disport himself in the fine element; but, wading eagerly, alas! finds not a single pool deeper than his knees.

'What's the matter with you, Wilfrid?' said Charley, who, in the midst of some gay talk, suddenly perceived my silence. 'You seem to lose all your spirits away from your precious library. I do believe you grudge every moment not spent upon those ragged old books.'

'I wasn't thinking of that, Charley; I was wondering what lies beyond that mist.'

'I see!--A chapter of the *Pilgrim's Progress*! Here we are--Mary, you're Christiana, and, Clara, you're Mercy. Wilfrid, you're--what?--I should have said Hopeful any other day, but this morning you look like--let me see--like Mr Ready-to-Halt. The celestial city lies behind that fog--doesn't it, Christiana?'

'I don't like to hear you talk so, Charley,' said his sister, smiling in his face.

'They ain't in the Bible,' he returned.

‘No--and I shouldn’t mind if you were only merry, but you know you are scoffing at the story, and I love it--so I can’t be pleased to hear you.’

‘I beg your pardon, Mary--but your celestial city lies behind such a fog that not one crystal turret, one pearly gate of it was ever seen. At least *we* have never caught a glimmer of it, and must go tramp, tramp--we don’t know whither, any more than the blind puppy that has crawled too far from his mother’s side.’

‘I do see the light of it, Charley dear,’ said Mary, sadly--not as if the light were any great comfort to her at the moment.

‘If you do see something--how can you tell what it’s the light of? It may come from the city of Dis, for anything you know.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Oh! the red-hot city--down below. You will find all about it in Dante.’

‘It doesn’t look like that--the light I see,’ said Mary, quietly.

‘How very ill-bred you are--to say such wicked things, Charley!’ said Clara.

‘Am I? They *are* better unmentioned. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die! Only don’t allude to the unpleasant subject.’

He burst out singing: the verses were poor, but I will give them.

‘Let the sun shimmer! Let the wind blow! All is a notion--What do we know? Let the moon glimmer! Let the stream flow! All is but motion To and fro!

‘Let the rose wither! Let the stars glow! Let the rain batter-- Drift sleet and snow! Bring the tears hither! Let the smiles go! What does it matter? To and fro!

‘To and fro ever, Motion and show! Nothing goes onward-- Hurry or no! All is one river-- Seaward and so Up again sunward-- To and fro!

‘Pendulum sweeping High, and now low! That star--*tic*, blot it! *Tac*, let it go! Time he is reaping Hay for his mow; That flower--he’s got it! To and fro!

‘Such a scythe swinging, Mighty and slow! Ripping and slaying-- Hey nonny no! Black Ribs is singing-- Chorus--Hey, ho! What is he saying-- To and fro?

‘Singing and saying “Grass is hay--ho! Love is a longing; Water is snow.” Swinging and swaying, Toll the bells go! Dinging and donging To and fro!’

‘Oh, Charley!’ said his sister, with suppressed agony, ‘what a wicked song!’

‘It *is* a wicked song,’ I said. ‘But I meant----it only represents an unbelieving, hopeless mood.’

‘*You* wrote it, then!’ she said, giving me--as it seemed, involuntarily--a look of reproach.

‘Yes, I did; but--’

‘Then I think you are very horrid,’ said Clara, interrupting.

‘Charley!’ I said, ‘you must not leave your sister to think so badly of me! You know why I wrote it--and what I meant.’

‘I wish I had written it myself,’ he returned. ‘I think it splendid. Anybody might envy you that song.’

‘But you know I didn’t mean it for a true one.’

‘Who knows whether it is true or false?’

‘*I* know,’ said Mary: ‘I know it is false.’

‘And *I* hope it,’ I adjoined.

‘Whatever put such horrid things into your head, Wilfrid?’ asked Clara.

‘Probably the fear lest they should be true. The verses came as I sat in a country church once, not long ago.’

‘In a church!’ exclaimed Mary.

‘Oh! he does go to church sometimes,’ said Charley, with a laugh.

‘How could you think of it in church?’ persisted Mary.

‘It’s more like the churchyard,’ said Clara.

‘It was in an old church in a certain desolate sea-forsaken town,’ I said. ‘The pendulum of the clock--a huge, long, heavy, slow thing--hangs far down into the church, and goes swing, swang over your head, three or four seconds to every swing. When you have heard the *tic*, your heart grows faint every time between--waiting for the *tac*, which seems as if it would never come.’

We were ascending the acclivity, and no one spoke again before we reached the top. There a wide landscape lay stretched before us. The mist was rapidly melting away before the gathering strength of the sun: as we stood and gazed we could see it vanishing. By slow degrees the colours of the Autumn woods dawned out of it. Close under us lay a great wave of gorgeous red--beeches, I think--in the midst of which, here and there, stood up, tall and straight and dark, the unchanging green of a fir-tree. The glow of a hectic death was over the landscape, melting away into the misty fringe of the far horizon. Overhead the sky was blue, with a clear thin blue that told of withdrawing suns and coming frosts.

‘For my part,’ I said, ‘I cannot believe that beyond this loveliness there lies no greater. Who knows, Charley, but death may be the first recognizable step of the progress of which you despair?’

It was then I caught the look from Mary’s eye, for the sake of which I have recorded the little incidents of the morning. But the same moment the look faded, and the veil or the mask fell over her face.

‘I am afraid,’ she said, ‘if there has been no progress before, there will be little indeed after.’

Now of all things, I hated the dogmatic theology of the party in which she had been brought up, and I turned from her with silent dislike.

‘Really,’ said Clara, ‘you gentlemen have been very entertaining this morning. One would think Polly and I had come out for a stroll with a couple of undertaker’s-men. There’s surely time enough to think of such things yet! None of us are at death’s door exactly.’

‘“Sweet remembrancer!”--Who knows?’ said Charley.

‘“Now I, to comfort him,”’ I followed, quoting Mrs Quickly concerning Sir John Falstaff, ‘“bid him, ‘a should not think of God: I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.”’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mary--‘there was no word of Him in the matter.’

‘I see,’ said Clara: ‘you meant that at me, Wilfrid. But I assure you I am no heathen. I go to church regularly--once a Sunday when I can, and twice when I can’t help it. That’s more than you do, Mr Cumbermede, I suspect.’

‘What makes you think so?’ I asked.

‘I can’t imagine you enjoying anything but the burial service.’

‘It is to my mind the most consoling of them all,’ I answered.

‘Well, I haven’t reached the point of wanting that consolation yet, thank heaven.’

‘Perhaps some of us would rather have the consolation than give thanks that we didn’t need it,’ I said.

‘I can’t say I understand you, but I know you mean something disagreeable. Polly, I think we had better go home to breakfast.’

Mary turned, and we all followed. Little was said on the way home. We divided in the hall--the ladies to breakfast, and we to our work.

We had not spoken for an hour, when Charley broke the silence.

‘What a brute I am, Wilfrid!’ he said. ‘Why shouldn’t I be as good as Jesus Christ? It seems always as if a man might. But just look at me! Because I was miserable myself, I went and made my poor little sister twice as miserable as she was before. She’ll never get over what I said this morning.’

‘It *was* foolish of you, Charley.’

‘It was brutal. I am the most selfish creature in the world--always taken up with myself. I do believe there is a devil, after all. *I* am *a* devil. And the universal self is *the* devil. If there were such a thing as a self always giving itself away--that self would be God.’

‘Something very like the God of Christianity, I think.’

‘If it were so, there would be a chance for us. We might then one day give the finishing blow to the devil in us. But no: *he* does all for his own glory.’

‘It depends on what his glory is. If what the self-seeking self would call glory, then I agree with you--that is not the God we need. But if his glory

should be just the opposite--the perfect giving of himself away--then--Of course I know nothing about it. My uncle used to say things like that.'

He did not reply, and we went on with our work. Neither of the ladies came near us again that day.

Before the end of the week the library was in tolerable order to the eye, though it could not be perfectly arranged until the commencement of a catalogue should be as the dawn of a consciousness in the half-restored mass.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A STORM.

So many books of rarity and value had revealed themselves, that it was not difficult to make Sir Giles comprehend in some degree the importance of such a possession. He had grown more and more interested as the work went on; and even Lady Brotherton, although she much desired to have, at least, the oldest and most valuable of the books re-bound in red morocco first, was so far satisfied with what she was told concerning the worth of the library, that she determined to invite some of the neighbours to dinner, for the sake of showing it. The main access to it was to be by the armoury; and she had that side of the gallery round the hall which led thither covered with a thick carpet.

Meantime Charley had looked over all the papers in my chest, but, beyond what I have already stated, no fact of special interest had been brought to light.

In sending an invitation to Charley, Lady Brotherton could hardly avoid sending me one as well: I doubt whether I should otherwise have been allowed to enjoy the admiration bestowed on the result of my labours.

The dinner was formal and dreary enough: the geniality of one of the heads of a household is seldom sufficient to give character to an entertainment.

‘They tell me you are a buyer of books, Mr Alderforge,’ said Mr Mellon to the clergyman of a neighbouring parish, as we sat over our wine.

‘Quite a mistake,’ returned Mr Alderforge. ‘I am a reader of books.’

‘That of course! But you buy them first--don’t you?’

‘Not always. I sometimes borrow them.’

‘That I never do. If a book is worth borrowing, it is worth buying.’

‘Perhaps--if you can afford it. But many books that book-buyers value I count worthless--for all their wide margins and uncut leaves.’

‘Will you come-and have a look at Sir Giles’s library?’ I ventured to say.

‘I never heard of a library at Moldwarp Hall, Sir Giles,’ said Mr Mellon.

‘I am given to understand there is a very valuable one,’ said Mr Alderforge. ‘I shall be glad to accompany you, sir,’ he added, turning to me, ‘--if Sir Giles will allow us.’

‘You cannot have a better guide than Mr Cumbermede,’ said Sir Giles. ‘I am indebted to him almost for the discovery--altogether for the restoration of the library.’

‘Assisted by Miss Brotherton and her friends, Sir Giles,’ I said.

‘A son of Mr Cumbermede of Lowdon Farm, I presume?’ said Alderforge, bowing interrogatively.

‘A nephew,’ I answered.

‘He was a most worthy man.--By the way, Sir Giles, your young friend here must be a distant connection of your own. I found in some book or other lately, I forget where at the moment, that there were Cumbermedes at one time in Moldwarp Hall.’

‘Yes--about two hundred years ago, I believe. It passed to our branch of the family some time during the troubles of the seventeenth century--I hardly know how--I am not much of an historian.’

I thought of my precious volume, and the name on the title-page. That book might have been in the library of Moldwarp Hall. If so, how had it strayed into my possession--alone, yet more to me than all that was left behind?

We betook ourselves to the library. The visitors expressed themselves astonished at its extent, and the wealth which even a glance revealed--for I took care to guide their notice to its richest veins.

‘When it is once arranged,’ I said, ‘I fancy there will be few private libraries to stand a comparison with it--I am thinking of old English literature, and old editions: there is not a single volume of the present century in it, so far as I know.’

I had had a few old sconces fixed here and there, but as yet there were no means of really lighting the rooms. Hence, when a great flash of lightning broke from a cloud that hung over the park right in front of the windows, it flooded them with a dazzling splendour. I went to find Charley, for the library was the best place to see the lightning from. As I entered the drawing-room, a tremendous peal of thunder burst over the house, causing so much consternation amongst the ladies, that, for the sake of company, they all followed to the library. Clara seemed more frightened than any. Mary was perfectly calm. Charley was much excited. The storm grew in violence. We saw the lightning strike a tree which stood alone a few hundred yards from the house. When the next flash came, half of one side seemed torn away. The wind rose, first in fierce gusts, then into a tempest, and the rain poured in torrents.

‘None of you can go home to-night, ladies,’ said Sir Giles. ‘You must make up your minds to stop where you are. Few horses would face such a storm as that.’

‘It would be to tax your hospitality too grievously, Sir Giles,’ said Mr Alderforge. ‘I dare say it will clear up by-and-by, or at least moderate sufficiently to let us get home.’

‘I don’t think there’s much chance of that,’ returned Sir Giles. ‘The barometer has been steadily falling for the last three days. My dear, you had better give your orders at once.’

‘You had better stop, Charley,’ I said.

‘I won’t if you go,’ he returned.

Clara was beside.

‘You must not think of going,’ she said.

Whether she spoke to him or me I did not know, but as Charley made no answer--

‘I cannot stop without being asked,’ I said, ‘and it is not likely that any one will take the trouble to ask me.’

The storm increased. At the request of the ladies, the gentlemen left the library and accompanied them to the drawing-room for tea. Our hostess asked Clara to sing, but she was too frightened to comply.

‘You will sing, Mary, if Lady Brotherton asks you, I know,’ said Mrs Osborne.

‘Do, my dear,’ said Lady Brotherton; and Mary at once complied.

I had never heard her sing, and did not expect much. But although she had little execution, there was, I found, a wonderful charm both in her voice and the simplicity of her mode. I did not feel this at first, nor could I tell when the song began to lay hold upon me, but when it ceased, I found that I had been listening intently. I have often since tried to recall it, but as yet it has eluded all my efforts. I still cherish the hope that it may return some night in a dream, or in some waking moment of quiescent thought, when what we call the brain works as it were of itself, and the spirit allows it play.

The close was lost in a louder peal of thunder than had yet burst. Charley and I went again to the library to look out on the night. It was dark as pitch, except when the lightning broke and revealed everything for one intense moment.

‘I think sometimes,’ said Charley, ‘that death will be like one of those flashes, revealing everything in hideous fact--for just one-moment and no more.’

‘How for one moment and no more, Charley?’ I asked.

‘Because the sight of the truth concerning itself must kill the soul, if there be one, with disgust at its own vileness, and the miserable contrast between its aspirations and attainments, its pretences and its efforts. At least, that would be the death fit for a life like mine--a death of disgust at itself. We claim immortality; we cringe and cower with the fear that immortality may *not* be the destiny of man; and yet we--*I*--do things unworthy not merely of immortality, but unworthy of the butterfly existence of a single day in such a world as this sometimes seems to be. Just think how I stabbed at my sister’s faith this morning--careless of making her as miserable as myself! Because my father has put into her mind his fancies, and I hate them, I wound again the heart which they wound, and which cannot help their presence!’

‘But the heart that can be sorry for an action is far above the action, just as her heart is better than the notions that haunt it.’

‘Sometimes I hope so. But action determines character. And it is all such a muddle! I don’t care much about what they call immortality. I doubt if it is worth the having. I would a thousand times rather have one day of conscious purity of heart and mind and soul and body, than an eternity of such life as I have now.--What am I saying?’ he added, with a despairing laugh. ‘It is a fool’s comparison; for an eternity of the former would be bliss--one moment of the latter is misery.’

I could but admire and pity my poor friend both at once.

Miss Pease had entered unheard.

‘Mr Cumbermede,’ she said, ‘I have been looking for you to show you your room. It is not the one I should like to have got for you, but Mrs Wilson says you have occupied it before, and I dare say you will find it comfortable enough.’

‘Thank you, Miss Pease. I am sorry you should have taken the trouble. I can go home well enough. I am not afraid of a little rain.’

‘A little rain!’ said Charley, trying to speak lightly.

‘Well, any amount of rain,’ I said.

‘But the lightning!’ expostulated Miss Pease in a timid voice.

‘I am something of a fatalist, Miss Pease,’ I said. ‘“Every bullet has its billet,” you know. Besides, if I had a choice, I think I would rather die by lightning than any other way.’

‘Don’t talk like that, Mr Cumbermede.--Oh! what a flash!’

‘I was not speaking irreverently, I assure you,’ I replied.--‘I think I had better set out at once, for there seems no chance of its clearing.’

‘I am sure Sir Giles would be distressed if you did.’

‘He will never know, and I dislike giving trouble.’

‘The room is ready. I will show you where it is, that you may go when you like.’

‘If Mrs Wilson says it is a room I have occupied before, I know the way quite well.’

‘There are two ways to it,’ she said. ‘But of course one of them is enough,’ she added with a smile. ‘Mr Osborne, your room is in another part quite.’

‘I know where my sister’s room is,’ said Charley. ‘Is it anywhere near hers?’

‘That is the room you are to have. Miss Osborne is to be with your mamma, I think. There is plenty of accommodation, only the notice was short.’

I began to button my coat.

‘Don’t go, Wilfrid,’ said Charley. ‘You might give offence. Besides, you will have the advantage of getting to work as early as you please in the morning.’

It was late and I was tired--consequently less inclined than usual to encounter a storm, for in general I enjoyed being in any commotion of the elements. Also I felt I should like to pass another night in that room, and have besides the opportunity of once more examining at my leisure the gap in the tapestry.

‘Will you meet me early in the library, Charley?’ I said.

‘Yes--to be sure I will--as early as you like.’

‘Let us go to the drawing-room, then.’

‘Why should you, if you are tired, and want to go to bed?’

‘Because Lady Brotherton will not like my being included in the invitation. She will think it absurd of me not to go home.’

‘There is no occasion to go near her, then.’

‘I do not choose to sleep in the house without knowing that she knows it.’

We went. I made my way to Lady Brotherton. Clara was standing near her.

‘I am much obliged by your hospitality, Lady Brotherton,’ I said. ‘It is rather a rough night to encounter in evening dress.’

She bowed.

‘The distance is not great, however,’ I said, ‘and perhaps--’

‘Out of the question!’ said Sir Giles, who came up at the moment.

Will you see, then, Sir Giles, that a room is prepared for your guest?’ she said.

‘I trust that is unnecessary,’ he replied. ‘I gave orders.’--But as he spoke he went towards the bell.

‘It is all arranged, I believe, Sir Giles,’ I said. ‘Mrs Wilson has already informed me which is my room. Good-night, Sir Giles.’

He shook hands with me kindly. I bowed to Lady Brotherton and retired.

It may seem foolish to record such mere froth of conversation, but I want my reader to understand how a part, at least, of the family of Moldwarp Hall regarded me.

CHAPTER XL.

A DREAM.

My room looked dreary enough. There was no fire, and the loss of the patch of tapestry from the wall gave the whole an air of dilapidation. The wind howled fearfully in the chimney and about the door on the roof, and the rain came down on the leads like the distant trampling of many horses. But I was not in an imaginative mood. Charley was again my trouble. I could not bear him to be so miserable. Why was I not as miserable as he? I asked myself. Perhaps I ought to be, for although certainly I hoped more, I could not say I believed more than he. I wished more than ever that I did believe, for then I should be able to help him--I was sure of that; but I saw no possible way of arriving at belief. Where was the proof? Where even the hope of a growing probability?

With these thoughts drifting about in my brain, like waifs which the tide will not let go, I was poring over the mutilated forms of the tapestry round the denuded door, with an expectation, almost a conviction, that I should find the fragment still hanging on the wall of the kitchen at the Moat, the very piece wanted to complete the broken figures. When I had them well fixed in my memory, I went to bed, and lay pondering over the several broken links which indicated some former connection between the Moat and the Hall, until I fell asleep, and began to dream strange wild dreams, of which the following was the last.

I was in a great palace, wandering hither and thither, and meeting no one. A weight of silence brooded in the place. From hall to hall I went, along corridor and gallery, and up and down endless stairs. I knew that in some room near me was one whose name was Athanasia,--a maiden, I thought in my dream, whom I had known and loved for years, but had lately lost--I knew not how. Somewhere here she was, if only I could find her! From room to room I went seeking her. Every room I entered bore some proof that she had just been there--but there she was not. In one lay a veil,

in another a handkerchief, in a third a glove; and all were scented with a strange entrancing odour, which I had never known before, but which in certain moods I can to this day imperfectly recall. I followed and followed until hope failed me utterly, and I sat down and wept. But while I wept, hope dawned afresh, and I rose and again followed the quest, until I found myself in a little chapel like that of Moldwarp Hall. It was filled with the sound of an organ, distance-faint, and the thin music was the same as the odour of the handkerchief which I carried in my bosom. I tried to follow the sound, but the chapel grew and grew as I wandered, and I came no nearer to its source. At last the altar rose before me on my left, and through the bowed end of the aisle I passed behind it into the lady-chapel. There against the outer wall stood a dusky ill-defined shape. Its head rose above the sill of the eastern window, and I saw it against the rising moon. But that and the whole figure were covered with a thick drapery; I could see nothing of the face, and distinguish little of the form.

‘What art thou?’ I asked trembling.

‘I am Death--dost thou not know me?’ answered the figure, in a sweet though worn and weary voice. ‘Thou hast been following me all thy life, and hast followed me hither.’

Then I saw through the lower folds of the cloudy garment, which grew thin and gauze-like as I gazed, a huge iron door, with folding leaves, and a great iron bar across them.

‘Art thou at thine own door?’ I asked. ‘Surely thy house cannot open under the eastern window of the church?’

‘Follow and see,’ answered the figure.

Turning, it drew back the bolt, threw wide the portals, and low-stooping entered. I followed, not into the moonlit night, but through a cavernous opening into darkness. If my Athanasia were down with Death, I would go with Death, that I might at least end with her. Down and down I

followed the veiled figure, down flight after flight of stony stairs, through passages like those of the catacombs, and again down steep straight stairs. At length it stopped at another gate, and with beating heart I heard what I took for bony fingers fumbling with a chain and a bolt. But ere the fastenings had yielded, once more I heard the sweet odour-like music of the distant organ. The same moment the door opened, but I could see nothing for some time for the mighty inburst of a lovely light. A fair river, brimming full, its little waves flashing in the sun and wind, washed the threshold of the door, and over its surface, hither and thither, sped the white sails of shining boats, while from somewhere, clear now, but still afar, came the sound of a great organ psalm. Beyond the river the sun was rising--over blue Summer hills that melted into blue Summer sky. On the threshold stood my guide, bending towards me, as if waiting for me to pass out also. I lifted my eyes: the veil had fallen--it was my lost Athanasia! Not one beam touched her face, for her back was to the sun, yet her face was radiant. Trembling, I would have kneeled at her feet, but she stepped out upon the flowing river, and with the sweetest of sad smiles, drew the door to, and left me alone in the dark hollow of the earth. I broke into a convulsive weeping, and awoke.

CHAPTER XLI.

A WAKING.

I suppose I awoke tossing in my misery, for my hand fell upon something cold. I started up and tried to see. The light of a clear morning of late Autumn had stolen into the room while I slept, and glimmered on something that lay upon the bed. It was some time before I could believe that my troubled eyes were not the sport of one of those odd illusions that come of mingled sleep and waking. But by the golden hilt and rusted blade I was at length convinced, although the scabbard was gone, that I saw my own sword. It lay by my left side, with the hilt towards my hand. But the moment I turned a little to take it in my right hand, I forgot all about it in a far more bewildering discovery, which fixed me staring half in terror, half in amazement, so that again for a moment I disbelieved in my waking condition. On the other pillow lay the face of a lovely girl. I felt as if I had seen it before--whether only in the just vanished dream, I could not tell. But the maiden of my dream never comes back to me with any other features or with any other expression than those which I now beheld. There was an ineffable mingling of love and sorrow on the sweet countenance. The girl was dead asleep, but evidently dreaming, for tears were flowing from under her closed lids. For a time I was unable even to think; when thought returned, I was afraid to move. All at once the face of Mary Osborne dawned out of the vision before me--how different, how glorified from its waking condition! It was perfectly lovely--transfigured by the unchecked outflow of feeling. The recognition brought me to my senses at once. I did not waste a single thought in speculating how the mistake had occurred, for there was not a moment to be lost. I must be wise to shield her, and chiefly, as much as might be, from the miserable confusion which her own discovery of the untoward fact would occasion her. At first I thought it would be best to lie perfectly still, in order that she, at length awaking and discovering where she was, but finding me fast asleep, might escape with the

conviction that the whole occurrence remained her own secret. I made the attempt, but I need hardly say that never before or since have I found myself in a situation half so perplexing; and in a few moments I was seized with such a trembling that I was compelled to turn my thoughts to the only other possible plan. As I reflected, the absolute necessity of attempting it became more and more apparent. In the first place, when she woke and saw me, she might scream and be heard; in the next, she might be seen as she left the room, or, unable to find her way, might be involved in great consequent embarrassment. But, if I could gather all my belongings, and, without awaking her, escape by the stair to the roof, she would be left to suppose that she had but mistaken her chamber, and would, I hoped, remain in ignorance that she had not passed the night in it alone. I dared one more peep into her face. The light and the loveliness of her dream had passed; I should not now have had to look twice to know that it was Mary Osborne; but never more could I see in hers a common face. She was still fast asleep, and, stealthy as a beast of prey, I began to make my escape. At the first movement, however, my perplexity was redoubled, for again my hand fell on the sword which I had forgotten, and question after question as to how they were together, and together there, darted through my bewildered brain. Could a third person have come and laid the sword between us? I had no time, however, to answer one of my own questions. Hardly knowing which was better, or if there was *a better*, I concluded to take the weapon with me, moved in part by the fact that I had found it where I had lost it, but influenced far more by its association with this night of marvel.

Having gathered my garments together, and twice glanced around me--once to see that I left nothing behind, and once to take farewell of the peaceful face, which had never moved, I opened the little door in the wall, and made my strange retreat up the stair. My heart was beating so violently from the fear of her waking, that, when the door was drawn to behind me, I had to stand for what seemed minutes before I was able to

ascend the steep stair, and step from its darkness into the clear frosty shine of the Autumn sun, brilliant upon the leads wet with the torrents of the preceding night.

I found a sheltered spot by the chimney-stack, where no one could see me from below, and proceeded to dress myself--assisted in my very imperfect toilet by the welcome discovery of a pool of rain in a depression of the lead-covered roof. But alas, before I had finished, I found that I had brought only one of my shoes away with me! This settled the question I was at the moment debating--whether, namely, it would be better to go home, or to find some way of reaching the library. I put my remaining shoe in my pocket, and set out to discover a descent. It would have been easy to get down into the little gallery, but it communicated on both sides immediately with bed-rooms, which for anything I knew might be occupied; and besides I was unwilling to enter the house for fear of encountering some of the domestics. But I knew more of the place now, and had often speculated concerning the odd position and construction of an outside stair in the first court, close to the chapel, with its landing at the door of a room *en suite* with those of Sir Giles and Lady Brotherton. It was for a man an easy drop to this landing. Quiet as a cat, I crept over the roof, let myself down, crossed the court swiftly, drew back the bolt which alone secured the wicket, and, with no greater mishap than the unavoidable wetting of shoeless feet, was soon safe in my own room, exchanging my evening for a morning dress. When I looked at my watch, I found it nearly seven o’clock.

I was so excited and bewildered by the adventures I had gone through, that, from very commonness, all the things about me looked alien and strange. I had no feeling of relation to the world of ordinary life. The first thing I did was to hang my sword in its own old place, and the next to take down the bit of tapestry from the opposite wall, which I proceeded to examine in the light of my recollection of that round the denuded door. Room was left for not even a single doubt as to the relation between this

and that: they had been wrought in one and the same piece by fair fingers of some long vanished time.

CHAPTER XLII.

A TALK ABOUT SUICIDE.

In the same excited mood, but repressing it with all the energy I could gather, I returned to the Hall and made my way to the library. There Charley soon joined me.

‘Why didn’t you come to breakfast?’ he asked.

‘I’ve been home, and changed my clothes,’ I answered. ‘I couldn’t well appear in a tail-coat. It’s bad enough to have to wear such an ugly thing by candle-light.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he asked again, after an interval of silence, which I judge from the question must have been rather a long one.

‘What is the matter with me, Charley?’

‘I can’t tell. You don’t seem yourself somehow.’

I do not know what answer I gave him, but I knew myself what was the matter with me well enough. The form and face of the maiden of my dream, the Athanasia lost that she might be found, blending with the face and form of Mary Osborne, filled my imagination so that I could think of nothing else. Gladly would I have been rid of even Charley’s company, that, while my hands were busy with the books, my heart might brood at will now upon the lovely dream, now upon the lovely vision to which I awoke from it, and which, had it not glided into the forms of the foregone dream, and possessed it with itself, would have banished it altogether. At length I was aware of light steps and sweet voices in the next room, and Mary and Clara presently entered.

How came it that the face of the one had lost the half of its radiance, and the face of the other had gathered all that the former had lost. Mary's countenance was as still as ever; there was not in it a single ray of light beyond its usual expression; but I had become more capable of reading it, for the coalescence of the face of my dream with her dreaming face had given me its key; and I was now so far from indifferent, that I was afraid to look for fear of betraying the attraction I now found it exercise over me. Seldom surely has a man been so long familiar with and careless of any countenance to find it all at once an object of absorbing interest! The very fact of its want of revelation added immensely to its power over me now--for was I not in its secret? Did I not know what a lovely soul hid behind that unexpressive countenance? Did I not know that it was as the veil of the holy of holies, at times reflecting only the light of the seven golden lamps in the holy place; at others almost melted away in the rush of the radiance unspeakable from the hidden and holier side--the region whence come the revelations. To draw through it, if but once, the feeblest glimmer of the light I had but once beheld, seemed an ambition worthy of a life. Knowing her power of reticence, however, and of withdrawing from the outer courts into the penetralia of her sanctuary, guessing also at something of the aspect in which she regarded me, I dared not now make any such attempt. But I resolved to seize what opportunity might offer of convincing her that I was not so far out of sympathy with her as to be unworthy of holding closer converse; and I now began to feel distressed at what had given me little trouble before, namely, that she should suppose me the misleader of her brother, while I knew that, however far I might be from an absolute belief in things which she seemed never to have doubted, I was yet in some measure the means of keeping him from flinging aside the last cords which held him to the faith of his fathers. But I would not lead in any such direction, partly from the fear of hypocrisy, partly from horror at the idea of making capital of what little faith I had. But Charley himself afforded me an opportunity which I could not, whatever my scrupulosity, well avoid.

‘Have you ever looked into that little book, Charley?’ I said, finding in my hands an early edition of the *Christian Morals* of Sir Thomas Browne.--I wanted to say something, that I might not appear distraught.

‘No,’ he answered, with indifference, as he glanced at the title-page. ‘Is it anything particular?’

‘Everything he writes, however whimsical in parts, is well worth more than mere reading,’ I answered. ‘It is a strangely latinized style, but has its charm notwithstanding.’

He was turning over the leaves as I spoke. Receiving no response, I looked up. He seemed to have come upon something which had attracted him.

‘What have you found?’ I asked.

‘Here’s a chapter on the easiest way of putting a stop to it all,’ he answered.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He was a medical man--wasn’t he? I’m ashamed to say I know nothing about him.’

‘Yes, certainly he was.’

‘Then he knew what he was about.’

‘As well probably as any man of his profession at the time.’

‘He recommends drowning,’ said Charley, without raising his eyes from the book.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean for suicide.’

‘Nonsense, He was the last man to favour that. You must make a mistake. He was a thoroughly Christian man.’

‘I know nothing about that. Hear this.’

He read the following passages from the beginning of the thirteenth section of the second part.

‘With what shifts and pains we come into the world, we remember not; but ‘tis commonly found no easy matter to get out of it. Many have studied to exasperate the ways of death, but fewer hours have been spent to soften that necessity.’--‘Ovid, the old heroes, and the Stoicks, who were so afraid of drowning, as dreading thereby the extinction of their soul, which they conceived to be a fire, stood probably in fear of an easier way of death; wherein the water, entering the possessions of air, makes a temporary suffocation, and kills as it were without a fever. Surely many, who have had the spirit to destroy themselves, have not been ingenious in the contrivance thereof.’--‘Cato is much to be pitied, who mangled himself with poniards; and Hannibal seems more subtle, who carried his delivery, not in the point but the pummel of his sword.’

‘Poison. I suppose,’ he said, as he ended the extract.

‘Yes, that’s the story, if you remember,’ I answered; ‘but I don’t see that Sir Thomas is favouring suicide. Not at all. What he writes there is merely a speculation on the comparative ease of different modes of dying. Let me see it.’

I took the book from his hands, and, glancing over the essay, read the closing passage.

‘But to learn to die, is better than to study the ways of dying. Death will find some ways to untie or cut the most gordian knots of life, and make men’s miseries as mortal as themselves: whereas evil spirits, as undying substances, are unseparable from their calamities; and, therefore, they

everlastingly struggle under their angustias, and, bound up with immortality, can never get out of themselves.'

'There! I told you so!' cried Charley. Don't you see? He is the most cunning arguer--beats Despair in the *Fairy Queen* hollow!'

By this time, either attracted by the stately flow of Sir Thomas's speech, or by the tone of our disputation, the two girls had drawn nearer, and were listening.

'What *do* you mean, Charley?' I said, perceiving, however, the hold I had by my further quotation given him.

'First of all, he tells you the easiest way of dying, and then informs you that it ends all your troubles. He is too cunning to say in so many words that there is no hereafter, but what else can he wish you to understand when he says that in dying we have the advantage over the evil spirits, who cannot by death get rid of their sufferings? I will read this book,' he added, closing it and putting it in his pocket.

'I wish you would,' I said: 'for although I confess you are logically right in your conclusions, I know Sir Thomas did not mean anything of the sort. He was only misled by his love of antithesis into a hasty and illogical remark. The whole tone of his book is against such a conclusion. Besides, I do not doubt he was thinking only of good people, for whom he believed all suffering over at their death.'

'But I don't see, supposing he does believe in immortality, why you should be so anxious about his orthodoxy on the other point. Didn't Dr Donne, as good a man as any, I presume, argue on the part of the suicide?'

'I have not read Dr Donne's essay, but I suspect the obliquity of it has been much exaggerated.'

‘Why should you? I never saw any argument worth the name on the other side. We have plenty of expressions of horror--but those are not argument. Indeed, the mass of the vulgar are so afraid of dying that, apparently in terror lest suicide should prove infectious, they treat in a brutal manner the remains of the man who has only had the courage to free himself from a burden too hard for him to bear. It is all selfishness--nothing else. They love their paltry selves so much that they count it a greater sin to kill oneself than to kill another man--which seems to me absolutely devilish. Therefore, the *vox populi*, whether it be the *vox Dei* or not, is not nonsense merely, but absolute wickedness. Why shouldn’t a man kill himself?’

Clara was looking on rather than listening, and her interest seemed that of amusement only. Mary’s eyes were wide-fixed on the face of Charley, evidently tortured to find that to the other enormities of his unbelief was to be added the justification of suicide. His habit of arguing was doubtless well enough known to her to leave room for the mitigating possibility that he might be arguing only for argument’s sake, but what he said could not but be shocking to her upon any supposition.

I was not ready with an answer. Clara was the first to speak.

‘It’s a cowardly thing, anyhow,’ she said.

‘How do you make that out, Miss Clara?’ asked Charley. ‘I’m aware it’s the general opinion, but I don’t see it myself.’

‘It’s surely cowardly to run away in that fashion.’

‘For my part,’ returned Charley, ‘I feel that it requires more courage than *I*‘ve got, and hence it comes, I suppose, that I admire any one who has the pluck.’

‘What vulgar words you use, Mr Charles!’ said Clara.

‘Besides,’ he went on, heedless of her remark, ‘a man may want to escape--not from his duties--he mayn’t know what they are--but from his own weakness and shame.’

‘But, Charley dear,’ said Mary, with a great light in her eyes, and the rest of her face as still as a sunless pond, ‘you don’t think of the sin of it. I know you are only talking, but some things oughtn’t to be talked of lightly.’

‘What makes it a sin? It’s not mentioned in the ten commandments,’ said Charley.

‘Surely it’s against the will of God, Charley dear.’

‘He hasn’t said anything about it, anyhow. And why should I have a thing forced upon me whether I will or not, and then be pulled up for throwing it away when I found it troublesome?’

‘Surely I don’t quite understand you, Charley.’

‘Well, if I must be more explicit--I was never asked whether I chose to be made or not. I never had the conditions laid before me. Here I am, and I can’t help myself--so far, I mean, as that here I am.’

‘But life is a good thing,’ said Mary, evidently struggling with an almost overpowering horror.

‘I don’t know that. My impression is that if I had been asked--’

‘But that couldn’t be, you know.’

‘Then it wasn’t fair. But why couldn’t I be made for a moment or two, long enough to have the thing laid before me, and be asked whether I would accept it or not? My impression is that I would have said--No, thank you; that is, if it was fairly put.’

I hastened to offer a remark, in the hope of softening the pain such flippancy must cause her.

‘And my impression is, Charley,’ I said, ‘that if such had been possible--’

‘Of course,’ he interrupted, ‘the God you believe in could have made me for a minute or two. He can, I suppose, unmake me now when he likes.’

‘Yes; but could he have made you all at once capable of understanding his plans, and your own future? Perhaps that is what he is doing now--making you, by all you are going through, capable of understanding them. Certainly the question could not have been put to you before you were able to comprehend it, and this may be the only way to make you able. Surely a being who *could* make you had a right to risk the chance, if I may be allowed such an expression, of your being satisfied in the end with what he saw to be good--so good indeed that, if we accept the New Testament story, he would have been willing to go through the same troubles himself for the same end.’

‘No, no; not the same troubles,’ he objected. ‘According to the story to which you refer, Jesus Christ was free from all that alone makes life unendurable--the bad inside you, that will come outside whether you will or not.’

‘I admit your objection. As to the evil coming out, I suspect it is better it should come out, so long as it is there. But the end is not yet; and still I insist the probability is that, if you could know it all now, you would say with submission, if not with hearty concurrence--“Thy will be done.”’

‘I have known people who could say that without knowing it all now, Mr Cumbermede,’ said Mary.

I had often called her by her Christian name, but she had never accepted the familiarity.

‘No doubt,’ said Charley, ‘but *I*‘m not one of those.’

‘If you would but give in,’ said his sister, ‘you would--in the end, I mean--say, “It is well.” I am sure of that.’

‘Yes--perhaps I might--after all the suffering had been forced upon me, and was over at last--when I had been thoroughly exhausted and cowed, that is.’

‘Which wouldn’t satisfy any thinking soul, Charley--much less God,’ I said. ‘But if there be a God at all--’

Mary gave a slight inarticulate cry.

‘Dear Miss Osborne,’ I said, ‘I beg you will not misunderstand me. I cannot be sure about it, as you are--I wish I could--but I am not disputing it in the least; I am only trying to make my argument as strong as I can.--I was going to say to Charley--not to you--that, if there be a God, he would not have compelled us to be, except with the absolute fore-knowledge that, when we knew all about it, we would certainly declare ourselves ready to go through it all again if need should be, in order to attain the known end of his high calling.’

‘But isn’t it very presumptuous to assert anything about God which he has not revealed in his Word?’ said Mary, in a gentle, subdued voice, and looking at me with a sweet doubtfulness in her eyes.

‘I am only insisting on the perfection of God--as far as I can understand perfection,’ I answered.

‘But may not the perfection of God be something very different from anything we *can* understand?’

‘I will go further,’ I returned. ‘It *must* be something that we cannot understand--but different from what we can understand by being greater, not by being less.’

‘Mayn’t it be such that we can’t understand it at all?’ she insisted.

‘Then how should we ever worship him? How should we ever rejoice in him? Surely it is because you see God to be good--’

‘Or fancy you do,’ interposed Charley.

‘Or fancy you do,’ I assented, ‘that you love him--not merely because you are told he is good. The Fejee islander might assert his God to be good, but would that make you love him? If you heard that a great power, away somewhere, who had nothing to do with you at all, was very good, would that make you able to love him?’

‘Yes, it would,’ said Mary, decidedly. ‘It is only a good man who would see that God was good.’

‘There you argue entirely on my side. It must be because you supposed his goodness what you call goodness--not something else--that you could love him on testimony. But even then your love could not be of that mighty absorbing kind which alone you would think fit between you and your God. It would not be loving him with all your heart and soul and strength and mind--would it? It would be loving him second-hand--not because of himself, seen and known by yourself.’

‘But Charley does not even love God second-hand,’ she said, with a despairing mournfulness.

‘Perhaps because he is very anxious to love him first-hand, and what you tell him about God does not seem to him to be good. Surely neither man nor woman can love because of what seems not good! I confess one may love in spite of what is bad, but it must be because of other things that are good.’

She was silent.

‘However goodness may change its forms,’ I went on, ‘it must still be goodness; only if we are to adore it, we must see something of what it is--of itself. And the goodness we cannot see, the eternal goodness, high

above us as the heavens are above the earth, must still be a goodness that includes, absorbs, elevates, purifies all our goodness, not tramples upon it and calls it wickedness. For if not such, then we have nothing in common with God, and what we call goodness is not of God. He has not even ordered it; or, if he has, he has ordered it only to order the contrary afterwards; and there is, in reality, no real goodness--at least in him; and, if not in him, of whom we spring--where then?--and what becomes of ours, poor as it is?'

My reader will see that I had already thought much about these things; although, I suspect, I have now not only expressed them far better than I could have expressed them in conversation, but with a degree of clearness which must be owing to the further continuance of the habit of reflecting on these and cognate subjects. Deep in my mind, however, something like this lay; and in some manner like this I tried to express it.

Finding that she continued silent, and that Charley did not appear inclined to renew the contest, anxious also to leave no embarrassing silence to choke the channel now open between us--I mean Mary and myself--I returned to the original question.

'It seems to me, Charley--and it follows from all we have been saying--that the sin of suicide lies just in this, that it is an utter want of faith in God. I confess I do not see any Other ground on which to condemn it--provided, always, that the man has no other dependent upon him, none for whom he ought to live and work.'

'But does a man owe nothing to himself?' said Clara.

'Nothing that I know of,' I replied. 'I am under no obligation to myself. How can I divide myself, and say that the one-half of me is indebted to the other? To my mind, it is a mere fiction of speech.'

'But whence, then, should such a fiction arise?' objected Charley, willing, perhaps, to defend Clara.

‘From the dim sense of a real obligation, I suspect--the object of which is mistaken. I suspect it really springs from our relation to the unknown God, so vaguely felt that a false form is readily accepted for its embodiment by a being who, in ignorance of its nature, is yet aware of its presence. I mean that what seems an obligation to self is in reality a dimly apprehended duty--an obligation to the unknown God, and not to self, in which lies no causing, therefore no obligating power.’

‘But why say *the unknown God*, Mr Cumbermede?’ asked Mary.

‘Because I do not believe that any one who knew him could possibly attribute to himself what belonged to Him--could, I mean, talk of an obligation to himself, when that obligation was to God.’

How far Mary Osborne followed the argument or agreed with it I cannot tell, but she gave me a look of something like gratitude, and my heart felt too big for its closed chamber.

At this moment the housemaid who had, along with the carpenter, assisted me in the library, entered the room. She was rather a forward girl, and I suppose presumed on our acquaintance to communicate directly with myself instead of going to the housekeeper. Seeing her approach as if she wanted to speak to me, I went to meet her. She handed me a small ring, saying, in a low voice,

‘I found this in your room, sir, and thought it better to bring it to you.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, putting it at once on my little finger; ‘I am glad you found it.’

Charley and Clara had begun talking. I believe Clara was trying to make Charley give her the book he had pocketed, imagining it really of the character he had, half in sport, professed to believe it. But Mary had caught sight of the ring, and, with a bewildered expression on her countenance, was making a step towards me. I put a finger to my lips,

and gave her a look by which I succeeded in arresting her. Utterly perplexed, I believe, she turned away towards the bookshelves behind her. I went into the next room, and called Charley.

‘I think we had better not go on with this talk,’ I said. ‘You are very imprudent indeed, Charley, to be always bringing up subjects that tend to widen the gulf between you and your sister. When I have a chance, I do what I can to make her doubt whether you are so far wrong as they think you, but you must give her time. All your kind of thought is so new to her that your words cannot possibly convey to her what is in your mind. If only she were not so afraid of me! But I think she begins to trust me a little.’

‘It’s no use,’ he returned. Her head is so full of rubbish!’

‘But her heart is so full of goodness!’

‘I wish you could make anything of her! But she looks up to my father with such a blind adoration that it isn’t of the slightest use attempting to put an atom of sense into her.’

‘I should indeed despair if I might only set about it after your fashion. You always seem to shut your eyes to the mental condition of those that differ from you. Instead of trying to understand them first, which gives the sole possible chance of your ever making them understand what you mean, you care only to present your opinions; and that you do in such a fashion that they must appear to them false. You even make yourself seem to hold these for very love of their untruth; and thus make it all but impossible for them to shake off their fetters: every truth in advance of what they have already learned, will henceforth come to them associated with your presumed backsliding and impenitence.’

‘Goodness! where did you learn their slang?’ cried Charley. ‘But impenitence, if you like,--not backsliding. I never made any *profession*.

After all, however, their opinions don't seem to hurt them--I mean my mother and sister.'

'They must hurt them if only by hindering their growth. In time, of course, the angels of the heart will expel the demons of the brain; but it is a pity the process should be retarded by your behaviour.'

'I know I am a brute, Wilfrid. I *will* try to hold my tongue.'

'Depend upon it,' I went on, 'whatever such hearts can believe, is, as believed by them, to be treated with respect. It is because of the truth in it, not because of the falsehood, that they hold it; and when you speak against the false in it, you appear to them to speak against the true; for the dogma seems to them an unanalyzable unit. You assail the false with the recklessness of falsehood itself, careless of the injury you may inflict on the true.'

I was interrupted by the entrance of Clara.

'If you gentlemen don't want us any more, we had better go,' she said.

I left Charley to answer her, and went back into the next room. Mary stood where I had left her, mechanically shifting and arranging the volumes on a shelf at the height of her eyes.

'I think this is your ring, Miss Osborne,' I said, in a low and hurried tone, offering it.

Her expression at first was only of questioning surprise, when suddenly something seemed to cross her mind; she turned pale as death, and put her hand on the bookshelves as if to support her; as suddenly flushed crimson for a moment, and again turned deadly pale--all before I could speak.

‘Don’t ask me any questions, dear Miss Osborne,’ I said. ‘And, please, trust me this far; don’t mention the loss of your ring to any one, unless it be your mother. Allow me to put it on your finger.’

[Illustration: “I THINK THIS IS YOUR RING, MISS OSBORNE.”]

She gave me a glance I cannot and would not describe. It lies treasured--for ever, God grant!--in the secret jewel-house of my heart. She lifted a trembling left hand, and doubtingly held--half held it towards me. To this day I know nothing of the stones of that ring--not even their colour; but I know I should know it at once if I saw it. My hand trembled more than hers as I put it on the third finger.

What followed, I do not know. I think I left her there and went into the other room. When I returned a little after, I know she was gone. From that hour, not one word has ever passed between us in reference to the matter. The best of my conjectures remains but a conjecture; I know how the sword got there--nothing more.

I did not see her again that day, and did not seem to want to see her, but worked on amongst the books in a quiet exultation. My being seemed tenfold awake and alive. My thoughts dwelt on the rarely revealed loveliness of my *Athanasia*; and, although I should have scorned unspeakably to take the smallest advantage of having come to share a secret with her, I could not help rejoicing in the sense of nearness to and *alone-ness* with her which the possession of that secret gave me; while one of the most precious results of the new love which had thus all at once laid hold upon me, was the feeling--almost a conviction--that the dream was not a web self-wove in the loom of my brain, but that from somewhere, beyond my soul even, an influence had mingled with its longings to in-form the vision of that night--to be as it were a creative soul to what would otherwise have been but loose, chaotic, and shapeless vagaries of the unguided imagination. The events of that night were as the sudden opening of a door through which I caught a glimpse of that

region of the supernal in which, whatever might be her theories concerning her experiences therein, Mary Osborne certainly lived, if ever any one lived. The degree of God's presence with a creature is not to be measured by that creature's interpretation of the manner in which he is revealed. The great question is whether he is revealed or not; and a strong truth can carry many parasitical errors.

I felt that now I could talk freely to her of what most perplexed me--not so much, I confess, with any hope that she might cast light on my difficulties, as in the assurance that she would not only influence me to think purely and nobly, but would urge me in the search after God. In such a relation of love to religion the vulgar mind will ever imagine ground for ridicule; but those who have most regarded human nature know well enough that the two have constantly manifested themselves in the closest relation; while even the poorest love is the enemy of selfishness unto the death, for the one or the other must give up the ghost. Not only must God be in all that is human, but of it he must be the root.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SWORD IN THE SCALE.

The next morning Charley and I went as usual to the library, where, later in the day, we were joined by the two ladies. It was long before our eyes once met, but when at last they did, Mary allowed hers to rest on mine for just one moment with an expression of dove-like beseeching, which I dared to interpret as meaning--‘Be just to me.’ If she read mine, surely she read there that she was safe with my thoughts as with those of her mother.

Charley and I worked late in the afternoon, and went away in the last of the twilight. As we approached the gate of the park, however, I remembered I had left behind me a book I had intended to carry home for comparison with a copy in my possession, of which the title-page was gone. I asked Charley, therefore, to walk on and give my man some directions about Lilith, seeing I had it in my mind to propose a ride on the morrow, while I went back to fetch it.

Finding the door at the foot of the stair leading to the open gallery ajar, and knowing that none of the rooms at either end of it were occupied, I went the nearest way, and thus entered the library at the point furthest from the more public parts of the house. The book I sought was, however, at the other end of the suite, for I had laid it on the window-sill of the room next the armoury.

As I entered that room, and while I crossed it towards the glimmering window, I heard voices in the armoury, and soon distinguished Clara’s. It never entered my mind that possibly I ought not to hear what might be said. Just as I reached the window I was arrested, and stood stock still: the other voice was that of Geoffrey Brotherton. Before my self-possession returned, I had heard what follows.

‘I am certain *he* took it,’ said Clara. ‘I didn’t see him, of course; but if you call at the Moat to-morrow, ten to one you will find it hanging on the wall.’

‘I knew him for a sneak, but never took him for a thief. I would have lost anything out of the house rather than that sword!’

‘Don’t you mention my name in it. If you do, I shall think you--well, I will never speak to you again.’

‘And if I don’t, what then?’

Before I heard her answer, I had come to myself. I had no time for indignation yet. I must meet Geoffrey at once. I would not, however, have him know I had overheard any of their talk. It would have been more straightforward to allow the fact to be understood, but I shrunk from giving him occasion for accusing me of an eavesdropping of which I was innocent. Besides, I had no wish to encounter Clara before I understood her game, which I need not say was a mystery to me. What end could she have in such duplicity? I had had unpleasant suspicions of the truth of her nature before, but could never have suspected her of baseness.

I stepped quietly into the further room, whence I returned, making a noise with the door-handle, and saying,

‘Are you there, Miss Coningham? Could you help me to find a book I left here?’

There was silence; but after the briefest pause I heard the sound of her dress as she swept hurriedly out into the gallery. I advanced. On the top of the steps, filling the doorway of the armoury in the faint light from the window, appeared the dim form of Brotherton.

‘I beg your pardon,’ I said. ‘I heard a lady’s voice, and thought it was Miss Coningham’s.’

‘I cannot compliment your ear,’ he answered. ‘It was one of the maids. I had just rung for a light. I presume you are Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘I returned to fetch a book I forgot to take with me. I suppose you have heard what we’ve been about in the library here?’

‘I have been partially informed of it,’ he answered, stiffly. ‘But I have heard also that you contemplate a raid upon the armoury. I beg you will let the weapons alone.’

I had said something of the sort to Clara that very morning.

‘I have a special regard for them,’ he went on; ‘and I don’t want them meddled with. It’s not every one knows how to handle them. Some amongst them I would not have injured for their weight in diamonds. One in particular I should like to give you the history of--just to show you that I am right in being careful over them.--Here comes the light.’

I presume it had been hurriedly arranged between them as Clara left him that she should send one of the maids, who in consequence now made her appearance with a candle. Brotherton took it from her and approached the wall.

‘Why! What the devil! Some one has been meddling already, I find! The very sword I speak of is gone! There’s the sheath hanging empty! What *can* it mean? Do you know anything of this, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘I do, Mr Brotherton. The sword to which that sheath belongs is *mine*. I have it.’

‘*Yours!*’ he shouted; then restraining himself, added in a tone of utter contempt--‘This is rather too much. Pray, sir, on what grounds do you lay claim to the smallest atom of property within these walls? My father ought to have known what he was about when he let you have the run of the house! And the old books, too! By heaven, it’s too much! I always thought--’

‘It matters little to me what you think, Mr Brotherton--so little that I do not care to take any notice of your insolence--’

‘Insolence!’ he roared, striding towards me, as if he would have knocked me down.

I was not his match in strength, for he was at least two inches taller than I, and of a coarse-built, powerful frame. I caught a light rapier from the wall, and stood on my defence.

‘Coward!’ he cried.

‘There are more where this came from,’ I answered, pointing to the wall.

He made no move towards arming himself, but stood glaring at me in a white rage.

‘I am prepared to prove,’ I answered as calmly as I could, ‘that the sword to which you allude is mine. But I will give *you* no explanation. If you will oblige me by asking your father to join us, I will tell him the whole story.’

‘I will have a warrant out against you.’

‘As you please. I am obliged to you for mentioning it. I shall be ready. I have the sword, and intend to keep it. And by the way, I had better secure the scabbard as well,’ I added, as with a sudden spring I caught it also from the wall, and again stood prepared.

He ground his teeth with rage. He was one of those who, trusting to their superior strength, are not much afraid of a row, but cannot face cold steel: soldier as he had been, it made him nervous.

‘Insulted in my own house!’ he snarled from between his teeth.

‘Your father’s house,’ I corrected. ‘Call him, and I will give explanations.’

‘Damn your explanations! Get out of the house, you puppy; or I’ll have the servants up, and have you ducked in the horse-pond.’

‘Bah!’ I said. ‘There’s not one of them would lay hands on me at your bidding. Call your father, I say, or I will go and find him myself.’

He broke out in a succession of oaths, using language I had heard in the streets of London, but nowhere else. I stood perfectly still, and watchful. All at once he turned and went into the gallery, over the balustrade of which he shouted,

‘Martin! Go and tell my father to come here--to the armoury--at once. Tell him there’s a fellow here out of his mind.’

I remained quiet, with my scabbard in one hand, and the rapier in the other--a dangerous weapon enough, for it was, though slight, as sharp as a needle, and I knew it for a bit of excellent temper. Brotherton stood outside waiting for his father. In a few moments I heard the voice of the old man.

‘Boys! boys!’ he cried; ‘what is all this to do?’

‘Why, sir,’ answered Geoffrey, trying to be calm, ‘here’s that fellow Cumbermede confesses to have stolen the most valuable of the swords out of the armoury--one that’s been in the family for two hundred years, and says he means to keep it.’

I just caught the word *liar* ere it escaped my lips: I would spare the son in his father’s presence.

‘Tut! tut!’ said Sir Giles. ‘What does it all mean? You’re at your old quarrelsome tricks, my boy! Really you ought to be wiser by this time!’

As he spoke, he entered panting, and with the rubicund glow beginning to return upon a face from which the message had evidently banished it.

‘Tut! tut!’ he said again, half starting back as he caught sight of me with the weapon in my hand--‘What is it all about, Mr Cumbermede? I thought *you* had more sense!’

‘Sir Giles,’ I said, ‘I have not confessed to having stolen the sword--only to having taken it.’

‘A very different thing,’ he returned, trying to laugh. ‘But come now; tell me all about it. We can’t have quarrelling like this, you know. We can’t have pot-house work here.’

‘That is just why I sent for you, Sir Giles,’ I answered, replacing the rapier on the wall. ‘I want to tell you the whole story.’

‘Let’s have it, then.’

‘Mind, I don’t believe a word of it,’ said Geoffrey.

‘Hold your tongue, sir,’ said his father, sharply.

‘Mr Brotherton,’ I said, ‘I offered to tell the story to Sir Giles--not to you.’

‘You offered!’ he sneered. ‘You may be compelled--under different circumstances by-and-by, if you don’t mind what you’re about.’

‘Come now--no more of this!’ said Sir Giles.

Thereupon I began at the beginning, and told him the story of the sword, as I have already given it to my reader. He fidgeted a little, but Geoffrey kept himself stock-still during the whole of the narrative. As soon as I had ended Sir Giles said,

‘And you think poor old Close actually carried off your sword!--Well, he was an odd creature, and had a passion for everything that could kill. The poor little atomy used to carry a poniard in the breast-pocket of his black coat--as if anybody would ever have thought of attacking his small

carcass! Ha! ha! ha! He was simply a monomaniac in regard of swords and daggers. There, Geoffrey! The sword is plainly his. *He* is the wronged party in the matter, and we owe him an apology.'

'I believe the whole to be a pure invention,' said Geoffrey, who now appeared perfectly calm.

'Mr Brotherton!' I began, but Sir Giles interposed.

'Hush! hush!' he said, and turned to his son. 'My boy, you insult your father's guest.'

'I will at once prove to you, sir, how unworthy he is of any forbearance, not to say protection from you. Excuse me for one moment.'

He took up the candle, and opening the little door at the foot of the winding stair, disappeared. Sir Giles and I sat in silence and darkness until he returned, carrying in his hand an old vellum-bound book.

'I dare say you don't know this manuscript, sir,' he said, turning to his father.

'I know nothing about it,' answered Sir Giles. 'What is it? Or what has it to do with the matter in hand?'

'Mr Close found it in some corner or other, and used to read it to me when I was a little fellow. It is a description, and in most cases a history as well, of every weapon in the armoury. They had been much neglected, and a great many of the labels were gone, but those which were left referred to numbers in the book-heading descriptions which corresponded exactly to the weapons on which they were found. With a little trouble he had succeeded in supplying the numbers where they were missing, for the descriptions are very minute.'

He spoke in a tone of perfect self-possession.

‘Well, Geoffrey, I ask again, what has all this to do with it?’ said his father.

‘If Mr Cumbermede will allow you to look at the label attached to the sheath in his hand--for fortunately it was a rule with Mr Close to put a label on both sword and sheath--and if you will read me the number, I will read you the description in the book.’

I handed the sheath to Sir Giles, who began to decipher the number on the ivory ticket.

‘The label is quite a new one,’ I said.

‘I have already accounted for that,’ said Brotherton. ‘I will leave it to yourself to decide whether the description corresponds.’

Sir Giles read out the number figure by figure, adding--

‘But how are we to test the description? I don’t know the thing, and it’s not here.’

‘It is at the Moat,’ I replied; ‘but its future place is at Sir Giles’s decision.’

‘Part of the description belongs to the scabbard you have in your hand, sir,’ said Brotherton. ‘The description of the sword itself I submit to Mr Cumbermede.’

‘Till the other day I never saw the blade,’ I said.

‘Likely enough,’ he retorted dryly, and proceeding, read the description of the half-basket hilt, inlaid with gold, and the broad blade, channeled near the hilt, and inlaid with ornaments and initials in gold.

‘There is nothing in all that about the scabbard,’ said his father.

‘Stop till we come to the history,’ he replied, and read on, as nearly as I can recall, to the following effect. I have never had an opportunity of copying the words themselves.

‘“This sword seems to have been expressly forged for Sir [----] [----],”’ (He read it *Sir So and So*.) ‘“whose initials are to be found on the blade. According to tradition, it was worn by him, for the first and only time, at the battle of Naseby, where he fought in the cavalry led by Sir Marmaduke Langdale. From some accident or other, Sir [----] [----] found, just as the order to charge was given, that he could not draw his sword, and had to charge with only a pistol in his hand. In the flight which followed he pulled up, and unbuckled his sword, but while attempting to ease it, a rush of the enemy startled him, and, looking about, he saw a Roundhead riding straight at Sir Marmaduke, who that moment passed in the rear of his retiring troops--giving some directions to an officer by his side, and unaware of the nearness of danger. Sir [----] [----] put spurs to his charger, rode at the trooper, and dealt him a downright blow on the pot-helmet with his sheathed weapon. The fellow tumbled from his horse, and Sir [----] [----] found his scabbard split halfway up, but the edge of his weapon unturned. It is said he vowed it should remain sheathed for ever.”--The person who has now unsheathed it has done a great wrong to the memory of a loyal cavalier.’

‘The sheath halfway split was as familiar to my eyes as the face of my uncle,’ I said, turning to Sir Giles. ‘And in the only reference I ever heard my great-grandmother make to it, she mentioned the name of Sir Marmaduke. I recollect that much perfectly.’

‘But how could the sword be there and here at one and the same time?’ said Sir Giles.

‘*That* I do not pretend to explain,’ I said.

‘Here at least is written testimony to our possession of it,’ said Brotherton in a conclusive tone.

‘How, then, are we to explain Mr Cumbermede’s story?’ said Sir Giles, evidently in good faith.

‘With that I cannot consent to allow myself concerned.--Mr Cumbermede is, I am told, a writer of fiction.’

‘Geoffrey,’ said Sir Giles, ‘behave yourself like a gentleman.’

‘I endeavour to do so,’ he returned with a sneer.

I kept silence.

‘How can you suppose,’ the old man went on, ‘that Mr Cumbermede would invent such a story? What object could he have?’

‘He may have a mania for weapons, like old Close--as well as for old books,’ he replied.

I thought of my precious folio. But I did not yet know how much additional force his insinuation with regard to the motive of my labours in the library would gain if it should be discovered that such a volume was in my possession.

‘You may have remarked, sir,’ he went on, ‘that I did not read the name of the owner of the sword in any place where it occurred in the manuscript.’

‘I did. And I beg to know why you kept it back,’ answered Sir Giles.

‘What do you think the name might be, sir?’

‘How should I know? I am not an antiquarian.’

‘Sir *Wilfrid Cumbermede*. You will find the initials on the blade.--Does that throw any light on the matter, do you think, sir?’

‘Why, that is your very own name!’ cried Sir Giles, turning to me.

I bowed.

‘It is a pity the sword shouldn’t be yours.’

‘It is mine, Sir Giles--though, as I said, I am prepared to abide by your decision.’

‘And now I remember;--the old man resumed, after a moment’s thought--‘the other evening Mr Alderforge--a man of great learning, Mr Cumbermede--told us that the name of Cumbermede had at one time belonged to our family. It is all very strange. I confess I am utterly bewildered.’

‘At least you can understand, sir, how a man of imagination, like Mr Cumbermede here, might desire to possess himself of a weapon which bears his initials, and belonged two hundred years ago to a baronet of the same name as himself--a circumstance which, notwithstanding it is by no means a common name, is not *quite* so strange as at first sight appears--that is, if all reports are true.’

I did not in the least understand his drift; neither did I care to inquire into it now.

‘Were you aware of this, Mr Cumbermede?’ asked his father.

‘No, Sir Giles,’ I answered.

‘Mr Cumbermede has had the run of the place for weeks. I am sorry I was not at home. This book was lying all the time on the table in the room above, where poor old Close’s work-bench and polishing-wheel are still standing.’

‘Mr Brotherton, this gets beyond bearing,’ I cried. ‘Nothing but the presence of your father, to whom I am indebted for much kindness, protects you.’

‘Tut! tut!’ said Sir Giles.

‘Protects me, indeed!’ exclaimed Brotherton. ‘Do you dream I should be by any code bound to accept a challenge from you?--Not, at least, I presume to think, before a jury had decided on the merits of the case.’

My blood was boiling, but what could I do or say? Sir Giles rose, and was about to leave the room, remarking only--

‘I don’t know what to make of it.’

‘At all events, Sir Giles,’ I said hurriedly, ‘you will allow me to prove the truth of what I have asserted. I cannot, unfortunately, call my uncle or aunt, for they are gone; and I do not know where the servant who was with us when I took the sword away is now. But, if you will allow me, I will call Mrs Wilson--to prove that I had the sword when I came to visit her on that occasion, and that on the morning after sleeping here I complained of its loss to her, and went away without it.’

‘It would but serve to show the hallucination was early developed. We should probably find that even then you were much attracted by the armoury,’ said Brotherton, with a judicial air, as if I were a culprit before a magistrate.

I had begun to see that, although the old man was desirous of being just, he was a little afraid of his son. He rose as the latter spoke, however, and going into the gallery, shouted over the balustrade--

‘Some one send Mrs Wilson to the library!’

We removed to the reading-room, I carrying the scabbard which Sir Giles had returned to me as soon as he had read the label. Brotherton followed, having first gone up the little turn-pike stair, doubtless to replace the manuscript.

Mrs Wilson came, looking more pinched than ever, and stood before Sir Giles with her arms straight by her sides, like one of the ladies of Noah's ark. I will not weary my reader with a full report of the examination. She had seen me *with* a sword, but had taken no notice of its appearance. I *might* have taken it from the armoury, for I *was* in the library all the afternoon. She had left me there thinking I was a 'gentlemany' boy. I had *said* I had lost it, but she was sure *she* did not know how that could be. She was *very* sorry she had caused any trouble by asking me to the house, but Sir Giles would be pleased to remember that he had himself introduced the boy to her notice. Little she thought, &c., &c.

In fact, the spiteful creature, propitiating her natural sense of justice by hinting instead of plainly suggesting injurious conclusions, was paying me back for my imagined participation in the impertinences of Clara. She had besides, as I learned afterwards, greatly resented the trouble I had caused of late.

Brotherton struck in as soon as his father had ceased questioning her.

'At all events, if he believed the sword was his, why did he not go and represent the case to you, sir, and request justice from you? Since then he has had opportunity enough. His tale has taken too long to hatch.'

'This is all very paltry,' I said.

'Not so paltry as your contriving to sleep in the house in order to carry off your host's property in the morning--after studying the place to discover which room would suit your purpose best!'

Here I lost my presence of mind. A horror shook me lest something might come out to injure Mary, and I shivered at the thought of her name being once mentioned along with mine. If I had taken a moment to reflect, I must have seen that I should only add to the danger by what I was about to say. But her form was so inextricably associated in my mind with all that had happened then, that it seemed as if the slightest allusion

to any event of that night would inevitably betray her; and in the tremor which, like an electric shock, passed through me from head to foot, I blurted out words importing that I had never slept in the house in my life.

‘Your room was got ready for you, anyhow, Master Cumbermede,’ said Mrs Wilson.

‘It does not follow that I occupied it,’ I returned.

‘I can prove that false,’ said Brotherton; but, probably lest he should be required to produce his witness, only added,--‘At all events, he was seen in the morning, carrying the sword across the court before any one had been admitted.’

I was silent; for I now saw too clearly that I had made a dreadful blunder, and that any attempt to carry assertion further, or even to explain away my words, might be to challenge the very discovery I would have given my life to ward off.

As I continued silent, steeling myself to endure, and saying to myself that disgrace was not dishonour, Sir Giles again rose, and turned to leave the room. Evidently he was now satisfied that I was unworthy of confidence.

‘One moment, if you please, Sir Giles,’ I said. ‘It is plain to me there is some mystery about this affair, and it does not seem as if I should be able to clear it up. The time may come, however, when I can. I did wrong, I see now, in attempting to right myself, instead of representing my case to you. But that does not alter the fact that the sword was and is mine, however appearances may be to the contrary. In the mean time, I restore you the scabbard, and as soon as I reach home, I shall send my man with the disputed weapon.’

‘It will be your better way,’ he said, as he took the sheath from my hand.

Without another word, he left the room. Mrs Wilson also retired. Brotherton alone remained. I took no further notice of him, but followed

Sir Giles through the armoury. He came after me, step for step, at a little distance, and as I stepped out into the gallery, said, in a tone of insulting politeness:

‘You will send the sword as soon as may be quite convenient, Mr Cumbermede? Or shall I send and fetch it?’

I turned and faced him in the dim light which came up from the hall.

‘Mr Brotherton, if you knew that book and those weapons as early as you have just said, you cannot help knowing that at that time the sword was *not* there.’

‘I decline to re-open the question,’ he said.

A fierce word leaped to my lips, but repressing it I turned away once more, and walked slowly down the stair, across the hall, and out of the house.

CHAPTER XLIV.

I PART WITH MY SWORD

I made haste out of the park, but wandered up and down my own field for half an hour, thinking in what shape to put what had occurred before Charley. My perplexity arose not so much from the difficulty involved in the matter itself as from my inability to fix my thoughts. My brain was for the time like an ever-revolving kaleidoscope, in which, however, there was but one fair colour--the thought of Mary. Having at length succeeded in arriving at some conclusion, I went home, and would have despatched Styles at once with the sword, had not Charley already sent him off to the stable, so that I must wait.

‘What *has* kept you so long, Wilfrid?’ Charley asked, as I entered.

‘I’ve had a tremendous row with Brotherton,’ I answered.

‘The brute! Is he there? I’m glad I was gone. What was it all about?’

‘About that sword. It was very foolish of me to take it without saying a word to Sir Giles.’

‘So it was,’ he returned. ‘I can’t think how *you* could be so foolish!’

I could, well enough. What with the dream and the waking, I could think little about anything else; and only since the consequences had overtaken me, saw how unwisely I had acted. I now told Charley the greater part of the affair--omitting the false step I had made in saying I had not slept in the house; and also, still with the vague dread of leading to some discovery, omitting to report the treachery of Clara; for, if Charley should talk to her or Mary about it, which was possible enough, I saw several points where the danger would lie very close. I simply told him that I had found Brotherton in the armoury, and reported what followed between us. I did not at all relish having now in my turn secrets from Charley, but

my conscience did not trouble me about it, seeing it was for his sister's sake; and when I saw the rage of indignation into which he flew, I was, if possible, yet more certain I was right. I told him I must go and find Styles, that he might take the sword at once; but he started up, saying he would carry it back himself, and at the same time take his leave of Sir Giles, whose house, of course, he could never enter again after the way I had been treated in it. I saw this would lead to a rupture with the whole family, but I should not regret that, for there could be no advantage to Mary either in continuing her intimacy, such as it was, with Clara, or in making further acquaintance with Brotherton. The time of their departure was also close at hand, and might be hastened without necessarily involving much of the unpleasant. Also, if Charley broke with them at once, there would be the less danger of his coming to know that I had not given him all the particulars of my discomfiture. If he were to find I had told a falsehood, how could I explain to him why I had done so? This arguing on probabilities made me feel like a culprit who has to protect himself by concealment; but I will not dwell upon my discomfort in the half-duplicity thus forced upon me. I could not help it. I got down the sword, and together we looked at it for the first and last time. I found the description contained in the book perfectly correct. The upper part was inlaid with gold in a Greekish pattern, crossed by the initials W. C. I gave it up to Charley with a sigh of submission to the inevitable, and having accompanied him to the park-gate, roamed my field again until his return.

He rejoined me in a far quieter mood, and for a moment or two I was silent with the terror of learning that he had become acquainted with my unhappy blunder. After a little pause, he said,

'I'm very sorry I didn't see Brotherton. I should have liked just a word or two with him.'

'It's just as well not,' I said. 'You would only have made another row. Didn't you see any of them?'

‘I saw the old man. He seemed really cut up about it, and professed great concern. He didn’t even refer to you by name--and spoke only in general terms. I told him you were incapable of what was laid to your charge; that I had not the slightest doubt of your claim to the sword,--your word being enough for me,--and that I trusted time would right you. I went too far there, however, for I haven’t the slightest hope of anything of the sort.’

‘How did he take all that?’

‘He only smiled--incredulously and sadly,--so that I couldn’t find it in my heart to tell him all my mind. I only insisted on my own perfect confidence in you.--I’m afraid I made a poor advocate, Wilfrid. Why should I mind his grey hairs where justice is concerned? I am afraid I was false to you, Wilfrid.’

‘Nonsense; you did just the right thing, old boy. Nobody could have done better.’

‘*Do* you think so? I am *so* glad! I have been feeling ever since as if I ought to have gone into a rage, and shaken the dust of the place from my feet for a witness against the whole nest of them! But somehow I couldn’t--what with the honest face and the sorrowful look of the old man.’

‘You are always too much of a partisan, Charley; I don’t mean so much in your actions--for this very one disproves that--but in your notions of obligation. You forget that you had to be just to Sir Giles as well as to me, and that he must be judged--not by the absolute facts of the case, but by what appeared to him to be the facts. He could not help misjudging me. But you ought to help misjudging him. So you see your behaviour was guided by an instinct or a soul, or what you will, deeper than your judgment.’

‘That may be--but he ought to have known you better than believe you capable of misconduct.’

‘I don’t know that. He had seen very little of me. But I dare say he puts it down to cleptomania. I think he will be kind enough to give the ugly thing a fine name for my sake. Besides, he must hold either by his son or by me.’

‘That’s the worst that can be said on my side of the question. He must by this time be aware that that son of his is nothing better than a low scoundrel.’

‘It takes much to convince a father of such an unpleasant truth as that, Charley.’

‘Not much, if my experience goes for anything.’

‘I trust it is not typical, Charley.’

‘I suppose you’re going to stand up for Geoffrey next?’

‘I have no such intention. But if I did, it would be but to follow your example. We seem to change sides every now and then. You remember how you used to defend Clara when I expressed my doubts about her.’

‘And wasn’t I right? Didn’t you come over to my side?’

‘Yes, I did,’ I said, and hastened to change the subject; adding, ‘As for Geoffrey, there is room enough to doubt whether he believes what he says, and that makes a serious difference. In thinking over the affair since you left me, I have discovered further grounds for questioning his truthfulness.’

‘As if that were necessary!’ he exclaimed, with an accent of scorn.’ But tell me what you mean?’ he added.

‘In turning the thing over in my mind, this question has occurred to me.--He read from the manuscript that oh the blade of the sword, near the hilt, were the initials of Wilfrid Cumbermede. Now, if the sword had never been drawn from the scabbard, how was that to be known to the writer?’

‘Perhaps it was written about that time,’ said Charley.

‘No; the manuscript was evidently written some considerable time after. It refers to tradition concerning it.’

‘Then the writer knew it by tradition.’

The moment Charley’s logical faculty was excited his perception was impartial.

‘Besides,’ he went on,’ it does not follow that the sword had really never been drawn before. Mr Close even may have done so, for his admiration was apparently quite as much for weapons themselves as for their history. Clara could hardly have drawn it as she did if it had not been meddled with before.’

The terror lest he should ask me how I came to carry it home without the scabbard hurried my objection.

‘That supposition, however, would only imply that Brotherton might have learned the fact from the sword itself, not from the book. I should just like to have one peep of the manuscript to see whether what he read was all there!’

‘Or any of it, for that matter,’ said Charley. ‘Only it would have been a more tremendous risk than I think he would have run.’

‘I wish I had thought of it sooner, though.’

My suspicion was that Clara had examined the blade thoroughly, and given him a full description of it. He *might*, however, have been at the

Hall on some previous occasion, without my knowledge, and might have seen the half-drawn blade on the wall, examined it, and pushed it back into the sheath; which might have so far loosened the blade that Clara was afterwards able to draw it herself. I was all but certain by this time that it was no other than she that had laid it on my bed. But then why had she drawn it? Perhaps that I might leave proof of its identity behind me--for the carrying out of her treachery, whatever the object of it might be. But this opened a hundred questions not to be discussed, even in silent thought, in the presence of another.

‘Did you see your mother, Charley?’ I asked.

‘No, I thought it better not to trouble her. They are going to-morrow. Mary had persuaded her--why, I don’t know--to return a day or two sooner than they had intended.’

‘I hope Brotherton will not succeed in prejudicing them against me.’

‘I wish that were possible,’ he answered. ‘But the time for prejudice is long gone by.’

I could not believe this to be the case in respect of Mary; for I could not but think her favourably inclined to me.

‘Still,’ I said, ‘I should not like their bad opinion of me to be enlarged as well as strengthened by the belief that I had attempted to steal Sir Giles’s property. You *must* stand my friend there, Charley.’

‘Then you *do* doubt me, Wilfrid?’

‘Not a bit, you foolish fellow.’

‘You know, I can’t enter that house again, and I don’t care about writing to my mother, for my father is sure to see it; but I will follow my mother and Mary the moment they are out of the grounds to-morrow, and soon see whether they’ve got the story by the right end.’

The evening passed with me in alternate fits of fierce indignation and profound depression, for, while I was clear to my own conscience in regard of my enemies, I had yet thrown myself bound at their feet by my foolish lie; and I all but made up my mind to leave the country, and only return after having achieved such a position--of what sort I had no more idea than the school-boy before he sets himself to build a new castle in the air--as would buttress any assertion of the facts I might see fit to make in after-years.

When we had parted for the night, my brains began to go about, and the centre of their gyrations was not Mary now, but Clara. What could have induced her to play me false? All my vanity, of which I had enough, was insufficient to persuade me that it could be out of revenge for the gradual diminution of my attentions to her. She had seen me pay none to Mary, I thought, unless she had caught a glimpse from the next room of the little passage of the ring, and that I did not believe. Neither did I believe she had ever cared enough about me to be jealous of whatever attentions I might pay to another. But in all my conjectures, I had to confess myself utterly foiled. I could imagine no motive. Two possibilities alone, both equally improbable, suggested themselves--the one, that she did it for pure love of mischief, which, false as she was to me, I could not believe; the other, which likewise I rejected, that she wanted to ingratiate herself with Brotherton. I had still, however, scarcely a doubt that she had laid the sword on my bed. Trying to imagine a connection between this possible action and Mary’s mistake, I built up a conjectural form of conjectural facts to this effect--that Mary had seen her go into my room, had taken it for the room she was to share with her, and had followed her either at once--in which case I supposed Clara to have gone out by the stair to the roof to avoid being seen--or afterwards, from some accident, without a light in her hand. But I do not care to set down more of my speculations, for none concerning this either were satisfactory to myself, and I remain almost as much in the dark to this day. In any case the fear

remained that Clara must be ever on the borders of the discovery of Mary's secret, if indeed she did not know it already, which was a dreadful thought--more especially as I could place no confidence in her. I was glad to think, however, that they were to be parted so soon, and I had little fear of any correspondence between them.

The next morning Charley set out to waylay them at a certain point on their homeward journey. I did not propose to accompany him. I preferred having him speak for me first, not knowing how much they might have heard to my discredit, for it was far from probable the matter had been kept from them. After he had started, however, I could not rest, and for pure restlessness sent Styles to fetch my mare. The loss of my sword was a trifle to me now, but the proximity of the place where I should henceforth be regarded as what I hardly dared to realize, was almost unendurable. As if I had actually been guilty of what was laid to my charge, I longed to hide myself in some impenetrable depth, and kept looking out impatiently for Styles's return. At length I caught sight of my Lilith's head rising white from the hollow in which the farm lay, and ran up to my room to make a little change in my attire. Just as I snatched my riding-whip from a hook by the window, I spied a horseman approaching from the direction of the park gates. Once more it was Mr Coningham, riding hitherward from the windy trees. In no degree inclined to meet him, I hurried down the stair, and arriving at the very moment Styles drew up, sprung into the saddle, and would have galloped off in the opposite direction, confident that no horse of Mr Coningham's could overtake my Lilith. But the moment I was in the saddle, I remembered there was a pile of books on the window-sill of my uncle's room, belonging to the library at the Hall, and I stopped a moment to give Styles the direction to take them home at once, and, having asked a word of Miss Pease, to request her, with my kind regards, to see them safely deposited amongst the rest. In consequence of this delay, just as I set off

at full speed from the door, Mr Coningham rode round the corner of the house.

‘What a devil of a hurry you are in, Mr Cumbermede!’ he cried. ‘I was just coming to see you. Can’t you spare me a word?’

I was forced to pull up, and reply as civilly as might be.

‘I am only going for a ride,’ I said, ‘and will go part of your way with you if you like.’

‘Thank you. That will suit me admirably, I am going Gastford way. Have you ever been there?’

‘No,’ I answered. ‘I have only just heard the name of the village.’

‘It is a pretty place. But there’s the oddest old church you ever saw, within a couple of miles of it--alone in the middle of a forest--or at least it was a forest not long ago. It is mostly young trees now. There isn’t a house within a mile of it, and the nearest stands as lonely as the church--quite a place to suit the fancy of a poet like you! Come along and see it. You may as well go one way as another, if you only want a ride.’

‘How far is it?’ I asked.

‘Only seven or eight miles across country. I can take you all the way through lanes and fields.’

Perplexed or angry I was always disinclined for speech; and it was only after things had arranged themselves in my mind, or I had mastered my indignation, that I would begin to feel communicative. But something prudential inside warned me that I could not afford to lose any friend I had; and although I was not prepared to confide my wrongs to Mr Coningham, I felt I might some day be glad of his counsel.

CHAPTER XLV.

UMBERDEN CHURCH.

My companion chatted away, lauded my mare, asked if I had seen Clara lately, and how the library was getting on. I answered him carelessly, without even a hint at my troubles.

‘You seem out of spirits, Mr Cumbermede?’ he said. ‘You’ve been taking too little exercise. Let’s have a canter. It will do you good. Here’s a nice bit of sward.’

I was only too ready to embrace the excuse for dropping a conversation towards which I was unable to contribute my share.

Having reached a small roadside inn, we gave our horses a little refreshment; after which, crossing a field or two by jumping the stiles, we entered the loveliest lane I had ever seen. It was so narrow that there was just room for horses to pass each other, and covered with the greenest sward rarely trodden. It ran through the midst of a wilderness of tall hazels. They stood up on both sides of it, straight and trim as walls, high above our heads as we sat on our horses; and the lane was so serpentine that we could never see further than a few yards ahead; while, towards the end, it kept turning so much in one direction that we seemed to be following the circumference of a little circle. It ceased at length at a small double-leaved gate of iron, to which we tied our horses before entering the churchyard. But instead of a neat burial-place, which the whole approach would have given us to expect, we found a desert. The grass was of extraordinary coarseness, and mingled with quantities of vile-looking weeds. Several of the graves had not even a spot of green upon them, but were mere heaps of yellow earth in huge lumps, mixed with large stones. There was not above a score of graves in the whole place, two or three of which only had gravestones on them. One lay open,

with the rough yellow lumps all about it, and completed the desolation. The church was nearly square--small, but shapeless, with but four latticed windows, two on one side, one in the other, and the fourth in the east end. It was built partly of bricks and partly of flint stones, the walls bowed and bent, and the roof waved and broken. Its old age had gathered none of the graces of age to soften its natural ugliness, or elevate its insignificance. Except a few lichens, there was not a mark of vegetation about it. Not a single ivy leaf grew on its spotted and wasted walls. It gave a hopeless, pagan expression to the whole landscape--for it stood on a rising ground, from which we had an extensive prospect of height and hollow, cornfield and pasture and wood, away to the dim blue horizon.

‘You don’t find it enlivening, do you--eh?’ said my companion.

‘I never saw such a frightfully desolate spot,’ I said, ‘to have yet the appearance of a place of Christian worship. It looks as if there were a curse upon it. Are all those the graves of suicides and murderers? It cannot surely be consecrated ground?’

‘It’s not nice,’ he said. ‘I didn’t expect you to like it. I only said it was odd.’

‘Is there any service held in it?’ I asked.

‘Yes--once a fortnight or so. The rector has another living a few miles off.’

‘Where can the congregation come from?’

‘Hardly from anywhere. There ain’t generally more than five or six, I believe. Let’s have a look at the inside of it.’

‘The windows are much too high, and no foothold.’

‘We’ll go in.’

‘Where can you get the key? It must be a mile off at least, by your own account. There’s no house nearer than that, you say.’

He made me no reply, but going to the only flat gravestone, which stood on short thick pillars, he put his hand beneath it, and drew out a great rusty key.

‘Country lawyers know a secret or two,’ he said.

‘Not always much worth knowing,’ I rejoined,--‘if the inside be no better than the outside.’

‘We’ll have a look, anyhow,’ he said, as he turned the key in the dry lock.

The door snarled on its hinges, and disclosed a space drearier certainly, and if possible uglier, than its promise.

‘Really, Mr Coningham,’ I said, ‘I don’t see why you should have brought me to look at this place.’

‘It answered for a bait, at all events. You’ve had a good long ride, which was the best thing for you. Look what a wretched little vestry that is!’

It was but a corner of the east end, divided off by a faded red curtain.

‘I suppose they keep a parish register here,’ he said. ‘Let us have a look.’

Behind the curtain hung a dirty surplice and a gown. In the corner stood a desk like the schoolmaster’s in a village school. There was a shelf with a few vellum-bound books on it, and nothing else, not even a chair in the place.

‘Yes; there they are!’ he said, as he took down one of the volumes from the shelf. ‘This one comes to a close in the middle of the last century. I dare say there is something in this, now, that would be interesting enough to somebody. Who knows how many properties it might make change hands?’

‘Not many, I should think. Those matters are pretty well seen to now.’

[Illustration: “COUNTRY LAWYERS KNOW A SECRET OR TWO,” HE SAID.]

‘By some one or other--not always the rightful heirs. Life is full of the strangest facts, Mr Cumbermede. If I were a novelist, now, like you, my experience would make me dare a good deal more in the way of invention than any novelist I happen to have read. Look there, for instance.’

He pointed to the top of the last page, or rather the last half of the cover. I read as follows:

‘MARRIAGES, 1748.

‘Mr Wilfrid Cumbermede Daryll, of the Parish of [----] second son of Sir Richard Daryll of Moldwarp Hall in the County of [----] and Mistress Elizabeth Woodruffe were married by a license Jan. 15.’

‘I don’t know the name of Daryll,’ I said.

‘It was your own great-grandfather’s name,’ he returned. ‘I happen to know that much.’

‘You knew this was here, Mr Coningham,’ I said. ‘That is why you brought me here.’

‘You are right. I did know it. Was I wrong in thinking it would interest you?’

‘Certainly not. I am obliged to you. But why this mystery? Why not have told me what you wanted me to go for?’

‘I will why you in turn. Why should I have wanted to show you now more than any other time what I have known for as many years almost as you have lived? You spoke of a ride--why shouldn’t I give a direction to

it that might pay you for your trouble? And why shouldn't I have a little amusement out of it if I pleased? Why shouldn't I enjoy your surprise at finding in a place you had hardly heard of, and would certainly count most uninteresting, the record of a fact that concerned your own existence so nearly? There!'

'I confess it interests me more than you will easily think--inasmuch as it seems to offer to account for things that have greatly puzzled me for some time. I have of late met with several hints of a connection at one time or other between the Moat and the Hall, but these hints were so isolated that I could weave no theory to connect them. Now I dare say they will clear themselves up.'

'Not a doubt of-that, if you set about it in earnest.'

'How did he come to drop his surname?'

'That has to be accounted for.'

'It follows--does it not?--that I am of the same blood as the present possessors of Moldwarp Hall?'

'You are--but the relation is not a close one,' said Mr Coningham.

'Sir Giles was but distantly related to the stock of which you come.'

'Then--but I must turn it over in my mind. I am rather in a maze.'

'You have got some papers at the Moat?' he said--interrogatively.

'Yes; my friend Osborne has been looking over them. He found out this much--that there was once some connection between the Moat and the Hall, but at a far earlier date than this points to, or any of the hints to which I just now referred. The other day, when I dined at Sir Giles's, Mr Alderforge said that Cumbermede was a name belonging to Sir Giles's ancestry--or something to that effect; but that again could have had nothing to do with those papers, or with the Moat at all.'

Here I stopped, for I could not bring myself to refer to the sword. It was not merely that the subject was too painful: of all things I did not want to be cross-questioned by my lawyer-companion.

‘It is not amongst those you will find anything of importance, I suspect. Did your great-grandmother--the same, no doubt, whose marriage is here registered--leave no letters or papers behind her?’

‘I’ve come upon a few letters. I don’t know if there is anything more.’

‘You haven’t read them, apparently.’

‘I have not. I’ve been always going to read them, but I haven’t opened one of them yet.’

‘Then I recommend you--that is, if you care for an interesting piece of family history--to read those letters carefully, that is constructively.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean--putting two and two together, and seeing what comes of it; trying to make everything fit into one, you know.’

‘Yes. I understand you. But how do you happen to know that those letters contain a history, or that it will prove interesting when I have found it?’

‘All family history ought to be interesting--at least to the last of his race,’ he returned, replying only to the latter half of my question.’ It must, for one thing, make him feel his duty to his ancestors more strongly.’

‘His duty to marry, I suppose you mean?’ I said with some inward bitterness. ‘But to tell the truth, I don’t think the inheritance worth it in my case.’

‘It might be better,’ he said, with an expression which seemed odd beside the simplicity of the words.

‘Ah! you think then to urge me to make money; and for the sake of my dead ancestors increase the inheritance of those that may come after me? But I believe I am already as diligent as is good for me--that is, in the main, for I have been losing time of late.’

‘I meant no such thing, Mr Cumbermede. I should be very doubtful whether any amount of success in literature would enable you to restore the fortunes of your family.’

‘Were they so very ponderous, do you think? But in truth I have little ambition of that sort. All I will readily confess to is a strong desire not to shirk what work falls to my share in the world.’

‘Yes,’ he said, in a thoughtful manner--‘if one only knew what his share of the work was.’

The remark was unexpected, and I began to feel a little more interest in him.

‘Hadn’t you better take a copy of that entry?’ he said.

‘Yes--perhaps I had. But I have no materials.’

It did not strike me that attorneys do not usually, like excise-men, carry about an ink-bottle, when he drew one from the breast-pocket of his coat, along with a folded sheet of writing-paper, which he opened and spread out on the desk. I took the pen he offered me, and copied the entry.

When I had finished, he said--

‘Leave room under it for the attestation of the parson. We can get that another time, if necessary. Then write, “Copied by me”--and then your name and the date. It may be useful some time. Take it home and lay it with your grandmother’s papers.’

‘There can be no harm in that,’ I said, as I folded it up, and put it in my pocket. ‘I am greatly obliged to you for bringing me here, Mr

Coningham. Though I am not ambitious of restoring the family to a grandeur of which every record has departed, I am quite sufficiently interested in its history, and shall consequently take care of this document.'

'Mind you read your grandmother's papers, though,' he said.

'I will,' I answered.

He replaced the volume on the shelf, and we left the church; he locked the door and replaced the key under the gravestone; we mounted our horses, and after riding with me about half the way to the Moat, he took his leave at a point where our roads, diverged. I resolved to devote that very evening, partly in the hope of distracting my thoughts, to the reading of my grandmother's letters.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MY FOLIO.

When I reached home I found Charley there, as I had expected.

But a change had again come over him. He was nervous, restless, apparently anxious. I questioned him about his mother and sister. He had met them as planned, and had, he assured me, done his utmost to impress them with the truth concerning me. But he had found his mother incredulous, and had been unable to discover from her how much she had heard; while Mary maintained an obstinate silence, and, as he said, looked more stupid than usual. He did not tell me that Clara had accompanied them so far, and that he had walked with her back to the entrance of the park. This I heard afterwards. When we had talked a while over the sword-business--for we could not well keep off it long--Charley seeming all the time more uncomfortable than ever, he said, perhaps merely to turn the talk into a more pleasant channel--

By the way, where have you put your folio? I've been looking for it ever since I came in, but I can't find it. A new reading started up in my head the other day, and I want to try it both with the print and the context.'

'It's in my room,' I answered, 'I will go and fetch it.'

'We will go together,' he said.

I looked where I thought I had laid it, but there it was not. A pang of foreboding terror invaded me. Charley told me afterwards that I turned as white as a sheet. I looked everywhere, but in vain; ran and searched my uncle's room, and then Charley's, but still in vain; and at last, all at once, remembered with certainty that two nights before I had laid it on the window-sill in my uncle's room. I shouted for Styles, but he was gone home with the mare, and I had to wait, in little short of agony, until he returned. The moment he entered I began to question him.

‘You took those books home, Styles?’ I said, as quietly as I could, anxious not to startle him, lest it should interfere with the just action of his memory.

‘Yes, sir. I took them at once, and gave them into Miss Pease’s own hands;--at least I suppose it was Miss Pease. She wasn’t a young lady, sir.’

‘All right, I dare say. How many were there of them?’

‘Six, sir.’

‘I told you five,’ I said, trembling with apprehension and wrath.

‘You said four or five, and I never thought but the six were to go. They were all together on the window-sill.’

I stood speechless. Charley took up the questioning.

‘What sized books were they?’ he asked.

‘Pretty biggish--one of them quite a large one--the same I’ve seen you, gentlemen, more than once, putting your heads together over. At least it looked like it.’

‘Charley started up and began pacing about the room. Styles saw he had committed some dreadful mistake, and began a blundering expression of regret, but neither of us took any notice of him, and he crept out in dismay.

It was some time before either of us could utter a word. The loss of the sword was a trifle to this. Beyond a doubt the precious tome was now lying in the library of Moldwarp Hall--amongst old friends and companions, possibly--where years on years might elapse before one loving hand would open it, or any eyes gaze on it with reverence.

‘Lost, Charley!’ I said at last.--‘Irrecoverably lost!’

‘I will go and fetch it,’ he cried, starting up. ‘I will tell Clara to bring it out to me. It is beyond endurance this. Why should you not go and claim what both of us can take our oath to as yours?’

‘You forget, Charley, how the sword-affair cripples us--and how the claiming of this volume would only render their belief with regard to the other the more probable. You forget, too, that I *might* have placed it in the chest first, and, above all, that the name on the title-page is the same as the initials on the blade of the sword,--the same as my own.’

‘Yes--I see it won’t do. And yet if I were to represent the thing to Sir Giles?--He doesn’t care for old books----’

‘You forget again, Charley, that the volume is of great money-value. Perhaps my late slip has made me fastidious; but though the book be mine--and if I had it, the proof of the contrary would lie with them--I could not take advantage of Sir Giles’s ignorance to recover it.’

‘I might, however, get Clara--she is a favourite with him, you know--’

‘I will not hear of it,’ I said, interrupting him, and he was forced to yield.

‘No, Charley,’ I said again; ‘I must just bear it. Harder things *have* been borne, and men have got through the world and out of it notwithstanding. If there isn’t another world, why should we care much for the loss of what *must* go with the rest?--and if there is, why should we care at all?’

‘Very fine, Wilfrid! but when you come to the practice--why, the less said the better.’

‘But that is the very point: we don’t come to the practice. If we did, then the ground of it would be proved unobjectionable.’

‘True;--but if the practice be unattainable--’

‘It would take much proving to prove that to my--dissatisfaction I should say; and more failure besides, I can tell you, than there will be time for in

this world. If it were proved, however--don’t you see it would disprove both suppositions equally? If such a philosophical spirit be unattainable, it discredits both sides of the alternative on either of which it would have been reasonable.’

‘There is a sophism there of course, but I am not in the mood for pulling your logic to pieces,’ returned Charley, still pacing up and down the room.

In sum, nothing would come of all our talk but the assurance that the volume was equally irrecoverable with the sword, and indeed with my poor character--at least, in the eyes of my immediate neighbours.

[Illustration: I SAT DOWN AGAIN BY THE FIRE TO READ, IN MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER’S CHAIR.]

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE LETTERS AND THEIR STORY.

As soon as Charley went to bed, I betook myself to my grandmother's room, in which, before discovering my loss, I had told Styles to kindle a fire. I had said nothing to Charley about my ride, and the old church, and the marriage-register. For the time, indeed, I had almost lost what small interest I had taken in the matter--my new bereavement was so absorbing and painful; but feeling certain, when he left me, that I should not be able to sleep, but would be tormented all night by innumerable mental mosquitoes if I made the attempt, and bethinking me of my former resolution, I proceeded to carry it out.

The fire was burning brightly, and my reading lamp was on the table, ready to be lighted. But I sat down first in my grandmother's chair and mused for I know not how long. At length my wandering thoughts rehearsed again the excursion with Mr Coningham. I pulled the copy of the marriage-entry from my pocket, and in reading it over again, my curiosity was sufficiently roused to send me to the bureau. I lighted my lamp at last, unlocked what had seemed to my childhood a treasury of unknown marvels, took from it the packet of yellow withered letters, and sat down again by the fire to read, in my great-grandmother's chair, the letters of Wilfrid Cumbermede Daryll--for so he signed himself in all of them--my great-grandfather. There were amongst them a few of her own in reply to his--badly written and badly spelt, but perfectly intelligible. I will not transcribe any of them--I have them to show if needful--but not at my command at the present moment;--for I am writing neither where I commenced my story--on the outskirts of an ancient city, nor at the Moat, but in a dreary old square in London; and those letters lie locked again in the old bureau, and have lain unvisited through thousands of desolate

days and slow creeping nights, in that room which I cannot help feeling sometimes as if the ghost of that high-spirited, restless-hearted grandmother of mine must now and then revisit, sitting in the same old chair, and wondering to find how far it was all receded from her--wondering, also, to think what a work she made, through her long and weary life, about things that look to her now such trifles.

I do not then transcribe any of the letters, but give, in a connected form, what seem to me the facts I gathered from them; not hesitating to present, where they are required, self-evident conclusions as if they were facts mentioned in them. I repeat that none of my names are real, although they all point at the real names.

Wilfrid Cumbermede was the second son of Richard and Mary Daryll of Moldwarp Hall. He was baptized Cumbermede from the desire to keep in memory the name of a celebrated ancestor, the owner, in fact, of the disputed sword--itself alluded to in the letters,--who had been more mindful of the supposed rights of his king than the next king was of the privations undergone for his sake, for Moldwarp Hall at least was never recovered from the Roundhead branch of the family into whose possession it had drifted. In the change, however, which creeps on with new generations, there had been in the family a re-action of sentiment in favour of the more distinguished of its progenitors; and Richard Daryll, a man of fierce temper and overbearing disposition, had named his son after the cavalier. A tyrant in his family, at least in the judgment of the writers of those letters, he apparently found no trouble either with his wife or his eldest or youngest son; while, whether his own fault or not, it was very evident that from Wilfrid his annoyances had been numerous.

A legal feud had for some time existed between the Ahab of Moldwarp Hall and the Naboth of the Moat, the descendant of an ancient yeoman family of good blood, and indeed related to the Darylls themselves, of the name of Woodruffe. Sir Richard had cast covetous eyes upon the field

surrounding Stephen's comparatively humble abode, which had at one time formed a part of the Moldwarp property. In searching through some old parchments, he had found, or rather, I suppose, persuaded himself he had found, sufficient evidence that this part of the property of the Moat, then of considerable size, had been willed away in contempt of the entail which covered it, and belonged by right to himself and his heirs. He had therefore instituted proceedings to recover possession, during the progress of which their usual bickerings and disputes augmented in fierceness. A decision having at length been given in favour of the weaker party, the mortification of Sir Richard was unendurable to himself, and his wrath and unreasonableness, in consequence, equally unendurable to his family. One may then imagine the paroxysm of rage with which he was seized when he discovered that, during the whole of the legal process, his son Wilfrid had been making love to Elizabeth Woodruffe, the only child of his enemy. In Wilfrid's letters, the part of the story which follows is fully detailed for Elizabeth's information, of which the reason is also plain--that the writer had spent such a brief period afterwards in Elizabeth's society that he had not been able for very shame to recount the particulars.

No sooner had Sir Richard come to a knowledge of the hateful fact, evidently through one of his servants, than, suppressing the outburst of his rage for the moment, he sent for his son Wilfrid, and informed him, his lips quivering with suppressed passion, of the discovery he had made; accused him of having brought disgrace on the family, and of having been guilty of falsehood and treachery; and ordered him to go down on his knees and abjure the girl before heaven, or expect a father's vengeance.

But evidently Wilfrid was as little likely as any man to obey such a command. He boldly avowed his love for Elizabeth, and declared his intention of marrying her. His father, foaming with rage, ordered his servants to seize him. Overmastered in spite of his struggles, he bound

him to a pillar, and taking a horse-whip, lashed him furiously; then, after his rage was thus in a measure appeased, ordered them to carry him to his bed. There he remained, hardly able to move, the whole of that night and the next day. On the following night, he made his escape from the Hall, and took refuge with a farmer-friend a few miles off--in the neighbourhood, probably, of Umberden Church.

Here I would suggest a conjecture of my own--namely, that my ancestor's room was the same I had occupied, so--fatally, shall I say?--to myself, on the only two occasions on which I had slept at the Hall; that he escaped by the stair to the roof, having first removed the tapestry from the door, as a memorial to himself and a sign to those he left; that he carried with him the sword and the volume--both probably lying in his room at the time, and the latter little valued by any other. But all this, I repeat, is pure conjecture.

As soon as he was sufficiently recovered, he communicated with Elizabeth, prevailed upon her to marry him at once at Umberden Church, and within a few days, as near as I could judge; left her to join, as a volunteer, the army of the Duke of Cumberland, then fighting the French in the Netherlands. Probably from a morbid fear lest the disgrace his father's brutality had inflicted should become known in his regiment, he dropped the surname of Daryll when he joined it; and--for what precise reasons I cannot be certain--his wife evidently never called herself by any other name than Cumbermede. Very likely she kept her marriage a secret, save from her own family, until the birth of my grandfather, which certainly took place before her husband's return. Indeed I am almost sure that he never returned from that campaign, but died fighting, not unlikely, at the battle of Laffeldt; and that my grannie's letters, which I found in the same packet, had been, by the kindness of some comrade, restored to the young widow.

When I had finished reading the letters, and had again thrown myself back in the old chair, I began to wonder why nothing of all this should ever have been told me. That the whole history should have dropped out of the knowledge of the family, would have been natural enough, had my great-grandmother, as well as my great-grandfather, died in youth; but that she should have outlived her son, dying only after I, the representative of the fourth generation, was a boy at school, and yet no whisper have reached me of these facts, appeared strange. A moment's reflection showed me that the causes and the reasons of the fact must have lain with my uncle. I could not but remember how both he and my aunt had sought to prevent me from seeing my grannie alone, and how the last had complained of this in terms far more comprehensible to me now than they were then. But what could have been the reasons for this their obstruction of the natural flow of tradition? They remained wrapped in a mystery which the outburst from it of an occasional gleam of conjectural light only served to deepen.

The letters lying open on the table before me, my eyes rested upon one of the dates--the third day of March, 1747. It struck me that this date involved a discrepancy with that of the copy I had made from the register. I referred to it, and found my suspicion correct. According to the copy, my ancestors were not married until the 15th of January, 1748. I must have made a blunder--and yet I could hardly believe I had, for I had reason to consider myself accurate. If there *was* no mistake, I should have to reconstruct my facts, and draw fresh conclusions.

By this time, however, I was getting tired and sleepy and cold; my lamp was nearly out; my fire was quite gone; and the first of a frosty dawn was beginning to break in the east. I rose and replaced the papers, reserving all further thought on the matter for a condition of circumstances more favourable to a correct judgment. I blew out the lamp, groped my way to bed in the dark, and was soon fast asleep, in despite of insult, mortification, perplexity, and loss.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

ONLY A LINK.

It may be said of the body in regard of sleep as well as in regard of death, ‘It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.’ For me, the next morning, I could almost have said, ‘I was sown in dishonour and raised in glory.’ No one can deny the power of the wearied body to paralyze the soul; but I have a correlate theory which I love, and which I expect to find true--that, while the body wearies the mind, it is the mind that restores vigour to the body, and then, like the man who has built him a stately palace, rejoices to dwell in it. I believe that, if there be a living, conscious love at the heart of the universe, the mind, in the quiescence of its consciousness in sleep, comes into a less disturbed contact with its origin, the heart of the creation; whence gifted with calmness and strength for itself, it grows able to impart comfort and restoration to the weary frame. The cessation of labour affords but the necessary occasion; makes it possible, as it were, for the occupant of an outlying station in the wilderness to return to his father’s house for fresh supplies of all that is needful for life and energy. The child-soul goes home at night, and returns in the morning to the labours of the school. Mere physical rest could never of its own negative self build up the frame in such light and vigour as come through sleep.

It was from no blessed vision that I woke the next morning, but from a deep and dreamless sleep. Yet the moment I became aware of myself and the world, I felt strong and courageous, and I began at once to look my affairs in the face. Concerning that which was first in consequence, I soon satisfied myself: I could not see that I had committed any serious fault in the whole affair. I was not at all sure that a lie in defence of the innocent, and to prevent the knowledge of what no one had any right to know, was wrong--seeing such involves no injustice on the one side, and does justice on the other. I have seen reason since to change my mind,

and count my liberty restricted to silence--not extending, that is, to the denial or assertion of what the will of God, inasmuch as it exists or does not exist, may have declared to be or not to be the fact. I now think that to lie is, as it were, to snatch the reins out of God's hand.

At all events, however, I had done the Brothertons no wrong. 'What matter, then,' I said to myself, 'of what they believe me guilty, so long as before God and my own conscience I am clear and clean?'

Next came the practical part:--What was I to do? To right myself either in respect of their opinion, or in respect of my lost property, was more hopeless than important, and I hardly wasted two thoughts upon that. But I could not remain where I was, and soon came to the resolution to go with Charley to London at once, and taking lodgings in some obscure recess near the Inns of Court, there to give myself to work, and work alone, in the foolish hope that one day fame might buttress reputation. In this resolution I was more influenced by the desire to be near the brother of Mary Osborne than the desire to be near my friend Charley, strong as that was. I expected thus to hear of her oftener, and even cherished the hope of coming to hear from her--of inducing her to honour me with a word or two of immediate communication. For I could see no reason why her opinions should prevent her from corresponding with one who, whatever might or might not seem to him true, yet cared for the truth, and must treat with respect every form in which he could descry its predominating presence.

I would have asked Charley to set out with me that very day, but for the desire to clear up the discrepancy between the date of my ancestor's letters, all written within the same year, and that of the copy I had made of the registration of their marriage--with which object I would compare the copy and the original. I wished also to have some talk with Mr Coningham concerning the contents of the letters which at his urgency I had now read. I got up and wrote to him therefore, asking him to ride

with me again to Umberden Church, as soon as he could make it convenient, and sent Styles off at once on the mare to carry the note to Minstercombe, and bring me back an answer.

As we sat over our breakfast, Charley said suddenly, ‘Clara was regretting yesterday that she had not seen the Moat. She said you had asked her once, but had never spoken of it again.’

‘And now I suppose she thinks, because I’m in disgrace with her friends at the Hall, that she mustn’t come near me,’ I said, with another bitterness than belonged to the words.

‘Wilfrid!’ he said reproachfully; ‘she didn’t say anything of the sort. I will write and ask her if she couldn’t contrive to come over. She might meet us at the park gates.’

‘No,’ I returned; ‘there isn’t time. I mean to go back to London--perhaps to-morrow evening. It is like turning you out, Charley, but we shall be nearer each other in town than we were last time.’

‘I am delighted to hear it,’ he said. ‘I had been thinking myself that I had better go back this evening. My father is expected home in a day or two, and it would be just like him to steal a march on my chambers. Yes, I think I shall go to-night.’

‘Very well, old boy,’ I answered. ‘That will make it all right. It’s a pity we couldn’t take the journey together, but it doesn’t matter much. I shall follow you as soon as I can.’

‘Why can’t you go with me?’ he asked.

Thereupon I gave him a full report of my excursion with Mr Coningham, and the after reading of the letters, with my reason for wishing to examine the register again; telling him that I had asked Mr Coningham to ride with me once more to Umberden Church.

When Styles returned, he informed me that Mr Coningham at first proposed to ride back with him, but probably bethinking himself that another sixteen miles would be too much for my mare, had changed his mind and sent me the message that he would be with me early the next day.

After Charley was gone, I spent the evening in a thorough search of the old bureau. I found in it several quaint ornaments besides those already mentioned, but only one thing which any relation to my story would justify specific mention of--namely, an ivory label, discoloured with age, on which was traceable the very number Sir Giles had read from the scabbard of Sir Wilfrid's sword. Clearly, then, my sword was the one mentioned in the book, and as clearly it had not been at Moldwarp Hall for a long time before I lost it there. If I were in any fear as to my reader's acceptance of my story, I should rejoice in the possession of that label more than in the restoration of sword or book; but amidst all my troubles, I have as yet been able to rely upon her justice and her knowledge of myself. Yes--I must mention one thing more I found--a long, sharp-pointed, straight-backed, snake-edged Indian dagger, inlaid with silver--a fierce, dangerous, almost venomous-looking weapon, in a curious case of old green morocco. It also may have once belonged to the armoury of Moldwarp Hall. I took it with me when I left my grannie's room, and laid it in the portmanteau I was going to take to London.

My only difficulty was what to do with Lilith; but I resolved for the mean time to leave her, as before, in the care of Styles, who seemed almost as fond of her as I was myself.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A DISCLOSURE.

Mr Coningham was at my door by ten o'clock, and we set out together for Umberden Church. It was a cold clear morning. The dying Autumn was turning a bright thin defiant face upon the conquering Winter. I was in great spirits, my mind being full of Mary Osborne. At one moment I saw but her own ordinary face, only what I had used to regard as dulness I now interpreted as the possession of her soul in patience; at another I saw the glorified countenance of my Athanasia, knowing that, beneath the veil of the other, this, the real, the true face ever lay. Once in my sight the frost-clung flower had blossomed; in full ideal of glory it had shone for a moment, and then folding itself again away, had retired into the regions of faith. And while I knew that such could dawn out of such, how could I help hoping that from the face of the universe, however to my eyes it might sometimes seem to stare like the seven-days dead, one morn might dawn the unspeakable face which even Moses might not behold lest he should die of the great sight? The keen air, the bright sunshine, the swift motion--all combined to raise my spirits to an unwonted pitch; but it was a silent ecstasy, and I almost forgot the presence of Mr Coningham. When he spoke at last, I started.

'I thought from your letter you had something to tell me, Mr Cumbermede,' he said, coming alongside of me.

'Yes, to be sure. I have been reading my grannie's papers, as I told you.'

I recounted the substance of what I had found in them.

'Does it not strike you as rather strange that all this should have been kept a secret from you?' he asked.

'Very few know anything about their grandfathers,' I said; 'so I suppose very few fathers care to tell their children about them.'

‘That is because there are so few concerning whom there is anything worth telling.’

‘For my part,’ I returned, ‘I should think any fact concerning one of those who link me with the infinite past out of which I have come, invaluable. Even a fact which is not to the credit of an ancestor may be a precious discovery to the man who has in himself to fight the evil derived from it.’

‘That, however, is a point of view rarely taken. What the ordinary man values is also rare; hence few regard their ancestry, or transmit any knowledge they may have of those who have gone before them to those that come after them.’

‘My uncle, however, I suppose, told *me* nothing because, unlike the many, he prized neither wealth nor rank, nor what are commonly considered great deeds.’

‘You are not far from the truth there,’ said Mr Coningham in a significant tone.

‘Then *you* know why he never told me anything!’ I exclaimed.

‘I do--from the best authority.’

‘His own, you mean, I suppose.’

‘I do.’

‘But--but--I didn’t know you were ever--at all--intimate with my uncle,’ I said.

He laughed knowingly.

‘You would say, if you didn’t mind speaking the truth, that you thought your uncle disliked me--disapproved of me. Come, now--did he not try to make you avoid me? You needn’t mind acknowledging the fact, for,

when I have explained the reason of it, you will see that it involves no discredit to either of us.'

'I have no fear for my uncle.'

'You are honest, if not over-polite,' he rejoined. '--You do not feel so sure about my share. Well, I don't mind who knows it, for my part. I roused the repugnance, to the knowledge of which your silence confesses, merely by acting as any professional man ought to have acted--and with the best intentions. At the same time, all the blame I should ever think of casting upon him is that he allowed his high-strung, saintly, I had almost said superhuman ideas to stand in the way of his nephew's prosperity.'

'Perhaps he was afraid of that prosperity standing in the way of a better.'

'Precisely so. You understand him perfectly. He was one of the best and simplest-minded men in the world.'

'I am glad you do him that justice.'

'At the same time I do not think he intended you to remain in absolute ignorance of what I am going to tell you. But, you see, he died very suddenly. Besides, he could hardly expect I should hold my tongue after he was gone.'

'Perhaps, however, he might expect me not to cultivate your acquaintance,' I said, laughing to take the sting out of the words.

'You cannot accuse yourself of having taken any trouble in that direction,' he returned, laughing also.

'I believe, however,' I resumed, 'from what I can recall of things he said, especially on one occasion, on which he acknowledged the existence of a secret in which I was interested, he did not intend that I should always

remain in ignorance of everything he thought proper to conceal from me then.'

'I presume you are right. I think his conduct in this respect arose chiefly from anxiety that the formation of your character should not be influenced by the knowledge of certain facts which might unsettle you, and prevent you from reaping the due advantages of study and self-dependence in youth. I cannot, however, believe that by being open with you I shall now be in any danger of thwarting his plans, for you have already proved yourself a wise, moderate, conscientious man, diligent and painstaking. Forgive me for appearing to praise you. I had no such intention. I was only uttering as a fact to be considered in the question, what upon my honour I thoroughly believe.'

'I should be happy in your good opinion, if I were able to appropriate it,' I said. 'But a man knows his own faults better than his neighbour knows his virtues.'

'Spoken like the man I took you for, Mr Cumbermede,' he rejoined gravely.

'But to return to the matter in hand,' I resumed; 'what can there be so dangerous in the few facts I have just come to the knowledge of, that my uncle should have cared to conceal them from me? That a man born in humble circumstances should come to know that he had distinguished ancestors, could hardly so fill him with false notions as to endanger his relation to the laws of his existence.'

'Of course--but you are too hasty. Those facts are of more importance than you are aware--involve other facts. Moldwarp Hall is *your* property, and not Sir Giles Brotherton's.'

'Then the apple was my own, after all!' I said to myself exultingly. It was a strange fantastic birth of conscience and memory--forgotten the same moment, and followed by an electric flash--not of hope, not of delight,

not of pride, but of pure revenge. My whole frame quivered with the shock; yet for a moment I seemed to have the strength of a Hercules. In front of me was a stile through a high hedge: I turned Lilith's head to the hedge, struck my spurs into her, and over or through it, I know not which, she bounded. Already, with all the strength of will I could summon, I struggled to rid myself of the wicked feeling; and although I cannot pretend to have succeeded for long after, yet by the time Mr Coningham had popped over the stile, I was waiting for him, to all appearance, I believe, perfectly calm. He, on the other hand, from whatever cause, was actually trembling. His face was pale, and his eye flashing. Was it that he had roused me more effectually than he had hoped?

'Take care, take care, my boy,' he said, 'or you won't live to enjoy your own. Permit me the honour of shaking hands with Sir Wilfrid Cumbermede Daryll.'

After this ceremonial of prophetic investiture, we jogged away quietly, and he told me a long story about the death of the last proprietor, the degree in which Sir Giles was related to him, and his undisputed accession to the property. At that time, he said, my father was in very bad health, and indeed died within six months of it.

'I knew your father well, Mr Cumbermede,' he went on, '--one of the best of men, with more spirit, more ambition than your uncle. It was *his* wish that his child, if a boy, should be called Wilfrid,--for though they had been married five or six years, their only child was born after his death. Your uncle did not like the name, your mother told me, but made no objection to it. So you were named after your grandfather, and great-grandfather, and I don't know how many of the race besides.--When the last of the Darylls died--'

'Then,' I interrupted, 'my father was the heir.'

‘No; you mistake: your uncle was the elder--Sir David Cumbermede Daryll, of Moldwarp Hall and The Moat,’ said Mr Coningham, evidently bent on making the most of my rights.

‘He never even told me he was the eldest,’ I said. ‘I always thought, from his coming home to manage the farm when my father was ill, that he was the second of the two sons.’

‘On the contrary, he was several years older than your father, but taking more kindly to reading than farming, was sent by his father to Oxford to study for the Church, leaving the farm, as was tacitly understood, to descend to your father at your grandfather’s death. After the idea of the Church was abandoned he took a situation, refusing altogether to subvert the order of things already established at the Moat. So you see you are not to suppose that he kept you back from any of your rights. They were his, not yours, while he lived.’

‘I will not ask,’ I said, ‘why he did not enforce them. That is plain enough from what I know of his character. The more I think of that, the loftier and simpler it seems to grow. He could not bring himself to spend the energies of a soul meant for higher things on the assertion and recovery of earthly rights.’

‘I rather differ from you there; and I do not know,’ returned my companion, whose tone was far more serious than I had ever heard it before, ‘whether the explanation I am going to offer will raise your uncle as much in your estimation as it does in mine. I confess I do not rank such self-denial as you attribute to him so highly as you do. On the contrary I count it a fault. How could the world go on if everybody was like your uncle?’

‘If everybody was like my uncle, he would have been forced to accept the position,’ I said; ‘for there would have been no one to take it from him.’

‘Perhaps. But you must not think Sir Giles knew anything of your uncle’s claim. He knows nothing of it now.’

I had not thought of Sir Giles in connection with the matter--only of Geoffrey; and my heart recoiled from the notion of dispossessing the old man who, however misled with regard to me at last, had up till then shown me uniform kindness. In that moment I had almost resolved on taking no steps till after his death. But Mr Coningham soon made me forget Sir Giles in a fresh revelation of my uncle.

‘Although,’ he resumed, ‘all you say of your uncle’s indifference to this world and its affairs is indubitably correct, I do not believe, had there not been a prospect of your making your appearance, that he would have shirked the duty of occupying the property which was his both by law and by nature. But he knew it might be an expensive suit--for no one can tell by what tricks of the law such may be prolonged--in which case all the money he could command would soon be spent, and nothing left either to provide for your so-called aunt, for whom he had a great regard, or to give you that education, which, whether you were to succeed to the property or not, he counted indispensable. He cared far more, he said, about your having such a property in yourself as was at once personal and real, than for your having any amount of property out of yourself. Expostulation was of no use. I had previously learned--from the old lady herself--the true state of the case, and, upon the death of Sir Geoffrey Daryll, had at once communicated with him--which placed me in a position for urging him, as I did again and again, considerably to his irritation, to assert and prosecute his claim to the title and estates. I offered to take the whole risk upon myself; but he said that would be tantamount to giving up his personal liberty until the matter was settled, which might not be in his lifetime. I may just mention, however, that, besides his religious absorption, I strongly suspect there was another cause of his indifference to worldly affairs: I have grounds for thinking that he was disappointed in a more than ordinary attachment to a lady he

met at Oxford--in station considerably above any prospects he had then. To return: he was resolved that, whatever might be your fate, you should not have to meet it without such preparation as he could afford you. As you have divined, he was most anxious that your character should have acquired some degree of firmness before you knew anything of the possibility of your inheriting a large property and historical name; and I may appropriate the credit of a negative share in the carrying out of his plans, for you will bear me witness how often I might have upset them by informing you of the facts of the case.'

'I am heartily obliged to you,' I said, 'for not interfering with my uncle's wishes, for I am very glad indeed that I have been kept in ignorance of my rights until now. The knowledge would at one time have gone far to render me useless for personal effort in any direction worthy of it. It would have made me conceited, ambitious, boastful: I don't know how many bad adjectives would have been necessary to describe me.'

'It is all very well to be modest, but I venture to think differently.'

'I should like to ask you one question, Mr Coningham,' I said.

'As many as you please.'

'How is it that you have so long delayed giving me the information which on my uncle's death you no doubt felt at liberty to communicate?'

'I did not know how far you might partake of your uncle's disposition, and judged that the wider your knowledge of the world, and the juster your estimate of the value of money and position, the more willing you would be to listen to the proposals I had to make.'

'Do you remember,' I asked, after a canter, led off by my companion, 'one very stormy night on which you suddenly appeared at the Moat, and had a long talk with my uncle on the subject?'

‘Perfectly,’ he answered. ‘But how did you come to know? *He* did not tell you of my visit!’

‘Certainly not. But, listening in my night-gown on the stair, which is open to the kitchen, I heard enough of your talk to learn the object of your visit--namely, to carry off my skin to make bagpipes with.’

He laughed so heartily that I told him the whole story of the pendulum.

‘On that occasion,’ he said, ‘I made the offer to your uncle, on condition of his sanctioning the commencement of legal proceedings, to pledge myself to meet every expense of those, and of your education as well, and to claim nothing whatever in return, except in case of success.’

This quite corresponded with my own childish recollections of the interview between them. Indeed there was such an air of simple straightforwardness about his whole communication, while at the same time it accounted so thoroughly for the warning my uncle had given me against him, that I felt I might trust him entirely, and so would have told him all that had taken place at the Hall, but for the share his daughter had borne in it, and the danger of discovery to Mary.

CHAPTER L.

THE DATES.

I have given, of course, only an epitome of our conversation, and by the time we had arrived at this point we had also reached the gate of the churchyard. Again we fastened up our horses; again he took the key from under the tombstone; and once more we entered the dreary little church, and drew aside the curtain of the vestry. I took down the volume of the register. The place was easy to find, seeing, as I have said, it was at the very end of the volume.

The copy I had taken was correct: the date of the marriage in the register was January 15, and it was the first under the 1748, written at the top of the page. I stood for a moment gazing at it; then my eye turned to the entry before it, the last on the preceding page. It bore the date December 13--under the general date at the top of the page, 1747. The next entry after it was dated March 29. At the bottom of the page, or cover rather, was the attestation of the clergyman to the number of marriages in that year; but there was no such attestation at the bottom of the preceding page. I turned to Mr Coningham, who had stood regarding me, and, pointing to the book, said:

‘Look here, Mr Coningham. I cannot understand it. Here the date of the marriage is 1748; and that of all their letters, evidently written after the marriage, is 1747.’

He looked, and stood looking, but made me no reply. In my turn I looked at him. His face expressed something not far from consternation; but the moment he became aware that I was observing him, he pulled out his handkerchief, and wiping his forehead with an attempt at a laugh, said:

‘How hot it is! Yes; there’s something awkward there. I hadn’t observed it before. I must inquire into that. I confess I cannot explain it all at once.

It does certainly seem queer. I must look into those dates when I go home.'

He was evidently much more discomposed than he was willing I should perceive. He always spoke rather hurriedly, but I had never heard him stammer before. I was certain that he saw or at least dreaded something fatal in the discrepancy I had pointed out. As to looking into it when he got home, that sounded very like nonsense. He pulled out a note-book, however, and said:

'I may just as well make a note of the blunder--for blunder it must be--a very awkward one indeed, I am afraid. I should think so--I cannot--but then--'

He went on uttering disjointed and unfinished expressions, while he made several notes. His manner was of one who regards the action he is about as useless, yet would have it supposed the right thing to do.

'There!' he said, shutting up his note-book with a slam; and turning away he strode out of the place--much, it seemed to me, as if his business there was over for ever. I gave one more glance at the volume, and replaced it on the shelf. When I rejoined him, he was already mounted and turning to move off.

'Wait a moment, Mr Coningham,' I said. 'I don't exactly know where to put the key.'

'Fling it under the gravestone, and come along,' he said, muttering something more, in which, perhaps, I only fancied I heard certain well-known maledictions.

By this time my spirits had sunk as much below their natural level as, a little before, they had risen above it. But I felt that I must be myself, and that no evil any more than good fortune ought for a moment to perturb the tenor of my being. Therefore, having locked the door deliberately and

carefully, I felt about along the underside of the gravestone until I found the ledge where the key had lain. I then made what haste I could to mount and follow Mr Coningham, but Lilith delayed the operation by her eagerness. I gave her the rein, and it was well no one happened to be coming in the opposite direction through that narrow and tortuous passage, for she flew round the corners--'turning close to the ground, like a cat when scratchingly she wheels about after a mouse,' as my old favourite, Sir Philip Sidney, says. Notwithstanding her speed, however, when I reached the mouth of the lane, there was Mr Coningham half across the first field, with his coat-tails flying out behind him. I would not allow myself to be left in such a discourteous fashion, and gave chase. Before he had measured the other half of the field, I was up with him.

'That mare of yours is a clever one,' he said, as I ranged alongside of him. 'I thought I would give her a breather. She hasn't enough to do.'

'She's not breathing so *very* fast,' I returned. 'Her wind is as good as her legs.'

'Let's get along then, for I've lost a great deal of time this morning. I ought to have been at Squire Strode's an hour ago. How hot the sun is, to be sure, for this time of the year!'

As he spoke, he urged his horse, but I took and kept the lead, feeling, I confess, a little angry, for I could not help suspecting he had really wanted to run away from me. I did what I could, however, to behave as if nothing had happened. But he was very silent, and his manner towards me was quite altered. Neither could I help thinking it scarcely worthy of a man of the world, not to say a lawyer, to show himself so much chagrined. For my part, having simply concluded that the new-blown bubble hope had burst, I found myself just where I was before-with a bend sinister on my scutcheon, it might be, but with a good conscience, a tolerably clear brain, and the dream of my Athanasia.

The moment we reached the road, Mr Coningham announced that his way was in the opposite direction to mine, said his good morning, shook hands with me, and jogged slowly away. I knew that was not the nearest way to Squire Strode's.

I could not help laughing--he had so much the look of a dog with his tail between his legs, or a beast of prey that had made his spring and missed his game. I watched him for some time, for Lilith being pulled both ways--towards home, and after her late companion--was tolerably quiescent, but he never cast a glance behind him. When at length a curve in the road hid him from my sight, I turned and went quietly home, thinking what the significance of the unwelcome discovery might be. If the entry of the marriage under that date could not be proved a mere blunder, of which I could see no hope, then certainly my grandfather must be regarded as born out of wedlock, a supposition which, if correct, would account for the dropping of the *Daryll*.

On the way home I jumped no hedges.

Having taken my farewell of Lilith, I packed my 'bag of needments,' locked the door of my uncle's room, which I would have no one enter in my absence, and set out to meet the night mail.

CHAPTER LI.

CHARLEY AND CLARA.

On my arrival in London, I found Charley waiting for me, as I had expected, and with his help soon succeeded in finding, in one of the streets leading from the Strand to the river, the accommodation I wanted. There I settled and resumed the labour so long and thanklessly interrupted.

When I recounted the circumstances of my last interview with Mr Coningham, Charley did not seem so much surprised at the prospect which had opened before me as disappointed at its sudden close, and would not admit that the matter could be allowed to rest where it was.

‘Do you think the change of style could possibly have anything to do with it?’ he asked, after a meditative silence.

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘Which change of style do you mean?’

‘I mean the change of the beginning of the year from March to January,’ he answered.

‘When did that take place?’ I asked.

‘Some time about the middle of the last century,’ he replied; ‘but I will find out exactly.’

The next night he brought me the information that the January which, according to the old style, would have been that of 1752 was promoted to be the first month of the year 1753.

My dates then were, by several years, antecedent to the change, and it was an indisputable anachronism that the January between the December of 1747 and the March of 1748, should be entered as belonging to the latter year. This seemed to throw a little dubious light upon the

perplexity; the January thus entered belonging clearly to 1747, and, therefore, was the same January with that of my ancestor's letters. Plainly, however, the entry could not stand in evidence, its interpolation at least appeared indubitable, for how otherwise could it stand at the beginning of the new year instead of towards the end of the old, five, years before the change of style? Also, now I clearly remember that it did look a little crushed between the heading of the year and the next entry. It must be a forgery--and a stupid one as well, seeing the bottom of the preceding page, where there was a small blank, would have been the proper place to choose for it--that is, under the heading 1747. Could the 1748 have been inserted afterwards? That did not appear likely, seeing it belonged to all the rest of the entries on the page, there being none between the date in question and March 29, on the 25th of which month the new year began. The conclusion lying at the door was that some one had inserted the marriage so long after the change of style that he knew nothing of the trap there lying for his forgery. It seemed probable that, blindly following the letters, he had sought to place it in the beginning of the previous year, but, getting bewildered in the apparent eccentricities of the arrangement of month and year, had at last drawn his bow at a venture. Neither this nor any other theory I could fashion did I, however, find in the least satisfactory. All I could be sure of was that here was no evidence of the marriage--on the contrary, a strong presumption against it.

For my part, the dream in which I had indulged had been so short that I very soon recovered from the disappointment of the waking therefrom. Neither did the blot with which the birth of my grandfather was menaced affect me much. My chief annoyance in regard of that aspect of the affair was in being *so* related to Geoffrey Brotherton.

I cannot say how it came about, but I could not help observing that, by degrees, a manifest softening appeared in Charley's mode of speaking of his father, although I knew that there was not the least approach to a

more cordial intercourse between them. I attributed the change to the letters of his sister, which he always gave me to read. From them I have since classed her with a few others I have since known, chiefly women, the best of their kind, so good and so large-minded that they seem ever on the point of casting aside the unworthy opinions they have been taught, and showing themselves the true followers of Him who cared only for the truth, and yet holding by the doctrines of men, and believing them to be the mind of God.

In one or two of Charley's letters to her I ventured to insert a question or two, and her reference to these in her replies to Charley gave me an opportunity of venturing to write to her more immediately, in part defending what I thought the truth, in part expressing all the sympathy I honestly could with her opinions. She replied very kindly, very earnestly, and with a dignity of expression as well as of thought which harmonized entirely with my vision of her deeper and grander nature.

The chief bent of my energies was now to vindicate for myself a worthy position in the world of letters; but my cherished hope lay in the growth of such an intimacy with Mary Osborne as might afford ground for the cultivation of far higher and more precious ambitions.

It was not, however, with the design of furthering these that I was now guilty of what will seem to most men a Quixotic action enough.

'Your sister is fond of riding--is she not?' I asked Charley one day, as we sauntered with our cigars on the terrace of the Adelphi.

'As fond as one can possibly be who has had so little opportunity,' he said.

'I was hoping to have a ride with her and Clara the very evening when that miserable affair occurred. The loss of that ride was at least as great a disappointment to me as the loss of the sword.'

‘You seem to like my sister, Wilfrid,’ he said.

‘At least I care more for her good opinion than I do for any woman’s--or man’s either, Charley.’

‘I am so glad!’ he responded. ‘You like her better than Clara, then?’

‘Ever so much,’ I said.

He looked more pleased than annoyed, I thought--certainly neither the one nor the other entirely. His eyes sparkled, but there was a flicker of darkness about his forehead.

‘I am very glad,’ he said again, after a moment’s pause. ‘I thought--I was afraid--I had fancied sometimes--you were still a little in love with Clara.’

‘Not one atom,’ I returned. ‘She cured me of that quite. There is no danger of that any more,’ I added--foolishly, seeing I intended no explanation.

‘How do you mean?’ he asked, a little uneasily.

I had no answer ready, and a brief silence followed. The subject was not resumed.

It may well seem strange to my reader that I had never yet informed him of the part Clara had had in the matter of the sword. But, as I have already said, when anything moved me very deeply I was never ready to talk about it. Somehow, perhaps from something of the cat-nature in me, I never liked to let go my hold of it without good reason. Especially I shrank from imparting what I only half comprehended; and besides, in the present case, the thought of Clara’s behaviour was so painful to me still that I recoiled from any talk about it--the more that Charley had a kind and good opinion of her, and would, I knew, only start objections and explanations defensive, as he had done before on a similar occasion,

and this I should have no patience with. I had, therefore, hitherto held my tongue. There was, of course, likewise the fear of betraying his sister, only the danger of that was small, now that the communication between the two girls seemed at an end for the time; and if it had not been that a certain amount of mutual reticence had arisen between us, first on Charley's part and afterwards on mine, I doubt much whether, after all, I should not by this time have told him the whole story. But the moment I had spoken as above, the strangeness of his look, which seemed to indicate that he would gladly request me to explain myself but for some hidden reason, flashed upon me the suspicion that he was himself in love with Clara. The moment the suspicion entered, a host of circumstances crystallized around it. Fact after fact flashed out of my memory, from the first meeting of the two in Switzerland down to this last time I had seen them together, and in the same moment I was convinced that the lady I saw him with in the Regent's Park was no other than Clara. But, if it were so, why had he shut me out from his confidence? Of the possible reasons which suggested themselves, the only one which approached the satisfactory was that he had dreaded hurting me by the confession of his love for her, and preferred leaving it to Clara to cure me of a passion to which my doubtful opinion of her gave a probability of weakness and ultimate evanescence.

A great conflict awoke in me. What ought I to do? How could I leave him in ignorance of the falsehood of the woman he loved? But I could not make the disclosure now. I must think about the how and the how much to tell him. I returned to the subject which had led up to the discovery.

'Does your father keep horses, Charley?'

'He has a horse for his parish work, and my mother has an old pony for her carriage.'

'Is the rectory a nice place?'

‘I believe it is, but I have such painful associations with it that I hardly know.’

The Arab loves the desert sand where he was born; the thief loves the court where he used to play in the gutter. How miserable Charley’s childhood must have been! How *could* I tell him of Clara’s falsehood?

‘Why doesn’t he give Mary a pony to ride?’ I asked. ‘But I suppose he hasn’t room for another?’

‘Oh! yes, there’s plenty of room. His predecessor was rather a big fellow. In fact, the stables are on much too large a scale for a clergyman. I dare say he never thought of it. I must do my father the justice to say there’s nothing stingy about him, and I believe he loves my sister even more than my mother. It certainly would be the best thing he could do for her to give her a pony. But she will die of religion--young, and be sainted in a twopenny tract, and that is better than a pony. Her hair doesn’t curl--that’s the only objection. Some one has remarked that all the good children who die have curly hair.’

Poor Charley! Was his mind more healthy, then? Was he less likely to come to an early death? Was his want of faith more life-giving than what he considered her false faith?

‘I see no reason to fear it,’ I said, with a tremor at my heart as I thought of my dream.

That night I was sleepless--but about Charley--not about Mary. What could I do?--what ought I to do? Might there be some mistake in my judgment of Clara? I searched, and I believe searched honestly, for any possible mode of accounting for her conduct that might save her uprightness, or mitigate the severity of the condemnation I had passed upon her. I could find none. At the same time, what I was really seeking was an excuse for saying nothing to Charley. I suspect now that, had I searched after justification or excuse for her from love to herself, I might

have succeeded in constructing a theory capable of sheltering her; but, as it was, I failed utterly, and, turning at last from the effort, I brooded instead upon the Quixotic idea already adverted to, grown the more attractive as offering a good excuse for leaving Charley for a little.

CHAPTER LII.

LILITH MEETS WITH A MISFORTUNE.

The next day, leaving a note to inform Charley that I had run home for a week, I set out for the Moat, carrying with me the best side-saddle I could find in London.

As I left the inn at Minstercombe in a gig, I saw Clara coming out of a shop. I could not stop and speak to her, for, not to mention the opinion I had of her, and the treachery of which I accused her, was I not at that very moment meditating how best to let her lover know that she was not to be depended upon? I touched the horse with the whip, and drove rapidly past. Involuntarily, however, I glanced behind, and saw a white face staring after me. Our looks encountering thus, I lifted my hat, but held on my course.

I could not help feeling very sorry for her. The more falsely she had behaved, she was the more to be pitied. She looked very beautiful with that white face. But how different was her beauty from that of my Athanasia!

Having tried the side-saddle upon Lilith, and found all it wanted was a little change in the stuffing about the withers, I told Styles to take it and the mare to Minstercombe the next morning, and have it properly fitted.

What trifles I am lingering upon! Lilith is gone to the worms--no, that I *do not* believe: amongst the things most people believe, and I cannot, that is one; but at all events she is dead, and the saddle gone to worms; and yet, for reasons which will want no explanation to my one reader, I care to linger even on the fringes of this part of the web of my story.

I wandered about the field and house, building and demolishing many an airy abode, until Styles came back. I had told him to get the job done at once, and not return without the saddle.

‘Can I trust you, Styles?’ I said abruptly.

‘I hope so, sir. If I may make so bold, I don’t think I was altogether to blame about that book--’

‘Of course not. I told you so. Never think of it again. Can you keep a secret?’

‘I can try, sir. You’ve been a good master to me, I’m sure, sir.’

‘That I mean to be still, if I can. Do you know the parish of Spurdene?’

‘I was born there, sir.’

‘Ah! that’s not so convenient. Do you know the rectory?’

‘Every stone of it, I may say, sir.’

‘And do they know you?’

‘Well, it’s some years since I left--a mere boy, sir.’

‘I want you, then--if it be possible--you can tell best--to set out with Lilith to-morrow night--I hope it will be a warm night. You must groom her thoroughly, put on the side-saddle and her new bridle, and lead her--you’re not to ride her, mind--I don’t want her to get hot--lead her to the rectory of Spurdene--and-now here is the point--if it be possible, take her up to the stable, and fasten her by this silver chain to the ring at the door of it--as near morning as you safely can to avoid discovery, for she mustn’t stand longer at this season of the year than can be helped. I will tell you all.--I mean her for a present to Miss Osborne; but I do not want any one to know where she comes from. None of them, I believe, have

ever seen her. I will write something on a card, which you will fasten to one of the pommels, throwing over all this horsecloth.'

I gave him a fine bear-skin I had bought for the purpose. He smiled, and, with evident enjoyment of the spirit of the thing, promised to do his best.

Lilith looked lovely as he set out with her late the following night. When he returned the next morning, he reported that everything had succeeded admirably. He had carried out my instructions to the letter; and my white Lilith had by that time, I hoped, been caressed, possibly fed, by the hands of Mary Osborne herself.

I may just mention that on the card I had written, or rather printed, the words: 'To Mary Osborne, from a friend.'

In a day or two I went back to London, but said nothing to Charley of what I had done--waiting to hear from him first what they said about it.

'I say, Wilfrid!' he cried, as he came into my room with his usual hurried step, the next morning but one, carrying an open letter in his hand, 'what's this you've been doing--you sly old fellow? You ought to have been a prince, by Jove!'

'What do you accuse me of? I must know that first, else I might confess to more than necessary. One must be on one's guard with such as you.'

'Read that,' he said, putting the letter into my hand.

It was from his sister. One passage was as follows:

'A strange thing has happened. A few mornings ago the loveliest white horse was found tied to the stable door, with a side-saddle, and a card on it directed to *me*. I went to look at the creature. It was like the witch-lady in Christabel, 'beautiful exceedingly.' I ran to my father, and told him. He asked me who had sent it, but I knew no more than he did. He said I couldn't keep it unless we found out who had sent it, and probably not

then, for the proceeding was as suspicious as absurd. To-day he has put an advertisement in the paper to the effect that, if the animal is not claimed before, it will be sold at the horse-fair next week, and the money given to the new school fund. I feel as if I couldn't bear parting with it, but of course I can't accept a present without knowing where it comes from. Have you any idea who sent it? I am sure papa is right about it, as indeed, dear Charley, he always is.'

I laid down the letter, and, full of mortification, went walking about the room.

'Why didn't you tell me, Wilfrid?'

'I thought it better, if you were questioned, that you should not know. But it was a foolish thing to do--very. I see it now. Of course your father is right. It doesn't matter though. I will go down and buy her.'

'You had better not appear in it. Go to the Moat, and send Styles.'

'Yes--that will be best. Of course it will. When is the fair, do you know?'

'I will find out for you. I hope some rascal mayn't in the mean time take my father in, and persuade him to give her up. Why shouldn't I run down and tell him, and get back poor Lilith without making you pay for your own?'

'Indeed you shan't. The mare is your sister's, and I shall lay no claim to her. I have money enough to redeem her.'

Charley got me information about the fair, and the day before it, I set out for the Moat.

When I reached Minstercombe, having more time on my hands than I knew what to do with, I resolved to walk round by Spurdene. It would not be more than ten or twelve miles, and so I should get a peep of the rectory. On the way I met a few farmer-looking men on horseback, and

just before entering the village saw at a little distance a white creature--very like my Lilith--with a man on its back, coming towards me.

As they drew nearer, I was certain of the mare, and, thinking it possible the rider might be Mr Osborne, withdrew into a thicket on the road-side. But what was my dismay to discover that it was indeed my Lilith, but ridden by Geoffrey Brotherton! As soon as he was past, I rushed into the village, and found that the people I had met were going from the fair. Charley had been misinformed. I was too late: Brotherton had bought my Lilith. Half distracted with rage and vexation, I walked on and on, never halting till I reached the Moat. Was this man destined to swallow up everything I cared for? Had he suspected me as the foolish donor, and bought the mare to spite me? A thousand times rather would I have had her dead. Nothing on earth would have tempted me to sell my Lilith but inability to feed her, and then I would rather have shot her. I felt poorer than even when my precious folio was taken from me, for the lowest animal life is a greater thing than a rare edition. I did not go to bed at all that night, but sat by my fire or paced about the room till dawn, when I set out for Minstercombe, and reached it in time for the morning coach to London. The whole affair was a folly, and I said to-myself that I deserved to suffer. Before I left, I told Styles, and begged him to keep an eye on the mare, and, if ever he learned that her owner wanted to part with her, to come off at once and let me know. He was greatly concerned at my ill-luck, as he called it, and promised to watch her carefully. He knew one of the grooms, he said, a little, and would cultivate his acquaintance.

I could not help wishing now that Charley would let his sister know what I had tried to do for her, but of course I would not say so. I think he did tell her, but I never could be quite certain whether or not she knew it. I wonder if she ever suspected me. I think not. I have too good reason to fear that she attributed to another the would-be gift; I believe that, from Brotherton’s buying her, they thought he had sent her--a present certainly

far more befitting his means than mine. But I came to care very little about it, for my correspondence with her through Charley, went on. I wondered sometimes how she could keep from letting her father know: that he did not know I was certain, for he would have put a stop to it at once. I conjectured that she had told her mother, and that she, fearing to widen the breach between her husband and Charley, had advised her not to mention it to him; while believing it would do both Charley and me good, she did not counsel her to give up the correspondence. It must be considered, also, that it was long before I said a word implying any personal interest. Before I ventured that, I had some ground for thinking that my ideas had begun to tell upon hers, for, even in her letters to Charley, she had begun to drop the common religious phrases, while all she said seemed to indicate a widening and deepening and simplifying of her faith. I do not for a moment imply that she had consciously given up one of the dogmas of the party to which she belonged, but there was the perceptible softening of growth in her utterances, and after that was plain to me, I began to let out my heart to her a little more.

About this time also I began to read once more the history of Jesus, asking myself as if on a first acquaintance with it, ‘Could it be--might it not be that, if there were a God, he would visit his children after some fashion? If so, is this a likely fashion? May it not even be the only right fashion?’ In the story I found at least a perfection surpassing everything to be found elsewhere; and I was at least sure that whatever this man said must be true. If one could only be as sure of the record! But if ever a dawn was to rise upon me, here certainly the sky would break; here I thought I already saw the first tinge of the returning life-blood of the swooning world. The gathering of the waters of conviction at length one morning broke out in the following verses, which seemed more than half given to me, the only effort required being to fit them rightly together:--

Come to me, come to me, O my God; Come to me everywhere! Let the trees mean thee, and the grassy sod, And the water and the air.

For thou art so far that I often doubt, As on every side I stare, Searching within, and looking without, If thou art anywhere.

How did men find thee in days of old? How did they grow so sure? They fought in thy name, they were glad and bold, They suffered, and kept themselves pure.

But now they say--neither above the sphere, Nor down in the heart of man, But only in fancy, ambition, or fear, The thought of thee began.

If only that perfect tale were true Which, with touch of sunny gold, Of the ancient many makes one anew, And simplicity manifold.

But *he* said that they who did his word The truth of it should know: I will try to do it--if he be Lord, Perhaps the old spring will flow;

Perhaps the old spirit-wind will blow That he promised to their prayer; And doing thy will, I yet shall know Thee, Father, everywhere!

These lines found their way without my concurrence into a certain religious magazine, and I was considerably astonished, and yet more pleased, one evening when Charley handed me, with the kind regards of his sister, my own lines, copied by herself. I speedily let her know they were mine, explaining that they had found their way into print without my cognizance. She testified so much pleasure at the fact, and the little scraps I could claim as my peculiar share of the contents of Charley's envelopes grew so much more confiding that I soon ventured to write more warmly than hitherto. A period longer than usual passed before she wrote again, and when she did she took no express notice of my last letter. Foolishly or not, I regarded this as a favourable sign, and wrote several letters, in which I allowed the true state of my feelings towards her to appear. At length I wrote a long letter in which, without a word of direct love-making, I thought yet to reveal that I loved her with all my heart. It was chiefly occupied with my dream on that memorable night--of course without the slightest allusion to the waking, or anything

that followed. I ended abruptly, telling her that the dream often recurred, but as often as it drew to its lovely close, the lifted veil of Athanasia revealed ever and only the countenance of Mary Osborne.

The answer to this came soon and in few words.

‘I dare not take to myself what you write. That would be presumption indeed, not to say wilful self-deception. It will be honour enough for me if in any way I serve to remind you of the lady in your dream. Wilfrid, if you love me, take care of my Charley. I must not write more.--M.O.’

It was not much, but enough to make me happy. I write it from memory--every word as it lies where any moment I could read it--shut in a golden coffin whose lid I dare not open.

CHAPTER LIII.

TOO LATE.

I must now go back a little. After my suspicions had been aroused as to the state of Charley's feelings, I hesitated for a long time before I finally made up my mind to tell him the part Clara had had in the loss of my sword. But while I was thus restrained by dread of the effect the disclosure would have upon him if my suspicions were correct, those very suspicions formed the strongest reason for acquainting him with her duplicity; and, although I was always too ready to put off the evil day so long as doubt supplied excuse for procrastination, I could not have let so much time slip by and nothing said but for my absorption in Mary.

At length, however, I had now resolved, and one evening, as we sat together, I took my pipe from my mouth, and, shivering bodily, thus began:

'Charley,' I said, 'I have had for a good while something on my mind, which I cannot keep from you longer.'

He looked alarmed instantly. I went on.

'I have not been quite open with you about that affair of the sword.'

He looked yet more dismayed; but I must go on, though it tore my very heart. When I came to the point of my overhearing Clara talking to Brotherton, he started up, and, without waiting to know the subject of their conversation, came close up to me, and, his face distorted with the effort to keep himself quiet, said, in a voice hollow and still and far-off, like what one fancies of the voice of the dead:

'Wilfrid, you said Brotherton, I think?'

'I did, Charley.'

‘She never told me that!’

‘How could she when she was betraying your friend?’

‘No no!’ he cried, with a strange mixture of command and entreaty; ‘don’t say that. There is some explanation. There *must* be.’

‘She told *me* she hated him,’ I said.

‘*I know* she hates him. What was she saying to him?’

‘I tell you she was betraying me, your friend, who had never done her any wrong, to the man she had told me she hated, and whom I had heard her ridicule.’

‘What do you mean by betraying you?’

I recounted what I had overheard. He listened with clenched teeth and trembling white lips; then burst into a forced laugh. ‘What a fool I am! Distrust *her!* I will *not*. There is some explanation! There *must* be!’

The dew of agony lay thick on his forehead. I was greatly alarmed at what I had done, but I could not blame myself.

‘Do be calm, Charley,’ I entreated.

‘I am as calm as death,’ he replied, striding up and down the room with long strides.

He stopped and came up to me again.

‘Wilfrid,’ he said, ‘I am a damned fool. I am going now. Don’t be frightened--I am perfectly calm. I will come and explain it all to you to-morrow--no--the next day--or the next at latest. She had some reason for hiding it from me, but I shall have it all the moment I ask her. She is not what you think her. I don’t for a moment blame you--but--are you sure it was--Clara’s--voice you heard?’ he added with forced calmness and slow utterance.

‘A man is not likely to mistake the voice of a woman he ever fancied himself in love with.’

‘Don’t talk like that, Wilfrid. You’ll drive me mad. How should she know you had taken the sword?’

‘She was always urging me to take it. There lies the main sting of the treachery. But I never told you where I found the sword.’

‘What can that have to do with it?’

‘I found it on my bed that same morning when I woke. It could not have been there when I lay down.’

‘Well?’

‘Charley, I believe *she* laid it there.’

He leaped at me like a tiger. Startled, I jumped to my feet. He laid hold of me by the throat, and griped me with a quivering grasp. Recovering my self-possession, I stood perfectly still, making no effort even to remove his hand, although it was all but choking me. In a moment or two he relaxed his hold, burst into tears, took up his hat, and walked to the door.

‘Charley! Charley! you must *not* leave me so,’ I cried, starting forwards.

‘To-morrow, Wilfrid; to-morrow,’ he said, and was gone.

He was back before I could think what to do next. Opening the door half way, he said--as if a griping hand had been on *his* throat--

‘I--I--I--don’t believe it, Wilfrid. You only said you believed it. *I* don’t. Good night. I’m all right now. *Mind, I don’t believe it.*’

He, shut the door. Why did I not follow him?

But if I had followed him, what could I have said or done? In every man’s life come awful moments when he must meet his fate--dree his

weird--alone. Alone, I say, if he have no God--for man or woman cannot aid him, cannot touch him, cannot come near him. Charley was now in one of those crises, and I could not help him. Death is counted an awful thing: it seems to me that life is an infinitely more awful thing.

In the morning I received the following letter:--

‘Dear Mr Cumbermede,

‘You will be surprised at receiving a note from me--still more at its contents. I am most anxious to see you--so much so that I venture to ask you to meet me where we can have a little quiet talk. I am in London, and for a day or two sufficiently my own mistress to leave the choice of time and place with you--only let it be when and where we shall not be interrupted. I presume on old friendship in making this extraordinary request, but I do not presume in my confidence that you will not misunderstand my motives. One thing only I *beg*--that you will not inform C.O. of the petition I make.

‘Your old friend,

‘C.C.’

What was I to do? To go, of course. She *might* have something to reveal which would cast light on her mysterious conduct. I cannot say I expected a disclosure capable of removing Charley’s misery, but I did vaguely hope to learn something that might alleviate it. Anyhow, I would meet her, for I dared not refuse to hear her. To her request of concealing it from Charley, I would grant nothing beyond giving it quarter until I should see whither the affair tended. I wrote at once--making an appointment for the same evening. But was it from a suggestion of Satan, from an evil impulse of human spite, or by the decree of fate, that I fixed on that part of the Regent’s Park in which I had seen him and the lady I now believed to have been Clara walking together in the dusk? I cannot now tell. The events which followed have destroyed all certainty, but I

fear it was a flutter of the wings of revenge, a shove at the spokes of the wheel of time to hasten the coming of its circle.

Anxious to keep out of Charley's way--for the secret would make me wretched in his presence--I went into the City, and, after an early dinner, sauntered out to the Zoological Gardens, to spend the time till the hour of meeting. But there, strange to say, whether from insight or fancy, in every animal face I saw such gleams of a troubled humanity that at last I could bear it no longer, and betook myself to Primrose Hill.

It was a bright afternoon, wonderfully clear, with a crisp frosty feel in the air. But the sun went down, and one by one, here and there, above and below, the lights came out and the stars appeared, until at length sky and earth were full of flaming spots, and it was time to seek our rendezvous.

I had hardly reached it when the graceful form of Clara glided towards me. She perceived in a moment that I did not mean to shake hands with her. It was not so dark but that I saw her bosom heave and a flush overspread her countenance.

'You wished to see me, Miss Coningham,' I said. 'I am at your service.'

'What is wrong, Mr Cumbermede? You never used to speak to me in such a tone.'

'There is nothing wrong if you are not more able than I to tell what it is.'

'Why did you come if you were going to treat me so?'

'Because you requested it.'

'Have I offended you, then, by asking you to meet me? I trusted you. I thought *you* would never misjudge me.'

'I should be but too happy to find I had been unjust to you, Miss Coningham. I would gladly go on my knees to you to confess that fault, if

I could only be satisfied of its existence. Assure me of it, and I will bless you.'

'How strangely you talk! Some one has been maligning me.'

'No one. But I have come to the knowledge of what only one besides yourself could have told me.'

'You mean--'

'Geoffrey Brotherton.'

'*He!* He has been telling you--'

'No--thank heaven! I have not yet sunk to the slightest communication with *him*.'

She turned her face aside. Veiled as it was by the gathering gloom, she yet could not keep it towards me. But after a brief pause she looked at me and said,

'You know more than--I do not know what you mean.'

'I do know more than you think I know. I will tell you under what circumstances I came to such knowledge.'

She stood motionless.

'One evening,' I went on, 'after leaving Moldwarp Hall with Charles Osborne, I returned to the library to fetch a book. As I entered the room where it lay, I heard voices in the armoury. One was the voice of Geoffrey Brotherton--a man you told me you hated. The other was yours.'

She drew herself up, and stood stately before me.

'Is that your accusation?' she said. 'Is a woman never to speak to a man because she detests him?'

She laughed--I thought drearily.

‘Apparently not--for then I presume you would not have asked me to meet you.’

‘Why should you think I hate *you*?’

‘Because you have been treacherous to me.’

‘In talking to Geoffrey Brotherton? I do hate him. I hate him more than ever. I spoke the truth when I told you that.’

‘Then you do not hate me?’

‘No.’

‘And yet you delivered me over to my enemy bound hand and foot, as Delilah did Samson.--I heard what you said to Brotherton.’

She seemed to waver, but stood--speechless, as if waiting for more.

‘I heard you tell him that I had taken that sword--the sword you had always been urging me to take--the sword you unsheathed and laid on my bed that I might be tempted to take it--why I cannot understand, for I never did you a wrong to my poor knowledge. I fell into your snare, and you made use of the fact you had achieved to ruin my character, and drive me from the house in which I was foolish enough to regard myself as conferring favours rather than receiving them. You have caused me to be branded as a thief for taking--at your suggestion--that which was and still is my own!’

‘Does Charley know this?’ she asked, in a strangely altered voice.

‘He does. He learned it yesterday.’

‘O my God!’ she cried, and fell kneeling on the grass at my feet. ‘Wilfrid! Wilfrid! I will tell you all. It was to tell you all about this very

thing that I asked you to come. I could not bear it longer. Only your tone made me angry. I did not know you knew so much.'

The very fancy of such submission from such a creature would have thrilled me with a wild compassion once; but now I thought of Charley and felt cold to her sorrow as well as her loveliness. When she lifted her eyes to mine, however--it was not so dark but I could see their sadness--I began to hope a little for my friend. I took her hand and raised her. She was now weeping with down-bent head.

'Clara, you shall tell me all. God forbid I should be hard upon you! But you know I cannot understand it. I have no clue to it. How could you serve me so?'

'It is very hard for me--but there is no help now: I must confess disgrace, in order to escape infamy. Listen to me, then--as kindly as you can, Wilfrid. I beg your pardon; I have no right to use any old familiarity with you. Had my father's plans succeeded, I should still have had to make an apology to you, but under what different circumstances! I will be as brief as I can. My father believed you the rightful heir to Moldwarp Hall. Your own father believed it, and made my father believe it--that was in case your uncle should leave no heir behind him. But your uncle was a strange man, and would neither lay claim to the property himself, nor allow you to be told of your prospects. He did all he could to make you, like himself, indifferent to worldly things; and my father feared you would pride yourself on refusing to claim your rights, unless some counter-influence were used.'

'But why should your father have taken any trouble in the matter?' I asked.

'Well, you know--one in his profession likes to see justice done; and, besides, to conduct such a case must, of course, be of professional advantage to him. You must not think him under obligation to the present

family: my grandfather held the position he still occupies before they came into the property.--I am too unhappy to mind what I say now. My father was pleased when you and I--indeed I fancy he had a hand in our first meeting. But while your uncle lived he had to be cautious. Chance, however, seemed to favour his wishes. We met more than once, and you liked me, and my father thought I might wake you up to care about your rights, and--and--but--'

'I see. And it might have been, Clara, but for--'

'Only, you see, Mr Cumbermede,' she interrupted with a half-smile, and a little return of her playful manner--'*I* didn't wish it.'

'No. You preferred the man who *had* the property.'

It was a speech both cruel and rude. She stepped a pace back, and looked me proudly in the face.

Prefer that man to *you*, Wilfrid! No. I could never have fallen so low as that. But I confess I didn't mind letting papa understand that Mr Brotherton was polite to me--just to keep him from urging me to--to--You *will* do me the justice that I did not try to make you--to make you--care for me, Wilfrid?'

'I admit it heartily. I will be as honest as you, and confess that you might have done so--easily enough at one time. Indeed I am only half honest after all: I loved you once--after a boyish fashion.'

She half smiled again. 'I am glad you are believing me now,' she said.

'Thoroughly,' I answered. 'When you speak the truth, I must believe you.'

'I was afraid to let papa know the real state of things. I was always afraid of him, though I love him dearly, and he is very good to me. I dared not disappoint him by telling him that I loved Charley Osborne. That

time--you remember--when we met in Switzerland, his strange ways interested me so much! I was only a girl--but--'

'I understand well enough. I don't wonder at any woman falling in love with my Charley.'

'Thank you,' she said, with a sigh which seemed to come from the bottom of her heart. 'You were always generous. You will do what you can to right me with Charley--won't you? He is very strange sometimes.'

'I will indeed. But, Clara, why didn't Charley let *me* know that you and he loved each other?'

'Ah! there my shame comes in again! I wanted--for my father's sake, not for my own--I need not tell you that--I wanted to keep my influence over you a little while--that is, until I could gain my father's end. If I should succeed in rousing you to enter an action for the recovery of your rights, I thought my father might then be reconciled to my marrying Charley instead--'

'Instead of me, Clara. Yes--I see. I begin to understand the whole thing. It's not so bad as I thought--not by any means.'

'Oh, Wilfrid! how good of you! I shall love you next to Charley all my life.'

She caught hold of my hand, and for a moment seemed on the point of raising it to her lips.

'But I can't easily get over the disgrace you have done me, Clara. Neither, I confess, can I get over your degrading yourself to a private interview with such a beast as I know--and can't help suspecting you knew--Brotherton to be.'

She dropped my hand, and hid her face in both her own.

‘I did know what he was; but the thought of Charley made me able to go through with it.’

‘With the sacrifice of his friend to his enemy?’

‘It was bad. It was horridly wicked. I hate myself for it. But you know I thought it would do you no harm in the end.’

‘How much did Charley know of it all?’ I asked.

‘Nothing whatever. How could I trust his innocence? He’s the simplest creature in the world, Wilfrid.’

‘I know that well enough.’

‘I could not confess one atom of it to him. He would have blown up the whole scheme at once. It was all I could do to keep him from telling you of our engagement; and that made him miserable.’

‘Did you tell him I was in love with you? You knew I was, well enough.’

‘I dared not do that,’ she said, with a sad smile. ‘He would have vanished--would have killed himself to make way for you.’

‘I see you understand him, Clara.’

‘That will give me some feeble merit in your eyes--won’t it, Wilfrid?’

‘Still I don’t see quite why you betrayed me to Brotherton. I dare say I should if I had time to think it over.’

‘I wanted to put you in such a position with regard to the Brothertons that you could have no scruples in respect of them such as my father feared from what he called the over-refinement of your ideas of honour. The treatment you must receive would, I thought, rouse every feeling against them. But it was not *all* for my father’s sake, Wilfrid. It was, however mistaken, yet a good deal for the sake of Charley’s friend that I thus disgraced myself. Can you believe me?’

‘I do. But nothing can wipe out the disgrace to me.’

‘The sword was your own. Of course I never for a moment doubted that.’

‘But they believed I was lying.’

‘I can’t persuade myself it signifies greatly what such people think about you. I except Sir Giles. The rest are--’

‘Yet you consented to visit them.’

‘I was in reality Sir Giles’s guest. Not one of the others would have asked me.’

‘Not Geoffrey?’

‘I owe *him* nothing but undying revenge for Charley.’ Her eyes flashed through the darkness; and she looked as if she could have killed him.

‘But you were plotting against Sir Giles all the time you were his guest?’

‘Not unjustly, though. The property was not his, but yours--that is, as we then believed. As far as I knew, the result would have been a real service to him, in delivering him from unjust possession--a thing he would himself have scorned. It was all very wrong--very low, if you like--but somehow it then seemed simple enough--a lawful stratagem for the right.’

‘Your heart was so full of Charley!’

‘Then you do forgive me, Wilfrid?’

‘With all my soul. I hardly feel now as if I had anything to forgive.’

I drew her towards me and kissed her on the forehead. She threw her arms round me, and clung to me, sobbing like a child.

‘You will explain it all to Charley--won’t you?’ she said, as soon as she could speak, withdrawing herself from the arm which had involuntarily crept around her, seeking to comfort her.

‘I will,’ I said.

We were startled by a sound in the clump of trees behind us. Then over their tops passed a wailful gust of wind, through which we thought came the fall of receding footsteps.

‘I hope we haven’t been overheard,’ I said. ‘I shall go at once and tell Charley all about it. I will just see you home first.’

‘There’s no occasion for that, Wilfrid; and I’m sure I don’t deserve it.’

‘You deserve a thousand thanks. You have lifted a mountain off me. I see it all now. When your father found it was no use--’

‘Then I saw I had wronged you, and I couldn’t bear myself till I had confessed all.’

‘Your father is satisfied, then, that the register would not stand in evidence?’

‘Yes. He told me all about it.’

‘He has never said a word to me on the matter; but just dropped me in the dirt, and let me lie there.’

‘You must forgive him too, Wilfrid. It was a dreadful blow to him, and it was weeks before he told me. We couldn’t think what was the matter with him. You see he had been cherishing the scheme ever since your father’s death, and it was a great humiliation to find he had been sitting so many years on an addled egg,’ she said, with a laugh in which her natural merriment once more peeped out.

I walked home with her, and we parted like old friends. On my way to the Temple I was anxiously occupied as to how Charley would receive the explanation I had to give him. That Clara's confession would be a relief I could not doubt; but it must cause him great pain notwithstanding. His sense of honour was so keen, and his ideal of womankind so lofty, that I could not but dread the consequences of the revelation. At the same time I saw how it might benefit him. I had begun to see that it is more divine to love the erring than to love the good, and to understand how there is more joy over the one than over the ninety and nine. If Charley, understanding that he is no divine lover, who loves only so long as he is able to flatter himself that the object of his love is immaculate, should find that he must love Clara in spite of her faults and wrong-doings, he might thus grow to be less despairful over his own failures; he might, through his love for Clara, learn to hope for himself, notwithstanding the awful distance at which perfection lay removed.

But as I went I was conscious of a strange oppression. It was not properly mental, for my interview with Clara had raised my spirits. It was a kind of physical oppression I felt, as if the air, which was in reality clear and cold, had been damp and close and heavy.

I went straight to Charley's chambers. The moment I opened the door, I knew that something was awfully wrong. The room was dark--but he would often sit in the dark. I called him, but received no answer. Trembling, I struck a light, for I feared to move lest I should touch something dreadful. But when I had succeeded in lighting the lamp, I found the room just as it always was. His hat was on the table. He must be in his bed-room. And yet I did not feel as if anything alive was near me. Why was everything so frightfully still? I opened the door as slowly and fearfully as if I had dreaded arousing a sufferer whose life depended on his repose. There he lay on his bed, in his clothes--fast asleep, as I thought, for he often slept so, and at any hour of the day--the natural relief of his much-perturbed mind. His eyes were closed, and his face

was very white. As I looked, I heard a sound--a drop--another! There was a slow drip somewhere. God in heaven! Could it be? I rushed to him, calling him aloud. There was no response. It was too true! He was dead. The long snake-like Indian dagger was in his heart, and the blood was oozing slowly from around it.

I dare not linger over that horrible night, or the horrible days that followed. Such days! such nights! The letters to write!--The friends to tell!--Clara!--His father!--The police!--The inquest!

* * * * *

Mr Osborne took no notice of my letter, but came up at once. Entering where I sat with my head on my arms on the table, the first announcement I had of his presence was a hoarse deep broken voice ordering me out of the room. I obeyed mechanically, took up Charley's hat instead of my own, and walked away with it. But the neighbours were kind, and although I did not attempt to approach again all that was left of my friend, I watched from a neighbouring window, and following at a little distance, was present when they laid his form, late at night, in the unconsecrated ground of a cemetery.

I may just mention here what I had not the heart to dwell upon in the course of my narrative--that since the talk about suicide occasioned by the remarks of Sir Thomas Browne, he had often brought up the subject--chiefly, however, in a half-humorous tone, and from what may be called an aesthetic point of view as to the best mode of accomplishing it. For some of the usual modes he expressed abhorrence, as being so ugly; and on the whole considered--I well remember the phrase, for he used it more than once--that a dagger--and on one of those occasions he took up the Indian weapon already described and said--'such as this now,'--was 'the most gentleman-like usher into the presence of the Great Nothing.' As I had, however, often heard that those who contemplated suicide never spoke of it, and as his manner on the occasions to which I

refer was always merry, such talk awoke little uneasiness; and I believe that he never had at the moment any conscious attraction to the subject stronger than a speculative one. At the same time, however, I believe that the speculative attraction itself had its roots in the misery with which in other and prevailing moods he was so familiar.

CHAPTER LIV.

ISOLATION.

After writing to Mr Osborne to acquaint him with the terrible event, the first thing I did was to go to Clara. I will not attempt to describe what followed. The moment she saw me, her face revealed, as in a mirror, the fact legible on my own, and I had scarcely opened my mouth when she cried ‘He is dead!’ and fell fainting on the floor. Her aunt came, and we succeeded in recovering her a little. But she lay still as death on the couch where we had laid her, and the motion of her eyes hither and thither, as if following the movements of some one about the room, was the only sign of life in her. We spoke to her, but evidently she heard nothing; and at last, leaving her when the doctor arrived, I waited for her aunt in another room, and told her what had happened.

Some days after, Clara sent for me, and I had to tell her the whole story. Then, with agony in every word she uttered, she managed to inform me that, when she went in after I had left her at the door that night, she found waiting her a note from Charley; and this she now gave me to read. It contained a request to meet him that evening at the very place which I had appointed. It was their customary rendezvous when she was in town. In all probability he was there when we were, and heard and saw--heard too little and saw too much, and concluded that both Clara and I were false to him. The frightful perturbation which a conviction such as that must cause in a mind like his could be nothing short of madness. For, ever tortured by a sense of his own impotence, of the gulf to all appearance eternally fixed between his actions and his aspirations, and unable to lay hold of the Essential, the Causing Goodness, he had clung, with the despair of a perishing man, to the dim reflex of good he saw in her and me. If his faith in that was indeed destroyed, the last barrier must have given way, and the sea of madness ever breaking against it must have broken in and overwhelmed him. But oh, my friend! surely long ere

now thou knowest that we were not false; surely the hour will yet dawn when I shall again hold thee to my heart; yea, surely, even if still thou countest me guilty, thou hast already found for me endless excuse and forgiveness.

I can hardly doubt, however, that he inherited a strain of madness from his father, a madness which that father had developed by forcing upon him the false forms of a true religion.

It is not then strange that I should have thought and speculated much about madness.--What does its frequent impulse to suicide indicate? May it not be its main instinct to destroy itself as an evil thing? May not the impulse arise from some unconscious conviction that there is for it no remedy but the shuffling off of this mortal coil--nature herself dimly urging through the fumes of the madness to the one blow which lets in the light and air? Doubtless, if in the mind so sadly unhinged, the sense of a holy presence could be developed--the sense of a love that loves through all vagaries--of a hiding-place from forms of evil the most fantastic--of a fatherly care that not merely holds its insane child in its arms, but enters into the chaos of his imagination, and sees every wildest horror with which it swarms; if, I say, the conviction of such a love dawned on the disordered mind, the man would live in spite of his imaginary foes, for he would pray against them as sure of being heard as St Paul when he prayed concerning the thorn from which he was not delivered, but against which he was sustained. And who can tell how often this may be the fact--how often the lunatic also lives by faith? Are not the forms of madness most frequently those of love and religion? Certainly, if there be a God, he does not forget his frenzied offspring; certainly he is more tender over them than any mother over her idiot darling; certainly he sees in them what the eye of brother or sister cannot see. But some of them, at least, have not enough of such support to be able to go on living; and, for my part, I confess I rejoice as often as I hear that one has succeeded in breaking his prison bars. When the crystal

shrine has grown dim, and the fair forms of nature are in their entrance contorted hideously; when the sunlight itself is as blue lightning, and the wind in the summer trees is as ‘a terrible sound of stones cast down, or a rebounding echo from the hollow mountains;’ when the body is no longer a mediator between the soul and the world, but the prison-house of a lying gaoler and torturer--how can I but rejoice to hear that the tormented captive has at length forced his way out into freedom?

When I look behind me, I can see but little through the surging lurid smoke of that awful time. The first sense of relief came when I saw the body of Charley laid in the holy earth. For the earth *is* the Lord’s--and none the less holy that the voice of the priest may have left it without his consecration. Surely if ever the Lord laughs in derision, as the Psalmist says, it must be when the voice of a man would in *his* name exclude his fellows from their birthright. O Lord, gather thou the outcasts of thy Israel, whom the priests and the rulers of thy people have cast out to perish.

I remember for the most part only a dull agony, interchanging with apathy. For days and days I could not rest, but walked hither and thither, careless whither. When at length I would lie down weary and fall asleep, suddenly I would start up, hearing the voice of Charley crying for help, and rush in the middle of the Winter night into the wretched streets there to wander till daybreak. But I was not utterly miserable. In my most wretched dreams I never dreamed of Mary, and through all my waking distress I never forgot her. I was sure in my very soul that she did me no injustice. I had laid open the deepest in me to her honest gaze, and she had read it, and could not but know me. Neither did what had occurred quench my growing faith. I had never been able to hope much for Charley in this world; for something was out of joint with him, and only in the region of the unknown was I able to look for the setting right of it. Nor had many weeks passed before I was fully aware of relief when I remembered that he was dead. And whenever the thought arose that God

might have given him a fairer chance in this world, I was able to reflect that apparently God does not care for this world save as a part of the whole; and on that whole I had yet to discover that he could have given him a fairer chance.

CHAPTER LV.

ATTEMPTS AND COINCIDENCES.

It was months before I could resume my work. Not until Charley's absence was, as it were, so far established and accepted that hope had begun to assert itself against memory; that is, not until the form of Charley ceased to wander with despairful visage behind me and began to rise amongst the silvery mists before me, was I able to invent once more, or even to guide the pen with certainty over the paper. The moment, however, that I took the pen in my hand another necessity seized me.

Although Mary had hardly been out of my thoughts, I had heard no word of her since her brother's death. I dared not write to her father or mother after the way the former had behaved to me, and I shrunk from approaching Mary with a word that might suggest a desire to intrude the thoughts of myself upon the sacredness of her grief. Why should she think of me? Sorrow has ever something of a divine majesty, before which one must draw nigh with bowed head and bated breath:

Here I and sorrows sit; Here is my throne: bid kings come bow to it.

But the moment I took the pen in my hand to write, an almost agonizing desire to speak to her laid hold of me. I dared not yet write to her, but, after reflection, resolved to send her some verses which should make her think of both Charley and myself, through the pages of a magazine which I knew she read.

Oh, look not on the heart I bring-- It is too low and poor; I would not have thee love a thing Which I can ill endure.

Nor love me for the sake of what I would be if I could; O'er peaks as o'er the marshy flat, Still soars the sky of good.

See, love, afar, the heavenly man The will of God would make; The thing I must be when I can, Love now, for faith's dear sake.

But when I had finished the lines, I found the expression had fallen so far short of what I had in my feeling, that I could not rest satisfied with such an attempt at communication. I walked up and down the room, thinking of the awful theories regarding the state of mind at death in which Mary had been trained. As to the mere suicide, love ever finds refuge in presumed madness; but all of her school believed that at the moment of dissolution the fate is eternally fixed either for bliss or woe, determined by the one or the other of two vaguely defined attitudes of the mental being towards certain propositions; concerning which attitudes they were at least right in asserting that no man could of himself assume the safe one. The thought became unendurable that Mary should believe that Charley was damned--and that for ever and ever. I must and would write to her, come of it what might. That my Charley, whose suicide came of misery that the painful flutterings of his half-born wings would not bear him aloft into the empyrean, should appear to my Athanasia lost in an abyss of irrecoverable woe; that she should think of God as sending forth his spirit to sustain endless wickedness for endless torture;--it was too frightful. As I wrote, the fire burned and burned, and I ended only from despair of utterance. Not a word can I now recall of what I wrote:--the strength of my feelings must have paralyzed the grasp of my memory. All I can recollect is that I closed with the expression of a passionate hope that the God who had made me and my Charley to love each other, would somewhere, some day, somehow, when each was grown stronger and purer, give us once more to each other. In that hope alone, I said, was it possible for me to live. By return of post I received the following:--

SIR,

After having everlastingly ruined one of my children, body and soul, for *your* sophisms will hardly alter the decrees of divine justice, once more

you lay your snares--now to drag my sole remaining child into the same abyss of perdition. Such wickedness--wickedness even to the pitch of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost--I have never in the course of a large experience of impenitence found paralleled. It almost drives me to the belief that the enemy of souls is still occasionally permitted to take up his personal abode in the heart of him who wilfully turns aside from revealed truth. I forgive you for the ruin you have brought upon our fondest hopes, and the agony with which you have torn the hearts of those who more than life loved him of whom you falsely called yourself the friend. But I fear you have already gone too far ever to feel your need of that forgiveness which alone can avail you. Yet I say--Repent, for the mercy of the Lord is infinite. Though my boy is lost to me for ever, I should yet rejoice to see the instrument of his ruin plucked as a brand from the burning.

Your obedient well-wisher,

CHARLES OSBORNE.

‘P.S.--I retain your letter for the sake of my less experienced brethren, that I may be able to afford an instance of how far the unregenerate mind can go in its antagonism to the God of Revelation.’

I breathed a deep breath, and laid the letter down, mainly concerned as to whether Mary had had the chance of reading mine. I could believe any amount of tyranny in her father--even to perusing and withholding her letters; but in this I may do him injustice, for there is no common ground known to me from which to start in speculating upon his probable actions. I wrote in answer something nearly as follows:--

SIR,

That you should do me injustice can by this time be no matter of surprise to me. Had I the slightest hope of convincing you of the fact, I should strain every mental nerve to that end. But no one can labour without

hope, and as in respect of *your* justice I have none, I will be silent. May the God in whom I trust convince you of the cruelty of which you have been guilty: the God in whom you profess to believe, must be too like yourself to give any ground of such hope from him.

Your obedient servant,

'WILFRID CUMBERMEDE.'

If Mary had read my letter, I felt assured her reading had been very different from her father's. Anyhow she could not judge me as he did, for she knew me better. She knew that for Charley's sake I had tried the harder to believe myself.

But the reproaches of one who had been so unjust to his own son could not weigh very heavily on me, and I now resumed my work with a tolerable degree of calmness. But I wrote badly. I should have done better to go down to the Moat, and be silent. If my reader has ever seen what I wrote at that time, I should like her to know that I now wish it all unwritten--not for any utterance contained in it, but simply for its general inferiority.

Certainly work is not always required of a man. There is such a thing as a sacred idleness, the cultivation of which is now fearfully neglected. Abraham, seated in his tent door in the heat of the day, would be to the philosophers of the nineteenth century an object for uplifted hands and pointed fingers. They would see in him only the indolent Arab, whom nothing but the foolish fancy that he saw his Maker in the distance, could rouse to run.

It was clearly better to attempt no further communication with Mary at present; and I could think but of one person from whom, without giving pain, I might hope for some information concerning her.

* * * * *

Here I had written a detailed account of how I contrived to meet Miss Pease, but it is not of consequence enough to my story to be allowed to remain. Suffice it to mention that one morning at length I caught sight of her in a street in Mayfair, where the family was then staying for the season, and overtaking addressed her.

She started, stared at me for a moment, and held out her hand.

‘I didn’t know you, Mr Cumbermede. How much older you look! I beg your pardon. Have you been ill?’

She spoke hurriedly, and kept looking over her shoulder now and then, as if afraid of being seen talking to me.

‘I have had a good deal to make me older since we met last, Miss Pease,’ I said. ‘I have hardly a friend left in the world but you--that is, if you will allow me to call you one.’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ she answered, but hurriedly, and with one of those uneasy glances. ‘Only you must allow, Mr Cumbermede,
that--that--that--’

The poor lady was evidently unprepared to meet me on the old footing, and, at the same time, equally unwilling to hurt my feelings.

‘I should be sorry to make you run a risk for my sake,’ I said. ‘Please just answer me one question. Do you know what it is to be misunderstood--to be despised without deserving it?’

She smiled sadly, and nodded her head gently two or three times.

‘Then have pity on me, and let me have a little talk with you.’

Again she glanced apprehensively over her shoulder.

‘You are afraid of being seen with me, and I don’t wonder,’ I said.

‘Mr Geoffrey came up with us,’ she answered. ‘I left him at breakfast. He will be going across the park to his club directly.’

‘Then come with me the other way--into Hyde Park,’ I said.

With evident reluctance, she yielded and accompanied me.

As soon as we got within Stanhope Gate, I spoke.

‘A certain sad event, of which you have no doubt heard, Miss Pease, has shut me out from all communication with the family of my friend Charley Osborne. I am very anxious for some news of his sister. She is all that is left of him to me now. Can you tell me anything about her?’

‘She has been very ill,’ she replied.

‘I hope that means that she is better,’ I said.

‘She is better, and, I hear, going on the Continent, as soon as the season will permit. But, Mr Cumbermede, you must be aware that I am under considerable restraint in talking to you. The position I hold in Sir Giles’s family, although neither a comfortable nor a dignified one--’

‘I understand you perfectly, Miss Pease,’ I returned, ‘and fully appreciate the sense of propriety which causes your embarrassment. But the request I am about to make has nothing to do with them or their affairs whatever. I only want your promise to let me know if you hear anything of Miss Osborne.’

‘I cannot tell--what--’

‘What use I may be going to make of the information you give me. In a word, you do not trust me.’

‘I neither trust nor distrust you, Mr Cumbermede. But I am afraid of being drawn into a correspondence with you.’

‘Then I will ask no promise. I will hope in your generosity. Here is my address. I pray you, as you would have helped him who fell among thieves, to let me know anything you hear about Mary Osborne.’

She took my card, and turned at once, saying,

‘Mind, I make no promise.’

‘I imagine none,’ I answered. ‘I will trust in your kindness.’

And so we parted.

Unsatisfactory as the interview was, it yet gave me a little hope. I was glad to hear that Mary was going abroad, for it must do her good. For me, I would endure and labour and hope. I gave her to God, as Shakspere says somewhere, and set myself to my work. When her mind was quieter about Charley, somehow or other I might come near her again.--I could not see how.

I took my way across the Green Park.

I do not believe we notice the half of the coincidences that float past us on the stream of events. Things which would fill us with astonishment, and probably with foreboding, look us in the face and pass us by, and we know nothing of them.

As I walked along in the direction of the Mall, I became aware of a tall man coming towards me, stooping, as if with age, while the length of his stride indicated a more vigorous period. He passed without lifting his head, but, in the partial view of the wan and furrowed countenance, I could not fail to recognize Charley’s father. Such a worn unhappiness was there depicted that the indignation which still lingered in my bosom went out in compassion. If his sufferings might but teach him that to brand the truth of the kingdom with the private mark of opinion must result in persecution and cruelty! He mounted the slope with strides at once eager and aimless, and I wondered whether any of the sure-coming

compunctions had yet begun to overshadow the complacency of his faith; whether he had yet begun to doubt if it pleased the Son of Man that a youth should be driven from the gates of truth because he failed to recognize her image in the faces of the janitors.

Aimless also, I turned into the Mall, and again I started at the sight of a known figure. Was it possible?--could it be my Lilith betwixt the shafts of a public cabriolet? Fortunately it was empty. I hailed it, and jumped up, telling the driver to take me to my chambers.

My poor Lilith! She was working like one who had never been loved! So far as I knew she had never been in harness before. She was badly groomed and thin, but much of her old spirit remained. I soon entered into negotiations with the driver, whose property she was, and made her my own once more, with a delight I could ill express in plain prose--for my friends were indeed few. I wish I could draw a picture of the lovely creature, when at length, having concluded my bargain, I approached her, and called her by her name! She turned her head sideways towards me with a low whinny of pleasure, and when I walked a little away, walked wearily after me. I took her myself to livery stables near me, and wrote for Styles. His astonishment when he saw her was amusing.

‘Good Lord! Miss Lilith!’ was all he could say--for some moments.

In a few days she had begun to look like herself, and I sent her home with Styles. I should hardly like to say how much the recovery of her did to restore my spirits; I could not help regarding it as a good omen.

And now, the first bitterness of my misery having died a natural death, I sought again some of the friends I had made through Charley, and experienced from them great kindness. I began also to go into society a little, for I had found that invention is ever ready to lose the forms of life, if it be not kept under the ordinary pressure of its atmosphere. As it is, I doubt much if any of my books are more than partially true to those

forms, for I have ever heeded them too little; but I believe I have been true to the heart of man. At the same time, I have ever regarded that heart more as the fountain of aspiration than the grave of fruition. The discomfiture of enemies and a happy marriage never seemed to me ends of sufficient value to close a history withal--I mean a fictitious history, wherein one may set forth joys and sorrows which in a real history must walk shadowed under the veil of modesty; for the soul, still less than the body, will consent to be revealed to all eyes. Hence, although most of my books have seemed true to some, they have all seemed visionary to most.

A year passed away, during which I never left London. I heard from Miss Pease--that Miss Osborne, although much better, was not going to return until after another Winter. I wrote and thanked her, and heard no more. It may seem I accepted such ignorance with strange indifference; but, even to the reader for whom alone I am writing, I cannot, as things are, attempt to lay open all my heart. I have not written and cannot write how I thought, projected, brooded, and dreamed--all about *her*; how I hoped when I wrote that she might read; how I questioned what I had written, to find whether it would look to her what I had intended it to appear.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE LAST VISION.

I had engaged to accompany one of Charley's barrister-friends, in whose society I had found considerable satisfaction, to his father's house--to spend the evening with some friends of the family. The gathering was chiefly for talk, and was a kind of thing I disliked, finding its aimlessness and flicker depressing. Indeed, partly from the peculiar circumstances of my childhood, partly from what I had suffered, I always found my spirits highest when alone. Still, the study of humanity apart, I felt that I ought not to shut myself out from my kind, but endure some little irksomeness, if only for the sake of keeping alive that surface friendliness which has its value in the nourishment of the deeper affections. On this particular occasion, however, I yielded the more willingly that, in the revival of various memories of Charley, it had occurred to me that I once heard him say that his sister had a regard for one of the ladies of the family.

There were not many people in the drawing-room when we arrived, and my friend's mother alone was there to entertain them. With her I was chatting when one of her daughters entered, accompanied by a lady in mourning. For one moment I felt as if on the borders of insanity. My brain seemed to surge like the waves of a wind-tormented tide, so that I dared not make a single step forward lest my limbs should disobey me. It was indeed Mary Osborne; but oh, how changed! The rather full face had grown delicate and thin, and the fine pure complexion if possible finer and purer, but certainly more ethereal and evanescent. It was as if suffering had removed some substance unapt, [Footnote: Spenser's 'Hymne in Honour of Beautie.'] and rendered her body a better-fitting garment for her soul. Her face, which had before required the softening influences of sleep and dreams to give it the plasticity necessary for complete expression, was now full of a repressed expression, if I may be allowed the phrase--a latent something ever on the tremble, ever on the

point of breaking forth. It was as if the nerves had grown finer, more tremulous, or, rather, more vibrative. Touched to finer issues they could never have been, but suffering had given them a more responsive thrill. In a word, she was the Athanasia of my dream, not the Mary Osborne of the Moldwarp library.

Conquering myself at last, and seeing a favourable opportunity, I approached her. I think the fear lest her father should enter gave me the final impulse; otherwise I could have been contented to gaze on her for hours in motionless silence.

‘May I speak to you, Mary?’ I said.

She lifted her eyes and her whole face towards mine, without a smile, without a word. Her features remained perfectly still, but, like the outbreak of a fountain, the tears rushed into her eyes and overflowed in silent weeping. Not a sob, not a convulsive movement, accompanied their flow.

‘Is your father here?’ I asked.

She shook her head.

‘I thought you were abroad somewhere--I did not know where.’

Again she shook her head. She dared not speak, knowing that if she made the attempt she must break down.

‘I will go away till you can bear the sight of me,’ I said. She half-stretched out a thin white hand, but whether to detain me or bid me farewell I do not know, for it dropped again on her knee.

[Illustration: “I will come to you by and by,” I said.]

‘I will come to you by-and-by,’ I said, and moved away. The rooms rapidly filled, and in a few minutes I could not see the corner where I had left her. I endured everything for awhile, and then made my way back to

it; but she was gone, and I could find her nowhere. A lady began to sing. When the applause which followed her performance was over, my friend, who happened to be near me, turned abruptly and said,

‘Now, Cumbermede, *you* sing.’

The truth was that, since I had loved Mary Osborne, I had attempted to cultivate a certain small gift of song which I thought I possessed. I dared not touch any existent music, for I was certain I should break down; but having a faculty--somewhat thin, I fear--for writing songs, and finding that a shadowy air always accompanied the birth of the words, I had presumed to study music a little, in the hope of becoming able to fix the melody--the twin sister of the song. I had made some progress, and had grown able to write down a simple thought. There was little presumption, then, in venturing my voice, limited as was its scope, upon a trifle of my own. Tempted by the opportunity of realizing hopes consciously wild, I obeyed my friend, and, sitting down to the instrument in some trepidation, sang the following verses--

I dreamed that I woke from a dream, And the house was full of light; At the window two angel Sorrows Held back the curtains of night.

The door was wide, and the house Was full of the morning wind; At the door two armed warders Stood silent, with faces blind.

I ran to the open door, For the wind of the world was sweet; The warders with crossing weapons Turned back my issuing feet.

I ran to the shining windows-- There the winged Sorrows stood; Silent they held the curtains, And the light fell through in a flood.

I clomb to the highest window-- Ah! there, with shadowed brow, Stood one lonely radiant Sorrow, And that, my love, was thou.

I could not have sung this in public, but that no one would suspect it was my own, or was in the least likely to understand a word of it--except her for whose ears and heart it was intended.

As soon as I had finished, I rose, and once more went searching for Mary. But as I looked, sadly fearing she was gone, I heard her voice close behind me.

‘Are those verses your own, Mr Cumbermede?’ she asked, almost in a whisper.

I turned trembling. Her lovely face was looking up at me.

‘Yes,’ I answered--‘as much my own as that I believe they are not to be found anywhere. But they were given to me rather than made by me.’

‘Would you let me have them? I am not sure that I understand them.’

‘I am not sure that I understand them myself. They are for the heart rather than the mind. Of course you shall have them. They were written for you. All I have, all I am, is yours.’

Her face flushed, and grew pale again instantly.

‘You must not talk so,’ she said. ‘Remember.’

‘I can never forget. I do not know why you say *remember*.’

‘On second thoughts, I must not have the verses. I beg your pardon.’

‘Mary, you bewilder me. I have no right to ask you to explain, except that you speak as if I must understand. What have they been telling you about me?’

‘Nothing--at least nothing that--’

She paused.

‘I try to live innocently, and were it only for your sake, shall never stop searching for the thread of life in its ravelled skein.’

‘Do not say for *my* sake, Mr Cumbermede. That means nothing. Say for your own sake, if not for God’s.’

‘If *you* are going to turn away from me, I don’t mind how soon I follow Charley.’

All this was said in a half-whisper, I bending towards her where she sat, a little sheltered by one of a pair of folding doors. My heart was like to break--or rather it seemed to have vanished out of me altogether, lost in a gulf of emptiness. Was this all? Was this the end of my dreaming? To be thus pushed aside by the angel of my resurrection?

‘Hush! hush!’ she said kindly. ‘You must have many friends. But--’

‘But you will be my friend no more? Is that it, Mary? Oh, if you knew all! And you are never, never to know it!’

Her still face was once more streaming with tears. I choked mine back, terrified at the thought of being observed; and without even offering my hand, left her and made my way through the crowd to the stair. On the landing I met Geoffrey Brotherton. We stared each other in the face and passed.

I did not sleep much that night, and when I did sleep, woke from one wretched dream after another, now crying aloud, and now weeping. What could I have done? or rather, what could any one have told her I had done to make her behave thus to me? She did not look angry--or even displeased--only sorrowful, very sorrowful; and she seemed to take it for granted I knew what it meant. When at length I finally woke after an hour of less troubled sleep, I found some difficulty in convincing myself that the real occurrences of the night before had not been one of the many troubled dreams that had scared my repose. Even after the dreams had all

vanished, and the facts remained, they still appeared more like a dim dream of the dead--the vision of Mary was so wan and hopeless, memory alone looking out from her worn countenance. There had been no warmth in her greeting, no resentment in her aspect; we met as if we had parted but an hour before, only that an open grave was between us, across which we talked in the voice of dreamers. She had sought to raise no barrier between us, just because we *could* not meet, save as one of the dead and one of the living. What could it mean? But with the growing day awoke a little courage. I would at least try to find out what it meant. Surely *all* my dreams were not to vanish like the mist of the morning! To lose my dreams would be far worse than to lose the so-called realities of life. What were these to me? What value lay in such reality? Even God was as yet so dim and far off as to seem rather in the region of dreams--of those true dreams, I hoped, that shadowed forth the real--than in the actual visible present. ‘Still,’ I said to myself, ‘she had not cast me off; she did not refuse to know me; she did ask for my song, and I will send it.’

I wrote it out, adding a stanza to the verses:--

I bowed my head before her, And stood trembling in the light; She dropped the heavy curtain, And the house was full of night.

I then sought my friend’s chambers.

‘I was not aware you knew the Osbornes,’ I said. ‘I wonder you never told me, seeing Charley and you were such friends.’

‘I never saw one of them till last night. My sister and she knew each other some time ago, and have met again of late. What a lovely creature she is! But what became of you last night? You must have left before any one else.’

‘I didn’t feel well.’

‘You don’t look the thing.’

‘I confess meeting Miss Osborne rather upset me.’

‘It had the same effect on her. She was quite ill, my sister said, this morning. No wonder! Poor Charley! I always had a painful feeling that he would come to grief somehow.’

‘Let’s hope he’s come to something else by this time, Marston,’ I said.

‘Amen,’ he returned.

‘Is her father or mother with her?’

‘No. They are to fetch her away--next week, I think it is.’ I had now no fear of my communication falling into other hands, and therefore sent the song by post, with a note, in which I begged her to let me know if I had done anything to offend her. Next morning I received the following reply:

‘No, Wilfrid--for Charley’s sake, I must call you by your name--you have done nothing to offend me. Thank you for the song. I did not want you to send it, but I will keep it. You must not write to me again. Do not forget what we used to write about. God’s ways are not ours. Your friend, Mary Osborne.’

I rose and went out, not knowing whither. Half-stunned, I roamed the streets. I ate nothing that day, and when towards night I found myself near my chambers, I walked in as I had come out, having no intent, no future. I felt very sick, and threw myself on my bed. There I passed the night, half in sleep, half in helpless prostration. When I look back, it seems as if some spiritual narcotic must have been given me, else how should the terrible time have passed and left me alive? When I came to myself, I found I was ill, and I longed to hide my head in the nest of my childhood. I had always looked on the Moat as my refuge at the last; now it seemed the only desirable thing--a lonely nook, in which to lie down and end the dream there begun--either, as it now seemed, in an eternal

sleep, or the inburst of a dreary light. After the last refuge it could afford me it must pass from my hold; but I was yet able to determine whither. I rose and went to Marston.

‘Marston,’ I said, ‘I want to make my will.’

‘All right!’ he returned; ‘but you look as if you meant to register it as well. You’ve got a feverish cold; I see it in your eyes. Come along. I’ll go home with you, and fetch a friend of mine, who will give you something to do you good.’

‘I can’t rest till I have made my will,’ I persisted.

‘Well, there’s no harm in that,’ he rejoined. ‘It won’t take long, I dare say.’

‘It needn’t anyhow. I only want to leave the small real property I have to Miss Osborne, and the still smaller-personal property to yourself.’

He laughed.

‘All right, old boy! I haven’t the slightest objection to your willing your traps to me, but every objection in the world to your *leaving* them. To be sure, every man, with anything to leave, ought to make his will betimes;--so fire away.’

In a little while the draught was finished.

‘I shall have it ready for your signature by to-morrow,’ he said.

I insisted it should be done at once. I was going home, I said. He yielded. The will was engrossed, signed, and witnessed that same morning; and in the afternoon I set out, the first part of the journey by rail, for the Moat.

CHAPTER LVII.

ANOTHER DREAM.

The excitement of having something to do had helped me over the morning, and the pleasure of thinking of what I had done helped me through half the journey; but before I reached home I was utterly exhausted. Then I had to drive round by the farm, and knock up Mrs Herbert and Styles.

I could not bear the thought of my own room, and ordered a fire in my grandmother's, where they soon got me into bed. All I remember of that night is the following dream.

I found myself at the entrance of the ice-cave. A burning sun beat on my head, and at my feet flowed the brook which gathered its life from the decay of the ice. I stooped to drink; but, cool to the eye and hand and lips, it yet burned me within like fire. I would seek shelter from the sun inside the cave. I entered, and knew that the cold was all around me; I even felt it; but somehow it did not enter into me. My brain, my very bones, burned with fire. I went in and in. The blue atmosphere closed around me, and the colour entered into my soul till it seemed dyed with the potent blue. My very being swam and floated in a blue atmosphere of its own. My intention--I can recall it perfectly--was but to walk to the end, a few yards, then turn and again brave the sun; for I had a dim feeling of forsaking my work, of playing truant, or of being cowardly in thus avoiding the heat. Something else too was wrong, but I could not clearly tell what. As I went on, I began to wonder that I had not come to the end. The gray walls yet rose about me, and ever the film of dissolution flowed along their glassy faces to the runnel below; still before me opened the depth of blue atmosphere, deepening as I went. After many windings, the path began to branch, and soon I was lost in a labyrinth of passages, of which I knew not why I should choose one rather than another. It was

useless now to think of returning. Arbitrarily I chose the narrowest way, and still went on.

A discoloration of the ice attracted my attention, and as I looked it seemed to retreat into the solid mass. There was something not ice within it, which grew more and more distinct as I gazed, until at last I plainly distinguished the form of my grandmother lying as then when my aunt made me touch her face. A few yards further on lay the body of my uncle, as I saw him in his coffin. His face was dead white in the midst of the cold clear ice, his eyes closed, and his arms straight by his side. He lay like an alabaster king upon his tomb. It *was* he, I thought, but he would never speak to me more--never look at me---never more awake. There lay all that was left of him--the cold frozen memory of what he had been, and would never be again. I did not weep. I only knew somehow in my dream that life was all a wandering in a frozen cave, where the faces of the living were dark with the coming corruption, and the memories of the dead, cold and clear and hopeless evermore, alone were lovely.

I walked further; for the ice might possess yet more of the past--all that was left me of life. And again I stood and gazed, for, deep within, I saw the form of Charley--at rest now, his face bloodless, but not so death-like as my uncle's. His hands were laid palm to palm over his bosom, and pointed upwards, as if praying for comfort where comfort was none: here at least were no flickerings of the rainbow fancies of faith and hope and charity! I gazed in comfortless content for a time on the repose of my weary friend, and then went on, inly moved to see what further the ice of the godless region might hold. Nor had I wandered far when I saw the form of Mary, lying like the rest, only that her hands were crossed on her bosom. I stood, wondering to find myself so little moved. But when the ice drew nigh me, and would have closed around me, my heart leaped for joy; and when the heat of my lingering life repelled it, my heart sunk within me, and I said to myself: 'Death will not have me. I may not join her even in the land of cold forgetfulness: I may not even be nothing *with*

her.' The tears began to flow down my face, like the thin veil of water that kept ever flowing down the face of the ice; and as I wept, the water before me flowed faster and faster, till it rippled in a sheet down the icy wall. Faster and yet faster it flowed, falling, with the sound as of many showers, into the runnel below, which rushed splashing and gurgling away from the foot of the vanishing wall. Faster and faster it flowed, until the solid mass fell in a foaming cataract, and swept in a torrent across the cave. I followed the retreating wall through the seething water at its foot. Thinner and thinner grew the dividing mass; nearer and nearer came the form of my Mary. 'I shall yet clasp her,' I cried; 'her dead form will kill me, and I too shall be inclosed in the friendly ice. I shall not be with her, alas! but neither shall I be without her, for I shall depart into the lovely nothingness.' Thinner and thinner grew the dividing wall. The skirt of her shroud hung like a wet weed in the falling torrent. I kneeled in the river, and crept nearer with outstretched arms: when the vanishing ice set the dead form free, it should rest in those arms--the last gift of the life-dream--for then, surely, I *must* die. 'Let me pass in the agony of a lonely embrace!' I cried. As I spoke she moved. I started to my feet, stung into life by the agony of a new hope. Slowly the ice released her, and gently she rose to her feet. The torrents of water ceased--they had flowed but to set her free. Her eyes were still closed, but she made one blind step towards me, and laid her left hand on my head, her right hand on my heart. Instantly, body and soul, I was cool as a Summer eve after a thunder-shower. For a moment, precious as an aeon, she held her hands upon me--then slowly opened her eyes. Out of them flashed the living soul of my Athanasia. She closed the lids again slowly over the lovely splendour; the water in which we stood rose around us; and on its last billow she floated away through the winding passage of the cave. I sought to follow her, but could not. I cried aloud and awoke.

But the burning heat had left me; I felt that I had passed a crisis, and had begun to recover--a conviction which would have been altogether

unwelcome, but for the poor shadow of a reviving hope which accompanied it. Such a dream, come whence it might, could not but bring comfort with it. The hope grew, and was my sole medicine.

Before the evening I felt better, and, though still very feeble, managed to write to Marston, letting him know I was safe, and requesting him to forward any letters that might arrive.

The next day, I rose, but was unable to work. The very thought of writing sickened me. Neither could I bear the thought of returning to London. I tried to read, but threw aside book after book, without being able to tell what one of them was about. If for a moment I seemed to enter into the subject, before I reached the bottom of the page, I found I had not an idea as to what the words meant or whither they tended. After many failures, unwilling to give myself up to idle brooding, I fortunately tried some of the mystical poetry of the seventeenth century. The difficulties of that I found rather stimulate than repel me; while, much as there was in the form to displease the taste, there was more in the matter to rouse the intellect. I found also some relief in resuming my mathematical studies: the abstraction of them acted as an anodyne. But the days dragged wearily.

As soon as I was able to get on horseback, the tone of mind and body began to return. I felt as if into me some sort of animal healing passed from Lilith; and who can tell in how many ways the lower animals may not minister to the higher?

One night I had a strange experience. I give it without argument, perfectly aware that the fact may be set down to the disordered state of my physical nature, and that without injustice.

I had not for a long time thought about one of the questions which had so much occupied Charley and myself--that of immortality. As to any communication between the parted, I had never, during his life, pondered

the possibility of it, although I had always had an inclination to believe that such intercourse had in rare instances taken place. Former periods of the world's history, when that blinding self-consciousness which is the bane of ours was yet undeveloped, must, I thought, have been far more favourable to its occurrence. Anyhow I was convinced that it was not to be gained by effort. I confess that, in the unthinking agony of grief after Charley's death, many a time when I woke in the middle of the night and could sleep no more, I sat up in bed and prayed him, if he heard me, to come to me, and let me tell him the truth--for my sake to let me know, at least, that he lived, for then I should be sure that one day all would be well. But if there was any hearing, there was no answer. Charley did not come; the prayer seemed to vanish in the darkness; and my more self-possessed meditations never justified the hope of any such being heard.

One night I was sitting in my grannie's room, which, except my uncle's, was now the only one I could bear to enter. I had been reading for some time very quietly, but had leaned back in my chair, and let my thoughts go wandering whither they would, when all at once I was possessed by the conviction that Charley was near me. I saw nothing, heard nothing; of the recognized senses of humanity not one gave me a hint of a presence; and yet my whole body was aware--so, at least, it seemed--of the proximity of another *I*. It was as if some nervous region commensurate with my frame, were now for the first time revealed by contact with an object suitable for its apprehension. Like Eliphaz, I felt the hair of my head stand up--not from terror, but simply, as it seemed, from the presence and its strangeness. Like others also of whom I have read, who believed themselves in the presence of the disembodied, I could not speak. I tried, but as if the medium for sound had been withdrawn, and an empty gulf lay around me, no word followed, although my very soul was full of the cry--*Charley! Charley!* And alas! in a few moments, like the faint vanishing of an unrealized thought, leaving only the assurance that

something half-born from out the unknown had been there, the influence faded and died. It passed from me like the shadow of a cloud, and once more I knew but my poor lonely self, returning to its candles, its open book, its burning fire.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

Suffering is perhaps the only preparation for suffering: still I was but poorly prepared for what followed.

Having gathered strength, and a certain quietness which I could not mistake for peace, I returned to London towards the close of the Spring. I had in the interval heard nothing of Mary. The few letters Marston had sent on had been almost exclusively from my publishers. But the very hour I reached my lodging, came a note, which I opened trembling, for it was in the handwriting of Miss Pease.

DEAR SIR,--I cannot, I think, be wrong in giving you a piece of information which will be in the newspapers to-morrow morning. Your old acquaintance, and my young relative, Mr Brotherton, was married this morning, at St George's, Hanover Square, to your late friend's sister, Miss Mary Osborne. They have just left for Dover on their way to Switzerland. Your sincere well-wisher, 'JANE PEASE.'

Even at this distance of time, I should have to exhort myself to write with calmness, were it not that the utter despair of conveying my feelings, if indeed my soul had not for the time passed beyond feeling into some abyss unknown to human consciousness, renders it unnecessary. This despair of communication has two sources--the one simply the conviction of the impossibility of expressing *any* feeling, much more such feeling as mine then was--and is; the other the conviction that only to the heart of love can the sufferings of love speak. The attempt of a lover to move, by the presentation of his own suffering, the heart of her who loves him not, is as unavailing as it is unmanly. The poet who sings most wailfully of the torments of the lover's hell, is but a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal in the ears of her who has at best only a general compassion to meet the song withal--possibly only an individual vanity

which crowns her with his woes as with the trophies of a conquest. True, he is understood and worshipped by all the other wailful souls in the first infernal circle, as one of the great men of their order--able to put into words full of sweet torment the dire hopelessness of their misery; but for such the singer, singing only for ears eternally deaf to his song, cares nothing; or if for a moment he receives consolation from their sympathy, it is but a passing weakness which the breath of an indignant self-condemnation--even contempt, the next moment sweeps away. In God alone there must be sympathy and cure; but I had not then--have I indeed yet found what that cure is? I am at all events now able to write with calmness. If suffering destroyed itself, as some say, mine ought to have disappeared long ago; but to that I can neither pretend nor confess.

For the first time, after all I had encountered, I knew what suffering could be. It is still at moments an agony as of hell to recall this and the other thought that then stung me like a white-hot arrow: the shafts have long been drawn out, but the barbed heads are still there. I neither stormed nor maddened. I only felt a freezing hand lay hold of my heart, and gripe it closer and closer till I should have sickened, but that the pain ever stung me into fresh life; and ever since I have gone about the world with that hard lump somewhere in my bosom into which the griping hand and the griped heart have grown and stiffened.

I fled at once back to my solitary house, looking for no relief in its solitude, only the negative comfort of escaping the eyes of men. I could not bear the sight of my fellow-creatures. To say that the world had grown black to me, is as nothing: I ceased---I will not say *to believe* in God, for I never dared say that mighty thing--but I ceased to hope in God. The universe had grown a negation which yet forced its presence upon me--death that bred worms. If there were a God anywhere, this universe could be nothing more than his forsaken moth-eaten garment. He was a God who did not care. Order was all an invention of phosphorescent human brains; light itself the mocking smile of a Jupiter over his writhing

sacrifices. At times I laughed at the tortures of my own heart, saying to it, ‘Writhe on, worm; thou deservest thy writhing in that thou writhest. Godless creature, why dost thou not laugh with me? Am I not merry over thee and the world--in that ye are both rottenness to the core?’ The next moment my heart and I would come together with a shock, and I knew it was myself that scorned myself.

Such being my mood, it will cause no surprise if I say that I too was tempted to suicide; the wonder would have been if it had been otherwise. The soft keen curves of that fatal dagger, which had not only slain Charley but all my hopes--for had he lived this horror could not have been--grew almost lovely in my eyes. Until now it had looked cruel, fiendish, hateful; but now I would lay it before me and contemplate it. In some griefs there is a wonderful power of self-contemplation, which indeed forms their only solace; the moment it can set the sorrow away from itself sufficiently to regard it, the tortured heart begins to repose; but suddenly, like a waking tiger, the sorrow leaps again into its lair, and the agony commences anew. The dagger was the type of my grief and its torture: might it not, like the brazen serpent, be the cure for the sting of its living counterpart? But alas! where was the certainty? Could I slay *myself?* This outer breathing form I could dismiss--but the pain was not *there*. I was not mad, and I knew that a deeper death than that could give, at least. than I had any assurance that could give, alone could bring repose. For, impossible as I had always found it actually to believe in immortality, I now found it equally impossible to believe in annihilation. And even if annihilation should be the final result, who could tell but it might require ages of a horrible slow-decaying dream-consciousness to kill the living thing which felt itself other than its body?

Until now, I had always accepted what seemed the natural and universal repugnance to absolute dissolution as the strongest argument on the side of immortality;--for why should a man shrink from that which belonged to his nature? But now annihilation seemed the one lovely thing, the one

sole only lonely thought in which lay no blackness of burning darkness. Oh, for one eternal unconscious sleep!--the nearest likeness we can cherish of that inconceivable nothingness--ever denied by the very thinking of it--by the vain attempt to realize that whose very existence is the knowing nothing of itself! Could that dagger have insured me such repose, or had there been any draught of Lethe, utter Lethe, whose blessed poison would have assuredly dissipated like a fume this conscious self-tormenting *me*, I should not now be writhing anew, as in the clutches of an old grief, clasping me like a corpse, stung to simulated life by the galvanic battery of recollection. Vivid as it seems--all I suffer as I write is but a faint phantasm of what I then endured.

I learned, therefore, that to some minds the argument for immortality drawn from the apparently universal shrinking from annihilation must be ineffectual, seeing they themselves do not shrink from it. Convince a man that there is no God--or, for I doubt if that be altogether possible--make it, I will say, impossible for him to hope in God--and it cannot be that annihilation should seem an evil. If there is no God, annihilation is the one thing to be longed for, with all that might of longing which is the mainspring of human action. In a word, it is not immortality the human heart cries out after, but that immortal eternal thought whose life is its life, whose wisdom is its wisdom, whose ways and whose thoughts shall--must one day--become its ways and its thoughts. Dissociate immortality from the living Immortality, and it is not a thing to be desired--not a thing that can on those terms, or even on the fancy of those terms, be desired.

But such thoughts as these were far from me then. I lived because I despaired of death. I ate by a sort of blind animal instinct, and so lived. The time had been when I would despise myself for being able to eat in the midst of emotion; but now I cared so little for the emotion even, that eating or not eating had nothing to do with the matter. I ate because meat was set before me; I slept because sleep came upon me. It was a horrible

time. My life seemed only a vermiculate one, a crawling about of half-thoughts-half-feelings through the corpse of a decaying existence. The heart of being was withdrawn from me, and my life was but the vacant pericardium in which it had once throbbed out and sucked in the red fountains of life and gladness.

I would not be thought to have fallen to this all but bottomless depth only because I had lost Mary. Still less was it because of the fact that in her, around whom had gathered all the devotion with which the man in me could regard woman, I had lost all womankind. It was *the loss* of Mary, as I then judged it, not, I repeat, the fact that *I* had lost her. It was that she had lost herself. Thence it was, I say, that I lost my hope in God. For, if there were a God, how could he let purity be clasped in the arms of defilement? how could he marry my Athanasia--not to a corpse, but to a Plague? Here was the man who had done more to ruin her brother than any but her father, and God had given her to *him!* I had had--with the commonest of men--some notion of womanly purity--how was it that hers had not instinctively shuddered and shrunk? how was it that the life of it had not taken refuge with death to shun bare contact with the coarse impurity of such a nature as that of Geoffrey Brotherton? My dreams had been dreams indeed! Was my Athanasia dead, or had she never been? In my thought, she had ‘said to Corruption, Thou art my father; to the worm, Thou art my mother and my sister.’ Who should henceforth say of any woman that she was impure? She *might* love him--true; but what was she then who was able to love such a man? It was this that stormed the citadel of my hope, and drove me from even thinking of a God.

Gladly would I now have welcomed any bodily suffering that could hide me from myself; but no illness came. I was a living pain, a conscious ill-being. In a thousand forms those questions would ever recur, but without hope of answer. When I fell asleep from exhaustion, hideous visions of her with Geoffrey would start me up with a great cry, sometimes with a curse on my lips. Nor were they the most horrible of

those dreams in which she would help him to mock me. Once, and only once, I found myself dreaming the dream of *that* night, and I knew that I had dreamed it before. Through palace and chapel and charnel-house, I followed her, ever with a dim sense of awful result; and when at the last she lifted the shining veil, instead of the face of Athanasia, the bare teeth of a skull grinned at me from under a spotted shroud, through which the sunlight shone from behind, revealing all its horrors. I was not mad--my reason had not given way: *how* remains a marvel.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE DAWN.

All places were alike to me now--for the universe was but one dreary chasm whence I could not escape. One evening I sat by the open window of my chamber, which looked towards those trees and that fatal Moldwarp Hall. My suffering had now grown dull by its own excess, and I had moments of restless vacuity, the nearest approach to peace I had yet experienced. It was a fair evening of early summer--but I was utterly careless of nature as of all beyond it. The sky was nothing to me--and the earth was all unlovely. There I sat, heavy, but free from torture; a kind of quiet had stolen over me. I was roused by the tiniest breath of wind on my cheek, as if the passing wing of some butterfly had fanned me; and on that faintest motion came a scent as from long-forgotten fields, a scent like as of sweet-peas or wild roses, but of neither: flowers were none nearer me than the gardens of the Hall. I started with a cry. It was the scent of the garments of my Athanasia, as I had dreamed it in my dream! Whence that wind had borne it, who could tell? but in the husk that had overgrown my being it had found a cranny, and through that cranny, with the scent, Nature entered. I looked up to the blue sky, wept, and for the first time fell on my knees. ‘O God!’ I cried, and that was all. But what are the prayers of the whole universe more than expansions of that one cry? It is not what God can give us, but God that we want. Call the whole thing fancy if you will; it was at least no fancy that the next feeling of which I was conscious was compassion: from that moment I began to search heaven and earth and the soul of man and woman for excuses wherewith to clothe the idea of Mary Osborne. For weeks and weeks I pondered, and by degrees the following conclusions wrought themselves out in my brain:--

That she had never seen life as a whole; that her religious theories had ever been eating away and absorbing her life, so preventing her religion

from interpenetrating and glorifying it; that in regard to certain facts and consequences she had been left to an ignorance which her innocence rendered profound; that, attracted by the worldly splendour of the offer, her father and mother had urged her compliance, and broken in spirit by the fate of Charley, and having always been taught that self-denial was in itself a virtue, she had taken the worldly desires of her parents for the will of God, and blindly yielded; that Brotherton was capable, for his ends, of representing himself as possessed of religion enough to satisfy the scruples of her parents, and, such being satisfied, she had resisted her own as evil things.

Whether his hatred of me had had any share in his desire to possess her, I hardly thought of inquiring.

Of course I did not for a single moment believe that Mary had had the slightest notion of the bitterness, the torture, the temptation of Satan it would be to me. Doubtless the feeling of her father concerning the death of Charley had seemed to hollow an impassable gulf between us. Worn and weak, and not knowing what she did, my dearest friend had yielded herself to the embrace of my deadliest foe. If he was such as I had too good reason for believing him, she was far more to be pitied than I. Lonely she must be--lonely as I--for who was there to understand and love her? Bitterly too by this time she must have suffered, for the dove can never be at peace in the bosom of the vulture, or cease to hate the carrion of which he must ever carry about with him at least the disgusting memorials. Alas! I too had been her enemy, and had cried out against her; but now I would love her more and better than ever! Oh! if I knew but something I could do for her, some service which on the bended knees of my spirit I might offer her! I clomb the heights of my grief, and looked around, but alas! I was such a poor creature! A dabbler in the ways of the world, a writer of tales which even those who cared to read them counted fantastic and Utopian, who was I to weave a single silken thread into the web of her life? How could I bear her one poorest service?

Never in this world could I approach her near enough to touch yet once again the hem of her garment. All I could do was to love her. No--I could and did suffer for her. Alas! that suffering was only for myself, and could do nothing, for her! It was indeed some consolation to me that my misery came from her hand; but if she knew it, it would but add to her pain. In my heart I could only pray her pardon for my wicked and selfish thoughts concerning her, and vow again and ever to regard her as my Athanasia.--But yes! there was one thing I *could* do for her: I would be a true man for her sake; she should have some satisfaction in me; I would once more arise and go to my Father.

The instant the thought arose in my mind, I fell down before the possible God in an agony of weeping. All complaint of my own doom had vanished, now that I began to do her the justice of love. Why should *I* be blessed--here and now at least--according to my notions of blessedness? Let the great heart of the universe do with me as it pleased! Let the Supreme take his own time to justify himself to the heart that sought to love him! I gave up myself, was willing to suffer, to be a living pain, so long as he pleased; and the moment I yielded half the pain was gone; I gave my Athanasia yet again to God, and all *might* yet, in some nigh, far-off, better-world-way, be well. I could wait and endure. If only God was, and was God, then it was, or would be, well with Mary--well with me!

But, as I still sat, a flow of sweet sad repentant thought passing gently through my bosom, all at once the self to which, unable to confide it to the care of its own very life, the God conscious of himself and in himself conscious of it, I had been for months offering the sacrifices of despair and indignation, arose in spectral hideousness before me. I saw that I, a child of the infinite, had been worshipping the finite--and therein dragging down the infinite towards the fate of the finite. I do not mean that in Mary Osborne I had been worshipping the finite. It was the eternal, the lovely, the true that in her I had been worshipping: in myself I

had been worshipping the mean, the selfish, the finite, the god of spiritual greed. Only in himself *can* a man find the finite to worship; only in turning back upon himself does he create the finite for and by his worship. All the works of God are everlasting; the only perishable are some of the works of man. All love is a worship of the infinite: what is called a man's love for himself, is not love; it is but a phantastic resemblance of love; it is a creating of the finite, a creation of death. A man *cannot* love himself. If all love be not creation--as I think it is--it is at least the only thing in harmony with creation, and the love of oneself is its absolute opposite. I sickened at the sight of myself: how should I ever get rid of the demon? The same instant I saw the one escape: I must offer it back to its source--commit it to him who had made it. I must live no more from it, but from the source of it; seek to know nothing more of it than he gave me to know by his presence therein. Thus might I become one with the Eternal in such an absorption as Buddha had never dreamed; thus might I draw life ever fresh from its fountain. And in that fountain alone would I contemplate its reflex. What flashes of self-consciousness might cross me, should be God's gift, not of my seeking, and offered again to him in ever new self-sacrifice. Alas! alas! this I saw then, and this I yet see; but oh, how far am I still from that divine annihilation! The only comfort is, God is, and I am his, else I should not be at all.

I saw too that thus God also lives--in his higher way. I saw, shadowed out in the absolute devotion of Jesus to men, that the very life of God by which we live is an everlasting eternal giving of himself away. He asserts himself, only, solely, altogether, in an infinite sacrifice of devotion. So must we live; the child must be as the father; live he cannot on any other plan, struggle as he may. The father requires of him nothing that he is not or does not himself, who is the one prime unconditioned sacrificer and sacrifice. I threw myself on the ground, and offered back my poor wretched self to its owner, to be taken and kept, purified and made divine.

The same moment a sense of reviving health began to possess me. With many fluctuations, it has possessed me, has grown, and is now, if not a persistent cheerfulness, yet an unyielding hope. The world bloomed again around me. The sunrise again grew gloriously dear; and the sadness of the moon was lighted from a higher sun than that which returns with the morning.

My relation to Mary resolved and re-formed itself in my mind into something I can explain only by the following--call it dream: it was not a dream; call it vision: it was not a vision; and yet I will tell it as if it were either, being far truer than either.

I lay like a child on one of God's arms. I could not see his face, and the arm that held me was a great cloudy arm. I knew that on his other arm lay Mary. But between us were forests and plains, mountains and great seas; and, unspeakably worse than all, a gulf with which words had nothing to do, a gulf of pure separation, of impassable nothingness, across which no device, I say not of human skill, but of human imagination, could cast a single connecting cord. There lay Mary, and here lay I--both in God's arms--utterly parted. As in a swoon I lay, through which suddenly came the words: 'What God hath joined, man cannot sunder.' I lay thinking what they could mean. All at once I thought I knew. Straightway I rose on the cloudy arm, looked down on a measureless darkness beneath me, and up on a great, dreary, world-filled eternity above me, and crept along the arm towards the bosom of God.

In telling my--neither vision nor dream nor ecstasy, I cannot help it that the forms grow so much plainer and more definite in the words than they were in the revelation. Words always give either too much or too little shape: when you want to be definite, you find your words clumsy and blunt; when you want them for a vague shadowy image, you straightway find them give a sharp and impertinent outline, refusing to lend themselves to your undefined though vivid thought. Forms themselves

are hard enough to manage, but words are unmanageable. I must therefore trust to the heart of my reader.

I crept into the bosom of God, and along a great cloudy peace, which I could not understand, for it did not yet enter into me. At length I came to the heart of God, and through that my journey lay. The moment I entered it, the great peace appeared to enter mine, and I began to understand it. Something melted in my heart, and for a moment I thought I was dying, but I found I was being born again. My heart was empty of its old selfishness, and I loved Mary tenfold--no longer in the least for my own sake, but all for her loveliness. The same moment I knew that the heart of God was a bridge, along which I was crossing the unspeakable eternal gulf that divided Mary and me. At length, somehow, I know not how, somewhere, I know not where, I was where she was. She knew nothing of my presence, turned neither face nor eye to meet me, stretched out no hand to give me the welcome of even a friend, and yet I not only knew, but felt that she was mine. I wanted nothing from her; desired the presence of her loveliness only that I might know it; hung about her life as a butterfly over the flower he loves; was satisfied that she could *be*. I had left my self behind in the heart of God, and now I was a pure essence, fit to rejoice in the essential. But alas! my whole being was not yet subject to its best. I began to long to be able to do something for her besides--I foolishly said *beyond* loving her. Back rushed my old self in the selfish thought: Some day--will she not know--and at least--? That moment the vision vanished. I was tossed--ah! let me hope, only to the other arm of God--but I lay in torture yet again. For a man may see visions manifold, and believe them all; and yet his faith shall not save him; something more is needed--he must have that presence of God in his soul, of which the Son of Man spoke, saying: ‘If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.’ God in him, he will be able to love

for very love’s sake; God not in him, his best love will die into selfishness.

CHAPTER LX.

MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER.

The morning then which had thus dawned upon me, was often over-clouded heavily. Yet it was the morning and not the night; and one of the strongest proofs that it was the morning lay in this, that again I could think in verse.

One day, after an hour or two of bitterness, I wrote the following. A man's trouble must have receded from him a little for the moment, if he descries any shape in it, so as to be able to give it form in words. I set it down with no hope of better than the vaguest sympathy. There came no music with this one.

If it be that a man and a woman Are made for no mutual grief; That each gives the pain to some other, And neither can give the relief;

If thus the chain of the world Is tied round the holy feet, I scorn to shrink from facing What my brothers and sisters meet.

But I cry when the wolf is tearing At the core of my heart as now: When I was the man to be tortured, Why should the woman be *thou?*

I am not so ready to sink from the lofty in to the abject now. If at times I yet feel that the whole creation is groaning and travailing, I know what it is for--its redemption from the dominion of its own death into that sole liberty which comes only of being filled and eternally possessed by God himself, its source and its life.

And now I found also that my heart began to be moved with a compassion towards my fellows such as I had never before experienced. I shall best convey what I mean by transcribing another little poem I wrote about the same time.

Once I sat on a crimson throne, And I held the world in fee; Below me I heard my brothers moan, And I bent me down to see;--

Lovingly bent and looked on them, But *I* had no inward pain; I sat in the heart of my ruby gem, Like a rainbow without the rain.

My throne is vanished; helpless I lie At the foot of its broken stair; And the sorrows of all humanity Through my heart make a thoroughfare.

Let such things rest for a while: I have now to relate another incident--strange enough, but by no means solitary in the records of human experience. My reader will probably think that of dreams and visions there has already been more than enough: but perhaps she will kindly remember that at this time I had no outer life at all. Whatever bore to me the look of existence was within me. All my days the tendency had been to an undue predominance of thought over action, and now that the springs of action were for a time dried up, what wonder was it if thought, lording it alone, should assume a reality beyond its right? Hence the life of the day was prolonged into the night; nor was there other than a small difference in their conditions, beyond the fact that the contrast of outer things was removed in sleep; whence the shapes which the waking thought had assumed had space and opportunity, as it were, to thicken before the mental eye until they became dreams and visions.

But concerning what I am about to relate I shall offer no theory. Such mere operation of my own thoughts may be sufficient to account for it: I would only ask--does any one know what the *mere* operation of his own thoughts signifies? I cannot isolate myself, especially in those moments when the individual will is less awake, from the ocean of life and thought which not only surrounds me, but on which I am in a sense one of the floating bubbles.

I was asleep, but I thought I lay awake in bed--in the room where I still slept--that which had been my grannie’s.--It was dark midnight, and the

wind was howling about the gable and in the chimneys. The door opened, and some one entered. By the lamp she carried I knew my great-grandmother,--just as she looked in life, only that now she walked upright and with ease. That I was dreaming is plain from the fact that I felt no surprise at seeing her.

‘Wilfrid, come with me,’ she said, approaching the bedside. ‘Rise.’

I obeyed like a child.

‘Put your cloak on,’ she continued. ‘It is a stormy midnight, but we have not so far to go as you may think.’

‘I think nothing, grannie,’ I said. ‘I do not know where you want to take me.’

‘Come and see then, my son. You must at last learn what has been kept from you far too long.’

As she spoke she led the way down the stair, through the kitchen, and out into the dark night. I remember the wind blowing my cloak about, but I remember nothing more until I found myself in the winding hazel-walled lane, leading to Umberden Church. My grannie was leading me by one withered hand; in the other she held the lamp, over the flame of which the wind had no power. She led me into the churchyard, took the key from under the tombstone, unlocked the door of the church, put the lamp into my hand, pushed me gently in, and shut the door behind me. I walked to the vestry, and set the lamp on the desk, with a vague feeling that I had been there before, and that I had now to do something at this desk. Above it I caught sight of the row of vellum-bound books, and remembered that one of them contained something of importance to me. I took it down. The moment I opened it I remembered with distinctness the fatal discrepancy in the entry of my grannie’s marriage. I found the place: to my astonishment the date of the year was now the same as that on the

preceding page--1747. That instant I awoke in the first gush of the sunrise.

I could not help feeling even a little excited by my dream, and the impression of it grew upon me: I wanted to see the book again. I could not rest. Something seemed constantly urging me to go and look at it. Half to get the thing out of my head, I sent Styles to fetch Lilith, and for the first time since the final assurance of my loss, mounted her. I rode for Umberden Church.

It was long after noon before I had made up my mind, and when, having tied Lilith to the gate, I entered the church, one red ray from the setting sun was nestling in the very roof. Knowing what I should find, yet wishing to see it again, I walked across to the vestry, feeling rather uncomfortable at the thought of prying thus alone into the parish register.

I could almost have persuaded myself that I was dreaming still; and in looking back, I can hardly in my mind separate the dreaming from the waking visit.

Of course I found just what I had expected--1748, not 1747--at the top of the page, and was about to replace the register, when the thought occurred to me that, if the dream had been potent enough to bring me hither, it might yet mean something. I lifted the cover again. There the entry stood undeniably plain. This time, however, I noted two other little facts concerning it.

I will just remind my reader that the entry was crushed in between the date of the year and the next entry--plainly enough to the eye; and that there was no attestation to the entries of 1747. The first additional fact--and clearly an important one--was that, in the summing up of 1748, before the signature, which stood near the bottom of the cover, a figure had been altered. Originally it stood: ‘In all six couple,’ but the six had been altered to a seven--corresponding with the actual number. This

appeared proof positive that the first entry on the cover was a forged insertion. And how clumsily it had been managed!

‘What could my grannie be about?’ I said to myself. It never occurred to me then that it might have been intended to *look like* a forgery.

Still I kept staring at it, as if by very force of staring I could find out something. There was not the slightest sign of erasure or alteration beyond the instance I have mentioned. Yet--and here was my second note--when I compared the whole of the writing on the cover with the writing on the preceding page, though it seemed the same hand, it seemed to have got stiffer and shakier, as if the writer had grown old between. Finding nothing very suggestive in this, however, I fell into a dreamy mood, watching the red light, as it faded, up in the old, dark, distorted roof of the desolate church--with my hand lying on the book.

I have always had a bad habit of pulling and scratching at any knot or roughness in the paper of the book I happen to be reading; and now, almost unconsciously, with my forefinger I was pulling at an edge of parchment which projected from the joint of the cover. When I came to myself and proceeded to close the book, I found it would not shut properly because of a piece which I had curled up. Seeking to restore it to its former position, I fancied I saw a line or edge running all down the joint, and looking closer, saw that these last entries, in place of being upon a leaf of the book pasted to the cover in order to strengthen the binding, as I had supposed, were indeed upon a leaf which was pasted to the cover, but one which was not otherwise connected with the volume.

I now began to feel a more lively interest in the behaviour of my dream-grannie. Here might lie something to explain the hitherto inexplicable. I proceeded to pull the leaf gently away. It was of parchment, much thinner than the others, which were of vellum. I had withdrawn only a small portion when I saw there was writing under it. My heart began to beat faster. But I would not be rash. My old

experience with parchment in the mending of my uncle’s books came to my aid. If I pulled at the dry skin as I had been doing, I might not only damage it, but destroy the writing under it. I could do nothing without water, and I did not know where to find any. It would be better to ride to the village of Gastford, somewhere about two miles off, put up there, and arrange for future proceedings.

I did not know the way, and for a long time could see no one to ask. The consequence was that I made a wide round, and it was nearly dark before I reached the village. I thought it better for the present to feed Lilith, and then make the best of my way home.

The next evening--I felt so like a thief that I sought the thievish security of the night--having provided myself with what was necessary, and borrowed a horse for Styles, I set out again.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE PARISH REGISTER.

The sky clouded as we went; it grew very dark, and the wind began to blow. It threatened a storm. I told Styles a little of what I was about--just enough to impress on him the necessity for prudence. The wind increased, and by the time we gained the copse, it was roaring, and the slender hazels bending like a field of corn.

‘You will have enough to do with two horses,’ I said.

‘I don’t mind it, sir,’ Styles answered. ‘A word from me will quiet Miss Lilith; and for the other, I’ve known him pretty well for two years past.’

I left them tolerably sheltered in the winding lane, and betook myself alone to the church. Cautiously I opened the door, and felt my way from pew to pew, for it was quite dark. I could just distinguish the windows from the walls, and nothing more. As soon as I reached the vestry, I struck a light, got down the volume, and proceeded to moisten the parchment with a wet sponge. For some time the water made little impression on the old parchment, of which but one side could be exposed to its influence, and I began to fear I should be much longer in gaining my end than I had expected. The wind roared and howled about the trembling church, which seemed too weak with age to resist such an onslaught; but when at length the skin began to grow soft and yield to my gentle efforts at removal, I became far too much absorbed in the simple operation, which had to be performed with all the gentleness and nicety of a surgical one, to heed the uproar about me. Slowly the glutinous adhesion gave way, and slowly the writing revealed itself. In mingled hope and doubt I restrained my curiosity; and as one teases oneself sometimes by dallying with a letter of the greatest interest, not until I had folded down the parchment clear of what was manifestly an entry, did I bring my candle close to it, and set myself to read it. Then, indeed, I

found I had reason to regard with respect the dream which had brought me thither.

Right under the 1748 of the parchment, stood on the vellum cover 1747. Then followed the usual blank, and then came an entry corresponding word for word with the other entry of my great-grandfather and mother's marriage. In all probability Moldwarp Hall was mine! Little as it could do for me now, I confess to a keen pang of pleasure at the thought.

Meantime, I followed out my investigation, and gradually stripped the parchment off the vellum to within a couple of inches of the bottom of the cover. The result of knowledge was as follows:--

Next to the entry of the now hardly hypothetical marriage of my ancestors, stood the summing up of the marriages of 1747, with the signature of the rector. I paused, and, turning back, counted them. Including that in which alone I was interested, I found the number given correct. Next came by itself the figures 1748, and then a few more entries, followed by the usual summing up and signature of the rector. From this I turned to the leaf of parchment; there was a difference: upon the latter the sum was six, altered to seven; on the former it was five. This of course suggested further search: I soon found where the difference indicated lay.

As the entry of *the* marriage was, on the forged leaf, shifted up close to the forged 1748, and as the summing and signature had to be omitted, because they belonged to the end of 1747, a blank would have been left, and the writing below would have shone through and attracted attention, revealing the forgery of the whole, instead of that of the part only which was intended to look a forgery. To prevent this, an altogether fictitious entry had been made--over the summing and signature. This, with the genuine entries faithfully copied, made of the five, six, which the forger had written and then blotted into a seven, intending to expose the entry of my ancestors' marriage as a forgery, while the rest of the year's register

should look genuine. It took me some little trouble to clear it all up to my own mind, but by degrees everything settled into its place, assuming an intelligible shape in virtue of its position.

With my many speculations as to why the mechanism of the forgery had assumed this shape, I need not trouble my reader. Suffice it to say that on more than one supposition, I can account for it satisfactorily to myself. One other remark only will I make concerning it: I have no doubt it was an old forgery. One after another those immediately concerned in it had died, and there the falsehood lurked--in latent power--inoperative until my second visit to Umberden Church. But what differences might there not have been had it not started into activity for the brief space betwixt then and my sorrow?

I left the parchment still attached to the cover at the bottom, and, laying a sheet of paper between the formerly adhering surfaces, lest they should again adhere, closed and replaced the volume. Then, looking at my watch, I found that, instead of an hour as I had supposed, I had been in the church three hours. It was nearly eleven o'clock, too late for anything further that night.

When I came out, the sky was clear and the stars were shining. The storm had blown over. Much rain had fallen. But when the wind ceased or the rain began, I had no recollection; the storm had vanished altogether from my consciousness. I found Styles where I had left him, smoking his pipe and leaning against Lilith, who--I cannot call her *which*--was feeding on the fine grass of the lane. The horse he had picketed near. We mounted and rode home.

The next thing was to see the rector of Umberden. He lived in his other parish, and thither I rode the following day to call upon him. I found him an old gentleman, of the squire-type of rector. As soon as he heard my name, he seemed to know who I was, and at once showed himself hospitable.

I told him that I came to him as I might, were I a Catholic, to a father-confessor. This Startled him a little.

‘Don’t tell me anything I ought not to keep secret,’ he said; and it gave me confidence in him at once.

‘I will not,’ I returned. ‘The secret is purely my own. Whatever crime there is in it, was past punishment long before I was born; and it was committed against, not by my family. But it is rather a long story, and I hope I shall not be tedious.’

He assured me of his perfect leisure.

I told him everything, from my earliest memory, which bore on the discovery I had at length made. He soon showed signs of interest; and when I had ended the tale with the facts of the preceding night, he silently rose and walked about the room. After a few moments, he said:

‘And what do you mean to do, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Nothing,’ I answered, ‘so long as Sir Giles is alive. He was kind to me when I was a boy.’

He came up behind me where I was seated, and laid his hand gently on my head; then, without a word, resumed his walk.

‘And if you survive him, what then?’

‘Then I must be guided partly by circumstances,’ I said.

‘And what do you want of me?’

‘I want you to go with me to the church, and see the book, that, in case of anything happening to it, you may be a witness concerning its previous contents.’

‘I am too old to be the only witness,’ he said. ‘You ought to have several of your own age.’

‘I want as few to know the secret as may be,’ I answered.

‘You should have your lawyer one of them.’

‘He would never leave me alone about it,’ I replied; ‘and positively I shall take no measures at present. Some day I hope to punish him for deserting me as he did.’

For I had told him how Mr Coningham had behaved.

‘Revenge, Mr Cumbermede?’

‘Not a serious one. All the punishment I hope to give him is but to show him the fact of the case, and leave him to feel as he may about it.’

‘There can’t be much harm in that.’

He reflected a few moments, and then said:

‘I will tell you what will be best. We shall go and see the book together. I will make an extract of both entries, and give a description of the state of the volume, with an account of how the second entry--or more properly the first--came to be discovered. This I shall sign in the presence of two witnesses, who need know nothing of the contents of the paper. Of that you shall yourself take charge.’

We went together to the church. The old man, after making a good many objections, was at length satisfied, and made notes for his paper. He started the question whether it would not be better to secure that volume at least under lock and key. For this I thought there was no occasion--that in fact it was safer where it was, and more certain of being forthcoming when wanted. I did suggest that the key of the church might be deposited in a place of safety; but he answered that it had been kept there ever since he came to the living forty years ago, and for how long before that he could not tell; and so a change would attract attention, and possibly make some talk in the parish, which had better be avoided.

Before the end of the week, he had his document ready. He signed it in my presence, and in that of two of his parishioners, who as witnesses appended their names and abodes. I have it now in my possession. I shall enclose it, with my great-grandfather and mother’s letters--and something besides--in the packet containing this history.

That same week Sir Giles Brotherton died.

CHAPTER LXII.

A FOOLISH TRIUMPH.

I should have now laid claim to my property, but for Mary. To turn Sir Geoffrey with his mother and sister out of it, would have caused me little compunction, for they would still be rich enough; I confess indeed it would have given me satisfaction. Nor could I say what real hurt of any kind it would occasion to Mary; and if I were writing for the public, instead of my one reader, I know how foolishly incredible it must appear that for her sake I should forego such claims. She would, however, I trust, have been able to believe it without the proofs which I intend to give her. The fact was simply this: I could not, even for my own sake, bear the thought of taking, in any manner or degree, a position if but apparently antagonistic to her. My enemy was her husband: he should reap the advantage of being her husband; for her sake he should for the present retain what was mine. So long as there should be no reason to fear his adopting a different policy from his father's in respect of his tenants, I felt myself at liberty to leave things as they were; for Sir Giles had been a good landlord, and I knew the son was regarded with favour in the county. Were he to turn out unjust or oppressive, however, then duty on my part would come in. But I must also remind my reader that I had no love for affairs; that I had an income perfectly sufficient for my wants; that, both from my habits of thought and from my sufferings, my regard was upon life itself--was indeed so far from being confined to this chrysalid beginning thereof, that I had lost all interest in this world save as the porch to the house of life. And, should I ever meet her again, in any possible future of being, how much rather would I not stand before her as one who had been even Quixotic for her sake--as one who for a hair's-breadth of her interest had felt the sacrifice of a fortune a merely natural movement of his life! She would then know not merely that I was true to her, but that I had been true in what I professed to believe when I sought her favour. And if it had been a pleasure to me--call it a weakness,

and I will not oppose the impeachment;--call it self-pity, and I will confess to that as having a share in it;--but, if it had been a shadowy pleasure to me to fancy I suffered for her sake, my present resolution, while it did not add the weight of a feather to my suffering, did yet give me a similar vague satisfaction.

I must also confess to a certain satisfaction in feeling that I had power over my enemy--power of making him feel my power--power of vindicating my character against him as well, seeing one who could thus abstain from asserting his own rights could hardly have been one to invade the rights of another; but the enjoyment of this consciousness appeared to depend on my silence. If I broke that, the strength would depart from me; but while I held my peace, I held my foe in an invisible mesh. I half deluded myself into fancying that, while I kept my power over him unexercised, I retained a sort of pledge for his conduct to Mary, of which I was more than doubtful; for a man with such antecedents as his, a man who had been capable of behaving as he had behaved to Charley, was less than likely to be true to his wife: he was less than likely to treat the sister as a lady, who to the brother had been a traitorous seducer.

I have now to confess a fault as well as an imprudence--punished, I believe, in the results.

The behaviour of Mr. Coningham still rankled a little in my bosom. From Geoffrey I had never looked for anything but evil; of Mr Coningham I had expected differently, and I began to meditate the revenge of holding him up to himself: I would punish him in a manner which, with his confidence in his business faculty, he must feel: I would simply show him how the precipitation of selfish disappointment had led him astray, and frustrated his designs. For if he had given even a decent attention to the matter, he would have found in the forgery itself hints sufficient to suggest the desirableness of further investigation.

I had not, however, concluded upon anything, when one day I accidentally met him, and we had a little talk about business, for he continued to look after the rent of my field. He informed me that Sir Geoffrey Brotherton had been doing all he could to get even temporary possession of the park, as we called it; and, although I said nothing of it to Mr Coningham, my suspicion is that, had he succeeded, he would, at the risk of a law-suit, in which he would certainly have been cast, have ploughed it up. He told me, also, that Clara was in poor health; she who had looked as if no blight could ever touch her had broken down utterly. The shadow of her sorrow was plain enough on the face of her father, and his confident manner had a little yielded, although he was the old man still. His father had died a little before Sir Giles. The new baronet had not offered him the succession.

I asked him to go with me yet once more to Umberden Church--for I wanted to show him something he had over-looked in the register--not, I said, that it would be of the slightest furtherance to his former hopes. He agreed at once, already a little ashamed, perhaps, of the way in which he had abandoned me. Before we parted we made an appointment to meet at the church.

We went at once to the vestry. I took down the volume, and laid it before him. He opened it, with a curious look at me first. But the moment he lifted the cover, its condition at once attracted and as instantly riveted his attention. He gave me one glance more, in which questions and remarks and exclamations numberless lay in embryo; then turning to the book, was presently absorbed, first in reading the genuine entry, next in comparing it with the forged one.

‘Right, after all!’ he exclaimed at length.

‘In what?’ I asked.’ In dropping me without a word, as if I had been an impostor? In forgetting that you yourself had raised in me the hopes whose discomfiture you took as a personal injury?’

‘My dear sir!’ he stammered in an expostulatory tone, ‘you must make allowance. It was a tremendous disappointment to me.’

‘I cannot say I felt it quite so much myself, but at least you owed me an apology for having misled me.’

‘I had *not* misled you,’ he retorted angrily, pointing to the register.--‘There!’

‘You left *me* to find that out, though. *You* took no further pains in the matter.’

‘How *did* you find it out?’ he asked, clutching at a change in the tone of the conversation.

I said nothing of my dream, but I told him everything else concerning the discovery. When I had finished--

‘It’s all plain sailing now,’ he cried. ‘There is not an obstacle in the way. I will set the thing in motion the instant I get home.--It will be a victory worth achieving,’ he added, rubbing his hands.

‘Mr Coningham, I have not the slightest intention of moving in the matter,’ I said.

His face fell.

‘You do not mean--when you hold them in your very hands--to throw away every advantage of birth and fortune, and be a nobody in the world?’

‘Infinite advantages of the kind you mean, Mr Coningham, could make me not one whit more than I am; they *might* make me less.’

‘Come, come,’ he expostulated; ‘you must not allow disappointment to upset your judgment of things.’

‘My judgment of things lies deeper than any disappointment I have yet had,’ I replied. ‘My uncle’s teaching has at last begun to bear fruit in me.’

‘Your uncle was a fool!’ he exclaimed.

‘But for my uncle’s sake, I would knock you down for daring to couple such a word with *him*.’

He turned on me with a sneer. His eyes had receded in his head, and in his rage he grinned. The old ape-face, which had lurked in my memory ever since the time I first saw him, came out so plainly that I started: the child had read his face aright! the following judgment of the man had been wrong! the child’s fear had not imprinted a false eidolon upon the growing brain.

‘What right had, you,’ he said, ‘to bring me all this way for such tomfoolery?’

‘I told you it would not further your wishes.--But who brought me here for nothing first?’ I added, most foolishly.

‘I was myself deceived. I did not intend to deceive you.’

‘I know that. God forbid I should be unjust to you! But you have proved to me that your friendship was all a pretence; that your private ends were all your object. When you discovered that I could not serve those, you dropped me like a bit of glass you had taken for a diamond. Have you any right to grumble if I give you the discipline of a passing shame?’

‘Mr Cumbermede,’ he said, through his teeth, ‘you will repent this.’

I gave him no answer, and he left the church in haste. Having replaced the register, I was following at my leisure, when I heard sounds that made me hurry to the door. Lilith was plunging and rearing and pulling at the bridle which I had thrown over one of the spiked bars of the gate.

Another moment and she must have broken loose, or dragged the gate upon her--more likely the latter, for the bridle was a new one with broad reins--when some frightful injury would in all probability have been the consequence to herself. But a word from me quieted her, and she stood till I came up. Every inch of her was trembling. I suspected at once, and in a moment discovered plainly that Mr Coningham had struck her with his whip: there was a big weal on the fine skin of her hip and across, her croup. She shrunk like a hurt child when my hand approached the injured part, but moved neither hoof nor head.

Having patted and petted and consoled her a little, I mounted and rode after Mr Coningham. Nor was it difficult to overtake him, for he was going a foot-pace. He was stooping in his saddle, and when I drew near, I saw that he was looking very pale. I did not, however, suspect that he was in pain.

‘It was a cowardly thing to strike the poor dumb animal,’ I cried.

‘You would have struck her yourself,’ he answered with a curse,’ if she had broken your leg.’

I rode nearer. I knew well enough that she would not have kicked him if he had not struck her first; and I could see that his leg was not broken; but evidently he was in great suffering.

‘I am very sorry,’ I said. Can I help you?’

‘Go to the devil!’ he groaned.

I am ashamed to say the answer made me so angry that I spoke the truth.

‘Don’t suppose you deceive me,’ I said. ‘I know well enough my mare did not kick you before you struck her. Then she lashed out, of course.’

I waited for no reply, but turned and rode back to the church, the door of which, in my haste, I had left open. I locked it, replaced the key, and then rode quietly home.

But as I went, I began to feel that I had done wrong. No doubt, Mr Coningham deserved it, but the law was not in my hands. No man has a right to *punish* another. Vengeance belongs to a higher region, and the vengeance of God is a very different thing from the vengeance of man. However it may be softened with the name of retribution, revenge runs into all our notions of justice; and until we love purely, so it must ever be.

All I had gained was self-rebuke, and another enemy. Having reached home, I read the Manual of Epictetus right through before I laid it down, and, if it did not teach me to love my enemies, it taught me at least to be ashamed of myself. Then I wrote to Mr Coningham, saying I was sorry I had spoken to him as I did, and begging him to let by-gones be by-gones; assuring him that, if ever I moved in the matter of our difference, he should be the first to whom I applied for assistance.

He returned me no answer.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A COLLISION.

And now came a dreary time of re-action. There seemed nothing left for me to do, and I felt listless and weary. Something kept urging me to get away and hide myself, and I soon made up my mind to yield to the impulse and go abroad. My intention was to avoid cities, and, wandering from village to village, lay my soul bare to the healing influences of nature. As to any healing in the power of Time, I despised the old bald-pate as a quack who performed his seeming cures at the expense of the whole body. The better cures attributed to him are not his at all, but produced by the operative causes whose servant he is. A thousand holy balms require his services for their full action, but they, and not he, are the saving powers. Along with Time I ranked, and with absolute hatred shrunk from--all those means which offered to cure me by making me forget. From a child I had a horror of forgetting; it always seemed to me like a loss of being, like a hollow scooped out of my very existence--almost like the loss of identity. At times I even shrunk from going to sleep, so much did it seem like yielding to an absolute death--a death so deep that the visible death is but a picture or type of it. If I could have been sure of dreaming, it would have been different, but in the uncertainty it seemed like consenting to nothingness. That one who thus felt should ever have been tempted to suicide, will reveal how painful if not valueless his thoughts and feelings--his conscious life--must have grown to him; and that the only thing which withheld him from it should be the fear that no death, but a more intense life might be the result, will reveal it yet more clearly. That in that sleep I might at least dream--there was the rub.

All such relief, in a word, as might come of a lowering of my life, either physically, morally, or spiritually, I hated, detested, despised. The man who finds solace for a wounded heart in self-indulgence may indeed be

capable of angelic virtues, but in the mean time his conduct is that of the devils who went into the swine rather than be bodiless. The man who can thus be consoled for the loss of a woman could never have been worthy of her, possibly would not have remained true to her beyond the first delights of possession. The relief to which I could open my door must be such alone as would operate through the enlarging and elevating of what I recognized as *myself*. Whatever would make me greater, so that my torture, intensified, it might well be, should yet have room to dash itself hither and thither without injuring the walls of my being, would be welcome. If I might become so great that, my grief yet stinging me to agony, the infinite *I* of me should remain pure and calm, God-loving and man-cherishing, then I should be saved. God might be able to do more for me--I could not tell: I looked for no more. I would myself be such as to inclose my pain in a mighty sphere of out-spacing life, in relation to which even such sorrow as mine should be but a little thing. Such deliverance alone, I say, could I consent with myself to accept, and such alone, I believed, would God offer me--for such alone seemed worthy of him, and such alone seemed not unworthy of me.

The help that Nature could give me, I judged to be of this ennobling kind. For either nature was nature in virtue of having been born (*nata*) of God, or she was but a phantasm of my own brain--against which supposition the nature in me protested with the agony of a tortured man. To nature, then, I would go. Like the hurt child who folds himself in the skirt of his mother’s velvet garment, I would fold myself in the robe of Deity.

But to give honour and gratitude where both are due, I must here confess obligation with a willing and thankful heart. The *Excursion* of Wordsworth was published ere I was born, but only since I left college had I made acquaintance with it: so long does it take for the light of a new star to reach a distant world! To this book I owe so much that to me it would alone justify the conviction that Wordsworth will never be forgotten. That he is no longer the fashion, militates nothing against his

reputation. We, the old ones, hold fast by him for no sentimental reminiscence of the fashion of our youth, but simply because his humanity has come into contact with ours. The men of the new generation have their new loves and worships: it remains to be seen to whom the worthy amongst them will turn long ere the frosts of age begin to gather and the winds of the human autumn to blow. Wordsworth will recede through the gliding ages until, with the greater Chaucer, and the greater Shakspere, and the greater Milton, he is yet a star in the constellated crown of England.

Before I was able to leave home, however, a new event occurred.

I received an anonymous letter, in a hand-writing I did not recognize. Its contents were as follows:--

'SIR,--Treachery is intended you. If you have anything worth watching, *watch* it.'

For one moment--so few were the places in which through my possessions I was vulnerable--I fancied the warning might point to Lilith, but I soon dismissed the idea. I could make no inquiries, for it had been left an hour before my return from a stroll by an unknown messenger. I could think of nothing besides but the register, and if this was what my correspondent aimed at, I had less reason to be anxious concerning it, because of the attested copy, than my informant probably knew. Still its safety was far from being a matter of indifference to me. I resolved to ride over to Umberden Church, and see if it was as I had left it.

The twilight was fast thickening into darkness when I entered the gloomy building. There was light enough, however, to guide my hand to the right volume, and by carrying it to the door, I was able to satisfy myself that it was as I had left it.

Thinking over the matter once more as I stood, I could not help wishing that the book were out of danger just for the present; but there was hardly

a place in the bare church where it was possible to conceal it. At last I thought of one--half groped my way to the pulpit, ascended its creaking stair, lifted the cushion of the seat, and laid the book, which was thin, open in the middle, and flat on its face, under it. I then locked the door, mounted, and rode off.

It was now more than dusk. Lilith was frolicsome, and, rejoicing in the grass under her feet, broke into a quick canter along the noiseless, winding lane. Suddenly there was a great shock, and I lay senseless.

I came to myself under the stinging blows of a whip, only afterwards recognized as such, however. I sprung staggering to my feet, and rushed at the dim form of an assailant, with such a sudden and, I suppose, unexpected assault, that he fell under me. Had he not fallen I should have had little chance with him, for, as I now learned by his voice, it was Sir Geoffrey Brotherton.

‘Thief! Swindler! Sneak!’ he cried, making a last harmless blow at me as he fell.

All the wild beast in my nature was roused. I had no weapon--not even a whip, for Lilith never needed one. It was well, for what I might have done in the first rush of blood to my reviving brain, I dare hardly imagine. I seized him by the throat with such fury that, though far the stronger, he had no chance as he lay. I kneeled on his chest. He struggled furiously, but could not force my gripe from his throat. I soon perceived that I was strangling him, and tightened my grasp.

His efforts were already growing feebler, when I became aware of a soft touch apparently trying to take hold of my hair. Glancing up without relaxing my hold, I saw the white head of Lilith close to mine. Was it the whiteness--was it the calmness of the creature--I cannot pretend to account for the fact, but the same instant before my mind’s eye rose the vision of one standing speechless before his accusers, bearing on his

form the marks of ruthless blows. I did not then remember that just before I came out I had been gazing, as I often gazed, upon an Ecce Homo of Albert Dürer's that hung in my room. Immediately my heart awoke within me. My whole being still trembling with passionate struggle and gratified hate, a rush of human pity swept across it. I took my hand from my enemy's throat, rose, withdrew some paces, and burst into tears. I could have embraced him, but I dared not even minister to him for the insult at would appear. He did not at once rise, and when he did, he stood for a few moments, half-unconscious, I think, staring at me. Coming to himself, he felt for and found his whip--I thought with the intention of attacking me again, but he moved towards his horse, which was quietly eating the grass, now wet with dew. Gathering its bridle from around its leg, he mounted, and rode back the way he had come.

I lingered for a while utterly exhausted. I was trembling in every limb. The moon rose and began to shed her low yellow light over the hazel copse, filling the lane with brightness and shadow. Lilith, seeming-in her whiteness to gather a tenfold share of the light upon herself, was now feeding as gently as if she had known nothing of the strife, and I congratulated myself that the fall had not injured her. But as she took a step forward in her feeding, I discovered to my dismay that she was quite lame. For my own part I was now feeling the ache of numerous and severe bruises. When I took Lilith by the bridle to lead her away, I found that neither of us could manage more than two miles an hour. I was very uneasy about her. There was nothing for it, however, but make the best of our way to Gastford. It was no little satisfaction to think, as we hobbled along, that the accident had happened through no carelessness of mine, beyond that of cantering in the dark, for I was on my own side of the road. Had Geoffrey been on his, narrow as the lane was, we might have passed without injury.

It was so late when we reached Gastford, that we had to rouse the ostler before I could get Lilith attended to. I bathed the injured leg, of which the

shoulder seemed wrenched; and having fed her, but less plentifully than usual, I left her to her repose. In the morning she was considerably better, but I resolved to leave her where she was, and, sending a messenger for Styles to come and attend to her, I hired a gig, and went to call on my new friend the rector of Umberden.

I told him all that had happened, and where I had left the volume. He said he would have a chest made in which to secure the whole register, and, meanwhile, would himself go to the church and bring that volume home with him. It is safe enough now, as any one may find who wishes to see it--though the old man has long passed away.

Lilith remained at Gastford a week before I judged it safe for her to come home. The injury, however, turned out to be a not very serious one.

Why should I write of my poor mare--but that she was once hers all for whose hoped perusal I am writing this? No, there is even a better reason: I shall never, to all my eternity, forget, even if I should never see her again, which I do not for a moment believe, what she did for me that evening. Surely she deserves to appear in her own place in my story!

Of course I was exercised in my mind as to who had sent me the warning. There could be no more doubt that I had hit what it intended, and had possibly preserved the register from being once more tampered with. I could think only of one. I have never had an opportunity of inquiring, and for her sake I should never have asked the question, but I have little doubt it was Clara. Who else could have had a chance of making the discovery, and at the same time would have cared to let me know it? Also she would have cogent reason for keeping such a part in the affair a secret. Probably she had heard her father informing Geoffrey; but he might have done so with no worse intention than had informed his previous policy.

CHAPTER LXIV.

YET ONCE.

I am drawing my story to a close. Almost all that followed bears so exclusively upon my internal history, that I will write but one incident more of it. I have roamed the world, and reaped many harvests. In the deepest agony I have never refused the consolations of Nature or of Truth. I have never knowingly accepted any founded in falsehood, in forgetfulness, or in distraction. Let such as have no hope in God drink of what Lethe they can find; to me it is a river of Hell and altogether abominable. I could not be content even to forget my sins. There can be but one deliverance from them, namely, that God and they should come together in my soul. In his presence I shall serenely face them. Without him I dare not think of them. With God a man can confront anything; without God, he is but the withered straw which the sickle of the reaper has left standing on a wintry field. But to forget them would be to cease and begin anew, which to one aware of his immortality is a horror.

If comfort profound as the ocean has not yet overtaken and infolded me, I see how such may come--perhaps will come. It must be by the enlarging of my whole being in truth, in God, so as to give room for the storm to rage, yet not destroy; for the sorrow to brood, yet not kill; for the sunshine of love to return after the east wind and black frost of bitterest disappointment; for the heart to feel the uttermost tenderness while the arms go not forth to embrace; for a mighty heaven of the unknown, crowded with the stars of endless possibilities, to dawn when the sun of love has vanished, and the moon of its memory is too ghastly to give any light: it is comfort such and thence that I think will one day possess me. Already has not its aurora brightened the tops of my snow-covered mountains? And if yet my valleys lie gloomy and forlorn, is not light on the loneliest peak a sure promise of the coming day?

Only once again have I looked in Mary's face. I will record the occasion, and then drop my pen.

About five years after I left home, I happened in my wanderings to be in one of my favourite Swiss valleys--high and yet sheltered. I rejoiced to be far up in the mountains, yet behold the inaccessible peaks above me--mine, though not to be trodden by foot of mine--my heart's own, though never to yield me a moment's outlook from their lofty brows; for I was never strong enough to reach one mighty summit. It was enough for me that they sent me down the glad streams from the cold bosoms of their glaciers--the offspring of the sun and the snow; that I too beheld the stars to which they were nearer than I.

One lovely morning I had wandered a good way from the village--a place little frequented by visitors, where I had a lodging in the house of the syndic--when I was overtaken by one of the sudden fogs which so frequently render those upper regions dangerous. There was no path to guide me back to my temporary home, but, a hundred yards or so beneath where I had been sitting, lay that which led down to one of the best known villages of the canton, where I could easily find shelter. I made haste to descend.

After a couple of hours' walking, during which the fog kept following me, as if hunting me from its lair, I at length arrived at the level of the valley, and was soon in one of those large hotels which in Summer are crowded as bee-hives, and in Winter forsaken as a ruin. The season for travellers was drawing to a close, and the house was full of homeward-bound guests.

For the mountains will endure but a season of intrusion. If travellers linger too long within their hospitable gates, their humour changes, and, with fierce winds and snow and bitter sleet, they will drive them forth, preserving their Winter privacy for the bosom friends of their mistress, Nature. Many is the Winter since those of my boyhood which I have

spent amongst the Alps; and in such solitude I have ever found the negation of all solitude, the one absolute Presence. David communed with his own heart on his bed and was still--there finding God: communing with my own heart in the Winter-valleys of Switzerland I found at least what made me cry out: ‘Surely this is the house of God; this is the gate of heaven!’ I would not be supposed to fancy that God is in mountains, and not in plains--that God is in the solitude, and not in the city: in any region harmonious with its condition and necessities, it is easier, for the heart to be still, and in its stillness to hear the still small voice.

Dinner was going on at the *table-d’hôte*. It was full, but a place was found for me in a bay-window. Turning to the one side, I belonged to the great world, represented by the Germans, Americans, and English, with a Frenchman and Italian here and there, filling the long table; turning to the other, I knew myself in a temple of the Most High, so huge that it seemed empty of men. The great altar of a mighty mountain rose, massy as a world, and ethereal as a thought, into the upturned gulf of the twilight air--its snowy peak, ever as I turned to look, mounting up and up to its repose. I had been playing with my own soul, spinning it between the sun and the moon, as it were, and watching now the golden and now the silvery side, as I glanced from the mountain to the table, and again from the table to the mountain, when all at once I discovered that I was searching the mountain for something--I did not know what. Whether any tones had reached me, I cannot tell;--a man’s mind may, even through his senses, be marvellously moved without knowing whence the influence comes;--but there I was searching the face of the mountain for something, with a want which had not begun to explain itself. From base to peak my eyes went flitting and resting and wandering again upwards. At last they reached the snowy crown, from which they fell into the infinite blue beyond. Then, suddenly, the unknown something I wanted was clear. The same moment I turned to the table. Almost opposite was a

face--pallid, with parted lips and fixed eyes--gazing at me. Then I knew those eyes had been gazing at me all the time I had been searching the face of the mountain. For one moment they met mine and rested; for one moment, I felt as if I must throw myself at her feet, and clasp them to my heart; but she turned her eyes away, and I rose and left the house.

The mist was gone, and the moon was rising. I walked up the mountain path towards my village. But long ere I reached it the sun was rising. With his first arrow of slenderest light, the tossing waves of my spirit began to lose their white tops, and sink again towards a distant calm; and ere I saw the village from the first point of vision, I had made the following verses. They are the last I will set down.

I know that I cannot move thee To an echo of my pain, Or a thrill of the storming trouble That racks my soul and brain;

That our hearts through all the ages Shall never sound in tune; That they meet no more in their cycles Than the parted sun and moon.

But if ever a spirit flashes Itself on another soul, One day, in thy stillness, a vapour Shall round about thee roll;

And the lifting of the vapour Shall reveal a world of pain, Of frosted suns, and moons that wander Through misty mountains of rain.

Thou shalt know me for one live instant-- Thou halt know me--and yet not love: I would not have thee troubled, My cold, white-feathered dove!

I would only once come near thee--Myself, and not my form; Then away in the distance wander, A slow-dissolving storm.

The vision should pass in vapour, That melts in aether again; Only a something linger-Not pain, but the shadow of pain.

And I should know that thy spirit On mine one look had sent; And glide away from thy knowledge, And try to be half-content.

CHAPTER LXV.

CONCLUSION.

The ebbing tide that leaves bare the shore swells the heaps of the central sea. The tide of life ebbs from this body of mine, soon to lie on the shore of life like a stranded wreck; but the murmur of the waters that break upon no strand is in my ears; to join the waters of the infinite life, mine is ebbing away.

Whatever has been his will is well--grandly well--well even for that in me which feared, and in those very respects in which it feared that it might not be well. The whole being of me past and present shall say: It is infinitely well, and I would not have it otherwise. Rather than it should not be as it is, I would go back to the world and this body of which I grew weary, and encounter yet again all that met me on my journey. Yes--final submission of my will to the All-will--I would meet it *knowing what was coming*. Lord of me, Father of Jesus Christ, will this suffice? Is my faith enough yet? I say it, not having beheld what thou hast in store--not knowing what I shall be--not even absolutely certain that thou art--confident only that, if thou be, such thou must be.

The last struggle is before me. But I have passed already through so many valleys of death itself, where the darkness was not only palpable, but choking and stinging, that I cannot greatly fear that which holds but the shadow of death. For what men call death, is but its shadow. Death never comes near us; it lies behind the back of God; he is between it and us. If he were to turn his back upon us, the death which no imagination can shadow forth, would lap itself around us, and we should be--we should not know what.

At night I lie wondering how it will feel; and, but that God will be with me, I would rather be slain suddenly, than lie still and await the change. The growing weakness, ushered in, it may be, by long agony; the

alienation from things about me, while I am yet amidst them; the slow rending of the bonds which make this body a home, so that it turns half alien, while yet some bonds unsevered hold the live thing fluttering in its worm-eaten cage--but God knows me and my house, and I need not speculate or forebode. When it comes, death will prove as natural as birth. Bethink thee, Lord--nay, thou never forgettest. It is because thou thinkest and feelest that I think and feel; it is on thy deeper consciousness that mine ever floats; thou knowest my frame, and rememberest that I am dust: do with me as thou wilt. Let me take centuries to die if so thou willest, for thou wilt be with me. Only if an hour should come when thou must seem to forsake me, watch me all the time, lest self-pity should awake, and I should cry that thou wast dealing hardly with me. For when thou hidest thy face, the world is a corpse, and I am a live soul fainting within it.

* * * * *

Thus far had I written, and was about to close with certain words of Job, which are to me like the trumpet of the resurrection, when the news reached me that Sir Geoffrey Brotherton was dead. He leaves no children, and the property is expected to pass to a distant branch of the family. Mary will have to leave Moldwarp Hall.

* * * * *

I have been up to London to my friend Marston--for it is years since Mr Coningham died. I have laid everything before him, and left the affair in his hands. He is so confident in my cause, that he offers, in case my means should fail me, to find what is necessary himself; but he is almost as confident of a speedy settlement.

And now, for the first time in my life, I am about--shall I say, to court society? At least I am going to London, about to give and receive

invitations, and cultivate the acquaintance of those whose appearance and conversation attract me.

I have not a single relative, to my knowledge, in the world, and I am free, beyond question, to leave whatever property I have, or may have, to whomsoever I please.

My design is this: if I succeed in my suit, I will offer Moldwarp to Mary for her lifetime. She is greatly beloved in the county, and has done much for the labourers, nor upon her own lands only. If she had the full power she would do yet better. But of course it is very doubtful whether she will accept it. Should she decline it, I shall try to manage it myself--leaving it to her, with reversion to the man, whoever he may be, whom I shall choose to succeed her.

What sort of man I shall endeavour to find, I think my reader will understand. I will not describe him, beyond saying that he must above all things be just, generous, and free from the petty prejudices of the country gentleman. He must understand that property involves service to every human soul that lives or labours upon it--the service of the elder brother to his less burdened yet more enduring and more helpless brothers and sisters; that for the lives of all such he has in his degree to render account. For surely God never meant to uplift any man *at the expense* of his fellows; but to uplift him that he might be strong to minister, as a wise friend and ruler, to their highest and best needs--first of all by giving them the justice which will be recognized as such by him before whom a man *is* his brother’s keeper, and becomes a Cain in denying it.

Lest Lady Brotherton, however, should like to have something to give away, I leave my former will as it was. It is in Marston’s hands.

* * * * *

Would I marry her now, if I might? I cannot tell. The thought rouses no passionate flood within me. Mighty spaces of endless possibility and endless result open before me. Death is knocking at my door.--

No--no; I will be honest, and lay it to no half reasons, however wise.--I would rather meet her then first, when she is clothed in that new garment called by St Paul the spiritual body. That, Geoffrey has never touched; over that he has no claim.

But if the loveliness of her character should have purified his, and drawn and bound his soul to hers?

Father, fold me in thyself. The storm, so long still, awakes; once more it flutters its fierce pinions. Let it not swing itself aloft in the air of my spirit. I dare not think, not merely lest thought should kindle into agony, but lest I should fail to rejoice over the lost and found. But my heart is in thy hand. Need I school myself to bow to an imagined decree of thine? Is it not enough that, when I shall know a thing for thy will, I shall then be able to say: Thy will be done? It is not enough; I need more. School thou my heart so to love thy will that in all calmness I leave to think what may or may not be its choice, and rest in its holy self.

* * * * *

She has sent for me. I go to her. I will not think beforehand what I shall say.

Something within tells me that a word from her would explain all that sometimes even now seems so inexplicable as hers. Will she speak that word? Shall I pray her for that word? I know nothing. The pure Will be done!