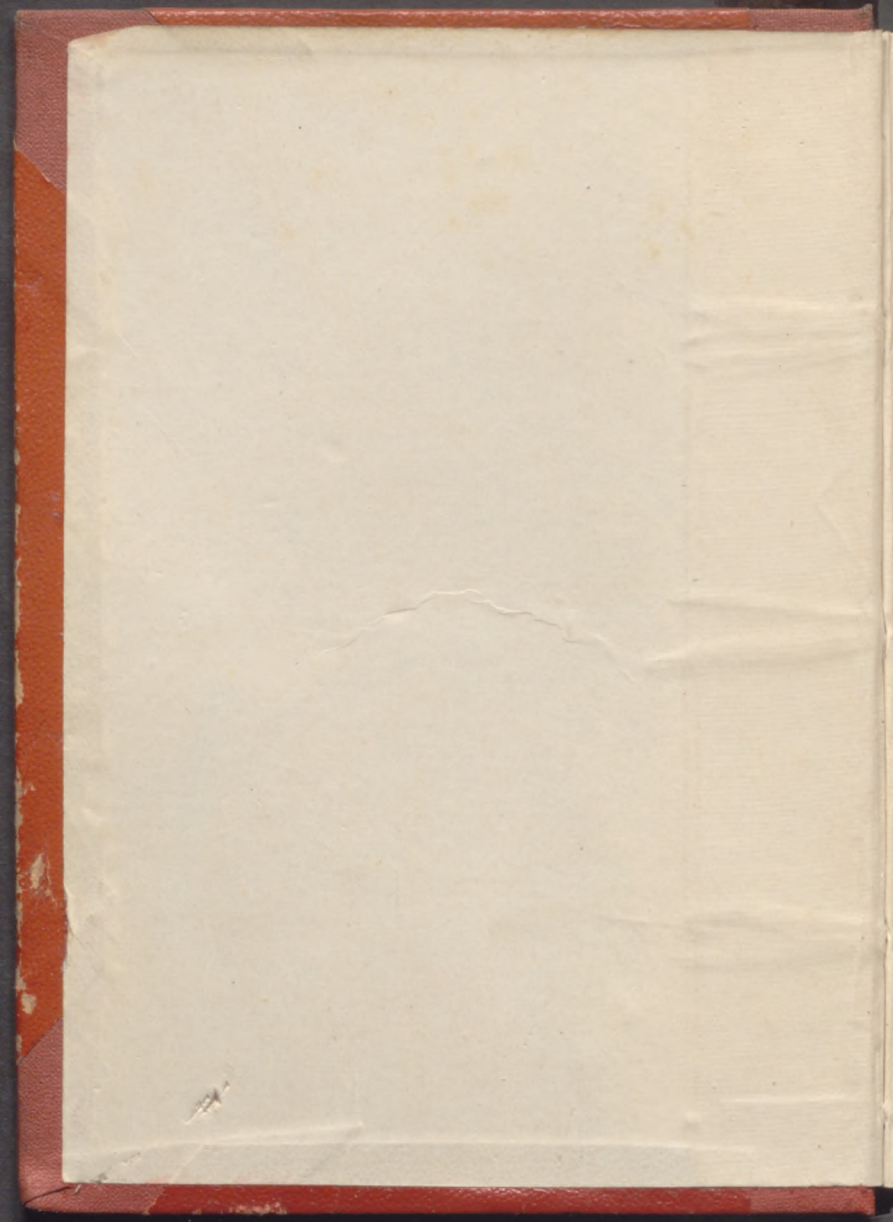


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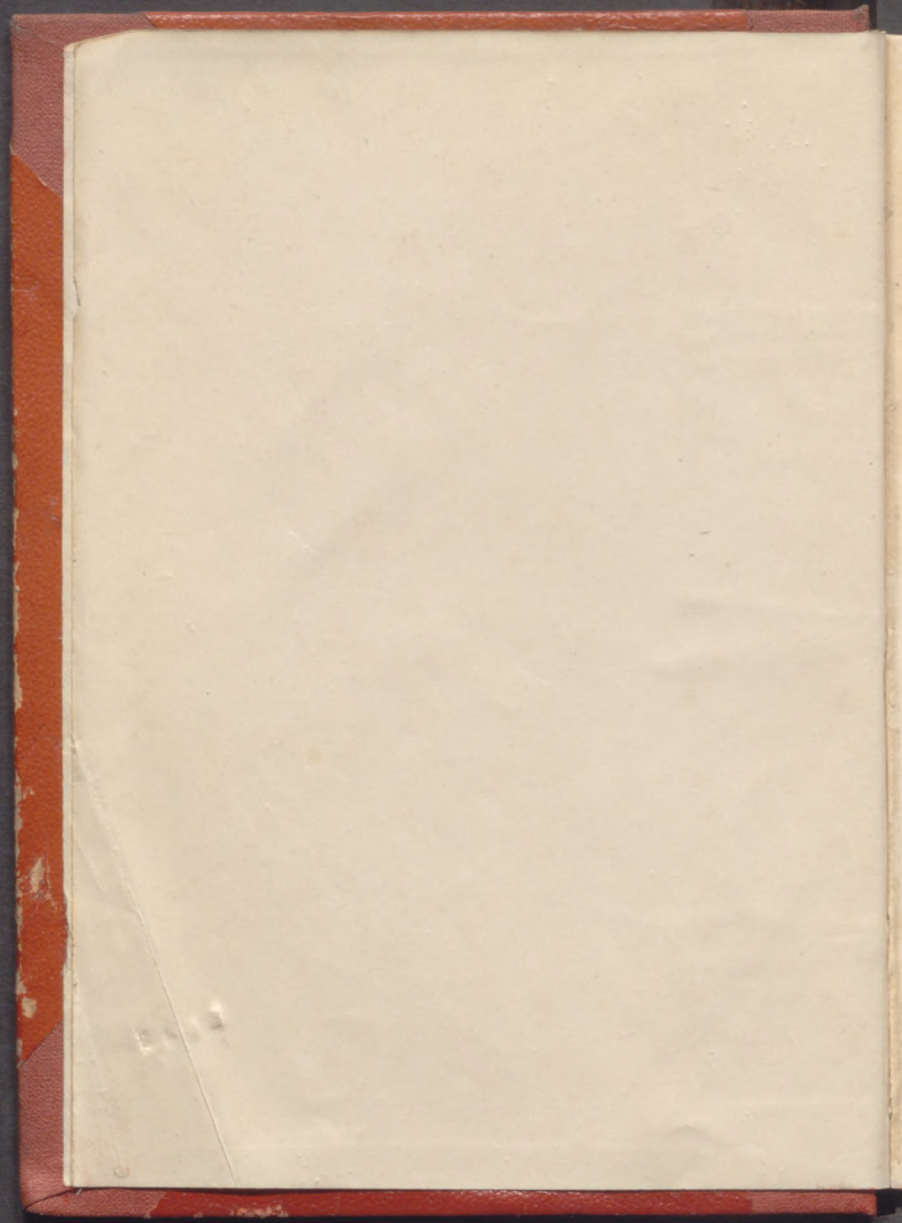
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LADY BABY



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COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2672.

LADY BABY BY DOROTHEA GERARD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

COLLECTION

BRITISH ANTHROPS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL

VOL. 21

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THE

1911

LADY BABY

A NOVEL

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1890.

LADY BABA

NOVEL

MORTHEA GERARD



VOL. I

LEAH BROWN & CO. CHICAGO

DEDICATED TO

MY KIND AND HONOURED FRIEND,

PRINCESS SOPHIE D'ARENBERG,

née PRINCESS D'AUERSPERG,

IN MEMORY OF MANY HAPPY HOURS.

PRINTED BY

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1885

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LADY BABY.

CHAPTER I.

THE WHISKY-TRAIN'S CRANK-AXLE.

"I sing no tale of high renown."

MR. CARBURY was just beginning drowsily to wonder whether his corner of the railway-carriage was or was not comfortable enough for a snooze, when the question was settled by his finding himself abruptly jerked out of it. Without emitting a single warning shriek or a single threatening groan, the train had suddenly stood stock-still. As he gathered himself together and let down the window, Mr. Carbury confessed to himself that nothing but the comfortable jog-trot pace by which for the last hour his patience had been so sorely tried, could have saved him from a severe shaking.

Other windows had been let down and other heads put out, but no one appeared to be in the least alarmed, or even particularly surprised; and the questions put to the guard, who was familiarly addressed as, "Eh, Sandy, man!" or "Hist! Sandy, lad," consisted solely of friendly "chaff." Somebody cheerily inquired whether the water was off the boil. Some one else wished to

know whether Mrs. Johnston's cow was on the line again, or whether it was Mrs. Wallace's bairn this time.

"Na, na!" said the imperturbable Sandy, after a little more wit had been aired, "it's no' the coo, and it's no' the bairn; it's jist the whusky-train's crank-axle gane wrang."

"Williams," said Mr. Carbury to his valet, who at a sign had hurried up, "find out what the whisky-train's crank-axle is, and how long it is going to keep us here."

Williams shot off, and presently returned with the following facts ascertained,—that there were several trucks laden with whisky-casks blocking the line; that the fresh engine could not be here for an hour, or— for Sandy declined to commit himself—"maybe twa"; that, owing to the want of an available siding, the passenger-train could do nothing to help the "whusky-train," and consequently nothing to help itself; but that (in Sandy's opinion) it did not after all matter much, as the station was only a hundred yards off. "Aweel," he had soothingly remarked in answer to the sharp questioning of the valet, "it's no' so bad either. There's no express behind us. I wudna be put aboot if I was you."

But Mr. Carbury, thus reported to, was by no means soothed. Though there might be no express behind them, there was one in front of them—or rather, there was the chance of catching the London mail at the junction, a close-run chance in the best of cases, but which the "whusky-train's crank-axle," and the hour's delay its breakdown entailed, had conclusively settled beyond all hope of redemption.

“Williams,” said Mr. Carbury wearily, as he descended from the carriage, “find out what’s to be done;” and as the agile Williams hurried off once more in search of some practical solution of the difficulty, Mr. Carbury, following more slowly, bent his mind to a dispassionate and disconsolate review of his situation.

He had been paying a visit in the south-east of Scotland, and was now on his way back to London; the station a hundred yards off was strange to him, he was not aware of knowing any one in the immediate neighbourhood, the afternoon shadows were beginning to grow long, and there was a night between this and the next train that was likely to be of any use. Such was the sum of his position; not at all pathetic, not at all affecting, calling for no depth of pity either from gods or men, and yet amply sufficient to test the meekness of a canonised saint. It had not even the dignity of an accident. It was like a shipwreck with the inconveniences but without the romance. Also it lacked the sympathy of fellow-suffering, for the rest of the travellers,—not more than a dozen in all,—were of the strictly local species, and to them the London train was a matter of indifference. By the time Mr. Carbury reached the station Williams had verified the worst features of the case, and had furthermore ascertained that there was no inn worth the name at the junction, while the “Kippendale Arms” at the village close by was reported to furnish decent accommodation. In the blackest of humours, Mr. Carbury therefore resigned himself to his fate. A wheelbarrow for his portmanteau was luckily forthcoming, and under the watchful superintendence of Williams it was presently despatched. As for him-

self, the short cut across the fields was recommended. It did not do for the wheelbarrow, on account of the stiles.

"But ye canna miss it," explained the rustic porter. "Ye've but to gang ahead till ye get to the bit plank ower the burn, and when ye've turned wast o' Mrs. Armstrong's hoose, ye'll tak' the path by Jock M'Clocharty's kail-yaird. Ony callant ye speir at on the way will show it ye; and when ye're past the wud, and hae gotten the kirk richt ahead o' ye——"

But the stranger, with a gesture of deprecation, had tossed a silver piece to the informant, and was walking off leisurely in the direction indicated.

"Looks gey furrin-like," remarked a bystander, staring after the tall figure of the traveller.

"His siller's English, onyway," answered the porter, pocketing his shilling.

Meanwhile Mr. Carbury was moodily pursuing his way, not troubling himself much to unravel the true meaning of the directions that had been given him.

Had he been impressionable to outward influences, surely the pure sunshine which had burst out after a long grey day could not have failed to coax him from his ill-humour. It was early spring, and there were lambs in some of the fields he passed through; but Mr. Carbury had never been able to see anything worth noticing in a lamb off a dish: he even kicked one of the innocent creatures that reflected too long before getting out of his path; and his frame of mind was so far from idyllic that a young heifer that came trotting up, confident and curious, was rewarded by a threatening

wave of his stick, which sent it back scampering to its companions.

His mind, at first occupied with gloomy anticipations of overdone beef and an understuffed mattress, soon turned bitterly to the instability of crank-axles; and so engrossed did he become in framing imaginary letters to the "Times" upon the subject, that when the end of the meadow brought him to an open gate, he walked straight in, heedless of his surroundings, and unconscious of trespassing. He had just reached the conclusion that the improvement in the system of crank-axles was one of the burning questions of the day, when his meditations were broken by an approaching sound. It was the sound of galloping hoofs.

He looked around him, and became aware that he was standing upon private ground. The galloping horse passed him at some little distance; he caught the glimpse of a red coat, and he remembered that this must be one of the latest, if not the last hunting-day of the season.

The ground which he had invaded was a long grass avenue, bordered on each side by clumps of rhododendrons, over whose heads the budding beeches and oaks stretched their arms protectingly. Looking back, he could see in the distance the open gate through which he had entered; looking forward, the broad green path seemed to lead straight to the foot of heather-clad hills, whose sweeping lines loomed coldly purple against the sky. In the grass at his feet the very first daisies were nestling; on the highest branch of the highest beech an enamoured blackbird was disburdening its heart to the echoes; while the setting sun, like a penitent miser on

his death-bed, was making the most of its last hour, and remorsefully trying to atone for its sins of avarice by a burnt-offering of the purest gold.

It was scarcely spring yet; it was only the hint of spring, the promise of that which was to follow, of the colour and perfume which still lay folded away in a million brown buds on the trees, or buried an inch deep under the fresh sod. It was the time when grass-blades are prized higher than roses will be in June, and when people still think it worth while to stoop for a daisy, or to stand still and listen when a bird is singing.

Mr. Carbury did not stoop for the daisy, he looked at the prospect and yawned; and again he wished that some one would invent a better sort of crank-axle.

"My ideas with regard to the characteristics of a kail-yard are somewhat unpronounced," he reflected, as he gazed about him; "but I'll take my oath that this is *not* Jock M'Clocharty's kail-yard. Why, here is another horse,—several other horses."

A stretch of low paling was visible to the right, and just as Mr. Carbury was in the act of turning to retrace his steps, a fine bay hunter, ridden by a white-whiskered, red-faced man, in hunting attire, appeared on the other side of the paling, cleared it with ease, and crossing the grass avenue, disappeared in one of the glades to the left. At the same moment another group of riders turned on to the avenue at a short distance off. These were two ladies, one mounted on a dark brown, the other on a singularly tall and powerful chestnut. A grey-haired groom followed.

"This is becoming a nuisance," thought Mr. Carbury,

as the horses vanished among the trees. "As yet I am unperceived, but presently, I suppose, I shall be taken up for trespassing. I wonder where I am? That stout woman on the chestnut strikes me as being not quite a novelty. I have seen her before, and I have seen her on horseback too, and yet I can't quite put a name to the face."

He had turned now, and was walking back towards the gate, when once more the sound of galloping hoofs fell on his ear, and there came tearing up the avenue towards him a riderless horse, wet with foam, and splashed with mud up to the girths. As the beast thundered past, shying violently at sight of him, Mr. Carbury perceived that one of the stirrup-leathers was broken, which had probably caused the rider's fall. The bridle had slipped forward, and threatened every moment to trip up the excited animal in a noose.

"Plenty of horses about, at anyrate," reflected Mr. Carbury, as he looked after the runaway. "Now I wonder whether Christianity or Humanity, or whatever they call the thing, demands that I should hunt up the unhorsed rider? Ten to one he is lying all of a heap somewhere in the neighbourhood, and his relatives, if they be such, seem to be on ahead. This is becoming more and more of a nuisance. I wish that confounded crank-axle had managed to stick together for a little longer!" And in a worse humour than ever, Mr. Carbury retraced his steps down the grass avenue, glancing now and then listlessly and ever more listlessly, to the right and to the left, among the trees for a sight of the dismounted rider. But his eye fell only on the tangles of last year's ferns, or upon the ghosts of dead hem-

lock, upright still after all the winter's storms. He had almost forgotten about the supposed victim, when there arose a commotion among the bushes beside him, a crackling of twigs, a bending of boughs, and the sound of heavy breathing. "Another horse, I suppose," he thought, resignedly, and stepped aside just as the shaggy black head of a pony emerged from among the bushes. In another moment the pony had struggled free of the branches, and Mr. Carbury now perceived that its rider was a girl, or, as it appeared to him, a child, in a rough home-spun riding-habit. She was bending forward in the saddle, and with one arm held above her face, was shielding herself from the branches which closed again behind her. As she reached the clear space she dropped her arm and her eyes fell full upon those of Mr. Carbury, who was standing aside to let her pass. She glanced at him in surprise, and was about to touch up her pony, when, as if struck with an idea, she reined it in rather sharply, close by Mr. Carbury's side, and asked, in a quick, peremptory tone—

"Did she pass this way?"

Mr. Carbury was stupid enough to say, "Who?"

He was not indeed a particularly stupid man, nor one easily flurried; but this young amazon's sudden appearance and imperious glance had quite swept from his mind the recollection of the runaway horse.

Transported just as she was, pony and all, to Rotten Row, she would doubtless have caused there more amazement than admiration. Nobody in London wore such long, full-skirted habits, nor such wide-brimmed hats, nor such thick gauntlet-gloves; but, in present surroundings, the careless and primitive equipment seemed some-

how wonderfully in place. Once, when Mr. Carbury was a very young man, he had seen an old print, with the title, "A Morning Ride." It represented the edge of a forest in the early morning, while a girl, mounted on a white palfrey, had evidently just drawn rein in the shade of the trees, and was leaning forward to pat a large dog which sprang up to be caressed. It might have been nothing but the shape of the hat, which now brought back that old print to Mr. Carbury's mind. He used to think then that the painter had made the hat by several inches too broad, and now the same thought crossed his mind. The shadow of the hat-brim was so deep that he could not even determine whether this child was pretty or not, whether he was addressing a blue-eyed or a brown-eyed damsel, a blonde or a brunette. He could see only that her small ear was flushed pink with exercise, that her glistening lips were parted, and that her cheek was round and fresh, as the rosebud which has just burst into sight.

As Mr. Carbury uttered his pointless "Who?" the curious and enigmatical child-amazon made a movement, which seemed to suggest that, if she had been on *terra firma*, she would have stamped.

"Who? Why, the mare, of course—a brown, with one white fore-leg, and a white face. Have you seen her?"

"Yes, she passed this way, looking rather wild."

"This way? Then why did you not catch her?"

"It did not occur to me," he candidly replied.

Again the amazon's stirrup gave an ominous click, and the impish-looking black pony, catching the infection from its mistress, champed at its bit, and eyed



Mr. Carbury through its tangled mane with a pair of impertinently bright black eyes.

"I suppose you can tell me, at least, which way she went? Up there? Thanks," she said, graciously but shortly, and, with a slight inclination of the head, she put her pony to a gallop, and left Mr. Carbury standing where he was, alone under the trees.

Mr. Carbury stood for some minutes hesitating, but at last he turned his face back again in his first direction, and renewed his progress up the avenue away from the gate—and this time with a rather less leisurely step. "I ought to be near to lend that child a hand, if necessary," he thought. "I wonder how old she is? She might be twenty in manner; but from what I saw of her face it belongs to the schoolroom; and as for her voice, it's straight from the nursery."

At that very instant the voice in question rang out among the trees, not fifty yards from him. "Suleika!" it called impatiently. "Suleika!" and the youthful rider appeared again, glancing about her from side to side under the branches, and this time visibly annoyed with what, judging from the state of the black pony's coat, must have been a lively chase.

"Do you not think the mare will have taken the straightest road to her stables?" suggested Mr. Carbury, when he was within speaking distance.

"No: the inner gate was shut, and that turned her back. I was close to her once,—I almost had her; ah! there again, beyond the birches. Now, Zet, let us have another try!"

"One moment, please," said Mr. Carbury, putting out his hand towards Zet's bridle. "If I might offer a

piece of advice, it would be to moderate the pace. Once let it come to galloping, and your pony cannot possibly try conclusions with that brown; but a little stratagem may do it. If you will trot round to the other side of the birch-clump quietly, I will cut off the retreat here, and between us, I think, we shall manage it."

The girl gave him one long steady look, as though weighing the advisability of accepting his help; but she ended by making a sign of assent, and trotting off towards the birch-clump.

There followed a breathless ten minutes, during which Mr. Carbury, with something that for him almost amounted to energy, and with varying turns of fortune, stalked the mare, much as he might have stalked a stag, and at the end of which he succeeded, by a sudden and very dexterous movement, in getting possession of the bridle.

The girl was sitting quite still on her pony when he brought up the now submissive brown.

"You did that beautifully," she said, with grave approbation. "You could not have done it more beautifully if you had dropped straight from heaven to help me; and, by the by, where *did* you drop from? I don't think I have ever seen you before. It can't have been the express intention of catching Suleika that brought you in here, so what was it that *did* bring you?"

"It was the whisky-train's crank-axle," answered Mr. Carbury.

"The what?"

And then Mr. Carbury told his sorrowful tale. She

listened attentively, but without showing any more surprise than the people in the train had done.

"Well, it is hard luck for you," she said at the end. "And I don't think you will get very much to eat at the village; but since you *have* to get there, it is a pity you did not take the right road instead of the wrong one. You are three miles out of the way now. I wonder how the matter is to be settled." She said this with an air of serious concern, as though the responsibility of the situation rested entirely upon her. "Perhaps the dogcart which has taken Nicky home could drive you to the village."

"Nicky?" repeated Mr. Carbury, struck with a recollection; "which Nicky?"

"My brother-in-law, Mr. Nicholas Craigtoun," replied the girl, drawing herself up in the saddle, and apparently displeased with the question.

"Nicky Craigtoun! The world is a small place after all. Craigtoun and I have been great chums in our day." And, as he spoke, Mr. Carbury suddenly became able to identify the face of the stout woman of whom he had caught a glimpse a little time ago. She was Lady Agnes Craigtoun, of course. He remembered now having seen her with her husband at the Blankshire races.

"A friend of Nicky's?" said the girl, in an altered and eager tone, while a bright smile showed her milk-white teeth. "Oh, then the difficulty disappears. Never mind the inn: I will take you home to Kippendale."

"But, really," began Mr. Carbury in some amazement, "I do not quite see that I can accept this kind

invitation; I know no one of the family except Craigtoun——”

“And myself,” she finished for him; “that is quite sufficient. Any one who is a friend of Nicky and Agnes’s, is also a friend of mine. You need not have the smallest scruples, Mr. —— By the by, perhaps you would not mind introducing yourself,” she added, with a return of her former quaint dignity of manner.

“Laurence Carbury,” said the stranger, gravely lifting his hat. She inclined her head with the same gravity.

“Thank you; that makes it all right. My name is Frances Bevan. Well, Mr. Carbury, have you made up your mind? Are you going to sleep at the Kippendale Arms or at Kippendale House?”

She had noted the indecision on his face, for he was asking himself whether this welcome but oddly given invitation was to be considered seriously or as a joke. If there had only been some one, an elder sister, or even a governess, by to ratify this strange child’s proposal, his mind would have been easier by far. He feebly suggested that his bags and his servant were at the village; but she disposed of that objection at once by saying she would have them fetched. He did not think they could be reclaimed in time for the dressing-gong; she considered this of no consequence whatever, —Nicky could lend him a spare dress-coat. “And I suppose you will be able to get into it without your servant for once.”

“I suppose so,” he said with a laugh, which, nevertheless, had a touch of dismay in it; for, to tell the truth, the prospect of appearing in a coat not measured

to his person was as little agreeable to his vanity as the prospect of putting it on without Williams at his elbow was agreeable to his indolence.

"You could even dine without a dress-coat for once," she added; "papa is not at all particular."

"Thanks, you are very kind," he murmured, in deeper amazement.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked, knitting her eyebrows. "We can't keep Suleika here much longer," for the brown was fidgeting again.

"But are you going to lead her all the way home?"

"Can you ride?" she asked him abruptly.

"Yes," he said, with a smile.

"But can you ride well?—very well? For if you can, and if you have quite made up your mind about coming back with me, the simplest plan would be for you to ride Suleika home. Only I had better tell you that she has a particular dislike to strangers, and also she kicks dreadfully and sometimes rears. That is the way she threw Nicky to-day, and you must know what a splendid seat he has."

Now it so happened that Mr. Carbury was particularly vain of his horsemanship, and that of late years he had rather lacked opportunities for displaying it. While she was speaking he had been examining the unimpaired stirrup, and, before she had done her sentence, he had swung himself into the saddle. Suleika, taken by surprise, plunged rather violently, but, after a minute, settled down. The curious child on the pony looked pleased, and led the way down the avenue. Though he had not formally accepted the invitation, Mr. Carbury, in mounting Suleika, had tacitly yielded.

"Are you very fond of riding?" asked his companion, as she watched him approvingly.

"I used to be."

"Then you ought to be still, for you really ride very well. I don't suppose you could break a horse as well as Nicky does; but your hand is just what it ought to be."

Mr. Carbury raised his hat with an air of mock gratification.

"If Suleika *should* throw you," she said presently, "your best plan will be to——"

"Get on again," he suggested, drily.

"Well, no; I think on the whole it would be wiser to make for the nearest tree. She is very savage at times with strangers."

As this reassuring piece of advice was uttered, the riders issued from between the trees and reached open ground. A great sweep of lawn lay before them, dotted with majestic beech-trees, which stood far apart and solitary, like kings that have turned hermits from weariness of the world. In the distance the green stretch was broken by the yet leafless woods, through whose depths the landscape-gardener's art had opened up many a delicious glimpse of softly rolling hills. To the left the ground fell away in gradual slopes; and somewhere far below and out of sight, the river was tinkling musically among the stones. And soon the house itself was disclosed—a tall, irregular, many-storeyed, many-gabled mansion. Bathed as it now stood in the evening sunshine, its long lines of terraces flooded with golden light, its many panes all aflame with the dying beams, Kippendale promised indeed to afford pleasanter

quarters than those which Mr. Carbury had but half an hour ago been despondently contemplating. As they cantered across the velvet lawn, scattering the browsing sheep to the right and to the left, and drawing nearer to the hospitably open hall-door, even an unobservant man could not fail to be aware of the many little signs of care and comfort, without which a place of this description will always miss the seal of perfection. The costly shrubs, carefully netted against the voracious rabbit, the well-tended grass, the brilliant ribbon of crocuses with which even at this early season the edge of the lawn was picked out, the blaze of hyacinths behind the panes of the conservatory—all these were little things in themselves, yet they served to produce a whole. Mr. Carbury did not scan these details; he was only aware that everything was in very good order and in very good style, and an undefined feeling of comfort began to take the place of his recent ill-humour. And when, just as the last glow of sunset had died down in the west, they drew up under the stone porch, and Mr. Carbury heard the crackle and saw the blaze of the welcome fire, whose light played along the seats and rugs of the entrance-hall, then the annoyance of his interrupted journey appeared to him in so very different a light, that he found himself mentally ejaculating, "I am glad that that crank-axle went wrong."

CHAPTER II.

A B C.

"Be your own palace, or the world's your jail."

"IF there is one thing I object to more than another," soliloquised Mr. Carbury, as he glared at himself somewhat tragically in the glass, "it is being made a guy of. I wish I knew the name of Craigtoun's tailor, in order to avoid him, and I wish I knew when Williams will turn up. Makes a fellow feel like something in a Christmas pantomime to be humps and bags all over this way; I hope to goodness they haven't a houseful! From all I know of them, I fancy they're a quiet set."

During the intervals of his unsatisfactory toilet, Mr. Carbury had been ransacking his memory for any scrap of information with regard to the family whose hospitality he found himself thus unexpectedly enjoying. He had the peerage pretty well at his finger-ends; but Lord Kippendale never brought his family to town for the season, and the very nature of his political opinions was unknown, so there was little to fix them in the memory of such a thorough Londoner as was Mr. Carbury. All that he could recall was that the present Lord Kippendale had succeeded his brother, who had died unmarried; that there were one son and several daughters, one of whom was the wife of Nicholas Craigtoun, with whom he had been at college. Then, as his memory freshened, Mr. Carbury recollected that whenever he had heard Lord Kippendale mentioned, it was as a "hard-riding Scotch peer," and M.F.H. in his

county. Presently, in the midst of a tussle with his tie, another circumstance occurred to his mind; he had heard this same hard-riding Scotch peer familiarly nicknamed "the Copper Earl," but whether as a skit upon his complexion, or as a reference to the source of his wealth, Mr. Carbury was not sure. He vaguely inclined to the latter theory: "but there is no such thing as Scotch copper," next occurred to him as a passing thought; "Lord Kippendale must have land elsewhere. Confound the thing!" and, abandoning all dim speculations, Mr. Carbury became absorbed in the more immediate necessities of the moment; for not only did the tie absolutely refuse to lie with that perfection of snowy smoothness which only Williams knew how to impart to it, but no amount of tugging and shifting could persuade Nicky's coat not to bulge up to Mr. Carbury's ears, "And, by Jove!" sighed the harassed man, "I have always laboured under the impression that my limbs were fully as long as those of my neighbours, but there positively seems no end to Craigtoun's sleeve. It will be a mercy if they are not given to personal remarks in this house," and Mr. Carbury made his way downstairs, grimly resolved to discourage the most distant approach to a smile by looking supremely and pointedly comfortable in Nicky's coat.

As yet he had only had a momentary glimpse of his host, who had appeared to be very hospitable, but very muddy, and who had shaken his hand violently and told him that he was "verra welcome," for Lord Kippendale's accent was not above an occasional lapse into a genial breadth of vowel. Of the other members of the family, with the exception of "Nicky," he had

seen nothing. As he was descending the wide staircase he heard some one, obviously a servant, apostrophising another in the depth of a passage with: "Have Lady Baby's tea-things been cleared away?" Mr. Carbury made an involuntary grimace, for children were his pet aversion. "So they deal in babies? What a pity! I hope they are kept out of the drawing-room." In the big entrance-hall, on which doors opened all round, a footman was trimming the fire. "The drawing-room?" said Mr. Carbury, at a loss for the right door. "Any one down yet?" he asked, as the servant showed the way. "No one but Lady Baby, sir." Mr. Carbury drew back apprehensively. "I asked the way to the drawing-room, not to the nursery," he muttered; but the footman, with the ghost of a smile upon his face, was holding the door open, and it was too late to retreat. The first big drawing-room was deserted, and would have been dark but for the shifting fire-light that made the crimson couches and hangings of the room look like bits out of a Rembrandt picture. Fitfully and fancifully a spot of bright gold alighted upon some polished surface, the corner of a gilt picture-frame, the bulging side of a china vase, or the round knob of a table-foot. Out of far-off dark corners bright objects twinkled dimly. The dreaded infant was not visible anywhere.

"I don't know a single fairy tale, and I have no sugar-plums in my pocket," sullenly thought Mr. Carbury, as he lounged across the big room and cast a rather fearful glance into the next apartment. There was no infant here either, but a young lady in a white silk dress was standing on a footstool before a mirror,

engaged in fastening a bunch of purple crocuses into the front of her bodice.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Carbury, afraid that his appearance had startled her. She looked at him quite composedly in the mirror, without turning her head or pausing in her arrangement of the flowers.

"Down already?"

The voice seemed familiar; but this only bewildered him, for he did not think that he had ever seen her before.

"Yes," he said, rather pointlessly; "I am down."

She turned round to look at him.

"What has made you so shy?"

"Nothing; I thought there was no one in the room—that is to say, I fancied there was a child here."

"A child?"

"Yes, a baby; or so I understood."

"Oh!" Her lips twitched for an instant; in the next she broke into a sudden, delicious, ringing laugh, and laughed for a full minute with her face hidden in her hands. But in the midst of it she drew up, as abruptly as she had begun, and stepped quite gravely off her footstool.

"I forgot you have had no introduction; but Lady Baby is quite used to introducing herself," and as she stood before him in the firelight, she dropped him a curtsey to the ground. At her words, Mr. Carbury's blindness vanished. In the tone and gesture he had recognised his acquaintance of the green avenue.

"It is rather a foolish name," she explained, as she came forward further into the light; "but we girls were all called 'Lady Baby' in turn, and as I was the last

it stuck to me. Most likely it will stick to me for ever." And she heaved a sigh of aggrivement.

"Most likely," thought Mr. Carbury, as he viewed her more closely. In spite of the respectable length of her white silk dinner-dress, which had evidently quite recently had the benefit of a let-down tuck, Lady Baby looked somehow as though she were only playing at being grown-up. Her slight figure wanted finish, though it was not without that grace which sometimes belongs to the very immaturity of early girlhood; her step, her glance, her smile, the roundness of her cheek, were still too evidently those of a child to satisfy a very severe critic of female loveliness; and yet the picture, such as it was, was little short of charming. In some undefined way she reminded Mr. Carbury of the April day which had just gone down in the west. Here also everything was promise, nothing fulfilment—everything was in bud, nothing in bloom. It was scarcely loveliness yet, but only a foreshadowing of loveliness which made her face sweet to look upon. In hair and complexion she was extremely fair, but her lashes were dark and sweeping, like those of a child, and in her blue eyes there shone that soft, dim, dewy lustre, which is like the first bloom on the flower, or like the last veil that still hangs between childhood's ignorance and life's realities. Her nose and chin were delicately pointed, which gave her an expression at once rebellious and imperious. Something of pride, too, there was in the curve of her short upper lip, and something of vehemence in the line of her deeply cut nostril. She looked like a child indeed, but like a child who has been used to have her own way and means to keep it;

whose rosy finger-tips have not often felt a chastening stroke, whose free and fearless glance knows nothing of the horror of penitential corners, and whose spirit has never quailed before such nursery tortures as dark cupboards and butterless bread to tea.

"She has not done growing yet," thought Mr. Carbury, "and her hair is not used to being pulled up in that fashion: it won't lie still, and yet she is prettier than I thought she was; but, bah! I never cared for unripe fruit."

The lights had been brought meanwhile, and the rest of the party appeared.

Lord Kippendale was a short spare man of near seventy, with thin iron-grey locks and dead-white whiskers; but the reassuring brick-red of his complexion, the vivacity of his manner, and the keen glance of his eye, virtually took twenty years off his age. He was one of those men who, without a spice of what is generally understood as bad temper, yet go through life in a state of irrepressible impatience. Everything moved too slowly for his taste, everybody was much too leisurely in their actions and too hesitating in their decisions. He was always looking at the clock to see whether the next hour was not going to strike; not that he had anything particular to do in the next hour, but simply because some want in his nature was hurrying him continually over the present and pressing him towards the future. He was for ever wanting to be at "the next thing." As an uncivil friend had once observed, "Kippendale is like a kettle continually on the boil."

His two married daughters, who always passed the

hunting season at Kippendale, were both present. The elder, Lady Agnes, whom Mr. Carbury had once or twice met, was a large, meek, sleek woman, a little on the shady side of thirty, who, according to rules, ought to have been handsome, and who yet somehow managed to be almost plain. She possessed quite an array of charms, which catalogued upon paper would have sounded overwhelming. She had good solid teeth, looking as though they were cut out of the most stainless ivory; she had good solid hair, carved apparently out of solid gold, and heaped in a hillock on her neck; she had perfectly rounded arms, and a flawless complexion. And yet she escaped being handsome, and conveyed only the impression of being genuine, and framed of the most sound and healthy, not to say expensive, materials. She rarely spoke except to agree with her husband, and yet more rarely acted except to obey him. If he was not at hand she would obey whoever else happened to be, *faute de mieux*. Round her throat Lady Agnes wore a single row of the very finest diamonds that Mr. Carbury had ever seen except among crown jewels. Perhaps it was the great advantage to which they were displayed which chiefly attracted his attention. On Lady Agnes's neck they looked as though laid out for inspection on a well-padded white satin cushion.

Lady Catherine Blashford, the second daughter, a widow of some years' standing, was of the same slender type of figure as Lady Baby, being only somewhat taller,—for Lady Catherine had long since done growing,—and she had the very same wavy flaxen hair; but her features were sharper, and her complexion had

begun to fade. She was pretty still, in a way, pretty and disconsolate, and matters were so arranged about her that she would not have been pretty if she had not been disconsolate. It was the slight but suggestive disorder of her hair (no one had ever seen Lady Catherine's hair quite smooth), the droop at the corners of her mouth, and the appealing look in her eyes, always apparently on the point of filling with tears, which made her pretty. If she had been cheerful, she would have been quite commonplace. But nature had guarded against this by giving her an unlimited power of being disconsolate about anything or everything. She was capable of being unhappy about an ill-starched cuff, and of appearing inconsolable over a broken boot-lace.

"Nicky" Craigtoun, Lady Agnes's husband, was the only other member of the family present, for the son, Lord Germaine, was away from home. Craigtoun, as the borrower of Craigtoun's coat knew to his cost, was an abnormally big and abnormally broad-shouldered man, with the neck of a bull and the muscles of a gladiator. Regarded as a gladiator, he would, no doubt, have come up to the mark; but regarded as an English gentleman, he was somewhat less satisfactory. There was a suggestion of coarseness about his features, and people who saw him for the first time had a way of shrinking back nervously, as if expecting him to bite. But for this poor Nicky was not responsible; it was the construction of his jaw which forced him to show his teeth, whether he wanted to bite or no, almost like a thorough-bred bulldog, which might, after all, be the best-natured creature in the world.

At dinner, where Mr. Carbury found himself seated next to Lady Baby who presided with great composure at the head of the table, the subject of Nicky's fall formed the chief topic of conversation. Nicky himself sat by in sulky silence, for he was not used to having falls. Mr. Carbury took little part in the talk; there had been a time when he had liked to shine in conversation, but nowadays he did not care to exert himself so far. Besides, he was ruffled and preoccupied. Try as he would, he could not banish from his mind the consciousness of those humps and bags which he had seen in the mirror up-stairs; he could not forget that there was a black cloth sausage rolled across his shoulders, and a white linen cavern shielding his chest; and when seated at table and engaged with his soup, he could not fail to be painfully reminded of the length of Craigtoun's arms as compared to his own. A shy man would perhaps have suffered more, at any rate he would have suffered differently; but though shyness was foreign to Mr. Carbury's nature, there were other elements composing it which rendered the torture very exquisite indeed. While something in the construction of his mind made him acutely aware of every separate crease on each of his sleeves, something else made him morbidly dread his state of mind being detected; and this dread was only deepened by the instinctive and absolute conviction that all eyes were fixed upon his devoted person. The mixture of these sentiments produced a sort of gloomy defiance of attitude. Not for worlds would he have any one guess the depth of suffering which some inches of superfluous cloth were capable of causing him.

Lady Baby, puzzled by this gloomy defiance, watched him furtively. She had made one or two vain attempts to draw him out. A discussion about railway accidents had failed to animate him; he exhibited supreme indifference as to politics; even the hunting-field, which Lady Baby generally considered infallible, had produced no effect.

"It is not shyness, certainly," she reflected, as she ate her soup. "I wonder if it is stupidity. I should like to know what his tastes are: he must have tastes. Ah, I have it! I shall put him through his alphabet."

This alphabetical system was one of Lady Baby's favourite resources in cases like the present. It consisted in choosing topics by the alphabet in steady progression; and it was generally to be counted on that somewhere about M or N, often even by C or D, some congenial subject was hit upon, which, so to say, floated the conversation.

"Have you ever been to Athens?" asked Lady Baby, turning to Mr. Carbury.

"To Athens?" he answered, rousing himself. "Oh yes; very often."

"What is it like?"

"Very like every other place; there are houses, and there are people. Some of the people have red caps, and most of the houses have flat roofs! but it isn't a bit more amusing than London, I assure you, only a little further off."

Lady Baby appeared to reflect for a moment, and then resumed.

"How do you like Miss Braddon's novels?"

"Miss Braddon?" repeated Mr. Carbury, in some

slight surprise at the change of topic. "I scarcely know, it is so long since I have read any."

"There are lots that I like better than hers," went on Lady Baby; "for instance, Ouida."

"You read Ouida?" said Mr. Carbury, with just the ghost of a startled look upon his face.

"Of course I do, as fast as they appear. I could read Ouida all day and all night. Couldn't you, Mr. Carbury?"

Mr. Carbury said that he didn't think he could.

"Then what could you read all night? Who is your favourite author? Don't you find novels interesting?"

"I am so tired of them," said Mr. Carbury, indifferently; "they're all exactly alike."

Her face fell. "I am afraid he is not literary," she said to herself.

"Please tell me all you know about crocodiles," she presently began. "I hear there is one in the menagerie that is coming to the village next month. They are beginning to put up planks already, for it's to be a circus as well—a 'dramatic equestrian entertainment,' I believe, is what the playbills call it. I am so glad they have got a crocodile! In the last novel I read the hero was eaten by a crocodile in Egypt, and since then it has been one of my greatest wishes to see a crocodile."

"Really! I am afraid you will be disappointed. One can't quite fancy the Nile without them; but to look at they are nothing but an ugly lump of brown leather, not in the least interesting."

"Then you have been on the Nile? How exciting such travels must be!"

"Perhaps so," civilly assented Mr. Carbury, not looking in the least excited.

I have found him out now," thought Lady Baby; "he is a great traveller,—though, to be sure, he didn't seem to care much about Athens. He must be something, after all; everybody is something." Then aloud—"What other places have you been to?"

"Oh, a great many," said Mr. Carbury abstractedly, for he was just then endeavouring furtively to hitch up his right sleeve to a more convenient angle.

"You will find it a comfort to get into your own coat again," said Lady Baby, catching sight of the manœuvre, and merely by way of saying something civil, for, to tell the truth, the deficiencies in Mr. Carbury's attire had up to this moment passed completely unobserved by her.

"Oh, thanks," said Mr. Carbury hastily, feeling this sympathetic notice to be just the last drop in his cup, "it doesn't in the least signify. The coat does very well," he added, with an extra touch of defiance. "You—you were asking about the places I had been to?"

"Yes; you seem to have travelled a great deal. I think you English travel more than we Scotch. There are some of the people in this county who have never even been over the Border, and yet we are within a drive of England, you know. By the by, you *are* English, are you not?"

"Yes, I *am* English," he answered, with a rather more violent emphasis than the occasion seemed to demand. "What else did you take me for?"

"Oh, I don't know. My first idea was that you might be a Frenchman or an Italian; but when I saw

you catch that horse, I felt pretty sure you could not be a foreigner."

"Really!" Mr. Carbury flushed with what seemed to be annoyance, while at the same time he laughed with what might have been gratification; but the laugh was forced, and annoyance evidently had the upper hand.

"No," thought Lady Baby, "he is not an enthusiastic traveller, and he certainly is very touchy, though I can't make out what it is about. I wonder what would be a safe subject? Let me see. Where am I in the alphabet? If he does not care for crocodiles, I am afraid dragons will not do, nor ducks, nor dolphins; devils might have a better chance, but I can't use bad language at table on account of the servants' morals." Her eyes wandered round the table in search of a subject, and by chance they alighted on the diamond necklace which her sister wore. Mr. Carbury happened to be looking in the same direction.

"You are looking at Agnes's diamonds," said Lady Baby; "are you a judge of diamonds?"

"Well, no; one can't help getting rather bored with diamonds after a time; they are such aggressive things. Your sister's are very fine stones," he added, as a sort of reparation for his too obvious indifference.

"They are fine, but they are not my sister's."

"Whose, then?"

"They will belong to Germaine's wife, my brother, you know; but he is not married yet, so Agnes wears them in the meantime. They have a history too, quite a tragical history. Do you like tragical histories, Mr. Carbury?"

"I don't mind them."

"Well, then, thirty years ago, when papa's brother was still alive——"

"Baby!" interrupted Lady Catherine, "you are not going to tell that story now, surely?"

"Frances!" said Lord Kippendale, across the table, "I beg you to recollect!" and he glanced significantly towards the servants.

"Oh well, I forgot," said Lady Baby, colouring; "it will do as well at dessert. Can you wait till dessert, Mr. Carbury?"

"I will try," he said, with his jaded smile. Some dim and far-off recollection had awakened in his mind; something about a diamond robbery in connection with the Bevan family, which had made a sensation at the time. He could not remember what the circumstances had been, but he knew that they had been peculiar. At any rate, he felt quite able to hold out till dessert, or possibly till Doomsday, without ascertaining the details of the story. Sensational robberies were quite a commonplace, and he was very tired of diamonds.

But by dessert-time Lady Baby had forgotten about the promised story, for another topic had arisen. Just as she was casting about for her next alphabetical subject, and hesitating between the rival merits of Esquimaux and earthquakes, her sister Catherine unconsciously came to her aid by observing, in a tone of most becoming dejection—

"What on earth am I to say in answer to Maud Epperton's letter?" The appeal was made to no one in particular, but to every one in general, and her pretty

helpless eyes wandered from face to face, as though in search of advice.

"That will do for E," thought Lady Baby; "it is better than either Esquimaux or earthquakes."

"Do you know Miss Epperton?" she asked Mr. Carbury.

He looked almost amused. "I should think I do. One can't help knowing Miss Epperton."

"Do you know her as well as Athens, and crocodiles, and the Nile?" she asked, with unconscious irony.

Instantly the cloud descended again on Mr. Carbury's face. "I know her pretty well," he said stiffly, eyeing Lady Baby somewhat askance. Could it be possible—no, surely it could not be possible—that the child was making fun of him?

"She is very fond of country life, is she not?"

"Country-house life, I daresay, yes."

"And very glad to get away from town life when she can?"

"There is a town called London that she is very glad to get to when she has a chance."

"But she doesn't talk as if she cared about London much, and she must be fond of the country—she says so in her letter to Catherine this morning. Catherine is the only one of us who knows her. She wants to come here."

"Miss Epperton wants to come to Scotland *now*?" asked Mr. Carbury, with the first genuine interest he had shown that day; "surely you must be mistaken. Why, I have not known her miss a season for years."

"I knew it!" cried Lady Catherine, who scented a

grievance on the instant. "I have only met her once or twice at Bournemouth, but I felt quite sure she was a worldly creature; and what are we to do with a worldly creature at Kippendale? I wish some one would tell me how to answer her letter!"

"Why, say 'Yes,' of course," broke in Lord Kippendale, taking up the question of the moment rather hotly, as was his wont. "And, for goodness' sake, say it in as few words and as few minutes as you can. Don't take an hour to make up your mind on which part of the page you'll begin. Eh? What's wrong? Any more difficulties? For goodness' sake, let us consider the matter settled."

"But, papa, please don't be so dreadfully cheerful about it," pleaded poor Lady Catherine; "don't you hear that she is just wild about gaiety, and we have none to give her? I can't imagine why she is coming. Does she ride, Mr. Carbury?"

Mr. Carbury was quite sure that she didn't ride.

"If she doesn't ride," pronounced Nicky, with oracular decision, "she will be a bore;" and Lady Agnes considering that she had received her orders, immediately began to regard Miss Epperton as a bore.

"If she doesn't ride," remarked Lady Baby, "it won't be easy to amuse her. She can feed the horses if she likes, and take the puppies out for exercise, and I can show her the kennels; it is all I can do for her. But I hope she will come all the same, for I want to see a regular fashionable girl."

"Of course she will come," said Lord Kippendale, decisively; "what is the use of wasting words over it? Why, Kate, lass, where are your notions of Scotch

hospitality? For goodness' sake, why shouldn't the poor girl come if she has a fancy for rest and change? Isn't that the way she puts it in her letter, eh? There's nothing to blether or haver over that I can see. Let's consider the point settled, and get on to the next thing. Will you pass me the figs, Craigtoun?"

"She will turn the whole house inside out," sighed Catherine, softly. "I know she will."

"Why shouldn't she come?" reflected Mr. Carbury. "Yes; but why *should* she come? She has taken her aim, no doubt; but I confess I don't see the mark this time."

Mr. Carbury was puzzled. For more than half-a-dozen—in fact, it was nearer a dozen—years past, Miss Epperton had been one of the standing features of London society. Mr. Carbury had met her more times than he had memory for,—in drawing-rooms, in theatres, in the Park, at kettle-drums, and at Academy openings. He had passed her on crowded staircases at night, and come across her at morning concerts. Many a polo-match had he watched with her at Hurlingham, and many a lobster-salad had he handed up to her at race-day luncheons. He knew what she was like in her winter furs, and how she looked in summer muslins. He had shaken hands with her some thousands of times, in some thousand different situations; he had walked with her, danced with her, flirted with her, and admired her; but he had never been in love with her, even in the slightest degree. Perhaps for this reason they had been all the better friends; for every one knew that Miss Epperton could marry only a rich man, and every one knew also that Mr.

Carbury was not rich, or at least not rich enough. That a girl whose sole object in life was understood to be the securing of a husband with an establishment, should of her own free will come to bury herself in Scotland, just as the season was beginning to wax towards its glory,—this appeared to Mr. Carbury to cry very loudly for explanation. Even after he found himself in the solitude of his room that night, his mind continued to run with a sort of vague wonder upon the question of Miss Epperton's motive. That she had a motive, was as certain as that two added to two produces the sum of four. He had never known her do the most trivial act without a motive, and he had known her long. As regards that idyllic yearning after rustic repose before mentioned, Mr. Carbury, figuratively speaking, snapped his fingers at it.

“But who can it be?” he argued, as, having dismissed Williams, he lay back luxuriously in an easy-chair, before the still smouldering fire. “She is certainly coming down here after somebody. *Cherchons l'homme*, by way of a change. It can't be Lord Germaine, for he is a boy, six years her junior, I should think; and besides, it is not likely they have ever met. I don't think she is quite desperate enough yet to try her hand on the old man. It can't be me, because I am not supposed to be here, and then she is too clever not to know that I see through her. Oh no! I am safe. After an acquaintance of such long standing, we are not likely to make any mistakes about each other.”

“Long, very long,” he muttered presently, “a great many years. I am getting old. Heavens! how out of

date I felt while that child was chattering away to me! She can't be more than sixteen, I imagine—sixteen at the outside.”

He remained for a minute staring fixedly into the fire. His thoughts had taken another turn; he was troubling himself no longer about Miss Epperton and her motive. After a minute he rose and walked slowly towards the toilet-table, then stood still and gazed abstractedly at his reflection in the glass.

It was the face of a world-worn man, worn before his time. Years, no doubt, had something to do with that sunken look about his temples and those deeply ploughed lines about his mouth, but years alone could not have done it. Of good looks, strictly speaking, there remained but the gauntest and grimmest of wrecks; but something in the type of his countenance, or the cut of his deepset eyes, or the turn of his head, or the carriage of his tall figure, made it absolutely impossible for him to go through life unnoticed, even had he so wished it. He did not happen to wish it very much, and though there were moments when he resented this notice, he would probably have found its cessation far the greater trial of the two.

Rather peculiar circumstances had surrounded his childhood. Strange though it may sound, boundless unselfishness and bottomless good-nature—not his own—had been his undoing. Good luck or bad luck had fated him to grow up the centre-piece of an admiring circle of sisters, all his seniors, and all—so also a freakish fate would have it—as remarkable for their uniform plainness of feature as he was for the somewhat showy style of his good looks. What might yet

have been wanting to put the crown to the work was supplied by the injudicious tenderness of a widowed mother, to whom this late-born, brilliant boy quite outweighed his three colourless and featureless sisters. In her eyes, as well as in those of the ungrudging sisters, his mere existence was a standing credit to the family, and everything which could make that existence smoother and pleasanter, even only by a shade, it was no more than the family's duty to procure. Upon this principle, therefore, his education was conducted, and in this way a positive mania of egotism was scientifically fed up, and vanity was nursed with as tender a care as though it had been the most precious and delicate of hothouse plants, and answered so well to the nursing, that soon, with its stealthily spreading roots, and with its luxuriant tendrils, it strangled, one by one, every single seed of good which tried to live within him. The showy style of looks clung to him, even after boyhood's bloom was gone. If a clear olive skin and a pair of very remarkable black eyebrows could do it, the man Carbury was no less a credit to his family than the child Carbury had been. The family, at least, continued to think so, despite a certain sprinkling of hostile remarks; for this particular class of good looks, though it met with universal notice, did not meet with universal approval, and, though it always made people stare, did not always make them admire. While something about him appealed to the imagination of the fair sex, this same something seemed to provoke the criticism—or perhaps it was the jealousy—of his brother men. Women described his appearance as “romantic,” men as “operatic.” One man had been

heard to compare him to "an Italian baritone, masquerading in plain clothes," but that man had been of stumpy build and flabby complexion.

Carbury's own mental attitude towards his own looks was of the most complex. He was vain of them, with a sort of sneaking vanity which dreaded detection as morbidly as it feared ridicule, but which nevertheless was very intense. Their possession caused him as much anxiety as satisfaction. In any case the consciousness of their existence was, in one shape or another, seldom absent from his mind. His personal tastes were of the most cultured and fastidious, and it is quite possible that in any one else he would have found that it was almost too gaudy, scarcely good style in fact, to have eyebrows so broadly marked that they might have been laid on with chalk, or such very brilliantly white teeth, or such very aggressively black hair, that lay about his temples in the thickest of jetty waves. It was all just a trifle overpowering; it wanted distance, it almost wanted footlights. On occasion it would have been all very well, but the display of all this holiday style of beauty was too much for the week-day life of this workaday world. No one felt this latter truth more than the admiring family circle. Work! It was not to be thought of; he was a great deal too ornamental to be allowed even to dream of making himself useful. He might leave that to the plain people. And he did leave it to the plain people, though not without a few, a very few, uncertain efforts at resistance, born of some faint feeling of shame, or of some fibre of healthy ambition which had miraculously survived within him. It was wasted pains. He had no chance against the

demoralising atmosphere of self-sacrifice which surrounded him; and, giving up the unequal struggle, he let his arms sink to his sides, and resigned himself to a life of idleness. But even idleness, unless accompanied by imbecility or sickness, must take some shape. A man in full possession of his mental powers, and of a physically vigorous youth, must either work or play. Since he was not suffered to work, and since, after all, there are twenty-four hours to be filled up in the day, Carbury took to play of all sorts. Society came first, varied by a very free pursuit of equestrian and field sports. These latter he cultivated assiduously, not only because, at that time of his life, he enjoyed them very keenly, but also because of some instinctive conviction that to prove himself ostentatiously British in this respect would be the best refutation of the Italian baritone idea, of which all the time he was angrily conscious. But he soon grew tired of that which he drank of in such full and unchecked draughts; and then he tried Art, and then he tried books, and he tried dice, and he tried politics. The wildest romance and the driest science were all experimented upon; and when these too had palled, travelling had its turn, to the ineffable grief of his sisters, who worked their fingers sore in equipping him for his wanderings as no traveller had ever before been equipped, and who knitted thick vests for the cold countries, and sewed muslin scarves for the hot countries, as well as they could see for the tears that dimmed the stitches. But the novelty of travelling wore off, like the novelty of everything else, and he returned home, to find that the interests which he had left because they tasted so

flat only tasted rather flatter for the spell of disuse. And meantime his fortune had melted and his youth had faded, and Laurence Carbury found himself a worn-out man on the verge of forty, sick to death of the world in which he moved, yet finding it intolerable to move in any other; sick to death of life itself, with a withered face which many suns had tanned and many passions deeply marked, and with eyes that had grown almost as irresponsible as dimmed and blinded mirrors, worn away, as it were, by the many things that have been reflected on their surface,—the many landscapes and cities and flowers and trees, the many beautiful pictures, and the many beautiful women that had cast their images there. Such as he was even now, he was a man whom few people passed without turning their heads to take another look at, or asking instinctively, "Who is he?" In his way he was almost as striking as in the days when he had uneasily wondered whether, after all, his teeth were not a shade too white, and his hair a shade too black. Too black! Ah, well! time had altered that at any rate; but even his hair had not turned grey as other people's do; and the faint silver sprinkling, contrasting with the black of his eyebrows, altered the character of his face without making it less remarkable.

The fortunes of his mother and his three sisters (who had all remained unmarried) were virtually at his disposal; and this, together with the wrecks of his own, enabled him to live in comfort, even comparative luxury; so it can scarcely be said that he palpably missed the money he had squandered. Every interest and instinct within him was deadened, except the instinct of that

insensate egotism which coloured for him every inch of the world. Seldom, very seldom nowadays, was he visited by any of those self-questionings which had disturbed his youthful mind. Only now and then, at very rare intervals, something like the far-off echo of a voice would faintly stir some shadowy feeling of regret for his wasted life; sometimes, as to-night, the sight of a very young face, or the radiant innocence of a pair of blue eyes, would touch him, as the memory of the first spring day touches those that stand in mid-autumn; and in those moments even his supreme self would totter, and his soul within him would cry rebelliously—"O God! (if there be a God) can I have done well? Can this be the whole of life? Is there not something beyond?"

But those moments were few and far between; the mood was wont to pass rapidly, and it passed rapidly now. As he turned from the glass, it wanted no more than the chance sight of Nicky's coat, hanging over a chair-back, to change the current of his thoughts; and instead of his wasted life, it was the galling recollection of his recent appearance in that garment, which formed Mr. Carbury's last waking thought that night.

CHAPTER III.

A BORDER RAID.

"England and us have been lang at feud."

LORD KIPPENDALE'S hatred of anything in the shape of procrastination, and his anxiety to be at "the next thing," led to Miss Epperton's appearance at Kippen-

dale only two days after the reception of her letter. The train which brought her from the south arrived a little later in the day than the one by which Mr. Carbury had found himself left stranded, but it joggled along at just the same easy pace. Miss Epperton did not lean back in her corner with closed eyes as Mr. Carbury had done; for, in the first place, it was a third-class carriage, and the corner was not a tempting one for lounging in; and, in the second place, she had discovered that her glove wanted mending, and it would take her all her remaining time to put in the needful stitches. A torn glove would have accorded ill with the perfect neatness of the travelling-cloak which fitted close to her slim and elegant figure, or with the faultless sit of the plain black hat which surmounted her shining braids of hair. An uncharitably keen-eyed person might have pointed out that the cloak had certainly been turned, and that the hat had probably been reshaped more than once; but, to the ordinary observer, the things were worn with a certain easy grace that disarmed criticism.

In the intervals of stitching her glove, Miss Epperton took a delicate sniff at her bottle of salts. She was not alone in the carriage. A noisy farmer and a snuff-taking mechanic occupied the further end of the compartment; for Miss Epperton had been unable to spare the necessary half-crown tip for the guard. Her head was aching a little, and every tone of the farmer's bucolic roar went through it like a knife; but she looked neither morose nor sour. She only looked very tired, and at the same time sensibly and courageously resigned to her fate.

As they neared the station—the glove by this time being rebuttoned—she took down her bag and small bundle of wraps from the net, and then, catching sight of the footman on the platform, she drew sharply back until they had glided past him. In the next minute the passengers were descending, and while the footman made a rush for the first-class carriages, Miss Epperton, deftly gathering up her slender hand-baggage, leapt lightly to the ground, and presently James, looking about him in bewilderment for the tall, dark, young lady who had been described to him, became aware that the very young lady required was standing calmly and coolly on the platform, with her bag by her side.

“From Kippendale?” she said suavely. “You missed me, I suppose; my box is in the van.”

The whole little manœuvre was executed with an ease and a neatness which spoke of long practice; and after all, it was not in the least necessary that James should know by what class this new visitor had travelled.

When Miss Epperton alighted at the door, and for the first time set foot on the threshold of Kippendale House—and it turned out later to have been a memorable day—the whole party happened to be gathered together in the entrance-hall, knocking the balls about the billiard-table which stood in the centre.

“We are not all strangers,” said Lady Baby, doing the honours of the house, when the first flurry of introduction and greeting was over; “there is some one else here whom you know besides Catherine,—a friend of yours. He has only been here two days.”

“A friend of mine?” repeated Miss Epperton, in an extremely melodious voice, as she turned expectantly

towards the dark corner where Mr. Carbury was putting away the billiard-cues.

"And old friend, Miss Epperton," said he, advancing to shake hands with her, and watching with a sort of languid curiosity to see what effect the sight of him would have upon her. It did not seem agreeable. The expectant light on her face vanished, and in its place came a look of vexation, swift but unmistakable.

"Oh, Mr. Carbury, of course; but I did not know you were in Scotland. Is not this rather hard upon London?"

"Scarcely as hard as your absence will be, Miss Epperton."

She bit her lip, and then said hurriedly, "It is quite a pleasant surprise to see you."

"Surprising it may be, but pleasant it is not," thought Mr. Carbury, as he noted her forced smile. "What your little game is, my fair husband-hunter, I do not know; but it is quite evident that you would rather have played it without any 'old friend' looking on. She expected to see some one else when she turned; I was distinctly a disappointment: well, time will show! I almost hope they will keep me on here to see the sport."

And there seemed every prospect of his being "kept on." There was no question yet as to his resuming his interrupted journey. Since, as he confessed, he had nothing particular to do in London, there was no reason for hurrying south. The fact of his being an acquaintance of Nicky's seemed sufficient recommendation for his social character, in Lady Baby's eyes at least, whose will ruled the household, and who looked up to Nicky

with enthusiastic admiration, as to a wonderful elder brother whose power of muscle would have been sufficient to tame anything that could be saddled and bridled, short perhaps of a zebra. As for Lord Kippendale, as soon as he had seen Mr. Carbury sit on horseback and take a fence, he refused to hear an immediate departure spoken of, and insisted on considering a long visit to Kippendale as a thing sealed and settled, over which neither time nor words need be wasted.

It was well that Mr. Carbury's curiosity was more of a desultory than of a devouring sort, for during the first forty-eight hours, neither Miss Epperton's manner nor conversation afforded the slightest clue to the possible motive of her visit. To all appearances it was neither more nor less than the harmless desire for change of air spoken of in her letter. That dangerous thirst for amusement, of which Lady Catherine had talked with such apprehension, had as yet not showed itself. There were no symptoms whatever of the house being turned either upside down or inside out. She was a trifle pale, a trifle languid, quite unobtrusive, and even easily amused; equally ready to feed the horses or to join Lady Baby in taking two young and very foolish foxhound puppies out for their daily exercise, and helping to control their vagrant and unsteady conduct.

"I can't make it out at all," said Lady Catherine, much distressed at seeing everything go so smoothly; "I have always heard that she is thoroughly worldly, and there she was yesterday helping to plan the arrangement of the annuals in the flower-garden, just as though she were really fond of flowers. I thought she was going

to be supercilious and disagreeable, and make us all feel uncomfortable."

"Cheer up, Kate," said Lady Baby, laughing; "she may make us all very unhappy yet. It is the vocation of all the handsome dark people in the world to make all the plain fair ones unhappy; they do it in every novel. And, O Kate! *isn't* she beautiful?"

Lady Baby's own beauty belonging to the fair and irregular order, led her passionately to admire all dark and regular beauties, and at the very instant of their meeting she had decided that Miss Epperton's face was far the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in her life. As a piece of delicate and almost pathetic pallor, the face, indeed, when seen in a favourable light and at a favourable moment, was one which might well have enchained the fancy of a severer critic than Lady Baby. Searching daylight was apt to reveal marks of wear about the eyes and mouth, just as sharp-eyed people might detect the same marks about her hats and gowns; and when the searching daylight was ungentle enough to lend its aid to the sharp-eyed people, then not only the marks of wear became revealed, but also the efforts which had been made to repair them. But of this Lady Baby noticed nothing; indeed it is probable that such a thing as *poudre de riz* was not even known to her by sight. She saw only that Maud Epperton had the most beautiful dark eyes and the most beautiful dark hair, so dark that it might have been taken for black except for a certain luminous warmth shed over it, and for the rich depth of its shades, richer and deeper than the shades which even the most magnificent black hair can ever boast of. And in a vague way Lady Baby felt

too that her new friend was not only to be admired but was also to be pitied; that though her eyes were so beautiful they were not peaceful, and though her smile was so brilliant it was not happy, and the awe she had expected to feel of "the regular fashionable girl," was softened into something more like sympathetic interest.

It was on the third day of Miss Epperton's visit that Mr. Carbury's curiosity got its first taste of satisfaction. Strolling up to the tea-table that afternoon, he found Lady Baby serving out, together with the bread-and-butter, various items of information concerning their neighbours in the county; from which Mr. Carbury concluded that Miss Epperton, who was sitting by in a listening attitude, had deemed it time to show some active interest in her surroundings.

"And then there are the Frazers," Lady Baby was saying as Mr. Carbury came up; "but they are always either ill or gone abroad to get well. And then there are the Smarts—seven girls, I think, or is it eight?"

"Oh," said Miss Epperton, rather blankly, "you don't seem to be very lucky in neighbours. And are all the people who have not got seven daughters, or who are not gone abroad to get well, out of driving distance?"

"All those in the county are—though there is another place over the Border which is quite within reach as far as distance goes; but—we don't go there much."

"Don't you?" Miss Epperton looked up for a moment from her work. This subject seemed to interest her more than the seven Miss Smarts had done. "I should

have thought that in the country any neighbours within reasonable distance——”

“Yes; but the Wyndhursts are not like usual neighbours. We—don’t get on with them.”

“That means that they don’t ride, or don’t sit straight in their saddles, I suppose,” suggested Miss Epperton, with a smile.

“Oh, but they *do* ride!” exclaimed the three sisters simultaneously. “They ride very much indeed, and sit very straight,” added Lady Baby, in the tone of one who intends to deal justice even to her foes.

“Then what can their shortcomings be?”

“Oh, nothing particular; only, don’t you see, it is just because they *do* ride, and are so awfully conceited about it, and always look out for the biggest fences, especially when any of us are behind them, and think they know more about breeding thorough-breds than papa does (which of course is absurd), or breaking horses than Nicky does (ridiculous idea!). That is why we don’t get on,” said Lady Baby, simply; “and besides, we are Scotch Borderers, you know, and they are English Borderers. It is quite impossible that we should get on just like other people. In fact, we haven’t got on for the last five hundred years, ever since the first Wyndhurst set fire to the first Bevan’s haystack; for I am quite sure they began.”

Miss Epperton sat silent, thoughtfully putting stitches into a very modest and unostentatious strip of white embroidery. No one from her expression would have guessed that she had met with a check in the first move she had played since her arrival at Kippen-

dale, and was considering how to circumvent the unexpected obstacle.

It will be as well to explain here that Lady Baby's speech had very correctly sketched the state of feeling which existed between the Scotch family of Bevan and the English family of Wyndhurst. They met rarely, except in the hunting-field, and, when there, found the keenest enjoyment in eclipsing each other's achievements. Such similarity of tastes as they possessed could only produce either firm friendship or hot rivalry, and in this case some traditional remnant of an ancient Border-feud had perhaps determined for the latter. Since the death of Sir Anthony Wyndhurst, somewhat more than two years ago, the heat of the rivalry had slightly flagged, for the only Wyndhursts in the hunting-field had been three or four small boys on tiny shaggy ponies, who used to disappear, pony and all, into deep ditches, and reappear again on the other side with a spirit and pertinacity which a Bevan could not but admire even in a Wyndhurst. Sir Anthony had left another son, considerably older than these sporting mites; for he had been twice married, and his heir was the only child by the first marriage. This young man, the present baronet, was not known, except distantly by sight, to the Bevans, for they had never come across him in the hunting-field, the most natural place for a Bevan to meet a Wyndhurst. He was generally away from home: he liked yachting, and it was understood that he was delicate. Perhaps sea-air suited him; or perhaps, as was sometimes hinted, his stepmother's society did not particularly suit him. Those who knew his stepmother best appeared to think this supposition

not impossible. But even in Sir Anthony's lifetime the eldest son had rarely been at home; nor was he talked of and made much of, as eldest sons, be they absent or present, generally are in the conversation of their fond relations. It had almost seemed as if Sir Anthony were not particularly proud of his heir, over whom some unknown cloud seemed mysteriously to brood. People had gone so far as to suggest a want of intellect, or a hump, or a crime, as explanations of the mystery; but nothing was positively ascertained.

"By the by," said Lady Baby, presently, "talking of the Wyndhursts, Nicky told me yesterday that Sir Peter is on his way home at last. It is a positive mercy, on account of next year's hunting. Poor papa was getting quite low at no longer having Sir Anthony to eclipse."

Sir Peter was the present baronet, who had never been home, except on flying visits, since his succession to the title.

"He did not seem in a particular hurry to get home when I saw him last week in London," said Miss Epper-ton, without looking up from her work.

"In London? Has he got as far as London? And you know him? What is he like?"

"He is very quiet and rather silent, and—and really nothing else very particular, except that he is something of an artist. He has a portfolio full of sun-rises done at sea, and another full of sunsets."

"I don't care for landscapes," said Lady Baby; "does he never paint faces?"

"Yes; he takes portraits too: he is a sort of general

dabbler in art. He took quite a gallery of portraits when he was in London last month."

"And you figure in the gallery?" suggested Mr. Carbury, as she hesitated, and he began to see a glimmer of Miss Epperton's plans.

"Yes," she said quietly, and she looked Mr. Carbury full in the face; "Sir Peter painted me in costume. He wanted some one very colourless and very tall, for a study of Clytemnestra, and so I sat to him. By the by, have you decided about the blue lobelia in the flower-garden?"

The name of Wyndhurst was not mentioned again till that evening after dinner; and then, quite accidentally it seemed, the subject came up again. Lord Kippendale, who liked a decent excuse for his after-dinner snooze, had asked for some music. Catherine had gone to the piano and was singing the "Pibroch of Donald Dhu," in a feebly pretty voice, not by any means calculated to induce even the most loyal of Scots to "hark to the summons." Maud Epperton, however, must have been moved by the appeal, for by-and-by she left her seat, and drawing nearer to the piano, began to turn over some books of songs that were piled on a chair.

"I am sure you must find our music dreadfully barbarous," said Catherine, as she touched the last chord, and speaking in the deprecating tone in which she generally addressed Miss Epperton. "I am so sorry we can't entertain you better, and I suppose you have heard all the good singers in London; but——"

"Indeed I have not," said Maud, good-humouredly, "and I think a touch of barbarism is quite refreshing

after all the 'Good nights' and 'Farewells' we get in English drawing-rooms. But, do you know, these volumes here are a revelation to me. I did not know the whole musical world contained as many Scotch songs as I have already found on this one chair. I see you have got some of the Border ballads put to music; do you sing any of them?"

Catherine confessed to singing a few of them, only she was not sure of the accompaniments, and Maud, whose fancy seemed to be caught by something about the Border ballads, offered to accompany her; and thus many pages were turned over, and many verses deciphered, and Maud carefully examined the quaint old engravings which illustrated some of the Border songs. Presently one particular engraving appeared to have fixed her attention. It was the rude representation of a gigantic oak, with a gaping trunk, and one huge leafless branch stretching gauntly and weirdly from out of a mass of leafy boughs, and with the sufficiently startling inscription: "The Gibbet-tree at Nolesworth Castle."

"And what is the story of *this?*" asked Maud; "this tree can't possibly help having a story."

"Oh, the story is quite simple," said Lady Baby, who had joined the group at the piano; "it is the tree on which one of the Wyndhursts had the impertinence to hang one of the Bevans a few hundred years ago, and the branch on which they hung him very properly never bore leaves again. It is exactly what one would expect of any respectable oak."

"Hang!" repeated Maud, rather staggered.

"Yes; though of course they did it in the night, and denied it afterwards. Wasn't it an awful shame?"

Instead of running him through with a lance, or knocking him on the head with an axe in the proper way."

"But why had he to be killed at all?"

"Oh, well, you see, he had cut off two of the young Wyndhursts' heads and brought them to Scotland, which, of course, irritated them a good deal. And even before that they were always persecuting him. Once they even made such a fuss that they got our own Warden to lock him up, and that was all about some stupid cows or sheep that they had not looked after properly."

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," said Maud; "did the cows and sheep——"

"We took them, of course, don't you see?"

"Took them?"

"Yes; carried them off. Haven't you noticed the wall round the flower-garden? That was the place where we used to shut up the Wyndhursts' cattle, for fear of their getting back again, and the wall is still part of the old one. I assure you there was nothing in the least odd about it: it was the custom of the time; and besides, they always took *our* cattle whenever they could get them. It was perfectly fair play; don't you understand?"

"Give her time," said Mr. Carbury, who also had come up; "you see these facts are just a shade startling to effeminate Southerners like Miss Epperton and myself. Bear with us, please: consider that we have not been brought up in Border lore."

"Oh, but you must not believe half that Frances says," broke in Lady Catherine; "most of the tales are mere traditions, and most likely nobody was ever

hanged upon that tree,—and people have just invented stories to account for the barren branch.”

“At any rate the branch is there, if it has to be accounted for,” said Maud, who had been deeply engrossed with the verses meanwhile. “If the tree is at all like its portrait, it must be well worth seeing, whether it ever served as a gibbet or not. Why, its trunk is a perfect cavern!”

“Do you mean that you would really care to see it?” said Catherine, eagerly, feeling only too happy to have hit upon anything which could keep this dangerously worldly creature amused, and gazing at Maud as one might gaze at some half-tamed ferocious animal, in whom an outbreak is momentarily to be expected. “Frances, don’t you think that, if it would really amuse Miss Epperton to see the ‘gibbet-tree,’ perhaps papa might not mind, for once in a way, on the show-day, you know—for Nolesworth is quite a show-place,” she explained, turning to Maud; “the outer park is open to visitors twice a-week.”

“Oh!” cried Maud, in mock alarm, “I could never forgive myself if I were to be the cause of a renewal of hostilities. Should we have to go armed to the teeth?”

“It would be the proper way of conducting a Border raid,” remarked Mr. Carbury, drily.

“Border raid? eh? what?” broke in Lord Kippendale, waking up at that moment, and very anxious to slur over the fact that he had ever been asleep, for which reason he threw himself warmly into the discussion. “Miss Epperton anxious to see the gibbet-tree? Eh? Is that so, Miss Epperton?”

"Well," said Maud, with a laugh, "I confess to having rather lost my heart to the gibbet-tree. But of course I shall stifle my yearning, if there are such difficulties in the way; your daughters seem afraid——"

"Afraid!" broke in Lady Baby, scornfully. "We are not a bit afraid; we never have been afraid of any Wyndhurst, so why should we begin now? Papa, don't you think we might go?"

A very little more discussion now settled the point. Everything unconsciously was shaping itself towards the fulfilment of Miss Epperton's wish.

Lady Baby was indignant at the imputation thrown out; Lady Catherine was anxious that Miss Epperton should be amused, and seemed inclined to view the gibbet-tree in the light of a quieting sop to be thrown to the dangerous animal; Lord Kippendale was not only hospitably ready to gratify any wish even hinted at by any guest residing under his roof, but also laboured under an intense dislike to postponing, even by one unnecessary hour, the execution of any resolve once arrived at; and between all these various influences, it was decided, before they parted for the night, that, as next day happened to be a show-day, Nolesworth Castle should without further delay be visited.

"The Wyndhursts are not back, are they?" asked Lord Kippendale while the candles were being lit in the hall. But none of the family knew anything of the Wyndhursts' movements, and Maud said nothing, but kept her eyes bent on the candle which Mr. Carbury was lighting for her; so Lord Kippendale answered his own question by concluding that they were sure not to have left London yet. "Besides we don't bite when we

meet, you know, Miss Epperton; you must not think that there are no such things as manners on the Borders: we are very civil, I can tell you; it's only that there's no love lost."

"So the raid is resolved on," said Carbury, in a low voice, as he handed Maud the candle.

"Yes, the raid is resolved on," and she met his mocking gaze unflinchingly. "Are you to be of the invaders?"

"Undoubtedly; I might be useful in helping to carry off the booty."

"The booty!" said Maud, as she calmly gave him her hand for good night; "the booty will I daresay be quite transportable, even without your aid."

"D—— her pluck!" remarked Mr. Carbury to himself as he walked up-stairs, "and d—— her cleverness; she deserves to succeed."

Next day was dull and the afternoon was damp, and looked almost as if it might in time be wet; not at all the sort of day for seeing a show-place to advantage. "But it is all the better not to have too bright a day," said Miss Epperton, when, after some hesitation, it was finally decided to risk the chance of a shower; "at least we shall have the tree all to ourselves."

Nolesworth Castle was a far more impressive building and a far more important place than Kippendale, and in its features it had much more rigidly preserved its ancient character of a Border mansion.

While successive Kippendales had added to and altered their ancestral abode until the rugged old "keep" had gradually become transformed into a picturesque

and homelike jumble of gables and excrescences, which, though it might irritate an antiquarian and madden an architect, was yet a most cheering sight to the ordinary visitor, Nolesworth Castle still stretched the same stony wings and reared the same forbidding towers that had loomed and frowned thus for centuries. And while the Kippendales had filled up and planted with flowers the moat that was no longer threatened, and had light-heartedly thinned out the woods that were no longer required as convenient hiding-places, the English Border-castle had disdained to modernise so much as a single breast-work or bastion, and remained still wrapped in the gloom of its vast forests, as grimly prepared for an attack now as in the times when a horse ready saddled had stood day and night in the Wyndhurst stables, and a broadsword newly sharpened had ever hung within reach of the master's hand. It was a place to look at, but not to live in. The long straight avenues and scrupulously stiff gravel-walks, laid out on something of a regal scale, might perhaps excite a sort of cold admiration, but they did not tempt to leisurely saunters. It was the sort of place which puts people on their good behaviour, and brings every one's store of company manners to the light. It seemed incongruous to walk vagrantly on these ceremonious stretches of gravel, or to laugh foolishly in the shade of these historical-looking trees. "Have we got umbrellas?" said Lord Kippendale, as they alighted in the outer park. "I declare it is going to rain after all."

"We can take shelter inside the oak," suggested Miss Epperton, airily; "I am sure it ought to hold us, if that picture spoke true."

"But the horses can't get inside the oak," said Lady Baby. "Papa, must the poor horses stand out?"

"If that black fellow up there breaks," said Nicky, scowling at the sky, "we are in for a jolly good wetting, that's all."

"Then let us not give it time to break," said his father-in-law testily. "Which is the way to the oak? We had better make sure of that first."

But the gibbet-tree was not by any means the only sight at Nolesworth, as was proclaimed by the numerous sign-boards, which directed the visitor to go this way "To the Waterfall," or that way "To the Fairy Grove," and the various hands which pointed towards spots that were rather mysteriously designated as "Dick's Cradle," or "Red Willie's Trysting-dell," and which excited Miss Epperton's curiosity to such a degree that a great many rounds were made, and a great many corners of the park explored, before the gibbet-tree was reached. And though Lord Kippendale fussed visibly, and continually pressed the pace, and though all the rest of the family were rather silent, and felt probably a great deal more guilty than ever their ancestors had felt when visiting these same grounds in the shades of night, Maud Epperton, strangely enough, appeared to be blind and deaf to these general symptoms of discomfort. Not only did she not hurry; but whenever a shadow of an excuse offered itself, she distinctly loitered, talking at first with animation, but gradually lapsing into pauses of what looked like anxious reflection, until, by the time the gibbet-tree was reached, she had become almost as silent as her companions.

"Has the oak disappointed you?" asked Mr. Car-

bury at her elbow, as she stood with her head thrown back, gazing up rather blankly into the naked branches. Maud quickly called up a smile.

"A little bit; yes—the portrait was a flattered one."

"Come, come, Miss Epperton. I am sorry to hurry you," burst out Lord Kippendale; "but just look at the sky! We positively must be going."

"Without booty?" said Mr. Carbury, raising his eyebrows. "Who has ever heard of a raid without booty? How are we to show our faces in Scotland if we come back empty-handed?"

"We are not back in Scotland yet," said Maud, coolly. "Lord Kippendale, is there no better view to be had of the castle? We have seen everything, it strikes me, except the very kernel of the thing; and I am sure the rain will hold off for five minutes longer."

There *was* another view—the show-view in fact, the view of views, proclaimed upon numerous wooden boards, and pointed at by extra large index-fingers—and as it really did seem absurd to leave a show-place without seeing the show-view, this last extra round was decided upon.

"Dear me!" said Lady Baby, as they turned the corner of the walk which brought them in face of the castle, "we are not the only visitors after all who have braved the weather."

There was a bench at the end of the walk, and on it, with his back towards them, sat a young man apparently engaged with a sketch-book. They were close upon him when they saw him, and, at the sound of their steps, he glanced over his shoulder; then, as though aware that he was obscuring the view, he rose

and stepped aside, closing his sketch-book and slightly raising his hat. He appeared to be on the point of moving away altogether, when Miss Epperton, with a step forward, held out her hand and exclaimed—

“Sir Peter!”

CHAPTER IV.

SIR PETER.

“Love guided not his hand, content to see
Mere beauty, as of sunset hills or skies.”

At Maud's exclamation, Lady Agnes and Lady Catherine looked at each other with a start; Lord Kippendale turned a shade redder, and Lady Baby grew almost pale.

“Miss Epperton!” said Sir Peter, with a look of unmistakable pleasure, “this is almost too good to be true! What happy skies have you dropped from?”

“Only from some very damp and grey ones,” I am afraid,” said Maud, laughing. She no longer looked tired, and a delicate and most becoming flush had sprung to her cheek.

“Do you know, it is not five minutes since I was wondering how you could be conjured to the spot, and yet I had no glimpse of an idea that you were in the North. I shall begin to believe in magnetism. Will you kindly introduce me to your friends?”

Miss Epperton's host had stood by, looking rather haughty and feeling very miserable. Now, as though with one accord, they scanned Sir Peter's face, to mark what effect the discovery of their identity would have

upon him. It had none whatever; he neither winced nor changed colour, and his easy and confident manner grew neither stiff nor suspicious. There was not a shade of constraint on his handsome, high-bred face as he cordially shook hands with Lord Kippendale and raised his hat to the ladies; and yet Miss Epperton had very distinctly pronounced the inimical name. Sir Peter was a tall, somewhat loosely built man, of seven or eight and twenty, with a pair of rather dreamy grey eyes, a careless and yet cordial smile, and a finely cut nose and chin.

"It is I who ought to apologise," he said in answer to Lord Kippendale, who was taking great trouble to explain that this meeting had not been intentional. "I know that I have no right to be in the outer park on Tuesdays, but that bit of mist against the hill tempted me out, and I did not think that any one would brave the weather to-day. There! was that not the first drop?"

It was the first drop, and the second, and the third.

"Come, girls, hurry up!" said Lord Kippendale, much relieved. "There is no use in getting drenched."

"None whatever," assented Sir Peter. "Can I help you to open your umbrella, Miss Epperton? Let me hold it for you." And Miss Epperton and Sir Peter under one umbrella led the way.

"To the left, to the left!" Lord Kippendale called after them, still struggling with his own umbrella. "You are taking the wrong turning; the carriages are to the left."

"But we are not going to the carriages," called back Sir Peter.

"In goodness' name, where to?"

"To the house, of course: you surely do not mean to drive home through the deluge that is coming?"

"To the house?—eh, what?" repeated Lord Kippendale, much flurried by the struggle with his umbrella; "to the house? Which house? *Your* house?"

"To the castle," said Sir Peter, with an amused smile. "What is the matter? Have I suggested anything very dreadful?"

"Bless me, no!" said Lord Kippendale, rather lamely, overwhelmed by the sudden discovery that after all there was nothing so very terrible in the suggestion; and that the fact of their respective ancestors having run each other through with their lances as often as circumstances would permit, or of having taken a more than neighbourly interest in each other's sheepfolds, could scarcely be alleged as rational grounds for risking an attack of lumbago or rheumatism.

"I think we shall find a fire over there," Sir Peter was saying, in as unconscious a manner as though there had never been a question of so much as a single missing cow between Bevans and Wyndhursts. "And I venture to guess that your daughters would like to drive home with dry feet."

"As for my feet," said Lady Catherine who was picking her way along, looking like the picture of lady-like misery, "I don't feel as if they ever would be dry again. I wonder how it is that I never *can* get boots like other people's."

Lord Kippendale said not a word more, and the castle was steered for. The party, hurrying along for shelter, fell naturally into couples, each couple being,

so to say, linked by an umbrella; and under the shelter of each umbrella, remarks, favourable and unfavourable, were passed upon Sir Peter.

"He is *not* hunchbacked," said Lady Baby to Mr. Carbury, "and there does not seem to be anything wrong with his intellect either. I cannot imagine why he should have been kept so much out of sight. I find him very handsome."

"Do you?" said Mr. Carbury, rather shortly. "I always think that fair men are a mistake."

"He ought to ride a light weight in spite of his height," said Nicky to his wife. "I'll be bound my grey mare could carry him, and I could put a stiffish price on if Wyndhurst were the buyer. I'm short of cash just now. You must get the governor to raise your allowance. Look here, Aggie! you're so slow about getting the governor to raise your allowance. And you must speak to him yourself next time. Kippendale has a way of being short with me; I don't always feel like tackling Kippendale."

"Yes, Nicky," said Agnes. She was never known to say "No, Nicky."

"Never was so taken aback in my life," Lord Kippendale was saying to his daughter Catherine. "If it wasn't for the loss of time, I should have protested against the arrangement; but that young fellow has such a way about him—seems to take it all for granted. How long will it take you to dry your feet? Five minutes?—eh?"

Catherine thought privately that it would take much longer, so she contented herself with an evasive reply.

The subject of these comments was likewise in-

dulging in umbrella confidences. "So I appeared like the wolf in the fable," said Miss Epperton. "Speak of—well, of somebody very black, and you will see his tail."

"Or else speak of the sun, and *on en voit les rayons*. I have stuck fast in Clytemnestra since your last sitting; when am I to have another?"

"*Are* you to have another? That appears to me to be the first point to be settled."

"It appears to me to be nothing of the sort. You promised to sit for Clytemnestra; and as long as I have not put the last touch to Clytemnestra's last eyelash, the engagement is not terminated. My easel and I shall haunt your footsteps until that end is reached. How long do you stay in these parts?"

"Not very long; so if your easel and you are really so determined——"

"We are. And as for the costume, it has occurred to me that a red scarf might look better than a green one. What made me think of it was that dress which you wore at Lady Euphrosyne's" (he always called his stepmother Lady Euphrosyne) "last month. I can't describe it, but it was in all tints. Pardon an artist's rudeness if I say that never, either before or since, have I seen you look so well."

"All in tints," repeated Maud, meditatively; "was that the evening that you took me in to dinner?"

"I am not certain; yes, to be sure it was. I distinctly remember what I suffered from the effects of that sickly blue-and-yellow garment opposite, and how your red dress felt just like a tonic by contrast. It is positively wicked of women not to match their colours properly."

"Oh," said Maud, but her voice sounded rather less buoyant. "Yes, I remember the evening: you brought me such a lovely red rose after dinner. I could not think where you had got it from."

Sir Peter laughed. "Well, it wasn't likely to be missed from Lady Euphrosyne's flower-vases, and it just wanted that to make the scale of colour in your dress complete. You can't think how well it looked against the red velvet."

Maud said nothing this time. A slight, very slight but yet perceptible damp had fallen upon her spirits. It was gratifying that Sir Peter should so vividly recall her dress, but it would have been more gratifying if he had been quite sure about having taken her down to dinner that night.

"I ignore what the resources of the house may be," said Sir Peter, when the dripping visitors stood at length in the drawing-room. "Lady Euphrosyne has got the housekeeper with her in London, and I, a lonely and neglected bachelor, have been living *incog.* for a week; but I suppose it is not reckless to offer tea."

"As for pouring it out," he declared, when the tea had appeared, "I must throw myself on the mercy of whichever of the ladies will be good enough to play hostess."

The Ladies Bevan shrank back instinctively. This was really too much to be expected from any Bevan. An awkward pause appeared imminent, when, just at the right moment, Maud Epperton stepped up to the table and commenced to place the cups and distribute the sugar. The others sat round the tea-table, feeling and looking rather frigid, and concentrating their chief

attention upon the fine collection of sporting pictures, chiefly portraits, which covered the walls.

"Never mind about the tea not being strong, Miss Epperton," said Lord Kippendale, in a fever of half-suppressed impatience. "We can't keep the horses standing much longer; we really can't, Sir Peter."

"But you will have to wait till they are put in again," said Sir Peter, quietly. "I gave orders that they should be taken to the stables."

"I am glad of that," broke in Lady Baby, "for there is nothing so bad for old horses as standing in puddles of water; it very often makes their legs swell. What do you use for your horses' legs, Sir Peter?"

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Peter, turning from Miss Epperton, and for the first time becoming clearly aware of Lady Baby's existence. "You said something about horses' legs?"

"Do you find arnica or fluid best?"

"For feeding them with?" asked Sir Peter.

"Good heavens, no! for rubbing their legs with, of course. What do you rub their legs with after a hard day's hunting?"

"I don't rub them," said Sir Peter.

"You don't do it yourself, I daresay," with a gesture of impatience at his slowness of comprehension; "but surely you must know what you use on hunting-days."

"But," said Sir Peter, "I don't hunt."

"Don't hunt!" repeated every Bevan in the room, and there was a pause, almost of consternation. Lady Baby recovered first.

"To be sure; I forgot. You have been out of the

way of it lately; you could only have hunted dolphins in the Mediterranean, and ridden upon sea-horses. How you must have missed it! What a trial it must have been!"

"Scarcely so much as if I had been at home," said Sir Peter, with a peculiar smile hovering about his lips.

Lady Baby felt remorseful. Did his health forbid him to hunt? And had her question unwittingly touched on a sore spot? And to a Wyndhurst how sore a spot it must be! "Well, this season is over," she said, hurriedly, "and there is time enough before next; but we have some lovely rides about here even in summer. Don't you think so?"

"But I don't ride," said Sir Peter.

Lady Baby was in the act of raising her full cup to her lips; she put it down untouched, and gazed at Sir Peter with unspeakable things in her face.

"Bless my heart!" Lord Kippendale audibly ejaculated. Lady Agnes looked at Nicky, as if for guidance in this unlooked-for contingency; while Lady Catherine, who was resting one foot on the fender, came very near to singeing her damp skirt through sheer amazement. If Sir Peter had in this same tone of quiet unconcern announced that he could not read, the intelligence would have been received with far less agitation.

"Do you mean," asked Lady Baby, with a stern frown on her face, but in a tone which incredulous wonder rendered tremulous—"do you mean that you don't ride from choice, or from necessity?"

"Oh! from choice, entirely. I have not been on a horse since I was fifteen; and, please heaven, I shall never get on another."

The last doubt was removed. He was a Wyndhurst—and he did not ride, could not ride, did not wish to ride; had not the glimmering of an idea as to how horses' legs should be treated after a hard day's hunting; had, perhaps, never seen a fox sailing across a stubble-field, and knew naught of the keen pleasure of breaking his way through tangled brushwood in the grey of a hunting-morning. And he did not blush as he said it, even though he spoke under the shadow of his grandfather's portrait, who, in hunting-dress and spurs, frowned down from the wall, and even though his great-grandfather, on a blood-hunter, hung straight opposite.

"The fact is," he explained, as he calmly stirred his tea, "I gave up riding by the advice of my doctor."

"Ah!" There seemed to be a ray of renewed hope for his character.

"Yes; he found that riding did not agree with me."

"Not agree? What a pity! Why?"

"Because I usually fall off."

Lady Baby's lips twitched; and Lord Kippendale, after a brief struggle, burst into a hearty laugh. The first shock had been weathered, and somehow the frigidity had also disappeared.

"If the consequences are so dreadful," said Maud, who had felt rather "out of it" all this time, "I really hope that you have given up riding."

"Be quite easy on that point; I have suffered too much already. I am constitutionally timid."

Lord Kippendale caught something of a twinkle in Sir Peter's eye as he made this assertion in the most natural tone in the world; and, for some inexplicable reason, the old Earl went off into a second fit of laughter.

"But at least you used to ride," suggested Lady Baby, "when you were fifteen."

"Yes, I used to ride," said Sir Peter, gloomily; "I am not likely to forget it. There were hurdles put up on the lawn for my special benefit, and an artificial stream dug in the park, a very wide and deep stream; I know, alas! how deep, for I have often lain at the bottom. I was made miserable with a succession of the most vicious ponies that the world ever produced. My father gave me a new riding-whip on every birthday. He seemed to think that perseverance would engraft the taste. But it was no use; life used to be a burden to me on hunting-days. But that is over now, thanks to Providence, and I have survived."

"This is dreadful," thought Lady Baby, "and he seems quite hardened too. I shall say something rude if we stay much longer. Ah, there is the carriage at last!"

While they were putting on their cloaks in the hall, there was something said about Clytemnestra and the sitting which Miss Epperton had promised Sir Peter, and Lord Kippendale was heard to make some hospitable speeches. He could scarcely do less, after the way in which the afternoon had shaped itself.

"Ugh!" growled Nicky, as they started homeward, "and I had just made up my mind that eight hundred would not be too stiff a price to ask for the mare. But I may whistle for eight hundred pounds now."

"Of course that quite explains the cloud under which he lived," Lady Baby in the second carriage was saying to her father; "no wonder his father kept him out of sight."

Lord Kippendale was still gently shaking with laughter. Curiously and contradictorily enough, something about Sir Peter had rather tickled the fancy of the old fox-hunting Earl. "I'm not at all so sure that I would have kept him out of sight if I had been his father," he retorted; "I always thought Sir Anthony was a bit of a fool."

"Papa!" said Lady Baby, aghast, "you don't mean to say that you actually—*like* him? A man who dares to say that he is constitutionally timid?"

"*Dares*,—yes, that's the word; that's where it lies. I don't know whether he is constitutionally timid or not, my dear, but that I do know that it would need a precious deal less pluck to take a post and rails with an unexplored ditch on the other side and half the field pushing behind you, than to be a Wyndhurst and quietly tell a room full of Bevans that you can't ride. I wouldn't have done it for a thousand pounds, and there are not many fences that I have funk'd in my day."

CHAPTER V.

CLEOPATRA.

"Thine eyes so bright
 Bereft my sight
 When first I viewed thy face."

THE old schoolroom at Kippendale, in which no more lessons were now learnt since Lady Baby had decided that her education was finished, had sunk almost to the level of a lumber-room. Grammars and histories had begun to grow a little musty on the

shelves for want of being opened, the tinted maps on the wall were fading to a uniform yellow, and the ancient piano, on which scales used daily to be strummed, had long since been finally locked, and even the key had gone astray. But, on a certain day in April, this ancient haunt of learning found itself invaded, and filled unexpectedly with light and colour. Chests had been opened and cupboards ransacked; and now, over the well-worn chairs, over the ink-spotted table and locked piano, there lay a disorderly but brilliant mass of silk and velvet, of dresses and mantles, of bits of gold brocade, faded scarves, and old-fashioned fans, while an earnest discussion was in progress.

Maud Epperton had suggested that to get up tableaux would be an excellent way of killing time in this rainy weather; and Lady Baby once having caught at the excitement of the idea, every one else submitted.

"I have never seen tableaux in my life," said Lady Baby, "so I will take your advice about everything. You know all about the grouping and arranging, I suppose?"

"I am afraid I don't," said Miss Epperton, shaking her head; "we should require some one experienced."

"Oh, then, ask Mr. Carbury; he is sure to know. He does nothing now, but he seems to have done everything in the world and to have grown tired of it. I wonder, by the by, why he has not grown tired of Kippendale yet."

"I doubt whether Mr. Carbury would be a satisfactory stage-director," said Maud; "he is not enough of an artist."

Naturally the mention of the word artist led to the mention of Sir Peter; and presently it was decided that Sir Peter should be asked over to Kippendale. He had been at the house already on two different occasions, on each of which Miss Epperton had sat to him for Clytemnestra. But Clytemnestra was now finished, and, though the intercourse thus begun was not likely to die out immediately, still Maud considered that the tableaux had been a very happy thought. Tableaux could not be discussed in one day; so when Sir Peter was asked to come and stay a week at Kippendale, he found it quite natural, and came readily—so readily that Maud's heart beat high with hope.

“This is quite a new groove to be getting into with Nolesworth,” said Lord Kippendale, rather surprised at himself after he had given the invitation; “but I suppose that, if he does not mind coming, there is no reason why we should mind having him.”

It was strange how the old prejudice faded when once looked at in this new light which chance—or Maud Epperton—had thrown upon it; like the outward shell of a barrier which has long been rotten at the core, and which wants but one resolute touch to crumble it into dust. Perhaps the barrier fell all the more readily because of Sir Peter's absolute unconsciousness of its ever having existed. There were one or two points which in the very beginning of this renewed intercourse Lady Baby and her sisters instinctively avoided, as being possibly a little awkward for both parties; amongst these were all references to Border history or to private executions. Such topics as horse-stealing or cattle-lifting were by common consent re-

garded as delicate, and not to be selected as subjects of conversation. The remains of the old wall round the garden were *not* pointed out to Sir Peter, as they were to most visitors; and the pile of old song-books on the chair was hastily stuffed into a cupboard. They might just as well have remained where they were. If Sir Peter had any views at all about the feud, they were of a sort which were not likely to produce fresh bloodshed. "Do you know, I think that would be almost *paintable*," he said to Lady Baby one day, after she had, half reluctantly, half defiantly, been giving him the history of the stump of an old broadsword which had attracted his attention among a miscellaneous collection of weapons in the hall. "One of *my* ancestors broke it on the head of one of *your* ancestors," veracity compelled Lady Baby to acknowledge. "You don't say so!" said Sir Peter, quite cordially. "That shows that your ancestors used very inferior steel, or else that my ancestors had very superior skulls." And then he listened to the account of the single combat by moonlight, and at the end made the remark about the incident being "*paintable*." In face of this unconsciousness the consciousness of his new friends could not fail to dwindle. "And as for the riding," reflected Lord Kippendale, as he tried to puzzle out the situation, "that's his own loss, and not ours; and it would be almost absurd to have found fault with the father and grandfather because they rode too well, and then to find fault with the son because he does not ride at all." After the lapse of ten days, this fact of Sir Peter not riding was contemplated rather more calmly; and though the discovery was hard to get over, and though he must

always be looked upon as a degenerate descendant of his booted and spurred ancestors, still it had been tacitly agreed that, since he was not as he should be, he had better be taken as he was. Lady Baby had indeed attempted to open his eyes to his shortcomings, but she succeeded only in discovering still deeper depths of degradation.

"Why on earth should I want to hunt a fox?" he answered, quite unmoved by a panegyric on the noblest of sports; "the fox doesn't want to hunt me."

"You might as well say that partridges don't want to shoot you, and yet you shoot partridges."

"No, I don't."

"Well, then, grouse or woodcock; it doesn't matter which."

"No, it doesn't in the least matter," said Sir Peter, "because I don't shoot any of them. I am not quite sure that I know what a grouse is like, with its feathers on."

"Good heavens! Do you fish?"

"No."

"Sir Peter, Sir Peter, this is awful!" cried Lady Baby. "Do you mean to say that you absolutely kill *nothing*?"

"Not unless it wants to kill me."

After this his case was regarded as hopeless. But presently it was conceded that, though he would be useless with either a gun or a whip in his hand, still he might do well enough with a lead-pencil. He was holding one now, while he sat in judgment on the brocaded gowns presented for his approval, and, with

a few rough strokes, was sketching the proposed arrangement of figures.

"Everything depends on catching each person's artistic possibilities," he explained, "and every one has artistic possibilities of some sort; it all lies in finding them out. Now, Lady Agnes's possibilities lie in the Anglo-Saxon line, and Lady Catherine requires a weeping-willow."

"And what do I require?" asked Maud.

"A Grecian tiara or an oriental veil. I suppose you are tired of dressing up as Clytemnestra. What do you say to Helen of Troy?"

"And Paris?"

"I fear you must do without a Paris. There is no one with the artistic possibilities of a Paris among us. Paris must positively be under twenty-four."

"Germaine is under twenty-four," said Lady Catherine; "and of course, just because we want him, he is not here. Could we not wait for him? He is to be back next week."

"It would be a pity to delay longer," said Maud, quickly. That absent boy was not the Paris she wished to see at her feet.

"No," said Lady Baby, "we can't delay, even for Germaine. I have quite made up my mind that the tableaux are to be this week."

Sir Peter made no remark, but looked at her rather curiously. She caught the glance.

"Are you weighing my artistic possibilities? What are they?"

"I should give you a crown," said Sir Peter, thoughtfully, "and a sceptre; but it should be a toy crown

and a toy sceptre, and I should surround you with broken playthings and ill-treated dolls; and the name—well, the name of the picture should be, 'The Nursery Tyrant,' or something equivalent.

"Sir Peter!" she cried, facing him with indignant eyes, "you surely forget that I am not a child!"

"I should never be rude enough to forget anything of the sort," said Sir Peter, quite unmoved; "I was only talking of your artistic possibilities."

She threw up her head. Something in Sir Peter's tone had touched her almost like a skilfully conveyed lesson, and to Lady Baby the most distant hint of admonition or control was a thing unendurable. She was not used to it; how should she be?

"Proud as well as headstrong," thought Sir Peter, as he watched her. "What a strange child! It is a pity they have spoiled her."

"I don't like your artistic possibility," she said, with a petulant elevation of her chin.

"Then here is another; it has occurred to me this instant. If you will put this on for a moment, I will show you the other side of the medal, as the French say;" and Sir Peter picked up from the heap of things beside him a soft scarlet cap, which looked almost like the typical *bonnet rouge* of the Reign of Terror. "It fits you, does it not? Now, don't you feel as if you could cry '*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité! A bas l'ordre; à bas les lois!*' We could call it 'the Spirit of Revolt.'"

"Oh, Sir Peter!" said Lady Agnes, "how can you say such things, even in joke? What would we be without laws? It is such a comfort to be told what to do."

"Another artistic possibility!" cried Sir Peter, as he caught her look of distress—the distress of a yoked creature that likes its yoke, and would not know how to move without it. "Allow me to place you on the picture as well, and then we can call it 'Revolution and Order.'"

"No!" cried Lady Baby abruptly, flinging the red cap to the ground; "I will not play that part. Of course I have not got Agnes's mania for doing what I am told; but I—I feel as if you were laughing at me, and—and treating me like a child. Think of something else."

The discussion grew prolonged. Somebody asked what Mr. Carbury was to be. "I think he had better be a corpse," said Sir Peter, calmly eyeing his intended victim as though debating inwardly as to whether he would look to most advantage with a jewelled dagger sheathed in his heart, or with half-a-dozen arrows artistically disposed about his person. Mr. Carbury tried to look civilly amused, but failed. The tableaux irritated him: it was not he who had proposed them; and there were, besides, certain vague misgivings which troubled his mind. A satin doublet would, no doubt, suit him admirably; but it could scarcely fail to suggest that odious comparison to an Italian baritone which in the course of his life had caused him so much real mental suffering. A long cloak would have draped his tall figure gloriously, had he only not feared to look too thoroughly at home in it. If Mr. Carbury had been possessed of one grain of vulgar coxcombry, he would have blithely donned both doublet and cloak, undisturbed by any such fine-drawn scruples; but his vanity

was of far too fastidious as well as too deep-rooted a sort, to glory in any mere dressing-up or display. A dread of ridicule may not always be a healthy mental sign, but it did Mr. Carbury at least the good service of preserving him from a host of minor absurdities. Nobody ever saw him ogling himself in mirrors, or affectionately twirling his moustache, or complacently smoothing his necktie. And thus it happened that in general he did not pass for a vain man, and that none but very shrewd people suspected the over-weening self-esteem which was his ruling passion.

When Mr. Carbury had with some difficulty been fitted with a part, a difficulty which arose precisely from the ease with which he would have fitted into so many parts, Launcelot and Elaine were suggested for Sir Peter and Lady Baby. Maud, busied with some lace she was mending for one of the costumes, began to grow uneasy. It was not for this that she had brought Sir Peter to Kippendale.

"Are the pictures all settled," she asked serenely, "all but mine?"

"Yes, all but yours—that is to say, all but the gem of the collection," answered Sir Peter; "for of course, Miss Epperton, you will make far the best picture of any of us. Helen of Troy must be discarded for want of a Paris; besides, I should prefer to make a single-figure study of you. How about Cleopatra? Ah! that flash of your eye settles it; I saw visions of Egypt in that glance. Yes, you shall be Cleopatra, the Cleopatra of the 'Dream of Fair Women,' 'brow-bound with burning gold.' It is true that your cheeks are not 'swarthy,' but we will not stick at a shade of complexion; and

here is the very dress, gold brocade. Miss Epperton, excuse me for saying that you will be magnificent."

"He is talking of my artistic possibilities," thought Maud, with a sigh. "Well, let it be," she said aloud. It had occurred to her that if Sir Peter himself were disengaged during the tableau in which she appeared, he would have a far better chance of viewing her in her costume.

"We shall keep it for our last picture, our crowning triumph," said Sir Peter. "I want the effect to be dazzling. The brocade is splendid, but we must have jewels; there must be a glitter, a glamour, over Cleopatra—a vague suggestion of half the wealth of Egypt being on her back. In my mind the idea of the Egyptian queen is inseparable from the idea of 'beaten gold,' and 'divers-coloured fans,' and 'strange invisible perfume.' We must load Cleopatra with gems."

"Provided we have them," suggested Mr. Carbury.

"Every one must contribute what they have," said Lady Baby. "I have some sapphires; and, oh Agnes, to be sure, the diamonds! I will fetch them."

Five minutes later Lady Baby was back in the room, holding in her hand a red-morocco case, in which lay a row of single diamonds of the first water, the same which Lady Agnes had worn on the evening of Mr. Carbury's coming to Kippendale.

"Oh!" was all that Miss Epperton could say, and again, "oh!" It is a strange fact that even strong-minded women are apt to become weak-minded in face of a diamond necklace. The brilliant fire which flashed from the case as it opened, quite took away her speech for a moment. She had never seen such

diamonds. "Oh, Lady Agnes, am I really to wear these?"

"They are not Agnes's, and you are to wear them," said Lady Baby; "they belong to Germaine's wife."

"His wife? But he is not married?"

"Of course not; but he will be some day, and then the diamonds go to her, whoever she is."

"Lucky creature!" said Miss Epperton, as she softly lifted the glittering string. The very glitter somehow gave to Lady Baby's absent brother a greater importance than he had hitherto worn in Maud Epperton's eyes.

"It was about these diamonds that you once promised me a tragical story," said Mr. Carbury; "was it not?"

"A tragical story?" cried Maud. "Oh, let us have it!"

"By all means, let us have it," said Sir Peter, sinking into a chair; "a little tragedy will be quite refreshing after so much art. Once upon a time——"

"Once upon a time," began Lady Baby, "papa had an elder brother, who was not married but who was engaged to be married, and he bought a diamond necklace for his bride. It was sent to him from London——"

"And was stolen out of the post-bag?" suggested Maud.

"No; it reached him quite safely, and he locked it away in an iron safe in the wall."

"Which safe? The one down-stairs?"

"Oh no; the safe is hundreds of miles away. This did not happen at Kippendale, but at Gullyscoombe."

"And what is Gullyscoombe?"

"Gullyscoombe is what papa calls his useful estate. It is a hideous piece of land, I believe, but none of us have ever seen it; fortunately, it is very far away. But there is copper on it, you know; and all our money comes from it, somehow," added Lady Baby, with magnificent vagueness.

"And yet you have never seen it?" said Maud, reflectively. "I wonder you never go there, by way of a change."

"Go there! Go to Gullyscoombe!" from the three sisters, in different tones of horror.

"Why," said Lady Baby, "papa has only been there twice in his life himself; and each time he came away in a hurry—because he thought he would be driven to drowning himself in the sea, which came up close to his window at high tide. He calls Gullyscoombe the most God-forsaken spot between the four seas of Britain."

It was thus that Gullyscoombe was invariably spoken of in the family. The distant estate on the sea-coast of the English county of Choughshire was regarded almost as a necessary evil; while the valuable produce of its copper-mines, which they had never seen and never wished to see, made life easy and luxurious for them, and was lavished open-handed on the beloved Kippendale.

"But was your uncle fond of God-forsaken places?" asked Maud; "or why did he live at Gullyscoombe?"

"Uncle Ronald was a dreadful martinet about business; and as he was going to be married, he had gone down to Gullyscoombe to look after his affairs. It was something about Wheal Tallyho (that was an old mine,

you know) coming to an end, or something of that sort; but of course he came up here once a-week for the hunting. He started on one of these journeys on the day after he had locked away the diamonds, and as soon as he was gone the safe was robbed."

"By a servant, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, by a sort of servant. Uncle Ronald never took more than one real servant with him when he went to Gullyscoombe, and that was Adam, the old groom, who is still with us; but there was a man upon the place, a very handy sort of a fellow, who led a kind of mixed existence, and who was sometimes a miner, and sometimes a fisherman, and sometimes anything else that turned up. And whenever there was any extra work to be done, and Christopher Swan—that was his name—did not happen to be either mining or fishing, then he was called in to do it. It was partly out of charity that Uncle Ronald used to employ him, for though he was a regular Jack-of-all-trades, he never seemed to prosper in anything he tried. He had lost one eye from a blast-hole exploding in his face; and though he was sharp in some ways, he was not always very rational—people said that came from the mast of a fishing-boat having fallen on his head when he was a child. In general, people disliked him and were rather afraid of him. I am not sure that they didn't think he was a sort of sorcerer; at any rate they all seem to have believed that he possessed the power of finding metals with the divining-rod. There really seems to have been something uncanny about him. But Uncle Ronald never had any patience with what he called fanciful prejudices, and he often had Christopher Swan

in the house. Well, on one of these occasions when Christopher had been engaged for a week, the overseer, who lived in the house, heard a noise and found the safe-door open. This was on the night after Uncle Ronald's departure. Everybody turned out except Christopher Swan, who had disappeared. Next they noticed that the boat had been unmoored and was gone. There were more boats got, and the thief was pursued; but they found nothing, and two days afterwards the boat came drifting back, keel uppermost. The thief had been drowned."

"Well, but the diamonds?" asked Maud, bewildered; "they could not have come back with the boat, and they were not drowned, since I hold them in my hands. Or did your uncle buy another necklace for his bride?"

"Poor Uncle Ronald! No; his bride did not need another necklace, for she never married him. He did not get back to Gullyscoombe again; he broke his neck out hunting. And now comes the mysterious part of the story. I told you that there was a groom in the house, too: he had been away with Uncle Ronald at the time of the robbery. A few months later, he married the niece of one of the fishermen near Gullyscoombe. Her name was Molly, and she was very pretty. Uncle Ronald used to call her the Destroying Angel, because she used to have a new sweetheart every week. Papa, when he succeeded to the title, had kept Adam in his service. One day, several months later, there was a great noise heard in the stable-yard, and Adam burst into papa's room dragging his wife by the hand; she was staring and pale as a sheet, and round her neck she had—guess what?"

"The diamonds?"

"Yes, the diamonds. Adam had surprised her kneeling before her open box, and looking at herself in a glass inside the lid. He had taken her by the hand, and dragged her, just as she was, through the stable-yard, before all the stable-boys, and he actually flung her down at papa's feet, diamonds and all. She did nothing but cry at first, but at last she confessed that Christopher Swan had given her the diamonds as a present, but that she had not known where he had taken them from. She was so awfully silly about it that papa half thought of forgiving her, but Adam took her by the two shoulders and turned her out of the house-door; and she never came back. She died a great many years ago in London."

"And could she throw any light on the fate of the unfortunate Christopher?" asked Sir Peter. "How had he conveyed the diamonds to her?"

"Oh, I suppose she helped him in the robbing. Christopher Swan must, of course, have been drowned; he has never been heard of since."

"A curious story," said Maud, still gazing at the diamonds. "It is evident that the Destroying Angel had a large choice of victims, and it is conceivable that she should have preferred the man with two eyes to the man with one. Well, it does not much matter now; the upshot of it is, that the diamonds are here, and that I am to wear them as Cleopatra." And the talk drifted from the one-eyed miner back to the Egyptian queen.

The mention of the diamond robbery had been purely casual, and the tragedy of Christopher Swan

was spoken of as a thing accomplished and done with. It did not cross the mind of either Lady Baby, the teller of the story, or that of any of her listeners, that there might yet remain one act of the tragedy to be played out, or rather that the play was to have an after-play destined to influence the lives of more than one of the persons assembled to-day in the old school-room at Kippendale.

The evening fixed for the tableaux happened to be the same on which Lord Germaine was expected home. It had been calculated that he would be able to get down from the station in time to form one of the spectators. But whether it was that the train was late, or the horses slow, or the clocks in the house fast, nine o'clock had struck before there was any sign of his appearance. The invited guests, consisting of two or three fox-hunting squires, and about as many agricultural lairds, with their wives and daughters, had already taken their places before the curtain; while behind it Mr. Carbury, in the character of a slain knight bewailed by his bride on the battle-field, was beginning to discover that wooden boards can be very hard indeed.

"This will never do," said Lord Kippendale, after having pulled out his watch fifty times in the course of five minutes; "we cannot wait any longer. Germaine has only himself to thank for his unpunctuality. For goodness' sake, don't let us sit here for ever! Up with the curtain!"

The curtain went up and discovered Mr. Carbury and Catherine.

"Well done, Kate!" cried Lord Kippendale delighted, amidst the murmur of applause. "Wailing and

dishevelled, eh? she looks it to the very life;" for Lady Catherine indeed revelled in the becoming despair of her *rôle*.

"But who is Launcelot?" was whispered round the circle, as the curtain next rose on Launcelot and Elaine; Elaine with her hands outstretched and her blue eyes uplifted to Launcelot, as she received the sacred shield in keeping. There were many present to whom the young baronet was still a stranger.

"It is Sir Peter Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, stroking his chin rather thoughtfully; and immediately it was whispered round the circle, "It is Sir Peter Wyndhurst." And more than one glance of surprise was interchanged, and some people said to themselves, "Lord Kippendale is turning over a new leaf;" others, "What a tall man Sir Peter is!" while yet others wondered whether Sir Peter's good looks were entirely owing to the helmet, or whether some of them were his own.

"Your daughter looks lovely," whispered the lady next Lord Kippendale.

"Eh? Yes: but I wonder she can stand so still; she doesn't so much as blink—yes, there she is blinking; holloa! what was that?"

The shield had fallen to the ground with a clatter, and Launcelot, springing forward, pulled down the curtain.

"Did you find it too heavy?" asked Sir Peter, turning to where Lady Baby stood, looking equally ready to laugh or cry.

"Yes—no; it was papa's talking that put me out. I wish people would not make remarks aloud. I felt quite hot all of a sudden."

"Is the room too warm?"

"No, it was not the room, it was the blinking; how could I help blinking?"

"I told you that did not signify; why, even a photographer allows people to blink. It is all right, so long as you look straight into my face."

"But I don't want to look straight into any one's face."

"It is an artistic necessity," urged Sir Peter. "There! they want the curtain up for the second view. Are you ready?"

"No, I will not do it again; tell them that I will not."

"As you like," said Sir Peter, quietly.

"Well, then; for the next picture!" Another picture and then another were displayed, and then the last had been reached. But this time the preparatory pause was longer, for Sir Peter was almost over-fastidious about the finishing touches of this picture. All the other tableaux had embraced two or more figures, but this was one solitary resplendent apparition—the Cleopatra which Sir Peter had so studiously planned, and on which Maud Epperton had, so to say, staked her last chance. It was the illustration of Tennyson's lines:—

"I turning saw, throned on a flowery rise,
One sitting on a crimson scarf unroll'd;
A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold black eyes,
Brow-bound with burning gold."

"There now, Miss Epperton," said Sir Peter, as he settled the last fold of her drapery, "you are absolutely perfect, all but the direction of your eyes. Look towards the public, but not at them; let your gaze pass

over their heads, and fix it on some distinct point, say the door, for instance. You will find that a help. And try to think that the door is not a door, but some slave whose allegiance you are claiming. Shall I give the signal?"

He gave the signal. But this time, as the curtain rose, instead of the admiring murmur, there was a minute of complete silence. No one was at all prepared for the effect Maud would produce; her beauty was of that sort which can be almost incalculably enhanced by gaslight and costume. And here every advantage had been lavished, every point had been weighed. The severe lines of her flowing robe gave to her splendid figure an almost statuesque perfection, while the dusky waves of her unbound hair fell round her like a mantle. With one beautiful arm half raised, and her crimson lips just parted, as though in the act of speaking, she sat immovable, and nothing but the quiver of the diamonds on her neck and the brilliancy of her dark eyes showed that she was no statue.

A burst of applause followed upon the first silence of surprise. Recovered from their amazement, the fox-hunting squires and the agricultural lairds, imagining that they had become young again, clapped their hands with vigour and shouted themselves hoarse with approbation. And in the midst of the noise the door opened unnoticed and a curly-haired young giant in a travelling-coat stood on the threshold, and stared, and rubbed his eyes, and stared again, wondering how it was that he had never before seen anything as beautiful as that glittering vision, whose eyes, bright with triumph, were looking straight into his, and asking himself whether

she was a woman, or whether in the next minute she would melt back to empty air. And then Lady Baby sprang out from behind the scenes, crying—

“Germaine has come! Here is Germaine at last!”

CHAPTER VI.

CLEOPATRA AT HOME.

“Judge not thy friend until thou standest in his place.”

MAUD EPPERSON sat before her toilet-glass, and with thoughtful eyes gazed into its depths. She was still Cleopatra, “brow-bound with burning gold,” and the diamonds still glittered on her neck. Though every one in the house was long since asleep, she lingered as though unwilling to part with one jot of her Egyptian splendour.

And yet it was not of her Egyptian splendour she was thinking as she sat there quite still, meeting her own gaze in the glass, her head a little bent, and her arms, laden with bracelets, resting on the toilet-table. Her thoughts were travelling back over the last few weeks—were passing each day in a sort of cursory review, until they halted on one especial day, which stood out branded with a mark of its own. Nothing could have been more different, more wide apart to all appearances, than that day and this present one; and yet it was exactly the brilliancy of this evening which sent back her thoughts straight to the gloom of that other one. They were linked by an invisible thread. The other had been the cause, this was the effect.

How dark it had been, how chill and damp, as she

peered through the blurred window of the fly which was taking her from the station to her aunt's lodging, and what a time she had stood shivering on the door-step before the well-known slip-slap of the lodging-house servant's down-trodden shoes had been heard coming along the passage. Up a steep staircase Maud had dragged herself wearily—up several steep staircases, until she reached the flat occupied by her spinster aunt, the elder Miss Epperton. The kitchen on this flat had a window which received its light through the passage, and there were various half-jars of butter and remains of cold pudding standing on the sill inside. A light burned dimly within, and some one was moving about the hearth.

"She has not waited dinner for me," said Maud, as she looked through the window; and then, slowly and reluctantly, she pushed open the door. A minute later she stood in her aunt's sitting-room. The sitting-room was the dining-room as well—the big round table in the middle being cleared three times a-day to make room for dishes and glasses. At this round table Maud's aunt was sitting, having just finished eating her soup, and was putting in a few stitches to a stripe of sky-blue crochet-work, while waiting for Sarah-Ann to bring in the Irish stew. At the sound of the opening door she looked over her spectacles at Maud, then put in the six remaining stitches to the row she was working, and then only laid down the stripe and gazed deliberately at her niece.

"So you are back?" she said, blankly and drearily.

"Yes, I am back," said Maud, in a tone which be-

trayed nothing but the indifference of fatigue. "Did you not get my telegram?"

"Yes, I got your telegram. I suppose Sarah-Ann has put sheets on your bed. I told her to."

"And the soup would have spoiled, of course, by standing five minutes longer," said Maud, with a touch of irritation.

"The soup would have spoiled, probably; it was singed at any rate, by reason, I suppose, of Sarah-Ann having to look after your room. What makes you come down here in this way, like a thunderbolt? You may be used to flying about like a rocket, but I am not used to having rockets fly at me. What makes you come down here at all? Couldn't you have written? What is the good of spending a shilling instead of a penny? I detest telegrams."

"I had no time to write," said Maud, sinking into a chair and pulling her hat off her aching head: "it was only this morning that the Oakhams finally made up their minds to go to Paris. I had only just time to send off that telegram and pack up my things."

"And why didn't the Oakhams take you to Paris with them? They took you to Bournemouth last year; and the difference of the ticket wouldn't be much to *them*. Are they tired of you?"

"Very likely they are," said Maud, with a smile that looked dangerous: "they have another daughter out this year, too."

"And what has become of the Bailies and the Belfields, and all the rest of your fine titled friends? Have they all got daughters come out too? Has London turned into a wilderness? Dear, dear! who ever would

have thought that the beautiful Miss Epperton would condescend to show her face in Brackton at this time of year? Why, the place will look quite new to you, my dear. I don't believe you have seen it by an April light since you were fifteen; and that's a good bit back now, you know."

"The Bailies are in mourning," answered Maud, as she slowly dipped her spoon into the plate of warmed-up potato-soup which Sarah-Ann had placed before her; "and the Belfields have got their house full, and most of my other friends are either out of town or else unable to ask me just at present."

Miss Epperton the elder took up her sky-blue stripe again and held it close to the lamp. It was necessary to do so, because the wick could not be turned up high on account of the chimney being cracked.

"Yes, yes," she said, with a short and dismal laugh, "that's how it begins. In a few years more you will be quite surprised to see how full your friends' houses will be exactly at the time you want an invitation: it can't go on for ever, you know. How old are you? Thirty next birthday? No wonder they are tired of their toy; and the toy is not so pretty as it was either. You have gone off a good deal in these two last months, my dear."

Maud's eyes gleamed, but she sat quite still. After her day of hurry and travelling she felt almost too tired to be angry. Her glance strayed round the room, over the horse-hair chairs and the threadbare carpet, and towards Sarah-Ann bringing in the Irish stew. Yesterday she had dined in a room hung with peacock-blue silk, and a powdered footman had moved her plate.

"Aunt Sophy," she said suddenly, "what has become of the piano?"

"Sold," was the short reply.

"Sold? Good gracious! why?"

"Because I wanted the money. Do you wish for any more reasons? If you do, I can give you one—they've raised the rent."

"Oh!" Maud sank back despondently on her chair.

"So if you want to practise your waltzes, you will have to do it elsewhere."

"But the rent is paid this term?"

"Yes, the rent is paid this term, thanks to keeping down the butcher's bill and not having the fire put on till the afternoon. But the rent won't be paid next term if there's a second mouth to feed. How long have you come for?"

The question was not put roughly, scarcely harshly; it was put only with that dreary hopelessness which has no room for sentiment.

"I don't know," said Maud, with a hysterical laugh. "Are you going to turn me out of doors?"

"No. For one thing, I don't suppose you would go. You may have a deal of pride about you, my dear, but it doesn't often interfere with your convenience. You wouldn't be here to-night if it did."

"Oh, Aunt Sophy, where else could I have gone to?" cried Maud, with a sob. "Do not be so unmerciful! You know I have no home but this."

The elder Miss Epperton made no answer just at once, but helped herself to a very small portion of salt. Then she looked across suddenly into her niece's face.

“*Why* have you no home but this?” she asked. “That’s what I want to know.”

Maud sat silent, looking sullenly at her plate.

“You don’t play the innocent — that’s one good thing. I think we both prefer plain English. Why haven’t you got a husband? It’s a husband’s place to feed his wife. I have put bread into your mouth as long as I had it, but what I haven’t got I can’t give; and it’s no use talking of mercy or pity. If I had a house in London and ten thousand a-year, I daresay I should be very merciful, and I should be a most loving aunt, and you a most affectionate niece; but I haven’t, and there’s an end of it. And it’s no use pretending that it is a joy to me to have you on my hands—for it is not. And if I am to come to a crust of bread, which does not seem unlikely, I would a great deal rather eat it by myself than share it with any one, even if it be my brother’s child.”

Maud dropped her knife and fork with a clatter, and rose from her chair. “That will do, Aunt Sophy,” she said, hoarsely; “that is just about as much as I can bear. I—I can’t eat any more. I am going.”

“Where to? The poorhouse?”

“To my room just at present; that is, the room you let me have; and afterwards, I don’t know—to some place where my food is not grudged me.” And snatching up her hat and gloves, Maud walked from the room.

“She will be back before the table is cleared,” said Miss Sophy Epperton, nodding her head twice at the door as it shut with a slam. But Miss Sophy Epperton was mistaken. Maud did not show herself again that

evening. Though she walked so steadily from the room, she was in reality shaking all over from the excitement of overstrained nerves. The first thing she did on reaching her room was to stumble and nearly fall over the travelling trunk which had been left standing in the middle of the floor, and which, in her agitation, she did not see. There were no matches on the chimney-piece and no fire in the grate; but as there was also no curtain to the window, and a street lamp burned straight opposite, the room was not quite dark. At any rate, there was light enough for what Maud had to do, and that was merely to sit down and think, think, think of what her next step should be—which way she should turn on her lonely and precarious path in life. As she sat there before the empty grate, with her elbows on her knees and her hands pressed over her face, few people indeed would have recognised the brilliant Miss Epperton who had graced so many drawing-rooms for so many years past, who could rattle off small-talk with the best of chatterers, and smile as blithely as the most favoured child of fortune. And yet this was the real Maud Epperton as much as the other—more than the other, perhaps; for much of that brilliancy was but an outward gloss, assumed because the world will not tolerate what is dull and sad, and because Maud's only hope in life lay in keeping friends with the world.

Maud Epperton had never known her parents. She had neither brother nor sister, nor—with the exception of her aunt Sophy—near relations of any sort; and if the penniless girl had secured for herself a recognised place in London society, it was by sheer strength of

her own cleverness. In default of fortune, she lived upon her wits. Her first appearance had been under the wing of a distant cousin in high life (for she was well connected on her mother's side), who, growing tired of her when after one season she had failed to make the brilliant match expected of her, had handed her on to another chaperon, from whom she had passed on to another. Thus she had struggled on in hand-to-mouth fashion, by turns admired and slighted, taken up and dropped; and in this way she had slowly become what she was,—had learnt to stoop and dissimulate, to curry the favour which to her meant not only balls and theatre-tickets, but also food and lodgings; had taught herself to flatter women who had not the tenth particle of her beauty, to submit her judgment to that of women who had not the tenth particle of her brains; had acquired the talent of smiling with rage in her heart, and of laughing her gayest when she felt sad to death.

And was it all in vain? Were hundreds of painfully devised plans, were thousands of mortifications swallowed, were ten seasons of such grinding work as only fashion dare demand of her slaves, to result in old-maidhood, spent in the company of Aunt Sophy's still older maidenhood? Obviously there was but one way of escape from this existence as dismal as it was humiliating, and that way was matrimony. If was strange that, with all her beauty, Maud was still Miss Epperton; and yet, perhaps, seeing the mixture in Maud's nature, it was not very strange. Had she been a little harder, she would have made a wise and worldly marriage long ago; had she been a little softer, she

would probably have made a foolish one. She might have done either. On one occasion she had all but accepted a grey-haired Croesus who, with senile ardour, had laid his riches at her feet; another time she had been half engaged to a curate with soft brown eyes and an empty pocket. But in both these cases, when it came to the point her courage had failed; she was, after all, not quite worldly enough to accept the rich old man—and she was, after all, not quite unworldly enough to marry the poor young one. She had been very young herself when both these things happened, and when she thought the matter over nowadays, she always felt quite sure that she would act just the same again as regards the curate, but she was not quite so sure now as regards the millionaire. Much in her had hardened since then, and millionaires were not so plentiful as they used to be. Most girls in her place would have thought that even a penniless husband would have been a welcome exchange for Aunt Sophy; and as the curate episode showed, Maud had come very near to thinking so herself; but on this and other occasions her very clear common-sense had saved her from wrecking her one chance in life upon any rock of mere mortification or petulance. Mortified she might feel, and petulant she could be, for those people who said that Miss Epperton was all made up of calculation judged her falsely. She was, on the contrary, all made up of impulse, only that she almost invariably withstood her impulses. And who would blame her for her common-sense? Had it not been acquired in a hard enough school? When people said, “Miss Epperton is trying to catch a rich husband,” they little knew what alternative

Miss Epperton had before her eyes. It was not so much that she was covetous of riches, as that she was terrified of poverty. She knew it too well, knew it with all its sordid cares and its countless worries, with all its great horrors and its little miseries; had watched how under its touch all brightness had faded from her aunt's life, how kindness had been cankered and sweetness soured, and softness pinched away by its tightening fingers, until a woman, once fairly amiable and undoubtedly well-intentioned, had gradually turned into this snappish and hardened and prematurely withered Aunt Sophy.

And Maud knew more than this, for she had seen life in many aspects; she knew that there was a worse poverty than this, the poverty of struggling families and of hungry children—a poverty more heartbreaking, if less solitary. And thus, while many a girl without any more vocation for self-sacrifice than Maud had, would have walked blithely and blindly into an imprudent marriage, simply because she did not know what she was doing, Maud, knowing too well, preferred to remain Miss Epperton; and this is why she was able to swallow the bread which her Aunt Sophy gave her without choking with shame. Such scenes as the one to-night were of no very unusual occurrence, but her aunt had never stated the case quite so brutally before; and all that there remained of pride in Maud was quivering now as though under a lash. Short of turning her niece on to the street, what more could she have said? "And it is true," said Maud, as she clasped and unclasped her trembling hands; "it is quite true; I am another mouth to feed;

she cannot give me what she has not got;" and having reached this point in her reflections, Maud suddenly remembered that all she had got this evening was a few spoonfuls of singed potato-soup, and she realised all at once that she was almost faint with hunger. The vision which this discovery most distinctly conjured up before her mind's eye was that of the Irish stew which at her indignant exit she had left almost untouched upon her plate. Would it be there still? Rather cold, rather uninviting perhaps; but what of that? she *was* so hungry! "Perhaps Aunt Sophy will send me a message," she said to herself. "Perhaps Sarah-Ann will bring me something; she must know I have had no dinner,"—and for a little while after this Maud sat listening for some sound in the passage; but time passed, and all was still. Then she heard her aunt come out of the sitting-room and go into her bedroom—for Maud, busy with her thoughts, had not realised how long she had sat there. Then Sarah-Ann came along the passage and put out the lamp, and, returning to the kitchen, locked the door behind her. And then Maud's courage broke down. The full consciousness of her wretched loneliness seemed to sweep down upon her. And was it because of the awful idea of missing this season in London? or was it because she remembered that she would be thirty next birthday? or was it only because she had travelled very far and eaten very little that day? More probably it was a mixture of all these causes which made her suddenly break into a flood of scalding tears.

"My welcome!" she sobbed aloud, "my welcome

home! Oh, where can I go? Yes, Aunt Sophy is right; why have I not got another home? Oh, who could give me one? who—who?”

She cried for about five minutes, and then her common-sense began to come to her aid, and suggested that the first thing to be done was to still these unbearable pangs of vulgar, physical hunger. Half blind with tears, she groped her way to her travelling-bag, and dug out from its depths a few stale sandwiches and broken biscuits that had survived the journey. Then, with her shawl huddled round her—for the evening had grown very chill—she sat down again beside the empty grate, and ate her vagabond fare by the light of the street lamp.

She was much calmer now. The burst of tears had relieved her, and she felt better able to take a dispassionate review of her situation. Though she still kept repeating that wild query of “Who? who?” there was an answer to it already in her mind. A name stood out in her thoughts shining like a faint star of hope suggesting the bare possibility of escape. It was the name of Sir Peter Wyndhurst.

A short time before this she had met Sir Peter at his stepmother's house in London, and it had immediately become evident to her that she had produced some sort of impression upon him. His open admiration had been noted and talked of; he had followed her about for several days, and at last had asked leave to paint her portrait. But the portrait was not done when business called him away to Scotland, and Maud's hopes, which had begun to rise high, were abruptly extinguished.

So, at least, it had seemed. But now, with wits sharpened by the need of the moment, casting about for some straw of hope to catch at, she began to ask herself whether something might not yet be done. She was not in love with Sir Peter. She did not for a moment try to persuade herself that she was—for she always preferred to be honest when she could possibly afford it; but she had a distinct liking for him. He was sympathetic to her; was not that enough? She was persuaded that his wife would be a lucky woman, and this not only because he was enormously rich. This was no case of the wealthy monsters, the leering millionaires, who in bygone days had knelt at her feet. To marry Sir Peter, despite his thousands, would not even entail any distinct loss of self-respect.

That advantage, therefore, must be followed up. A very little more reflection fixed this resolve. She was quite herself again now, her figure straightened, the tears dried on her cheeks, her mind grappling with the problem in hand. It was not often that she gave way to fits of such weakness as the one she had indulged in to-night. Her judgment was in general clear and masterful, and her resolutions were ever quickly formed and carried out with spirit. Very soon she had devised the ways and means by which her project was to be carried out; she had recollected her lucky acquaintance with Lady Catherine, and determined to write a letter which should be a masterpiece of diplomacy. She was quite sure of the surprise which, despite all its diplomacy, the letter must cause, but something like despair had made her more reckless than usual.

How Maud Epperton acted upon that resolution has already been told. Up to her meeting with Sir Peter all her plans had worked without a flaw; but after that point there came a check. Sir Peter's admiration was as evident as ever. How was it, then, that he did not take fire? Vanity for its own sake was a weakness which Maud never gave way to; and even before the tableaux were done rehearsing, she had pierced the question to its core, and had realised that Sir Peter's interest in her was the interest of a painter in a beautiful model.

Now, as she sat before her glass in her rich costume, she alone awake in all the house, Maud did not mince matters in her mind.

"As regards the whole parcel of those rosy-cheeked squires," she said aloud, "I have been a success. I seemed to go to their heads like champagne. I think some of them did not walk quite straight out of the door; they will have Cleopatra on the brain for a fortnight to come. But as regards Sir Peter, I have been—let me be honest, there is no one here but my looking-glass,—I have been a failure." She said the word firmly, but in her eyes there was no failure written, rather there was something that looked like a doubtful, dawning triumph. She knew that she had gained a victory in the very moment of defeat; for, immovable as she had remained, and wrapt as she had seemed in her part, by her alone of all present the opening of the door had been noticed. With her eyes fixed on the doorway she could not help seeing the young man who stood there; she had observed his start and change of colour, had almost guessed at the very shape of the

question which in his first bewilderment he had put to himself. Before any one else had even noticed that he was in the room, she had realised that he was Lord Germaine, and had said to herself, "Why, he is more than a boy—he is almost a man;" and before even she had stepped off her pedestal, an amazing thought had flashed through her mind, and unconsciously her brain was at work upon this new conception while she was still thanking Sir Peter for his help in disentangling her train.

There is a Scottish proverb which says that "when ae door steeks anither opens"; and though Maud had never heard this saying, something of the same idea was floating in her mind to-night. "I wonder what that boy looks like by daylight," she mused; "he struck me as handsome. I had not realised that he is actually twenty-three—they all talked of him as of a mere school-boy. Heavens! how he looked at me! I wonder——" she broke off, and fell into brooding thought. "Of course, he is the only son," she said, presently; "and though I don't think they are inordinately rich, they are without doubt very comfortably off. Evidently it must all come from those coppermines down in the south—for Kippendale, though it is very ornamental, can scarcely be productive. Why, there are no farms at all; it is all one big pleasure-ground. I wish I knew a little more about copper; and I wish, oh, I wish that I had not to take off these diamonds—they make me look quite five years younger. But it is late. Cleopatra, farewell!"

She unclasped the necklace, and held it for a minute dangling in the light. All at once she gave a short laugh.

“Germaine’s wife’s diamonds, to be sure! I had forgotten that. Germaine’s wife’s diamonds!”

CHAPTER VII.

WHEAL TALLY-HO.

“All engulfed in rock
Of hue ferruginous.”

If Maud was indeed anxious to gain a little more insight into the mysteries of coppermining, it would seem as though fate were inclined to smile upon her latest desire; for, in the course of the next few days, there came in her way two distinct opportunities of picking up some useful shreds of information.

The first of these opportunities occurred on the very day after the tableaux. Maud had gone into the library after breakfast, with the intention of restoring to their places some of the illustrated histories of costume which been consulted for the pictures. Maud’s habits were methodical in the extreme, and it was by such little services as these that she contrived to keep herself afloat in society. In one corner of the library there stood a glass case with various minute and generally indescribable articles, which had been carefully labelled and ranged there by some Bevan of bygone days. Most of these articles were historical, or at least semi-historical. There was the usual lock of Prince Charlie’s hair, which no Scotch family of any note could well be without; there was also the usual piece of exceedingly fine and exceedingly useless needlework of which Mary Queen of Scots seems to have executed so many square miles;

there was the unavoidable "quaigh," out of which either Wallace or Bruce, or somebody else, had drunk his stirrup-cup; and all the other interesting if somewhat doubtful relics which, as a matter of course, are to be found in every glass case of curiosities north of the Tweed. But in this particular glass case the display was varied by a great many curious little lumps of all shapes and sizes, and shining with a dull subdued glimmer of yellowish-green or greenish-yellow. Maud had never thought of examining the curiosity-case before, for neither Prince Charlie nor Robert Bruce interested her very particularly; but on this occasion, as she passed the case on her way to the book-shelves, her eye happened to be caught by a label attached to one of the greenish lumps, and on it there was distinctly written "Sample of Copper—Wheal Tally-ho, 183-." With awakened interest she stopped beside the case and bent over it. She was standing thus when Lord Kippendale came in.

"Am I disturbing you?" asked Maud. "Shall I go?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Lord Kippendale, briskly—"nothing of the sort; only too glad if any one will look after the books; they've not been in order, for the matter of that, since my father's time. Don't let me scare you away. Nothing like getting a thing done when you're at it. What have you found there to interest you? Eh? Is it Mary Stuart's embroidery you're looking at? I believe there are yards more of it somewhere in a cupboard up-stairs."

"No, I was not looking at the embroidery just now; I was wondering how people ever discovered that these

pieces of rubbishy-looking stones were so valuable. You brought them from Gullyscoombe, I suppose?"

"No; not I. My poor brother did; collected them himself, labelled them himself. Ronald took a terrible interest in the mines."

"And don't you?"

"In the money they bring me," chuckled Lord Kippendale, "yes, a vast interest; but in those holes in the ground, and all the questions about cages and shafts, and pumping-engines and levels, and the 'poor lodes' and the 'keenly lodes,' bless you, no! Details disagree with me, Miss Epperton. Why, the mere idea of writing out those tickets and gumming them on would be enough to send me half-daft. That's the Wheal Tally-ho sample you are looking at now, (it was my grandfather who baptised it) old mine shut up thirty years ago; came to grief just about the same time that poor Ronald did."

"Yes?" said Maud, with a distinct point of interrogation, for the cadence of Lord Kippendale's voice seemed to indicate a full stop.

"Yes. You see it had grown very poor—was being worked at a loss, in fact; and then, just as they were trying to make up their minds as to whether they should stop the work or not, half-a-dozen yards of roofing mercifully fell in, and that settled their minds for them. It wasn't worth the expense of clearing out; so Wheal Tally-ho was shut up."

"There are a good many shut-up mines down there, are there not?" asked Maud, bending over the glass case.

"Not on my land, I am happy to say. Tally-ho is

the only one that has ever failed me, or is likely to fail me either, from what Captain John says. He's my head man, you know. According to him the mines we are working now—the 'Bluebell Mines,' we call them (we've always had the christening of our mines in our own hands)—have got copper enough to send to grass for another half-century, another half-hundred of centuries, perhaps."

Maud scrutinised the samples from the Bluebell Mines in the case before her. She wished to know why the colour was so different from the Tally-ho sample?

"That's because they are richer—very much richer. Now poor Ronald could have told you, to an exact figure, how much per cent of copper there is in this stone, and how much in the other; but it's no use asking me those things. All I know is that the workings under the sea have always paid much better than any workings that have ever been tried inland."

The mention of mines under the sea interested Maud very much. It took her only a few minutes to find out that the Bluebell Mines before-mentioned extended to a considerable distance from the shore, and that the miners actually worked with ships sailing over their heads, and could hear the very stones grinding each other into powder upon the ocean's bed.

"And you have heard them?" asked Maud.

"Yes, once. They dragged me down there after Ronald's death. It was a terrible scrimmage. But, to tell the truth, it was the only scrimmage I ever had in connection with the mines, though the whole concern is nominally in my own hands, and would no doubt be

an unbearable bother if it were not for Captain John being such an ace of trumps as he fortunately is."

"Oh, I see," said Maud; "but really, Lord Kippendale, I must not waste more of your time, and these books must positively settle down again to a respectable existence on their shelves: they have led a vagabond life for quite long enough."

Maud's interest in the mines was by no means exhausted, but Lord Kippendale's patience very evidently was. After he had left her, Maud proceeded with some difficulty to restore the various volumes to their places. It was not a joking matter by any means; for, as Lord Kippendale had said, the books had not been looked after for years. It was a fairly large collection of mostly venerable-looking volumes; but as the old Earl himself confined his reading principally to "Jor-rocks" and the sporting news, as Nicky never opened a book of any sort, and as Lady Baby found her time amply filled by Mudie's box, it followed that occasional stray visitors were the only people interested in the library shelves; and stray visitors are not generally remarkable for their conscientiousness in replacing any particular volume in exactly the place they take it from. It was no wonder, therefore, that the Kippendale library was a rather maddening place for any one who happened to be conscientious in this respect; that some shelves were overcrowded and others underfilled; that gaps were stopped up with bundles of newspapers, thrust there at random, while tables were littered with the rightful occupants of these gaps; that as many volumes stood upon their heads as upon their heels; that what had once been happy pairs now led a

solitary existence upon widely separated shelves; and that what had once been united families found themselves so ruthlessly torn asunder and so recklessly scattered, that all hopes of reunion must long since have abandoned their papery and somewhat musty hearts.

"It certainly would be a work of mercy," mused Maud as she looked around her, "if any benevolent person would undertake to catalogue and arrange these books. I wonder how long it would take? A month—two months, perhaps; and it's a thing that, once started, would have to be carried out to the very bitterest of bitter ends. Shall I be the benevolent person?" A minute later she shook her head. "Not quite yet. It might be very convenient for me to be sure of two months at Kippendale, or, possibly, it might be just a little inconvenient. A few days more, to see how matters are shaping themselves—just a few days more. As quantities are now distributed, it might turn out to be a mistake." What Maud meant by this possible mistake was only the other end, as it were, of last night's reflections. She was too wise to waste either time or energy upon what she now frankly recognised to be a losing game. Sir Peter was slipping beyond her grasp, and she knew it. True, with time and trouble, passions had been evoked out of less promising materials even than this artistic admiration, which irritated her more than it flattered her; and had not some other elements entered into the question, Maud would undoubtedly have redoubled her efforts, taken all risks, and still have hoped for success. But her perceptions were exceptionally keen. She had become aware of a something new in the atmosphere, unsuspected by most of

the others, and the conviction was borne in upon her, that if the retreat had to be made, this was the last possible moment for doing it with anything like dignity or grace.

As regards Sir Peter, therefore, the severed volumes on the shelves might just as well continue to mourn apart, or to groan under each other's weight. But there was also that "new conception," which had dawned in her mind last night at the moment of the opening of the door; and that was why Maud said "A few days, just a few days more."

Maud had not to wait many days before she got her second chance of picking up the sort of information she wanted.

Lord Kippendale appeared one morning at breakfast in an absolutely hilarious mood, and electrified Nicky by telling him that he might buy that team for himself which he had had his eye on for so long—might telegraph for it that very day if he liked.

"That means that you have had a nice letter from Gullyscoombe, I suppose, papa?" said Lady Baby; "and if it is really such a very nice letter, don't you think that the pony-carriage you promised me for my birthday would look much nicer with two ponies than with one?"

"Eh? We'll see, we'll see," said Lord Kippendale, gleefully pinching his daughter's cheek. He had indeed had a very "nice" letter from Gullyscoombe. The copper was doing more than ordinarily well; also there had been a slight rise in the market, which had sent the price up higher than it had been for some years, and which promised to hold on for some time longer.

All this was discussed openly and fully during the greater part of breakfast, and Maud sat by, very attentive, but singularly silent.

After breakfast she retired to her own room, and that afternoon she suggested to Lady Baby that it would be a very good thing if a new catalogue were made of the books in the library.

CHAPTER VIII.

AJAX.

“At first there’s nothing to resist;
He fights with all the forms of peace.

And then, unlook’d for, strikes amain.”

ON the morning after the tableaux, both Sir Peter and Mr. Carbury had given orders for their portmantous to be packed. Neither of them gave the order with much enthusiasm, but by mid-day both portmantous were strapped. After luncheon Sir Peter took his departure, but Mr. Carbury, over-persuaded, apparently, told Williams to unpack his portmanteau again. He gave this order with much more alacrity than he had given the first. Having been a fortnight in the house, he had felt it incumbent on him to make at least “an offer at” departure; but perhaps Lord Kippendale’s broad and old-fashioned views of hospitality had removed his scruples, or perhaps Sir Peter’s withdrawal from the scene had removed some other objection. For a week past Mr. Carbury had felt aware that he was sinking into the background, and this discovery was, of course, extremely unpalatable.

Catherine had departed to her home in Bournemouth, but Aggie and Nicky were staying on at Kippendale.

The reason that Aggie and Nicky were not going yet, was that they had no fixed home to go to. Though Nicky always had a few horses standing in the Kippendale stables, and always could find a *pied-à-terre* in his father-in-law's house, yet the general course of the Craigtouns' life was of a semi-nomadic character.

When Mr. Carbury decided to stay, Lady Baby thought it very good-natured of a "real London man," such as he was, to put up with a dull country visit, and she resolved to reward him by extra attention. So he was more frequently asked to join the ladies in their rides, he was consulted about the clipping of Zet's mane, and his advice was taken in various minor equestrian matters. When this had gone on for a few days, Sir Peter drove over one afternoon to fetch a pet paint-brush which he had left at the house. Next day he came back for a cake of ultramarine, which it seemed had been dropped in the old schoolroom; and two days after that, he found that his best lamp-black had shared the same fate.

"How many colours are there in a paint-box?" asked Mr. Carbury on the occasion of this third visit.

"I have seen them with as many as thirty-six," said Sir Peter, coolly. "Does the question interest you?"

"Not at all. I was only trying to make a rough calculation as to how many more times you would have to cross the Border."

"I am afraid your arithmetic will fall short," answered Sir Peter.

“Artists are always losing their things,” put in Lady Agnes, who, being a woman, even if rather a stupid one, could not help scenting danger in the air. “Ah! there is Frances all ready, and the horses are at the door.”

Sir Peter went to the door to see them mount, and then watched them ride away. They made a pretty picture trotting away under the budding beech-trees, and the lines of the avenue were to Sir Peter no doubt as good as a practical lesson in perspective, for he stood and gazed at the prospect during several minutes. Last time he had come to the house he had not had even this much to look at, for the whole party had been out riding and did not return until he was on the point of departure. And it was the same thing every time he came: the ladies had just gone out riding, or were just going. He never saw them but in their habits, and seldom except in the saddle. Once, it is true, he had been told that Miss Epperton was in the library, and, with his sketch-book in his hand, he had hopefully proceeded thither; but, to his disgust, he found Miss Epperton with a handkerchief tied over her head, a large apron over her dress, and enveloped in a cloud of dust, while Lord Germaine, on his knees beside a small mountain-range of books, was vigorously wielding a feather-brush. Sir Peter hurriedly retired. It was quite evident that Miss Epperton was a great deal too busy to act as model just now.

At last one day as he was standing on the door-steps, rather ruefully watching the start of the riders, Lady Baby seemed struck by the doleful expression of his face, for she checked her pony and asked him suddenly—“Do you think you are too old to learn?”

"To learn what?"

"To learn to ride. You might take lessons."

"From whom?"

"From me."

This seemed to put the matter in a new light, for, after a brief moment of stupefaction, he answered: "Perhaps you are right, and perhaps I am not too old to learn. I knew a fellow at Rome who began to take drawing-lessons at fifty, and he got to making very clever sketches—very clever indeed."

"I don't suppose you will ever make a really good rider," said Lady Baby cautiously, fearing that she had awakened unduly sanguine expectations; "it certainly is too late a beginning for that. I began at five, you see."

"So did I, but I left off at fifteen. But after all, it is just possible that those bitter lessons of my tortured infancy may have left some traces behind them—a sort of foundation to start upon."

"Well, we can try," said Lady Baby. "Will you bring a horse from Nolesworth? Of course you have plenty. I am always jealous of the Nolesworth horses. There's a jewel of a little bay mare that has often made me wish the old Border customs had not quite died out," and Lady Baby sighed regretfully; "and then your stables are much better than ours—you must have so much room there."

"Lots of room," assented Sir Peter; "in fact, there is nothing but room there at present."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that the stables are empty; there are no horses."

"No horses?"

"No, not even the tail of one. I made arrangements last week for selling my father's stud, and I intend in future to keep only carriage-horses of the very meekest description."

"Sold your father's stud!" almost shouted Nicky, with a stare of horror at the speaker—"What the dev—I mean why?"

"Why? Because upon reflection I found that it was scarcely worth while keeping fifteen horses and six grooms, and spending two thousand a-year, in order to break into a cold perspiration each time I came in sight of a fence. I did not think that the result quite justified the expense."

"Sir Peter! Sir Peter!" cried Lady Baby, "this is even worse than I thought! I am afraid you will never learn, after all."

"But you said I was worth a trial," urged Sir Peter, who now, contradictiously enough, seemed determined to have his riding-lessons, "and I am not going to let you off your word. Surely you will be kind enough to lend me a mount, since there is nothing at Nolesworth but the old rocking-horse in my brothers' nursery."

"I can lend you a live rocking-horse," said Lady Baby.

Next day orders were given for Ajax to be saddled. Ajax, *alias* the rocking-horse, was Lady Agnes's special steed, somewhat on the same scale as Lady Agnes herself, and quite the quietest horse in the Kippendale stables. He was an ancient animal by this time, very knowing in his ways, and very cool in his head; entirely to be relied upon for picking his way along the roughest

of roads, finding the easiest passage through a broken hedge, or similar questions of delicate equine judgment; but most of all to be relied upon for not taking the smallest atom of unnecessary trouble to himself upon any occasion whatever. For though Ajax had lived through a fiery youth, he had long since settled into the wisdom of age. In colour Ajax was a rather pale chestnut; in power it will be enough to say that he was up to Lady Agnes's weight. His general appearance had something unlike the modern horse, something semi-heraldic, semi-historical about it.

"I'd no' tak' it on me to be ower positive aboot onything," said Adam, the old groom, as he limped rheumatically across the stable-yard, "but I canna help thinking that things is takin' a kin' o' a queer turn. M' Leddy Baby gi'en orders for A Jacks" (this was Adam's way of viewing old Greek) "to be saddled for Sir Peter Wyndhurst, and him to be ta'en oot first, for fear o' him bein' ower fresh. I thocht m' Leddy Baby wad hae kent A Jacks a wee bit better nor that. Hi there, lads! Gie me my leg-up." What Adam elegantly termed his "leg-up" was in reality a wooden chair, without which his stiffened joints could no longer hoist him into the saddle; but he had not yet brought himself to ask for the chair *as* a chair—he preferred the sound of the paraphrase. Adam's age was sixty in point of years, but he was never seen as a man of sixty; for on foot he was fully eighty, and on horseback he was barely forty.

This was the same groom whose family history had been marked by the semi-tragical diamond-scene recounted by Lady Laby; but the incident had left little

trace upon him, or rather, its memory consisted solely in the indignation of a sternly and somewhat grimly honest man at the trickery and worthlessness of the woman he had married. And the trickery was all the more abominable to him as having been practised against one of "the family." She had been lovely, and he had wooed her with ardour, and won her with rapture; but from the day that, deaf to all intercession, he had turned her out of doors, he had never seen her face again, though she had survived her disgrace for ten years. As for forgiving her after she was dead, or at least making allowances for extreme youth and giddiness, the idea had never so much as occurred to him.

"Is that animal quite tame?" inquired Sir Peter, as Ajax clattered into the stone-paved porch—for he always made a point of quitting his stables with a mock-show of being irrepressible. It was a harmless little joke which deceived no one who knew him, and which appeared to amuse his senile mind.

"Same as a arm-cheer upon wheels, sir," answered Adam, with a faint but deadly smile of scorn.

"Thanks; that is reassuring. From an artistic point of view he looks at this moment more like a dragon spitting fire than an arm-chair. Is this the right way to take the bridle? Which leg must go up first?"

"That's right!" chuckled Lord Kippendale; "try again. I believe you'll make a rider yet."

"Would you like a ladder?" asked Maud from the doorstep, not sorry to shoot an arrow of sarcasm at the man who had refused to be wounded by the other sort of arrow.

"And a leading-rein?" suggested Mr. Carbury, who

likewise had come out to see the start. They were all looking on, each person with a different sort of smile on his or her lips. Even Zet, the black pony, who always looked like the incarnation of equine impudence, seemed to have an ironical gleam in the corners of his mischievous eyes.

"Don't speak all at once, or you will flurry me," said Sir Peter, looking singularly unfurried. "Now, memories of my childhood, come to my aid!"

They came to his aid apparently, for in the next moment, rather to his own surprise, he found himself in the saddle.

"There! it's done! Thanks every one for their kind assistance and advice. Germaine, if I happen not to return, bear in mind that my keys are in my writing-table drawer."

The first riding-lesson was to be confined to the inner park, and for this Adam was considered as sufficient chaperon.

"Your seat is really not so very bad," said Lady Baby, as pupil and mistress moved down the avenue side by side. "You are actually sitting straight."

"It is all a snare and a delusion, I assure you: it may commend itself to the eye, but a feather would knock me off. The unfortunate fact of my sitting straight on horseback was the chief cause of my sufferings as a child. Somebody once had the cruel idea of saying that my seat was graceful; I have never been able to think of that person with any charity since. He confirmed my father in his treatment of me by giving him vain hopes."

"Sir Peter, are you not sometimes given to drawing

slightly on your imagination?" asked Lady Baby, with a mistrustful glance. "If half you say were true, you ought to be feeling nervous now, and you look quite calm."

"I always do; it is the calmness of despair. Do not trust to appearances. My position is most insecure."

The distress on Lady Baby's face turned to consternation. "If you really should feel like falling off, remember to take hold of Ajax's mane."

"I have been looking at his mane with a view to that already," said Sir Peter, "but he does not seem to have much mane remaining. The animal has some artistic possibilities about him; they lie, I think, in the antique line. I perceive a dash of the wooden Trojan horse, and at times I catch a glimmer of something Pompeian. Yes, he is very like a horse in a Pompeian frieze—a slightly dilapidated bas-relief, with bits chipped away, and, unluckily for me, the bit with the mane is gone."

"Do pay attention to your reins," said Lady Baby; "you talk a great deal too much for a beginner. We might try a slow trot, but remember about the mane."

They tried a slow trot, at the end of which Ajax found it proper to fall into one of his smooth rocking-horse canters, which gave him less trouble than any other pace. "If riding is nothing worse than this," said Sir Peter, "I think I could get blunted to it in time."

They drew rein at the end of the park and slowly began to retrace their way, for the first lesson was to be a short one. They were in a mossy path between the trees; above their heads the branches met, the

daisies were thickly strewn now, and the hedges were strung with the pearls of hawthorn-buds. Lady Baby broke a branch in passing and stuck it through her saddle-strap. Her eyes were shining with the intense but serious look of enjoyment, which her favourite pastime always kindled there. Her delight was never wont to vent itself in laughter and smiles, and, even as a child, she had never screamed with joy over a new toy. It was in the moments of her greatest delight that she grew the gravest, and in proportion that her enjoyment was deep it was repressed.

They rode for a little time in silence, Ajax profiting by his relaxed reins to make a hearty meal off the young beech-leaves within reach.

"I think some of it will be out for my birth-day," said Lady Baby presently, plucking idly at the hawthorn-boughs. "I shall be seventeen on my birthday."

"Really? So much as that? Are you going to have a birthday cake?"

"Certainly not. I stopped my birthday cakes when I was twelve years old. I am going to have a picnic. I have one every year. You will come to it, of course; I take that for granted."

"A picnic in the open air?" inquired Sir Peter.

"Of course. Why?"

"Nothing; I was only trying to remember whether I brought an overcoat down with me."

"You can drink your tea at home, if you like," she retorted, bridling again on the instant.

"I shall drink it in the open air, or perish in the attempt. But don't you think that a Scotch picnic in May is rather a reckless idea?"

"No, I don't," said Lady Baby, and of course that settled the matter.

"I'm no' wishin' to be ower positive," said Adam, when he found himself in the stable-yard again at the end of that first ride—"I'm no' wishin' to be ower positive about onything whatever; but if I could find it in me to mak' an assairtion, I'd say there was a deal o' mischief in the wind. Hi, lads, here! Gie me my leg-doon!"

"Is it the east wind or the west wind the mischief blows from?" asked the precocious youngster who brought the required chair.

"The Hurst wind," said Adam, with a convulsive effort at a joke, and a stare which put even the precocious stable-boy out of countenance. "'Tis in the Hurst wind that the mischief sits," he repeated, grimly pleased with his newly coined word. "Ay, to think that my eyes sud hae lived to see a Wyndhurst puttin' the wrang foot foremost i' the stirrup, and to think that my ears sud hae lived to hear a Wyndhurst speirin' which way to tak' up the rein! If it had been ane o' oor ain fam'ly, it 'ud hae broke my hert richt oot; but as it's ane o' the English castle folk, it's jist graand!"

All this part of the matter was eminently satisfactory to Adam; for in the tacit feud between the two families he had always played a respectful but enthusiastic part. The pleasure of stirring up, in "oor ain fam'ly," those embers of rivalry which had sometimes seemed in danger of smouldering, had been for long his keenest enjoyment; and this interest had amply made up for the loss of the domestic interest of which he had had so slight a taste. "And to think," said

Adam, with a sort of withered cackle which did duty with him for a laugh, and which amply sufficed for his requirements of hilarity,—“to think that yon Sir Peter had the same faither wi’ thae bits o’ laddies whase ridin’ has riled me so sair, mony’s the day!” Often upon hunting days, when Adam had met these same “bits o’ lads” on their “bits o’ ponies,” had he painfully studied the clouds for fear lest they should be daft enough to fancy that their budding horsemanship could have any power to extort his admiration. And then, when he had let the tiny riders go by as though they were the emptiest of empty air, would he whip behind a hedge, and from behind that shelter his keen old eyes would follow the small enemies with eager scrutiny. Sometimes, secure of being unwitnessed, he would permit himself the relaxation of an approving smile; or when some particularly small boy had emerged, still in company with his pony, from some particularly big ditch, Adam, in a torment of mixed feelings, would groan out to the hedges that sheltered him: “Ay, but they can ride, thae Wynnhurst lads!” Neither rack nor thumbscrew would have wrung the same remark from him anywhere within reach of mortal ears. Therefore, to find one of the “English castle folk” sunk so low as was Sir Peter, was grimly gratifying to Adam; but any symptom of hostilities ceasing was to him as gall and wormwood, and there had been more than one symptom lately. Adam declined to be positive on any point whatever, but he remained of opinion that there was “a sicht o’ mischief” brewing.

Next day Sir Peter had another lesson, and on the day after that again another. Mr. Carbury thought

once more of having his portmanteau packed, but only thought of it and let it alone. The riding-lessons somehow tried his temper; they had not turned out as he expected. It had seemed to him almost incredible that a sane man should deliberately propose to make an exhibition of his unskilfulness. Mr. Carbury himself would never have mounted a horse if he had known his horsemanship to be anything short of first class. He had promised himself something almost like enjoyment in the spectacle of Sir Peter on horseback. It was Sir Peter's vanity which was to be mortified, not his own. But his very first glimpse of Sir Peter in the saddle had been a distinct disappointment. Whatever mistakes he might make, however ludicrous an inexperience he might betray, the joke, instead of being on the side of the spectators, was always on the side of the tyro in horsemanship. No laughter seemed to ruffle him, no criticism to put him out of countenance.

While matters were at this juncture, Lady Agnes, sitting alone in her room one afternoon, heard hurried steps stumbling up the staircase, and in the next moment Lady Baby, looking rather wild and breathless, stood upon the threshold.

"Nicky? has anything happened to Nicky?" was Agnes's instinctive question; for it was scarcely half an hour since pupil and teacher, under Nicky's protection, had left the house.

"Nothing; no, it is not Nicky," panted Lady Baby. "I don't know where Nicky is. He—he—oh, Agnes, he has done it!"

"Who has done what?"

"Sir Peter. He has proposed to me."

"Proposed to you? Asked you to marry him? *Already?*"

"Yes, asked me to marry him. Can you believe it?"

"No, scarcely; you have only known him three weeks! It is so peculiar!"

"Is it only three weeks? I thought it was much longer. Never mind about the time; you are always so punctilious about doing things exactly like everybody else. That is not the point. The point is his daring to propose to me at all."

"But how did he do it?" asked Agnes, still plunged in ponderous bewilderment, not so much at Sir Peter's proposing, but at his proposing so quickly. "Was not Nicky there?"

"Nicky? No. I don't know where Nicky was. He started with us, but afterwards he said something about giving Suleika a gallop round a ploughed field, so as to take it out of her, for she was standing on her hind legs more than usual to-day; and he said he would rejoin us higher up, and he took the gallop, but somehow he didn't rejoin us, and then, before I knew where I was, Sir Peter had proposed to me. Agnes, would you mind telling me how Nicky proposed to you? What did he say?" Lady Baby had pulled off her hat to cool her forehead, and, with the end of her habit thrown over her arm, was rapidly pacing the room.

"Nicky didn't say very much," replied Agnes, lowering her ample eyelids over her saucer eyes. "I think he said: 'Agnes, I should be the luckiest fellow in the world if you would consent to gallop on with me this way through life.'"

"You were galloping at the moment, I suppose?"

"Yes; and then he got his horse quite close to mine and took my hand and pressed it. I think he would have kissed it, only that his horse was pulling so."

"Well, Sir Peter didn't do it like that at all, and of course he couldn't go in for acrobatic feats on horseback, like Nicky. I wonder how George proposed to Catherine?" (the defunct Mr. Blashford's name had been George.) "Listen, Agnes: it was just after Nicky left us; we were riding along quite slowly, and I was trying to explain to Sir Peter the theory of leaping. Then we came to a lovely little fence, which looked as if it had been put there on purpose to be used as an illustration, so I just took Zet over it, while Sir Peter looked on, and then suddenly I heard a strange voice saying, 'Capital figure for the paper-hoop business!' and I saw a fat little red-faced man leaning against the paling and watching me. Of course I gave him a withering glance. When I got back to Sir Peter he was biting his lips, and he asked whether I wished him to get off and box the man's ears; and when I asked what for, he said, 'For thinking aloud; it is bad taste to think aloud.' I told him I could take care of myself, and he gave a smile—somehow, Agnes, it was a very enraging smile—and when he had ridden on a little way he said, 'Do you mean to take care of yourself all your life?' I asked him what he meant; and he said he meant that possibly somebody else might wish to take care of me, and had it never occurred to me that people sometimes get married? I answered that of course it had occurred to me often, and that I supposed I should get married some day, just like most other people. Then Sir Peter

said, 'And have you made up your mind as to what sort of a husband you would like best?' It sounded exactly as if he were asking me whether I would like a wax or a china doll best."

"And what did you say?" asked Agnes, breathless.

"I told him that my mind had been long made up, and that of course, in the first place, my husband must ride straight across country, and, in the second place, be an excellent shot; and that, though I would not positively stipulate that he should be strong enough to hold plunging horses with his bare hand in their nostrils, as Nicky does, still that I wanted him to be as like Nicky as possible in that way; and in the middle of it all, while I was drawing breath in my description, the man quietly asked me to marry him. I thought I should have fallen off my pony with the surprise. I asked him to repeat his words, and he said, 'Yes, I am asking you to marry me; but there is no reason for looking scared,—of course you need not do it unless you like.'"

"And you refused him?" murmured Agnes.

"Agnes!" cried Lady Baby, stopping short in her walk, and turning a pair of indignant blue eyes upon her sister,—“refused him? What else could I possibly have done? A man who only cares for horses on pictures and bas-reliefs—what possible bond of sympathy could exist between us? Surely Agnes, you must be forgetting.”

"Yes, to be sure," said Agnes, doubtfully; "but Nicky was saying the other day——"

"What was Nicky saying?"

"That—that many girls would give a good deal for the chance of marrying Sir Peter."

"Nicky didn't know what he was talking about; Nicky shouldn't talk, he should only ride; and besides, he undervalues himself. Don't you remember my always saying that nothing but a second Nicky would do for me? Don't you remember my saying that, Agnes?" and Lady Baby's riding-whip impatiently tapped her boot.

Agnes hastened to remember. "Yes, yes, Frances, I know; and of course, none of us ever thought of your marrying Sir Peter unless you cared for him."

"*Cared* for him!" echoed Lady Baby, with a rather hysterical laugh; "as if *that* was the sort of a man I was likely to care for! And you know quite well that it isn't the riding alone—there are thousands of other things. He doesn't know anything about breech-loaders or match-locks, and he takes snipe for woodcock, and partridge for grouse; yes, and I don't believe he had ever heard the word 'covert-shooting' before he came here, and he calls moors 'pretty bits of colour'; and the other day, when we were walking across the heather—I wish you had seen him, Agnes—he kept looking down in a distressed way at his feet, and at last he asked papa why he did not keep the grass better cut in these places. You should have seen papa's face! And this is the man who asks me to marry him! Agnes, it is dreadful!"

"But, Baby dear, don't excite yourself," said Agnes, who could not help recognising that perhaps it was not so very dreadful after all; "since you have refused him, it is all right now."

"Oh yes, of course, *now* it is all right;" and stopping beside her sister, Lady Baby flung herself on her knees, and put down her head on Agnes's lap. She was in the

habit of flinging herself down in this way occasionally, when she was particularly in want of being agreed with and petted. Agnes was so good at agreeing, and there was something vast and solid about her personality which made it pleasant to use her as a pillow. And she liked being used as a pillow, perhaps because it was her vocation in life. She had a well-stuffed pillow's properly regulated softness, and not much more than a pillow's emotions. If there were not a fair supply of some such comfortable cushions as Agnes to pad the walls of human society, and to be leant upon and fallen upon, and punched and pinched *ad libitum*, then a good many more of us would dash out our brains and scratch our nails bloody against the walls of this great closed madhouse which we call the world.

Agnes put a large, white hand down tenderly upon Lady Baby's untidy head. She had no children of her own, and her younger sister came in for a large share in the big fund of her unclaimed motherly affection.

"Baby," she said in alarm, "you are crying!"

"No, I am not crying; and why shouldn't I cry when it is all so provoking? I wish we had never made friends with Sir Peter. The old rules were quite right after all, and no good ever comes of Borderers making friends; and I told him so, too, or something very like it. For although I distinctly said no, very distinctly indeed, somehow he didn't seem to take it quite seriously, and that made me so angry that I think I lost my head a little, and I told him that if I had known it would come to this, I would have walked home through the rain from Nolesworth that day, rather than have put foot within his house."

"Oh, Frances, that was rather cruel! How did he take it?"

Lady Baby suddenly sprang to her feet. "Good heavens, Agnes! it has only just struck me. I don't know how he took it. I didn't wait to see him take it, for I was so irritated by that time that I just turned Zet's head and galloped away, and I quite forgot how he was to get home by himself, and Ajax was rather skittish to-day. Oh, Agnes, I wonder if he can manage him?"

"Here is Nicky," said Agnes, in great relief. "Baby, I suppose Nicky may know?"

"Yes, yes, anything you like; but ask him whether he has seen Sir Peter."

"I've seen him," said Nicky, sulkily; "he's right enough."

"And, Nicky, Frances has just refused him."

"Then Frances has done a deuced stupid thing," said Nicky, savagely.

"What, Nicky! you too? even you?" cried Lady Baby, aghast. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Wyndhurst has thirty thousand a-year, said Nicky, doggedly; "that's what I mean, and not a bad thing to mean either."

Lady Baby cast upon her ideal brother-in-law one long look of the blankest consternation, and then abruptly left the room.

Though his own Agnes had married him for his sweet and penniless self alone, Nicky Craigtoun was acutely awake to the value of money, and had more than once reflected that a wealthy brother-in-law would be an uncommonly valuable acquisition, and probably a

more tractable article than even a wealthy father-in-law. In his opinion Sir Peter was a muff; but for all that, Lady Baby had done a deuced stupid thing in refusing him. And since Nicky thought so, of course Agnes had no choice but to think so too. She began to take this view of the matter into more serious consideration.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "DOWSING-ROD."

"Why, 'tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath shot out in our latter times!"

"WHAT *is* it?" asked Maud, in deep perplexity, turning over between her fingers an object that looked very much like an ordinary dead twig. "Lord Germaine, I really can't guess."

"I am quite sure you can if you try," said the young man, with a sort of bashful bluntness that sat oddly, yet not unbecomingly, upon him. "You can do anything you try to do."

Germaine was a big young man,—very big and very young; a good deal bigger than his five-feet-eleven, and a good deal younger than his twenty-two years. With his obstinately curly hair, lying in silky, gold rings on his head, his wide-open eyes of an infantine blue, his large unformed hands, still bearing the traces of dimples about the knuckles, he looked like the rough outline-sketch of a giant—a sketch which nature might perhaps by-and-by fill in to a very fine picture, but which was as yet nothing more than a sketch. In his face Germaine had a little of each of his three sisters: when he

stared, he was like Agnes; when he smiled, he was like Lady Baby; and when the corners of his mouth went down, as they were apt to do on occasion, he looked like an enlarged copy of Catherine.

"It certainly is not a riding-whip," said Maud, still examining the enigmatical twig, which was forked at one end, and had evidently at some remote time been cut from either a hazel or a white-thorn bush. It was in the course of the tidying process in the library that a bundle of these mysterious dry twigs had come to light at the back of a drawer. "I don't suppose it is a wizard's wand; really it seems to be just what I called it, a common stick. Lord Germaine, I give it up."

"Well, it *is* a common stick, if you like, and yet it isn't a common stick. It's a divining-rod, you know; they call it a 'dowsing'-rod down there."

"A divining-rod! And are the people 'down there' (which I suppose means Gullyscoombe) actually benighted enough to cling to such a piece of decayed superstition as a divining-rod?"

"Decayed superstition?" repeated Germaine, tearing open his eyes a little wider, just as though they were not big enough already.

"Yes, which means foolish belief, or absurd delusion." Maud had long ere this discovered that the plainer words she used, the better did she get on with this young man. "I thought that the very word 'divining-rod' was banished from the vocabulary of all but the most gullible of rustics."

"Then you think it is wrong to believe in divining-rods?"

"I think it is worse than wrong; I think it is silly."

This answer seemed to trouble Germaine greatly. "Worse than wrong?" he began. How can anything——"

But Maud broke in with an impatient laugh. "Why, you look almost as though you were a secret worshipper of the 'dowsing-rod' yourself!"

Germaine, in genuine misery, balanced himself heavily on one foot, and then on the other. It was great agony to him to brand himself in Miss Epperton's eyes as a "gullible rustic"; but it would have been greater agony to render himself guilty of even an indirect evasion of the truth. "I—I—yes, I always *did* think there was something in it," he stammered, blushing like a schoolgirl, as he plunged resolutely through his confession, but bravely keeping himself from devoting his gaze to his shooting-boots, as he was secretly yearning to do.

"But it is quite an exploded theory," said Maud, speaking with that forbearing patience which generally answers best in the treatment of unreasonable children.

"I don't quite know what that means, but I know that every one swears by it down there; and even Captain John, who is awfully clever about mines, won't say that he thinks it's nonsense."

"Won't he? Well, that lowers Captain John very considerably in my estimation. What's the way to get hold of the thing? There is an orthodox way, I suppose; and if you miss it by a hair's-breadth, your failure is of course put down to your having had your little finger where your forefinger should have been, or to having blinked your eyes or dared to draw a breath just at the wrong moment; so it is quite impossible that the rod should be to blame. Is this the way?"

It was not the way, however, for the forked ends were the ones to be held, as Germaine explained; and the searcher for hidden metals was to rest his two hands against his sides, keeping the rod before him at a given angle—very difficult to hit off, and almost impossible to maintain when once hit off. And Maud, though she did not believe in the divining-rod, had no objection at all to going through the amusing farce under Germaine's directions.

"Well, it is very clear that we have either not got 'the virtue,' or else that there is no gold hidden under *this* carpet," she said at the end of ten minutes, during which they had both been gravely pacing the floor in the prescribed attitude. "My rod has not got an idea in its head. How is yours getting on?"

"I have broken it into three pieces," said Germaine, ruefully; "but I suppose that's my own fault. Somebody once said that my fingers were all thumbs."

"Well, in this case I should absolve your fingers. I had to handle my own stick just as though it were made of spun glass. If you *do* go in for 'dowsing-rods,' I should advise keeping some rather less brittle specimens in stock."

"But they are not mere specimens, you see," explained Germaine; "these rods are rather mixed up with the diamond story. They told you about the diamonds, didn't they? and about that villain Christopher Swan? Well, on the day after the robbery, when they searched his room, they didn't find the diamonds, of course, but they found these rods. Swan had always had the name of being a first-rate hand at the dowsing-rod, and at any rate he knew more about the minerals

on the estate than even Captain John himself. And somehow it seems that not long before he disappeared, the report had got about that he had hit upon a new copper-vein somewhere about Gullyscoombe."

"Which one of these very rods was supposed to have pointed out?" suggested Maud, derisively.

"Yes, exactly; and as they didn't know which was which——"

"I see; and as it would have been an enormous pity to risk the chance of lightly casting aside so valuable a relic, it was thought safer to preserve the whole bundle; is that so?"

"That is just how it was; you put it so much better than I could. It was Captain John himself who brought the rods to my father, and my father kept them as a curiosity. I don't know whether he believed in the rods, but I know that he believed in Swan's copper."

Maud had once or twice before this heard a casual reference to "Swan's copper." At first she had understood it to be one of the working mines, but had afterwards found out that this designation was applied to a copper-vein whose existence was rather hazily believed in, but the site of which had never been properly explored, apparently for no other reason than that the "Bluebells" were sending up metal enough for the market demand—the average price of copper in those years not being such as to make it particularly advisable to face all the risks of an additional enterprise.

"And do you believe in Swan's copper?" asked Maud.

"Yes, I do. Swan was always pottering about the place; there is no reason why he shouldn't have spotted

a vein. And he always was full of mysteries and secrets. Uncle Ronald used to call him the 'sly and sleekit un.'"

"And does it not strike you as much more likely that the 'sly and sleekit one' should have chanced upon this hidden treasure while pottering about the place, rather than insist on giving the merit to this little bit of twig?"

"I suppose it is more likely," said Germaine, humbly; "it is sure to be if you say so."

And then for a minute the infatuated youth struggled hard to get together something appropriate about there being other sorts of treasures, infinitely more precious than copper or tin, or even silver and gold, and which could only be pointed out by quite another sort of divining-rod. He had a dim notion that the materials for turning a neat compliment were there, but by no manner of means could he get them into shape, and after a moment of painful indecision was reduced to saying with a sigh, "Nobody ever put it in that light to me before; but then I don't suppose that many people in the world know as many things as you do, or are as clever as you are."

"No, I don't suppose so either," said Maud, drily; "at any rate, I am pretty sure that very few people have had such good cause to practise their wits as I have had, and it is practice that makes perfect, you know."

"Is it? Then what a lot of practice you must have had in—in being kind to people. Nobody ever was so kind to me as you are, and nobody has ever had such a lot of patience with me. I know I'm dull, I know I'm slow, I know I can't talk, and yet you let me

talk to you as much as I like!" cried Germaine, getting a little mixed.

"Perhaps," suggested Maud, with a slight contraction of her lips, "that is because I have no one else to talk to?"

"You might have the whole world to talk to, if you chose; and yet you never tell me that I bore you, and you never tell me that I'm in the way——"

"If you knock over that inkstand, I will most decidedly tell you that you are in the way,"—and she sharply drew back the hand towards which Germaine had made a sudden vigorous lunge across the table. "There, I told you so; it is over!"

"I am the most confounded fool in Christendom," stammered Germaine, plunged back all at once into his native bashfulness, from which his ardour had for a moment lifted him. "Is it on your dress? Oh, it's only on the carpet. How good you are about it! I wish you would scold me. I suppose I had better not try to do anything to it; hadn't I better tell somebody to wipe it up?" And, covered with blushes, Germaine left the presence of his siren, and thundered down the staircase to bury his confusion in the smoking-room.

Maud likewise sought a retired spot. She had upset no inkstand, and yet she was fully as confused as was Germaine.

"In my grasp," she murmured, "in my grasp already. He will speak any day I choose; but it is too early. Am I not quite satisfied? I suppose I am,—but still——"

Perhaps it was the very ease of the conquest that faintly marred her satisfaction. She had entered on this campaign, as she had entered on many others,

with thought and circumspection, with prudence and wile. She had begun by mustering her forces and sharpening her weapons, and had looked her victim all over, intent, as it were, on giving "the local wound a name." But see there, before even the point had been fixed, or her position adopted, the victim had shown that he was stricken already, and stricken mortally. There was no object in threatening one who was so ready to die, and no zest in convincing one who was more than half convinced.

This attitude was something new to Maud, and it disconcerted her. She was used to owing her victories quite as much to her wit as to her beauty; but here it seemed that wit was superfluous, and that coquetry was almost too effective to be safe. Experienced though she was, it almost took her breath away to see how the most careless motion of her white hand could command the staying or going, the delight or misery, of this young, blunt-spoken, blue-eyed giant, or to mark how he trembled and coloured, and yet in the midst of his bashfulness grew so daring, when she attempted to practise upon him one of her famous long glances. With this special type of glance—it consisted in a peculiarly slow unveiling of the eyes—Maud had slain many victims. In the circle of Miss Epperton's acquaintances it was known as "the eyelash trick," or sometimes as "the Epperton glance." It had been imitated, of course, but generally with little success. In this case, after a few attempts, Maud had given up using it, for it worked too alarmingly well.

"If only he would not put such absolute faith in every word I say," she sighed, as with restless steps

she paced the room. "No one has ever before so blindly believed in me. I am not accustomed to it. It makes me feel—I don't know what it makes me feel,—it puts me out. I don't like his eyes; they are too big and blue and honest—a great deal too honest. I cannot stand being trusted to this terrible degree. Credulous young fool! It is a shame to deceive children of that age. I have a great mind to throw up the whole game and go back to Brackton."

She dropped into a chair, and began nervously twining the bracelet on her wrist. In the next minute she burst out laughing. "What? was it I who said that? Go back to Brackton? What for? To be asked by my affectionate aunt for how long I have come? And why? Because, forsooth, I have succeeded too well in Scotland, and have become too scrupulous to accept a coronet. I declare I have got a fit of the virtues. Steady, Maud, steady! No excitement, no passion, no impulses; I thought we had done with all that long ago. When once I am Lady Germaine, perhaps I can afford to keep a temper again."

CHAPTER X.

STELLA.

"My glass shall not persuade me I am old,
So long as youth and thou are of one date."

THE "Dramatic Equestrian Entertainment, largely patronised by the Nobility and Gentry of the Neighbourhood," which for several weeks past had been advertised on orange and purple play-bills, was on a

certain day more largely patronised than usual. On the seats of honour, draped with red cloth, the Kippendale party found the greater number of their acquaintances already installed. There was only one chair left vacant, "for Nolesworth Castle," explained the manager, a short red-faced man, in a shabby dress-coat.

"Agnes, will you please sit near the Nolesworth Castle chair?" said Lady Baby, drawing back. "I don't like draughts; and Agnes," she added in a whisper, "that is the same red-faced man who—who brought it all about the other day. Now I understand what he meant by paper-hoop business, and it doesn't look so very difficult either."

The performance had opened with an *entrée comique*, which somehow was not very comical, and consisted chiefly in some rather mild tricks played with a hollow cane and a peacock's feather. It was followed by the usual sylphides in short petticoats, and these by Madam Manageress in a primrose-coloured wig, and a habit blue as the sky in June, putting an equine skeleton through its paces.

Lady Baby looked on in grave but intense delight. "I think a circus is a delightful thing," she said to Mr. Carbury. "Oh, do look at that clown!"

"Yes, I see him; he is going to pull away the chair from behind the other, and the other will come down on his back and kick up a prodigious amount of sawdust, which will probably make us either sneeze or cough—possibly both; but it will bring down thunders of applause. There! didn't I tell you so? It is strange that they cannot let a man sit down quietly on a chair without all this fuss."

"It is very silly," said Lady Baby; "but I can't help laughing. Used you ever to laugh at these sort of things, Mr. Carbury?"

"It must have been very long ago if I did. But I am *so* tired of clowns."

"Good heavens!" she said, turning upon him impatiently, "I am *so* tired of hearing you say that you are *so* tired of everything. Is there anything in the world that you are *not* tired of, Mr. Carbury?"

"Yes," he said, with a swift glance into her face—"yes, there is one thing."

"And what is it?"

"I will tell you another time."

"Do you promise to tell me?"

"I promise to tell you," he said very low.

"Thanks," she murmured absently—for her attention was already taken up with the opening of the "unparalleled aquatic ballet," which consisted in putting a fishing-net and an oar to every conceivable use to which fishing-nets and oars are *not* meant to be put.

The aquatic ballet was followed by a pause in the performances, and the Kippendale party left their seats to inspect the zoological branch of the establishment,—some five or six unhappy-looking tigers and panthers in iron cages at the back, as well as the crocodile about which Mr. Carbury had shown himself so wofully uninterested. And here, in front of the panther cage, and in conversation with the keeper, they found Sir Peter. He had not been seen since the day of his last ride with Lady Baby. Lady Baby looked haughty and confused, Sir Peter looked unconcerned.

"I have been studying the artistic possibilities of

this pretty little kitten," he observed, indicating a young and rather pale-coloured panther in the cage beside him. "She doesn't look like a convicted murderess, does she? But I hear distressing accounts of her."

"Half-grown specimen of royal Bengal panther," began the keeper, with a sort of spasmodic jerk, like an instrument freshly wound up; "born in captivity named Stella native of India feeds on flesh and climbs trees one and a half years old present specimen is remarkable for the size of the black eye-patches. Not so near, sir; she's the savagest beast we have." This was added in an everyday tone, and with quite a commonplace indication of punctuation, the remark not belonging to the programme; for Nicky Craigtoun, in whom a certain bullying instinct was not wanting, had poked his cane at the recumbent panther's ribs.

"Ah! that's better still, as a bit of action," said Sir Peter, as, with a terrific snarl of exasperation, Stella started to her feet, and stood with raised upper lip and murderous eyes, slowly moving her tail from side to side.

"Is the cage quite firm?" asked Agnes.

"It's a bit weak about the hinges," said the keeper, placidly, "but it's good for another month or two. We used to keep her with the other panthers, but she came too expensive,—killed her sister in December, and her mother in March; did it mighty neat too. Whist! one clap of her paw, and the old panther's eyes were a yard from her head—taken out just as complete as a pair of halfpenny marbles. Mr. Martin was for shooting Stella; but he wasn't quite handy enough with his rifle, for directly as the young devil saw that the old

one was too far gone to give back tit for tat, you couldn't have said Jack Robinson before she was on the top of her, and making herself very busy with the old one's paws. Mr. Martin thought she was licking them; but she wasn't, she was biting them; she bit them clean through. I shouldn't stand so near, sir—I shouldn't indeed;" for Nicky and Stella were still showing their teeth at each other through the bars.

"Why, here you are," said Lord Kippendale, hurrying up; "I have been round the stable. Shocking collection of screws. What's the sight here? Why, Wyndhurst, haven't seen you to-night yet: haven't seen you for a good wee while, it strikes me. Tired of driving over? But, of course, you're to be at the picnic? Birthday picnic, you know, eh? Got a card of invitation?"

"I believe I was invited," said Peter; "but I am not sure whether the invitation has not since, by implication, been retracted."

"Eh? What's that? Sounds like a conundrum. Of course we expect you on Thursday. In the meantime we had better get back to our seats; there's the next thing just coming on."

The next thing, and several other next things, came on; and the next thing after that was a general rush for the entrance. Lady Baby, a little in rear of the others, had just reached the open air when she heard herself addressed from behind. She turned, and saw Sir Peter.

"One word, if you please," said Sir Peter. "Will my coming spoil the picnic on Thursday?"

"I—I don't know. I suppose it can't be helped."

"It can easily be helped. There are a dozen excuses I can make."

"But it would spoil it more if—I mean if any one were to think that there had been anything."

"Then you prefer that I should come?"

"No—that is to say, it doesn't in the least matter; besides, papa has asked you, you know."

In the next minute they had got separated, and Lady Baby, feeling somehow that her presence of mind had not been quite equal to the occasion, was following her sister into the carriage; while Sir Peter, after a glance, half perplexity, half amusement, just shrugged his shoulders and went home.

Next day it was reported that one of the panthers had broken loose, and that all efforts at capture had hitherto failed. A reward was offered, panic-stricken villagers shut themselves into their houses, no children were seen playing on the roads, and most people thought it wiser to have a pistol about them. After three days the excitement rather abated. It was supposed that the panther had either starved to death on the hills, or else strayed too far to molest the neighbourhood. At any rate, the cause was not considered sufficient to stand in the way of the Thursday birthday picnic. At a comparatively early hour Kippendale House was astir, and hampers were being packed and horses were being rubbed down, while the spotless blue of an ideal May sky seemed bent upon showing that a May picnic in Scotland was not such a very reckless idea after all.

The forenoon was taken up with discussing the arrangements for the afternoon. Lady Baby gave despotic orders to the housekeeper about the filling of hampers,

without troubling herself to consider the feasibility or infeasibility of chocolate-cakes and jam-tarts being produced at a couple of hours' notice; and when they were produced, she naturally put it down to her own excellent household management, and not to Mrs. Spunker's prudence and foresight. Nicky was anxious to drive the new team, and he was also anxious that Ajax should be offered to Sir Peter, for which reason Agnes was to have a seat in the drag. Mr. Carbury was to be of the riding-party too, and so were Lady Baby and her father. Lord Germaine had wished to drive Miss Epperton in the pony-carriage, but finally made the best of the back-seat of the drag, which, but for the vicinity of the grooms, would have made almost as good a paradise as the other.

Then there arose some question about the vehicle which was to carry the hampers. The dog-cart was suggested; but partly owing to the indisposition of one of the under-grooms, and partly to the want of extra hands for the new team, it appeared that the resources of the stable-yard were wellnigh exhausted. In fact, there remained no possible conductor for the dog-cart but one small stable-boy of tender years who was temporarily supplying the sick groom's place, and who, for this purpose, had been recently and suddenly promoted from the garden.

When this boy heard what was expected of him, he gave one deep gasp of terror, and then subsided into resignation. Until to-day he had never been called upon to do anything more "horsey" than to clean a stable-lantern, or to fill a pail, or to drive anything more formidable than a wheelbarrow; but he was a

great deal too frightened of Lord Kippendale to say so; and Lord Kippendale, who scarcely knew the boy by sight, simply concluded that, being in the stable-yard, he naturally knew how to drive a horse, and settled the matter off-hand. It was only just as he was turning away that the boy's face caught his attention.

"Bless me, the lad's in a funk!" he said, standing still. "Ever been out in the dog-cart before—eh? Mind you don't bring the horse down. Know what to do when a horse comes down—eh?"

"No, m' lord," said the boy, perspiring at every pore.

"Try to get him up again."

"And if I canna?" asked the boy, breathing very hard.

"Then you just get out and sit on his head."

"Please, m' lord," inquired the wretched boy, "how long am I to sit?"

"Till some one comes along the road."

The boy retired, gasping, and presently the whole party was in motion.

The site chosen for the picnic was the bank of a small lake, known as the White Loch. People might just as well have called it the Black Loch when they were about it, for if it suggested anything, it suggested blackness. A thick plantation of fir-trees surrounded it on three sides, standing close enough to turn the water black with their shadows, and producing altogether the effect of a picture drawn in ink. But the popular voice had decreed that this was the White Loch. Perhaps the name had been given before the fir-trees were planted; at any rate the name was there, and so were

the fir-trees. On the least black side of this white loch—the side most free of fir-trees—the short fine grass was quite as dry as can be expected of Scotch grass in May. So, what between the really genial though slightly deceptive sunshine, and a large supply of substantial wraps, and with a still larger supply of animal spirits, it was quite possible to keep one's teeth from chattering, and even at moments to delude one's self into the belief that one's circulation was in its normal condition. The bank at this spot shelved away at a most obliging angle, which favoured the unpacking of hampers, and did not encourage plates and tumblers in a downward course, or at least did so only to a reasonable degree. And then, though you might feel aware that your toes were chilled, there was a feast of brilliancy for the eyes; for the loch was not only black to-day, it was silver and golden—silver with flowering thorn, and golden with whin-flowers. It seemed almost as though all the whin-flowers of the country, like a party of vain village beauties, had collected to see their own faces here, and were jostling and elbowing each other as to who should have the best place at the mirror.

"I haven't had such a good birthday picnic for long," said Lady Baby; "last year we had to light the fire under an umbrella, and we all had sore throats next day."

"Well, my dear, this is not next day yet," said Lord Kippendale; "I won't answer for my rheumatism. Germaine, I wish you would give a whistle to that dog; there's game in the wood."

The party were seated on the bank in an irregular

circle, round the remains of the picnic feast, which had been a species of glorified, very much glorified, afternoon tea. It was just the pause before the moment of breaking up to take a stroll, while the servants should be left to repack the hampers. The eldest and most staid of the fox-hound puppies was sitting bolt upright on the edge of an unoccupied plaid, with roaming eyes and anxiously wrinkled brow, apparently weighed down by the conviction that the responsibility of the whole party's safety rested upon his youthful shoulders. His younger and more frivolous brother had withdrawn to the opposite side of the water, and there had discovered something lovely in the shape of a semi-decayed pheasant, to which he was earnestly devoting his undivided attention. The distance across the little scrap of a loch was so small that every movement of the dog was plainly visible.

Germaine, instead of whistling, uttered a half-exclamation, and rose slowly to his knees.

"What is it?" asked Maud, with a start. "Please consider our nerves, Lord Germaine, and don't make exclamations without explaining them."

But, oddly enough, Germaine offered no explanation. He got up and threw a long keen glance across the water. Every one got up, without knowing why, and went close to the water's edge. What had first attracted Germaine's attention was a movement, a struggle among the tall heather on the opposite bank; then, before any one had even had time to shape a guess, the heather had ceased swaying and had parted, and out of it a head emerged; and immediately there stepped something large, and lean, and yellow, and

stealthy—something that looked so strangely out of place among heather and hawthorn, that the first instinct of the spectators was to disbelieve their eyes. Mr. Carbury was the one who said "The panther!" and then there was a moment of flurry.

"The panther? Which panther?" inquired Lord Kippendale, whose sight was not so good as it used to be, and who always lost his temper when he failed to grasp any subject on the instant. "Didn't know we had started panthers in Scotland."

"It's the menagerie panther," said Mr. Carbury; "and we haven't got a gun among us."

"The keeper's house!" cried Nicky. There was a keeper's house among the fir-trees, at a short distance.

"Yes, yes; the keeper's house!" said Lord Kippendale, beginning to fuss; "there's my express-rifle at the keeper's house; and take the girls there—they will be safe."

Nicky and Carbury were already racing for the rifle; Agnes and Miss Epperton disappeared among the trees, but Lady Baby did not move. She stood, looking very pale, and straining her eyes across the water. "I can't go," she said. "Brenda is going to be killed."

The panther was now presenting its broad-view to the party, its head slightly turned away, and its face towards the fox-hound puppy. The dog seemed too much dazed to fly—too much dazed even to lower the awkward paw which he held hysterically poised in the air. He did not mean to dispute the question of the exquisitely decayed pheasant with this yellow monster; but neither did he know how gracefully to retreat from the position. A stiff and convulsive averting of the

head was all that he could manage; but out of the corners of his agonised eyes his glance seemed nailed to the enemy's face.

"Is the keeper's house far off?" "Supposing the keeper is out?" "Supposing the express-rifle is not there after all?" Such suggestions and questions passed quickly among the three men who still stood by the water's edge.

"They might have been back fifty times," said Lord Kippendale.

"They are never coming!" cried Lady Baby; "and oh, the dog! I want the dog saved! He's just going to spring! Oh, Brenda! poor Brenda!" and she covered her eyes.

"Let us shout or make a noise, or something," said Lord Kippendale, frantic with the suspense.

"What for?" said Sir Peter. "In order to show the panther that we are here? She has not seen us yet; but it would not take her more than twenty seconds to scamper round that corner."

"Then let us all dash at her in a body," said Germaine, beginning wildly to pick up stones.

"And force her to kill one of us out of sheer terror, poor beast! There is a much simpler way than that: and really, as long as we don't cut our own throats, there is no cause for special excitement. Lord Germaine, I must beg you to leave those stones alone, unless you wish to endanger all our lives."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Germaine, dropping the stones. "I don't want to see that poor dog torn to pieces before my eyes."

"Neither do I," said Sir Peter.

"Is that rifle never coming?" fumed Lord Kippendale.

"Is he killed yet?" asked Lady Baby, who had thrown herself on the grass, and put both her hands over her eyes, so as not to see Brenda's certain death. As soon as she had asked it she closed her ears, so as not to hear the answer; then, after a minute, she removed her fingers and listened, still with tightly closed eyes. Every one had grown very quiet; there were no more frantic suggestions being made. She heard Germaine say, "Why, what's he up to?" Then she heard her father say, "The man's daft!" and then again they were quiet. All at once there were hurrying steps, a few words, a dead pause, a click, and a quick double-shot, followed by a rolling sound and a splash, and then a long breath was drawn all round, and everybody spoke at once.

Lady Baby looked up. Both panther and dog were gone, and instead there was something yellow floating in the water, hard by the opposite bank, and Mr. Carbury held a smoking gun in his hand. Then she perceived Sir Peter coming in a most leisurely fashion along the bank towards them, and holding Brenda, still limp with terror, comfortably tucked under his arm. He came up to her, and gently put down the dog by her side.

"How?" she stammered, looking from the dog to his face. "Why! I don't understand. Did you——?"

"Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, who had grown very red in the face, "I thought you were a sensible man, but I see that you are just as hare-brained as any other youngster of my acquaintance;

and hang it, man, I like you all the better for it—and for a dog too!”

“It was not for the dog,” said Sir Peter, smiling rather strangely.

“But I don’t understand,” said Lady Baby again, kneeling with both her arms tightly clasped round Brenda’s neck.

Lord Kippendale turned almost savagely upon his daughter. “Don’t you? Then it is time you did; it’s only a little piece of politeness after all. You wanted the dog fetched away from the panther, didn’t you? Well, it’s only that Wyndhurst went and fetched him; picked him up like a kitten from beside its mother,—*picked him up*, I tell you. By the by, Wyndhurst, what would you have done if the keeper’s wife had been a quarter of a minute later in opening the door, or if the cartridges had not been quite handy? Made any plans for that contingency? Eh?”

“I suppose I should have attempted an argument with the enemy,” said Sir Peter; “she appeared quite open to reason: didn’t seem to care much, either, about being looked at straight in the face; also my cigar appeared to puzzle her.”

“There was no need for any expenditure of heroism,” said Mr. Carbury, dropping the spent gun to the grass; “the dog was out of the line of shot, and the panther had not moved by an inch.”

“I am truly grieved to have caused so much sensation,” said Sir Peter, lighting a fresh cigar; “I knew it was ten to one in favour of that starved cat being too much astonished to do herself justice. If I had gone at her with a stick, I daresay she would be

crunching my bones by this time. Suppose we look at her closer."

The dead panther had already been pulled out of the water by the servants. The thin yellow carcass lay stretched on the grass.

"It's Stella," said Nicky, stopping to examine the eye-patches.

"Yes, I saw it was Stella by the colour," said Sir Peter.

"And did you remember that Stella had knocked out her mother's eyes?" asked Germaine.

"Well, yes; it occurred to me when I was about two yards from her."

"You're a good shot, Carbury," said Lord Kippendale, putting his finger to the bullet-hole in Stella's shoulder.

Mr. Carbury smiled, but it was not a joyful smile. He knew he was a goot shot, and yet there was darkness in his heart. Though it was he who had shot the panther, he was quite aware that the glory of the day was Sir Peter's and not his; and it was a knowledge that made his vanity smart.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UGLY FENCE.

"My queen was crouching at my side,
By love unseptred and brought low,
Her awful garb of maiden pride
All melted into tears like snow."

THE darkness was still in Mr. Carbury's heart as he mounted for the homeward ride. Was it wounded

vanity alone which made him thus secretly writhe? And what had Sir Peter done which could wound any one's vanity? He had only shown a little ordinary courage, and a little not quite ordinary coolness. Nor was Mr. Carbury aware of feeling any special surprise. He had never doubted Sir Peter's courage, even when Sir Peter was describing himself as "constitutionally timid." Men with courage of their own generally guess at the presence of courage in others, and Mr. Carbury's personal courage had never been called in question. There is a sort of freemasonry between brave men, which enables them to recognise each other, even without a test. It is a mistake to think that one man has to see another in such an emergency as a shipwreck or a fire in order to be convinced that he is not a coward. He may only have seen the other handing cups at afternoon tea, or he may only have spent half an hour in the smoking-room with him, and yet he may be able to form a pretty accurate guess as to how that other would behave in the shipwreck or the fire.

The homeward ride promised to be a very silent one on Mr. Carbury's part, and his chief energies seemed devoted to ascertaining how much spur Suleika would put up with without rearing beyond control. There was some balm in the reflection that Sir Peter could not have sat through one of these plunges, which, as Mr. Carbury was fully aware, only served to show off his own horsemanship to thrilling advantage. Sir Peter himself made some remark to this effect, as he brought up the rear of the riding-party upon Ajax,—Ajax ambling along at its clock-work pace, "same as an arm-chair upon wheels," according to Adam.

The conversation lay chiefly between Sir Peter and Lord Kippendale, for Lady Baby had lost both her colour and her speech since the affair with the panther. The sun had sunk behind the round shoulder of a hill, and it was beginning to grow chill now in good earnest.

Suddenly there was heard a cry of distress and the noise of some rapidly approaching vehicle, and on the road, which was scarcely a hundred yards off, there appeared a dog-cart, borne along at an alarming pace, with nothing but one small frantic-looking figure in it, upright, swaying from side to side, and tugging at the reins.

"It's that fool of a lad!" exclaimed Lord Kippendale, "and he's going to have the horse down after all; he'll have him down like a shot, unless he's stopped before the corner."

"There is time to stop him," said Mr. Carbury.

"I wash my hands of it, though. That's a very ugly fence, and this horse would buy up the other a dozen times over. I say, Carbury, mind Suleika!" for the mare, answering to a cut of the whip, was bounding forward towards the "ugly fence" which separated the road from the field.

"The uglier the better," thought Carbury, as he put down his hands and steadied Suleika's head. Here was the chance he wanted, thrown on to his very path; here that cold-blooded baronet could not compete, and the glory must be his alone. On came the dog-cart, tearing along the road, while it looked just possible that Suleika, racing for the corner of the field, might yet arrive in time to intercept the runaway.

Matters, however, took a turn which Mr. Carbury had not expected. Whether it was that the cold-

blooded baronet had on his side a store of dormant vanity, or whether it was that the recollections of Ajax's youth were too much for the wisdom of Ajax's head at this tantalising moment, was never clearly ascertained; but at any rate Lord Kippendale suddenly became aware that there was a second knight hurrying to the lad's relief.

"Hold hard!" shouted the old Earl. "Wyndhurst, hold hard! You can't do it. For goodness' sake, hold hard!"

But either Ajax or Sir Peter declined to hold hard, and the chestnut drew nearer to the fence.

The truth of the matter was that the first impulse had been given by Ajax alone. Sir Peter, sitting negligently, and with perilously long reins, as was his habit, found himself suddenly borne forward in the rear of Suleika. He was not conscious of any burning desire to imperil his neck for the sake of the boy's, but once started, the ardour of the race caught him. There is something contagious in sudden excitement, and in moments like this it seizes even on the least excitable men. So Sir Peter, instead of holding hard, set his teeth and looked to see what Mr. Carbury was doing. Ajax's full gallop was such as could not have unseated a child, and really the thing did not look so difficult after all. There was Suleika flying over the fence like a bird, and not touching so much as a splinter; he could not do better than exactly follow Mr. Carbury's lead, and take the fence exactly where Mr. Carbury had taken it.

But Sir Peter had reckoned without Ajax. That sage animal, though fully meaning to be even with that

fence, meant to do it in his own way, for excitement in him was far from drowning prudence. He intended to reach the road, but he intended to reach it with as little trouble to himself as possible; and spying a place where the loss of the top-bar had lowered the fence by wellnigh a foot, Ajax made for that spot. Sir Peter, not understanding the intention, attempted to pull him round towards the place that Mr. Carbury had cleared. Ajax persisted, Sir Peter persisted; the fence was reached, and unsteadily risen to; there was a scramble and a crash.

"Hold hard! hold hard!" Lord Kippendale was still shouting at the top of his voice, when already it was too late to hold at all. "I said he couldn't do it, He's down! No, he isn't! Yes, he is!"

"He's killed!" said some one beside Lord Kippendale; and the next thing Lord Kippendale became aware of was that his daughter had likewise reached the fence, had sprung off her pony, and was bending over something that lay quite still on the grass.

When the old Earl got there too, he found that Lady Baby was crying.

"He's killed!" she was saying wildly. "He's dead; he doesn't move!" and she tried to loosen Sir Peter's necktie, but her fingers shook helplessly. Call people! get a doctor! Why isn't anybody here? Papa, is he dead? Tell me quick. Adam, is he dead? Why doesn't he move?"

"I'd no' tak' it on me to be positive," said Adam, who had been vainly endeavouring to dismount without the aid of his "leg-doon." "I couldna be positive, 'specially at this distance, but he's a gey queer colour. It couldna be expeckit otherwise when gentlemen as doesna ken ae rein frae anither tak's upon themsel's——"

"Adam, you're fool!" she cried passionately. "Is he alive or dead?"

One of the younger grooms, who was kneeling on the grass, lifted Sir Peter's limp hand and let it fall again with a grave shake of the head.

"*Deid's* a big word, m' leddy," said Adam grimly; "*deid's* a deal too positive a word for my liking, but he's far gone ony way."

"Sir Peter! Sir Peter!" cried Lady Baby, and she flung herself down beside the insensible man. "No, you are not dead; I want you to look at me, I want you to speak to me! Sir Peter!"

"Tut, tut! let me see," said Lord Kippendale, dismounted by this time, and quite as much flurried by his daughter's singular conduct as by the accident which had caused it. Accidents were a commonplace to Lord Kippendale. Had he not seen men down in ditches and up again before it was fairly realised that they ever had been down? Had he not seen them shot through hedges like cannon-balls, hurled into the water like millstones, dragged across stubble-fields by their stirrups, or emerging with a disarranged cravat or a small scratch upon their face from under four struggling hoofs, a single blow of any one of which would have amply sufficed to dash their brains to powder and pulp? There is a German saying to the effect that a special legion of guardian angels has been told off to guide the steps of drunkards: for my part, I believe that the individual known as the British fox-hunter is watched over by just such a legion of angels, and that these angels must be specially well mounted as regards wings.

"Who talks of his being killed? Eh?" said Lord Kippendale. "Let me get to him. Frances, this is not your place. There, hold his head up. Has any one gone for a doctor? Frances, stand aside; there are the others too. You must be mad, child. Go to your sister; this is not your place."

"It *is* my place!" was all she said between her set teeth, and with her two hands she chafed Sir Peter's cold fingers. Of his face she saw nothing, for the tears hung so thick in her lashes that she was blind.

"He moved now," said some one. "Hold him up a little more;" and presently through the haze of her tears Lady Baby became dimly aware that it was Nicky who was holding Sir Peter up. Water was being poured on his face; there were more people gathered round—some on the road, some in the field. She heard her sister saying something to her, and then she felt herself pulled rather roughly to her feet, and found that her brother was leading her forcibly from the spot.

"Germaine, leave me," she said, staring at him with unnaturally distended eyes; "I must know if he is alive."

"He is alive," said Germaine, rather sternly. "Don't you hear that he has moved? Come away!"

"He has opened his eyes," called out Lord Kippendale, "he seems conscious; we shall get him to the carriage."

Lady Baby ceased to struggle with her brother. "Yes, I will come away," she said. "Give me your arm, Germaine; help me, I feel dizzy. Did I say anything? What did I say? How did it happen?" She staggered and fell against her brother's arm. He caught her, looked her in the face, and saw that she had fainted.

"You know me, Wyndhurst, don't you?" asked Lord Kippendale, bending over the fallen man.

Sir Peter said "Yes," very faintly.

"You have had a fall, you know; but we are going to get you home now. You fell from your horse; you understand me, don't you?"

An ample experience in the hunting-field had taught Lord Kippendale that men newly fallen upon their heads must be addressed in the simplest of A B C phrases, confined, if possible, to words of one syllable.

"Yes," said Sir Peter, "I understand."

Something like a smile flickered over his face as he said it, and his eyes wandered round the group, as though in search of something. Then they closed again, not having found what they wanted. In this semi-unconscious state he was transported to the carriage, but began to revive before reaching the house.

The first fumes of panic once dispersed, the case appeared far from desperate or even seriously alarming. The village doctor, at whose house two frantic grooms had simultaneously arrived with the news that Sir Peter Wyndhurst had broken his neck, and that he (the village doctor) was required to set it again, was almost disappointed to find nothing but a simple fracture of the arm. "It will only be one bad moment, Sir Peter," said the old doctor, rather nervously, for it was not every day that he was asked to set a baronet's arm; "it may be a little painful, for the swelling has begun; but if you don't feel quite strong enough I have chloroform by me."

"Thanks," said Sir Peter, whose equanimity had returned with his consciousness, "but chloroform is too

sensational for my taste. I like having my wits about me. Will you begin now? May I talk while you are doing it? I want a question answered."

"I should prefer answering it when we have got the bone in its place," replied the doctor in a flurry. "It will be a wrench, Sir Peter."

"But I prefer having the answer now. Oh yes, I perceive that it is a wrench. What I want to know is whether this wrench is to be the end of it? or whether any of my other bones are out of gear? I'm not come to crutches, am I?"

"Crutches! Preserve us, Sir Peter, no! You will walk as straight as ever you did. There's positively nothing wrong but a fracture of the arm and a sort of general shaking."

"Yes, so I thought; but I like certainty. And about my face—is it badly marked? My nose isn't smashed, is it? Any lasting disfigurement?"

"Nothing but a cut on the forehead, Sir Peter; that's the only thing that might leave a scar."

"A very ugly scar?" asked Sir Peter.

"Upon my word, Wyndhurst," said Lord Kippendale, "you might as well be a London beauty come to grief in the hunting-field. Your face isn't your fortune, you know."

Sir Peter said nothing for a minute, then turned his head sharply on the pillow and looked the old doctor straight in the eyes. "Will you swear that you are not mincing matters because you happen to think that I have a touch of fever about me? Will you swear that I shall be the same man again that I was an hour ago?"

The doctor not only swore, but was profuse in his oaths, and the operation being completed, and mental

agitation being warned against in the usual set form, the old man withdrew for the present.

"Lord Kippendale," said Sir Peter, as the door closed, "you heard what he said about my being all right again in a few weeks?"

"Certainly I heard."

"And I think he was speaking the truth."

"Of course. So do I."

"Then, Lord Kippendale, would you oblige me by asking your daughter whether she will marry me?"

"Eh? what?" cried Lord Kippendale, bounding from his chair. "My daughter? Tut, tut—nonsense! This is the fever setting in; where's your pulse? Upon my word, I can't find your pulse."

"When you have quite done with my pulse, will you go and speak to your daughter?"

"Eh? No; I shall do nothing of the sort. What do you know about my daughter? You couldn't have heard anything she said,—you were unconscious, you know. All nonsense, all nonsense. You were unconscious, Wyndhurst, weren't you?" he asked sharply.

A very faint tinge of colour appeared on Sir Peter's forehead.

"Lord Kippendale, I will tell you the truth. I *was* unconscious, so help me God! I must have been, for I remember hearing a sound of wood breaking beneath me, and then all was a blank until I felt something upon my face, and heard a voice speaking. It was something like warm rain that I felt on my face, Lord Kippendale, and it woke me. I did not quite say to myself, 'These are her tears, and this is her hand upon mine,'—I was too dazed for that; but I dimly under-

stood something, and I do believe I kept my eyes closed just about half a minute longer than was absolutely necessary. I am afraid it was a shabby thing to do."

Lord Kippendale was pacing the room in extreme agitation. "I am not sure that it wasn't shabby," he said; "no, it wasn't fair upon the child; and women's nerves always are such a touch-and-go affair, either all up or all down."

"Then will you take her my message? I only waited to send it until I was quite sure that I was not going to be a wreck or a cripple."

"Tut, tut, Wyndhurst! this is delirium. The child only lost her head. We all saw that."

"Exactly. And do you want to have it said that this losing of head was all on her side, and none of it on mine? There were witnessess enough."

"There's something in that," said Lord Kippendale, frowning. "But, Wyndhurst, I can't accept it; it's a whim, it's a sacrifice."

"It is not a very great sacrifice," said Sir Peter, in a tone which made Lord Kippendale turn and stare at him.

"What do you mean? Eh? Upon my word, I don't understand anything about it."

"I mean that I asked your daughter last week whether she would have me, and she said she would not. I thought you knew that. Would you mind going and asking her again now? If you refuse, I shall be mentally agitated, and you heard what the doctor said."

The old Earl left the room without another word. In less than five minutes he was back again.

"Upon my word," he said, "I understand less than ever what it is all about. She wouldn't have you last week, you say, and now she says she will. It's the cropper that's done it, you know; but I hope she knows her own mind."

"I know mine," said Sir Peter, as Lord Kippendale wrung his hand rather more vigorously perhaps than the old doctor would have approved of.

And thus ended the birthday picnic, and next day the news of the betrothal flew round the county, simultaneously with the news of the accident.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY EUPHROSYNE.

"Oh then up gat his fause mither!"

LADY EUPHROSYNE WYNDHURST was sitting at an elegantly appointed writing-table, occupied in answering a number of very elegant notes, when the news of her step-son's engagement became known to her. She was a faint-coloured woman of forty-five, with faint blue eyes, faintly silvered hair, and a deeply exhausted voice. The same exhaustion was discernible in her manner, which seemed to say, "The calls upon my time are great; but I am not one to shirk the responsibilities of my position." Lady Euphrosyne was a duke's daughter, who had made the mistake of marrying a baronet, and had never ceased regretting it; as, indeed, neither had the baronet. Some people called her a martyr, and some people called her a humbug; but everybody—that is, everybody in her own peculiar circle of society—agreed that in the most intricate

questions of drawing-room and dining-room etiquette no one was so deeply versed and so firmly established as Lady Euphrosyne Wyndhurst. This own peculiar circle of hers was not exactly that *crème de la crème*, among whom, indeed, she was tolerated by reason of her birth, but had never been cajoled: for the *crème* did not care about etiquette, and believed firmly in themselves, whereas the section which represents the skim-milk of society believed as firmly in printed rules. As there were a great many printed rules, and they were difficult to remember, it was, of course, delightful to find some one who had them at her finger-ends; and besides, how very nice that it should be the daughter of a real duke who told you what to do! It was in this circle, therefore, that Lady Euphrosyne reigned supreme, and found opportunity to indulge to her heart's content that affection for minute rules and observances which was her nearest approach to a ruling passion. She was for ever receiving little notes, smelling of violet, moss-rose, or verbena, folded into playful triangles, or twisted into artistic spills, and running something in this fashion:—

“Dear Lady Euphrosyne, you would oblige me infinitely by giving me your opinion on the arrangements for my afternoon party: is claret or champagne cup most *chic* this season?” &c. Or, “Dear Lady Euphrosyne, excuse the great liberty I take in addressing you, but your universally acknowledged kindness emboldens me in this case. Would it be considered *unfeeling* to dance in crape? My sweet child Amy is clamouring to be taken to the Lackmans’ dance, and, of course, I could not be so *heartless* as to let her wear colours,” &c.

Or from a more intimate quarter: "Dearest Euphrosyne, you are so well up in these things, does a bishop's niece take precedence of a captain's widow?" &c., &c., &c.

The answering of these notes constituted a great portion of the calls upon Lady Euphrosyne's time. But there were other duties too, and heavier ones; for though she had no daughter grown up, Lady Euphrosyne would have considered it unfair to her circle to have closed her doors in its face, and thus deprived the unenlightened of so many hints on etiquette to be had here *gratis*. When the more intimate of her bosom friends, perhaps jealous of her influence, would implore her to spare herself, and take more rest, Lady Euphrosyne would give a faint smile of resignation, and faintly concede that the calls upon her time certainly were very great, but that she hoped to drag herself on a little longer. She could not give in just in the thick of the season: it would cause too much surprise, and possibly disappointment. She could not overthrow every one's arrangements on account of a touch of *migraine*. Yes, she must confess that her head did ache rather badly to-day; but a darkened room and a sofa *might* perhaps relieve it in time for her to dress, before dining with young Mrs. Pauncelot. She was so inexperienced, poor young bride, and Lady Euphrosyne had promised, positively *promised*, to help her in receiving her guests that night. And the bosom friends would go home and gnash their teeth, and when the supreme moment came Lady Euphrosyne would deck herself with flowers like the victims of old, and walk to her post by the door, as a lamb walks to the altar.

This morning, while preparing to enter on her daily

correspondence, Lady Euphrosyne espied among the three-cornered and fantastically twisted notes one very plain square one, sealed with a coat-of-arms which she knew. Those three stars on an azure ground figured very generally in the arms of those families whose ancestors have lived on the Borders, and been partial to starlight excursions. "From Kippendale," said Lady Euphrosyne; "what can the Kippendale people possibly want of me?" With a very soft sigh she broke the seal, but her eyes grew stony as she read. The letter was from Lord Kippendale, written at Sir Peter's desire, and very briefly announcing the engagement of Sir Peter to his daughter.

"DEAR LADY EUPHROSYNE,—Sir Peter (who broke his arm yesterday, but is doing well) wishes me to say that my daughter Frances and he have agreed to get married as soon as the matter can reasonably be arranged. Hoping this finds you well, I am your obedient servant,
KIPPENDALE."

"At last! Then it has come at last! In spite of all my care!" cried the distracted martyr of society, springing to her feet, and allowing her languor to drop from her like a cloak; "and I thought he was quite safe down there! I forgot the existence of that child, or rather, I forgot her age; I thought she was in the nursery. Engaged? This is overwhelming! And what has he been after? Broken his arm? It might just as well have been——" She left the phrase unfinished; but if she had gone on in the first breath, it would have run thus: "It might just as well have been his neck."

Not that Lady Euphrosyne was accustomed to harbour such very black thoughts towards her step-son. To do her justice, she really would have felt shocked if he had broken his neck, but no one could have expected her to be inconsolable. Even when Peter had been a boy, and, by reason of his youth, placed at her mercy, Lady Euphrosyne had never played the part of the step-mothers in the fairy tales: she had neither cuffed him in public nor pinched him in private; for that would have been so very incorrect, any woman with a glimmering of social knowledge would have pronounced such a proceeding bad style. But no treatise on etiquette told her that she must love her step-son; and besides, it became very soon evident that her step-son did not love her. He was a very quiet boy, peculiar in his ways, and extremely delicate, so that the hope of seeing one of her own sons coming to the title appeared far from irrational. She had close upon half-a-dozen of them, all healthy, all boisterous, and all as passionately addicted to riding as their father. Lady Euphrosyne herself rode with great ease and elegance, but she preferred the park to the hunting-field—as, indeed, all her tastes clung to paved streets rather than to country roads. It had always been a trial to her to see her five precious boys picking out the very straightest line across country. And it was hard to think that, just to spite these five rosy cherubs and their loving mother, Peter had to be born a dozen years ahead of them. Unfortunately, too, as he grew older he grew less delicate; a long course of sea-air made him almost robust. But there remained another hope; for though he grew less delicate he did not grow less peculiar.

He preferred galleries to ball-rooms, and marbles to women. Lady Euphrosyne had been the first to discover her step-son's artistic talent, and had eagerly favoured its development; it kept him so well occupied. The yacht, too, was a capital invention: this wandering sort of artist life was the very thing she would herself have chosen for him; and when yacht and Peter—as sometimes happened—disappeared for a month or two at a time, there could not fail to be a sort of pleasing excitement in the question as to whether they would ever again reappear.

Her fears as to Peter making a choice in life had for a long time past been lulled into quietude, so Lord Kippendale's cruelly concise note was a shock almost stupefying.

"Something must be done," she said, sweeping half-a-dozen unopened notes to one side; "something must instantly be done—but what? I can't manage Peter, I never could; but there must be some way of preventing it: it cannot be that this cruel wrong should be done to my five innocent boys;" and a few real tears actually came to Lady Euphrosyne's relief. She was very fond of the five innocent boys (who at that moment were being remonstrated with by one of the police force for racing their ponies in the Park), and she was very fond too of the increase of *prestige* and power which might one day be hers as the mother of Sir Philip or Sir Davjd Wyndhurst. She felt that this chance was slipping from her grasp, and she was clutching wildly after it. She was just as likely as not to clutch too near or too far, and thus miss her object altogether, for she had no intellectual resources or pre-

sence of mind beyond the artificial sort which she used in social life.

After she had hastily rung the bell, she had got no order ready for the servant; and when she had told him that the boxes were to be packed for Nolesworth that night, she was not yet clear with herself as to what good her presence at Nolesworth would do. But to go she was resolved, even though the cards for her ball—the first ball she had given since her widowhood—were out. People's arrangements must just be upset. There was no question now as to whether that "sweet child Amy" was to be allowed to dance in crape or not, and the bishop's niece might mortally offend the captain's widow for aught Lady Euphrosyne cared. Her step-son's accident, conveniently magnified for the occasion, was quite enough to explain her flight; and though society might mourn, it would understand. A hasty glance over the list of engagements on the white china slate, a hasty despatching of explanatory notes, a great rushing about of ladies'-maids, and looking-up of time-tables, and Lady Euphrosyne, in her normal state of exhaustion, but still abnormally bewildered, found herself flying towards the north.

Sir Peter was not at the castle; he had not yet been moved from Kippendale. Lady Euphrosyne lost no time in visiting her step-son, but got little satisfaction from her visit. Yes, he said, there was no mistake about it, he was engaged to Lady Frances Bevan. Was the acquaintance a short one? Possibly it was; yes, certainly she was very young, but that was a defect which time was generally supposed to mend. He believed that other men of twenty-seven had married girls

of seventeen without anything very dreadful coming of it. He was much obliged, though, for her anxiety regarding his future welfare; he shared the same wishes himself.

It was not till some ten days later that the first passage-of-arms took place between Lady Euphrosyne and her future step-daughter-in-law. Their meetings had been of too hurried and transitory a nature to allow of much mutual study, until one day Lady Euphrosyne, driving over, found Sir Peter in one of the morning-rooms, with his arm in a sling, and Lady Baby sitting on a footstool beside him. It was a fortnight now since the accident, and this was the invalid's first appearance down-stairs.

"I suppose I can give orders for your rooms to be got ready," said Lady Euphrosyne, when, with one of her faintest smiles, she had congratulated her step-son on this improvement. "Of course you will move to Nolesworth this week."

"Oh, but he is not going to move," said Lady Baby. "I don't want him to move."

Lady Euphrosyne did not look *at* Lady Baby; she looked past her, in a way which said as plainly as words, "Young girls in good society generally wait till they are spoken to."

"Will you have the close or the open carriage, Peter, for driving over?"

"Neither, thanks; I am not coming over just yet."

"But," said Lady Euphrosyne, "it is so unusual, you know, when your own house is close by. There is a sort of custom in these things. It is always bad taste to do what is unusual."

"I like unusual things," said Lady Baby. She had her chin up in the air, and was looking dangerous. There was always some mischief to be expected when Lady Baby's chin took that upward direction. She had grasped the outline of Lady Euphrosyne's attitude, and had taken up her own; for no deer that ever sniffed the forest breeze was quicker in scenting danger than was Lady Baby in guessing at the faintest shadow of a patronising control. Lady Euphrosyne, on her side, had an instinct in divining tractable and intractable subjects—those that would be led by her superior wisdom and those that would not. She had hitherto disliked her future step-daughter-in-law because she was her future step-daughter-in-law; but from this moment forward she disliked her because she was herself.

"Then am I to understand," she resumed, with a quiver in her voice, and looking *through* Lady Baby, by way of a change, instead of past her,—“am I to understand that Peter means to take up his quarters here until the—the——?” the word stuck in her throat.

"Until the wedding," finished Peter. "No; not quite. Of course there will be matters to be looked after at Nolesworth."

"We are going to have a tenants' ball," broke in Lady Baby, "and I hear I shall have to dance with all the farmers."

"With *all* the farmers," echoed Lady Euphrosyne, with a little gasp, for matters were going at an awfully fast pace, and she felt more helpless than ever in averting their course. "Nobody expects a bride to dance

with *all* the farmers,—such a thing is never done; she need only——”

“Dance with the young and good-looking ones?” suggested Lady Baby, with a gleam in her eye. “That is just what I have been saying to Peter; but he didn’t seem to see it, somehow.”

“Excuse me, I meant to say that a bride is only expected to open the ball with the chief tenant; and of course if there happen to be some old and valued farmers on the estate to whom it is thought advisable to show a little extra favour, they can be given a turn. This is what is generally done.”

“Really?” said Lady Baby, with a provoking smile; “it is not what I am going to do: I mean to dance with the sons of the old and valued farmers; and, by the by, Lady Euphrosyne, you have not given up dancing, have you? Perhaps you would consent to take the fathers off my hands?”

Lady Euphrosyne shut her eyes, shuddered, and shortly afterwards retired, feeling generally routed and baffled. “How Peter could make such a choice is to me a mystery,” she reflected. “There is no getting over the fact that she has turned out pretty, and of course people in London have not got complexions like that; but after all, she is only a piece of inelegant rusticity—and as for her education, I don’t know when I have seen such a display of ignorance on the simplest points of *savoir faire!*” The question of the forms attending the wedding had for the moment almost swamped the question of the wedding itself; and what she termed the “country-bumpkin tone” in which the tenants’ ball had been discussed was very nearly as

upsetting to her as the consideration of the main point. With regard to that there had come over her a hopeless sensation of drifting towards the dreaded rock without a straw to catch at. Without aim or plan she had rushed to the scene of action, and without aim or plan she now continued weakly to harass the enemy's flanks. It would have been hard to say what result she expected from these tactics.

"I am *so* glad your step-mother has come," said Lady Baby, almost fervently, when Lady Euphrosyne had retired after the discussion of the tenants' ball.

"Why?" asked Sir Peter.

"Because she is the first person who disapproves of our engagement. I was afraid that everybody was going to approve, and that would have been so monotonous."

She gave an impatient sigh, and threw back her head against the wall.

"Was I not right when I wanted you to wear the *bonnet rouge*?" said Sir Peter, watching her through his half-closed eyelids.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you cannot be a despot you would wish to be a rebel."

"Oh, don't begin that again," she said with a frown, and she put up her hand to close his mouth; but the little white fingers were taken and kissed instead, at which the frown melted into something softer, though the tip of a restless foot still beat the floor.

It was not the first time that these symptoms had shown themselves, and during the days that followed they showed themselves more frequently. In the very

beginning of her engagement the newly affianced bride had been unusually quiet and subdued. Gradually, however, as Sir Peter recovered, as the engagement became fully recognised, and as good wishes and congratulatory visits poured in from all sides, Lady Baby began to show signs of restlessness. From morning to night she heard of nothing but of the general approval which was felt at her marriage. Everybody was steeped to the lips in a state of contentment and delight, so uniform as to be just a little wearisome. Lord Kippendale went about rubbing his hands and giving little approving pinches to his youngest daughter's cheek, or little sly fatherly pulls to her ear. Nicky's beaming grin grew wider every day; Germaine took every opportunity of half suffocating her in his brotherly embrace; and Agnes became almost loquacious in pointing out the great advantages of the arrangement. And as if this atmosphere of approval at home were not oppressive enough, the whole neighbourhood showed itself unanimous, even clamorous, in declaring that such a suitable marriage had not for years past been heard of. It was, in fact, so incredibly suitable that words ran short to express its suitability. All the fox-hunting squires had felt convinced that this was going to be the end from the very moment that they had seen Sir Peter in his helmet as Launcelot. That had been the first step towards the making up of the feud, and this would be the final dissolution of that estrangement which had, of course, not failed to throw a certain chill upon the social life of the neighbourhood. In one word, the marriage was considered very nearly as a political event; and, as Maud Epperton suggested, it was evidently felt by some

among the Border families that the union of the crowns was only now about to be accomplished. Maud's own personal congratulations had been proffered with a warmth which was not the less sincere from being somewhat mixed in its elements.

"To think that the Border raid was to end in this way!" she said, laughing softly, as she held Lady Baby's hands and looked into her eyes. "If a Border minstrel had risen from his grave on that day to foretell this one, I should have given him the lie." She stooped and kissed the younger girl's cheek. "You will be very happy," she added, turning away, for she did not want Lady Baby to see the tears that even in the very saying of the words had sprung to her eyes. It was not that she grudged Lady Baby her happiness; "Live and let live" had ever been Maud's motto. But after all, in order to let others live you must first live yourself; and at this moment the contrast between their two lots sprang up rather sharply. Brought suddenly face to face with the actual reality of the match which Lady Baby was about to make, its brilliancy flashed, as it were, straight into her eyes, Maud could not fail very vividly to remember that she had once intended to make that match herself. There had even been moments lately, passing moments, when meeting Sir Peter's artist's eye upon her, the haunting question had risen to her mind, "Would it, after all, have been impossible? Did I not throw up the game too soon?" She was asking herself the question now, even as she turned away from Lady Baby; and yet, for all that, her kiss had been sincere.

From one person alone had Lady Baby heard not

even the most set phrase of congratulation, or received the most conventional pressure of the hand. Mr. Carbury had left the house abruptly on the morrow of the picnic. It was natural, under the circumstances, that he should go; but he need not have gone in such a hurry. Perhaps, as Germaine suggested, he was huffed at the small recognition which his feat of horsemanship had met with; for, from the moment of Sir Peter's fall, no one had so much as asked after the small stable-boy's fate, and probably no one but the small boy himself was aware of the skill with which the runaway dog-cart had been rescued.

So Mr. Carbury went; but he did not go back to London—he quite unexpectedly discovered that he had some more visits to pay in Scotland, and, as Germaine reported a few days later, he was “still haunting the neighbourhood.”

But Lady Baby had never noticed this one blank in the stereotyped congratulations. The delight seemed to her to be universal, and the more this universal satisfaction showed itself the more restless did she grow. When the first excitement of unpacking wedding-presents had worn off, she began to get tired of the eternal tea-sets and fire-screens, and to exhibit impatience at the sight of new parcels. “There is something the matter with you,” said Sir Peter, one day, when she had pushed aside a set of ormolu writing things, having scarcely taken the trouble to examine them.

“There is nothing the matter with me; but I am sick of writing notes of thanks, and I have no more room to put the things away. There are seven writing-table sets on the top of my wardrobe already, and I

daren't move for fear of knocking down china vases. I shall get Maud to answer my notes now. She writes notes beautifully."

"Shall I tell you what is the matter with you?" asked Sir Peter, having quietly waited till she had done speaking.

"What?"

"It is prosperity that is the matter with you. Things are going so smooth that you would like a little adversity to roughen them a bit. Where are you going to?"

"Up-stairs, to Maud, to speak about the notes," said Lady Baby rather frigidly, as she walked to the door. She made her exit with great dignity; but outside she turned her face once more and went through a fierce little bit of pantomime, which consisted in a phantom stamp and a small fist shaken at the curtained entrance. Then, instead of going up-stairs at once, she sat down on the lowest step of the staircase, and seemed intent on deliberately digging the nails of one hand into the palm of the other.

Was there something wrong, then, beyond the mere want of resistance in her surroundings? Were the skirmishes with Lady Euphrosyne insufficient to support her spirit under these tryingly peaceful circumstances? As Lady Baby sat on the staircase with clenched hands, there was a gleam as of angry tears in her eyes. "I wish," she said, through her set teeth,— "I wish he was not so exasperatingly quiet!"

Here, then, was the root of the evil. For in the midst of the general enthusiasm there was one person who preserved his calmness to an unwarrantable degree,

and that person was Sir Peter. In the first days after the accident no very desperate demonstration could be expected of him; but, as convalescence made rapid strides, Lady Baby began to own to herself, secretly at first, that she had expected something more, she was not quite sure what, but, at any rate, more display of that affection of which, in a few grave words, he had assured her on the first day. Those few grave words had done very well to start with; but she wished to hear variations worked upon this theme, languishing, passionate, even perhaps a little sentimental, and as the days passed, these variations did not appear. Soon she began to tell herself that there was a great deal too little of the completely subjugated slave in his attitude towards her, and a great deal too much of the self-possessed everyday man. He did not appear to regard every lightly breathed wish of hers as a command; he seemed quite capable of discerning imperfections in her actions; he still read his newspapers; he still used his pencil, and her portrait did not fill the pages of his sketch-book to the exclusion of all others—at any rate, not to the exclusion of Miss Epperton, who figured there quite as often as hitherto. He took no part in the skirmishes with Lady Euphrosyne; occasionally even he looked grave, when, of course, he should have been laughing like the others over her petulant sallies.

Was this to be borne without complaint? Not by Lady Baby at any rate, who, as far back as her memory could reach, had imposed her whims and fancies on the household as commands; who had made slaves of her nurses and governesses, and fully meant to do the same by her husband.

There was one circumstance which specially fed the smouldering fire of her discontent, for, uncontrolled as she was by motherly authority, Lady Baby had dipped pretty freely into the fiction of the period. Though no one had ever suspected her of it, she had held locked away in her inner consciousness a very fair show of romantic ideas with regard to the qualifications to be expected of a lover. She had read of "burning oaths," of "delirious joy," of "frenzied glances"; she had read also of men going down on their knees and talking by the page in one breath, and never in anything under superlatives. Lady Baby had not doubted that her lover would do all these things, or, at least, a reasonable amount of them; in fact, she had a hazy notion that a kneeling posture was almost *de rigueur* in putting the momentous question, and that a declaration made in a less sensational attitude was the exception and not the rule. But Sir Peter had never looked or said anything that, by the wildest stretch of imagination, could be construed as frenzied; and he had never offered to go down upon so much as one knee. As to this latter point, allowances had of course to be made at first: for several days after the accident Sir Peter's knees were probably not in a kneeling condition. But Lady Baby watched his progress critically, and, having noted that his joints had regained their normal flexibility, she knew that there was no further excuse for him. It was extremely mortifying, and each failure was more mortifying than the last, for Lady Baby had tried, in various small ways, cautiously at first, and then more boldly, to discover some means of rousing the fund of dormant ardour which she still hoped to find concealed some-

where about his nature. Hitherto, if existent, it remained dormant. She had tried coldness, she had tried a little sulking, she had tried sarcasm; they produced no impression. Sir Peter persisted in keeping his temper, and in being, as Lady Baby said, with tears of anger in her eyes, "so exasperatingly quiet."

Having relieved her feelings to this extent she went up-stairs, but not to look for Maud; she went to Agnes's room.

"Agnes," she began abruptly, "tell me all about how Nicky behaved when you were engaged."

"But, child, I have told you all that I can. You cannot, you really cannot, expect me to repeat every word he said."

"No, of course not," and Lady Baby gave a rather stormy sigh, as it struck her how very easily she could repeat every word that Sir Peter had ever said; "but tell me the sort of things. Did he tell you every day that his life without you would be an aching void or a howling blank, or whatever the right expression is?"

"Not every day," said Agnes, truthfully; "but he did say so occasionally. At least he did not put it quite in these words; he used to say, 'I'm quite the luckiest fellow going, Aggie; and by Jove——'"

"Oh, bother the words; I only mean the sense, of course. But Agnes, tell me, did he—did he ever go down on his knees to you?"

"Never!" said Agnes, dropping her work in her lap. "That would have been dreadful! There was no need for that. I——"

"Yes; I suppose you would have been more likely to go on your knees to him. I daresay you do so now

in private; but then I shall never 'honour and obey' my husband to the ridiculous extent that you do, Agnes. You always talk as if you had invented matrimony, and were bound to show how well it worked. And yet Nicky could make very nice speeches, even if he did say 'by Jove' in the middle of the tenderest part. Peter doesn't even say 'by Jove.'"

"Sir Peter and Nicky are very different," said Agnes.

"As if that was not obvious to the meanest capacity! Do make some more original suggestion: leave Nicky alone; he is exhausted. Tell me more about George and Kate. George was very madly in love, was he not? He must have been; he did everything madly."

"Poor George was rather trying, I believe; at least Kate says so. They were always having scenes; and—oh yes, as for George, I have seen him dozens of times on his knees before Kate."

Lady Baby sat down and knit her brows intently. "What did they have scenes about?"

"George had an unfortunate temperament; he was extremely jealous."

"Jealous!" repeated Lady Baby, thoughtfully. "Yes, go on; tell me more. Who was he jealous of?"

"Of anybody to whom Kate was at all civil. They must have had a dozen quarrels in the course of their engagement; but it always ended in George going down on his knees and making wilder and wilder protestations, and being more frantically attached than ever to Kate."

"I have read somewhere something about lovers' quarrels being the renewal of love," said Lady Baby, staring dreamily from the window. "There is a car-

riage going round to the stables. More visitors, beaming all over with congratulations, I suppose. Horrible! This time I shall strike; I shall not show myself;—and, what was I saying, Agnes? Yes, about quarrels. Then I suppose it is jealousy that makes the quarrels usually, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," Agnes began, when the door opened and Germaine put in his head.

"The Smarts are in the drawing-room," he announced. "They want to see Frances."

"They must just want; I am not coming down."

"Wait a bit. Carbury is with them. He has been staying there since Wednesday, it seems. Do come down, Frances. I never know how to talk to Carbury. He's so awfully well up in everything."

"Well, I don't want to talk to him either. Hand him over to somebody else."

"I handed him over to Wyndhurst; but somehow they don't seem to be hitting it off together."

"Peter? Is Peter in the drawing-room too? Yes, I think I will come," said Lady Baby, with a sudden change of manner. "Agnes, will my hair do?"

"I think so," said Agnes, putting a stray lock back in its place; and then something in her sister's eyes seemed to startle her, for she caught her hand.

"Baby, what is the matter? You are not going to— to do anything foolish, are you?"

"Quite the contrary; I am going to be extremely wise," said Lady Baby, pulling away her hand—"much wiser than anybody would give me credit for. Good-bye!" and turning once more at the door to nod to Agnes, on whose broad countenance a vague panic was

written, Lady Baby slowly descended the staircase to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY BABY TRIES AN EXPERIMENT.

“Beyond her sex, she was not wise.”

THE Smarts were a large family, in which the female element beat the male quite out of the field. There were several daughters—people were never quite sure of the number—and none of them were much under six feet. Mr. Smart was generally described as having forty-two feet of daughter, and people divided the forty-two feet in their minds as they liked best. Also all the daughters wore blue gauze veils at all seasons and on almost all occasions. Mr. Smart, of course, had no blue gauze on his hat; but he looked as if he ought to have had, and as if his abstinence from blue gauze was only a concession to the rigours of fashion. No one had ever pierced the cause of the blue gauze phenomenon. Some people had suggested a large stock of gauze bought up cheap at some remote period, others inclined to believe in an interest in the silk trade, or a system of walking advertisements for a London firm; but the mystery never had been unravelled, and never was, and the fact remained that blue gauze seemed to grow as naturally on the Miss Smarts' heads as hair does on that of other people. Imagination succumbed when asked to picture the number of yards of blue gauze which must in the course of even recent years have been immolated on

these six-foot high altars; of the miles of the material which of necessity had been blown rough by the wind, stiffened by the rain, and blistered by the sun, within the memory of Smarts and their neighbours. The selection of daughters which Mr. Smart had brought with him had new veils on to-day, and the effusion of their congratulations was on a par with the festive freshness of their head-decoration.

"Thanks, yes, thanks," said Lady Baby, gasping for breath. "Mr. Carbury," and she turned to the nearest means of escape, "why have you not come near us before? You left us in the most unceremonious fashion. I don't believe you said good-bye."

"I had to go," said Carbury. He was sitting near her, but he did not look at her as he spoke. He stared down hard into his hat, and there was something like a nervous twitch in the muscles of his cheek. He looked older to-day, more weary and more world-worn than she had ever seen him look; but the observation of this merely flashed through her mind, without awakening curiosity.

"It was so very good of Mr. Carbury to come," the biggest Miss Smart was explaining to Maud. "Pa has asked him so often, but, of course, his engagements are numerous; however, he seems to be getting fond of Scotland now, and as for his tennis-service, it's simply lovely. Do you play tennis, Lord Germaine? Oh no, I suppose it's too tame for you; polo's your game, of course; we've heard that you've been making a polo-ground in the park. Is it ready yet? When are you going to play?"

"I don't know," said Germaine, blushing at being

thus publicly addressed; "two of the fellows from the barracks promised to play, but I haven't been able to secure a fourth player, and it's an awful pity, too, for Miss Epperton," and he blushed a shade deeper. "Miss Epperton likes polo—I mean, she likes looking on," and Germaine, in an agony of shyness, began in sheer desperation to kick the fender. He had imagined that he had confided his remark to one Miss Smart alone; but his voice unfortunately was one of those that are more easily raised than moderated. To his horror he saw all the blue gauze in the room turning in his direction.

"Germaine, if it's only a fourth player you want," said Lady Baby, abruptly, "why don't you ask Mr. Carbury to come over and play polo with you?"

Germaine looked doubtfully in Carbury's direction; Carbury was sure to be as tired of polo as of everything else. "It would bore him so awfully," muttered Germaine, but he looked at Carbury wistfully, all the same. Carbury himself said nothing. He flushed, suddenly but very slightly, and he sat still staring into his hat.

"Mr. Carbury, would it bore you awfully?" asked Lady Baby.

"I—I don't quite understand," said Carbury, with curious hesitation.

"Of course it would be awfully good if you would play," burst out Germaine, fired by the idea; "I know you're a dab hand at polo."

"Germaine is asking whether you will come over and play. Do you understand now, Mr. Carbury?" He seemed very slow at understanding.

"I can't come over," said Carbury, suddenly; "I can't come over here."

"Why not?" asked Lady Baby. "You had better give a good reason, for you are not going to be let off without one."

"I must go back to London," he said hurriedly, and again he did not raise his eyes to her, but sat staring into his hat as if his very life depended upon it.

"To London? Oh, Mr. Carbury!" gasped the biggest Miss Smart, shaking half-a-dozen yards of blue gauze reprovingly, "and you talked yesterday of being in Scotland for our tennis-match."

"Did I? I don't know, I don't think I can," said Carbury, almost helplessly. His tone was rapid and uneasy, like a man who has lost his hold upon something, and is drifting away against his will.

"I am sorry," stammered Germaine, resignedly, "but of course don't put yourself out."

"Does Craigtoun not play?" interrupted Carbury.

"Nicky is away," said Lady Baby; "he went up for the Derby, and he usually takes a long time to come back again."

"And when he does come back it will be with his 'pockets full of tin,'" suggested Mr. Smart, meaning to say something jocular and pleasant, but hitting unluckily on a rather sore point.

"It will be with nothing of the sort," retorted Lord Kippendale, somewhat sharply. "We go in for horses, Mr. Smart, but not for betting-books."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Smart, alarmed at the effect of his harmless joke, but in his wish to clear himself floundering still deeper in the mud, "I didn't

intend any criticism; betting-books in moderation are all right of course, and Mr. Craigtoun has, I believe, been always lucky, at least so I have always heard, for I positively know nothing about it——”

“That is very evident,” said Lord Kippendale, who had grown rather red in the face. “If you have heard anything concerning my son-in-law meddling in the betting-ring, they are idle reports, understand me—idle reports. He goes to the Derby because every man with a well-balanced mind likes to see good horses and good running.”

“Oh, pa, *do* hold your tongue,” whispered the nearest Miss Smart, with a warning nudge of the elbow, —“you always make the wrong remarks;” and Mr. Smart relapsed into silence, with an uncomfortable recollection awaking in his mind that there had once been an unfortunate affair in which Lord Kippendale’s son-in-law (the dead one) and a big Derby bet, gone the wrong way, had figured conspicuously and unpleasantly.

“But, about Carbury’s playing,” began Germaine again, undeterred by the digression, for when he had once got hold of an idea he was apt to hammer away at it. “Will you really not give us a chance, Carbury? It’s only polo in a way, you know, only a scratch performance,” he added, with the candour of an honest seller who is determined not to overpraise his wares.

“It is very kind of you to ask me,” began Carbury, “but——”

“But it is not he who is asking you,” said Lady Baby all at once, leaning forward a little, “it is I.”

He gave something like a start. “You? You are

asking me to come?" But still, for some reason or other, he seemed unable to meet her eyes. "Don't ask me," he added abruptly; "it is better not."

"You are not particularly complimentary to-day," she said, with a touch of petulance. "Mr. Carbury, I ask you to come as a favour—to me. Is that enough?"

No one else was speaking at the moment, so her words were audible to every one, and every one, too, saw the eagerness on her face, as she sat bending forward with her eyes on Carbury. There was a quiver among the gauze veils, a glance of surprise from Maud, a broad stare from Germaine.

Mr. Carbury looked up rapidly and furtively, like a guilty man discovered. His glance only swept over her face to pass to Sir Peter, who had sat all this time quite silent in the background. Lady Baby knew that he was there; while she had been talking to Mr. Carbury she was listening for Sir Peter's voice to interpose, and instinctively she had guessed where now Mr. Carbury's glance was directed. She would have given a great deal, a very great deal, to have known at that moment what change was passing over Sir Peter's face, or whether any change was there. A friendly mirror might have aided her, but there was none in the desired position, and to turn her head would have been a great deal too undignified. If she gazed intently into Mr. Carbury's face it was because at this moment she was using him as a mirror, for from his look she hoped to glean some reflection of the look on Sir Peter's face. But Mr. Carbury's expression did not enlighten her, his face indeed expressed nothing but a sort of blank perplexity.

"Have you made up your mind?" she asked; "are you coming?"

It was the same question that she had asked on the occasion of their first meeting in the green avenue, when the blackbird was singing on the tree and the buds were bursting on the branches.

"Yes," he said all at once, "I will come."

"How awfully good of you!" cried Germaine.

"When?" asked Lady Baby.

"Whenever the Miss Smarts have had enough of me," said Mr. Carbury, speaking more in his usual tone.

The Miss Smarts, who were as overflowing in good-nature as in blue gauze, declared unanimously, not that they had had enough of Mr. Carbury, but that they would let him go immediately rather than stand in the way of any one's pleasure. Since the polo-ground was ready, there was no reason why he should not come over next day.

"To-morrow, of course,—let it be to-morrow," said Lord Kippendale, whose propensities were of a chronically hospitable nature; "no use in putting off things. Let him come by all means to-morrow." No visitor ever was proposed for Kippendale without Lord Kippendale murmuring, in his sleep as it were, "Let him come by all means."

The Miss Smarts were already seated in the carriage, when Mr. Carbury all at once muttered something about a stick, and walked back into the hall. Lady Baby was still standing there. He walked straight up to her. "Are you sure I am to come?" he asked. "Are you quite sure?"

Even then it was not too late; even then she might

have taken warning by the forced calm of his tone, by the fevered light in his eyes. But she looked in his face and saw nothing, or saw only that he had certainly worn very badly for his years. She never perceived that behind that spoken question there was another question unspoken, and that his eyes, all afire with that question, were burning themselves into hers. If a doubt crossed her mind at that moment, it was a doubt as to whether the instrument she had chosen was not too worn and weather-beaten to be of very great use. It was a pity that there was no younger man at hand, one of whom Sir Peter might more reasonably be expected to be jealous; but since there was not, this haggard worldling must do, *faute de mieux*.

These were the only thoughts that passed through her mind as she gave him her hand once more, and once more said that he was to come. And in the next minute he was gone, and only a flutter of blue veils was to be seen as the carriage rolled down the avenue.

Lady Baby walked back deliberately into the drawing-room. She knew that Sir Peter was still there, and she was desirous of hearing what remark he would have to make on her so unnecessarily pressing invitation to Mr. Carbury. Sir Peter was deep in the evening paper; he did not look up as she entered. "Perhaps he is sulky," she hopefully reflected; and she went and busied herself with some flowers at the other end of the room, waiting for the storm to break. Presently the paper rustled, and he spoke.

"They are going to have a wonderful take of her-

rings it seems this year off the Norway coast," he observed, in quite his usual tone.

"I take no interest in herrings," she loftily replied.

"But I do,—or rather, I take an interest in the people and the places mentioned. How I did enjoy that cruise!"

"Perhaps you wish yourself back there?" she suggested.

"Occasionally, yes,"—and he took up the paper again.

Lady Baby came and sat down on a footstool some little distance from him and waited. She waited some minutes, but he did not speak again. She tapped her heel against the floor, he did not move; she twisted up a scrap of paper, and threw it at him,—it only hit him on the knee, and he did not yet look up—he was smiling at something or other in the article about the Norway herrings. She aimed another pellet, more accurately this time, for it brushed his ear. He looked up with a little surprise.

"What was that? Did anything fall? Can I do anything for you?"

"No, nothing; please don't let me engage your attention. Newspapers are so much more interesting than—than——"

"Dear me, child!" and he put down his paper; "how black you are looking! Has anything occurred to put you out of temper?"

"It is very evident that nothing has occurred to put *you* out of temper," she said, biting her lip.

"No, nothing has that I know of. I feel all right just now, thank you."

"I suppose," and her voice slightly quivered—"I suppose that you have no objection *whatever* to Mr. Carbury coming here?"

"To Carbury coming here? Good heavens! No! What earthly objection could I have? Surely your father is free to ask whom he chooses."

"It was not papa who asked him,—it was I who did so;" and she tried to look unspeakable things. If the crisis was ever to come, it should have come now; if Sir Peter was ever to drop his mask of serenity (it could only be a mask), he should have dropped it now. And the drawing-room carpet was soft and thick, and could not hurt any one's knees to go down upon. Why, people in novels thought nothing of going down plump upon granite flag-stones and "shingly beaches"; even limpet-covered rocks appeared to be of no account whatever to the ardour of those gentlemen. There was no excuse for Sir Peter. But all he said was—

"Yes, I heard you inviting him; and he seemed to need some pressing, too."

"I am glad he is coming," she burst out; "he will be a great acquisition. He knows about so many things, and I find him extremely—extremely interesting," she concluded, having hastily cast about for a suitable term.

"So do I; vastly interesting. Carbury seems to me like a distilled essence of experience. You can't mention a place that he has not been to, or an exploit that he has not been mixed up in, or at any rate knows more about than you do. He has had all illnesses, and felt all sensations. Oh, Carbury is quite the most interesting fellow I know."

"And good-looking, too; that is to say, he certainly must have been very handsome, and his eyes are extremely fine."

"So they are," acquiesced Sir Peter, who now was biting his moustache, as though to repress a rising smile; "at least they would be if you had a chance of seeing them; but he doesn't seem to think it worth while to keep them open. I suppose he is tired of seeing his fellow-creatures."

"And he can be very amusing when he chooses," persisted Lady Baby.

"Yes; but I think he is more amusing when he doesn't choose," and Sir Peter took up his paper again, this time merely for the sake of holding it before his face.

"Are you going to read your paper again?" inquired Lady Baby, bitterly. "Do you know that Nicky never read any paper at all the whole six weeks he was engaged, and that he couldn't have told what party was in office if you had shot him for it?"

"I have no difficulty in believing it. Now that he isn't engaged I never see him opening a paper."

"And do you know," she went on gloomily, "that poor George used to read poetry aloud to Kate by the hour, actually by the hour? He read her the whole of the 'Excursion' and of the 'Deserted Village,' while they were engaged; and he used to serenade her upon several sorts of instruments."

"And she did not break off the engagement?"

"Break off! They were madly in love with each other. Poor George used to call Kate his 'fairest, whitest flower,' and the 'star of his life.' I know it, because Agnes told me so."

"I am afraid," said Sir Peter, calmly—"I am afraid that poor George must have been rather sentimental."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE POLO LESSON.

"And I meant to make *you* jealous. Are you jealous of me now?"

WHEN Mr. Carbury arrived, Lady Baby happened to be occupied on a ladder in the conservatory. She had taken a gardening fit lately; not that she understood anything about gardening, but she was apt to take up things by fits and starts, and the flowers were having their turn just then.

"I have had the ponies saddled," said Germaine, eagerly. "How long will it take you to dress, Carbury? We might have a bit of practice before those two fellows from the barracks come."

"How ridiculous you are, Germaine!" said Lady Baby, who was sitting on the top rung of her short ladder, with one small foot just visible under the hem of her white dress,—“as if there wasn't time enough to play polo later! I want Mr. Carbury to help me with tying up this passion-flower."

"But the ponies are saddled," said Germaine, quite aghast; "and wasn't it for the polo that Carbury came over?"

"For the polo and for other things," said Lady Baby emphatically, and she swept her eyes round to where Sir Peter was apparently quite absorbed in the contemplation of a rare shade of yellow begonia.

"But everything is prepared," said Germaine, looking ready to cry, "and Miss Epperton said——"

"Well," interrupted Lady Baby, "let Mr. Carbury put in a word for himself. Will you play polo at once, Mr. Carbury, or will you help me now in tying up this passion-flower? I need some one tall and active."

"Wyndhurst is tall," said Germaine, bluntly.

"But not active—at least, not generally. Well, Mr. Carbury, can you be active? Yes, or no?"

Fate had somehow arranged that she was always to be putting this form of question to him, and Fate had also arranged that he was always to answer it with "Yes." He did so now; he could not well have done otherwise in common civility, even if the downward glance of her blue eyes had not been making such things as polo appear to him very distant and indistinct just then. He said he would tie the passion-flower, or hold the ladder, or hand the string, or do anything else required of him; and he spoke to-day with a touch of recklessness in tone and manner—a touch of something very different from his nervous demeanour of yesterday. So the passion-flower was tied, and afterwards polo was played, and Lady Baby came and sat beside Maud, and applauded very loudly whenever the ball was sent through the goal, and seemed to applaud loudest when it was Mr. Carbury who sent it. And next day much the same thing took place; there was more passion-flower tied, and more polo played, more applause, more smiles sent from the top of the ladder to the bottom, and sent most lavishly when Sir Peter was anywhere in the vicinity. A week passed in this way. Lady Baby talked more, laughed more, with each day, and showed

a more reckless gaiety. Lord Kippendale saw nothing; he never saw anything that was not immediately thrust under his notice. Sir Peter, apparently, saw nothing either—his manner, at least, never changed. He was perfectly—almost aggravatingly civil to Carbury, and perfectly, though gravely, affectionate to his betrothed. Germaine did not see much either, though at intervals he was visited by a glimpse of something being wrong somewhere; but he was busy enough himself in those days, and contented himself with the vague impression that, of course, Frances could take care of herself—she always did. Agnes indeed saw, but saw without understanding. Once or twice she had asked a question, but had been immediately and peremptorily silenced. Lady Baby never came now to her elder sister's room to be agreed with; she seemed even to avoid the alarmed questioning of Agnes's great ox-like eyes. Was it possible, was it really possible, Agnes asked herself aghast, that the child was such an arrant flirt—such an insatiable flirt—that she could not renounce the vulgar satisfaction of setting two men by the ears? And such a barefaced flirt too; for Lady Baby, new as she was to the business, could not fail to overdo her part. Her encouragement of Mr. Carbury was a great deal too open and ostentatious to have deceived a shrewd and uninterested spectator. Her attempts at the depths of coquetry were of the downright and reckless sort, not to say awkward,—what Maud, speaking from experience, would have called inartistic, had her mind just now been free enough to give itself to the subject; and what Lady Euphrosyne would have stigmatised as the country-bumpkin style of doing things. There was none of the

finesse, there were none of those delicate *nuances*, with which Miss Epperton, under similar circumstances, would have operated. Lady Baby knew of no tactics, and dealt only in downright attacks—in full-gallop charges.

At last one day the climax came, or what she had resolved should be the climax. There had been a polo-match, in which Mr. Carbury had at length brilliantly won a long-contested game. Lady Baby, wound up as it appeared to a pitch of enthusiasm, had taken a flower from her hair—it was a flower which Sir Peter had given her—and thrown it to the victor.

“Do you know what that is?” asked Carbury, riding up to the bank where she sat with Sir Peter by her side.

“A tricoloured gloxinia, I believe,” she said, laughing.

“No, a badge,” said Carbury, as he fastened the flower into his coat. “It would need the point of a lance to lift it from here.” He was bending over his horse’s neck, and spoke so that she alone could hear him; but he shot a glance towards Sir Peter. It looked like a glance of triumph. His face was still flushed with the exercise, and his eyes were wide open and brilliant. The jaded look had left his features for the moment, he looked almost young, or “almost not middle-aged,” as Lady Baby put it to herself.

“Oh, Carbury, stop a moment, if you don’t mind,” said Sir Peter; “don’t change your position. It’s the very thing for a knight of the middle ages. ‘After the tournament,’ you know, or something in that line. I wish I had my note-book here; that downward bend of the head is absolutely perfect.”

Instead of maintaining his position, Carbury bit his lip and sat bolt upright. This was one of the moments

when he felt Sir Peter's cool friendliness to be almost insulting. Was the man really so blind as he pretended to be? or was he so conceited, or so confident in his youth, that he would not do the older man the honour of being jealous?

Lady Baby got up from her seat on the bank and stroked the neck of the brown pony. "Fire-fly knows his business, doesn't he, Mr. Carbury? I am sure he runs after the ball of his own accord. It can't be so very difficult to play polo on a good pony; and oh, show me your mallet. It isn't at all heavy; I am sure I could manage it. Don't you think that Zet would make a good polo pony?"

"Why not try?" said Mr. Carbury, eagerly. "You would not be my first lady-pupil at polo."

Lady Baby hesitated, and looked sideways at Sir Peter.

"I—I should like it very much," she began; "but I am not quite sure whether it would be—advisable."

"I think it would be most unadvisable," said Sir Peter, decisively.

"Oh! Why?"

"Because it is so very much of a toss-up as to whether you will end by landing on your head or your heels."

"Oh, is that all? I am not afraid of that."

"Then, will you try?" asked Carbury.

"Perhaps. I shall think about it, but I must go home now;" and she turned abruptly and walked towards the house. After a few steps Sir Peter joined her.

"It is very kind of Mr. Carbury to want to teach me polo," she began.

"Very."

"And what do you think of the plan?"

"I told you what I think: I think it is extremely foolish."

"Because of the chance of coming down?"

"Yes."

There was nothing more said on the subject. Sir Peter, on reaching the house, went to the smoking-room to write letters for the post. Lady Baby retired to her room. An hour later she was standing on the doorstep in her habit, and pulling on her gloves with a curious air of defiance. She had been as far as the smoking-room door, half intending to go in and announce to Sir Peter that she was about to have her first polo-lesson; but she had come away without turning the handle, and she meant now to go without his knowledge.

"It is quite clear that he does not approve of the polo," she said to herself, "and if this does not bring on the crisis nothing will."

The polo-ground was some distance from the house, in a portion of the park which lay solitary, and surrounded by a grove of beeches. Germaine was still there, practising by himself. The lesson began, but Lady Baby was not quite so promising a pupil as Mr. Carbury had expected: she appeared at moments to forget what she was there for, and just as often hit the empty air as the ball. Germaine became rather indignant, and in his eagerness to demonstrate the necessity of sharp turnings, he succeeded in effecting so very sharp a turning that he brought his pony to its knees; and though he had pulled it together in a moment, it

became evident in the next few minutes that the beast was dead lame.

"It's over then for to-day," he said despondently. "You're coming along with me too, I suppose, Frances?"

"What for? Because your pony is lame? Mine isn't, and I am just beginning to get into the spirit of the game. I shall stay."

"All by yourself with Carbury?" asked Germaine, staring. Mr. Carbury was at that moment at the opposite end of the ground.

"Yes; why not?"

"Look here," said Germaine, bluntly, "I don't know what you are driving at; but it strikes me that something is off the square. I don't think you are fair upon Wyndhurst. You had better come home with me. It will be dark in half an hour."

"Dear boy," she said, smiling, but there was something like a demon of recklessness in her eyes,— "when I feel in need of advice I shall know exactly where to come to for it; you seem to have a large stock on hand. In the meantime I am going to play polo."

"And what am I to say to Wyndhurst?"

"Anything you like. You can tell him that my bones are still unbroken."

"Well, it's your own business, of course; but I should recommend you to look out. Those quiet fellows are far the worst sort when once their blood is up. If you don't look out, you may have the devil to pay yet." And Germaine, having eased his conscience, walked off with his pony and left his sister to take care of herself.

If Lady Baby had been calm enough to have taken note of Mr. Carbury's look as he saw Germaine depart, she might have felt moved to recall her brother or to follow him. In the first moment Carbury had been almost as surprised as Germaine; then upon the surprise had come something like a flash of joy; and then, from having been unusually talkative, he grew silent, with that ominous silence which is more dangerous than words.

The polo was resumed, but pursued in a somewhat desultory fashion. Lady Baby's conversation died out by degrees, and she too lapsed into intervals of silence, never noticing the long questioning looks with which Mr. Carbury was seeking vainly to meet her glance. Meanwhile the dusk was stealing in, and twice she had suggested going home; and Mr. Carbury had pleaded for a few minutes longer, and she had yielded, half unwillingly, and yet with a secret looking forward to the crisis which this must bring about.

It was dusk in good earnest when at length they turned into the grass avenue, moving at a foot-pace, for the ponies had had a hard afternoon of it. Lady Baby began to feel now that she too was tired, and that polo was, after all, a rather fatiguing game.

"This is the place," said Mr. Carbury suddenly, and for a moment he drew rein. "Yes; this is the very place," he repeated, coming to a standstill, and gazing round about him in the dusk.

"Which place?"

"The place where you came through the bushes that evening in spring. I heard the branches rustle, and wondered what it was; it might have been a deer

or a hare springing up—how easily it might have been that! but it was not; it was—you. The grass was green, but there were no leaves on the trees yet. I think there was a bird singing somewhere; was there not?"

"I daresay there was," she said, listlessly. "It is not unusual for birds to sing in spring. That was the day that Suleika threw Nicky. Is it not that day you are talking of?"

"Yes, it is that day."

They moved on again in silence. After a minute, she said, with something between a laugh and a sigh, "It seems a long way off now, and yet it is scarcely three months. That day was like the beginning. You came first, and then Maud, and then Peter."

"That day *was* the beginning," said Carbury.

"I wish it had never begun," she cried, upon some sudden impulse. "I was happier then; everything was so much simpler." She checked herself; but she had said enough already—she had said too much.

Carbury had brought his horse close to her side. "You wish it had never begun?" he said, quickly. "You were happier then? You are not happy now?"

"Yes, yes, I am happy—of course I am happy," she hastily retorted; but even as she said it, she felt something hot on her cheek, and a bright drop fell on the black pony's mane. She was tired and uneasy and dissatisfied with herself, and that tear that fell came only from the petulance of a spoilt child that finds itself unexpectedly crossed in a whim; but Carbury could not know this. He was near enough to see the

drop fall, and he started as though it had been liquid fire, and had fallen upon him.

"Happy? You say you are happy? Look at that!" and bending forward, he pointed to the glistening drop which even then Zet was shaking from his mane. "Do people cry when they are happy?"

But Lady Baby was fiercely drying her eyes, and scarcely heard. As for his face, she could not see it, or the look written there might have scared her into the knowledge of the work she had accomplished. More than once in the past week had this flash of wild hope lighted up Carbury's weary eyes, which at first had looked so uncertain and perplexed, so inclined to be convinced, yet afraid of believing too soon. But Lady Baby, while looking in his face, was calculating the effect of each look upon Peter; while speaking to him, was weighing the importance which each word would gain in Peter's ear; while smiling at him, was measuring the depth of the stab which that smile would be to Peter. Her bodily eyes were on Mr. Carbury, but her mental eyes were, so to say, turned over her shoulder towards Peter; and the changes on his face were of no more account to her than would have been the faint breath upon a mirror.

To-night, if it had not been for the dusk, she might have seen more; but they were nearing the house. Oh, to have been now where they had been a quarter of an hour back! thought Carbury. To have been now on the lonely grass-plot among the beeches! He could have said much then; he could say little now.

"There is something wrong; I knew it. I have

guessed, I hoped, but I was not sure. I want you to tell me what it is."

"You?" she said, somewhat tremulously, as she pocketed her handkerchief. "Oh, never, never! I could never tell *you!*" Even Lady Baby, accustomed as she was to be petted and consoled by any one to whom she deigned to pour out her griefs, felt aware that she could scarcely confide in the man whom she had used as her instrument.

"You have some trouble, then, some cause for unhappiness; could you tell it to any one else, and why not to—me?"

He held his breath to listen, for the blood was hammering in his temples.

"Oh, never, never!" she said quickly; "not to you of all men in the world."

His heart gave a leap of insane delight. "You shall tell it me yet," he muttered; for they were entering the porch. "Oh, I have not been blind, and I have understood very well."

"That is why he played into my hands so perfectly," reflected Lady Baby, as she mounted the steps; for, as it suddenly occurred to her, Mr. Carbury had certainly been a wonderfully convenient tool, always within reach when she required him, always ready to be made use of. But this was not the occasion for thanking him, supposing that he deserved thanks, for already they were entering the hall. "It will keep till to-morrow," she said to herself; and after hesitating for a moment at the foot of the staircase, she walked slowly towards the smoking-room. The dressing-gong had sounded some time back, but she knew that Peter generally

dressed in the last five minutes. She was a little, just a little, bit frightened at what she had done, but not the less determined to know at once the result of her latest experiment. Supposing that Germaine should be right, and that she was going to have "the devil to pay"? Never mind—in fact, all the better. She set her teeth and went in, feeling that she was strung up to anything, even to being called false and fickle, if that were necessary to relieve Sir Peter's feelings.

He was still at the writing-table, scribbling away against time; but he threw down his pen as she entered, and came toward her. "Well, little one," he said, with his usual grave smile, "so you have had your polo after all—and who won the game?"

"The game—the game?" she stammered, quite taken aback, for she had been armed for anger, or at least cold displeasure, and she was not armed for this; "it was no game."

"What was it, then? Terrible earnest?"—and he drew her towards him to look in her eyes.

"You shall hear what it was," she said, with a sudden display of icy dignity, as she disengaged herself from his arm. "You shall hear what it was—tomorrow," and, abruptly turning, she left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

LADY BABY HAS HER WAY.

“Profess indeed I do not Cupid’s art,

Nor nourish special locks of rowéd hair,

Nor give each speech a full point of a groan.”

THE harmless, though rather vulgar little joke which Mr. Smart had attempted about Nicky coming home “with his pockets full of tin,” had left a disagreeable impression on Lord Kippendale’s mind. He approved of everything connected with horses, except betting; on this one point he was stern. He had lived in unfashionable though very comfortable rusticity all his life, and in the matter of betting-books he had not marched with the time. To his old-fashioned ideas there was something almost of desecration in making a trade of so noble a passion. Good judge of horse-flesh though he was, he had never made money by his horses; he was a great deal too impulsive in his decisions and hasty in his transactions. It had almost grieved him to observe in Nicky some traces of the horse-dealer’s genius, for Nicky’s income was none the worse for a little padding of this sort, but as for the betting-ring he had had no suspicions. Nicky knew well enough what were his father-in-law’s ideas on that subject; and also he remembered well enough the stormy day on which poor George had burst into Lord Kippendale’s room, and with much tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth had announced himself to be a beggar, and all because of a Derby debt. It was not quite

so bad as that,—starvation was not staring him in the face,—but by the time the debt was cleared, George Blashford was no longer the fairly wealthy man he had been when Lady Catherine Bevan had married him. Kippendale had certainly been singularly unlucky in marrying his daughters, the world decided; it all came from his not taking time to think over it. No title and no money in one case; no title in the other, and the money that there had been gone in one day, like a bubble on the wind.

“That idiot Smart was talking nonsense, of course,” said the old Earl to himself: “but I’ll put the question to Craigtoun; a man with Craigtoun’s pluck is bound to speak out, if there *should* be a wee bit truth in the matter.”

Accordingly, when Nicky came back, which he did on the day after the polo-lesson last described, Lord Kippendale, without prelude or preamble, button-holed his son-in-law, and began: “Look here, Craigtoun, I want a square answer to a square question. You know what my ideas about betting-books are; have you, or have you not, been betting at the Derby?”

If the irascible old Earl had not been the most unsuspecting and short-sighted of mortals, he could not have failed to perceive the start which Nicky gave; and if Nicky had not happened to be standing with his back to the light, Lord Kippendale would have observed that his son-in-law’s usually ruddy complexion had suddenly undergone a curious change.

“I?” stammered Nicky. “I? what have you been hearing? Surely you know that I——”

“Yes, yes, I know that you are not the wild fellow

that poor George was. You have been very steady, Craigtoun, my boy, very steady; and with temptations in your way, too. I was sure from the first that it was nothing but a daft bit of gossip, and I only want your word for it; so speak out, and let's be done with it."

"Really," began Nicky, taking refuge in a sort of virtuously indignant bluster,—“really I should have thought that, after such a spell of time, I mean that, by Jove! I shouldn't have expected,—and upon my word it's hard upon a fellow when he has done his best to——”

Lord Kippendale put his hands over his ears with an expression of agonised impatience. “For goodness' sake, Craigtoun, how long are you going to keep me here? Adam is waiting for me in the stable-yard. I asked for a *word*, not for *words*;" or to be quite correct, what Lord Kippendale really said was: “I asked for a *woard*, not for *woards*;" for in critical moments, Lord Kippendale's vowels had a way of broadening out in exact proportion to the emotions at work.

Then Nicky's bluster died out, and he felt himself growing livid. He looked at his father-in-law, or rather he gazed convulsively at his shirt-pin; he heard the quick tap of the riding-whip against the table-foot, and he knew that a moment's hesitation would ruin him. And then this man, so celebrated for his courage, whose hand had never trembled and whose eye had never flinched in face of the greatest perils of the hunting-field,—this man became all at once aware that he was a coward, and swallowing something dry in his throat, waveringly pronounced the false word “No.” For Lord Kippendale had not considered that there are two sorts

of pluck in the world,—the pluck that enables men to mount on vicious horses and take high fences and the pluck that nerves them to speak the truth under disadvantageous circumstances.

Even though Nicky had to clear his throat twice before pronouncing that "No," the monosyllable was quite enough for Lord Kippendale. "All right—that's all I wanted; I knew it was all right; and with a squeeze to Nicky's hand, he left the room, and Nicky, before drawing a breath of relief, first passed his tongue over his lips, for they were quite dry, while on his cold forehead the drops were standing.

He was still where Lord Kippendale had left him when Lady Baby looked into the room and distantly inquired whether he had seen Sir Peter. Nicky gave an impatient shake of the head, and began heavily to pace the floor, but as she was closing the door an idea seemed to strike him.

"Look here," he called after her,—“look here, Baby, I—I haven't been a bad sort of a brother to you, have I? I—I trained your ponies for you all right, and all that sort of thing, didn't I?”

"Of course you did," she answered, staring; "do you want to be thanked for it now?"

"No, upon my word I don't; I didn't do it for thanks. I like training ponies; but still I suppose that if ever you were in the way of doing me a good turn, you wouldn't mind doing it?"

"Mind doing it? Why, Nicky, I shouldn't wait till the good turn came in my way, I should go out of my way to do it. You couldn't have been a better brother than you have been. What has come over you to-day?"

"Nothing. And, look here, I think I have been civil to Wyndhurst too, haven't I? I'm not a particularly civil fellow generally, but I always was ready to push Wyndhurst's chances. I made Aggie sit on the drag that day on purpose, that he should have Ajax to ride; and though Ajax *did* throw him, that wasn't my fault, and it all came straight in the end. Yes, by Jove! I think I've been uncommonly civil to Wyndhurst!"

"I daresay you have," said Lady Baby, suddenly withdrawing the hand which she had laid on her brother-in-law's sleeve, "but what has that to do with it? And what is it you want, Nicky? I don't understand you at all."

"Oh, I want nothing just now, at least not this minute; but maybe I'll remind you of this some day,—some day soon," he added under his breath, brushing past her into the passage. "That pushing on of Wyndhurst's suit was the luckiest thing I ever did," reflected Nicky, as he plunged out of the house. "And what are a beggarly thousand pounds to Wyndhurst? The income of a beggarly fortnight, nothing more; and I'll net it again somehow; it's only time that I'm short of just now."

Lady Baby, meanwhile, having puzzled for a few minutes over Nicky's strange behaviour, dismissed the subject and pursued the search for Sir Peter. She found him in a far-off morning-room at last, and walking straight up to him she said, "Sir Peter, I wish to speak with you alone after luncheon."

"*Sir Peter?*" he said inquiringly.

"Yes," she said severely, avoiding his glance. "Will you come to the big drawing-room after luncheon? I

shall be there;" and, without waiting for an answer, she disappeared.

Lady Baby had come down to breakfast that morning looking rather pale, with tight-set lips and a general appearance of having come to a resolution, and of meaning rigidly to adhere to it. There was an ominous silence about her, and occasional flashes of something alarming in her eyes. And yet Sir Peter ate his luncheon with perfect equanimity and strolled quite leisurely into the big drawing-room when the party dispersed.

Lady Baby was there already, a shade paler, a shade more determined than she had been in the morning, and with her chin, if possible, a shade higher in the air.

"Supposing," said Sir Peter, before she had spoken,—"supposing we adjourn to the conservatory? There is more sunshine than here, and more view."

The conservatory was very large, and it was square in shape, with a paved way running all round the four sides, while the entire centre was filled up with a mass of tall green-house plants, the tallest of which brushed the ceiling with their crowns, and formed altogether a small forest, just dense enough to be a screen. There were two entrances to the conservatory—one through a window in the big drawing-room, the other from the flower-garden; and it was to a bench placed beside this outer door, which to-day stood open, that Lady Baby led the way.

The winding ribbon-borders and twisted flower-scrolls in the garden outside had just reached the summit of their brief summer glory. There was scarcely a

flower dropped yet, there was not a leaf turned. For some days past the weather had been brilliant, but to-day there were signs of a break. There were those rapid changes from blue sky to grey, those fitful plunges from brilliancy to gloom, which portend revolution. The roses were greedily drinking in the last favours of the precious sunshine, and the scent of heliotrope and ver-bena hung heavily on the warm air. Through the midst of the blaze of well-ordered colour, a gardener would now and then glide discreetly with a watering-can in his hand; and the distant sound of gravel-paths being raked was all that broke the afternoon silence.

"May I smoke?" asked Sir Peter; "it is good for the plants, I believe."

"You may do what you like," she said, frowning, for she felt this was a bad beginning to what was to follow. "You can do whatever you like after to-day, Peter,—I mean Sir Peter. Do you know why I asked for this interview?"

"I have no idea."

"Have you not even attempted to form a guess?"

"I have not."

"Well, then, you shall know at once. Sir Peter, all is over between us."

There was just an instant's silence before Sir Peter spoke. "For what reason?" he asked.

"Reason? reason?" she said, beginning to pant a little; "I could give you a dozen reasons, I could give you a hundred."

"I only ask you to give me one," said Sir Peter, folding his arms and leaning back. Whether it was this attitude of patient waiting which drove the ideas from

her mind, or whether it was his steadfast gaze, Lady Baby did not know; but for a minute she seemed to have lost sight of all the reasons to be propounded, and it was only with an effort that she could rally her arguments around her.

"My reasons—yes, I have plenty. In the first place" (oh, what was in the first place? she mentally inquired of herself)—"in the first place, we don't suit each other."

"Why not?"

"Because—because we are different; everything about us is different; our tastes differ."

"For instance?"

"For instance, the thing I like best in the world is horses, and you only care for them if you can paint them. That in itself ought to have been enough from the beginning. I should have kept to the first answer I gave you; it was only the accident that upset my nerves, and made me fancy that I—cared for you, when really I was only sorry for you. Such mistakes are often made, you know. They happen in almost every novel."

"So they do," agreed Sir Peter. "Well, that is in the first place; now, in the second place?"

"We have no sympathies in common."

"But you have told me that already."

"Well, then," she broke out, "you don't care for me as you should—not as I expected it, not as I wanted it; that is in the second place."

In the programme of the interview which Lady Baby had sketched out for herself, she had proposed to maintain an absolutely icy dignity, but at this juncture

the programme flew to the winds, and springing from the bench, she began to pace the paved walk between the flowers, nervously plucking a leaf here and a flower there, and tearing it to pieces with her fingers.

"What is it you did expect?" asked Sir Peter, very gravely.

"More"—"*display*," she was going to have said, but the word struck her as too flippant for the occasion. "More of what is always expected in—in these cases," she lucidly substituted. "And I know the way it generally is, because I know how it was with Nicky and George. *They* cared for Aggie and Kate in the real way. George would have *killed* any one for whom Kate had shown the slightest preference; perhaps he might even have killed Kate. Don't you know that?"

"I had not the honour of Mr. Blashford's acquaintance."

"No; but you know Nicky. Aggie and Nicky were just as devoted in their way. I am quite sure that if I had asked you not to open a newspaper during the last six weeks, I am quite sure that you would have refused."

"I am certain of it," said Sir Peter, in a tone of conviction.

"And," she continued, with an additional quiver in her voice, "I am sure that you would never have thought of reading poetry aloud to me?"

"I am sure I should not."

"Nor of serenading me on the violin?"

"I never learnt the violin," said Sir Peter.

She waved off the objection as being a mere accidental circumstance which could not affect the main

principle. "And your conversation is as different as possible from that of either Nicky or George. Agnes says that George's language was simply unwritten poetry. I am sure that if I had waited for months longer, you would never have compared me either to an angel or a star."

"It is extremely unlikely that I should," agreed Sir Peter.

"And you admire other women as much as you do me,—more, perhaps; don't deny it! I know that you admire Maud."

"I admire Miss Epperton very much."

"Then why don't you marry Miss Epperton?"

"Because I don't happen to care for her."

She came to a standstill in front of him, and, perhaps because she dimly felt that his last answer was unanswerable, she hastened to quit that point. "Enough," she said, clenching her hands; "this is quite enough. All this only shows how right I was when I said that all must be over between us. I have felt it for a long time. Everything points the same way, that we have made a dreadful, a fearful mistake, and that we must part while there is still time."

Sir Peter laid down his cigar on the edge of the bench and looked her straight in the eyes.

"You wish me, then, to resign my claims?"

"Yes; here is your ring," and she began hastily pulling it off her finger.

"And you wish me to go away and not to return?"

"Of course; that is just what I wish. It is because we do not suit each other, don't you see?"

"So you have told me."

"And you think I am right?"

"Very likely you are right. I shall never learn either to speak unwritten poetry or to play the violin,—and as it appears that these things are essential to your happiness, I think you have come to a very wise conclusion."

"And—and what are you going to do?"

"I shall do as you wish. I shall go."

"Ah!" she said, with a quick breath that was something like a gasp, and she bit her quivering lip; "but remember that you are never to come back,—never, *never!* Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Sir Peter, rising, "and you shall be obeyed. Do you wish me to explain the alteration in our plans to Lord Kippendale, or will you do it yourself?"

"Leave it to me," and she crushed a head of costly begonia into an unsightly pink pulp.

"Then there is nothing more to say but good-bye," said Sir Peter, putting out his hand. "We need not swear enmity, I suppose, though they do that in novels." He held her hand in his for a moment, but dismay was bringing the tears to her eyes, and she could not see his face.

"Yes, good-bye; go at once," she said, with her head held high; "and—and remember that this is final,—that nothing, no, *nothing*, could ever make me change my mind again."

"I should not venture to expect it;" and, dropping her hand, he turned towards the open door.

"Peter!" she called after him as he reached it—
"I mean Sir Peter, remember that I don't want any

one, any friend, to—to interfere, or try and patch up anything.”

“Be quite easy, I shall let no one interfere.”

“Well, then, that is all; why are you not gone yet?”

“Because you recalled me. Good-bye.”

“And—and, Sir Peter, you are not on any account to write to me. I should be *very* angry if you wrote to me.”

“I should never be audacious enough to trouble you in that way;” and, having waited for a moment to see if this was the last of her instructions, Sir Peter turned and went slowly through the open door into the garden: his steps sounded on the gravel after he was out of sight.

A chill and threatening breeze was sweeping over the flower-beds; the drifting sunshine had died out, and now, as at a given signal, the whole sky seemed to be alive and moving. In the west a stretch of clear blue was still visible, but across it the white clouds and the black clouds were scudding like smoke; and the white looked as mischievous as the black,—and most mischievous of all looked the bronze-red glare which loomed in the east, tinging the heavens with a wild reflection almost like the light of a smile on the face of an angry man. Now the rose-bushes began to sway a little and to show the under side of their leaves, and the head-gardener was seen to pause with his watering-can in his hand, and keenly to scan the clouds. A complaining creak came from the open conservatory door; the flowers nearest the entrance began to shudder upon their stalks. As plainly as Chinese primroses can speak they were asking to be protected from the

unaccustomed rudeness of this air. But Lady Baby was in no mood for understanding Chinese, or indeed any other language. She was standing in a trance, listening to Sir Peter's departing steps upon the gravel. Her head was still erect and her hand clenched, but for all that there was a look of stupefaction on her face. Was he gone then? Was he really gone? Was it all over, so quickly, so easily, without a protest, without a struggle?

"And is this the way it ends?"

She was not aware that she had spoken aloud until some one behind her said, "No, this is the way it begins;" and turning with a start she perceived Mr. Carbury advancing towards her between the flowers, looking rather flushed and very much more wide-awake than she had ever seen him look during the whole course of their acquaintance.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT CAME OF THE EXPERIMENT.

"I am so much a fool should I stay longer.
It would be my disgrace and your discomfort:
I take my leave at once."

THERE was something so very strangely timed about the sudden apparition of Carbury in the nick of this particular moment, that Lady Baby, though her acquaintance with the stage was most limited, felt almost as though she were witnessing a well-rehearsed "entrance" in a play. It was Carbury himself who brought this suggestion of staginess in the atmosphere with him, for

excitement in him was always apt to take a theatrical shape; unconsciously he would stalk as though he were treading the boards, and instinctively speak as though he had studied his part. His black eyes were all in a flame, and his white teeth gleamed joyously, as out of the frame of clustering green-house plants he advanced towards Lady Baby. No *coup de théâtre* could have been more complete. "Where *have* you come from?" was all that she could find presence of mind to say; then in a moment she had remembered that the entrance through the drawing-room door was a very simple explanation, and quite disposed of any necessity for trap-doors or secret passages, of which an undefined suggestion had risen to her mind.

"Oh, I see!" she said quickly. "But you have not—heard anything? How much have you heard?" she asked imperiously.

"Enough: quite as much as I wanted to hear."

"Then you have listened? You came to listen?"

"I did not come to listen; I came to ask you a question, but I have got my answer already."

"Your answer?" she echoed, gazing in wide-eyed wonder. "When did I give you your answer?"

"When you said 'Good-bye' to Sir Peter Wyndhurst." Carbury was still smiling; but a little of the triumph had died out of the smile, and a little anxiety had come into it. He was watching Lady Baby's face keenly, eagerly, almost a little suspiciously. "Yesterday," he said, and his voice shook a little—"yesterday I guessed, but to-day I know."

"Do you?" she repeated; "well, *you* may know, but I am sure *I* don't," and she burst into a childishly im-

pertinent laugh; not because she was amused, but because her nerves were overstrained. Indeed, if she had not laughed then, her only alternative would have been tears. Carbury was not smiling any longer; right through the sunburn of his dark skin his face had grown very pale. The flicker of suspicion in his eyes had turned to a fixed gleam of distrust. "Is this to try me?" he stammered; "is it to put me to the proof that you pretend not to understand what it is that I am here for? is it——"

"Pretend!" she flashed out. "Much need of pretence, indeed, when you start up as though you were struck from the ground, and look mysterious, and talk in riddles, instead of in plain English. It is exactly like the play I saw when papa took me to Edinburgh in winter. Do you know, when you came in just now from behind the flowers, I couldn't help thinking that if only you had had lace ruffles, and if the flowers had only been pasteboard ones, you would have looked exactly like the hero when he came out of the bushes in the garden, just before the grand declaration scene. Any one would fancy——"

Lady Baby stopped short; it was something in Carbury's face that stopped her. There was a minute's complete silence in the conservatory. Outside the storm was coming fast: a wall of white dust rushed across the garden, to be torn to shreds and whirled to the roofs. It had grown very dark, though it was still so early in the afternoon. Over Lady Baby's face there had crept a look of panic.

"Good heavens!" she cried impetuously, "you cannot, oh surely you cannot have meant *that!*" and

again, in place of any answer, there was a minute of absolute silence. During that minute it all dawned upon Lady Baby. Perhaps it was the stony consternation of Carbury's eyes that enlightened her, perhaps it was in the silence that she read her answer, or perhaps she owed the revelation to that lightning-like piecing together of past infinitesimal trifles, of which on occasion we are all capable—an instantaneous upstarting of those atoms of evidence which, once the right spring is touched, range themselves suddenly into incontrovertible proof. May it not even be that an experience not her own came to her aid, and that the heroes and heroines of a few hundred novels rose up at this moment to lend a hand in tearing the veil from her unwilling eyes? So blinding was the light let in upon her that she could do nothing but lapse into horror-stricken silence. And Carbury also stood dumb, not because words failed him, but because he never would have risked speaking until he felt pretty sure that he could do so without anything absurd happening to his voice. For he also had lived through his minute of revelation, he also had put together his patchwork of words and of looks, of atoms of proof and half-formed suspicions; and as he stood there in the first blush of his discomfiture, it struck him that the whole which they produced was like nothing so much as a cunningly devised fool's cap, and that the head which this cap fitted was no other than his own.

He was neither slow nor stupid, and he was almost fanatically vain. There are many sorts of vain men, but, broadly speaking, there are two distinct species—the thick-skinned, complacent vain, and the thin-skinned,

morbid vain. Had Mr. Carbury been of the first species, he would probably have taken half an hour to be convinced of the mistake he had made; but being a rather extreme example of the thin-skinned order, and being always more ready to suppose that he was being made a laughing-stock of than that he was not, instead of retreating before the proof, he met it half-way. Even before Lady Baby had quite done speaking, he had grasped the situation—the peculiarly and grimly farcical situation—in which he found himself placed. All its accessories might not be very clear, all its details of cause and effect might take time to unravel; the only thing that was perfectly plain and intelligible to him was that the past week had been a game, and that he had been duped,—for what end?—with what purpose?—did not greatly signify just at present, nor whether he had been toy or tool. What did it matter, so long as the fact remained that he had been taken up and cast aside,—that he, Laurence Carbury, the veteran campaigner, had been as completely and neatly blinded by this young lady just out of the schoolroom as ever was the most whiskerless boy by the most wily of sirens?

Some men might, at this juncture, have been relieved by realising the very absurdity of the position—the absolutely hopeless tragi-comedy of the case; but to Mr. Carbury it was precisely the absurdity which was the tragical part of the matter. It was nothing but an instinct of self-preservation which, as he stood there, enabled him to maintain this outward composure—belied indeed by his colour, but respectable at any rate in its effort. The terror of detection was upon

him. Hide the injury, hide it at any price! Never mind though the very soul be stunned with the blow; never mind though the heart be bursting, and the dream of yesterday turned to a grinning nightmare,—hide it, cover the bleeding wound; smile down the dismay which must perforce be so ludicrous to watch; swallow the mortification which, once displayed, must surely be as laughable as it is pitiable! There would be plenty of time later to stanch the wound and sharpen the weapons for revenge; but now, quick, a mask, a shield, a screen,—anything to slouch behind. It was this that his writhing vanity groaned for,—this that his wits were wildly casting about for, as he stood there and quite distinctly felt the fool's cap on his head. It seemed to him that, if he moved, he would hear the very jingle of the bells.

In after-days, when the thoughts of Lady Baby or of Mr. Carbury went back to this afternoon, neither of them could ever quite clearly remember what had been said during the five minutes that followed on her fierce, and, as it were, panic-stricken exclamation. Mr. Carbury, indeed, had ever after an indistinct recollection of having burst into a laugh—or something that on the whole was not very unlike a laugh—and of having made some remark about the coming storm—perhaps under a passing wild idea that, since he had not spoken in so many plain English words, retreat was still open to him. But in the midst of it he had caught Lady Baby's look of haughty amazement, and, with a groan, he broke off, as though aware that he was wasting his pains. Without another word he turned and walked out bareheaded into the pelting rain. But he kept his

head up as he went—he did not forget that he might be seen from the windows. He was conscious of having borne himself very bravely in the five minutes just lived through, and he did not want to mar it all at the last. Until he has reached the privacy of his room, let his poor mangled vanity remain at least decently, if not effectually, covered up.

The thick drops had been falling now for some minutes; they blurred the glass-panes of the conservatory, and drove in through the open door upon the shivering plants. A flower-pot fell with a crash to the ground; the wind howled round the corner; and a dazed sparrow, helpless as a dead leaf, was borne in by the storm, flapping feebly about among the palms, so blinded with dust and terrified by the darkness that it could not again find the entrance.

Lady Baby sank down on the bench and stared fixedly into the stormy turbulence of the garden. What, oh, what exactly had happened? Mr. Carbury in love with her? Preposterous idea! And yet, the first shock once over, she never thought of doubting it. The mask had been too transparent even for Lady Baby's eyes. Pity for him she felt none as yet; she was far too deeply plunged in pity for herself—far too wild with a nameless pain whose dull stabs she was only just now beginning to feel in her heart. As for weighing for a moment the right that was on his side and the wrong that was on hers, she was very far from calm enough to have realised even that such a wrong existed. Later the self-reproaches might come, later the remorse. If her conscience stirred just now, it was but faintly; and if anything within her soul at this

moment deserved the name of remorse, it was at best a mixed and chaotic sentiment.

It was long before she felt calm enough to leave the conservatory. When she did so, she met her father on the staircase. Lord Kippendale was in a state of boundless excitement.

"The world is gone clean daft," he announced. "What's the meaning of every one rushing off in this fashion, as though we had the plague in the house? Eh? What's the meaning of it? Can no one explain?"

"Every one?" repeated Lady Baby, standing still.

"Yes, Wyndhurst and Carbury; that's enough for one day, I suppose."

"Sir Peter is—gone?"

"Bless me, yes! Didn't he ask for leave of absence? It was a business letter or something which required his presence at Nolesworth. He went off an hour ago—that's rational enough. It's Carbury who is the crazy one; declared suddenly he had to catch the London night mail—went off at half an hour's warning. It's confoundedly rude to decamp in this fashion without any explanation."

"Perhaps he had a business letter too," suggested Lady Baby, rather faintly.

"Well," said Lord Kippendale, irritably, "it would take a precious deal of business to induce *me* to travel to-night. There's something bad coming; the barometer has not been so low for two years. We are either in for a rattling thunderstorm in the night, or it's going to be a stiff gale. I shall have the chimneys looked to."

The thunder did not come in the night—it had blown over; but the stiff gale came, chasing thunder

and rain before it, roaring and howling and bellowing round the house like twenty thousand mad bulls let loose. Through long hours of the darkness Lady Baby lay with her eyes wide open, listening to the booming in the chimney, to the rattling at the shutters, to the whistling through the keyholes, uneasily looking back on the day that was past, and fervently wishing, as she tossed about from side to side, that she had let well alone, and had stopped short of at least her last experiment on Sir Peter.

In the morning two of the big beeches on the lawn were down, and there were broken branches snapped into little bits of wood scattered all over the grass, and flung even against the windows. The flower-beds were as thoroughly destroyed as though they had been trampled by a marching army, or as though the bellowing bulls had been bodily monsters, and had thought that calceolarias and lobelias were pleasant things to roll upon. But this was too little yet for the gale; it just held its breath in the daylight hours, and then burst out anew on the second night.

News began to be heard of fatalities occasioned. A child in the village had been hurled against a wall and badly hurt; a man had been injured by the fall of a chimney. "And it is not confined to Scotland," said Lord Kippendale, as he read his paper at breakfast on the second morning of the gale; "it has been blowing twenty to the dozen all over England. The world is certainly gone crazy. November is the time for these big gales, not June. There it is: sixteen men wounded by the fall of a factory wall; loss of a boat and seven lives; two women crushed by a tree

trunk. Why, it must have been worse down there by a good bit. We have been let off easy this time."

But Lord Kippendale had not been let off quite as easy as he imagined. On the afternoon of that same day there suddenly arose a commotion in the house. Lady Baby, sitting alone in her room, alternately listening to the wind which still howled lustily round the house corners and writing letters to Sir Peter, which she immediately tore up and burnt carefully at a candle, all at once became vaguely aware that something had happened. She had heard no great noise, no scream,—and yet, by one of those indefinable instincts that sometimes seize upon us, she felt in one instant convinced that "something" had happened, and that it was something great and important, perhaps even something terrible.

There had been a ring at the door, then steps, then silence; and then again steps, more hurried this time, more doors opened and shut, her father speaking, Agnes speaking, her father speaking louder, calling for somebody, for Nicky, for Germaine, loudly declaring that something or other was nonsense, but doing so in a tone of alarmed defiance. "What? Eh? Rubbish!" she heard. "It can't be. I don't believe a word of it. It's badly written too. Give me my glasses, Germaine! Where is Germaine? Why doesn't Germaine come?"

Lady Baby was at the foot of the stairs by this time. Her father was standing near the billiard-table with a paper in his hand, there was a boy by the door turning a greasy cap between his fingers, and there was an orange-coloured envelope on the floor.

"Agnes," and she put her hand on her sister's arm; "Agnes, what is it? A telegram? Has anything happened to——"

"I don't know," said Agnes, in tremulous perplexity. "I don't know what has happened. I don't understand. I don't believe; but there has been an accident——"

"To whom?" asked Lady Baby, shaking her sister's arm.

"To nobody; it was at Gullyscoombe. It was the gale. Wasn't it the gale? I am not sure what has happened, but it is something dreadful about the mines at Gullyscoombe."

CHAPTER XVII.

TABLE DECORATION.

"Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?"

WHERE was Germaine while Lord Kippendale shouted for him? Not very far off, only as far as the dining-room, where he was engaged in helping, or, to speak more truly, hindering Miss Epperton in her arrangement of the flowers for the dinner-table. Maud was never known to be idle; and Germaine, of whom the same could not generally be asserted, had lately developed an interest in all sorts of mixed occupations. When Maud was arranging books in the library, Germaine was apt to become suddenly interested in literature; when Maud was practising waltzes on the piano (she had discovered that a good waltz-player is generally a

welcome member of society), Germaine, of whom his sisters used to assert that his only chance of distinguishing between "Rule Britannia" and "Pop goes the Weasel," was to hear them played in immediate succession,—this same Germaine would stand by the hour with bated breath, completely and entirely happy in turning over pages. Sometimes he would drop the books upon her toes, and sometimes he would not, and generally he would turn over the page of music at the wrong moment,—in either case he was very much in the way, but so eager to do right, and so penitent after doing wrong, that no one would have had the heart to discard his assistance. At any rate Miss Epperton had not.

On the present occasion Germaine had begun by breaking a crystal flower-trough, and had followed this up by sitting down in a basket full of geraniums, so perhaps it was no wonder if the process of table-decoration occupied rather more time than the filling of a few vases and the disposition of a few ferns generally requires.

"It is all I can do to make the table even decent to look at," said Maud, trying with her fingers to impart a little straightness to a battered verbena. "Just look at these little bits of wreck! Lord Germaine, don't you think that, instead of standing in my light, you might make yourself useful?"

"But I thought I was being useful," said Germaine, opening his eyes a little wider.

His present phase of usefulness consisted in sitting on the edge of the table and plunging his two hands alternately into the basket of cut flowers. "I thought I had done a great deal already."

“So you have: you have broken one glass trough, and chipped another; also you have put an end to most of the geraniums, and you are at this moment pulling to pieces the one cherished moss-rose which I had destined for the centre-piece, and in one other minute you will have brought the table-cloth down and scattered my fern-mosaic to the four winds of heaven.”

“I am *awfully* sorry,” said Germaine, plunging to his feet, and dropping the moss-rose as though it had been a hot cinder. “Can I do anything else for you? Shall I carry all the troughs back to the sideboard? or empty out all the baskets, or something? Or,” more doubtfully, “are you going to send me to gather flowers? Please don’t; you know I always pull them the wrong length.”

“No,” she laughed, “I shall not set you to gathering flowers again in a hurry. Take these scissors, please, and take this basket of verbena,—so.”

“What am I to do to them?” asked Germaine, gazing at the verbena with the eye of a man who is prepared to go to any extremity.

“Do exactly as I tell you. You are to clip off the spoilt flowers, and leave only the good ones. Do you see?”

“All right; I shall do exactly as you tell me,” and Germaine began fervently and energetically to make the scissors click.

“If I were not so abjectly afraid of that head-gardener,” said Maud, “I would have made another excursion to the flower-beds. You have got such an extraordinarily grim set of family retainers about you,

—they look as if none of them had been in the place under forty years.”

“Forty years!” repeated Germaine, with a stare. “Why, some of the housemaids are quite young.”

“I daresay,” laughed Maud; “of course it is only a *façon de parler*.” She had found already that Germaine was sometimes a little stolid and literal in his way of taking up a passing remark.

“What is a *façon de parler*?” he asked.

“Oh, it is a sort of loose general assertion that is not meant to bear dissection. Don’t you see?”

Any one else would have said “I see,” whether they saw or not; but Germaine did not quite see, and so held his tongue and vigorously slashed away at the verbena.

“But about the forty years,” he began presently; “there is Jemima, for instance, the kitchen-maid, forty years ago her mother may not even have been born.”

“Mercy!” cried Maud, laughingly putting her hands to her ears. “I concede everything; my forty years were selected quite at random. Perhaps there is not a servant in the house who has been here so long.”

“Oh yes, there is; there is Adam. He has been with us more than forty years, almost fifty, I think. He is a capital old fellow.”

“I have no doubt of it; but that particular class of capital old fellow is a little terrifying. Ever since I heard the details of his family history, I have quailed before Adam’s eye.”

“Why?” asked Germaine.

“Just think of the icy rigidity of a man who, without a pang or a struggle, could turn his wife out of the house, and refuse ever to see her face again.”

"But," said Germaine, "she had behaved atrociously—she had deceived him."

"I know; but think how young they both were. She was a mere child, it seems. Would he not be quite the upright man he now is, even if he had had the amiable weakness to forgive her?"

"Forgive her! Do you mean taking her back and trusting her again? Is that what you mean by forgiving her?"

"I mean not condemning an ignorant creature to life-long misery and degradation, because, dazzled by childish vanity, she had begun by making a fatal mistake. Don't you understand?"

"No, I don't understand. It was not a mistake; it was a downright acted lie. And how could she be more degraded than she was already by that lie?"

"A lie? Yes; but who is to throw the first stone at the liar? I suppose the people who tell the white lies think themselves entitled to throw stones at the people who tell the black ones."

"Then there are the people who don't tell lies at all."

"Dear me!" said Maud, with a thrill of uneasiness. "Do you really believe in those people?"

"I should think I do," said Germaine, stoutly, "and you are one of them yourself; you know you are."

Maud laughed a little loudly and unnaturally.

"You are wrong, Lord Germaine. I remember telling a most shocking fib on my fifth birthday. It was something connected with strawberry-jam and my aunt's store-cupboard."

Germaine looked genuinely distressed. "I am so

sorry," he murmured; but after a moment he brightened, and added: "But I am so glad that you were only five years old; and then you were a girl. I wonder what my father would have done if I had told a fib about strawberry-jam? I daresay he would have beaten me, even on my birthday."

"Truth-speaking is one of his hobbies, is it not?" said Maud, rather absently.

"Hobbies?" repeated Germaine.

"That is again a *façon de parler*," and Maud gave a little start. Germaine's complete subjection to her will and undisguised adoration had the effect of occasionally throwing her off her guard; but, oddly enough, there were moments when his steady pertinacity in taking up a word, and his persistency in following up an idea, had caused her almost some embarrassment. In such moments her mind would be touched by the passing question as to whether, for all the clearness of his big blue eyes, and for all the infantine candour of his smile, she had quite measured the height or quite sounded the depth of this boyish giant's nature?

"Scotch truthfulness is proverbial," she said rather hurriedly; "and yet in this very case did not your father act as intercessor?"

"My father has got fits of being soft-hearted."

"And you," asked Maud, "have you got fits of being hard-hearted?" She smiled at her own question; this curly-haired boy looked so much more soft-hearted than the irritable old Earl.

"Well, I don't know; but I think Adam was in the right that time, and my father in the wrong. Look, Miss Epperton, I have done the flowers."

"Yes," said Maud, gazing rather dreamily at the heap on the table, "I see that you have done them,—in fact you have done for them. There are next to nothing but stalks here."

"I cut off all the spoilt ones," said Germaine—"you told me to. I took great trouble to do the thing thoroughly."

"Yes; and as about nine-tenths of the flowers were more or less spoilt, you took me at my word and left me just the one-tenth which is not. Do you always do everything as thoroughly as this, Lord Germaine?" and Maud held up three inches of stalk, from which Germaine's merciless scissors had clipped all but one solitary pink star.

"Have I done it all wrong again?" he asked humbly.

"You have dispensed rather stern justice, that is all;" and then for a minute Maud was silent, slowly turning over the wrecks of the verbena. "Did he love her, I wonder?" she suddenly observed.

"Who?" asked Germaine. This time it was Maud whose thoughts were tenaciously clinging to a subject supposed to be put aside.

"Adam. Did he love the girl he married? That destroying angel whose favoured victim he was?"

"Molly? Adam was just wild about her, I believe."

"And yet he consented never to see her face again. Oh, why could he not have given her one other chance? Perhaps she loved him. She may have been vile in everything else,—she must have been vile; but if she loved him—just think, if she loved him! Perhaps he

could have saved her from herself; even if she was false to others she might have been true to him."

Maud broke off abruptly, and tried to smile away the tears that had sprung so suddenly to her eyes. She had spoken much more vehemently than she was aware of, and, but for the wonder on Germaine's face, she might have said more. How could he know that it was not the case of the long-dead fisher-girl that she was pleading? How could he guess that, in a dim and indistinct way, she felt as though she were pleading her own; and that what made her cheek flush now and her eye glisten was a craving scarcely understood by herself—a positive hunger to hear from his lips some sentence less stern to the guilt of falsehood than that which he had already pronounced! Germaine saw only that she was deeply moved by what he explained to himself as a divine tenderness of womanly compassion, and he saw also that this emotion made her look more lovely than he had ever seen her look. Not even as Cleopatra had she been quite as beautiful as this, for as Cleopatra she had had no tears in her eyes.

"I am talking nonsense," Maud was saying, quickly. "Of course you cannot understand me. I was sorry for the girl, that is all."

"Why should I not understand you?" said Germaine. He had grown rather pale, and his heart was thumping almost audibly under his shooting-jacket. "I know that good women feel for each other, but I did not know that good women feel so much for bad ones; it can only be because you are so—so extra-good," said

Germaine, bashfully yet resolutely coining a word for the occasion.

"Don't speak like that," said Maud, quickly; and at that moment it struck her that it would be but a small thing to give up all her chances in life in order to make herself into the sort of woman which Germaine so obstinately took her to be. Yet in the very height of the sensation she clearly understood that it was but a momentary madness—a passing "fit of the virtues," and that she never had been that woman, and never would be.

"You are always telling me not to speak," burst out Germaine; "you are always stopping me and turning off the subject, and just when I am about to say——"

"When you are about to say what?" asked Maud, faintly. It had become clear to her all at once that somehow the crisis was reached, and that Germaine was going to declare his love, and ask her to become his wife. To her great surprise, she discovered that she was trembling—actually trembling; she, Maud Epperton, who had heard this same question from so many lips, which, unfortunately, had been the lips of ineligible men—men without fortunes and without titles. But though she trembled, Maud was yet cool enough to glance rapidly over the situation, and put to herself the question, "Is this the moment? May he speak?" The answer was, "Yes, he may speak." There was nothing to be gained by further delay, and there were some things that might be lost. The marvel was that she had been able to proceed thus far unmolested; and though as yet, thanks to her own discretion, his

simple-minded relatives regarded Germaine's infatuation merely as a harmless boyish malady, still any day might betray her own motives a little too early. Therefore Maud said to herself, "Yes, he may speak."

"I won't be stopped any more," Germaine was hotly declaring. "You know what I want to say; it is nothing particular," he stammered, rosy-red now as a schoolgirl, and tugging away at an unhappy button,— "at least it is only that I—no, that you are the most beautiful and the most perfect woman in the world, and that I love you more than all the rest of the world put together, and that you—no, that I——"

"Hush!" said Maud, sharply turning her head, "what is that?"

"Nothing; I suppose you want to put me off again?"

"No, I don't; indeed I don't; but there is some one calling," and just then Lord Kippendale's voice was heard again shouting for Germaine. "Something has happened," said Maud, just as Lady Baby had said to herself. "Something has happened. Lord Germaine, you must go."

Germaine was at the door already. "Wait for me here," he called back, with a glance of desperate entreaty. "I daresay it is nothing particular, and I shall be back directly. If you mean to be good to me, wait for me here!"

And Maud must have meant to be good to him, for she waited. This time the interruption was not of her making, and her foot tapped the floor impatiently as she sat there in the big empty dining-room with the half-filled flower-troughs around her. But, though she waited very long, Germaine did not come back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE "BLUE-BELLS."

"I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore."

"I DON'T believe a word of it," said Lord Kippendale, standing with the open telegram in his hand. "Drowned? Eh? What's drowned? What's drowned? I've heard of men drowning; but as for drowned mines, it altogether beats me. Eh? What's it all about?"

"Papa," said Lady Baby, who, curiously enough, felt more relieved than aghast, "I think it means that the sea has somehow or other got into the mines."

"Which is as much as to say that the mines are swamped," said Nicky, who on the whole was the most practical member of the family.

"Swamped? Nonsense! Why can't they get the water out again by the way it came in?"

"I don't know," said Nicky,—“perhaps they can; but this telegram looks ugly. Captain John wouldn't telegraph without reason.”

"No, I suppose he wouldn't,—not that telegraphing at all is much good. Surely Captain John can manage the pumping out, or whatever it is, without me."

"But," said Nicky, "there may be the whole sea to pump out, in which case——"

"In which case," said Lord Kippendale, testily, "I certainly should not be of more use than he."

No one quite grasped what really would be the consequence of the case suggested by Nicky. They were all rather stunned and stupefied, and on the

whole more bewildered than panic-stricken. Gullyscoombe and the Gullyscoombe mines had always been such a distant thing to their minds, that it was impossible in one moment to realise the full weight of what had happened, or even thoroughly to understand it. With the exception of Lord Kippendale, they none of them had so much as seen closely a mine of any sort; and if Agnes or Lady Baby had been asked off-hand for their definition of the article, they probably would have described it in a general sort of way as a hole in the ground which occasionally collapsed and occasionally exploded, and where unfortunate miners sometimes got suffocated and sometimes got their necks broken. Also they understood that mining as an occupation was dirty and untidy work, but exceedingly lucrative to the people on whose estates these untidy holes were situated. To both Agnes and Lady Baby it appeared a comparatively simple matter to get the water out of the hole by the way it had gone in.

“And they seem to expect an answer,” said Lord Kippendale, taking up the telegram again; “they ask what they are to do, as if I could tell them! I have never known Captain John to be so helpless before,—holloa!” and he stopped short suddenly, and stared at the paper; “the telegram isn’t from Captain John at all, it’s from one of the foremen. What’s the meaning of this?”

What indeed could be the meaning of it? they all asked themselves, with a distinct increase of alarm. This was the first question to be settled, and now that it was suggested, Lord Kippendale was on thorns already to have it answered. An inquiry was wired to

Gullyscoombe, but it was not till towards the end of dinner that the butler brought in another orange envelope on a salver.

During the whole afternoon Lord Kippendale had shown himself loudly confident and sanguine, but his hand was shaking a little as he cut the envelope. They all watched him intently as he read, but he had scarcely glanced at the paper when he rose to his feet and looked about him with a shocked and perplexed air. The others rose instinctively, and asked, "What is it? Is it from Captain John?"

"No," said the Earl, "it is not from Captain John. Captain John is killed—drowned in the mine." He dropped the telegram and sank back in his chair, and then they all stood for a moment and looked helplessly into each other's faces.

For now the panic had seized them, now only they began to realise what had occurred. Captain John's death was something far more distinct and palpable than the swamping of all the mines in Christendom. This brought the blow home as nothing else could have done, and it was from this moment only that the catastrophe began to be recognised as such. Captain John's death had supplied the standard by which to measure it.

No one seemed inclined to finish dinner, and presently they were all in the drawing-room, a little pale, a little agitated, some of them subdued and others excited, giving out opinions, making suggestions, surmising, commenting, and throwing out questions, as people do in these moments of bewilderment, without stopping to wait for the answers.

"It is quite evident that they have all lost their heads without Captain John," said Lord Kippendale, desperately pacing the room. "I am not a mining engineer, but I shall have to send one down, I suppose. Something will have to be done, and I shall have to see Reid" (Reid was Lord Kippendale's man of business). "Good heavens! there will be no end of a bother. Craigtoun, see that a groom is mounted immediately—there will be half-a-dozen telegrams to send off; and look here, some of you girls come and help me," and seizing on a lighted bedroom candle, Lord Kippendale dashed off to his writing-room, and became almost happy in inditing telegraphic messages, for telegraphing was ever to him a congenial occupation.

There was nothing like connected conversation or social intercourse that evening; the butler was discussing matters with the upper-footman in the servants' hall, and had forgotten to have the lamps taken to the writing-room. Lord Kippendale sat scribbling by the light of one candle; and by the light of another candle, Lady Baby, kneeling before an ottoman which she was using as a table, and feeling her brain all in a whirl, was sending peremptory messages to the Gullyscombe workmen to pump the water from the mines. Maud Epperton was silently and deftly laying ready the telegraph-forms, while her face looked quite as grave as that of any of the family; and in the drawing-room Nicky sat plunged in gloom, and Agnes gazed towards him as if for comfort, but found none.

Next day Mr. Reid came. He was a chronically startled-looking man, owing to the upward and bristly propensities of his reddish hair. He looked a great

deal more startled than usual to-day, and his face grew very long as he examined the Gullyscoombe telegrams, of which there had been several more since the previous night.

"It looks bad, very bad," said Reid.

"Then is it your opinion that the mines are lost?" asked the Earl, who would have preferred even an unfavourable verdict to this nerve-trying suspense.

"My opinion on the subject is worth nothing," explained Reid. "These telegrams look bad, but it is quite possible that in the first shock and flurry the case may be taken for worse than it is; besides, the gale is still blowing, and would naturally interfere with all attempts at rescue. It does not seem quite clear, either, how many of the mines are drowned."

"No," said Kippendale; "and it would be too preposterous to suppose that they were all three swamped together."

"But they were all in connection," observed Reid, "were they not?"

"Yes; so I understood."

Mr. Reid said nothing, but looked one degree more startled.

"Then what is to be done? Am I really expected to go down there myself and ladle out the water?"

"There will be time enough to think of going down when we have the engineer's report; that is the first step. As I understand it, these cases differ so widely in each individual instance, and depend so entirely upon accidents of the soil, that no one but a mining engineer can pronounce a verdict. But there is no cause for premature despair."

"Despair? Oh, you don't catch me at that. The sea may have locked up the 'Blue-bells,' but it can't have carried away all the copper at Gullyscoombe, you know, Reid. Though neither you nor I are mining engineers, we may be pretty sure of that, I suppose, eh? The biggest tide there ever was can't have washed Gullyscoombe clean of copper."

Mr. Reid relaxed into a smile, and said something that might pass as an agreement; but the smile was wavering and the tone doubtful, and when he got back to his office his hair was standing more than usually on end.

There passed three days of inaction and waiting. Lord Kippendale fretted and fumed, and wished ten times a-day that he had gone to Gullyscoombe himself. The first brunt of the shock was over by this time, and the rest of the family had settled down into comparative calm; for they were now at that treacherously peaceful stage when the edge of a disagreeable surprise is passed, and when ultimate consequences are not yet foreseen. As yet these consequences were mere visions of air; there was nothing that could be taken hold of and felt as a palpable result of the catastrophe. The mines at Gullyscoombe were drowned, perhaps even irretrievably drowned, but dinner was served just as punctually at Kippendale; the cream was just as thick, and the toast as well buttered at breakfast as it had ever been. Of course there were qualms and questionings; but they were put aside as being possibly uselessly self-tormenting.

At last came Mr. Grey, the engineer, with his report. It was brief to cruelty; the mines were lost.

"All?" asked Lord Kippendale, standing still and

staring hard into the face of Mr. Grey. This engineer was a man who had incidentally been employed on small jobs at Gullyscoombe, and Lord Kippendale had on this occasion walked to the station to meet him. He was a middle-aged, sensible individual, without the shadow of a characteristic about him, except just that he was middle-aged and sensible. "All? Do you mean that all are lost—all three?"

"That is what I mean. Your lordship is aware that the three Blue-bell mines were all connected underground; the drowning of the one necessarily entails the drowning of the others."

Lord Kippendale walked on for a few steps, looking like a man who has received a blow on the head.

"How was it?" he said at last, slowly. "How did they manage to get drowned at all?"

"The old story—incautious blasting."

"But Captain John was the most cautious Christian alive."

"Yes; but he is a Choughshire man, and every Choughshire man with a pick in his hand and a good lode before his eyes is a match for the devil in the matter of reckless daring. It's a fever with them; it lies in the blood. I have known of a hundred cases in point. The men tell me that the face of the roof was stuck thick with the richest copper they had ever cut, and they were a good way from the water yet. Of course the temptation was great. It was hard to leave it untouched; a little more, and then only a little more—that is the way they put it. Captain John had more than once declared that it was the last blast he would allow. Unluckily, he allowed just one too many."

"Is there any life lost besides his?" asked Lord Kippendale, with a shudder.

"No; and he need not have lost his, if it had not been for his mad attempts to save the mine. This is how it was, Lord Kippendale;" and Mr. Grey, standing still, drew two lines on the gravel with his stick. "Your lordship is aware that the passages under the sea had been worked already to a distance of from three to four hundred feet below high-water mark. Let us call this first line high-water mark, and let the next stand for low-water mark. The spot where this fatal blast took place lay a little distance—only some dozen yards—above low-water mark. The tide was out at the time, but was just beginning to rise. When, therefore, it became evident that the blast had been overcharged, and that the roof of the mine was pierced, the water, not having yet risen to this spot, did not burst in immediately in a volume, but began by sending showers from the advancing waves, which ran very high then, for you must remember that this was on Wednesday afternoon, when the gale was pretty nearly at its highest. The rent in the roof was a comparatively small one, and it appears that Captain John entertained some hopes of blocking the aperture before the tide came in. At the moment of the first alarm he was at the shaft-head. The cages came up full of men; they had given up hope at once, and made for the cages in a panic. They tell me he waited quite quietly till the last man had disembarked, and then got into the empty cage and gave the down-signal. They would have refused if they dared, but they had always been mortally afraid of him; so the cage was lowered. At the last moment,

after it was in motion, three or four of the most reckless jumped in after him. Twenty minutes later the up-signal was given, and the cage came up with all but the Captain. They were dripping wet, and they said that the Captain had refused to follow them. The cage was lowered again, but there was no signal, and it came up empty. It was only next day that the body was recovered."

Lord Kippendale was angrily switching off the heads of dandelions, and angrily blinking his eyelids. "I—I never thought the old fellow was such a fool," he angrily observed. "Why, it's just about suicide."

"Foolhardy, unquestionably, but his madness was not without a touch of method. It is even imaginable that under normal circumstances his rash attempt might have succeeded. But it is not more than half-a-dozen times in a century that the wind blows as it did on Wednesday; consequently, the rush and the force of the water were such, that long before anything efficient could be done the sea must have dashed over the aperture and torn it wide. The crust of rock, even where not broken, was naturally weakened; yards and yards of the roof must have come down. It is impossible to say how many, but it is quite certain that the damage extends to far below low-water mark."

"Which means?" asked Lord Kippendale, staring blankly at the two lines on the gravel.

"Which means simply that every shilling spent in attempting to save the 'Blue-bells' would be just as advantageously laid out if made up into paper parcels and dropped into the sea. The miners have recognised this fact, and the consequence is that there are nothing

but long faces about. It is really rather appalling to contemplate how many men have been thrown out of work by that blast."

Lord Kippendale looked away with a groan. He had almost forgotten that, though he was the chief sufferer, he was not the only one. Then, pulling himself together, he began to ask spasmodic questions—questions which had been asked already, and answered too, but which the engineer answered again with professional patience and professional directness. When the engine was mentioned, the professional man smiled a little.

"I stopped the engine. It had been working at high pressure for forty-eight hours, and the water had not fallen by the eighth of an inch."

"And yet the copper is there!" cried Lord Kippendale, frantically; "tons and tons of it. Copper doesn't melt like sugar, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is there," replied the engineer, deferentially but drily; "tons and tons of it, as your lordship says; but you will never bring another ounce of it to grass. I have my detailed report by me, if you wish to have it submitted to you,"—Lord Kippendale made a gesture of agonised deprecation;—"but, in point of fact, the matter resolves itself into the four words that I began with: the mines are lost."

Again Lord Kippendale walked on unsteadily.

"Then," he began, speaking with unwonted slowness, "what is the next thing?"

"The next thing, in my opinion, is to survey the rest of the estate for whatever mineral may be beneath its surface. There seems to be a very general belief

at Gullyscoombe that a second vein of copper does exist, and that it is workable; but my time was so short, and my investigation so hurried, that I failed to gather any accurate information on the subject."

"Well, there is Swan's copper, of course," said Lord Kippendale, speaking still like a man half-dazed.

"Christopher Swan?"

"Yes. How do you happen to know his name? He has been dead these thirty and odd years."

"I heard his name at Gullyscoombe. When I explained to them that the 'Blue-bells' were quite as dead as their poor old captain, they said just what your lordship has said—'Well, there's always Swan's copper.' And then I inquired what was meant, and they told me."

"I thought there would be a way out of it somewhere," said Lord Kippendale, beginning to pluck up a little of his spirit. "We'll transplant the machinery, and open the new vein, and call it Wheal Swan; upon my word, we will. Yes, that's the very name—Wheal Swan. Capital idea that! eh?" and Lord Kippendale, very much tickled at his own inspiration, indulged in a genuine laugh; and there is no saying whether, in that hopeful moment, he did not prophetically see the pick-axes gleam, and prophetically hear the buckets swing in that newly christened Wheal Swan of the future.

Mr. Grey did not seem nearly so much tickled by Lord Kippendale's idea as was Lord Kippendale himself.

"Does your lordship not think," he observed respectfully, "that before we make up our minds about cooking our hare, we had better first catch it?"

"Bless me! that can't be very hard surely; every one seems pretty certain that Swan's copper is there."

"Yes; but every one seems equally uncertain as to where it should be looked for. As I told your lordship, I have hitherto failed to ascertain anything beyond——"

"Yes, yes, so you told me; but that's no reason why you should go on failing. If the thing has ever been there, it's there still, unless the pixies have wished it away. It can only be a matter of time and money. I shall go down by to-night's mail. I have had enough of sitting here with my hands tied, and getting information in spoonfuls."

And accordingly, that same evening Lord Kippendale started for Gullyscoombe.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAUD MAKES HERSELF USEFUL.

"I could heartily wish this had not befallen; but, since it is as it is, mend it for your own good."

THE whole party came to the doorsteps to see Lord Kippendale off, gazed rather sadly after the departing carriage, and retreated rather silently from the door when it had disappeared. As Maud Epperton was in the act of turning, she perceived that Lord Germaine was hovering about undecidedly, while his eyes, wistful and interrogative, were fixed upon her face.

"Have you any books to arrange in the library?" he diffidently inquired. "Or don't you think that the flowers in the dining-room want changing?"

"I—I don't think so; I am not quite sure," said

Maud, a little incoherently. "I have to see about something in my room first," and without looking into his face she turned and mounted the stairs. She mounted slowly until she was out of sight; but once in the long passage above she broke into a run, and with one panic-stricken look across her shoulder, flew swiftly along till she reached her own door, which having entered, she hastily closed and locked almost as though she feared that Germaine would follow even here.

"It must not be—it must not be," she panted, sinking on to a chair. "It cannot be now; I must wait."

This was not the first time that Maud had flown thus to the privacy of her room. For the last few days she had been continually on the strain, and it had taken all her ingenuity to avoid those *tête-à-têtes* with Germaine which formerly she had been equally ingenious in contriving. For, the first excitement of the catastrophe having subsided, it had become patent to Maud that Germaine, in the guilelessness of his twenty-three-year-old heart, fully intended to take up the thread of their last discourse exactly where it had been dropped. The idea that their relations to each other were to be in any way changed by reason of the catastrophe, appeared not to have dawned in his mind. But it had dawned long since in the mind of Maud. Even before the advent of the engineer with his report, the plain word *ruin* had commended itself to her most careful consideration.

Now it does not necessarily imply that a woman is absolutely heartless and entirely worldly, because she very distinctly sees how foolish it would be for a penniless girl to pledge her faith to a ruined man; it only

implies that she is very sensible. And in this way Maud was sensible. Until some light fell on the future of Germaine, she felt that it would be madness to listen to his addresses. This state of uncertainty could not last long, and absolutely her only course now was to adopt the tactics of evasion. The simplest solution of the difficulty appeared to lie in flight; there could be no doubt that a temporary withdrawal from the scene would relieve the worst of the tension. But here two difficulties presented themselves. In the first place, Maud did not know how to effect a flight without appearing to abandon her friends in their trouble. And in the second place,—ah yes! it was this second place that after all was the rub,—in the second place, where, in the name of all that is homeless and penniless in this wide world, *where* was Maud to fly to?

Sitting in her room to-night, she passed the entire string of her acquaintances in review; but at each member of the imaginary procession as it marched past she despondently shook her head. It was the worst possible moment for offering visits in any quarter. At this stage of the season country-houses were empty, and town-houses were packed to their last available inch. No; rack her brain as she liked, Maud could think of no roof under which she might propose to lay her head. There was always Brackton, of course, but that meant despair—despair and an unpaid rent next quarter. But problems of this sort are occasionally solved overnight.

Soon after luncheon next day Lady Euphrosyne was announced. She had come over to pay a visit, half of condolence and half of inquiry. Reports of the family misfortune had, of course, reached her, but they

were hazy and contradictory, and Lady Euphrosyne could not rest until she had learnt the truth. There was also a second point on which her soul was plunged in perplexing doubt, a doubt composed of hopes and fears, and the combination of this general incertitude turned her normal composure into tremulous agitation.

Lady Baby and Maud were both in the drawing-room. At the sound of the visitor's name, Lady Baby's face grew rather white, but she advanced with resolution to do her duty as hostess.

"I am so sorry to hear that your father is gone," said Lady Euphrosyne, retaining the small limp hand rather longer than was her wont, while her faint eyes gazed almost eagerly into the girl's face. "I suppose he had to go about this wretched mine business; I hope, I really hope that matters may not be so bad as they appear." This was expressed with an approach to fervour so obviously genuine that both Maud and Lady Baby gazed in surprise. "Of course, I could not keep away when I heard such bad news," went on Lady Euphrosyne, still scrutinising the face before her; "I made a point of driving over, even though half my correspondence has been left unanswered. I felt far too anxious to sit at my writing-table. And then as to Peter; I am devoured by anxiety about Peter—I cannot imagine what has taken him from home so suddenly; but no doubt you can enlighten me?"

"Is Sir Peter not at Nolesworth?" The question was put by Maud. Lady Baby said nothing, but her great blue eyes were devouring Lady Euphrosyne's face.

"No, he is not," said Lady Euphrosyne; "he went off in the most inexplicable way—to London, it appears.

It must have been something pressing, but of course Frances knows all about it. Ah!" with an apparent inspiration, "perhaps he has gone on special service? You have given him some commission in London? Has he not perchance been intrusted with the choice of an artistic bonnet?"

Lady Euphrosyne did not often make jokes, and those that she did make were rarely successful.

"I have given him no commission," said Lady Baby; "I——"

"No? But what account does he give of himself in his letters?"

For one minute longer Lady Baby continued to stare rather wildly into her visitor's face, then abruptly tearing herself away, she turned unceremoniously and burst from the room.

Lady Euphrosyne looked after her in such agitation that she dropped her card-case. As she turned to pick it up, Maud Epperton held it towards her.

"Dear Miss Epperton," began Lady Euphrosyne, in a still unsteady voice, for her nerves were very far from having regained their balance, "can you explain? What is it all about? What does it mean? This conduct is so exceedingly strange, so entirely contrary to all custom."

"I am as ignorant as yourself," said Maud, thoughtfully drawing her black brows together. Immersed as she had been in her own personal dilemma, Maud had never thought of puzzling herself over Sir Peter's prolonged absence, but at Lady Euphrosyne's question her curiosity was stirred.

"What?" cried Lady Euphrosyne—"living in the

same house with her? Do you know nothing? Has there been no explanation?"

"Of what?"

"Why, of Peter's departure. Has there been any—any little difference between them, do you think?"

"Not that I know of; and I don't think the rest of the family know any more than I do."

"And yet it is quite clear that something is wrong between them."

"Yes, it is quite clear that something is wrong," acquiesced Maud.

"I wonder that her father has not moved in the matter—it is a week now since Peter's departure; ah, but, to be sure, *what* a week!" cried Lady Euphrosyne, answering herself—"it must indeed have been terrible! You were in the thick of it, of course, Miss Epperton—you must know all about it; tell me—it is only natural that I should be concerned, you know—tell me what is the extent of the misfortune? Will they be—will they be—absolutely ruined?"

"I trust not," said Maud, quickly; "but I fear, I fear very much, that they will be seriously impoverished,—at any rate for a time."

"That is bad enough, quite bad enough!" cried Lady Euphrosyne, nervously fingering her parasol. Maud was watching her curiously. "Excuse me, Lady Euphrosyne," she said, after a moment, "but, after all, it cannot affect Sir Peter very much."

"Not affect him?" repeated Lady Euphrosyne, thrown off her guard. "Oh, you don't know Peter. Why, a misfortune of this sort is the very thing to bring him back to her feet,—supposing that they are

at this moment estranged, as I have every reason for trust—for believing," she finished.

Maud said nothing, but gazed with an expressionless face at the carpet. Lady Euphrosyne took instant fright, and began to ask herself what she had said, and whether she had better unsay it, or say it a little more distinctly. For a minute she stood quite helpless before Maud. It was wonderful how very small the great woman of society became in face of even this trifling emergency. Her studies of life had been all in one direction; she knew the right way of entering and leaving a drawing-room; she could have sent in a roomful of mixed guests to dinner without giving even the most susceptible among them cause for feeling himself slighted; but as to deciding a question like the present, she was as helpless as the most inexperienced bride whom she had ever assisted through the ordeal of her first dinner-party.

"Don't you see," she tremulously resumed, having come to a sort of wavering conclusion that she had gone too far to retreat, and speaking, therefore, in a tone of ostentatious frankness—"don't you see, I never could bring myself to approve of this engagement. I am convinced that this marriage would be Peter's undoing. Peter, though he is young in years, has quite the ways and the ideas of an older man; and just look at this child with her sixteen years—or is it seventeen? And her wilfulness and her whims? How could she possibly make him happy? Don't you see what I mean? You are so sensible, dear Miss Epperton. I am quite sure you see what I mean."

And Maud saw what she meant; in fact it was not

difficult to see. Lady Euphrosyne's pet scheme of keeping Sir Peter unmarried was an open secret to the world. And by this stage of the conversation Miss Epperton saw through and through the experienced woman of society opposite her, just as though she had been a figure cut in clear glass. For a moment her beautiful upper lip curled, as it were, in faint contempt; this new suavity of Lady Euphrosyne's tone had in it something almost sickening; the eager glimmer in the pale-blue eyes seemed to Maud more repulsive than the most steely glance that had ever fallen from them to confuse and confound the most luckless blunderer in the mysteries of etiquette. But why? Wherefore? Maud asked herself rapidly, even as she mentally recoiled, whence was this sugar-sweetness taken? From what was this glimmer struck? Obviously something was to be gained; was it her help? Could it be in the character of an instrument that Lady Euphrosyne was wooing her thus condescendingly? An indignant answer trembled on Maud's lips; it was all but spoken, when suddenly, as in a flash, she saw her chance. In the pale-blue eyes before her she read the answer to the problem of last night. "Keep friends with Lady Euphrosyne," her common-sense said within her—"keep friends with Lady Euphrosyne; go the length, if necessary, of letting her believe that she has found her instrument. Make yourself, or allow her to fancy that you are making yourself useful—either will do, and here is the roof you want over your head. Keep your wits together. Of what good will it be to any one—of what good even to your friend Lady Baby—if you flare up in a fine flash of virtue, and stamp your foot

at Sir Peter's step-mother?" All this passed through Maud's mind very quickly, and instead of the indignant words which had trembled on her lips, she made some answer evasive enough to soothe her own conscience, yet encouraging enough to induce Lady Euphrosyne to proceed. And Lady Euphrosyne did proceed, as Maud had rightly surmised. What the elder lady chiefly yearned for at this critical juncture was a confidante on whom to lean. Though her acquaintance with the girl was but superficial, yet it had existed for years. And, if report spoke true, Miss Epperton's discretion and skill were always to be counted on.

"And don't you see," went on Lady Euphrosyne, as she warmed to this idea—"don't you see that, of course, I am very anxious to ascertain the state of the case? but it looks so rude to ask point-blank—such very bad taste—and there is nothing I abominate so much as anything in bad taste; *cela ne se fait pas*, you know."

"If you are very anxious about it," said Maud, quietly—"and after all, you have a right to know—I daresay I could find out for you, without asking point-blank. I suppose that would be in good taste; *cela se fait*, does it not?"

The question was put with that air of referring to the decision of a final court that Lady Euphrosyne loved so dearly. If there was a slight twitch at the corners of Maud's mouth, Lady Euphrosyne did not see it, and Maud knew perfectly well that she could afford the luxury of that twitch.

"Naturally, of course, there would be no objection to that," answered Lady Euphrosyne, still with that un-

wanted eagerness. She had quite forgotten to be exhausted to-day. It was delightful to be met thus halfway in her wishes, and she thought she must have been very clever to have manœuvred so quickly to this point. "It is very kind of you, Miss Epperton, to undertake it. I am sure you will use all your tact in—procuring me the information which, as you justly observe, I have, of course, the right to possess. I have always heard that you have a great deal of tact for your age." For a moment the tone of serene patronage reappeared; but Maud, unlike Lady Baby, was used to being patronised, and she could bear it quite well. "And if there is anything decisive to be communicated, you might send me a little note, or come over to see me. I shall always be very glad to see you, Miss Epperton. I don't think I ever saw enough of you in London; I must try and manage to see more of you in future. I shall make an effort,—the spectacle of a young person who has both tact and taste, and who respects *les convenances*, is so very gratifying, but, alas! so rare."

"You do me too much honour," said Maud, with a smile which was perfectly sincere—for was not the refuge she coveted growing more distinct every moment?

Lady Euphrosyne gave an affectionate squeeze to Maud's hand. She was quite fascinated by the girl. That little speech about doing too much honour might have come straight from a printed treatise on the manners of good society.

"*Au revoir*," she said, as she moved to the door "and if you *do* let me have a little note, Miss Epperton, please don't forget to mention what news there is about

that dreadful place down there with the mines. I pray to Heaven that our friends may not be beggared!" cried Lady Euphrosyne, with a return of the fervent mood; "for the very next thing to happen then would be Peter coming back to offer his fortune as a stopgap."

"I suppose so," said Maud, thoughtfully; "but I wonder——"

"What do you wonder, dear Miss Epperton?"

"I wonder whether it would be taken."

Lady Euphrosyne stared a little.

"Not taken? What common-sense would there be in refusing it?"

"Not much, I confess; but, great heavens! Lady Euphrosyne," cried Maud, in one of those impulses which sometimes overpowered her, "after all, there are a few other things in the world besides common-sense. There is pride, for instance."

"I suppose there is," said Lady Euphrosyne, doubtfully. "Yes, I suppose there is pride," she repeated in a rather more hopeful tone; and having once more slightly pressed Maud's hand, she departed, meditating deeply upon this new idea, and cheered by the consciousness that she had established a secret communication with the heart of the citadel. Miss Epperton would be quite as useful as a professional spy, or even as an underground passage.

It was not till two days later that Maud found the opportunity of taking her first step in Lady Euphrosyne's service. This was during a late afternoon walk which the two girls were taking together in the park. That morning Lord Kippendale had telegraphed that he would be home by night. There was no other news in the

telegram. He did not say how his business as Gully-scoombe had sped.

The gale had blown for more than a week, but now at last the winds had gone back to their caverns, and every leaf hung motionless. Signs of the ravage were visible everywhere. There were bald crowns and bare branches where the trees had stood most exposed; the beeches and lime-trees drooped wearily, as though worn out with the long buffeting; the dog-roses in the hedges had been torn to pieces, and the long grass hung full of their scattered pink petals; brackens and lady-fern were dashed and tangled into mud-soiled clumps; the very daisies and buttercups all lay with their heads in one direction, all blown one way, with as little spirit to rise again as though they still felt the iron yoke upon their necks.

"They have not got over their fright yet," said Maud, as she stooped to gather some of the crouching daisies. "Poor things! don't they look like whipped children that are still in disgrace? Look at all their poor little noses turned to the wall!"

"It is very stupid of them to lie down in that way," said Lady Baby indifferently; "things that lie down only get trodden on."

"But things that stand up sometimes get knocked down. You can't expect a daisy to rise in armed rebellion like a piece of prickly furze; it would be out of character."

"Then I am glad I am not a daisy. Life would not be worth living if one were expected to lie down and be meek, and if there were no way of letting out one's temper at intervals."

"Take care!" said Maud, laughing; "you really should not let it out so violently. A golden-haired vixen is an anomaly; it does not answer, I assure you. In order to regulate your temper artistically, you require to consult the colour of your hair. The darker your hair is the more temper you can afford to have. If you are very fair-haired, you are bound to be an angel; but if your hair is black, you are welcome to be a demon. There! That's the system in a nutshell," added Maud, gaily. "I make you a present of it for whatever it is worth. It sounds almost like one of Sir Peter's theories about artistic necessities, does it not?" As she introduced the name Maud glanced obliquely at her companion—for she had a little private curiosity of her own to satisfy, quite apart from Lady Euphrosyne's mission. There was no need of deep scrutiny here; the brilliant colour that sprang to Lady Baby's cheek could not have escaped the must cursory observation.

"Sir Peter has got some very ridiculous theories," she observed, pointedly, turning away her head.

"She talks of him as *Sir Peter*," reflected Maud, making her first note.

"Artists generally are a little peculiar," she said aloud, "or, as some people put it, ridiculous; but even the most peculiar artists cannot expect to be always agreed with."

"I don't know about other artists," said Lady Baby, rather hotly; "but I know that Sir Peter does not care one bit as to whether I agree with him or not—he does not care one bit about any thing I do."

"Oh, you don't quite mean that; you can't mean that, surely?"

"Don't I?" said Lady Baby; "I do." She had been fighting her battle within the locked chambers of her heart for a week past; she thought herself quite strong enough to do without advisers, and yet, before she was aware of what she was about, she had, at the very first invitation, put the key in the lock, and was letting the door stand ajar.

"But surely you have not been quarrelling about any of these ridiculous notions—I mean his theories, his peculiarities?"

"Of course not," she said disdainfully. "We have not quarrelled at all, but only I have sent him away—for the present. I have considered it better that we should not see each other again—for a time." She did not mean to let Maud know that her engagement was broken off; in point of fact she did not consider that it was irretrievably broken,—she did not intend to let that inner door stand further open than just ajar, but neither did she know that Maud Epperton's eyes could look round corners.

"Of course," she went on to explain, "one can't always agree; and he has such a way of taking things quietly. I can't stand that,—I mean he requires to be broken of the habit."

"And in order to break him of the habit you have sent him away. How long is he to be kept in disgrace?"

"Until he asks my pardon, of course!" flashed out Lady Baby, regardless of consequences.

"And are you quite sure that it will not be the other way?" asked Maud, with a flicker of slyness in her smile.

"What other way?"

"Are you quite sure that it will not be you who have to ask his?" A retrospective glance at many incidents of Mr. Carbury's last visit had enabled Maud correctly to construe the phrase about Sir Peter taking things quietly.

"I ask *his* pardon!" said Lady Baby, putting up her head and breathing rather fast; "I should like to know what for? I would rather never see him again than ask his pardon."

"She is as proud as a young Satan and as obstinate as a mule," said Miss Epperton to herself. "I believe that if she wanted to get to the other side of a stone wall, and there was an open doorway before her eyes, she would find it preferable to put down her head and dash her skull to shivers, rather than take her passage at any spot but the one on which she had fixed her mind."

"Well, to be sure," she said presently, "matters will most likely not come to that extreme; it will not be a question of asking pardon, but a question of hurrying back to give sympathy in this new trouble." But, even as she said it, it struck Maud that Sir Peter could scarcely be described as "hurrying" himself with this object.

"Ah! you think so too? Yes, I am quite sure the news will bring him back, and I shall be so glad." She broke off and bit her lip, as having said too much.

"Yes, I suppose you will be glad, doubly glad, at this crisis."

"Why doubly?"

Maud kept her eyes fixed on the distant hills. She

knew quite well that that *doubly* had been faintly emphasised, and she knew quite well the reason why. There could be no doubt that the little germ of curiosity first awakened by Lady Euphrosyne's surmises had grown very much more lively during the last two days. Questions of this sort always interested Maud. Unable herself to afford the luxury of being proud, she liked studying the quality in others. It would have interested her greatly to ascertain whether her estimate of the Bevans' character was correct, and to measure to what length exactly the folly of pride could be pushed. But Lady Baby's stare disconcerted her, and it was almost with a little confusion that she hastened to point out that, of course, at a juncture like the present, the more friends one had the better it must be, and Sir Peter in his position towards them would naturally be more to be counted on than a mere friend, &c., &c.; out of all of which, however, Maud's curiosity got not even the shadow of a satisfaction, for the reason that Lady Baby never once comprehended that she was being sounded. The question which just now was present in Maud's mind lay such miles and miles out of her own range of thoughts, that it would take a much broader allusion to bring it within her notice. Her blue eyes looked almost stupid in their utter want of understanding. All that she felt was that there was something in Maud's words which she somehow failed to grasp—something that might perhaps be turned over and examined at leisure.

She asked for no further explanation at present, for by this time they were traversing the stable-yard on their way to the back entrance. In the middle of the

yard stood the dogcart from which the horse was just being led.

"What? Is it so late?" said Lady Baby; "they have been to the station already. Papa must be back. Adam!"

A younger groom put his head up over the dogcart to explain that Adam was at the house. His lordship had sent for him directly he returned.

"What can he want Adam for?" said Lady Baby—"he is not a mining engineer;" and with aroused curiosity the two girls hurried to the house.

CHAPTER XX.

SUSPENSE.

"One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow."

LADY BABY went straight across the hall to the door of her father's writing-room and opened it. Lord Kippendale sat leaning back in his leather arm-chair, which he had pushed from the table. He looked flushed and heated. The dust of travel was upon his coat, and his white hair tumbled about his forehead showed how hurriedly the hat had been thrown off. Exactly in the middle of the room stood Adam, as upright and as rigid as his rheumatic limbs would allow him, quavering out some sentence which broke off short at the opening of the door.

"It's all right, Maud; come in," said Lady Baby to Miss Epperton, who had followed thus far, but now drew back at sight of what looked like a strictly private conference. "Papa, Maud can come in, can't she?"

“By all means,” said the Earl, with a sort of fictitious and querulous briskness; “by all manner of means. Perhaps Miss Epperton’s wits can devise an escape from the fix we’re in: mine are at the end of their tether, I confess.” He laughed, not very joyfully. “Go on, Adam,” he said, drumming with his fingers on the leather padding of the chair—“and then, you said——”

“And then, m’ lord, I just said what I tell ye. I says, says I: Weel, weel, we canna baith hae her—meaning Molly, m’ lord,” Adam sternly interpolated; “and dinna ye think it’s fair play to let the lassie tak’ her ain choice? And it may be, m’ lord, that I just strauchtened mysel’ up a wee bit as I said it, and gied a wee jerk doon to my coat; for Christie was aye a shilpit, shauchlin’ bit body, and I was no’ jist that ill-lookit i’ thae days, m’ lord,” said Adam, straightening himself unconsciously as though in illustration of his story, and giving the identical “wee jerk doon,” with the identical fingers that thirty-two years ago had given it; but, alas, alas! how those poor fingers shook, and how loose the coat hung on the old shrivelled figure!

“And it may be,” said Adam, resuming his story, “that summat that I said, or summat that I lookit, just put his bluid a bit up; for oot he skirls (but it was sair mixed up wi’ sweerin’, m’ lord) that I needna tak’ siclike airs to mysel’ jist for that I was strauchter nor him, and taller nor him, and that I needna be sae dooms sure o’ gettin’ the lass, seein’ that lasses were aye as fond o’ siller as they were o’ straight backs. ‘And whaur’s yer siller?’ speirs I; ‘a’ the warld kens that ye’re a feckless loon, wi’ no’ sae muckle as ae

saxpence to rub again the tither.' At that he skirls the louder, and strikes his heel again' the airth. 'Doon there,' says he—'it's doon there that my siller is the noo; and it's no' siller aither jist the noo, it's copper; but it'll want no more nor a pickaxe to turn it into saxpences, you jist bet your soul on that,—ay, and a fine lot o' saxpences too!' And more o' the sort he gaed bletherin' on, touchin' this copper that he kenned o', and nae ither mon kenned o' but himsel'. And when I says to him quite cool, 'Dinna ye brag to me, Christie Swan; I ken fu' weel that ye'd think nae mair o' tellin' a lee than of swallowin' ane of yon pilchards to yer supper,' he flies oot wi' mair o' his sweerin'—that he'd wish to be struck deid if he werena speaking the truth, and that the day wudna be lang o' comin' when he'd have money enou' to dress Molly in silk and satin frae heid to fit, ay and in velvet too, if her fancy lay that way; and how many yairds o' velvet did I think I could get oot o' my groom's wages? 'Weel, weel,' says I, 'dinna fash yersel' ony further, Christie, mon—it may be that ye've had a stroke o' luck for aince in a way; I've heerd tell afore this that the deil's aye gude to his ain. But if yer news is true, what for hae ye no' been to m' lord wi't afore this? Or maybe this copper o' yourn's on some ither grund than m' lord's?' At this he bursts out laughin'. 'What ever put that in your heid?' says he. 'Oh, the grund's m' lord's sure enou'.' And then o' a suddent he seems to recollect himsel', and pulls up short and turns gey whitelike. Did I think he was going to hing his secret to the clapper o' the parish-bell? Folks might call him daft, but he was wise enou' onyway to keep his own

counsel and to tak' what he knew to the best market, ay, and at the best time; but meanwhile mum was the word,—and he stares roun' aboot in a kin' o' a scare, to see if any ane was listenin'. It seemed to me that the cratur was nearhand ready to bite his tongue oot for what he had let slip to me. And there's the heid and the tail o' what I ken, m' lord," finished Adam, abruptly.

"And there was nothing more definite than this? Absolutely nothing? Think again, man—think again!" And springing from his chair, Lord Kippendale excitedly paced the room.

Adam thought again; but despite all questionings, the only other fact elicited from him was, that on the day following the interview last described he had met Christie Swan issuing from the back-yard with a very "mystarious" expression of face, and with a bundle of sticks under his arm; and that, on being questioned as to what he was after, he had very darkly hinted something about being bound on another copper-hunt. "Much copper, indeed, may ye rin to earth," had been Adam's scornful rejoinder, "wi' they daft bits of stick that in Scotland we wudna think fit to drive a decent hog wi'." To which Christie had answered that they were not "daft bits o' stick," but "dowsing-rods," and had trudged off, grinning more mysteriously than ever, and with a finger laid knowingly to the side of his nose; which sight of him was the last that Adam ever had, as the same day he had started north with my lord, and that same week the safe was robbed.

Lord Kippendale sank once more despondently into his chair. "You see our fix now, Miss Epperton," he

said, turning with an impatient laugh to Maud. "Can you suggest any further question to be put to the witness, or shall we dismiss him from the box?"

Maud all this time had been sitting by, perfectly silent, but a great deal more attentive than Lady Baby, who had more than once attempted to hurry the proceedings. "There is just one thing that has occurred to me," she said now. "May I ask him one question, Lord Kippendale?"

"A hundred, if you please."

"It is—it is this," said Maud, with a little hesitation, as she turned towards the old groom: "Did Molly—I mean, did your wife know anything about this discovery of Christopher Swan's?"

"She may hae known," said Adam, looking surprised at the question. "I wadna sweer she didna."

Maud pushed her questions further. Did Adam think it unlikely that Christopher should have boasted of his discovery to Molly, as he had boasted to him? No, Adam thought it was "gey likely." Christie Swan, for all his slyness, was the man to do anything that was imprudent, seeing that he was, as Adam put it, "some jummelt i' the jeedgment." Had Molly never dropped any remark which indicated her knowledge of its existence? Upon this question Adam reflected for a minute or two, and finally fished out of his memory a tolerably distinct recollection of Molly having on one occasion importuned him for a velvet gown, and of his having reflected within himself that no one but Christie Swan could have put that notion into her head, seeing how he had bragged that he would dress her in velvet from top to toe.

"Oh," said Maud, "it is as I thought. I had a notion that Molly was more or less in the secret."

"But, bless my soul, Miss Epperton!" broke in Lord Kippendale, who had been listening with a puzzled air to Maud's apparently pointless questions, "what odds is it whether she was or not? She's, you know—she's——"

"She's deid, m' lord," finished Adam, quite steadily, as the old Earl hesitated. "She's been deid this thirty-one year, miss," he added, turning a perfectly unmoved and rigid face towards Maud, who knew quite well that Adam's wife had only been dead ten years, but who was quick enough to guess that her real death-day, in Adam's opinion, had been the one of her disgrace.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Maud, hurriedly. "Well, it was only an idea that crossed my mind. It isn't of much consequence."

"Upon my soul and honour!" cried Lord Kippendale, bringing the flat of his hand down on the table, "I begin to believe that Swan never found any copper at all, and that the whole thing, from beginning to end, was a simple unadulterated lie of his invention. Adam, you can go."

Adam moved to the door; but he appeared to have something still on his mind, for he hesitated with the handle in his fingers. "There is jist ae pint, m' lord," he croaked out at last—"not that I wish to be ower positive either; but I've kenned Christie Swan to tell lees, and I've kenned him whiles to tell truth, and I kenned his look when he was leein', and I kenned it when he was truth-tellin'; and, m' lord, it's my belief

that he wasna leein' thon day." And with this Adam turned the handle and hobbled out. Nothing but his loyal desire to soothe the evident anxiety of his master's mind could have induced him to commit himself to a statement so unqualified.

"And this is all we have to count on!" cried Lord Kippendale, as the door closed behind Adam—"the boast of a jealous lover to his rival, made thirty-two years ago, and the rival's impression that the jealous one was not telling fibs on this particular occasion. This, then, is the foundation-stone on which our future fortune is to be built!"

"Not much of a foundation-stone, I confess," said Maid; "but look at it in the light of the first link in a chain, and it cuts a very much better figure."

"But where's the second link? What made you put those questions to Adam about his wife?"

"It struck me that if it were proved that Swan had betrayed the clue to her, it would not be stretching probabilities very far to suppose that she had betrayed it to some one else, and there is no reason why this some one else should not still be alive. From all I have heard of this woman, I have a firm conviction that she was morally and physically incapable of holding her tongue. If the secret ever was in her keeping, the chances are ninety-nine to one that it has leaked out."

"But leaked out when, and to whom?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders.

"To one of her victims, possibly. You forget that she was the Destroying Angel. If it is true, as I am told, that she had a new sweetheart every week, just

think what temptations she must have had for betraying the old one's confidences."

Lord Kippendale stared hard at his guest.

"Bless my soul, Miss Epperton! I'm heartily glad that we haven't got any undiscovered criminals in the house just now. You're as bad as a detective."

"I have some humble talents in that line, I believe," said Maud, laughing. "It has very often struck me that female detectives ought to command a high price, and that there is always that between me and starvation. But what do you think of my theory? I don't know that I think much of it myself; it's only a forlorn-hope."

"It won't do," cried Lord Kippendale, relapsing into despondency. "Even granting all your arguments, why should our offer of reward have failed to produce this some one else? I have come back from Gullyscoombe as wise as when I started."

It was but too true. Lord Kippendale's journey had resulted in a blank. The vague, floating tradition concerning the copper-vein appeared on closer investigation to be as hard to substantiate as the generality of vague, floating traditions. "Swan's copper," which in the course of years had come to be talked of quite confidently as a sort of treasure laid by, no one exactly knew where, against a rainy day, now that the rainy day had come appeared not only to be not forthcoming, but its very existence was called in question,—at least by the higher authorities, for amongst the miners and fishermen about the place the implicit faith in "Swan's copper" was not to be shaken. The story of his boasted discovery had grown into a fixed popular belief, but not even the firmest of the believers could throw a single

ray of light upon the locality. In vain were the oldest inhabitants—a few bent-backed old miners and fishermen who remembered Christie Swan—questioned and requestioned, their accounts varied in all particulars, except in point of being utterly valueless. The one thing on which they agreed was that the “dowsing-rod was in it.” Christopher had never been so busy with the “dowsing-rod” as just about that time; and, as everybody knew, Captain John himself had commended to his lordship’s most special notice a whole bundle of the rods which had been found in Christie’s room when they searched it for the diamonds.

Maud’s theory concerning Molly’s inability to hold her tongue did not seem to throw any new light on the matter. It was ingenious, but Maud herself confessed that it was far-fetched; and after all, it was only one of a dozen other theories which in these agitated days started up, to be then cast aside as useless.

Dismay was now advancing with rapid strides at Kippendale.

“What is the next thing now?” asked Lord Kippendale during an interview with Reid.

There were constant interviews now, sometimes at Kippendale and sometimes at Mr. Reid’s office, and there were constant letters and telegrams passing backwards and forwards.

“The next thing is to wait for Mr. Grey’s report,” said Reid.

“Grey’s a fool!” burst out Lord Kippendale. “Either there’s no copper there or Grey doesn’t know his business; the stuff can’t be so deucedly hard to find.”

“On a surface of four thousand acres?” remarked

Reid, turning his reddish eyebrows into two very high arches.

"Well, well, we'll give him a little more time, then. So there's nothing to do but to wait, eh? Hope it won't be for long," he added with a stormy sigh.

"I sincerely trust not," said Mr. Reid, quite as fervently, though less stormily; "every hour of this kind of waiting is a matter of so many pounds, shillings, and pence."

"Are we—are we short of cash, Reid? Already?"

"Not quite yet; but your lordship forgets that every day since the mines stopped working has been all out-come and no income. Engineers' bills are not remarkable for their shortness. I see a great many unpleasant possibilities on ahead, and not so very far on ahead either."

Lord Kippendale departed homewards in great perturbation of mind, leaving Mr. Reid in his office not much less perturbed. Mr. Reid knew exactly to what extent Kippendale was already mortgaged; and he knew also that for the last thirty years Lord Kippendale had hardly ever succeeded in living within his income. Broadly speaking, the source of this income was now cut off short; for, despite its four thousand acres, the surface of Gullyscoombe was of small value. It consisted of low hills, bare, arid, and sterile, let out for the most part in sheep-farms, which brought in the lowest conceivable rent. As for Kippendale, it was, as Maud had called it, nothing more than a big pleasure-ground. Mr. Reid had seen very many families ruined in his day, but he had generally watched them sliding, more or less gracefully, down a slope of misfortune that was more or less inclined. In his entire profes-

sional experience he had never known another case that was quite so sudden, quite so much like a pantomime transformation-scene, as this collapse of the Kippendale fortunes. It is not very often that people have their eggs so exclusively confined to one basket. That basket had now fallen flat to the ground, so what wonder was it that Mr. Reid looked rather rueful as he contemplated its contents? He spent the rest of that day in going conscientiously into the state of the family affairs, which, of course, Lord Kippendale had never gone into himself. By the evening he did not look very cheerful. He foresaw no great difficulty in raising the first sums required; but supposing the search for this fabulous copper-vein should become indefinite? Supposing it should drag on for years, as many another search had done? The thought caused all Mr. Reid's hair to stand straight on end. "A name to back us up," he murmured pensively over his calculations; "some solid capitalist in the background to give confidence to the public—that is what we want to pull us through. If that plaguy copper is there at all—and considering this obstinacy of the popular faith, I rather agree with his lordship that there 'must aye be water where the stirkie droons'—then it's only a matter of inspiring enough confidence and raising enough money; but I'll eat my big ruler if I know how to do it."

After a few days Mr. Reid cheered up a little, for he thought he had an idea. Next time he saw Lord Kippendale he took an opportunity of sounding his client very cautiously regarding this idea.

"Any news to-day?" Lord Kippendale had asked on this occasion with his usual impatient snort.

There was no especial news, it seemed, except that the distress at Gullyscoombe was daily spreading. From the hundreds of miners thrown suddenly out of work many urgent if illiterate appeals had been forwarded by the foreman, who was temporarily supplying Captain John's place, with humble inquiries as to whether his lordship could not find other employment for the many idle hands now forced to lay aside the pick which for so long had been the support of their families. The foreman himself ventured to call his lordship's most gracious attention to the fact that he had worked in the "Blue-bells" for nine years, and that he was a married man with an invalid wife and fifteen children, and that consequently every day of inaction brought him a little nearer to starvation.

"Bless my soul!" said the old Earl testily, "what is it they expect me to do? I can't have them all down to Scotland, and set them to work raking the Kippendale walks, can I? or grooming the horses? And even if I did, it wouldn't be much good, since I don't know where I should get the money from to pay their wages. It isn't my fault that the mines are shut up; why do they come bothering me? And yet, hang it all, Reid! we can't let those fifteen children and all those other wretches starve, after all; can't one do something for them?"

Reid looked up with a startled glance, for he knew his client well. Lord Kippendale was quite capable of making his case more hopeless than it was by some absurd act of generosity.

"Do something for them? My lord, I decidedly protest; your lordship must remember that you have children of your own."

"Not fifteen, the heavens be praised!" cried the Earl, striding about the room. But, look here, Reid, we don't seem to be getting forward. Let's discharge Grey, and try some one younger and brisker. We've only Grey's words for it that the 'Blue-bells' are lost. I've a notion of having heard somewhere that leaks are sometimes stopped by sandbags; why shouldn't we give the sandbags a try?"

"It is quite a different sort of bag that is wanted to stop the leak here," said Mr. Reid, with a measured smile.

"And what sort is that?"

"Gold-bags, my lord."

"Ha, ha! upon my word, Reid, that's not so bad! First time I've ever heard you make a joke; only it would tickle me a vast deal more if you could tell me where they're to come from."

"Perhaps I might even answer that question," said Mr. Reid, still smiling, "if your lordship would first answer another of mine."

"Well?"

"Where is your prospective son-in-law at this moment?"

"Wyndhurst? Don't see the connection of subjects."

"Well, I should have thought that there was a good deal of connection between Sir Peter Wyndhurst and gold-bags." Mr. Reid, being a little exhilarated by the effect of his first joke, as a teetotaler may be exhilarated by the merest nip of wine, had been carried on to make this second somewhat poorer attempt. But he did it tentatively, with his eye on Lord Kippendale and the words were not well out before he saw that he had overshot the mark.

“Good heavens, Reid! Are you suggesting that I am to ask Wyndhurst for money?”

Mr. Reid, quite sober again after his momentary exaltation of spirit, hurriedly changed his tack, and assured Lord Kippendale that all he had meant by the reference to Sir Peter's gold-bags was to call his lordship's attention to the fortunate circumstance that, however great the pecuniary loss might prove, his lordship's mind could not fail to be greatly eased by the reflection that one of his children at least would be magnificently provided for. Having children of his own, he knew the anxieties of a father; and though, as his lordship said, fifteen children were no doubt harder to provide for than four, still even this number presented cause for serious reflection, &c., &c.

After all Mr. Reid had not completely failed in the object he had at heart, for he sent Lord Kippendale away asking himself what on earth had become of Sir Peter all this time, and wondering when he would be back from the business journey on which it was understood he was gone.

It was not many days after this that Maud and Lady Baby were engaged in a somewhat desultory game of billiards in the hall. Not more than a few languid strokes had been played, when a note was brought in for Miss Epperton. It was from Nolesworth, as Lady Baby could not help seeing by the envelope.

Maud, having opened it, uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise, and glanced instinctively across at Lady Baby. The glance was troubled: in the sudden pang of terror that came over her it seemed to Lady Baby that it was compassionate. She felt that she must

either see that note or die. She did not say "May I see it?" but as her eyes met Maud's she put out her hand, and Maud, after another glance at the note, and a moment's hesitation, passed it silently across the billiard-table.

The note, penned very hurriedly, ran as follows: "I have heard from Peter at last; only a few lines written on board his yacht in Plymouth harbour. He sailed on Tuesday for the North Sea. *Do they know?*"

Lady Baby having read it, said nothing, but tossed it back across the table, and the billiards were resumed. She even made some rather better strokes than she had made that day, perhaps because she was playing absolutely at random.

The billiards were not nearly concluded when the library door opened, and Lord Kippendale appeared on the scene.

"Still at it?" he exclaimed; "who has been beating, eh?" He came up to his daughter, and gave a paternal pat to her head. It was a very affectionate pat, and within the last few days he had indulged in a good many of the sort. Lady Baby had only been vaguely aware of them, as also she had been vaguely aware of an unexplained increase of affection on the part of both Nicky and Agnes. There seemed to have arisen a sort of tacit understanding that she was looking pale, there had been quite a bustle of little attentions around her—of glasses of port wine being sent up to her room, and of footmen appearing at odd moments with cups of strengthening broth, which, mistress of the house though she was, she was not conscious of having ordered.

But Lady Baby had not yet arrived at asking herself what it all meant.

She now withdrew rather stiffly from her father's caress. "Nobody has beaten anybody yet," she said; "we have not nearly done."

"But the conclusion may stand over," said Maud, thinking she perceived a desire on the part of Lord Kippendale to be left alone with his daughter, and being herself only too happy of the chance of escape.

Maud was not far wrong. She had scarcely disappeared above-stairs when Lord Kippendale abruptly asked Frances to follow him to the library.

"In the library both Nicky and Agnes were installed. Agnes put out her hand and drew her sister to her side, kissing her cheek in silence. Nicky, with more than brotherly courtesy, wheeled a comfortable chair towards her. "My dear child," began Lord Kippendale "there is nothing like getting to the point. It is in order to ask you a question that I have called you in here: When do you expect Sir Peter to return?"

The question put thus to Lady Baby was the natural outcome of the one which for two days Lord Kippendale had at intervals been putting to himself. Of course he was not going to accept Mr. Reid's suggestion in the sense that Mr. Reid had meant it; still Lord Kippendale would have been more than human if at this juncture he had not felt truly thankful to Providence for having ordained to his daughter such a husband as Sir Peter, and if the comforting conviction had not gradually forced itself on his mind that no man with such a son-in-law could ever be regarded as ruined beyond retrieval. His attention once directed to Sir Peter's prolonged absence, his anxiety

could not fail to be aroused. It was not without a certain misgiving that he put the question, "When do you expect Sir Peter to return?"

"I don't know," said Lady Baby. Her head was well up, and from beneath her downcast lashes her eyes gleamed with a perilous brilliancy.

"Does he write often? Have you heard from him lately?"

"I heard *of* him to-day."

"Does he mention the date of his return?"

"No."

"I must say he takes things mighty easy," said Lord Kippendale with a shrug. "It strikes me that a little human sympathy would not have been out of place in a moment like this."

Lady Baby said nothing. She had not sat down on the comfortable chair; she stood beside it with one of Agnes's softly cushioned hands clutched fiercely in her own. Lord Kippendale looked at his daughter's face. "Nothing wrong?" he inquired, with a sort of anxious jocularity: "he hasn't been refusing his fences lately, has he?" There was no response, and Lord Kippendale altered his tone.

"What is the business that took him away? What is he looking after now?"

"Herrings, I suppose," said Lady Baby, calmly.

"Wha-at?"

"Herrings—a fish that is very common in the North Sea."

"What the deuce has the North Sea got to do with Sir Peter at this moment?"

"A good deal, since he is sailing on it."

"Sailing on the North Sea? Sir Peter? Are you mad, child?"

Lady Baby shrugged her shoulders with apparent self-possession, but Agnes felt five small sharp nails making deep marks on her hand. Agnes did not wince—she knew that she was acting as safety-valve, but her heart thumped in dull apprehension.

"I suppose," said Lady Baby, coldly, "that Sir Peter has got the right to take his yacht wherever he likes; he is a free British subject."

"Murder!" said Nicky, "he isn't."

"Free?" echoed Lord Kippendale. "Is he not engaged to marry you within a month?"

"No," said Lady Baby, "he is not; nor within a year either."

"Let's have no more of this beating about the bush," retorted the old man, sternly. "Explain what you mean, Frances."

"I mean that our engagement is terminated."

"He has jilted you? The scoundrel has thrown you over?" The veins on Lord Kippendale's temples began to swell.

"No, he has not thrown me over; it was I who—came to the decision."

Nicky emitted a sound which was something like an imperfectly suffocated roar, and sank down on the seat beside him.

"You! The jilting was on your side, was it? It was you who sent him to the Noarth Sea?" cried the Earl, bursting into his broadest accent, a certain sign of an impending storm. "And what in the name of the devil did ye do it for?"

"I don't know what you mean by jilting," said Lady Baby loftily, though she was beginning to lose her calmness of manner. "Having come to the conclusion that our temperaments were not likely to agree throughout life, I found it wiser to insist upon an immediate separation."

"*Tamperaments? Feeddlesticks!*" said Lord Kippendale, hotly. "And these are the grounds on which you gave him his final dismissal? And he accepted it?"

"Yes; he saw the sense of it."

"Then that is gone too," said the old man, lifting his hands to his head—"that is gone too."

"But it isn't final! It can't be final!" shouted Nicky, springing to his feet; he looked pale and agitated. "Wyndhurst can't have accepted such an explanation as final; by Jove, he can't! Frances has only got to write to him—somebody ought to write at once—I'll make a shy at a letter if necessary; he must be brought back——"

"Brought back *now*?" said the Earl, stopping straight in front of his son-in-law, and for one minute growing haughty and cool; "begged to come back *now* that we are on the highroad to beggary? Entreated to overlook the trifling slight that has been put upon him, in consideration of our being so very much in need of his goodwill and assistance? My daughter has jilted him, and you seem about to suggest that I should ask him for money? You must be raving, Craigtoun!"

"By Jove! I didn't mean to put it that way," stammered the bulky Nicky, instinctively backing before his short father-in-law, the crown of whose head was about on a level with his chin, but the lightning of whose eyes was more than he could bear.

"I don't care in what way you put it, but that's the gist and upshot of the matter; and brought about by what? By a parcel of the daftest whims that ever were invented to make mischief in this world." He turned again upon his daughter, still with those flashing eyes, but Lady Baby held her ground, though she was trembling. She did not back like Nicky; she even met her father's gaze, persevering all the time in her ill-treatment of Agnes's long-suffering hand. Lady Baby was the only one of the family who ever dared to brave the old Earl's fits of passion.

"It was no whim," she said, obstinately; "we agreed to part."

"Silence!" thundered her father, coming a step nearer. "None of this schoolroom nonsense. Silence, I say! I will be obeyed,—have a care——"

"Father!" came from Agnes with a faint cry; for Lord Kippendale, with his clenched hand raised, looked almost ready to strike his daughter.

"Yes," he broke off, "you are right, Aggie—I am too hot;" his hand dropped to his side. He threw a glance around him, forlorn and hopeless. "Yes, you are right; it can do no good;—it is too late, the harm is done;—my daughter is a jilt, and I—I am a ruined man." His white head sank on his breast; he moved slowly to the door. They heard his steps along the passage.

For a minute there was silence in the library. Lady Baby had not moved by a hair's-breadth; her face was hard as stone. Then all at once Nicky burst out—

"You've got it now! I suppose you're pleased,—I suppose you like having your own way, my Lady

Baby? You've got it now—you've got it, by Jingo and by Jove! Come away, Aggie."

Agnes gave him an appealing glance, her hand was still held as in a vice.

"You are pleased now, I hope," said Nicky, bending down to glare into his sister-in-law's expressionless face. His own features were absolutely distorted with excitement, and his habitual grin had turned into a caricature of itself. "I hope you are pleased, now that you have been the ruin of us all. Aggie, curse it, I say, come this moment!"

Agnes was on her feet already, having cautiously released her hand. Her heart was full of the most sisterly sympathy, but she followed her husband from the room with scarcely a backward glance. Presently she was bathing her bruised hand in cold water; Nicky hated to see the smallest disfigurement about her person, and her milky-white skin now showed distinct marks of five small, sharp nails.

After the heavy door had closed, Lady Baby stood just as silently and stonily as before, staring in front of her at the book-shelves. She was not quite sure of her own identity. Was it indeed she who had been spoken to thus?—*she*, the petted child of the house and its supreme mistress? And *was* she the ruin of them all? Could Sir Peter have saved them? Was that what they meant? Was that what Maud had hinted at the other day? As her father's fierce words to Nicky rang again in her ears, it seemed to her all at once that a new barrier had sprung up between Sir Peter and herself. It was that which she stared at, while her gaze seemed fixed on vacancy.

In another moment she had thrown herself down with her head in the cushions of the chair, and had burst into passionate tears. They were the first tears she had shed since Sir Peter had parted from her in the conservatory.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLEDGE.

“But whispering tongues can poison truth;
And life is thorny and youth is vain.”

THE discovery that Sir Peter was rich and that she was poor had come upon Lady Baby like a revelation. When she had spoken of the news of the trouble being certain to bring him back, she had not in her own mind defined the trouble as being simply pecuniary. Money was a very formless conception to her, for she had never been in want of it. She had merely argued that because something disagreeable had happened to them, Sir Peter was sure to return.

But this new view of the case was startling; it filled her with a vague uneasiness. She brooded over it in private, without being able to come to any definite conclusion on the subject. Then there came a day when she found herself unexpectedly led to a conclusion, judiciously helped, as it were, to put into distinct form the uneasy thoughts that had been puzzling her.

The manner in which this came about was as follows.

For some time past Lady Euphrosyne, on her side, had been puzzling herself with questions. Something which Maud had said during that first conversation be-

tween them had been fermenting ever since in Lady Euphrosyne's mind. This was the exclamation which had escaped Miss Epperton about there being other things in the world besides common-sense—for instance, pride—and the inference drawn therefrom as to the possibility of Sir Peter not being re-accepted when he returned to re-offer himself. If that exclamation had been the means of stirring Maud's own curiosity, how much more was it likely to stir that of Lady Euphrosyne, who had a distinct interest very much at stake, and very much involved in this question! This curiosity had, with the lapse of days, gradually become devouring, and it was in the vague expectation of having it satisfied that her ladyship drove over one day to Kippendale. Fixed plan she had none in her mind. Her one idea was to find out, through Miss Epperton of course, as much as she could about the state of mind of Lady Baby and the rest of the family. Her hopes were exclusively fixed on Miss Epperton, so much so that when, having waited for ten minutes alone in the drawing-room, she found herself confronted by Lady Baby instead of Miss Epperton, her calculations were thrown all of a dismal heap, and every scrap of her presence of mind was required to cover her disappointment.

"I am afraid I have interrupted your stroll in the garden," she said with a bitter-sweet smile, glancing the while over Lady Baby's shoulder to see if her ally was not in sight. Lady Baby had come in through the conservatory door. Her garden-hat was in her hand, and her hair was pushed back from her forehead, for the day was very warm.

"I was coming in at any rate," she said, advancing rather stiffly to meet Lady Euphrosyne.

"Thanks; I shall not keep you long. I only looked in for a few minutes to inquire how you are all keeping up, and to——"

"Say that you had heard the news?"

"The news?"

"Yes, the news of my engagement being broken off. It is the news of the day," and she gave a hard little laugh.

"Yes," said Lady Euphrosyne, on whom this came rather suddenly; "yes, certainly, I am aware of that. Well, to speak the honest truth, I think you have taken the wisest course."

"Why?" asked Lady Baby, bristling on the instant.

"Why? Well, do you know, it struck me from the very first that you were eminently unsuited to one another."

"I am glad that *somebody* at least agrees with me there," said Lady Baby, with a scornful smile. "I think you are the first person, Lady Euphrosyne, who has acknowledged that I am wise."

"The first person?" echoed her ladyship; "are your relations, then, not of your way of thinking in this matter? The *first* person—oh yes, to be sure, I see. It was scarcely to be expected that they should be much pleased, and at this moment, too, of all others."

It had suddenly occurred to Lady Euphrosyne, that despite the non-appearance of her ally, she need not necessarily go back to Nolesworth with her curiosity unsatisfied. There was a much more direct way of gaining the assurance for which her spirit hungered,

though delicacy, to be sure, demanded that the point be led up to in the most indirect manner possible. She did not at all know how this was to be done, though she immediately resolved to do it; and when Lady Baby asked sullenly, "Why at *this* moment of all others?" Lady Euphrosyne, abandoning herself to the tide of chance, could only respond rather at random—

"Oh, it was not that I meant; and besides so far as I understand, it really did not occur at the same moment at all. That is to say, I believe I am right in saying that the discovery of your two characters not suiting each other was made previous to the melancholy news of the Gullyscoombe disaster, was it not?"

"Yes, it was," and the colour began very slowly to mount in Lady Baby's face. "What of that?"

"Nothing, nothing at all; except perhaps a rather unlucky, a rather unfortunate coincidence."

"But I thought you just said that I had been so wise——"

"In some senses, my dear; yes, certainly in *some* senses," said Lady Euphrosyne, leaning back in her chair. Her composure was returning in exact proportion as Lady Baby's was vanishing: she was now self-possessed enough to look thoroughly exhausted. Quite apart from her real *bonâ fide* curiosity, she was beginning to enjoy what she was about. For weeks past the intercourse between these two had been a continual case of mutual exasperation, in which Lady Baby had invariably held the advantage. To-day the cases were going to be reversed, and Lady Baby had only herself to thank if she could hope for no mercy. She stood now bolt-upright in the middle of the room, twisting

the long ribbon of her hat round each of her fingers in turn, while a shifting rose-coloured light, streaming through the closed curtains, daintily tinged her white dress into the semblance of a pink one, and playfully kindled her fair hair into the glow of a fiery auburn. The curtains had all been lowered to keep out the unusual heat of the sunshine; and, in this pink gloom, the big drawing-room had something of a religious mystery. There was a faint smell of sandal-wood in the air, and the faint outlines of costly screens and couches in the background.

"I want to know," said Lady Baby, coming a step nearer, "I want to understand what that means, being wiser in *some* senses,—in *what* senses, Lady Euphrosyne?"

"Dear me, child," and Lady Euphrosyne toyed delicately with her lace parasol, for she was now quite herself again, "you need not pounce upon one's words so! In worldly senses, I meant. One can't help there being worldly people in the world, and one can't help their looking at things from a worldly point of view."

"Why need they look from any point of view at all at an affair which isn't any business of theirs?"

"One can't help that either, my dear; they will not only look, but they will think and they will speak."

"Really!" with an increase of scorn, "and what will they say?"

"For one thing, I shouldn't be surprised if they said it was a pity you did not put off your discovery for a week longer."

"Which discovery?"

"The discovery about you and Peter not suiting each other."

"What good would the putting it off have done?"

"It might have done this good, that possibly—mind I only say *possibly*—you might not have thought it worth while to make the discovery at all."

"Do you know what made me make that discovery, Lady Euphrosyne?"

"The incompatibility of your dispositions, was it not?"

"Yes; and do you, or do the worldly people you speak of, suppose that our dispositions would have become more compatible in a single week?"

"Not in *any* single week, perhaps, but——"

"But in this particular week?"

Lady Euphrosyne looked aside, smiling undecidedly. This impetuous taking up of her words was hurrying her into a far broader statement of the case than she had originally contemplated.

"Because in this particular week we lost all our money?" finished Lady Baby, beginning to pant a little.

Lady Euphrosyne raised her hands with her favourite gesture of deprecation. She was protesting against the coarseness of the assertion. "*Par pitié!* People don't lose all their money in a week,—at least not the right sort of people, not people that one *knows*. You talk as if your father was an economical navvy who kept his earnings in a stocking or a flower-pot, and who is reduced to starvation by a fellow-navvy walking off with the flower-pot. Of course, he may have had serious losses, he may even be——"

"Ruined? I suppose the right sort of people can be ruined, can't they? Well, what earthly connection can there be between our being ruined and the resolution that I came to?" In her innermost heart Lady Baby contemplated that "resolution" rather differently now; but Lady Euphrosyne's attitude had driven her back to the defence of her half-abandoned guns. "Don't you see that the two facts are quite distinct and separate? Don't you see that, Lady Euphrosyne?"

"I see that they are so in your mind, my dear child, just now,—but that is no reason why they should remain so very distinct. We would need to see this great resolution put to the test first, you know," and she laughed uneasily.

"To the test! What test? When is it to be put to the test?"

"When Peter comes back."

"When he comes back!" said Lady Baby, catching her breath. "*Will* he come back?"

"Of course he will come back," said Lady Euphrosyne, watching the girl very keenly through her narrowed eyelids. "Even if he agreed with you ever so much in finding your two characters unsuited to one another, he will consider it his duty to come back, as affairs now stand. No man of honour would be willing to risk the imputation of having acted in a mercenary spirit,—for, of course, the world will never clearly disentangle the chronological order of two events that happened in such close succession."

"No, I suppose they will not," said Lady Baby, very slowly; "I am beginning to understand. Go on, please, Lady Euphrosyne—I want to hear a little more.

You have told me what you believe Peter is going to do, and now I should like to hear what you believe I am going to do."

"How can I tell you that, child," and Lady Euphrosyne languidly rose to leave, "when it is more than likely that you could not tell it yourself? But when I get the news—if I get the news—of your having made it up with him, I shall not pretend to be overwhelmed with surprise, and I am not sure, either, whether I shall not think that you have done the wisest thing after all."

"Even though we are so extremely ill suited to one another, as you said a minute ago?"

"You are young enough to learn how to conform your temper to that of your husband," said Lady Euphrosyne, in her tone of serenest patronage, and speaking at that moment with no deeper object than that of increasing the irritation which she was pleased to see she had produced. "There is no reason, after all, why this marriage should not turn out as well as many others. But, mind, I do not dabble in prophecy; all I venture to predict is that you will not be quite so inexorable as you would have me suppose. And now, really I cannot keep the horses standing any longer."

Lady Euphrosyne's curiosity was indeed *bonâ fide*, but so was her terror of doing anything that might be in doubtful taste. By the look of alarmed perplexity on her victim's face she recognised that the torture had been pushed to the utmost limit that the canons of polite society could be expected to tolerate; that she had dealt the straightest blow and given the deepest stab that etiquette could by any possibility be persuaded

to sanction. One line straighter, one shade deeper, would infallibly have vulgarised the whole transaction; and it was just because she caught a glimpse of this horrible danger impending, that Lady Euphrosyne thought it safer to cut her visit short. Something too there may have been about Lady Baby's expression which made her ladyship wish rather fervently that she were well out of that rose-coloured drawing-room, even with her curiosity in this half-satisfied state. After all, it would have been a great deal pleasanter if she could have got the information she wanted in a quiet way from Miss Epperton. Lady Baby was not an agreeable victim to experiment upon. With her gleaming blue eyes widely dilated, she looked just now somewhat like an animal at bay. Her chest was heaving and her fingers trembled as they twirled the ribbon. To Lady Euphrosyne's farewell words she made no answer; to the hand put out towards her she did not respond. She neither rang for the servant nor went to the door to see her visitor off,—in point of fact, she did not seem distinctly aware that Lady Euphrosyne was going until she heard the wheels grinding on the gravel. She raised her head then, as though waking from a dream. "Not so inexorable as you would have me believe," she repeated aloud; "that means—let me see, what does it mean exactly?" and she put her hands to her head. After a minute she burst into an almost triumphant laugh. She had got at the sense of it, she knew what it all meant now: it lay before her, clear as a map. Peter was going to come back; not because he cared for her, but because he would consider himself bound to sacrifice his own inclination, or disinclination,

to what the world might say of his conduct: he would then offer her his pity, his compassion, his—yes—his *charity*, thinly disguised under the name of his love. And this gift it was which Lady Euphrosyne believed that she, Lady Baby, was thankfully going to accept? O heavens! why had she been so stupid as not to have understood it all long ago? Why had she stood in that dazed bewilderment instead of promptly flinging back the ignominious charge in the most vigorous and unmistakable words afforded by the English language—if indeed the English language possessed any words vigorous enough for the occasion: at this moment she doubted it. Why had she not made a protestation? Why had she not sworn an oath? Was it too late to do so yet? She ran to the window to see if the carriage were yet within reach; alas! no—scarcely even within sight, a mere speck in the distance. And in that speck sat Lady Euphrosyne, rolling towards Nolesworth and firmly convinced all the time that she had just parted from the future recipient of her step-son's generously bestowed—alms; the poor beggar-maid who, for the sake of those alms, was to conform her character to that of the alms-giver. *Conform*, indeed! But this must not continue; Lady Euphrosyne must be cured of her misapprehension with the least possible delay. The only question was, how? And Lady Baby glanced wildly around her, as though in search of some instant remedy for her wounded pride. Unless some step were taken to clear her character of this hideous imputation, she felt that she could not sleep that night. Sleep! Why, she could scarcely breathe. The recollection of Lady Euphrosyne's words and of her looks, now seen in their

right light, produced an exasperation so acute as to be almost like physical pain: it stung like a lash, it choked her as though it had been a real tangible weight.

A note to be despatched immediately to Nolesworth was the only course that suggested itself, and scarcely had it suggested itself when Lady Baby flew at the writing-table like a tigress at her prey. The pen was dipped in the ink with an expression that would have befitted the loading of a pistol, and the Nolesworth carriage was not well off Kippendale ground before four pages of note-paper had been covered, partly with blots and partly with vehement denials and assurances as vehement. "I understand you now," it began point-blank. "I don't know why I did not understand you at once; but you are *quite* wrong." Then there followed a good deal, more or less grammatically expressed, about finding it infinitely preferable to live on bread-crusts and ditch-water for never mind how many years to come, than to marry a man who would only come back to her out of a sense of duty. The conduct of any woman who could be capable of so basely accepting his sacrifice was characterised as contemptible, ignominious, grovelling, and by a few other adjectives, the most powerful which she could collect upon so short a notice. "I solemnly assure you," she concluded, "that so long as Peter is rich and I am poor, nothing, nothing, *nothing* will ever induce me to be his wife. You *must* believe me now; I am ready to swear it if you wish."

It was with fingers still shaking with excitement, with quivering nerves and throbbing temples, that Lady Baby scrawled the lines. As she sat at the writing-

table, all alone in the big room, with its far-off corners drowned in rose-coloured gloom, and the faint smell of sandal-wood in the air, the atmosphere about her seemed to thrill with a strange solemnity. The red light played over the table, and poured down on the page of note-paper on which she was penning her impetuous declaration. If she had renounced her claim to Peter on a blood-stained parchment and signed it with her heart's own gore, the document could scarcely have looked redder or more threatening or more mystic than it looked to her eyes at this moment, and to her memory ever after.

When the curious note reached Lady Euphrosyne she was almost a little frightened. This stupendous result to her chance experiment rather took her breath away. It is not the first time that a shot fired off at random has brought down the right bird, or that a bait dropped anyhow into a pool has hooked the right fish. But Lady Euphrosyne did not reflect in this fashion; she thought she must have been manœuvring very deeply in order to have brought about this end, and she felt a distinct increase of awe towards herself.

This feeling, however, did not interfere with the scrupulous care with which she locked away the wild little note in the innermost recess of her desk.

END OF VOL. I.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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1892

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LADY BABY

A NOVEL

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1890.

LADY BABY

A NOVEL

DOROTHY GRAY

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II

LONDON

WILLIAM AND ANNE CLAY

1880

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LADY BABY.

CHAPTER I.

AMBER SILK.

“Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is—Love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust.”

ONE summer evening, about this time, Maud Epperton took an amber-silk dinner-dress out of the press, contemplated it thoughtfully, shook her head, put the dress back again, hesitated a little, and ended by taking it out again and laying it on the bed. It was a very handsome dress, one which she never would have possessed had not the young Marchioness of Carringsford, who had taken a fancy to her for a few weeks last season, discovered that amber did not suit her own complexion, and, with a sort of friendly impertinence, offered the cast-off garment to Maud. “It isn’t much soiled,” she explained; “the bottom flounce is rather shabby, but I daresay you are not so particular as I am.” Maud would have been as particular as anybody had she had any fortune but her face; but amber *did* suit her complexion, and she could not afford to take

offence. She knew that by sitting up for two hours any night she could easily contrive to make the dress look as good as new.

It was just because amber suited her complexion so well that Maud had hesitated about appearing in that colour to-night. She knew that she was in want of very careful dressing-up if she was to look anything like her best; but she also knew that there were certain prudential considerations which might make it advisable to avoid looking her best.

"But, after all, one can't be prudent for ever," said Maud, as she took up the little pot marked "*fleur de rose*," and began laying a delicate coat of pink on her cheeks. "There is no reason why he should think me a fright." In the midst of the operation she suddenly sprang up and threw the cotton-dab to the other end of the room.

"Sham! all sham!" she muttered. Something that Germaine had said in the course of their last conversation had flashed into her mind: "Then there are the people who don't tell lies at all. I know you are one of them."

She stood for a moment with her hands tightly clenched, then threw a glance into the glass, then quietly crossed the room, and picking up the dab, continued the operation just as before. What could it matter what Germaine said, since, after the events of the last few days, she had told herself at last that she must give him up!

The conclusion had not been reached without struggles; ay, and fierce ones. Why, oh why, was fate so perverse? Why need she have fixed her hopes on

a man whose prosperity could receive so great a shock from a blunder about a few inches of rock? That is what it came to. "And I thought mines were such safe things!" said Maud, despondently shaking her head. "If I had not thought that, I never would have troubled myself about those library-shelves or that catalogue. So far as that goes," and she smiled cynically, "the original business that brought me north was a considerably less risky affair. A gale of wind might make the park at Nolesworth look rather bare, but it would scarcely throw Sir Peter's prosperity into the balance."

Maud heaved a sigh. There may have been in that sigh a little passing and surely pardonable regret at the thought of that enterprise abandoned under rather mortifying circumstances and against her will; but it is certain that that same sigh expressed a much more poignant regret for another enterprise, which, under very different circumstances and of her entire free will, she was now about to abandon. What she felt for her boyish lover did not precisely answer to the description of love; it was more a keen gratitude for his affection, a shamed emotion at being held so far above her value, a stirring-up of all the remains of the really good qualities which had once been in her nature. To be esteemed and adored by him would have been very precious to her—might, in fact, have been her saving; but the price which she was asked to pay for this esteem was greater than her nature could afford.

It was some weeks now since the catastrophe; and Maud, thanks to being present at gloomy conversations and consulting works upon engineering, knew almost as much about the matter as Mr. Reid himself. She had

learned a great deal about the species of search now proceeding at Gullyscoombe, on the result of which the welfare or ill-fare of the house of Kippendale depended. She had found out that the expenses were enormous, the difficulties innumerable, and the results to be looked for absolutely problematical.

A very disagreeable word had been mentioned, the word *economy*; a word so very suggestive of warmed-up meat and last year's bonnets and hackney-carriages. Maud shuddered at the sound, as at the voice of a too familiar acquaintance. It was then that she began seriously to count the cost of Germaine's love; it was then also that she measured her capabilities of sacrifice, and found that they fell short of the standard required. Despise her, you who have lived in comfort all your days! Throw at her the biggest stones that you have strength to pick up and agility to fling, all you easy-going, un-vexed, well-lodged, well-fed ones of the earth, who have never had to take thought of where the next meal is to come from! Very many people think themselves poor because they feel that they could enjoy a stall at the play a great deal oftener than they can afford it, or because they are forced to buy their books second-hand, or to patronise a second-rate dress-maker. Many others think they know all about poverty because they have been inside the houses of the poor,—and this, by the by, would be about as true as saying that you know exactly what it is to be drowned because you have stood by and seen some one else drowning.

But the poverty which Maud knew was not an imitation article: it was the real thing, with no nonsense about it, and her acquaintance with it was of the most

personal and intimate. One wolf may be very like another; but it is one thing to see a wolf scratching at your neighbour's door, and it is quite another thing to see him walking in at your own and making himself quite comfortable on the hearthstone, and grinning at you from beside the empty grate. Maud knew both cold and hunger, and this is not meant as a figure of speech. She had really been faint from the simple want of sufficient food, or of means to buy it,—she had really been cold from the simple want of adequate clothing; not once, but several times in her life, she had been forced to go to bed because there were no coals in the house, and to put her two shawls over her—yes, and the hearth-rug on the top of them, because her blankets were so thin and so few. It was a poverty which, by courtesy, might perhaps be described as genteel, but which, nevertheless, could sting and could bite and could pinch with the best of sharp-toothed, long-clawed monsters; and those that have been so stung and bitten and pinched do not easily recover from their fright. Maud still bore the scars of those bites upon her, and she feared another encounter with the monster as a burnt child fears the fire.

Considering that she had made up her mind to give up Germaine, it certainly was a weakness on Maud's part to put on that amber silk. She began to repent of her folly before she had done eating her soup; and when dessert was reached and she felt his admiring gaze still upon her, she told herself that the hour of the final explanation could now not be long delayed.

It came that very evening. Of course it had to happen some time or other; the game at hide-and-peek

could not go on for ever. Maud could not always be having headaches and asking for her tea to be sent to her room, nor could she always be watching round corners and behind doors in order to escape Germaine. It may be that to-night she had desperately resigned herself to her fate, or it may be that the amber silk had made Germaine a shade more determined than usual; whatever it was, he managed to surprise her alone in one of the drawing-rooms after dinner.

He plunged at once into his declaration; he had been too long on the watch to be slow at taking this chance. He told her that he adored her, and he laid his heart and his life at her feet.

Maud was more taken aback than she could have supposed possible. For a minute or two she lost her head and they stood staring at one another—he looking so resolute, and she looking so disconcerted, that any one would have supposed all the cleverness to have been on his side and all the simplicity on hers. Then she began to recover.

“It can’t be, Lord Germaine,” she said quickly, “it cannot be now,—it would not do at present,—your father would never allow it.”

“I am of age,” said Germaine; “and, besides, why should my father not allow it?”

“Under the circumstances I am sure that he would protest; and, of course, you would owe deference to his wishes.”

“Under which circumstances?” asked Germaine.

“Dear Lord Germaine, these unfortunate circumstances connected with Gullyscoombe, of course.”

("Nothing but plain speaking will do it," she said to herself.)

"But Gullyscombe may come right any day."

"But also it may not."

"Well, then, let us agree to wait. I could wait a century if I had your promise," and he tried to take her hand.

She put it behind her back, smiling a little nervously. To pledge herself to this uncertain waiting was the very thing she wished to avoid. Had she been five years younger, she might have yielded, but she knew that her time was too short for any tricks of this sort.

"I can't do it, Lord Germaine; it would be unfair to you. You will have other duties now; don't you know what will be expected of you?"

"What?"

"To retrieve the family fortunes by a brilliant marriage, of course."

"Nothing could be more brilliant than a marriage with you," said Germaine, simply.

Maud sighed in despair; this simplicity was terrible.

"But don't you see," she said, trying hard to lose her temper, "that is not what I mean. You will be expected to marry somebody with a much better position than I have, and with a great deal more money."

Germaine flushed violently. "You have no right," he exclaimed in sudden anger, and with a stamp that was something like one of Lady Baby's petulant stamps, magnified fourfold,— "no one has any right to dispose of me in that way against my will, or to take for granted that I would marry anybody for the sake of money! It is you whom I want to marry—only you

alone, Miss Epperton," and he clasped his hands; "will you not give me your answer?"

"Give him your answer," a small voice cried within Maud's heart—"give him your answer, and his *congé* along with it, and say good-bye to him for evermore."

This was just what she wished to do; but face to face with him, she discovered that she could not. So Maud gave an answer, but it was evasive and temporising; it meant nothing, and it committed her to nothing. Germaine listened with an air of extreme perplexity, and at the end he shook his head, and looked very big and very obstinate.

"No, I don't see it," he said.

"One of us two must try and be wise," said Maud; "and since you will not have the wisdom on your side, it must be on mine. To consent to an engagement would be like hampering you with a burden."

"No, it wouldn't," said Germaine, brightening. "I have thought of all that. Oh, I am not quite so foolish as you think me. Even if the copper is never found, we won't have to starve exactly, though, of course, Reid says that we will have to give up a lot of things—horses and so on,"—he heaved a tremendous sigh,—“and, of course, I shall have to look out for something to do; but there will be no difficulty about that. I know lots of people; there's a friend of mine in the wine trade, and another in a big City house. I daresay they could get me in, though, of course, I should like the army best. I don't mind working; and oh, Miss Epperton, dearest, most beautiful Maud! I should be so proud to work for you! I am game for anything, and I am very strong; I would break stones

on the road if it would make you more comfortable. Only," he added, with a momentary touch of despondency, "I suppose I should always break them the wrong sizes."

Maud turned away; she was at her wits' end. How was she to tell him that, though he might be ready to become a stone-breaker for her sake, she was not at all ready to become a stone-breaker's wife; no, nor the wife of a wine merchant's clerk, or of a poor lieutenant? How was she to make him understand that, though these boasts were very brave, they were also very foolish? This boy knew not even the A B C of that dismal tale of pauperism which Maud had conned and conned until she knew it too well. Had not the lesson been learnt with pinched lips and chattering teeth, and by the light of the most inferior quality of tallow-candles?

"It cannot be," she murmured; "it cannot be now."

"Why not now, Maud?" he pleaded.

It thrilled her strangely to hear her name thus spoken by him, and yet she gladly seized on the pretext for anger. "It seems to me that you assume a great deal," she said, steadying herself to look straight into his blazing eyes, "it seems to me that you are very confident, Lord Germaine. What right have you to address me thus? What right have you to suppose that I return your sentiments?"

"No right at all," answered Germaine, without any hesitation, "except what you have given me."

"And what is that?" Maud felt an uneasy surprise; she had expected him to plunge headlong into an ocean

of humble protestations. His next words surprised her still more.

"I know quite well that I am not near good enough for you," he began, with almost as much confidence as humility; "but then, you see, I don't think any man in the world is that; and since some man must win you, why should not I as well as any other? It took me a very long time, I assure you, before I could trust myself to believe that, in spite of my being so clumsy and so ignorant, you really were good enough to care for me a little."

"Lord Germaine!" cried Maud, turning rather pale as she faced him.

"Are you angry? I suppose I am putting it awkwardly."

"How do you know?—what has made you think that I—care for you?"

"What has made me think it?" repeated Germaine slowly, though he did not look a bit disconcerted. "Why, dozens and dozens of things. All the times that you have allowed me to help you, and all the walks you have allowed me to take with you, and all the things you have allowed me to say; and—and the way in which you have sometimes looked at me," added Germaine, with one of his deepest school-girl blushes and his most resolute giant-manner. "You would never have allowed me to be with you so much if you had not cared for me a little; because, don't you see, that would have been giving me false hopes," he said earnestly, "and to give me false hopes would have been cruel."

"But how could I guess that you had any hopes?" cried Maud, in despair.

He shook his head with a broad smile of confidence. "You are a great deal too clever not to have guessed that."

"And supposing I tell you now that your hopes were groundless all along."

"You will not tell me that, because it would be the same as telling me that you have made a fool of me all along."

"And supposing I have made a fool of you?" she said, recklessly.

"You are a great deal too good to have done that."

Maud wrung her hands till they ached. "This faith, this terrible faith!" she muttered to herself.

"Have you never heard of men being made fools of by women, Lord Germaine?"

"Oh yes, I have," said Germaine, promptly; "but it is the wicked women that do that, not the good ones. There was Adam's wife, for instance, the fisher-girl: we talked about her the other day."

"Lord Germaine," said Maud, suddenly, "I am as bad as that fisher-girl. I am not to be trusted, believe me." And then she laughed aloud. "Of course you can't believe me if I am not to be trusted; but what I want you to understand is, that it was a mistake, I mean when you think that I——when you took my friendship for anything warmer——"

Germaine looked startled, but he stood his ground. "No, no, no, I am not mistaken. It can't be—it was all too clear; you cannot have been playing with me. Swear it!" he cried suddenly; "swear that it was all a comedy, and that I am nothing to you!"

Maud tried to meet his eyes and failed; tried to

open her lips and failed again. All her will was bent upon saying the words, and yet they would not be spoken.

“Swear it!” said Germaine again. “Swear it!” and he took her hands.

Then her white eyelids were slowly raised, with that exquisite languor, that slowly dawning brilliancy of the eye beneath, that had driven so many ineligible suitors half out of their senses. Maud was not thinking of the eyelash trick then, but she had never accomplished it more effectually. For a few seconds' space they looked at each other full, and there was hunger and yearning, not only on his face but also on hers, and the difference only was that to her yearning there was a measure and to his there was none. She had not gazed for half a minute when she saw the danger, saw the abyss at her feet, into which his breathless ardour had all but carried her, sweeping her off the firm ground of worldly wisdom. Let her hands rest but one minute longer in his, and she knew that their lips also would have met; let this dangerous pause endure for one second more, and the only words then fit to end it would be words of tenderest import, oaths which it would be so hard to break, yet so expedient.

It was for fear of being the first to speak those words that, with a faint cry, Maud wrenched away her hands—and hiding her face, flew from the room. She paused only when she was in the harbour of her own apartment, to which she had flown so often lately. So the dreaded end had come at last! Ah, that unlucky amber silk!

“I shall have to go away,” she said; and she began

feverishly to collect the trifles on the table, as though for instant departure. She felt that after to-day her tactics of evasion were played out. After to-day she could not fail to mistrust herself very gravely. If she stayed here longer, one of two things would happen: either she would tell Germaine that she loved him or she would tell him that she did not love him. To do the first would be to abandon herself voluntarily, and with her eyes wide open to the claws of that familiar wolf which she had with such varying success been artfully dodging all her life; to do the second would be to brand herself in his eyes as the heartless coquette of whom he had so slightly spoken. She dreaded this with a dread that was to herself almost incredible. He should be thrown over, yes—but thrown over so gently as not to disarrange one petal of that beautiful flower of love which grew in his heart.

A man of more experience would have simplified the matter by retiring voluntarily for the present, with some graceful phrase upon his lips about renouncing the woman he loved rather than asking her to share his ruined fortunes. That is what a man of common-sense and common honour would have done; but Germaine was not a man of common-sense, and his honour was of so uncommon and quixotical a type, that if any one had suggested to him the possibility of Miss Epperton finding him more acceptable with his money than without it, he would certainly have called the remark sacrilegious, and the person who made it a blasphemer. She was to him too much of a goddess to be judged of by the ordinary standards of humanity. His attitude to-day had altogether rather surprised Maud, and

it had infinitely complicated the position. There was nothing for it but flight, and this time she could not afford to be very nice in her choice of a refuge; there was only Brackton.

Nolesworth, indeed, might have been open to her, for the general invitation which Maud had already manœuvred out of Lady Euphrosyne might easily have been shaped into a particular one, but Nolesworth was not far enough off. Aunt Sophy, besides, would be a better card to play at this moment than Lady Euphrosyne. An aunt, particularly at so safe a distance, might very easily be supposed to require her niece's presence, and there were surely pretexts enough for making the summons sudden and peremptory, and thus saving the abruptly departing niece from all danger of being confounded with those proverbial rats that are so prone to scuttle out of sinking ships.

Maud packed her boxes that night, quite determined to leave next day, yet only half determined, or rather continually altering her determination, as to what her pretext of departure should be. It was just possible that she might not have to go beyond ingenious evasion and some vague statements about a letter received; but of course much depended on the circumstances of the moment, and to that she finally decided to trust.

When next morning came, her hopes as to vague statements being sufficient were very speedily baffled. The interest and sympathy of her hosts was a great deal too earnest to be satisfied with anything so indefinite. Her aunt wanted her? She really must go that very day? What did her aunt want her for? They

hoped she had had no bad news? Was it possible that her aunt was ill?

"Yes, she is ill—that is to say, she is not very well," said Maud, gulping down a mouthful of tea. She was in a corner, and there was no help for it. Germaine's distressed gaze was upon her, oh, how she wished at that moment that it could have been done without a fib! But it couldn't. In order that he should think her quite sincere, it was necessary to tell just one more lie. The lie once spoken, Maud still clung to the hope that at least her invention would not be taxed in elaborating her first general statement; but here she had reckoned without Germaine, who always liked a literal account of things, and whose deep concern for her suffering relative became, as breakfast advanced, almost oppressive. He wanted to know what she was suffering from; and when Maud said something evasive about attacks to which her aunt was occasionally subject, he was not satisfied yet. "There are so many different sorts of attacks," he persisted.

"These are nervous attacks," said Maud, hurriedly. It happened to be true that on the occasion of some furniture being seized for debt, Aunt Sophy had had an attack of the nerves. "He will drive me to detail all the symptoms presently, at the thorough-going rate he does things," added Maud to herself. It was in vain that she attempted to turn the conversation. Germaine pressed for more information; he wanted to know whether the best advice had been procured for her aunt? Whether Miss Epperton would have to sit up at night? How long the last attack had lasted? Whether she would not find it advisable to take her

aunt somewhere for change of air? He remembered that when his sister Catherine had had a nervous attack after poor George's death, she had not rallied until she had been moved to Brighton; and he also remembered that she had lived on nothing but champagne and hothouse grapes for weeks. He hoped Miss Epper-ton would give her aunt plenty of champagne and hot-house grapes.

"I think that will have to be dispensed with," said Maud, gravely. "My poor old aunt's income would not go far toward champagne or baskets of grapes." It was not without motive that Maud put in this side-shot. The impression she wanted to leave behind her was to be one of as great unselfishness as possible, and this could best be done by placing her poor old aunt in the light of an unattractive pauper.

But even the cleverest of all clever combinations sometimes fails; and how could Maud, with all her ingenuity, know that one single little remark dropped about hothouse grapes was going to lead to such serious ultimate results?

CHAPTER II.

A BASKET OF GRAPES.

"How many tales to please me hath she coined,
Dreading my love, the loss thereof still fearing!"

From the Lady FRANCES BEVAN² to Miss EPPER-TON, care of the Lady Euphrosyne Wyndhurst, Grosvenor Crescent, London, W.

"DEAREST MAUD,—We have at last made up our minds. It is rather terrible to be sure, but I think

that even a terrible thing is more bearable than dangling on as we have been doing for the last two months. Maud, we are going to leave Kippendale, and we are going to emigrate to—no, you will never guess if you try till to-morrow, so I had better plump it out at once—we are going to emigrate to Gullyscoombe! It was Mr. Reid who first started the idea, not about going to Gullyscoombe, but about leaving Kippendale. I think he has been working up to it for a long time past. First he insisted upon one footman being discharged, and then the other; then he pounced upon the stables, and very nearly cleared them out,—oh, Maud, and the kennels are empty too!—those were terrible days! And after that he began to talk about gardeners being so expensive, and about its being an extravagance to have hothouses; and at last papa lost patience, and asked him whether he did not think it an extravagance to have a roof over one's head at all? and Mr. Reid looked very grave, and answered that such a roof as Kippendale was undoubtedly more than we should be able to afford for very long, more especially if papa would insist on forgetting that charity begins at home. Of course he meant that last £50 which papa had sent to the poor foreman with the fifteen children. I wish you could have seen Mr. Reid when he found this out. I didn't think anybody ever could be so red in the face without exploding; and as for his hair, I thought it would fly straight off his head like dandelion fluff. Well, on the day I am telling you of, papa came home looking quite perplexed, and he called us all together, and we had a discussion. We very soon came to the conclusion that we had better go away

somewhere, just for a time, you know, until the copper is found,—for, of course, we all *firmly* believe in Swan's copper, and I hope you do too. The worst is that the looking for it costs such a lot of money. I never knew that engineers were such expensive things until Mr. Reid told me so. Mr. Reid is a very provoking person to talk to. That same day, when he was telling me about the engineers, he laughed in the most unpleasant manner, and only because I suggested to him that surely it would be much cheaper, instead of paying engineer's bills, to look for the copper with the divining-rod. 'Hazel and thorn-bushes grow everywhere, I said, 'and all one would require would be a pen-knife'— 'And the *virtue*,' he finished, with a horribly sarcastic smile. I am afraid he doesn't think much of the divining-rod; but I have read up all about it, and I believe in it almost as firmly as I do in Swan's copper. But I am getting off the history of that evening. After we had settled that we must go, the next question was where to go to; and we all had different ideas. I suggested Normandy or Brittany, for that is where people in novels always go to when they are ruined; but papa said he had forgotten all his French, and was not going to begin over again. Nicky suggested London lodgings, but at that we all struck. Germaine suggested nothing at all,—I don't know what has happened to Germaine, he doesn't seem to care what is going on,—but we others went on arguing and discussing. We were quite agreed that wherever we went to, it must be to a smaller house, and to live on a smaller scale, so that we should be able to spend every spare penny on the copper-hunt; but somehow we didn't

seem to be getting much beyond this point, when suddenly I had an idea. This time, I daresay, you will guess what the idea was—it was the divining-rod. You know that I had been thinking of the divining-rod a good deal lately, and wondering how we could hit upon somebody who had the power; and now it all at once occurred to me that there really was no reason at all why that person should not be one of ourselves; nobody can tell until they have tried, and fancy what an ideal end to all our troubles it would be if Agnes or Kate or I were to strike the hidden vein! It would be almost as good as the third volume of a novel.

“My proposal was at first received with consternation, then with jeers; but when they had done jeering they began to argue. One by one they came over to my side. Kate was the first who knocked under,—I think she rather enjoys the idea of the melancholy rocks and the waves and the sea-gulls; then Nicky got the length of acknowledging that Gullyscoombe was the only place for which we should not have to pay rent; then it suddenly occurred to papa that if he were down there he would have a much better chance of bullying the engineers. The argument lasted till deep into the night, but the long and the short of it is that we are going to Gullyscoombe. It seems that the house there is in quite a decent state of repair, and big enough to hold us, even without turning out Captain John’s widow and family. In fact, so many advantages have been discovered about the plan, that I am afraid they all have lost sight of the original idea of the thing; but I have not. In my eyes it is still the divining-rod which is acting finger of Providence; and having once

pointed out Gullyscoombe, surely it will not be so shabby as to stop short there!

“Good-bye, dearest Maud. It is not likely that we shall be here much longer, for we want to get settled before winter.”

This letter bore a date early in September, and by it it will be seen that though Lord Kippendale and his family had struggled hard against the acknowledgment of their actual ruin, yet when they gave in they gave in thoroughly, and had begun, in a rather headlong fashion, to fit themselves to their new position. Economy has a great many different forms, and can be practised on a great many different scales. A sultan economises by reducing his four hundred wives to two hundred; a London lady economises by giving up her carriage; and a curate's wife does so by scrimping the lard in the frying or the flounces on her gown.

Lady Baby, like others, had her own way, but it was of doubtful efficacy. The first thing she did, in the days when Mr. Reid began to talk of economy, was to give away all the silk dresses which hung in her wardrobe. It was to the housemaids and kitchen-maids that she gave them, most of whom were on the point of departure, and who accepted the gifts with amazed gratitude. What use a pale pink satin dinner-dress would be to Jemima, the scullery-maid, might be an open question; but Lady Baby only sat down to reflect when her wardrobe was empty, and though it then occurred to her that she had parted with the last silk dresses that she was likely to possess for a good long time, yet she consoled herself with a conviction that

she was in a general sort of way adapting herself to her new circumstances. The next step was to make up her mind that the household accounts must in future be strictly kept. Consequently she wrote to Howell & James, giving them *carte-blanche* to send her a "good, stout, serviceable, leather-bound account-book." Leather, of course, was more durable than linen; and Russia leather, she had always heard, was the best sort of leather, therefore the book was ordered of Russia. Being in a great hurry to commence her new economies, the order was sent telegraphically; and as it was impossible to give the details in a single message, the telegram had to be doubled. Howell & James telegraphed back (at her expense) that a book of that description was not in stock, but had been instantly ordered and intrusted to the most skilful workmen. The exquisite volume arrived in time, very exquisite and tremendously expensive; but then it was the first step towards economy. Lady Baby spent several hours every day over it, at least she did so at first; but it must be confessed that after a week the entries ran something as follows:—

Lucifer matches	£	0	4	6½
Washing soda	0	0	9½	
Lost account of	11	0	0	

All the same, the Russia leather book was a great help in those days; for Lady Baby had accepted her position with a sort of grim fervour that was almost enthusiasm. If she was to be penniless, she would be so ostentatiously; she did not mean to hang her head about that or about anything else. She was going to be very brave.

And courage was needed in those days, and was needed every day more as the slow time crept on and no good news came from Gullyscoombe. It was Mr. Reid on whom this strain of incertitude seemed to tell the most heavily. He had long ago come to the conclusion that Lord Kippendale was by far the most maddening client that ever an unhappy man of business was afflicted with. It was not only his attitude towards the Gullyscoombe miners which Mr. Reid objected to, it was his attitude towards the engineers as well. Three or four of them had been turned off in succession; for Lord Kippendale, convinced that nothing but blundering and ignorance were at the bottom of this long delay, was a great deal too impatient to get on to the next thing, which in this case happened to be the next engineer, to pay any heed to Mr. Reid's most strenuous protestations. The baffled engineers retired chafing, and presently sent in bills, the length of which might have led one to suppose that they were intended as healing plasters for wounded feelings. In this way, therefore, it was contrived that a search, which in itself was very expensive, was rendered about four times as expensive as was strictly necessary; and it was after this had gone on for a little time that Mr. Reid spoke out plainly and told Lord Kippendale that he would not be able to afford to dig very many more holes in the ground to stuff his money into. He also said various other things, which resulted in the resolution announced to Miss Epperton in Lady Baby's letter.

What Lady Baby said about Germaine having shown no interest in this discussion was true enough. A good

deal had happened to Germaine within the last six weeks, brief though the narrative of the following events may appear.

It was a couple of days after Miss Epperton's departure that Germaine, turning away from the door of Mr. Reid's office, whither he had accompanied his father, happened to find himself straight opposite a fruiterer's shop. He stood still on the instant, fascinated by the sight of a pile of hothouse grapes, the first he had seen that year, for the Kippendale grapes were not quite ripe. Hothouse grapes had been in his thoughts more than once during the last days. The pictures which had haunted him of his goddess smoothing pillows and stirring medicines had occasionally been mixed up with visions of the hothouse grapes and the champagne which Miss Epperton's aunt was not able to afford, but which he was quite sure she would require after her nervous attack. He did not quite see his way to presenting Miss Epperton's aunt with a dozen of Cliquot; but no one would scruple to accept a basket of hothouse fruit.

Evidently it was Providence which had thrown these grapes on his path, and that very same evening the basket went off, accompanied by a short note, and addressed to Miss Epperton, 93 Smithy Street, Brackton.

A few days later he received the following reply:—

“93 SMITHY STREET, BRACKTON.

“Miss Sophia Epperton presents her compliments to Lord Germaine. The grapes are being returned to him to-night by rail. It is all a mistake; she has not been ill, and if she had, grapes would probably have

made her worse, as fresh fruit of any sort disagrees with her. Miss Sophia Epperton begs to state that it is not her fault if she read the letter; people who address themselves to her niece should be careful to distinguish between the junior and the senior Miss Epperton, otherwise it is their own look-out. Miss Sophia Epperton has put Lord Germaine's letter into the fire, as the importance of its contents did not seem to warrant the expenditure of a penny stamp. The younger Miss Epperton, having unexpectedly favoured this poor roof for two nights, has now gone to London to rejoin her new patroness, Lady Euphrosyne—Something; but Miss Epperton senior has to confess that her memory is quite unequal to grasping the handles attached to the names of Miss Epperton junior's friends."

Fortunately for Germaine, he was alone in the library when the above curious composition came to his hands. After he had read it once, standing by one of the windows, he took it to the next window and read it again; and he read it after that by each of the windows in turn—as if with a sort of conviction that the right light had not yet fallen on its contents. Then he sat down in his father's big arm-chair, and remained there for half an hour, staring hard at the letter and pulling bits of fringe off the table-cloth near him. At the end of that half-hour he did the only thing which, being Germaine, he could do; he went to the writing-table and wrote direct to Maud, asking her point-blank for an explanation of the mystery. He went straight into the letter, without any "Dear Miss Epperton" to start with.

"I have just heard from your aunt," he wrote. "I had sent her a basket of grapes, and she writes to acknowledge them. She has not been ill, and has had no attack. You were not sent for to nurse her. Did you invent it all? I don't understand; please explain.

"GERMAINE."

This note came to Maud's hands next day in London. It was the day after the long-deferred ball, for the sake of which Lady Euphrosyne, finding no more work to be done in the North, had hastened back to London just as the season was drawing its last gasp. For Maud the ball had been rather a success, something like a solitary summer-day coming in late autumn. Many of the new London beauties had already left town, and Miss Epperton, appearing again after so long a retirement, naturally found herself prized in proportion as she had made herself precious. She was not at all disposed to over-value her triumph, but for the moment it had put her into a hopeful humour, and made it seem easier to forget Germaine. Ah, it was so much easier to renounce him when the gaze of those big, blue, childish eyes was not upon her!

His note startled her—it was so short and straightforward. It irritated her as well; she always felt provoked with him when he got into what she called his "literal frame of mind." After all, she could not have her eyes everywhere. It was mortifying, it was ridiculous; her neat little plan was exposed now beyond remedy. "So be it, then," she thought, with a sudden reckless defiance; "let him have the truth, and let him have it bare, since bare truth is all he cares for.

Better, perhaps, and simpler certainly, that the whole thing be cut short at one stroke." And on the instant she sat down and wrote as follows, unconsciously imitating the style of his note:—

"You have guessed right; I did invent it all. My aunt has not been ill. I was not sent for. It was you who drove me to it; it was to save you from 'scenes' that I did it. It was a lie, if you will; but the colour of the lie, I think you will agree, was white.

"MAUD EPPERTON."

The moment the letter was gone Maud felt that she had made a mistake. Once more she had acted on one of those impulses which she was always flattering herself were dead for ever, and which yet had such an awkward habit of reviving at odd moments. After the long strain of incertitude, she had felt as though to decide the question out of all power of reversal would be a relief. But having decided it, she wished the incertitude back again. "Bah!" she said, after a short reflection, "I should have had to break with him sooner or later, only that I would rather have waited until Mr. Christopher Swan's copper was proved to be a myth; but after all, there is no great harm done. Even if they find the copper to-morrow, and my blue-eyed slave becomes once more eligible, it can only be a question of smiling long enough and sweetly enough in order to bring him back to my feet. All the same, I wish I had not sent the letter. I suppose he will answer me with bitter reproaches—eight pages of them, most likely—in a copy-book hand. Heavens! *quel ennui!*"

But the days passed, and no other letter came from Germaine.

CHAPTER III.

THE EXILES.

“We leave the well-belovèd place
Where first we gazed upon the sky.”

THE last day had come, as all last days do come at last—the last day at Kippendale.

The resolution announced in Lady Baby's letter to Maud was not many weeks old, and to the eyes of all their horrified friends, to the eyes even of the economy-loving Mr. Reid, the action of Lord Kippendale and his family appeared precipitate to the verge of folly—and yet upon closer consideration, exactly what was to be expected of these particular people, placed in these particular circumstances. From the moment that Gullyscoombe had become the “next thing,” the old Earl was naturally in a fever to be there. His desire for hurry infected the others; it would be a relief to make the plunge even prematurely, to seize that dreadful Gullyscoombe bull by the horns, to step off their worldly pedestal of their own free will, rather than wait till they were knocked off it. Mr. Reid, though he might think the move precipitate, was so sincerely thankful to have Kippendale clear of his clients and his clients rid of Kippendale, that he judiciously refrained from throwing so much as a single drop of cold water on the plan. By this time Mr. Reid had pretty well made up his mind that “Swan's copper” had never had any

existence except in Mr. Swan's over-heated brain; and he had reached the point of wondering what Kippendale would let for, and whether a suitable tenant was likely to be found, supposing he were wanted. But this idea existed as yet only in Mr. Reid's most secret thoughts. Better far that the ruined family should say farewell to their old home without this additional wrench of agony; better far that they should go while they were still in some degree warranted in telling each other that, after all, it was probably "only for a time."

And now the last day had come,—and such a last day! Such a cruelly beautiful last day, intent, it seemed, on turning the beloved Kippendale into the semblance of an earthly paradise from which half-a-dozen poor wretches were about to be expelled. On the October sky not a cloud; on the violet hills in the distance not a speck of mist; in the long-bladed grass the sparkling jewels of a heavy autumn dew; and the trees—oh, surely the trees in their tenderest spring-time youth were never so beautiful as in this golden bravery of their decline! Already their bright leaves have begun to fall; they are scattered broadcast on the lawn like so many pieces of curious coloured coins which lie unheeded just now, but which the wind will pick up some day and hoard away in the sheltered glades, and heap together into the narrow crannies of the hills and the secret corners of the valleys. And not only on the lawn do they lie, they have lined the ditches with a lining of crimson and orange; they have made the banks yellower than the primroses could make them in April, and redder than they were with the ragged-robin in June; they have paved the paths in

the woods, and have inlaid the very floors of the ponds with a tinted mosaic pavement; they have flung gaudy stripes of colour across the country roads, and the broad grassy margins at the side—on which so many Bevans, past and present, have trotted to cover, on so many hunting-mornings—are turned by the leaves into paths of beaten gold.

But scant time did there remain for the heart-rending contemplation of all these glories. The carriages were at the door (hired carriages), and the luggage had started for the station. When the family had met at the early and hurried breakfast, they had taken much pains to inform each other that they had slept quite well. If they had wept, they had wept in secret, and been at much pains to efface the traces of their tears, for their spirit was high, and no one of them wished to be the cause of the others' breakdown. Those little sad and senseless good-byes—dumb good-byes to dumb things—were like their tears, transacted in secret, and in mortal terror of one another.

The breakfast was a rather noisy affair, because no one trusted himself to be silent. Even Agnes talked, and Lady Catherine absolutely rattled. It was some time now since Catherine had hurried to the spot with that mournful alacrity which brings the bird of sad plumage to the scene of a misfortune. But even for Catherine the misfortune was here rather too overwhelming; there was too much of it at once, and it was of too absolute a quality. She was accustomed to take her grief in spoonfuls, not to have it poured down her throat all boiling hot. There are epicures in grief, as in everything else, and the fair-haired widow had al-

ways shown her preference for those delicate morsels of sorrow which require an educated palate in order to be tasted. Her sighs were zephyrs, not hurricanes; her tears fell singly, like precious pearls, they did not stream in vulgar torrents.

When the falsely gay and yet so dreary breakfast was over, Lady Baby flew from the house, and did not stand still until she was within the wooden walls of the big kennels, now empty and deserted of all save Brenda and Fulda, the two foxhound puppies, of whom the elder had played so critical a part on Lady Baby's seventeenth birthday. The two dogs came bounding towards her, each describing nothing but one big wriggle from the tip of his tail to the point of his nose, and Lady Baby knelt down on the ground between them, and sobbed at last freely, to the undisguised perplexity of those well-meaning but foolish animals. And presently she was on a further station of her pilgrimage, and stood in the stables, with her hand on the mane of the wary old chestnut, that still paced its loose-box, though the bargain for its sale was already clenched. Ajax was the last of the old friends; even the impudent black pony had been led away with his bright black eyes turned wistfully over his shoulder: nothing but a pair of serviceable carriage-horses was to be taken to Gullyscombe, and no one but Adam and one stable-boy would remain to represent the once so brilliant equestrian staff. Adam was busy at this moment in the next loose-box, looking very grim and stony, and hissing with unnecessary loudness, perhaps with some hazy notion of discretion, for Lady Baby was sobbing audibly. The fact was that Adam disapproved

of those tears, and was inclined to be suspicious of the lengthened good-byes accorded to "A Jacks"; for it must be remembered that Adam had been a constant witness of those riding-lessons in early summer, the result of which had been in his eyes so disastrous.

"Where is he now? Where is he now? Will he ever come back again?" Lady Baby was whispering into Ajax's ear, with her cheek against his sleek neck. But Ajax did not care where *he* was, so he only shook what he still possessed of a mane and snorted with extreme affectation, and Adam hissed the louder, and presently a voice was heard calling for Lady Baby, and she had to pull down her veil over her swollen eyes and hurry off to the house.

"Hurry up!" her father was saying, fussing about uneasily on the doorsteps; "it's the highest time to be off; come along!"

But though he said "come along," Lord Kippendale himself went back into the house; and one by one they all went back, telling each other that they had forgotten something. But they had forgotten nothing; they went back only to steal one more, only one more hungry glance at the home they had lost, who knows for how long—who knows whether not for ever? To touch once more some familiar piece of furniture; to sit down again for only one minute on the old window-seat with the tapestry cover. And the end naturally was, that they all stumbled upon each other; and that after Lord Kippendale had made an attempt to say something cheery about the sea air, and after Agnes had faintly suggested that it would be a pleasant day for travelling, the whole thin pretence broke down, and

they wept at last openly, with their heads on each other's shoulders, and wept so long and so violently that they all but succeeded in missing their train.

It was late on the evening of the following day and very dark when they reached their destination. The golden day had been succeeded by a leaden one. Under the doubtful shelter of the shed which served as a station-house Nicky stood ready to receive them; he had been sent down some days previously in order to make the most necessary arrangements for their reception. His hands were in his pockets, his coat-collar turned up to his ears, and his humour was quite as black as the night itself. To Agnes's hurried and fearful inquiry, "What is it like? Is it so very bad?" he replied with the one simple and expressive word "Beastly."

It was about the only word that was said; for, when once more under way, they were all too tired to talk, and yet too much on the strain of a painful expectation to doze away in their respective corners, even if the strange vehicle in which they sat had jolted less fearfully, and the heavy leather curtains, which served as window-panes, had not required constant clutching and setting straight in order to keep out the small insinuating rain which seemed bent on making their more intimate acquaintance. They had been jolting along in this damp darkness for an hour and more, when, at a turn of the road, there fell a new sound on their ears—a subdued, rolling, thunderous sound which told its own tale. They said nothing, but took fast hold of each other's hands, and one or two corners of the leather

curtains were lifted and questioning glances were shot out into the darkness. The rush and fall of the waves sounds clearer now, and the muffled lazy roll is broken now and again by a sharper dash that dies away in a long-drawn hiss, as the unseen spray scatters over the unseen rocks. A strong whiff of salt air sweeps in along with the drizzle, but to the questioning glances the darkness gives back the vaguest of answers: only dimly through the black night is there something to be guessed of wide horizons and deserted roads; a half-revelation of naked ridges succeeding each other with a sense of endlessness that makes the travellers' quaking hearts sink down to the heels of their very damp boots. As they turn from that side shuddering, they are confronted on the other by something low and grey and exceedingly grim, even through the dark. They have entered something that is apparently a yard, for the vehicle bumps over a cobble-stone pavement; there are more greyish buildings around them. An old woman in tears stands at the door—she is Captain John's widow; two boys in pinafores peep all agape round a corner—they are Captain John's grandchildren.

One by one the travellers descended from the lumbering carriage and followed each other to the room which had hurriedly been arranged as "best parlour" for their reception. They were cramped and chilled, and wellnigh faint with hunger. One or two articles of the Kippendale furniture which had been sent down the week before, stood there to greet them; but this pang of recognition was almost the hardest thing to bear: the well-known bookstand looked so strangely out of place standing cheek-by-jowl with poor

Captain John's ink-spotted writing-desk; the pet tea-table seemed to have changed its expression, decorated as it now was by two symmetrically placed, pink, frosted vases, containing bouquets of dried sea-weed which Mrs. Captain John had put there by way of making things a bit more comfortable. The fireplace smoked a little, just enough to make one's eyes smart and one's throat itch; and one of the window-panes had been broken in the yesterday's window-cleaning, and was now provisionally patched with paper, for which Mrs. Captain John tearfully apologised, on the ground that it was such a distance for any workman to come. As for the dinner, she apologised likewise, for it was the work of her own willing but unpractised hands; the new cook (warranted economical), who was due to-day, having backed out of her engagement on account of a panic which had seized her at the want of society which the neighbourhood promised.

Lady Baby, out of sheer weariness of having wept so much, began to laugh at this, and the others followed suit.

"It isn't quite so nice as the old house," said Lord Kippendale, with a ghastly smile, as he offered his arm to his eldest daughter, "but we are not going to give in just yet. Come to dinner, girls—I am famishing; and, upon my word, I think we shall do without dressing for to-day."

CHAPTER IV.

MAUD HAS AN IDEA.

"La notte è madre di pensieri."

THE worst of the important moments of life is, that until we have got well past them they so often look exactly like the unimportant moments; and the worst of cross-roads and turning-points is, that unless the roads are real tangible macadamised roads, and unless the turning-point is painted a fine showy colour, likely to catch the eye, you are very liable not to find out where you are until you have either taken the wrong turning on the one or broken your head against the other. How could Lady Baby know that when, on a certain evening in October, she sat down to write another letter to Maud, that letter was going to be a crisis in the lives of several people? As it was, the crisis was within a hair's-breadth of slipping harmlessly by. Had the letter been worded but a trifle differently, or had Maud's mind not been tuned to the exact pitch which caused it to vibrate in response to one tiny note of suggestion that lurked—unknown to the writer—in one stray paragraph of the letter, a great many things would not have happened which afterwards did happen, and some people would have had fewer lawful complaints against fate.

The pitch to which Maud's mind was tuned the night that letter reached her, was a very low pitch indeed. Five minutes before the knock came at the door, and Lady Euphrosyne's maid, with her hair in

curl-papers, had thrust in the letter with a sleepy explanation about its having been overlooked among her ladyship's notes, Maud had been sitting beside her toilet-table with the bodice of a dress across her knee, needle and thread beside her, a thimble on her finger, but her arms hanging idly by her sides. The bodice wanted mending, but it did not seem to have very much chance of getting it just then, for Maud was allowing herself the unusual indulgence of an unchecked fit of the dumps. Lady Euphrosyne had that afternoon, in the suavest possible manner, announced that she really must tear herself away at last from her beloved London, and fulfil some long-standing engagements to friends in the east of England. Maud was not included in these invitations; the inference was obvious. Her ladyship herself was quite genuinely distressed at the necessary parting. By a thousand little ways, each apparently as slight as a gossamer thread, and yet in reality as strong as those fine fibrous roots by which some sort of creeping plants take their hold on the most inhospitable walls of rock, Maud had contrived to gain footing in Lady Euphrosyne's household. Very soon her ladyship was wondering how she ever had been able to answer all the notes she received without the help of that nice, quiet, sensible Miss Epperton. Maud, meanwhile, had early recognised that if these pleasant quarters were to be kept available for her frequent future reception, a good deal of diplomacy would be necessary. She had no idea, for instance, of being dislodged from her comfortable corner merely on account of the return of Sir Peter; and therefore, as the time drew near when that jealously guarded step-son might

reasonably be expected to reappear, instead of making the most of her personal advantages, she endeavoured rather to convey the impression of a person who has given up her pretensions to youth and who wishes only to be agreeable and unobtrusive. With this object she occasionally refrained from crimping her hair, and the amber silk was more and more rarely donned. Sometimes she debated within herself whether after Sir Peter's return it would not be necessary to pack away the amber silk for good in a box. There were *pros* and *cons* to the question. It was possible, on the one hand, that Lady Euphrosyne might think the "nice, quiet" Miss Epper-ton not nearly so nice nor so quiet in amber silk as in plain black; but then, on the other hand, it was equally possible that Sir Peter, with his artist's eye, might think quite otherwise. There never had been any secret about Sir Peter's admiration for her. Living, as she had done for weeks past, under a roof that was in reality Sir Peter's own, it was perhaps only natural that the gratifying recollection of this artistic admiration should occur to her rather more frequently than usual. But it was not quite so natural that the gratification should be mixed with a certain uneasiness; and that, whenever her thoughts did take the shape of wondering when and in what frame of mind Sir Peter would return, she should at once try very hard to think of something else, much as a person who distrusts his own honesty might turn away with a guilty start from a treasure that lies exposed and unguarded before him. What had she got to do with Sir Peter? Sir Peter was Lady Baby's property, and Lady Baby was her friend. Of course—she had got the length of this—if Lady Baby had *not*

been her friend, and if one were very desperate, what a fool one would be not to make the most of this novel and singularly advantageous position! Yes, if one were very desperate. . . .

Maud was rather desperate to-night, and that was perhaps why she turned more hastily than usual from the contemplation of the unguarded treasure, and impatiently snatching up the bodice that wanted mending, began anxiously to consider what remedy would be best applicable to a frayed collar-band. "Piecing will not do it," she sighed; "nor darning either: pitching it into the fire and getting a new bodice would do it best, of course. Oh, ye domestic gods! And it was for this sort of thing that I was to have become Germaine's wife,—for this, that I might have the fun of mending his collar-bands as well as my own; his collar-bands and his stockings—such big stockings, too, and such big holes as he would tramp and stamp and kick into them with those terrific beetle-crushers of his!" She burst out laughing, and right in the middle of the laugh, dashed her hand across her eyes. "I wonder who mends his stockings for him now? He must have worn out a good many pairs tramping about Gullyscoombe after that copper. Oh dear, why is life such a tangle, and fate such a lottery? Why do people go and discover copper-veins if they cannot live to point them out? Why did not everything remain as it was on the afternoon we arranged the flowers in the dining-room? Why have I got to mend my own collar-bands? And what on earth am I to do with myself when Lady Euphrosyne leaves London?" It was exactly at this moment, when life appeared to be shadowed by one

huge point of interrogation, that the knock was heard at the door, the head in curl-papers thrust in, and the belated letter tendered, accompanied by the sleepy explanation.

The sight of the handwriting struck rather painfully upon Maud. Certain thoughts which a few minutes back had been in her mind, certain possibilities which had obtruded themselves upon her notice, and not for the first time either, made her feel that there was something almost disconcerting about the broad stare of those round childish letters. But a second impression soon swept aside the first. The letter felt thick between her fingers, as letters do that contain announcements of importance and form epochs in our lives; what if this letter were to contain an announcement and mark an epoch? The copper! Her guesses flew straight to the copper. The appearance of this letter at this particular moment had so stirred her imagination that, with a half-superstitious conviction that here was sealed up the answer to all those disjointed questions which she had just been flinging in the face of fate, Maud paused for a minute with the unopened paper in her hand, as though to enhance her own expectation. The copper was found; yes, that was how it would be. The copper was found, and everything would again be as it had been on the day when she and Germaine had arranged the flowers in the dining-room.

Alas, no! the copper was not found; her first glance told her that. Indeed there appeared at first sight to be nothing very special in the letter, the close-written pages being filled with a minute description of their new home which Maud, in her disappointment, decided

would keep till daylight. It was not till the second-last page that a few words caught her eye and induced her to turn back with more attention to the head of the paragraph. The passage which had aroused her curiosity ran as follows:—

“All the others laugh at me about it, but you—even if you don’t believe, at least you don’t laugh. I can’t tell you how many miles I have walked already, or how many blades of penknives I have broken in cutting twigs. I am afraid there can by this time be no doubt that I have *not* got the ‘virtue’ of the divining-rod. But then there always remains the possibility of hitting upon some one else who has. For this purpose I have drawn the covers of the village. On the whole it is discouraging work, though a great many of the old miners believe in the rod, even if they don’t use it. Some of them again, the very religious ones, call divining-rods ‘unholy sticks’; and this reminds me of one of my recent acquaintances, an old crooked shoemaker, who lives, not in the village, but all by himself on the most desolate part of the estate, where the daft creature has set up a workshop in one corner of some old mine-buildings. His room is like a case of curiosities, but the greatest curiosity in it is himself. I shouldn’t be done to-night if I were to tell you about all his oddnesses, and his horrible temper, and his beautiful cat. For one thing, he is very *jumpy*, if you know what I mean; he skipped very nearly over a stool when he heard my name, but it was with fright apparently, and not with joy, though I didn’t see the reason. What made me think that I had at last found my long-sought diviner was that, among the curious things in the room,

I suddenly caught sight of two of the well-known forked twigs hung up neatly on the wall like two crossed swords. A minute before I had been examining one of his chimney-piece ornaments, a sort of very hideous little mound, like one of our Scotch cairns in miniature, only composed of bits of copper-ore (like those we had in the glass case at Kippendale), and gummed on the top of each other. Just as I turned to ask him where he picked up his specimens, I caught sight of the dowsing-rods on the wall and I flew at them. 'Oh, are you a diviner?' I asked. 'Can you make the rod work? Was it with these you found the copper for your cairn?' It was rather a stupid thing to say, for of course there is no lack of these copper-samples all over the country, but I don't know why it should have made him jump again, higher than the first time. He rocked his body and groaned out that heaven might strike him dead if he were a diviner,—that he could no more make those 'unholy sticks' work than he could make sea-boots out of rat-skins. I asked him why, if he thought them unholy, he had them on his wall, and he went on rocking his body and moaned, 'As keepsakes, to be sure.' I asked of whom? and he said, 'Of a friend.' When I hopefully inquired after the friend, he once more crushed my hopes by informing me that the friend had been dead for thirty years and more, and that the sea-weed had very likely woven a fine shroud for him by this time, seeing that he had been drowned at sea. He became quite voluble over it, though up to the moment of my noticing the rods he had been just as uncommunicative as the boot he was mending. But the divining-rod had certainly stirred him up; he even

left the boot and took me out to the mouth of the old mine-shaft close by, in order to show me where he had picked up his copper-samples. I suppose he was determined to prove to me that the unholy dowsing-rod had nothing to do with his beautifully gummed cairn. I humoured him, because I saw that he was very excited, but it only made me feel more sure that the poor creature is cracked. It was altogether just like a chapter in a novel, and you are the first person who has had the chapter whole. The others are so discouraging, all taken up with those despairing engineers, either bullying them (that's papa), or plodding along mentally, if not physically, in their footsteps (that's Agnes); in any case, they have eyes and ears for nothing but *shoding-pits* and *impregnations*; and whenever I begin to tell them about my adventures, they just laugh and tell me that I have got divining-rod on the brain. So now I have turned stiff and don't tell them. The only result of that expedition is, that papa has taken fright about my being garotted among the moors, and has put a stop to my long walks. I am therefore reduced again to the home-covers. Yesterday I paid a visit to an old rattle-trap of a granny,"—and the letter proceeded to describe another interior with much vividness and detail; but Maud's glance no more than skimmed this second picture: there was nothing about it that appealed either to her curiosity or to her imagination, while about the first there was something that appealed to both.

She read things in that letter which Lady Baby was utterly unconscious of having written there. Without having any suspicions of her own—partly perhaps

because suspicions were not much in her line, and partly because her interest in the eccentric shoemaker was only one shade stronger than the interest she felt in the old miner she had visited the day before, or the old granny she had visited the day after—Lady Baby had yet thoroughly succeeded in awakening suspicions in Maud, and without being distinctly aware of the suggestion of mystery about her adventure, she had yet very faithfully transferred that mysterious flavour to her bare statements of the facts. Looked at with Maud's eyes and from Maud's position, unimportant details fell away, and one distinctly suspicious circumstance stood staring her in the face.

She had not done folding up the letter before she said to herself: "That man has something to hide, and it is from that family in particular that he wants to hide it; why else should he have been scared at the name of Bevan?" Slowly slipping back the letter into the envelope, she reflected further thus: "The thing that he wants to hide has got something to do with that copper of his, and it is quite evident that wherever he may have picked up his samples, it certainly was *not* at the mouth of that old shaft—upon that I will cheerfully take my oath. If he did not pick them up there, he must have picked them up somewhere else. Query—Where is this somewhere else, and whence this secrecy? Could it be—no, surely it could not be——" and tearing the letter from the envelope, Maud greedily read over the passage for the third time. When she had done reading it, she sat down rather suddenly on her chair, and stared fixedly at the ceiling. Her mind had been working out the problem in a series of leaps, but

the final leap had landed her in the thick of such a very surprising conclusion, that, for an instant, it stopped her breath. Could it be that her wild guess was right after all? Could it be that this bootmaking maniac knew something of the lost copper? "All very well," said the cool side of Maud's mind—for Maud had a cool and a hot side to her mind—just as an apple has a sunburnt cheek and a pale one,—“all very well; but seeing that the reward offered would be enough to keep him in comfort—and leather—for the rest of his days, why does the old bootmaking maniac not speak out?” “Perhaps *because* he is a maniac,” suggested the opposition voice. But the cool side declined to take the answer; though on the point of there being a mystery about this—what was his name? Samuel Foote—and that mystery connected with the lost copper, both heated fancy and cool common-sense were very speedily agreed.

The frayed collar was not mended that night; Maud decided that she was not calm enough to make straight stitches. The tiny seed which had slipped from between the pages of that letter was growing fast. It had not been sown five minutes, and already it had struck deep roots—all the deeper, no doubt, for the soil on which it had fallen being in a singularly eager and receptive state—greedy for any chance that might fall that way. Soon she was losing herself in astonishment over Lady Baby's inexplicable blindness. “The child must indeed have divining-rods on the brain to have so completely overlooked the real points of the case.” The divining-rods were the part of the subject to which Maud gave the least attention, which she

swept aside with contemptuous disregard; and with all her ingenuity, it never struck her that in so doing she herself was overlooking a feature of the case that was quite as important as Samuel Foote's attitude towards his copper-cairn. Such is the imperfection of human reasoning, and so completely are we at the mercy of the faintest breath of chance.

Maud's pillow, for all that it was covered with the finest linen, felt very rough and very hot that night; the blankets weighed like lead; the Chinese birds upon the bed-curtains twisted themselves into imaginary portraits of the enigmatical shoemaker, and the songs which they piped in her broken dreams were all about Samuel Foote. Looked at from this distance, Samuel Foote was as provoking and also as incomplete as the first half of a riddle, the half without the answer. He was one of those things that demand explanation; and Maud, who had no patience with mysteries, felt certain that the explanation must be somewhere close at hand. It must have been getting on towards the small hours when she started broad awake, and sat up straight in bed. The leap which her mind had given last night had, after all, not been the final one. For now, lashed on by the whip of nightmare, it had leapt forward once again, and the effort, unconscious as it was, had awakened her. She believed that what she stood on now was firm ground; she believed that what she held now was verily the end of the clue. It was but a revival of an old theory of hers, cast aside and half forgotten; the theory about Molly having told tales out of school. Why should not Samuel Foote be one of the Destroying Angel's victims of old? Why should it not have been

from the Angel herself that he had gained his knowledge,—which, for some reason yet to be penetrated, he chose to keep to himself? Flashing down upon her in the dead of night, the suggestion, if it did not bear conviction with it, did at least serve to consolidate her first general suspicions of Samuel Foote, to guide them into a distinct channel—to give them just so much colour and just so much form as would make them worth further investigation. So confident, indeed, did she feel of having hit on the *mot de l'énigme*, that her first instinct, seeing that, at any rate, she could not sleep, was to light a candle and write off straight to Gullyscoombe, advocating an immediate and searching cross-examination of the shoemaker. She had even got so far as lighting the candle, but before she had got further another thought intervened, and she blew the candle out and lay down again. It had occurred to her that she had once been told by a successful whist-player that he made it his invariable rule never to play a trump-card without looking at it twice. If there was anything at all in her somewhat frantic surmise, she undoubtedly held a trump-card in her hand, and she would look at it twice before she played it. To put her friends on the track of the quarry which they had been too thick-skulled or too obstinate to scent for themselves, might be handing them back their lost fortune. They would be rich again. Germaine would be rich again. How, exactly, did she stand with Germaine?

The question brought a little tremor with it, a little uneasiness for the future; but the trump-card she held in her hand, if it was a trump-card, could not fail to

influence that future very seriously. So much might depend upon the exact moment at which it was played, and then there were so many different ways of playing it. To write to Lady Baby, and put the end of the clue into her hands, would be one way, and not a very satisfactory way either, seeing that that clue might, after all, prove to have been a mere bubble of her fancy, in which case she would cut a very well-meaning but somewhat ridiculous figure. Then there was the way of keeping the clue in her own hands and working it out with her own brains, until it proved itself either a failure or a success: if a failure, nothing more need be said about it; if a success, everything would end like a fairy tale—for what question about small scruples of veracity could there exist between any one Bevan and the good fairy from whose hands the family received back its restored fortune? The plan was tempting enough; but the means? The only chance of success pointed its finger straight at Samuel Foote himself. A course of cross-examination by letter was weighed in the balance and found wanting. The same course verbally carried out, was the suggestion that inevitably grew out of the first, and out of it in turn was evolved the equally inevitable logical conclusion that Maud's choice lay between visiting Gullyscoombe in person or throwing her plan to the winds.

As she lay there in the dark her pulses were throbbing tumultuously. The difficulties of the case had greatly stimulated her nerves, and the mystery about it had awakened the detective in her. She had spoken truly, though she had spoken in jest, when she had confessed to Lord Kippendale her talents in that line.

“And I said all along that a detective was what they wanted, quite as much as an engineer,” said Maud, staring still into the darkness. The resolve to play that detective’s part, to play it in the teeth of all difficulties, already stood firm within her. In after days she used to wonder greatly at the violence with which she had embraced her *rôle*. At the moment she was not disposed to analyse the elements of this enthusiastic violence, or she might have discovered among them a certain fanatical desire to be convinced by her own creed, a certain eager grasping at a treasure which she believed to be legitimately her own,—to which, at any rate, she had more right than to that other treasure which a little time back she had been contemplating with an uneasy conscience, and—must it be confessed?—itching fingers.

Yes, the detective should be played; but how? To offer a visit to Gullyscombe was out of the question, for many reasons; to reach that neighbourhood was imperative. Wild plans flitted through her brain, presentable perhaps when looked at in the dead of night; but Maud felt a vague, and by degrees a more and more drowsy conviction, that not one of them would stand the test of daylight; and it was with that “how?” still upon her lips that she at last fell asleep in good earnest.

CHAPTER V.

A CHANCE MEETING.

"My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease."

HER ladyship was dining out, and so was her ladyship's *protégée*. Considering how stark-dead the season was, the dinner-table presented a wonderfully respectable appearance, and after dinner more guests arrived, bringing with them rolls of music and instrument-cases of such divers shapes and sizes that the unmusical people began to feel doubtful about their dinner digestion; but they covered their doubts with a smile, for this was a musical house. Maud, listening languidly to a harp-solo played by a young lady who had acquired a much-admired execution at the expense of her spine and her complexion, all at once heard some one behind her ask in a whisper, "Who is that bored-looking individual in the doorway? Doesn't he look as if he had had just this harp-solo played to him all his life, and were gorged with it?"

"Or with anything else in the world as well," said another voice in answer; "it isn't harp-solos in particular that he is gorged with; it is life in general."

Maud turned her head in the direction indicated, and saw Mr. Carbury standing in the doorway, with folded arms and a look of patient misery on his face. She had expected to see him when she turned; the remarks she had overheard fitted him as well as his own coat fitted him.

The sallow lady with the injured spine and the beautiful execution had just struck her last chord, and, amidst deafening applause, was being led away to lie down flat on a sofa. Under cover of the general commotion, Maud left her place and moved towards the door where Mr. Carbury stood. At the same instant he moved away from it in an opposite direction. It might have been mere accident, he might not have seen her, and yet Maud had fancied that their glances had just crossed.

Exactly the same thing happened a little later in the evening, and this time there was obviously no accident about it. "What ever is the matter with the man?" thought Maud, rather amused, a good deal puzzled, and perhaps a trifle mortified. Up to that moment she had not cared particularly whether or not she had a talk with Mr. Carbury, whom she had not seen since the Kippendale days. She now determined that she would have the talk. And of course she had it. Mr. Carbury might just as well have given in to his fate with a good grace at once, instead of manœuvring about the rooms in avoidance of Miss Epperton, only to be out-manœuvred by Miss Epperton, and presently to find himself launched full sail on a *tête-à-tête* with her in one of the most retired corners of the room.

"To begin at the beginning," said Maud, "what makes you run away from me?"

Of course Mr. Carbury disclaimed all idea of running away, but he did so with a certain ruffled dignity which, instead of allaying Maud's curiosity, only increased it. She was accustomed to see him on the defensive, armed to the teeth, as it were, against any

atom of ridicule which might by any possibility be anywhere at large within striking distance of his person; but this stand-off attitude of to-night was something quite distinct and by itself. It was with an individual and not a general mistrust that he was watching her, as though doubtful of her intentions.

"It cannot be that you are afraid of me," said Maud, disregarding his stiff disclaimer, "for *you* know that *I* know you too well to expect you to exert yourself beyond bringing me an ice perhaps, *tout au plus*. It cannot be that you are bored with me, because you haven't seen me for three months, though, for the matter of that, I don't believe that has anything to do with it. I believe you were *blasé* as a baby; I believe you were bored to death by your first rattle."

"Very possibly I was," said Carbury, eyeing her a shade more suspiciously, "more especially if it rattled much."

Maud shook her head. "It was a great mistake, Mr. Carbury, and it was the first of a very long series of mistakes which you have been making ever since. Shall I tell you why life bores you so? It is because you look at it through one pair of eyes and listen to it with one pair of ears. It is because everything to you tastes of yourself. Now the really artistic egotism is to help yourself to other people's eyes and ears. Look at me, for instance,—have you ever seen me bored by any mortal thing? But you, who will persist in looking at everything from one single point of view, how can you wonder that you should be for ever getting the same lights and the same shades, that everything should look the same shape, the same colour, the same everything?"

"The violin trio is just beginning," said Mr. Carbury with undisguised irritation; "had we not better get nearer?" and he half rose from his chair.

"No, thanks," said Maud, settling herself more comfortably. "I have had enough music for to-night, and we have only just begun to talk. Don't you know that we ought to be mingling our condolences? Have you forgotten under what roof we last met? Have you no neat speech to make about the ruin of our friends?"

Maud spoke gaily, with her eyes on Carbury's face. She saw him give a very slight start, the sort of shiver that men give when an open wound is touched. Then he pulled himself together.

"They were scarcely my friends," he said, harshly. "I never saw them before the day that that crank-axle broke. I can't call them more than acquaintances."

"But even the ruin of one's acquaintances may distress one a little, I suppose?"

"Every one has to take their share of bad luck," said Carbury, almost violently. "And I don't suppose it's worse for them than for any one else." Then he turned impatiently, as though aware of Maud's laughing eyes upon him. "It doesn't seem to distress you much, at any rate, Miss Epperton. I never saw you in better spirits."

"That is because I reflect that every ruin is not irretrievable." And again Maud laughed. There was no denying that she was in exceptionally good spirits that night. Her laugh came readily, the exultant sparkle of her eye seemed to denote that she was hugging to her heart some secret cause for satisfaction. "I was in the thick of it, you know," she continued

lightly. "If you had not evacuated Kippendale with that tragic suddenness, just twelve hours too soon, you would have been in the thick of it too."

"I am not aware that there was anything either tragic or sudden about my departure from Kippendale," said Mr. Carbury, sitting very bolt-upright in his chair. "It was business that called me away," he haughtily continued; "at least, so far as I can recall the circumstances. I am not sure that I exactly remember what it was that caused me to leave Scotland that day: at any rate, it was nothing vital," finished Carbury, in a carefully steadied voice; and he eyed Maud with a distinct challenge, a sort of "laugh-if-you-dare" expression of countenance, which so nearly upset her gravity that she felt for a moment compelled to hide her face behind her fan. A light had broken in upon her. By dint of apologising for his departure he had succeeded in reminding Maud that an apology was necessary, by dint of giving explanations he had called her attention to the fact that such an explanation had hitherto been wanting. Her own wit, aided by a backward glance, did the rest. She had some difficulty in not choking behind her fan. So this was masculine ingenuity? She had heard of the thing before, but she had never seen it in quite so curious a shape. So that was why he had fled so perseveringly to-night, and had lowered so sulkily when brought to bay? Maud had never heard a full account of that scene in the conservatory, but from words and hints dropped, and conclusions drawn, she had got pretty near the truth; and she perfectly understood why, as being in a sort of way one of the witnesses of his discomfiture, she should be so distaste-

ful to Mr. Carbury. "And to think that, but for his running away, I never should have dreamt of pursuing him; and but for his sticking up a screen, it never would have occurred to me to try and find out what there was on the other side!" Thus reflected Maud, biting her lips in silence. "If he knew how deeply he has let me into his secrets, I believe his reason would totter. I declare until to-night I looked on the thing as a fancy, but after to-night I am not sure, I am not at all sure, whether it doesn't belong to the category of passions. I should like to find out; the man amuses me."

When Maud's face emerged again from over her fan, it was perfectly composed. The silence, however full it may have been, had been short—just long enough, in fact, to make an apparent change of subject natural.

"Have you any messages for our friends?" she serenely inquired. "It is not unlikely that I may have an opportunity of meeting them soon."

This was the experiment by means of which Maud had very rapidly decided to "find out."

"You are going there? To Gullyscoombe? To stay with them?"

Mr. Carbury's brown face had grown quite white; he spoke with a catch in his breath, and clutched at the arm of Maud's chair. Maud noticed nothing, apparently. She was not looking at him, but at a Japanese cabinet against the wall, and yet she could have told Mr. Carbury's complexion to a shade and the look in his eyes to a sparkle.

"No, I am not going to stay with them; but I am

going to spend a few weeks on that coast. Little Hal Wyndhurst, Lady Euphrosyne's youngest boy, is in bad health; he has been ordered to some quiet seaside place. Lady Euphrosyne's engagements being numerous and pressing, she has consented to intrust him to my care. Floundershayle, it now appears, is only some three miles distant from Gullyscoombe House. That is why I asked you whether you had any messages."

This gave Mr. Carbury the chance of picking up the fragments of his scattered self-possession, which he was not slow to do—Miss Epperton all the time studying the Japanese cabinet.

"Oh, that's it; I see," he said, leaning back in his chair with elaborate carelessness. The rigid and defiant attitude was dropped now as superfluous, since it was evident that, after all, Miss Epperton was not so quick at suspecting things as he had imagined. "Well—no," he drawled, languidly. "As for messages, I really don't know. By the by, is it a fact that the marriage is put off?"

"Put off? It is broken off."

Mr. Carbury waited for a minute before speaking again; there was something in his throat that might have interfered with his drawl if he had spoken at once. A wild curiosity was tearing at his heart-strings, a dozen questions were burning on his tongue. He had never quite understood the sequel of that affair; he had never quite comprehended why an announcement which he had been looking for with dread—the news of a broken engagement renewed—had not yet become an accomplished fact. He had waited for it as one waits for a thunderbolt, and felt harassed by its non-appearance as

a man might feel provoked with the thunderbolt for keeping him so long on thorns.

"How did the marriage come to be broken off?" he asked abruptly.

"They quarrelled."

"Yes, I know about that. But after that came the catastrophe,—how is it that that did not bring Wyndhurst back?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders. "The North Sea is a long way off, at least some parts of it are."

Carbury understood immediately that Sir Peter knew nothing of the catastrophe. "Oh, is it so? Then the events to come are as clear as the sun at noonday. He returns, hears of the misfortune, offers himself, and is accepted."

"Yes," said Maud, "offers himself, but is rejected."

"What makes you think so?"

"Have you forgotten that Lady Baby is a pauper and that Sir Peter is a millionaire?"

"Oh, I see,—scruples about pride and honour, and so on; they will be overcome."

"Not so easily as you think. I happen to know that Lady Baby has declared her distinct intention of not accepting Sir Peter's addresses—his charity she calls it—so long as she is a beggar."

Carbury was listening with strained attention. "But such a declaration is nonsensical; it could bind no one."

"No one perhaps but Lady Baby."

"Are you sure about this?" he asked quickly.

"Quite sure. In fact——" and then Maud broke off abruptly. No, it would undoubtedly be indiscreet to mention to Mr. Carbury a certain very much blotted

and wildly scrawled little note which, in a sudden fit of confidence, Lady Euphrosyne had shown her only the other day. The fact of its existence would probably be very comforting to this rejected lover; but, though Maud felt very sorry for him, she did not feel justified in administering comfort in exactly this shape. She had already said more than she had ever intended to say.

"Then that was not what you meant about the ruin not being irretrievable?" remarked Carbury. "You said something of the sort just now."

"I? Oh, I was speaking in general, about ruin in the abstract. How should I know anything about the chances of this ruin in particular? Our poor friends are beggars just at present; and for anything I know, they may end by being buried in paupers' graves."

"That would indeed be a come-down for their ladyships," said Carbury, with so cruel a gleam in his eyes that Maud looked at him in astonishment.

"Mr. Carbury!" she said on an impulse, "I should not like to have you for an enemy. Revenge is almost gone out of fashion, I know, but you look as though you had it in you to be implacable."

Carbury drew himself up stiffly; his face had frozen again into its habitual listlessness. "Who ever said that I had any cause for anything so melodramatic as revenge?" he inquired, distantly. "It strikes me that we are getting off our subject. When did you say that you make your start?"

"Next week," said Maud; and then there fell another silence between them, filled most conveniently by the shrieks of the three fiddles.

"I suppose," said Mr. Carbury slowly, after that silence,— "I suppose that that village—Floundershayle you called it—is nothing but a wretched little fishy hole?"

"Well, it will be provincial, to put it mildly," said Maud, in some surprise.

"And I suppose it hasn't got any shops?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. I daresay one will be able to buy fish-hooks, and perhaps even woollen jerseys."

"Then how will you do about getting things?—books, or paper, or so on?"

"Write for them, I suppose."

Carbury sat still for a moment, gnawing his black moustache, and gazing at his crush-hat with an expression of scorn and disgust which seemed quite inapplicable to that most faultless and exquisite article of attire.

"Look here," he broke out in the most ungracious of tones, "I am not at all bad at choosing books, or, in fact, at commissions of any sort—even ribbons, you know, and,"—he paused, and seemed to swallow something dry in his throat, something that must have had a bad taste too, to judge from his expression,— "and—hats. And I haven't got anything else special to do just at present. If you like you may drop me a line when you want a thing; I should be very"—another gulp—"glad to get it for you, and I shouldn't mind it much, really."

He broke off fiercely, and glared at Maud for her answer.

She had resumed her examination of the cabinet.

Right through the scorn of the tone she had rightly construed the drift of this unlooked-for address, and had understood that it was the part of underground passage which was once more being offered her. She was no longer surprised. She was not quite sure whether she was not a little touched. For Mr. Carbury to offer to incommode himself to the point of choosing a book for any one but himself was quite as startling as a three-hundred-mile journey undertaken by another. But while she thought thus she was speaking differently.

"What a capital idea!" she was saying, quite as calmly as though the proposition just made was of the most ordinary and everyday sort, and as though there was nothing in the least humorous about Mr. Carbury choosing her hats. "To tell the truth, I had never thought of that difficulty; but now that I come to consider it, I should have been rather put about for a connecting-link with civilisation. You will fill the post admirably."

Maud had no objection at all to being used as underground passage, for, except when her own interest came in the way, she was always good-natured.

"It's a bargain then," Mr. Carbury was saying hurriedly, just as the quiet corner was invaded; "and when you send me a line about the thing, whatever it is, you might just as well mention what the place is really like."

"And how it agrees with our friends?" added Maud, demurely.

"Not quite so well as Kippendale, I fancy," said Carbury, with another of those smiles which had startled

Maud a minute ago; and then, meeting her eyes, he turned sharply away, and she saw him no more that night.

Up to that last moment Maud had, in sheer mercy, avoided his face; but in that one glance she had learnt everything that she wanted to know.

"That child has very much more to answer for than she has any idea of," said Maud to herself, a little awe-stricken, perhaps, in the depth of her heart, as one is ever apt to be awe-stricken by a glimpse, however passing, of a genuine human passion unmasked, —of what it can put into a man's eyes, of how pitifully plain it can stand written on even a worldling's face.

"I believe that man would do any mortal thing if he thought he had the ghost of a chance," reflected Maud that night on the homeward drive;—"any mortal thing, though I daresay he is not aware of that himself." And this again was one of those unrecognised turning-points which we pass blindfolded. It was not till some time afterwards that Maud recalled this reflection of hers, or that its full import and meaning was borne in upon her. Just now her attention was taken up by preparations for the seaside trip.

The manner in which this said trip had come to be arranged requires some further explanation. Maud, having once made up her mind that, by fair means or foul, she would transport herself to within reach of the mysterious shoemaker, had been devoting the whole energies of her mind to discovering an answer to that "How?" immersed in the consideration of which she had gone to sleep a few days ago.

"Shall I discover a colony of country cousins in some remote village?" she reflected, seriously turning over the various schemes in her mind; "or shall I get shipwrecked on the coast, and require to spend a fortnight in a fisherman's hut, in order to set up my nerves?" She shook her head; the right thing had not yet been hit on. But Providence helps those that help themselves. If you sit all day long with your eyes wide open, and your ten fingers spread ready to catch at the merest rag of a chance, you generally end by finding means to accomplish your object.

Little Hal Wyndhurst had recently had a fall from his pony, and had been ailing ever since then, growing rather black about the eyes, and yellow about the throat. "A shock to the nervous system" had been the diagnosis, and "country air" the prescription. Accordingly it had been settled that when Lady Euphrosyne started on her fashionable visits, the five cherubs, with their six attending spirits, should be packed off to Nolesworth.

"Now, just supposing," thought Maud—"just supposing that that dear, delightful, intelligent, *good-looking* doctor had said 'sea air,' instead of 'country air'! Supposing he could be got to say so still!"

When this dear, delightful, intelligent, good-looking person paid his next professional visit, Miss Epperton happened to be in the room. He was undoubtedly good-looking, and very charming, quite the most charming medical adviser agoing, and not at all like a doctor to look at. Also there was something delightfully unprofessional about his smile and the soft impressionability of his glance. No rigidity of opinion, no rigour of prescription; it was entirely by the happy knack of

reading the wishes of his fair patients from out of their blue or black, fiery or languishing eyes, that Sir Ambrose Cathcart had become Sir Ambrose.

"Go by your own feeling, certainly; the great thing in these cases is to go by your own feeling," was the smooth formula, ready at any moment to trip from off the extreme point of his tongue, and calculated to make happy the heart of an overworked *élégante*, whose husband was for dragging her off to the repose of the country, but whose "own feeling" was that she would die for want of the London season.

"Change of air?" said Maud, in the course of this professional visit, "but is that enough? Ought there not also to be a complete change of scene? I know nothing about it at all, Sir Ambrose,"—with a little *naïve* laugh which helped to bewilder him with a flash of white teeth,—“but I always fancied that unfamiliar surroundings were nowadays considered the thing for shattered nerves; and Nolesworth can't exactly be described as unfamiliar to poor little Hal.”

"Quite so, Miss Epperton, your observation is of the most just. Also, it would be preferable if, instead of going to Nolesworth, he were to——”

"Ah, I know what you are going to say," broke in Maud; "go to the seaside. Was not that it, Sir Ambrose? I know that you always prescribe salt air for nerves."

"Your observation is just," said Sir Ambrose Cathcart, glibly, wincing just a little under the volley of "Epperton glances" which Maud was firing down upon him. "My usual prescription of course; and if the feeling of the patient——”

“Hal,” said Maud, gaily, drawing the pale boy towards her, “what is your feeling about going to the seaside?”

The patient thus consulted, aged eight, confessed to feelings which entirely favoured the seaside plan. How could it be otherwise, after all the delightful things about star-fish and cockle-shells, and pink-and-lilac sea-anemones which he had heard of last night when “Cousin Eppy”—as the little Wyndhursts playfully called Maud—had come to sit on the side of his bed, and put him to sleep with stories?

As the great thing was to go by one’s own feeling, the matter was here clenched. Lady Euphrosyne looked rather perplexed when she heard of the doctor’s decision. She had been out during the visit. What was she to do? Give up her visits in order to take Hal to the seaside? Send down the whole colony of eleven to eat their heads off at Brighton at a ruinous expense? Send Hal down alone with a nurse? No nurse was to be trusted at a place of that sort; at Nolesworth it was a different thing. What on earth was to be done?

It was then that Maud stepped in and offered to play Providence to Hal and his nurse. She had no special engagements for the next fortnight; would Lady Euphrosyne trust her? Lady Euphrosyne not only trusted her, but took her in her arms and kissed her, so delighted was she at her own escape; and she ended by leaving the arrangements for the expedition, and even the choice of the place, entirely in Maud’s hands. For two days Maud appeared to be studying this question, and then she spoke to Lady Euphrosyne about a

delightful little village on the sea-coast which she had heard of. "Quite a simple, lovely little fishing village, you know; not at all a fashionable place, but so free and healthy and retired. Does it not sound charming?"

Lady Euphrosyne thought it sounded very dull; but, after all, it was not she who was expected to go there. She was very fond of little Hal, but she was not fond of tiresome details. In fact, she did not clearly understand where exactly was situated this romantic fishing village to which her youngest cherub was to be taken; but she left everything to Miss Epperton. Miss Epperton was so sensible.

Maud felt pleased with herself. It was, in fact, a masterly *coup*. It was killing two very pretty birds with one neat little stone. It was gaining the object she had just then at heart, and it was at the same time retaining, nay, even improving, her position in Lady Euphrosyne's household—a circumstance which, considering the uncertainty of that object, was not to be despised. For Maud never for a moment forgot that her theory had yet to be proved, and she had no mind whatever to fall between two stools.

CHAPTER VI.

SAMUEL FOOTE.

"And, always, 'tis the saddest sight to see,
An old man faithless in Humanity."

TAKEN as a whole, Floundershayle was a singularly grey place, though grey, it is true, in many different shades. There was the dull grey of the rocks, the

chilly grey of the huddled houses, topped by the bluish-grey of their slate-roofs; there was the leaden grey of the waves, and there was the stormy grey of a low-hanging sky, rarely lightened at this season by so much as a watery sunbeam. Taken as a whole, Floundershayle was also a singularly serious place. Perhaps it was because of its being so grey that it was so serious; or perhaps what had given to the villagers that set cast of countenance, and even to the children that solemn stare, was the anxiety of the life they lived, the tooth-and-nail struggle with wind and waves by which the majority of them gained their bread. Men who, on an average, look death in the face not less than once a-week, are not generally given to viewing life from a light-hearted or a flippant point of view. Children whose fathers, or if not their fathers their uncles, or if not their uncles their grandfathers, have come to an untimely end in pursuit of their watery calling, are wont to draw their early impressions, those impressions that mould character, from nights of terror and scenes of grief; to have their games broken off by the exigencies of desperate rescues, and their laughter drowned by the wailing of their mothers and the weeping of their sisters. Windows that are for ever being shaken by the wind are apt to droop in their sockets to a half-melancholy, half-drunken angle, which cannot fail to impart a certain desolation to the scene which they are supposed to frame; panes that are for ever crusted with the salt of flying spray cannot be expected to blink so brightly as their inland brethren; walls that have stood there patiently to be beaten and buffeted from year to year, their faces scarred by a hundred storms, the doorsteps at their feet eaten into

by the eager breath of the sea, will never smile at the wanderer with that cheery welcome which happy farmhouses, or thatched cottages in sheltered dells, can so cheaply give. The very door—framed, as it very likely is, from the remains of a ship that has gone to pieces on the rocks before your eyes—can scarcely be entered with quite the same vacuity of thought that would be perfectly in place in the farmhouse or the cottage.

So, whether it was that the village was haunted by the ghosts of drowned fishermen, or whether it was that it was shadowed by the curses of shipwrecked mariners—such mariners, namely, who, according to wicked old stories about that Choughshire coast, had been shipwrecked not quite by accident—Floundershayle was grey, and it was serious. No doubt the granite had more to do with it than anything else. The rocks were granite; out of great square blocks of this same granite the houses were built, and with great slabs of granite the pig-sties were enclosed; lumps of granite paved the tortuous streets, and stiles of granite intercepted the paths. No golden thatch, no rosy flush of bricks—all grey stone and grey slate.

But of course it was not all grey, or flesh and blood could not have stood it. There is nothing so bad but it has its extenuating circumstances. The little steep stony streets climbing up and down the uneven ground were brightened here and there by rough attempts at gardening. Coming suddenly round a straggly corner, or emerging from out of the most curiously twisted by-way, it was a relief to find a fuchsia still in flower nailed against a sheltered scrap of wall, and nodding its many red heads at you in the breeze; or to stumble upon

little odd corners of garden, of any shape and in any position, three-cornered or square, a strip or a patch, screening themselves from the sea-air as best they could, and chock-full just now of somewhat battered autumn flowers,—of asters and marigolds and dahlias, all with very thick juicy stalks, and very big round heads, fed and fattened as they were by fish-refuse and sea-weed manure. And here, too, the remains of defunct vessels come in most conveniently; for if Dick Trebellin's patch of "escalony" was fenced in with what had once formed part of the cabinwork of that Dutch ship that was wrecked last year, Bob Penly had been even more fortunate in securing for his geranium-bed three yards of green trellis-work, which no one would have recognised as the poop of that unfortunate German vessel that six years ago was lost with all hands. But as the demand for the precious spars was great, and as ships were not wrecked every day even at Floundershayle, it was only a favoured few who were the proud possessors of wooden palings. Half-a-dozen granite boulders pushed together so as to form a rough wall was the common thing; or occasionally an old fishing-net, stretched from one stake to another, ended its existence in the character of an impromptu garden-hedge.

It must have been in obedience to the law of compensation that the Floundershayle villagers cultivated their tangled gardens. The red and the yellow of these bright patches was the natural antidote to the grey of the granite, and their perfume, no doubt, was equally the antidote to the other perfumes of the place. For, in addition to being grey and to being serious, the village also, unfortunately, was very highly scented, and

not exclusively with the breath of flowers. It smelt of fish in every shape, and also, alas! in every stage; of fish cooked, uncooked, and cooking; of fish plump and lean, flat and long, fresh-caught and stale. It smelt also of nets hung up to dry, of wet boots put out to sun, of boats pulled up on the beach, of a great many square yards of wood and leather, which had been saturated, and thrice saturated, with seawater.

Floundershayle had a church with a square tower, it had a post-office, and it had also an inn. This inn stood at the upper end of one of the steep streets, which up to that point was very narrow, like all the Floundershayle streets, but widened there abruptly, leaving a free space in front of the inn, a sort of sandy slope, where three or four old boats lay, keel uppermost—boats which would never put to sea again, and now appeared to have no other object in existence than to serve as convenient lounges for the gossips of the place. In each of the inn windows which flanked the front door there was stuck a paper, once white, now yellow by the action of the salt air. On one of these papers it was announced that hot coffee was to be had within on the shortest notice, on the other, in the same handwriting, and, as it were, in the same tone of voice, wooden coffins were promised, also at the shortest notice.

Considering the very frequent occurrence of violent death upon this coast, the advertisement of the coffins really required no explanation; but to the mind of a superstitious traveller there would appear to be some depressing connection between the two announcements in the two windows, as if the requirement of the second

article was a simple and natural result of the consumption of the first.

It was in this inn that Maud, in charge of little Hal and his nurse, found herself installed. The nurse was in despair at everything, beginning with the coffee and ending with the mattresses; and the corners of Hal's mouth went down a little when he discovered that the beach was of rock and not of sand, and that his wooden spade would not dig holes in granite; but Maud complained of nothing. Her curiosity had reached a pitch that was almost fever-heat, or would have been fever-heat had the hot-headed Maud not been resolutely kept under by the cool-headed Maud. It was the cool-headed Maud who determined that one whole day should be devoted to resting from the fatigues of the journey, calmly reviewing the situation, and cautiously making inquiries.

"Samuel Foote?" said the landlady, when questioned—"it's him we call the outlandish bootmaker." Why was he called so? The landlady really was not very sure, except that it might be he had come from some outlandish parts when he settled in the country some ten or twelve years ago. No one denied that he was crazy, but for all that he made fishing-boots that stuck together in the sea-water longer than any that were made for miles and miles around, and therefore, despite his inconvenient position, he never lacked customers. "But if it's giving him an order you're after, miss, you might as well spare yourself the trouble, for he'll not take it."

"Why not?" asked Maud in surprise.

"He'll neither make nor mend a shoe for any

woman, be she old or young, foul or fair; it's just one of his crazy ways."

"A woman-hater, then," said Maud to herself, in considerable amusement, and with an increased thrill of interest, for the idea of a woman-hater tallied most admirably with that of a rejected lover. "Is that why he lives so far away by himself?" she inquired.

"That's it, miss; he can't abide the sight of a woman's face. He's got better days and worse days. Sometimes, maybe, when a girl comes along with her father's boots to be patched he'll snap a few words at her, though mighty sharp ones; but oftener he'll turn his back and play the deaf, dumb, and blind, whatever you may do or say, and once he gets that fit, red-hot pincers wouldn't get a word out of him."

Presently Maud succeeded in discovering that the spot where Samuel Foote lived was the spot of what had once been one of the mines worked by the Bevan family. It stood on Gullyscombe ground, and was distant several miles. The name of the old mine? The name of the old mine was Wheal Tally-ho; it had been shut up years ago. The stolid but civil landlady was quite sorry to have to remember how many years ago it was. "Wheal Tally-ho," repeated Maud to herself, —where had that name got a place in her memory? Then it came back to her: the glass case in the library at Kippendale, and Lord Kippendale, with civilly repressed impatience, explaining to her about the different copper-samples. Yes, she remembered now quite well. Wheal Tally-ho was the old copper-mine which had come to grief, as Lord Kippendale expressed it, just about the same time that his brother Ronald had

come to grief. It was the mine that had grown so poor that the propriety of working it further had become an open question, when, again in Lord Kippendale's words, half-a-dozen yards of roofing had mercifully fallen in, and thus had settled the question in favour of abandonment.

Upon this day of voluntary inaction there followed two more days of enforced inaction — enforced, alas! by the rain, which boisterously pelted the inn windows, and which, no doubt, was doing exactly the same to the windows of Gullyscombe House, over at the other side of the bay. Maud could not help wondering how her friends were spending these dismal hours. She hoped, she hardly knew why, that she would not meet any of them before the question of Samuel Foote was settled one way or the other. But she had no objection to listening to what the landlady had to say about them, and the landlady had a good deal to say, for the subject was naturally one of very vital interest in this neighbourhood. By the evening of that third day, Maud was in possession of a very fair collection of particulars concerning what the family at Gullyscombe had said and done and looked since their advent in those parts. "Shall I be merciful and pass them on?" said Maud to herself, with a smile, that night after Hal had been packed into bed, and she sat alone in the little primitive sitting-room; and then, perhaps because she had nothing to do, perhaps because she so very distinctly remembered that last look she had seen on Mr. Carbury's face, she pulled the inkstand towards her, and, almost before she was aware of it, had covered three pages with her first imperfect and not over-cheer-

ful impressions of the country. "If Gullyscoombe is one quarter as bad as its description," she wrote, "it is no wonder that, despite their high spirit, they have begun to mope already, and that poor Lord Kippendale has aged a year for every week of his exile." And then, for decency's sake, something was said on the fourth page about a pair of gloves that were to be strong and cheap, and regarding which she would be very grateful, &c.

Next day the sky was still of a hardened hopeless grey; but the rain had ceased to fall, and Maud resolved to delay no longer. Despite the landlady's warning, she carefully wrapped a pair of old shoes in paper: whether they were accepted or not, they would do equally well as a means of introduction. Having established Hal at a window from which he could watch the string of men that were carting sea-weed on the beach—for the tide was out—Maud, with her parcel under her arm, a map of the country in her pocket, and a few general directions as to the road carefully stored in her memory, sallied forth on her voyage of discovery. Turning her face away from the sea, she threaded her way between the little close-packed grey houses until the path was struck which led her past the little grey church. Beyond the church there stood one or two solitary huts and some square enclosures, used for the cattle at night, and consisting of low loose walls of stone, kept only from crumbling down entirely by the bramble and furze which overgrew them. A gap in the wall, and the scattered stones beside it, ready to be built into their place when the cattle should have entered, was all the gate that could be afforded in this

country of much stone and little wood. A little farther on Maud passed some of the cows themselves, lifting their legs rather disconsolately from between the prickly furze, and looking very much, poor beasts, as though they had been fed upon something about as nourishing as that everlasting grey granite from which there seemed no escape.

The path had now become a sort of steep lane, sunk between high stony sides. By degrees, as the path mounted, the banks lowered; but it was not until she had been walking for fully half an hour that Maud emerged at last into the open, and was able to judge of the sort of country she was traversing.

A naked line of hills confronted her; their crests jagged into a rocky outline, as forbidding as battlements and as sharp as teeth, their flanks scattered over with granite blocks, savagely piled or wildly strewn. The summer blaze of furze-blossom had long since been quenched—all but a few yellow flames that lingered to crest a ridge or touch a hollow. For one bush in bloom there stood a hundred that were flowerless, or rustling with bleached remains, the ghosts of a fire that has burnt itself to ashes. Here and there, at great intervals, there was something that would have liked to be a tree, if only that tyrannous sea-breeze would consent; but these were all twisted and curiously contorted by the action of the wind, and the only leaves that grew to normal size were those that were turned towards the land. Every bush was thus but half developed, kept under by the knife of the gale where it stood exposed, which gave to them all a curious one-sided look. Seen from afar, these widely scattered

trees, all leaning in one direction, all with their backs to the sea and their faces to the land, with their knotted branches and crazy trunks, appeared like a scattered band of fugitive cripples, hunch-backed, lame, and dwarfed, hobbling away on their sick legs from the enemy behind them, but condemned by an unkind fate to hobble for ever on the same spot, and to stretch their arms in vain towards the shelter which they so sorely need, but which it is their destiny never to reach. Presently the path which Maud was following changed its character once more. It had begun by being a road, it had then turned into a lane, it had now become a path, and soon no more than a thread or a shadow of one, scarcely discernible as such except where looking some way ahead the darker green of the crushed grass caught the eye. All this time it had been steadily mounting, and soon Maud found herself in the midst of the scattered stone-blocks which she had seen from afar, and for the first time experienced the oppressive desolation of a granite moor.

And now the hillside begins to assume the appearance of a vast graveyard, with a graveyard's mournfulness, but without a graveyard's peace. These reeling slabs, these tottering pillars, these monumental piles, rudely thrown down and recklessly scattered, all seem to speak of tombs desecrated and broken repose. If the Choughshire giants of old do indeed sleep under these tumbled headstones, as it is hard to believe they do not, it is quite clear, at any rate, that they do not sleep well. Neither is their memory cherished, nor are their resting-places tended; only the bramble with its thorny branches clasps the stone, only bitter berries

drop upon it: for epitaph these much neglected giants have but the scars graven by the beating rain; and for mourner, the white sea-bird that flits moaning over the rock.

As Maud's eyes roamed from side to side, her heart seemed to stand still in face of this strong desolation. There was nothing living in sight, nothing that seemed to speak of life having ever been there, unless it were that shadowy thread of a path on ahead, and a tuft of sheep's-wool caught upon the thorns of a furze and fluttering in the wind. How long she wandered on thus Maud never exactly knew, nor how often she made up her mind that she had lost her way, nor how feverishly she consulted her map. She knew only that when her anxious eyes were at last rewarded by something that stood out boldly against the sky—something that was too tall for a tree and too straight for a pile of boulders—she gazed at it for more than a minute incredulously, and almost refused to believe that this was really a mine-chimney. But, once having convinced herself of the fact, she left the path without hesitation, and took what seemed to be the straightest road across country. It was with soaked feet and panting chest that she stood at length beside the old mine-buildings. The ground which they occupied was comparatively level, but at a few hundred paces off a new ridge of hill rose at so decided an angle as to present what was apparently a wall of rock curtained and fringed by tangled overgrowth. It was only now that with a qualm the question arose, Is it the right place after all? At first sight the engine-house alone, with its granite chimney, appeared to have escaped ruin.

There was an open shed or two with a certain amount of roof remaining, and there were several large uneven mounds of rubbish, the mining "deads" of former days, now half buried in weeds. The place had evidently been dismantled years ago, though, to judge from the extent of its ruins, it had once upon a time been a large concern. All the window-frames and doors had been torn out, though the walls had been left to stand, for wood was as precious in this country as stone was cheap.

"This is the wildest of all wild-goose chases," reflected Maud, as she picked her way among the weeds and rubbish; "a shoemaker here, indeed!" She had scarcely said it when, on turning a corner, she caught sight of a curl of smoke, a row of beehives, a band of flowers, and a blue signboard with the portrait of a wonderful sort of boot, for which the requisite sort of leg would still have to be invented, and the following inscription, "Samuel Foote, Man Bootmaker"—this written so large that he who might chance to run here could certainly not fail to read. The door over which the blue board hung was closed, and evidently in working order; and there were panes, very much crossed with strips of paper but still panes, in the window beside it. It was clear that this one little corner of the deserted buildings had been made habitable; there was even a rough stone fencing round the band of flowers, composed evidently of stones dragged together from the ruins around. By the side of the patched-up building stood a pile of dead furze neatly stacked and carefully weighted with stones. Finding herself so near the attainment of her object, actually face to face with the veil

which shrouded the mystery, Maud stood still in a sort of dismay. It rushed over her that what she was going to do was no less than putting her own fate and that of the house of Kippendale to the touch. The idea which had been for the last fortnight the mainspring of her actions had never appeared to her so insanelly far-fetched, so pitifully improbable, as it appeared at this moment. If she stayed her hand before lifting the veil, it was not because she was afraid of the mystery that lay behind; rather it was because she was afraid that there was no mystery there—that, after all, this old shoemaker was just an old shoemaker and nothing more, and that she herself would within the next ten minutes be proved the dupe of her own ingenuity.

But it was too late to retreat. With resolute steps Maud approached the door. A row of wooden boot-shapes leant against the wall, with the leather stretched over them for drying, looking rather like amputated legs. The beehives wore iron collars round their necks, and being securely tethered to the walls, could no doubt stand their ground in the teeth of the fiercest blast. Among the overblown flowers the bees were busily murmuring. Within, also, there was a sound—some one whistling in a shrill, sharp, melancholy tone. Maud rapped boldly with her umbrella against the door, and the whistling at once turned into a plaintive grumbling which gradually approached the door, accompanied by shuffling steps. Then a little, old man, a curiously hideous, little, old man looked out upon Maud. Everything about him was crooked, beginning with his mouth, which went down at one side as though he had just swallowed a spoonful of unadulterated vinegar, and his

nose, which inclined one way more than the other, and ending with his feet, which appeared to be of different sizes, a much worse match than any boots he had ever made—at least, it was to be hoped so for the sake of his customers. His shoulders also were of different heights, and no one of his fingers appeared to be in the slightest degree related to any of the nine others—scarcely, in fact, to be on bowing terms with them. Altogether, Maud, as she saw him, felt reminded of those grotesquely contorted trees which she had noticed in her upward walk. To make this general inequality complete, he was one-eyed. The remaining eye was small and grey; if he had ever had another, most likely it had been black or blue, so obstinately did Nature appear to have made up her mind that nothing about this unlucky creature should match anything else. “I am not in the least surprised at Molly not having taken *this* one,” said Maud to herself, as she surveyed the figure of fun before her. The queer little shoemaker had come to the door holding a half-finished boot in one hand, but at sight of Maud he dropped it, and stood regarding her in an attitude of petrified consternation.

“I have brought a pair of shoes to be new heeled,” began Maud in a clear and decisive tone.

The shoemaker glared for about a minute longer, with his sour mouth going down at one corner, and his solitary eye dilating with what looked like a mixture of alarm and suspicion. Then, slowly disclosing some half-dozen teeth, each of a different size, shape, and colour, he turned his misshapen head over the lower of his two shoulders. “Did she read the sign?” he

observed, in a voice as full of cracks and fissures as an old fiddle-board. "It is written plain, and it is written big. Shall I have to write it bigger?" He did not seem to be speaking to Maud but to somebody in the interior of the room.

"Well," said Maud calmly, "will you mend my shoes?"

"Will I mend her shoes?" said the shoemaker, speaking just as before. "They haven't asked me that question these ten years. I thought the women-folk knew me—it's time they did; ha! she had better read the sign."

Maud was much taller than the old man, and, peering over his shoulder, she could catch a glimpse of the room within. It seemed to be at least as funny as Lady Baby had described it, very small and very full, and papered apparently something on the principle of a scrapscreen. What puzzled her most was the silence which met Samuel Foote's remarks. Crane her neck as she might, she could catch no glimpse of any person within.

"Well, whether you mend them or not, I cannot possibly walk back without a reasonable rest," said Maud, and, coolly putting the shoemaker to one side, she walked past him into the room. She found herself standing in a little square space, very close and very stuffy, with a smell of flowers, of leather, and of grease, and yet, at the same time, as scrupulously neat as a box of toys. There were boots finished and half finished standing on the table, pieces of leather just shaped, mere silhouettes of boots, packets of soles and whole skins still untouched. Pots of grease and bobbins

of thread were ranged in long rows upon shelves on the wall. Walls and ceiling were papered entirely with a mixture of printed matter and pictures. Most of this was large-typed advertisements, often illustrated, and proclaiming generally some shoemaker's requisite, such as "the indestructible iron thread," or, "the best water-proof patent ready-made soles, in packets of a hundred dozen." At the bottom of one of these papers Maud's eye caught the word "Philadelphia"; and going nearer in some surprise, she proceeded to examine it. She then perceived that the papers on the wall were almost exclusively American, but most of them of very old date. "So these are the 'outlandish parts' he has come from?" thought Maud. "Let us say he fled broken-hearted to America at the time Molly bestowed her hand on Adam. Cheer up, Mr. Detective; so far, so good!" Even the chimney-piece was covered with these papers. It was to the chimney-piece that Maud next directed her particular attention. There was a great variety of ornaments there. There were branches of sea-weed stuck in glasses, and there were shells and crab-backs arranged in symmetrical rows, like the bob-bins and the pots of grease. It seemed as if the little crooked shoemaker had a vague idea of making up for the want of symmetry in his own person, by a passion for putting everything around him in rows and lines and precise shapes. But Maud's piercing eyes had instantly noted that among the miscellaneous ornaments there was nothing resembling a copper-cairn, neither were there any forked twigs hanging anywhere on the walls. "Better and better," was Maud's comment, as she noted this distinctly suspicious circumstance. "He

has had a fright, and no mistake." But though there were no copper-cairns on the chimney-piece, there was another very curious ornament there, an ornament which proudly graced the centre, and which for a little time puzzled Maud's ingenious guesses. Finally she came to the conclusion that it was a shoe, clumsily made of cloth, with something almost prehistoric about its shape; obviously very old, and yet apparently having been little worn, for the inside was in the same condition as the outside. It stood on a little square of nicked-out leather, and had once apparently been shaded by a glass globe, of which there now only remained the rim and a few fragments—the letter of the law without the spirit. Despite the laborious tidiness—a want of common-sense betrayed itself here and there in the disposition of the things,—something that spoke of incongruity in the mind that had planned it all.

Everything in the room was unexpected and puzzling, even this that no second occupant was visible—nothing but a large white tom-cat sitting on the table among the half-finished boots, with long silky fur that seemed to have been spun of snowflakes, and a pair of enormous round eyes, as brilliantly blue as two freshly gathered marsh forget-me-nots.

Samuel Foote meanwhile had partially recovered from his consternation; with a gesture of feeble resignation and a shrug of the higher of his two shoulders, he picked up the boot he had dropped and went back to work. Maud's decision had evidently overawed him, but his face might be likened to that of a holy monk who sees the sanctuary of his cell invaded, so much disgust, so much horror was written there.

"And now," said Maud, standing by the chimney-piece and surveying him sharply through her narrowed eyelids—"and now I want to know what possible reason you can have for grudging me a pair of new heels and a handful of nails for fixing them with."

"So they be not the nails in her coffin," said the shoemaker, without looking round, "she shall not have them." Again he seemed not to be speaking *to* her but speaking *at* her, through the medium of some invisible personage. Decidedly this was not one of the outlandish bootmaker's "good days," as indicated by the landlady.

"You seem a little put out, Mr. Foote," said Maud; "is that boot not getting on?"

He turned his eye suspiciously upon her, as if he doubted her intention in putting the question.

"I have been a little put out for the last thirty years," he replied; then, appearing to recollect himself, he withdrew his gaze. "Do you hear her speak, New York?" he said. "My work to be done before sun-down, and a woman chattering at my elbow. Do you hear her talk?"

This time Maud saw that he was looking straight at his cat.

"What is it you call your cat?" she asked.

"New York," said Samuel Foote.

"What?"

"New York," said the shoemaker again, quite calmly. Maud thought it was a good deal for a cat to be called, but Samuel Foote apparently did not think so, nor did New York itself, to judge from the air of perfect satisfaction with which it curled its feathery tail over its

velvet toes, neither oppressed nor embarrassed by the vastness of its title.

"I suppose you brought him with you from America?" suggested Maud.

"Who says I've been in 'Meriky'?" snapped Samuel Foote over his shoulder.

"Well, your wall-paper seems to say so, for one thing."

The old man threw a malignant glance at his walls, and then, with an uneasy grunt, settled again to his work. It was not until Maud had repeated her question in several different shapes that she remembered the landlady's words, and recognised one of those attacks of silence which, according to her informant, were deep enough and dogged enough to defy anything short of red-hot pincers. "Evident discomfort at mention of America," went down immediately in Maud's intangible note-book,— "circumstance to be further investigated at convenient moment." In the meantime she wisely dropped the point at issue, and made some harmless remark about bees and flowers, which drew a grudging reply from the shoemaker. In this way a sort of lame conversation was carried on for a little time, Samuel Foote either not answering or addressing his replies exclusively to his cat; Maud cautiously putting out feelers in the shape of personal questions, then hastily snatching at the first subject that came uppermost when she perceived that alarm had raised another of those blank walls of silence. She very soon discovered that, although the blank wall was not to be knocked down by pressure, it was easily circumvented by stratagem, a diplomatic change of topic being all that was wanted.

But it was a slow process, and at the end of ten minutes she did not seem to have gained much ground. It was during the fifth or sixth of these silent fits that Maud found herself obliged, for want of a rousing topic, to fall back upon that of her heelless shoes.

"'Twould have saved some trouble," grumbled Samuel Foote, "if she'd used her eyes instead of her tongue. What made her not read the sign? it's writ big enough: 'Samuel Foote, *Man* Bootmaker.'"

"And yet Samuel Foote must once upon a time have been a ladies' shoemaker," said Maud,—“at least, if he made this,” and as she spoke she touched the curious cloth slipper which graced the centre of the chimney-board.

"Don't touch it!" shrieked the old man suddenly. "Don't touch it! It is a poisonous thing—it burns, it smells."

"Smells?" said Maud in surprise. "No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does; it smells of badness and cruelty and falseness, of all the wicked women in the world. But it is neatly made," he added, in the same breath; "it is as neatly made as a shoe need be, and yet she said it did not fit." The last words were quavered out in a tone of profound aggrivement.

"And the second shoe," asked Maud—"the fellow of this one? Where is it?"

"At the bottom of the sea," said Samuel Foote, promptly, and then, perceiving all at once that he had been addressing himself directly to Maud, he turned sulkily away, and with the handle of his big scissors poked the ribs of the white cat. "New York" had been disposing himself to slumber among the half-

finished boots, but feeling himself appealed to in this very tangible manner, he sat up drowsily. No doubt he was used to the various eccentricities which marked his master's "bad days." He seemed to be a cat of a phlegmatic disposition, perfectly satisfied with his personal appearance, otherwise indifferent to the world at large.

"At the bottom of the sea!" repeated Maud. "Was she drowned?"

There was no answer. Samuel Foote's back remained steadily turned, his head bent low over the boot in his hands. It seemed to be a tough job, to judge from his heavy breathing.

"Was she drowned?" repeated Maud, but with the same result. The dogged fit was on again.

With the true detective's instinct, Maud had come here without any fixed plan in her mind, trusting to the circumstances of the moment for the shape which her cross-examination was to take. Opportunities never fail to those who know how to make them, and Maud, seeing her opportunity here, did not hesitate for a moment. Moving round to where she could get a view of the shoemaker's bent face, she observed in the most matter-of-fact tone in the world, "Then the shoe was not Molly's after all?"

"And wherefore not?" said Samuel Foote instinctively, his one-sided mind evidently so taken up with the question itself that the oddness of its being put at all did not at once strike him.

"Why? because Molly was not drowned," said Maud, speaking quite as quietly as before, though her excitement was steadily rising at this fresh support of her cherished theory.

"It's a pity it wasn't so," muttered Samuel Foote, still lost in his own train of thoughts; "it's a sad pity indeed that every worthless hussy in the world that drops her shoe into the water doesn't tumble after it herself." He grumbled on for a minute more, oblivious of Maud's personality, and answering her words as though he were answering his own random recollections.

"And so it was Molly who said that it did not fit," Maud observed. "That was unkind."

"She always was unkind," said Samuel Foote, with a whimper that sounded almost like tears; and at that moment, as he groped for his scissors, they slipped to the ground with a clatter. Picking them up, he met Maud's eyes, and instantly she saw that the spell of past memories was broken, and that he was once more conscious of his surroundings. First there came a look of hopeless bewilderment into his one eye, turned upon the tall figure beside his work-table; then very swiftly there followed a gleam of terror.

"It's a lie," he groaned, writhing on his bench. "Who says I ever set eyes on the giddy slut? It's a lie." And bending over his work, he once more settled down into that attitude which Maud by this time recognised as the certain symptom of the silent fit. Maud's patience had lasted very well till now, but at this point it gave way. To have got almost within touching distance of the very kernel of the mystery, and then to be brought up short by another of those blank walls, was rather too maddening even for a detective. Walking straight up to the chimney-piece, she

observed, abruptly, "Where have you hidden away your little copper-mound? I hear it was so nicely gummed."

The blank silence came to an end instantly and rather noisily. Samuel Foote dropped not only his scissors this time, but also his boot; while New York, obviously annoyed by the disturbance, moved disdainfully to one side with an expression which seemed plainly and plaintively to ask whether there really was no spot at all on this table where a respectable cat might hope for five minutes' peaceful slumber.

"It's another of them!" cried Samuel Foote, seizing his head between his hands and rocking his body from side to side. "I might have known it was another of them, and they're all after the——" He broke off with a shriek, and suddenly tearing off his leather apron, darted towards one corner of the room and flung it over some object which stood there half lost in the shadow. Maud, utterly taken by surprise, had just time to note that this object appeared to be a sack, or two sacks, filled with what might have been apples or potatoes.

Samuel Foote, having shrouded them in his apron, faced round towards Maud. "You're another of them, aren't you?" he panted.

"Another of whom?"

"Another Bevan?" he quavered, abjectly; "there was one here the other day, and you're another, aren't you?"

"I am not a Bevan," said Maud, quietly. The most acute shade of dismay faded out of the shoemaker's face. "But I am a friend of theirs—a great friend." The uneasiness returned. With one eye Maud

was aware of this, while with the other she was curiously measuring that muffled heap in the corner. Behind that piece of leather there must, almost of necessity, be concealed some vital element of the secret, perhaps even the key to that labyrinth in which she found herself wandering with an ever-growing excitement, but also an increasing bewilderment. It was not only because she was a detective, it was also because she was a woman, that Maud irrevocably resolved not to go back to Floundershayle that night without having ascertained the contents of those questionable sacks. For one minute she seriously contemplated the idea of making a rush for it, and trusting to her superior agility of movement for baffling Samuel Foote. But it was only for a minute. A hand-to-hand scuffle with the crazy shoemaker would have been rather too heavy a price to pay, even for the satisfaction of this devouring curiosity. From the shrouding apron she turned her eyes to the apronless shoemaker, and a very brief survey of his attitude and expression suggested to her another course of action. From his bench, to which he had dragged himself back, Samuel Foote was hungrily intent upon the momentous corner. His eye dilated towards it; the hands with which he had vaguely clutched his work were nervously jerking, and the fingers were closing and unclosing themselves upon the leather with a grip of meaningless violence. He sat on the extreme edge of the bench, as though strung to the most extreme pitch of readiness, and his trembling tongue passed once or twice across his lips with an action that betrayed the very agony of impatience. "He's all but ready to jump out of his skin to be at it,"

reflected Maud; "he'll be at it before I've well shut the door behind me." She regarded him steadily for a minute longer; then, with an excellently simulated yawn, she picked up her parcel, and proceeded to observe that the afternoon was getting on, and that since Mr. Foote's heart remained so obstinately hardened against her unlucky heels, she supposed she had better be getting back to Floundershayle. And with this, and with a friendly nod, she stepped briskly to the door, and without so much as once turning her head, proceeded to pick her way among the ruins towards the open hillside.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRIUMPH.

"We have found all, there is no more to seek."

HAVING reached the other side of the first convenient bit of wall, Maud stood still. "I will give him five minutes," she said, drawing out her watch; "and in the meantime, let us review the situation. To begin with: how far have we got? What are the strongest points of our case? *First*, the strong presumptive evidence that this man has a secret; *second*, the equally strong presumptive evidence that there is some copper mixed up in this secret; *third*, the all but absolute proof that this man with the obviously coppery secret is indeed one of the victims of the Destroying Angel, from whom it is conceivable that he may have derived his knowledge."

So far her theory held well, thought Maud, as she checked off the different points on her fingers. But at

number four she paused and shook her head. The one feature of the case that baffled her was this insensate and obviously genuine terror called up by the name of Bevan. How was she to account for this extraordinary, incontrovertible, and apparently isolated circumstance of the case? Until she had succeeded in making it fit in somewhere, it was plain that she had not got the "hang" of the thing. The elements indeed were there, but they would not mix; the links were there, but they would not join.

When Maud had set out for the Tally-ho mine that day, her hopes had not soared to the point of coming home with the answer to the riddle in her pocket. A favourable start on the highroad to discovery had been all she had contemplated. Had it not been for the lucky chance of those sacks in the corner, her visit of to-day would probably have been nothing more than the first of a series; and it is certain that, even in her most sanguine moments, Maud had never been prepared for the exceeding rapidity and conclusive demonstration of the events which were now about to follow.

The five minutes having passed, Maud began to pick her way back again towards Samuel Foote's shop—not indeed retracing her former steps, but taking a direction which led her to the further side of the building which he inhabited. There was no window at that side, and cautiously creeping along the wall she sharply turned the corner, and without a pause or a knock raised the latch of the door. To her surprise, she found herself confronted by nothing but the sleek and dazzling countenance of New York, who still sat squatted in the

centre of the table. Of Samuel Foote there appeared in the first instance to be no trace; but as she slowly advanced into the room, Maud noticed an open door which she had not before observed, probably owing to its being papered like the walls, while from some lower region, apparently a cellar, sounds came up which told her that the shoemaker was rummaging about down there. "His secret is a heavy one, at any rate," thought Maud, "from the way he is panting and dragging. Supposing, after all, it is only his potatoes for the winter!" At that moment she perceived that the apron was flung on the floor, that one of the sacks had been removed, but that the other still stood in the corner. Maud walked straight up to it, undid the fastening, and, looking the magnificent New York steadily in the face, plunged her hand in and drew out a handful of small shiny fragments, which she instantly recognised as rough copper-ore. She carried them to the light and examined them more carefully to make sure, but she really had no doubt whatever, nor did she experience the smallest surprise. Perhaps she had not clearly told herself that she expected to find copper-ore in those sacks, but there is no doubt that she would have been mightily taken aback if she had found potatoes.

With the copper in her hand, she went and took up her position beside the fireplace, and by the time she heard the shoemaker panting upwards, her plan of action was laid.

He came up slowly, as though exhausted, until his head reached the level of the floor; then at sight of Maud he cleared the remaining steps with one bound, slammed the papered door behind him, and flattened

himself breathless against it, in a way which made him look almost like one of the grotesque advertisements pasted there.

Maud surveyed him with a glance of pitying contempt.

"Has nobody ever pointed out to you what a waste of trouble it is to lock the stable-door after the horse is gone, Mr. Foote?" she observed presently. "You've forgotten the second sack."

"It's—it's provisions," gasped Samuel Foote; "it's prunes—it's hazel-nuts."

"Yes, exactly,—hazel-nuts; but rather hard to crack, as I perceive."

The shoemaker, in dead silence, remained flattened against his wall.

"Since you are so fond of prunes and hazel-nuts," she went on, "I wonder that you don't put yourself in the position of laying in larger stores of such delicacies. Do you know how many sackfuls of hazel-nuts you could buy with a hundred pounds in sterling cash?"

There was no answer.

"You can read, I suppose?" said Maud, impatiently. A feeble nod seemed to say yes.

"Then you must have read the advertisement sent out by Lord Kippendale, offering a hundred pounds reward for information respecting 'Swan's Copper'; what has possessed you not to claim it? Does shoemaking pay you so very well that you can afford to turn up your nose at a hundred pounds? If so, I shall take to shoemaking to-morrow."

Samuel Foote gazed vacantly; he seemed to be keep-

ing to the wall for the sake of its support. His face had become a sort of greenish-grey, which was probably his manner of turning pale.

"May the Heavens strike me dead," he began, "if——"

"You may spare yourself the trouble of invoking Heaven any further," interrupted Maud, "for, after all, you might be taken at your word; and I don't want anybody to strike you dead until you have told me where you got these from,"—and, stepping up to him, she unclosed the hand with the copper fragments, and held them before his face.

"Let us not have anything more about the old mine shaft," went on Maud, very quietly. "I will undertake to say that they did *not* come from there, though I will not undertake to say where they *did* come from. But, for the matter of that, we shall soon, with the help of an engineer—and perhaps a policeman—settle that point as well."

In the next instant, to her horror, the shoemaker let go his hold of the wall, and, without any warning of what was coming, collapsed straight on to his knees. Clutching the folds of her skirt, he tried to speak, but for the moment got no further than an indistinct gurgle and a ghastly grimace. Maud began to fear that she had baffled her own object by frightening him into temporary imbecility. By the fashion in which he cowered she could see that the clue must be under her hand, and yet this moment was the one in which she felt herself most unable to conjecture the nature of that clue on which her fingers had all but closed. A chaos of formless possibilities was beating about in her

brain, but nothing of it all appeared upon her face, as she gazed down at the shoemaker's upturned and grimacing physiognomy. To reassure him, at least to the point of regaining his voice, appeared to be the first obvious necessity. So far as she had been able to judge, it had been the word "policeman" that had sent him down on his knees, and for this reason she now hastened to assure him that there was no limb of the law at her heels just then, nor even waiting round the corner; and to hint that the appearance or non-appearance of any such individual on the scene depended entirely upon the truthfulness or untruthfulness with which Mr. Foote should see fit to answer certain questions which she was about to put to him. "To begin with,"—she rapidly opened the interrogatory—"you have lived in this part of the country before?" It was more an assertion than a question, and made with a sort of stony decision, which not only crushed all resistance, but also most bravely masked the insecurity of her own position.

Samuel Foote, quite past resistance by this time, signified with his head that it was so.

"You lived here at the time of the late Lord Kippendale?"

Samuel Foote made no attempt to deny that this also was the case.

"And you were at that time acquainted with a young woman of the name of Molly Benson?" pursued Maud.

"Yes," said the shoemaker, with an oath, "I was."

"And you also came in contact with a man of the name of Adam Armstrong, who afterwards became that young woman's husband?"

There was another oath, and another affirmative.

“And likewise with another man of the name of Christopher Swan?”

There was no answer this time. The shoemaker, still crouching on the floor, now sank back slowly on to his heels, and, with a return of the imbecile expression, stared up helplessly into Maud’s face.

“Answer!” said Maud, impatiently. “You cannot have known the others without knowing him; a one-eyed man who had to fly the country for robbery, and was then drowned at sea.” But as she was in the very act of saying it, a light broke in upon her. Suddenly, without preparation, the truth presented itself to her mind—not dimly or in pieces, but entire and unmistakably distinct, admitting of no doubt, and bearing with it the instantaneous conviction of an inspiration.

“I see it now,” she cried, almost joyfully,—“I see it all; the diamond robber was *not* drowned, and *you* are Christopher Swan!”

The old man scrambled to his feet and staggered against the table; and at that moment, gazing into his distorted face, Maud remembered that there was probably not another human being within a circle of five miles around. What if this madman, driven to bay, should throw himself upon her? He had many and sharp instruments at hand.

But if Maud was frightened, it was only for a moment. Though her wrists were as slender as those of a child, her nerves were as strong as those of a man. Under her steady gaze the little shoemaker was shaking like a leaf.

“I have not got them,” he groaned,—“I have not

got the diamonds; it was for her I took them—it was to her I gave them.”

Then Maud's last doubt vanished, and she knew that she had found, not only “Swan's Copper,” but Christopher Swan himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHOEMAKER'S STORY.

“Fiend, with an angel's face
And heart of stone.”

CHRISTOPHER SWAN, the son of a poor shoemaker at Floundershayle, owed his first acquaintance with the Gullyscoombe household to the late Lord Kippendale's pity for the poor misshapen object, whom Fate, as well as his fellowmen, seemed never tired of persecuting. From his unlovely infancy upwards, Christy's life had been a tissue of larger and smaller misfortunes, which lay unfailingly in wait for him whichever way he might turn, and whatever occupation he might adopt. The enterprises of the miner Christy succeeded no better than those of the fisherman Christy, or of the labourer Christy. Down to the depths of the very lowest “level,” and out to the full length of his very longest voyage, his bad luck would faithfully dog him. If a blast-hole exploded, it was sure to be in Christopher's face; if a fishing-mast toppled over, it was certain to be on Christopher's head. One of these accidents had cost him his eye; the other, it was affirmed, had cost him the best part of his wits. Even those wits that remained to him were unevenly developed, being stunted in

some directions and abnormally sharp in others. In the one matter of the discovery of minerals, Christopher had acquired for himself a reputation which Floundershayle and its neighbourhood loved to ascribe to the "dowsing-rod," but which, in point of fact, rested on nothing but a certain natural aptitude for the pursuit, so marked as almost to amount to instinct, and developed by close and cunning observation. It may have been the love of these researches, or it may have been the drop of vagabond blood which he undoubtedly had in his veins, which would send Christy in his "out-of-work" days wandering by himself over the hills, or making mysterious experiments in the valleys. At Floundershayle it was an article of faith that Christy, though he was mightily secret about it, knew what was hidden under every yard of ground of the Gullyscoombe estate, just as plainly as other folks could see what was growing on it. As for the mines at work, he was a privileged intruder into every one of them, and there was not one of them that he did not know as intimately as his own coat-pocket.

Lord Kippendale's charitable pity was not without a certain measure of reward. A convenient kind of general handiness was soon discovered about Christopher Swan, acquired by the mixture of occupations, and fitting him most admirably for the post of a domestic Jack-of-all-trades. Whether it was to wash dishes, or carry water, or brush clothes, Christy, with his crooked but nimble fingers, and his general propensity for being "sat upon" by his fellow-servants, never came in amiss. Soon it became Lord Kippendale's established custom to send for Christopher Swan

whenever he came down to "rough it" at Gullyscoombe. As he rose in favour his duties grew more varied, for now he was no longer only kitchen-scullion, but he was also partly valet and partly post-boy. The nearest post-office (Floundershayle) was three miles off by land, and much more than half that distance by cutting across the bay in a boat; therefore it was convenient that Christy should be used to the manipulation of oars.

Strolling one evening by the sea, when his miscellaneous duties of the day were over, Christopher happened to become attracted by the print of a very small bare foot on the sand. He began to follow it, at first indolently, but gradually with a sort of fascination. It wound in and out among the rocks, occasionally with a comparatively great interval, followed by a deeper print, as though she of the small feet had cleared some clump of sea-weed with a bound. At last he found her: she was sitting on a stone, with her bare feet in a pool of water, bending forward and gazing at them, as though in admiration of their beauty. She might well gaze, thought Christopher Swan. He had never seen anything like those feet before; they looked like two precious objects put under glass for inspection. He almost felt as though he ought to have paid a penny for the sight. But when she looked up he thought it was a very lucky thing that her face was to be seen without paying for it, for it seemed to him that all the pennies in the world would never be enough to pay for that vision. It was as delicate as the lining of a sea-shell, and her hazel eyes danced like the sea itself. Christopher stood stupidly staring and stupidly wondering how it was that he had never seen her be-

fore. He had indeed heard about old Mat Benson's niece, who had come to live with him at Floundershayle because of her recent orphanhood, and he had likewise caught some rumour about her beauty, and of the wholesale desertion of sweethearts which her advent had caused amongst Floundershayle youths. But it had never occurred to him that she would be so beautiful at this; and, even at this moment, it struck him that this was more of a laughing sprite than of a mourning orphan. Small wonder, indeed, that serious Floundershayle should be so grievously dazzled. So was poor Christopher in ten minutes more. What they had talked of he never even pretended to remember, but there had been a laugh for every word and a glance for every laugh, and a good deal of splashing of the small feet in the water, and a very distracting re-arrangement of the flaxen braids that had got loosened with the wind. "There's a girl at Floundershayle who ties her hair with a blue silk ribbon," she informed Christopher; "but it cost sixpence." And she sighed, and added very prettily that she wished she had a sixpence. That sigh somehow reminded Christopher that he had a spare sixpence at home. Before the end of the interview he had been coaxed into the promise of a yard of blue ribbon. A timely pedlar, one of the "Johnny Fortnights" of the country, provided the ribbon and carried off the contents of Christopher's purse. Christopher did not mind the emptiness of his purse so long as he saw the blue ribbon in its place, mingled with the braids of Molly's silken hair. But scarcely a day passed and the blue ribbon had vanished, and a brilliant green ribbon was binding Molly's head—a

ribbon which he knew, too, for he had seen it in Johnny Fortnight's box, only it was a superior article, with a scalloped edge, and quite above his means. Christopher looked gloomy when the blue ribbon disappeared, and, oddly enough, Adam, the Scotch groom, then a spruce personage of thirty, looked triumphant when the green one appeared. But the foolish, one-eyed youth was soon coaxed back into good-humour, for the siren had fallen a-wishing again. Ah! and could he not guess what her wish was now? And the hazel eyes sank down to the delicate feet that first entranced him; and if it was really true that they entranced him, how could he wish that they should go on bruising themselves against the stones, and cutting themselves upon the shells. A pair of shoes? Yes, that was the latest wish of her heart. Poor Christopher! His own heart was full, but for the moment his purse was empty. He had hopes, indeed, that it would not be empty for long; he had a secret which he had been hugging to his heart for weeks past, and on which he confidently expected to build his future prosperity. It was that same secret of which he subsequently boasted to Adam, in a conversation which, in Adam's words, has already been described. But, as he affirmed to Molly, it was a secret which absolutely required time to ripen it; not very much time—only a few weeks in all probability. But a few weeks more of shoeless existence did not at all fall in with Molly's desires; and Christopher, in deep distress of mind, and egged on by the ingenuity of love, began to consider whether, though he could not buy the shoes, it were not possible to make them? He was a shoemaker's son, and though he had

never learnt the trade, he had seen his father at work; and so, with borrowed tools, and with a piece of cloth begged from the overseer's wife, Christopher set to work in the dark hours of the night, and, after three days' hard labour, had turned out a pair of flat and shapeless articles, something of a cross-breed between a slipper and a bag. But the shoes, after a brief triumph, went the way of the ribbon, and there came a day when Christopher met the bewitching Molly in a pair of shop-made red-morocco shoes, which evidently caused her great discomfort, but also boundless delight. At the same time the victorious smile reappeared on Adam's face. That smile and the morocco shoes taken together were too much even for Christopher. There was a scene, and this time Molly had some little trouble in bringing her slave back to her feet, but it was nevertheless done.

Soon after the reconciliation Christopher saw his master receive a packet of a peculiar shape, and that same evening, while acting as valet, he had a glimpse of a glittering necklace, the wedding-present which the Earl had ordered for his betrothed. Christopher had never seen diamonds before, and he dreamed of them that night.

Next day, as evil chance would have it, he met Molly, and with recollection of those glittering stones in his head he spoke of them to her. It was the fatal mistake of his life. "I didn't know till now that there was anything in the world that shone so," he said. "It was fire, I thought; and then I thought it was water. I don't know what other way to put it; they seemed to burn and they seemed to melt. Just fire

and water—that's what they are." Fool! he might have taken warning by the way her eyes were glittering, as she listened to his description. Idiot! to talk of diamonds that were not his, before a woman who had the brains of a kitten, the giddiness of a butterfly, the heart of a pebble, and the vanity of a peacock!

Molly grew very thoughtful, and another wish was the result. This time really such a little thing and such an easy thing, quite simple and quite safe, only to bring her the necklace in secret,—for ten minutes, she hastened to explain, only just to look at it, touch it, perhaps (oh, supreme bliss!) just once to clasp it round her neck. She had a moral conviction that to have felt those diamonds on her neck for once would shed an undying lustre over the rest of her existence. And the moment was so favourable. The Earl was going to Scotland for a few days; the necklace would be in the safe, the key with the overseer, and Christopher had a thousand opportunities for purloining that key—only for ten minutes!

Christopher hesitated, but in the midst of his hesitation came the reflection that this time, at least, Adam would not be able to outdo him. He knew his rival's honesty to be incorruptible, and he was convinced that Adam's fidelity to the family would never permit him to tamper, however innocently, with a family safe, even for the sake of Molly's smiles; and for the matter of that, Molly knew it too, and had calculated her chances.

So he hesitated, and she pouted and coaxed, and looked so lovely in her eagerness, that at last Christopher plumped out with the question as to whether

she would be his wife? Yes, she would; but only on condition that he brought her the diamonds to revel in, to gloat over, to *belong* to her—for ten minutes.

The Earl went off for three days' hunting in the north, and Christopher, fired by the promised reward, watched his opportunity and accomplished the deed. In haste and flurry he possessed himself of the diamonds; then, leaving the iron door open in his agitation, off he hied to the boat, and rowed wildly along the coast and into the narrow creek which cut inland, and close by the side of which stood the house of the old fisherman who was Molly's uncle. The tide was high, and floated him up almost to the window where she was in wait. The diamonds were handed up. Molly received them with a scream, and disappeared with them from the window, while Christopher, in an agony, waited to have them back again. Five minutes passed, then the allotted ten, and she had not reappeared. His terror was growing unbearable. He called to her but she did not hear him, for she was clapping her hands and dancing about with joy before a broken glass. When at last she came to the window, the diamonds were on her neck, flashing in the moonlight, and there was a look of reckless wildness in her eyes. Give back the diamonds! She could not—it would kill her. She did not care what might happen to him or to her: they might cut off her head to get the diamonds off, but part with them she could not. She spoke the simple truth. In point of fact, she had not meant to keep them, but she had never seen such things before, and they had upset the small amount of common-sense she had ever possessed. Her brain was

too weak to stand such strong stimulants as this. The girl was simply drunk with diamonds.

From prayers Christopher got to threats, and claimed his promise, but she was far beyond the point of being reasoned with. He could not betray her without betraying himself, and besides, she had always found him ridiculous, and could not seriously be expected to marry a man with one eye; and the blue ribbon had been flimsy, and the shoes were frightful and several sizes too large, and didn't fit at all,—she would have nothing further to do, either with them or with him,—there! one, two,—they came flying through the window, number one splash into the water, number two bump into the boat. And then came a last word of warning through the chink of a closing pane—"You had better row hard, for they are moving already."

A glance in the direction of the house showed him moving lights and running figures. The safe-door had been found open—he was lost. In a panic he threw himself on his oars and rowed for his life towards the open sea. He rowed for hours, till at last aching arms dropped, and he crouched down, exhausted, on the floor of his boat. Here, as he crouched, his hand touched something soft, and by the light of the moon he recognised the cloth shoe which Molly had scornfully flung after him—literally cast in his teeth. Despite the rage which filled his heart against her, he did not chuck the shoe overboard. This clumsy formation of cloth had been toiled over so lovingly by him, it represented so much burning of the midnight oil, that even now he could not bring himself to think of it as anything but precious. "And yet she said that it did

not fit," he sighed, as he carefully stowed it away in his pocket, with perhaps some obscure idea of future revenge dawning dimly in his brain. When daylight came, he was out of sight of land and faint with hunger. Too weak to row, he drifted about for another day and night, and on the evening of the second day lost consciousness. When he recovered his senses he was on board a big steamer—a transatlantic boat, which had picked him up; and New York being this steamer's destination, it consequently became his. He set foot on the American continent without a sixpence in his pocket; but, thanks to his universal handiness, he did not starve. After a time of rough and hand-to-mouth existence, he even got into comparatively smooth water; and now he set himself to realise a dream which had haunted him ever since he had found the cloth shoe at the bottom of his boat. He had treasured it religiously—half in tenderness and half in bitterness; and often, when his day's work was over, and he sat alone in the garret or the cellar which just then might happen to be his lodging, he would bring out the shoe from its hiding-place and sit gazing at his rejected handiwork with a look of injured pride and sore perplexity. "And yet she said that it did not fit," was the remark with which he invariably capped his reflections. Even in his brightest days poor Christopher had never been much more than half-witted; and ever since that terrible night of the diamonds, it seemed as if all his remaining senses had left his head and taken refuge in his fingers. In proportion as he grew more queer and crotchety, he also grew more wonderfully neat-handed. Two ideas now governed his life: one, a morbid and insane woman-

hatred; the other, a fanatical desire to prove to the faithless one that Christopher Swan *could* make shoes, and shoes that *did* fit, though never—no, never again—should they be made to fit her feet, those wicked white feet which had trampled the life from his heart and the joy from his world. It was with this idea that he apprenticed himself to a shoemaker, and worked at his trade with frenzied zeal. There is no saying whether in his most sanguine moments Christopher, who now called himself Samuel Foote, did not see visions of the future, in which Molly on her knees conjured him for a pair of shoes of his own world-famed workmanship, while he sternly and bitterly refused. Most probably, also, it was some lurking and crazy dread of being trapped into working for the traitress Molly that had been the first origin of his repugnance to making or mending a woman's shoe. In time it crystallised into a fixed idea.

After an absence of close upon twenty years, "Samuel Foote" returned to Europe, home-sick. The dread of being tracked as the diamond-robber still occasionally haunted him; but stronger than this dread was the fascination which led him back to the scenes of his unhappy youth. Can the man with the hidden treasure ever be quite content away from it? Samuel Foote had a hidden treasure, and one from which he had been forced to fly, without raising so much as one pennyworth of it; one from which prudence had compelled him to live widely severed for very many years, but the thought of which he nevertheless dwelt on daily. In proportion as his terror of the law wore off, the longing to revisit his treasure grew strong within him. A

thousand questions tormented him; was it still *his* treasure, and his alone? Or had others chanced upon it as he had done? Did the precious copper still glisten in that hidden place as he had seen it glisten on that fortunate day of his discovery, and as it glistened now so often in his weary dreams; or was it all torn from the rock, gone up "to grass," backed and dressed and smelted and dispersed throughout the world? When he thought of his treasure as thus falling a prey to another pick than his own, Samuel Foote's eye would roll and his mouth would water, like the mouth of a dog who has to stand and look on from afar while another dog is disinterring his most highly cherished and most scientifically buried bone. It was this pursuing thought which closed in upon him year by year, and which finally, like an ever-tightening cord, drew him back to Choughshire.

The treasure was intact, as he very soon convinced himself, to his immeasurable joy; and from that moment he felt that he was chained to Gullyscoombe ground. In the solitary position he had chosen he believed himself safe from recognition; and now his attachment to the spot which, for years past, had been more of a sentimental feeling than anything else, began to assume a more practical, or, to speak truly, a more than ever unpractical shape. His ambition was nothing less than to trade secretly with the copper, and to trade with America, as he instantly decided. Ever since his return to the country, he had been patiently and laboriously amassing what was to be his first cargo to the New World, to be conveyed thither in some manner not yet matured in his mind. At the time of Maud's appear-

ance on the scene, the little hole below his workshop, which he called his cellar, was all but blocked up with sacks filled with the lumps of rough ore. In the extraction of the ore from the rock, in that hidden place which he alone knew of, he used every imaginable precaution,—never visiting the spot by daylight for fear of detection, and cleansing himself with the most elaborate care from every stain of that treacherous red iron-earth, which would have been almost as fatal to his secret as a blood-stain to that of the murderer. And yet his caution was, in fact, nothing but a mixture of morbid cunning and reckless imprudence. The defence which he put up with the one hand he knocked down with the other. While he was cautious enough to hedge round his mining operations with the darkness of night, he was at the same time incautious enough to display the pick of his specimen ores as chimney-piece ornaments in the broadest glare of day. Terrified though he was of being identified as Christopher Swan, he yet fell back unconsciously into his old habit of cutting hazel twigs and hanging them up on his wall, as he had done in the days of his dowsing-rod celebrity, though here again he would make crooked attempts to undo the effects of his own incaution by talking of the magic sticks as “unholy,” as was the fashion just then among the more bigoted inhabitants of the country. This hanging-up of the divining-rods was one of the distinct flaws in his otherwise exaggerated caution,—vacuums, so to say, which corresponded with the startling peculiarities in the symmetrical but senseless arrangement of his room. But the most curious feature in the room, symbolical of the most morbid twist in his

mind, was that shoe which throned proudly in the centre of the papered chimney-piece, like a monument put up to female ingratitude. That shoe had been the main-spring and talisman of Christopher's life,—the source which diligently fed his woman-hatred, which kept undyingly fresh the memory of his betrayed love. But even here the want of proportion which existed in his mind stepped in; and when, in the midst of his work, the glance of his one eye strayed towards the chief ornament of his chimney-piece, Christopher did not say: "She was false to me,—she broke my heart!" he simply shook his head and muttered, "And yet she said they did not fit!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DEFEAT.

"There must be now no passages of love
Betwixt us twain henceforward evermore."

Of the foregoing history Maud had gathered only the most general outlines, but they were enough to satisfy her that her object was gained. For the first day she had there to rest content—the more so as the end of her interview with Samuel Foote had been unhappily cut short by the appearance of a fisher-lad on a cobbling errand.

This was all very well for the first day, but not for the second. With the return of daylight came new anxieties. Christopher Swan, to be sure, was found. But supposing he were to be lost again, and with him the clue to the copper's whereabouts? For no parti-

culars upon this point had yet been reached at the abrupt termination of the interview. When she thought of the look of panic in the shoemaker's one eye, a dread came over Maud lest her very next visit to Wheal Tallyho should find him flown once more—hunted away by his terror of the law, and disbelieving in her promise of protection. Such an end to so carefully conducted a scheme would be like foundering within sight of land, and at the mere thought of this possibility, Maud felt herself grow chill with apprehension. At any price the danger must be averted, and the only step which seemed quite certain to avert it was to put a guard upon the shoemaker—if not, indeed, to secure his person. This, a very brief reflection assured Maud, she could not do unaided. Events, as she was wise enough to acknowledge, had got beyond her single-handed control. By the time breakfast was over, she had made up her mind that there was nothing to be gained, and possibly everything to be lost, by withholding the truth any longer from those most interested in it; and as a resolve with Maud was synonymous with immediate action, the breakfast things were not yet quite cleared away, and Hal was barely installed with his nurse in the inn garden, when already Miss Epperton might have been seen walking rapidly along the road which skirted the bay towards Gullyscombe House.

It was a white and dismal road, unshaded by any tree and unmarked by any special feature. On the one side the ground fell away towards the cliffs; on the other, the waste hillside rose abruptly, only occasionally broken by some small stony field laboriously reclaimed from the wilderness and jealously walled in. A thin

and uncertain bloom of furze ran through the grey and the brown of the hills, crossing and recrossing itself, and breaking into new combinations of pattern, like a thread of dull gold running through the web of a sad-coloured garment. The only moving thing in sight was a cart laden with sea-weed, plodding its way along far ahead, and shaking down fragments of its cargo on to the road, where the wet coils lay and glistened like some sort of shining black snake.

Maud had believed that this sea-weed-cart was the only moving thing on the road; but presently, from behind this shifting screen, there emerged another figure quite distinct from that of the driver, and walking, moreover, straight towards her. It was the figure of a tall man, as she could see immediately. When she had gone a dozen paces farther, she could see that the man was young; another dozen paces, and the man was fair-haired; a dozen more, and she began to think that the man might be Germaine; yet another dozen, and she knew that it was. Her first instinct was to turn and fly. A meeting with Germaine *tête-à-tête* had not entered into her plans for to-day, and somehow this very natural occurrence had not suggested itself to her even as a possibility. In the hurry of recent events, she had had no time to come to a final conclusion as to how he should be accosted: whether all misunderstandings should be ignored, or whether there would be any necessity for her to play the penitent. But it was clear that some resolution must very quickly be come to—for, of course, that idea of flight had been no more than a half-hysterical impulse, overcome on the moment; and, of course, Maud was still pursuing her way, though

her pace had slackened. By this a little time might be gained—a few minutes more in which to consider her course. Was this to be a reconciliation scene, or was it to be a business interview? Was Christopher Swan to be the theme of the conversation, or was it their relations to each other which were first to be put on a distinct footing? There were certain prudential considerations which seemed to point out the advisability of not hurrying into a reconciliation before this affair of the copper had been sifted to its bottom, and Maud began by inclining very seriously to the business side of the question. But it was a noticeable fact that the nearer she found herself to Germaine, and the more plainly she could distinguish his features, and the gold of his hair, and the blue of his eyes, the harder did she find it to keep her attention fixed on the more practical aspects of the case, or to remind herself of the measure of uncertainty which still hovered around the future of his family. Not long after she first perceived him, she saw him stand still and look along the road with his hand shading his eyes. "He has noticed me," said Maud. "Will he recognise me? Yes"—for, as he dropped his hand, he suddenly quickened his pace. "No, he can't have recognised me," she added, in an instant. "He is walking slower again—slower than before."

And so, on the naked, white road, without a tree as cover, the two advanced upon each other, drawing inevitably nearer, but the steps of each imperceptibly lagging more heavily, as though they were loath to meet. They were abreast before they stopped. The breadth of the road was between them; and as they stopped, they

did not make any of the conventional signs of recognition: they simply stood still, as something inevitable, and stared across the road, rather helplessly, at each other. By this time a paramount curiosity had taken the place of all prudential considerations. For the moment, possibly only a brief moment, yet not the less absolutely, Maud was simply a woman in face of her lover, and everything resolved itself into the one question, "Does he love me still?" As she looked at him she was trying to smile, but her lips were pale. The absence of surprise upon Germaine's face filled her with dismay. He must, after all, have recognised her when he shaded his eyes to look along the road—have recognised her, and yet not flown to meet her. What could this portend? It was she who spoke first.

"Are these Choughshire manners?" she began, with another attempt at a smile; "or does the sea-air affect the sight?"

"The sight!" repeated Germaine, stupidly. He showed no inclination to cross the road. His eyes, indeed, were upon her face, but she wondered why they were so desperately sad.

"Are you aware that, if I had not stopped, you would have cut me dead?"

"I beg your pardon; I am very rude, I am very stupid," stammered Germaine, growing scarlet. He pulled off his tweed cap, and managed first to drop it in the dust, and then to put it on wrong side foremost. Somehow this relieved Maud; it was like the old Germaine of Kippendale—the old Germaine who used to tread on her toes and adore her with his eyes. She

breathed more freely; this was the Germaine she had always been able to twist round her little finger.

"It is as crooked as possible," she cried, with one of her Kippendale laughs. "You have given a great deal too much of it to the right ear, and a great deal too little to the left,"—and she laughed again, rather loudly; but Germaine did not seem to see the joke. Determined, apparently, to stick to his side of the cart-ruts, he flattened the cap more hopelessly with one pat of his big paw, and then waited silently, his eyes now fixed on the black sea-weed snake that lay in a gleaming twist between them.

Maud's eyes hung on him for one minute, and it was borne in upon her that this sham fencing between them was as useless as it was torturing.

"You were going to Floundershayle?" she asked in a different tone.

"Yes," said Germaine, "I was."

"Was it to—to see me?" The question slipped out, quite regardless of her will, and with a touch of deprecation that seemed to plead almost humbly that the answer should be "Yes."

"No," said Germaine, stolidly yet sadly; "I was going to the post-office."

"And yet you knew that I was at Floundershayle?"

"Yes, I knew it, because Frances told me you were coming."

"And you would have passed the door of the inn without taking two steps aside to shake hands with me?"

"No," said Germaine, "I wouldn't."

"Ah!" she said breathlessly, her pleading eyes still

fixed upon his downcast face, "then you would have come to me?"

"I didn't mean that," said Germaine, grinding the sea-weed snake into the dust with his stick. "I mean, that to go to the post-office I haven't got to pass the inn-door."

Maud looked away with a groan. This was indeed the Germaine of old, but this time there was no comfort in the thought.

"What did you come for?" he asked abruptly, still operating with his stick upon the coil of sea-weed.

"I came as caretaker to little Hal Wyndhurst," said Maud, quickly. An instant's reflection had assured her that it was wiser to abide by the version which had originally been given out as the motive of her journey, and she therefore gave the account of Sir Ambrose Cathcart's curious prescription.

Germaine listened with his eyes on the ground. When she had done speaking he looked up suddenly into her face.

"Is that all true?" he asked.

Maud started back with a shiver. "Why do you ask me that?" she flashed out.

"Because you once told me something that was not true."

"Because I was once driven to do so, you mean," and she laughed uneasily. "I suppose you are talking of what I told you of—of my aunt's illness at the time I left Kippendale?"

"Yes, I am talking of that. You said afterwards that it was all an invention."

"Didn't you see that it was my only course?" said

Maud, with quickening breath,—“my only course—in mercy to you?”

“But it was an invention, was it not?” persisted Germaine, with gentle doggedness.

Maud threw up her hands in exasperation.

“Yes, in heaven’s name! it was an invention. And do you know what drove me to invent it?”

“No,” said Germaine; “I only know that you told me a lie.”

“A lie! a lie!” cried Maud, putting her hands to her ears. “How glib we all are with that word—*a lie!* How smart we all are about marking our neighbours with that brand—*a lie!* So-and-so has called a thing black that was white, or square that was round. Never mind his motives; never mind the circumstances; never mind that the truth would have been brutal; never mind the pain which the innocent makeshift has saved: quick! the brand! and let So-and-so be marked a liar in the face of all his fellow-men for ever after.”

“I don’t understand all that,” said Germaine, as Maud caught her breath; “but I know that to talk of things that have happened is to talk the truth, and to invent things that have not happened is false.”

“Even if they were invented for the sole purpose of saving you pain? If I felt that my duty to you, to your family, to your future, demanded that we should part before you had bound yourself to me by rash promises?”

“We could have parted without a lie,” said Germaine, heavily.

“But if there was no other way? If you would listen to no reason? If I felt that I must go, and go

suddenly and quickly, does that weigh not a feather in the balance?"

"But you said what was not true," repeated Germaine.

"If I loved you, Germaine," cried Maud, with a break in her voice,—“if I loved you all the time, and if I was flying from myself?” For the last few minutes Maud had been slowly drawing across the road towards him. She stood close before him now, and her eyes, drowned in tears, sought his. Alarm had been rising within her for some little time; but it was only now, as his patient gaze met hers, that there flashed upon her the possibility, the bare possibility, of her quest being vain and her cause being lost. For a moment her heart stood still, but in the next she had rallied her forces and redoubled the languishing fire of her eyes. Was it indeed conceivable, that with all this beauty and all this passion brought to bear straight upon him, this country-bumpkin youth could hold out much longer?

“Germaine!” sobbed Maud—“Germaine!” and she put her hand on his arm. “Don’t you hear me?”

“I hear you,” said Germaine, with his face still averted.

“And do you believe me? You used always to believe me.”

“That was before you deceived me.”

Maud’s hand dropped from his arm. “You never loved me,” she said, with curling lip. “You are like the other men. I thought you were constant, I thought you were true.” It was the very word she ought not to have used, and she broke off abruptly, but Germaine had taken it up.

"True!" he said, turning upon her with shining eyes and heaving breast; "do *you* tell *me* that I have not been true? I have been too true. I have believed everything,—but it is over now," he said, dropping his voice; "I can believe nothing more." He looked so masterful in his sudden movement and with his proud gaze, that Maud felt a new pang. At that moment she could almost have married him penniless. With all her cleverness she had mistaken him all along, perhaps because a nature so elaborately trained as hers was morally unable to do justice to a nature so simple as his. There had always been a touch of contempt in her affection; she had overvalued his credulity and undervalued his intellect.

"Yes," she said, "you believed too much; that was the mistake."

"I believed you were an angel," said Germaine, brokenly.

"Exactly. And when you found out I was not, you put me down as the opposite, instead of calling me simply a woman. Oh, you men! you men! Will nothing but extremes do for you? Does *not* being an angel necessarily mean that you are a devil? And because you have not got wings, will nothing serve but that you must have horns?" She was trying again to smile, but Germaine only shook his head with a perplexed air.

"I can't follow what you say—I am not clever enough; and I don't know either what has made you change your mind back again about—about me. I only know that you have told me a lie, and that I could never believe you again—never, never!" he cried pas-

sionately. "I don't know how it is," he went on, with his brows drawn together as though in painful thought, "I don't think I can explain it, but perhaps if I had not loved you so much, so very much—if I had not thought you so perfect—I could have stood it better. If it had been any one else, perhaps I might have been able to forgive. But the shock was too great; the change,—I could never get used to it—not in you," stumbled on Germaine, growing very hot in the endeavour to make his meaning clear. "I thought you were without a speck, without a flaw. Don't cry," he said piteously—"don't cry; it breaks my heart!" For Maud had her hands pressed to her face and was sobbing helplessly.

"If it breaks your heart you must love me still," she gasped.

"Yes," sighed Germaine, perplexed, "I am afraid I love you still."

"Then take me back—oh, take me back! Believe me, trust me, give me another chance!"

"After you have once deceived me?" said Germaine, opening his eyes wide. "I could not, I could never believe you again. My faith in you is gone. It's like—I don't know what it's like; it's like a tree that has been cut down; there is only a stump of it now. The stump can't grow again. Another tree may grow, perhaps, but it won't be the same thing; it won't be my faith in you." He raised his hands and dropped them heavily to his sides. "I can't explain it otherwise," he said; "I am too slow with my words. But that is how it is."

Though he could not explain, Maud understood,

and in the midst of her tears she was angry with him for having put up her image so high that the first fall had shattered it to atoms. From an altar of reasonable height the idol could have fallen and only been bruised, but what woman that ever lived could hope to keep her balance on that preposterous pinnacle of perfection to which he had insisted on raising her, despite her own protest? Who could hope to exist at that giddy height? Well, it was over now; she would never be asked to stand there again. That "terrible faith" which had worried her so sorely was dead now, dead of a sudden death. It had not died in lingering torments, it had not languished through feverish stages to its end. All his great and beautiful faith had been killed by one mortal stab, struck at the very core of its being.

Through her tears Maud laughed fiercely to think what that stab had been; to think that Germaine, who was so far from recognising the height and the depth of her treason to him, who so completely missed the real point of her mercenary motive, should be lost to her through a simple lie, perhaps the most harmless lie that she had ever told in her life, and certainly the most clumsy. Such a lie might have been told by women of ten times her worth, and yet gone unpunished; it might almost have been told in the nursery, and have been amply atoned for by half an hour in a dark corner: and to Maud it was to cost a life's happiness. It was ludicrous—like a man being hung for sheep-stealing after he had committed patricide, comfortably undetected. Oh, whimsical irony of fate!

Laughing and crying, she struggled against it, would

not believe it—would not be convinced even when she heard him say good-bye, so hopelessly, so sadly, but without a shade of wavering. But when she looked up and saw that he had left her, then both her tears and her laugh stopped suddenly short. The word she had been addressing to him broke off, the hand she had stretched towards him, thinking he was still there, remained poised and rigid, like a hand of stone. In wide-eyed wonder she gazed at his retreating figure, and as she looked, tenderness was fast turning to anger, regret was changing to the rage of the woman who has plotted and finds herself baffled, who has humbled herself to the point of offering her love and sees it refused.

Until the bend of the road hid him she stood like a statue; then, and only then, did she finally understand that he was lost. With tight-set lips she turned her face back towards Floundershayle; all thoughts of her errand were swept out of her mind for the moment, as all thoughts of the post-office had apparently been swept out of his; for, instead of proceeding on their way, they had each instinctively turned to retrace their steps.

Maud was quite breathless when she reached the inn, though she had no particular cause for hurry—nothing to do when she got there, but to sit down and try to think over the situation as it now stood in this new and unexpected light. But fate had arranged quite otherwise. Fate, in the shape of the landlady, received her at the door with the announcement that a gentleman had called to see her, and was at that moment waiting in the sitting-room, had in fact been there for quite half an hour.

"Indeed," said Maud, indifferently; and without pausing to reflect upon who the visitor might be, or even to ascertain whether her hat was straight or not, she flung open the door of the sitting-room and immediately found herself face to face with Mr. Carbury.

For a minute she gazed at him somewhat vacantly. He was so disconnected with her present thoughts that it almost cost her an effort to recognise him.

"What on earth——" she was beginning, then interrupted herself with a quick laugh. "Oh, I see, of course; I had forgotten; you have brought me the gloves, I suppose. This is indeed answering my letter by return of post!"

CHAPTER X.

"LAUNCE."

"Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
Could have recovered greenness?"

MR. CARBURY had not brought the gloves, in fact he had forgotten all about them, but he had brought a piece of news. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that the piece of news had brought him: its essence, at any rate, was the immediate cause of his presence here.

As usual, the crisis had come about casually. Mr. Carbury, feeling desirous of a breath of air, and discovering that he had just time for a run round to his club before dinner, was much provoked at being brought up by the want of a button on his glove, and Williams chancing to be out, went off in anything but a serene

humour in search of one of his sisters. It was extremely annoying of them not to have seen to it before. What was the good of having three sisters and a mother, and what was the good of their continually fussing over one's drawers and wardrobe if one's gloves were to be buttonless at the end of it?

Three meek, middle-aged heads were raised at his entrance, and three pairs of mild grey eyes anxiously sought his face. In this quiet little back-room, with its plain furniture and its scantily decorated walls, he was greeted as a ray of sunshine might be greeted by a secluded flower-bed. To these three women he did indeed represent all the sunshine that ever shone upon their lives, not because he was warm or tender, or even particularly grateful, but because they had sacrificed everything to him, and he had been good enough to accept it; also, perhaps, because he was so tall and dark and so distinctly remarkable, while they were so small and colourless and so hopelessly insignificant. If such contrast in a family does not produce jealousy, it is pretty certain to produce blind adoration.

The glove being flung on the table, was immediately clutched at by three hands, and triumphantly secured by Miss Christina Carbury. Would he have it sewed on with black or white silk? He would have it sewed on with any colour of the rainbow, so long as it was done quick; he was suffocating in here; couldn't imagine how they could put up with gas; why didn't they burn candles? Much the pleasanter light? Because they like gas, Miss Bessie Carbury unblushingly asserted. Why should Launce be worried by being reminded that the number of wax candles weekly consumed in

his room made it advisable to light the rest of the house on a more economical principle?

Miss Henrietta Carbury added that she hoped this much of the gas wouldn't give Launce a headache; was he quite sure he hadn't a headache already? He was looking rather pale. She had a bottle of smelling-salts here,—perhaps——

“Oh, hang it all!” said Carbury, with the laugh of a goaded man, as he violently backed before the scent-bottle. “Confound it!” came next, with a peculiarly brotherly growl, as, in his retreat, he stumbled over the skirt which Bessie Carbury was engaged in turning for her own winter use; for the Miss Carburys would have thought it wicked to indulge in a lady's-maid as long as there was Launce's valet to be provided for. Bessie was immediately covered with confusion, and filled with remorse at her own awkwardness in having left the skirt to trail on the floor. Launce must excuse her stupidity, and he must on no account think of picking up the hooks and eyes which he had upset in his stumble. To grope about on the floor would only make him hot—would make his head ache worse than it did already. For Carbury, perhaps half ashamed of his ungracious gesture, had stooped down to remedy the evil he had occasioned. But it was waste of trouble. At sight of Launce on the floor, the three horrified Miss Carburys had already risen to their feet and precipitated themselves upon the hooks and eyes. Was it likely that they would allow him to take any trouble for them, considering that they had never consented to his taking any trouble for himself? With a gesture, half impatience, half resignation, he stood up and walked away to the

window. What was the use of fighting them about it? The hooks and eyes were not his; and besides, it certainly was true, as Bessie said, stooping *did* make him hot—it *was* a deuce of a bore. Better leave it to them; they seemed to like picking up hooks and eyes. This was the sort of thing that was always happening. Carbury's family life had been but a daily repetition of the hook-and-eye incident. And certainly, whether they liked it or not, there could be no doubt that it was no more than poetical justice if the Miss Carburys were reduced to picking up their own hooks and eyes. That brother of theirs, of whom they were so proud, was a work of their own hands; it was they who had made him what he was—let them take the consequences.

"By the by, Launce," began Miss Christina hurriedly, as she regained her place and repossessed herself of the glove, "what did you think of the last telegrams from St. Petersburg?" Not that Miss Christina Carbury cared at all about the telegrams from St. Petersburg, but it was necessary to keep Launce in good humour until his glove was ready, and the St. Petersburg telegrams would do as well as anything else.

"Haven't looked at the paper to-day," came sulkily from the window.

"Then you haven't seen about Miss Greeve's marriage," broke in Bessie, coming to Christina's rescue—" (there's your thimble, Chrissy),—nor about Captain Trayner's promotion? It isn't an amusing paper," rambled on Bessie, whose interest in politics was considerably less keen than her interest in her friends' doings, and to whom newspapers in general were simply

birth, death, and marriage columns. "Scarcely a name one knows mentioned except those two."

"And Sir Peter Wyndhurst," added Henrietta. "I suppose it's the same one that Launce met in Scotland."

"What about him?" asked Carbury, sharply.

"Nothing about him; only something about his yacht, which he has had to bring into harbour for repairs, it seems, having encountered some heavy weather in the North Sea."

"*What?*" said Carbury, turning suddenly from the window.

"But there's nothing *happened* to the yacht, you know," Henrietta hastened to add, somewhat aghast at the effect of her announcement; indeed she had had no idea that Launce had been so fond of Sir Peter as to be agitated by the news of his yacht having been knocked about in the North Sea. "The yacht's quite safe in harbour."

"Was that in this morning's paper?" asked Carbury, sternly.

They hastened to assure him that it was.

"And that means that Wyndhurst is in England now?"

They supposed that, according to logical deduction, it could mean nothing else.

"That'll do," he said in a choking voice, as he brushed past his astonished sisters to the door.

"And he's gone without his glove!" gasped Christina, putting in the final stitch just as the door closed.

Mr. Carbury did not want his glove, for he did not go for his breath of air that night. He went straight

back to his own room, and shut himself in there. It was a large and handsome apartment, furnished with both taste and cost, well supplied with comfortable seats, hung with stamped leather, and adorned with valuable engravings. There was something suggestive about the medley of objects on all sides. Sometimes in the evening dusk, just before the candles were lit, they would seem to crowd about Carbury like shadows—the shadows of his old life. There were the engravings on the wall, telling how Laurence Carbury had once cared for art; the skins on the floor, telling how he had once cared for sport; the groups of strange outlandish knick-knacks, proclaiming how he once cared for travel. There were fishing-rod cases, too, in the corners, and books upon the shelves; but there was dust upon them all,—not merely the tangible, inevitable dust of the London day that was past, but a more suggestive and a more melancholy sort of dust, eloquent of dead pursuits that have been denied even the decency of burial, and are condemned to grow rusty and musty and mouldy upon their shelves and in their cases. If any one had taken the trouble to investigate, it would have been found that the joints of the fishing-rods had long ago forgotten how to fit into each other, and it would have been observed that the newest volume of fiction on the shelves bore a date of ten years back.

This was the place where, when immoderately bored by family affection, Carbury could take refuge in luxurious solitude. Here also had he sat and brooded over his wrongs, nursing his wounded vanity in jealous seclusion, eating out his heart, away from the sight of his fellow-men. Within these four walls, and these four

last months, what wild thoughts had not crossed his mind; what frantic plans of revenge had not been canvassed by his desperate brain; how had he not promised his writhing vanity that the wrong-doer should not go unhurt, much as a mother might promise her sick child that the naughty boy who gave him the slap should most certainly be whipped! It was to this room, too, that he had come back with the news of Lord Kippendale's ruin fresh in his mind, and in that well-padded chair he had thrown himself, setting his teeth, and asking himself why, in the name of everything that was reasonable, he should feel the smallest pain at the misfortune of people who had been the cause of misfortune to himself? Yet all the time, to his great annoyance, he was aware of a certain very faint, very undecided thrill of pity, which stirred uneasily within him.

To understand what that moment of disillusionment in the Kippendale conservatory had been to Carbury, it is necessary to look back upon what his life had been before. For years before the day on which he met Lady Baby, the world of women had been to him as a labyrinth of scentless flowers, from which he had sucked the honey long, long ago. He had arrived at that most hopeless point when a man recognises an old flame in every girl to whom he is introduced, by virtue of having flirted with her fascimile some dozen years before. Was there no refuge anywhere from this all-pervading weariness of the feminine element? Were there really nothing but beautiful and plain women in the world—clever and stupid ones? He was so tired of stupid women—but then he was so tired of clever ones!

Thus matters stood with him when he met Lady Baby, and, to his own amazement, perceived that he could not pass her by as he had passed the others. Looking back later on that April evening in the green avenue at Kippendale when the bushes had rustled beside him, it seemed to him that the bare branches, parting to let her through, had blossomed out all at once into a rare and unexpected flower—one that in all his travels he had never found growing under any clime of the earth. He had thought that the world was empty; he had believed that his blunted senses were dead to all passion, that his heart was a piece of dry wood that could never put out shoots again: but now, first with incredulous wonder and soon with tremulous delight, he felt that in this dry wood the sap was still stirring, that something was moving, something was pushing its way out to the daylight—that, after all, he was not too old to love again:—

"Kommst du noch einmal, Jugendzeit,
Kommst du noch einmal, Liebe?"

Yes, it was coming again; it was holding triumphal entrance into the poor egotist's tired-out heart. It was exactly because he knew himself to be an egotist that he grasped at this love as at the last possible escape from that stagnant swamp of self, self, self, against which occasionally, at very rare intervals, he had had the manliness to revolt, but never had possessed the energy to shake off.

And then had come Sir Peter's rivalry and the blow of the engagement. And after that Lady Baby's pressing invitation, and those intoxicating eight days at Kippendale, in which, from hour to hour, he grew more

convinced that his love was returned. The rapture of the thought bewildered him, but also it softened him. Regrets stirred within him; shame crept over him at thought of his wasted life. He began to make plans for the future, to think of things that he had not thought of for years, to remember the prayers which his mother had taught him in his boyhood. He had prayed on his knees, he had prayed with tears in his eyes, on the evening of that day when he rode back alone with Lady Baby from the polo-ground. It was next day that he met her in the conservatory and found out that it had all been a game; that, in pursuance of her own private object, she had taken his heart and crushed it in her baby hand; that he had been a tool where he had thought he was a conquerer.

He had never forgiven himself any more than he had forgiven her. No saint has ever felt such bitter remorse for a sin as Carbury felt for the absurdity of which he had allowed himself to be guilty. It was not until fate had undertaken to crush his enemies for him that he even, to his own incredulous indignation, became aware that there could be any sort of modification in this bitter hatred to which he was persuaded his love had turned. When he received Maud's note descriptive of that land of exile, and with the brief but suggestive reference to the dismal prison-house in which his cruel mistress was doing penance for her sins, Carbury's sentiments were a curious compound of wild triumph and aching compassion. A fierce cruel curiosity took possession of him: to see her in her humiliation, what a balm to his mortally stricken vanity! How would he not love to feast his eyes upon that

picture, which yet, by no stretch of imagination, could he conjure up before his mental vision! To think of Lady Baby amid those sad grey stones, beside those sad sea-waves, was as incongruous as to think of fresh-blown hawthorn in conjunction with a December frost! He could not bend his imagination to the task.

The two days and two nights which had passed since the receipt of Maud's letter, had been one long struggle with this whimsical and ever-growing curiosity,—it haunted him like a nightmare, it fastened on him like a torture. How much longer the struggle would have lasted it is hard to say, had not the announcement made by the guileless Bessie with one blow brought matters to a crisis.

The first thing that Carbury did on again reaching his room was to look up a time-table. He knew now that ever since the reading of Maud's letter he had intended to go down to Floundershayle. It was not only that he was worn-out with the struggle of the last two days, but also that a new curiosity was added to the old. He had not forgotten what Maud had told him of that barrier of pride which stood between Lady Baby and her lover,—with his own eyes he wanted to convince himself whether that barrier stood firm. Williams? where the deuce was Williams? He must go down to Floundershayle at once—that much he distinctly understood; somewhat more indistinctly he felt that he must get there before Sir Peter did. For what reason? For none that he knew of, or for one moment would have acknowledged to himself. If a man finds that a chain is dragging him, he may, having satisfied himself that it is not to be broken, end by submitting

to be dragged, but it is extremely unlikely that he will do so with a good grace. Carbury had given in to his chain, but he hated himself for doing so; and probably it was by way of making up for this hateful submission that he was so extremely short and sullen in inventing a pretext for his sudden journey, and so ill-tempered with Williams about the packing of his portmanteau.

CHAPTER XI.

VA BANQUE!

"Be sure of this,
What I can help thee to, thou shalt not miss."

"So you have not brought the gloves?" said Maud, as she sank into a chair, all breathless still from her haste, and throbbing with the excitement of the interview that was just past. She did not add: "Then what have you come for?" probably for the reason that Mr. Carbury's conduct appeared a great deal more simple and natural to her than it did to himself.

"I happened to be in the neighbourhood," said Carbury, with glib mendacity and a fine disregard for probabilities, "and so I thought I would call upon you, and—the Gullyscoombe people."

"Oh, I see," remarked Maud, her lips twitching in spite of herself. Then she gave him one keen glance. "What has happened?" she inquired shortly.

"Happened?" he repeated.

"Yes. Since I saw you last you have heard something new,—new and probably unpleasant. Let's hear

what it is, please. I am rather knocked up this morning, and when I am knocked up I am never very patient."

"I have heard nothing particularly new," said Carbury, in a tone of obviously false lightness, "unless the return of the yacht *Fantasca* is news to you?"

Mr. Carbury had come to the inn with the intention of leading up to this question, but he had not intended to broach it quite so precipitately. He was not sure now whether it was Maud's impatience or his own that was to blame. His eye hung eagerly upon her expression, anxious to learn whether the tidings of his rival's return had yet penetrated so far. It was clear at once that they had not. A look of surprise crossed Maud's face.

"*Fantasca!*" she repeated; "then Sir Peter is back." But she said it with no appearance of being specially interested in the subject; and pulling off her hat, sank back wearily in her chair and held up her hands to her flushed cheeks, still glowing with the shame and anger that had burnt there within the last hour, and scarcely dry yet from the tears she had shed.

"Is it to give me the latest shipping intelligence that you have come here?" she irritably inquired; and then, as from her recumbent position her gaze rested full on his face, her irritation died suddenly out. Until this moment her own case had been engrossing her thoughts too completely to let his appear of any importance; but now, reading the anguish in his eyes, she was startled, despite herself, into a more wide-awake attention.

Maud was intrinsically good-natured. She never failed to feel a pang of regret whenever the necessities

of her own position forced her to do an unkind thing; she was glad, therefore, whenever an opportunity offered for being kind without injury to her own interests, and thus, as it were, "taking it out" on the other side of the balance.

"Mr. Carbury," she said pensively, only half aware that she was speaking her thought aloud, "I don't quite see that you need despair."

Carbury started bolt-upright. "Really, Miss Epper-ton," he began, with his nose in the air, "I am not aware that I——"

"Have taken off my mask? Exactly. I know that you are not aware of it; but if you take my advice, you will not go on fumbling any longer to get it fastened on again. Even if you persuade it to stick, it might just as well be off, once I have seen what is under it. If we are to talk at all, we must talk to the point. Personally, I don't care the turn of a hand whether we do talk or not. I am not in a good humour this morning, and the affair isn't any of mine; but, not to put too fine a point upon it, I am sorry for you. Please let us not have another act of the farce which we played in Mrs. Fallala's drawing-room the other evening. It amused me then, but it does not bear repetition. You know as well as I do what was the real kernel of that polite talk we then carried on. The thing was not the less there because we tacitly agreed to look the other way."

Carbury cast her a glance of startled inquiry. It is always mortifying to discover that we have been transparent. Had he been quite himself, he would undoubtedly have beaten a haughty and hasty retreat,

but he was not quite himself. Since his arrival at the place only two hours ago he had had an experience—a very slight and passing experience—nothing but the distant glimpse of a slight figure, cut with the sharpness of a *silhouette* between the cliff and the sky—a fair head blown rough by the breeze, the turn of her neck, the curve of her arm as she battled for her hat with the unmannerly wind,—that was all, but it had been enough: the wound was gaping wide again. The last remnant of his icy self-control was broken to the ground, and in its place had sprung up a sudden vehemement craving for sympathy—sympathy of any kind, sympathy at any price. For some seconds he stood hesitating, his wounded dignity wrestling to the death with the blind craving of his passion; in the next the struggle was over.

“It is no use,” he groaned, sinking sullenly into a chair—“you cannot help me.” Yet even as he said “you cannot help me,” his eyes sought hers with a flicker of greedy hope.

“I don’t suppose I can help you, but at least I can reassure you—up to a certain point. Have you forgotten what I told you of the pledge Lady Baby has given? Of how she has vowed not to re-accept Sir Peter as long as she is a beggar?”

“No; but you seem to have forgotten how I then remarked that such a pledge is nonsensical, and can bind no one possessed of ordinary common-sense.”

“Is Lady Baby specially remarkable for her ordinary common-sense?” said Maud, impatiently. She was beginning to be rather weary of the subject, and to feel that she had done all that Christian charity demanded

of her to do for Carbury. "Of course she will give way in time; I only meant to point out that there will be a respite; or if she doesn't give way, something is sure to happen to smooth away difficulties." She broke off suddenly and struck her forehead. "What am I talking about? Something *has* happened already. Mr. Carbury, I am afraid I must withdraw every bit of consolation I have just been giving you. Things are happening at such a rate that I had forgotten the situation was changed. There is no barrier between Sir Peter and Lady Baby: she is no longer a beggar, since the copper is found, or as good as found." Within the last twenty-four hours events had been marching so fast that it was hard to overtake them. Scarcely was the one combination of circumstances realised than another totally different combination had arisen. In the emotions she had so recently undergone, Maud had, for a short space, lost sight of her great discovery, or rather of some of its consequences.

"The copper found?" echoed Carbury, helplessly.

"And Lord Kippendale rich again," said Maud with sudden bitterness. Was it not by Lord Kippendale's son that she had just been spurned? Was it not before Lady Baby's brother that she had just been humbling herself to the dust, only to see him turn away and leave her in the dust—alone? She clenched her slender fingers tight. "I might have known that they would come to no great harm. I might have rested assured that Lady Baby would end by being the mistress of Nolesworth Castle; that though Fortune might be sulking with her for the moment, she would not be long before she came to fetch her spoilt child out of the

corner. You've only got to look at her to see that she is destined for all the good things in life."

Maud ended unsteadily, and with averted face rose abruptly from her chair. Walking to the window, she stood there, her forehead pressed against the glass and a wild pain throbbing in her heart. There were tears in her eyes, but they looked a great deal more like fire than like water. Her anger, lulled for a brief space by her compassionate interest in Carbury, was roused anew by the picture which she herself had just painted of Lady Baby's future prosperity. In her better moods, Maud would not have grudged Lady Baby that prosperity, but this was none of Maud's better moods. At that moment, as she stood by the window with the sense of her own desolate loneliness sweeping down full upon her, she hated Lady Baby; she hated her as she hated every one in the wide world who was happy and prosperous, or who was going to be happy and prosperous; every one who did not stand alone, who had sisters to love her or friends to watch over her—who was not forced to plot and plan and tell lies for herself; every one even who had a comfortable bed to lie in, and food enough to eat without begging for it. She hated them all, as a starving wretch may hate the well-fed party he can see sitting round the table through the lighted window. She was wildly jealous of them all; she cried out to be revenged against them all. It was a momentary revolt of her whole being against fate—a sudden uprising against the injustice of those hardships which she had borne for so long with so much courage and philosophical patience. A veil seemed to lift and to show her all her carefully de-

vised and scientifically constructed plans lying in a heap of ruins at her feet. If it was true that Lady Baby bore upon her the mark of good-luck, then surely Maud Epperton was branded with bad-luck's deepest sign. She had lost Germaine. Before losing Germaine, she had lost Sir Peter. Before losing Sir Peter—— But hold! What was this new light flashing like lightning into Maud's eyes? Why did her angry tears dry up so suddenly on her cheek, and even her breath seemed to cease for a moment, as she stood quite still by the window, her lips parted, and her eyes staring wide as though at some wonderful vision of the air? *Was* Sir Peter lost to her? It was the upstarting of this question which had taken her breath away. He was not Lady Baby's yet. He would not be Lady Baby's until all doubts about this new copper were cleared away, for until then would the barrier of pride stand between them. And the fixity of that barrier she all at once realised was in no other keeping than her own. A hasty backward glance at her interview with Germaine assured her that the secret was not out, that the trump-card was still in her hand, that she was still at liberty to play it in any way she liked.

Mr. Carbury, sitting plunged in his own perplexing thoughts, was startled suddenly by a loud burst of laughter from the window. It was the laugh of the luckless victim of fate, who, while he is crying out for a weapon wherewith to revenge himself against the world in general for being happier than he is, suddenly discovers that he holds the very weapon in his hand. Maud's mind was peculiarly fitted for the taking up of sudden resolutions; in one instant she saw where her

chance lay. Brought up short by the failure of one object, she was already intent on the accomplishment of another. She had, as it were, reversed her engines at full steam. What was passing in her mind now was not at all unlike what had passed in her mind on the evening of the tableaux at Kippendale at the moment that she had met Germaine's first admiring gaze upon her. Then also a resolve had been conceived; on that evening a thread had been broken off, to-day it was to be picked up again. It was but the resuming of an old campaign; and, by the ease with which she fell into the plan, Maud recognised how much the idea had been in her thoughts lately, in defiance of her better self. The train had long been laid; it wanted but the spark to fire it, and the spark had fallen to-day.

Maud was still laughing as she turned from the window, so overcome was she at the change that had come over her prospects within the last two minutes. As her eye fell on Mr. Carbury, whose existence she had almost forgotten, she laughed still more. "That man would do anything in the world, if he thought he had the ghost of a chance." Once more her own words recurred to her, and this time they bore a significance she had never discovered in them before. It was wonderful how perfect the opportunity was, as it dawned upon her bit by bit. Here had been two people asking themselves which way to turn—two hands groping about in the dark, when all they had to do was to clutch each other for mutual support. It must have been her good angel—or her bad one—that had inspired her not to snub Mr. Carbury and send him away. Charity for once had truly been its own reward.

"Oh, Mr. Carbury," exclaimed Maud, as she returned to her chair straight opposite to him, "I have made such a mistake! I told you just now that Sir Peter's return was nothing to me, instead of thanking you so much for bringing me the intelligence. I didn't quite understand it then, but I see it all now—I see it all quite clearly before me. The ways of Providence are strange. Do you believe in fate, Mr. Carbury? I do; and I believe it is no use trying not to do a thing when it is destined that you are to do it."

Mr. Carbury stared at her in perplexity for a moment, and then, with some vague idea that Miss Epperton was not quite in her right mind, made an undetermined movement towards his hat. She saw it at once.

"Don't go away," she said, quickly. "You have been sent me in the very nick of time. I have not half explained to you the interest I feel in your case. You must let me help you. That was another mistake that I made when I said that I could not help you. I can do so very easily."

Mr. Carbury said nothing, but looked at her with some suspicion.

"Wait; you must give me a minute to disentangle the threads, there are so many, and they get so mixed." Then to herself she continued: "Yes, that is the way; that will work; I believe that will answer." "Mr. Carbury," she said aloud, "would you like to be put in the way of earning the eternal gratitude of Lady Baby and all her relations?"

"I don't want their gratitude," said Carbury, sullenly.

"Not even if it prove a stepping-stone to your purpose?"

"My purpose? What on earth do you mean by my purpose?"

"The one for which you left London. It was to *try again* that you came down here, was it not?"

Carbury started bolt-upright. "I am not thinking of doing anything of the sort. At least,—I mean that I left London without any such purpose in my mind."

"Then you are a greater—pardon me—fool than I should have taken you for. Such a combination of circumstances! Such a situation! Such a chance!"

"I don't understand you——"

"You shall presently. Love may be awakened by gratitude, may it not?"

"And how is this gratitude to be awakened?" asked Carbury in the most ungracious of tones.

"By playing Providence to them. I meant to do it myself, but I yield to you the whole honour and glory. I believe I have let slip the secret to you already, but I have let it slip to no one else, so its market-value is still intact." And then she very briefly told him of the old shoemaker on the moor and the discovery she had made. "I make you a present of the secret," she concluded, "and along with it I make you a present of the fate of the entire house of Kippendale. Use it as your feelings will direct. If with that weapon in your hand you cannot extort from Fate what you want, you are too great a bungler to be pitied; I wash my hands of you."

Before she had done speaking Carbury was pacing the room in an excitement which he vainly attempted

to mask. He had spoken the truth, or at least as much of the truth as he was aware of, when he said that he had left London without any intention of "trying again"; but since he had left London there had been that vision on the cliff, and from that moment he had known that merely to feast his eyes upon her humiliation would never satisfy the passion that was tearing his soul. He was a weaker if not exactly a more mercifully inclined man than he had been but a few hours back. This hope, flashed so dexterously into his eyes, was fast upsetting his senses. This chance, pushed right into his hand, would it be possible to resist it?

"But if she—if she cares for him," he said at last with an effort, "what good will all that do? *Does* she care for him?" he abruptly inquired, standing still before Maud.

"Of course she cares for him," was Maud's serene reply. "Wait a minute," as his face darkened—"I have not done yet. Have you ever heard of a girl of seventeen who was not ready to care for a walking-stick, so long as the thing had a well-cut coat over it and a pair of lips wherewith to propose to her? Your coat is quite as well cut as Sir Peter's; *ergo*, your chances are quite as good."

"Then why——"

"Why was he the favoured one and not you? Because he was first in the field,—*voilà tout*."

Carbury looked down intently into her face. "Will you swear to me that this is your conviction? Will you swear that you have no reason to suppose that her feel-

ing for Wyndhurst is anything deeper than this—than the sort you have just described?”

For just one little instant Maud hesitated,—just one little doubt flickered across her mind. Up to this moment her treachery had not been very deep; she was almost quite sure of her own theory; she honestly saw no reason why Mr. Carbury should not yet cut out Sir Peter. And yet, there had been moments,—lights on Lady Baby's face, shadows in Lady Baby's eyes,—bah! after all, she was but a child, and no child ever cries for long.

“As many oaths as you like,” she laughed. “Sir Peter was a new toy, and when the varnish was rubbed off she threw him away, and now that he is gone she would like to have him back again; that is not love, that is the ‘contrariness’ of human nature. Give her a newer toy and the old one will be forgotten.”

Carbury had resumed his pacing of the room, but his step was now more hurried and the pulses in his temples hammered feverishly. If she did not love him—and must not Miss Epperton know her own sex and her own friend?—then indeed a new light would have fallen on the situation; at worst it would be but a fair race between himself and Wyndhurst,—always supposing that he should really resolve to take the field again;—could the result be doubtful? Laurence Carbury did not think so, at any rate not at this moment. As he restlessly paced the little inn-parlour from end to end, Maud's arguments poured into his ears, smoothing out his ruffled vanity and pointing out to him the peculiar advantages of this new position, in which she proposed to place him. It was necessary to do so if

he were to be her ally, her unwitting and unconscious ally, as she had already determined that he should be. Neither was the task a very hard one, considering the man she had to deal with, and considering the woman she was. The revulsion of feeling brought by the last hour had paralysed her conscience and hardened her heart to a stone. All the evil instincts in her were awake, and had trampled down all the good instincts into a corner where they could neither stir nor cry out, much as the mutinous crew of a ship may fall upon the rightful commander and his supporters, and having put them in irons and battened down the hatchways, usurp the guidance of the ship for a time.

"If only it wasn't so confoundedly like a thing in a play," reflected Carbury as he listened. "And yet if it's the only way in which the thing is to be done, I'll do it; by——, I'll do it!"

Presently, in the midst of his walk, he turned aside and picked up his hat.

Maud watched him with an amused smile. "If I do not stop you," she said, "I do believe that you will go straight off to Gullyscoombe."

"Well," he coldly inquired, "and if I did?"

Maud struck her forehead. "How like a man! Why, don't you see that in that way you are simply throwing your chances by handfuls out of the window? Don't you know that you are ever so much more likely to succeed if you go in by the back door instead of by the front? Bless the man, that's not the way to do it at all!"

"I never said that I intended to do it at all," remarked Carbury, in his most ill-tempered tone.

"The way is to find out where she walks," continued Maud, calmly disregarding the interruption; "it will probably be somewhere near the sea. So much the better, as nothing makes a better background than waves; you cannot fail to have a halo of poetry about you. Meet her alone, of course. What you will say to her, I think I can safely leave to you. But—just one hint; the more you can manage to resemble the hero of a three-volume novel, the better it will be. She will probably be reading one when you come across her among the rocks, and all will depend upon how you compare with the lover in those printed pages. You have one immense advantage in common with most novel-heroes. You are poor—at least you are poor compared to Sir Peter; that in itself ought to give you a pull over him. No heroine worth her salt, having the choice between a millionaire and a pauper, ever hesitates in favour of the millionaire. Oh, Mr. Carbury, I do believe that no man ever before had such a chance as you have got!"

Without signifying by a single word whether he intended to adopt the course recommended or not, and without so much as taking leave, Carbury walked to the door. His fingers were on the handle when she called him back.

"One more piece of advice," she said, rising and looking him steadily in the face. "Watch your moment; don't be in too great a hurry to disclose your secret. Remember that in giving the clue to the copper, you knock over the barrier that now stands between Sir Peter and Lady Baby. Be careful, Mr. Carbury; I want you to succeed."

"Why does she want me to succeed?" reflected Carbury, as he walked up the village street. "Why does she want to leave to me the honour and the glory of the announcement?" Maud's eagerness in his cause was obvious; the reason for it was not so obvious. But the question did no more than pass through Carbury's mind. He had been so used all his life to have everything done for him, that he found it after all but natural that this should be done for him too. Since all difficulties and bothers had always been cleared out of his daily path, why shouldn't difficulties and bothers be cleared out of his love affairs as well? He supposed women liked to do that sort of thing; he supposed it was what they were meant for. This friendly interference was a pleasant fact, which he accepted much in the same spirit as he accepted the pleasant fact of his toast at breakfast being done to a turn, or his slippers being warmed for him before the fire.

"I think I have got matters into the right groove," said Maud to herself, alone in the inn-parlour. "It is playing *Va Banque*, of course, but at any rate it is a chance; the rest must be left to human nature, and to fate. And now I wonder when Sir Peter will be here?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLACE OF EXILE.

"We live within the stranger's land."

ON the morning after their arrival at Gullyscombe, the various members of the exiled family, slumbering

uneasily upon their unaccustomed beds, were roused from their last dreams by the noise of something which first grated heavily, and then groaned, and then rattled, and at last fell shut with a clap which shook the walls to their foundations. It was only the noise of the garden-door, which had stood closed and unused for so long that the hinges were thick with rust and the steps choked with weeds, so that it took all Lady Baby's strength to get the lazy bars to slide. The first streak of dawn had awakened her, for there were no thick curtains to her window here, as at Kippendale; and, through the silent house, she had stolen down to look out and see what Gullyscoombe was like—Gullyscoombe, their place of exile. Down the nettle-grown steps she walked, shivering in the bitterly chill air, but still eager to see, eager to inspect, determined to know the worst at once. Some two hundred years ago this grim and solid little house had started in the world as the residence of one of the small Choughshire county families. A slight suggestion of moulding on the vaulted ceiling of one of the little, thick-walled, white-washed rooms up-sairs, a date carved in a stone slab above one of the windows, and two mutilated pillars at the two sides of what was now the stable-door in the yard,—these were the marks that proclaimed the former manor-house. From that level it had sunk to be utilised as a coast-guard station; after which it had been purchased by a retired sea-captain, who had grown so used to the sound of the wind and the waves that he could not do without them, and who had fallen in love with this site, presumably because it was the most exposed in England. That sea-captain must have been a

happy man, for, so far as the sound of winds and waves could make it, this granite bower planted on the cliff was fit to be a merman's abode. Not a chance of remaining deaf to the tiniest ripple that broke on the rocks; not a hope of shutting out the sound of the thinnest whistle of wind which piped among the garden bushes.

The tide was out just now; and, peering over the wall, Lady Baby looked straight upon a series of wet ledges of rock,—some of them spread with a gloomy, green carpet of sea-weed, or decorated with wide, shining, sea-weed ribbons, or heaped with thick, slimy, sea-weed ropes, or fringed with heavy sea-weed fringes. The very pools of salt water that still lurked on those ledges were green and brown with the tints of the sea-weeds themselves. The great, round stones that lay strewn on the shingle below were tufted with tangles of sea-weed. Seen from above they might have been monstrous heads cut off and cast there, with long, wet, dishevelled hair streaming over the sand. In some of the nooks of the rocks lay yellowish-white masses of something that shuddered in the wind, so very much as heaps of feathers would have shuddered, that Lady Baby began to wonder whether this was the place where all the sea-birds of the coast were plucked. It was only when the wind snatched up a handful of these would-be feathers and whirled them up the cliff and over her head that she perceived it to be nothing but stagnant sea-foam which had collected among the stones and lay quivering there, rank, salt, and yellow.

Turning from that side of the picture, Lady Baby looked about her in the garden; that is to say, that

which had been a garden once: the path was still to be traced by the thinner growth of the weeds. About a dozen gooseberry and currant bushes stood in a straggly row. They had long ago forgotten what it was to bear fruit, and even their leaves had been eaten off them by snails much earlier in the year—brittle fragments of snail-shells testified to that. In the whole waste garden there was nothing that stood higher than these wretched bushes; and even they, and even the very weeds at their feet—sea-pink and samphire plants that had sown themselves there—seemed to be crouching before the pruning-knife of the breeze, crawling as close to the ground as they could manage, flattening themselves into corners, ducking their heads wherever a gap in the ruinous stone wall had left them unprotected. Not one of them dared to look over the highest stone; the sea-wind would not suffer it.

The four corners of the garden were marked by four battered, wooden figures, which Lady Baby, after an interval of perplexity, recognised as the figure-heads of old ships. She went round and examined them all. She had had a pretty sharp taste of misfortunes within the last months, but in the bottom of her heart she was still a child, and to a real child anything in the shape of a doll possesses always a mysterious fascination. Each of the figure-heads was different: there was a sea-king with a sceptre, a dragon with a tail that was tied in several artistic knots, a cherub who had probably once blown a trumpet, and there was of course the unavoidable mermaid with the harp. The dragon lay on his face, the mermaid on her back, the cherub reeled against the wall; alone among them the sea-king stood

upon his feet, or rather the remains of his scaly tail, still firmly embedded in the ground, and continued to wear the stump of his sceptre, as though he were still ruling the waves. At one time the other three had stood as straight as he, each in his own corner. This had been the retired sea-captain's idea of cheerful garden decoration.

Leaving this caricature of a garden, Lady Baby pursued her investigations further. When she had walked along a little piece of the road, she met some men and women leading children by the hand, and carrying bundles on their backs. She spoke to them, and found that they were some of the miners, thrown out of work by the catastrophe, and going to look for employment elsewhere. They had been waiting on till now, in hopes from day to day that the inland vein would be struck and the new mines opened. They could not wait any longer, and they were going; many had gone already, some would follow.

Then Lady Baby slowly pursued a little path on the right; she had asked the way to the head of the Bluebell mines, and they had pointed in this direction. The buildings were still untouched. If it had not been for the grass-blades, already beginning to push themselves up among the heaps of refuse at the pit-head, the place would have looked as though only locked up for the night, and this deathly silence which hung about it might have been the stillness of a holiday, and not the dumbness of ruin. But the grass-blades were enough, and even Lady Baby, who had never heard these engines clank, and never seen the full buckets come spinning up the ropes, felt struck to the heart as

she stood beside the lost mine, as though she were looking at a grave.

A little stone which she dropped down the shaft sent up a faint splash to her ear, no louder than might be the whisper of a spirit, and yet enough to remind her that the enemy was there—the patient, smiling, immeasurable sea, that had come in by one little hole, and would never, never go back again.

She sat down on a big stone, with her face in her hands. The sight of the departing workmen had awakened in her a vague, sickening sense of hopelessness; that tiny splash in the drowned shaft seemed to set the seal upon it. What, oh what was the future to be? She was not yet eighteen; was the rest of her life to be spent on this spot? Was she to live here always, always? In this place, where the world was all made of water and of stone?

The first day at Gullyscoombe was terrible—as terrible almost as the last day at Kippendale. And yet, perhaps, it was easier to bear than the days that slowly followed, just as acute pain is less wearing than that dull throbbing ache which has become chronic.

It had been a relief to weep upon one another's necks, and there was a certain relief in the first inspection of their place of exile; but that over, what next? Reasonable beings cannot continue to weep for any length of time, be their sorrow ever so genuine, and their store of cambric handkerchiefs ever so great. The next thing was simply to sit down, to wait, to hope, and to despair a little more every day.

Men always succumb sooner than women to this sort of passive suffering, so it was no wonder that the

first marks were to be seen upon the old earl. He did not complain—he was too much of a Bevan for that—but he grew fretful; his fits of anger occurred oftener, and upon more trivial provocations; his nervous habit of looking at his watch every five minutes to see when the “next thing” was due, began to grow upon him to the extent of a mania; the hand which no longer had any rein to guide seemed daily to become more unsteady, the foot which had no more cause to wear a spur now faltered and stumbled at the slightest obstacle on his path. Despite his white hairs, he had not been an old man before this; but now his years had claimed him. There were moments also when he would seem to forget, then suddenly to remember, his ruin. When at table, for instance, the soup being singed by the unskilful cook or the vegetables overdone, he would turn to Lady Baby with—“This is too bad of Mrs. Spunker; what is the good of paying eighty pounds a-year to one’s housekeeper unless”—and then, his eye falling on the blank faces of his daughters, he would suddenly break off and stare helplessly about him, remembering that he had no housekeeper, and that Mrs. Spunker was a thing of the past. Or once or twice, in the very earliest days of his exile, he would emerge from his newspaper with a jerk of his watch and a cheerful declaration that there would be just time for a gallop before luncheon, only to sink back into his chair with a groan, before the words were well out.

Lady Baby’s first days had been devoted to the divining-rod; but her inland expeditions having been interdicted, there remained nothing but to wander about the rocks, and count the clouds and speculate whether

ships from the North Sea ever passed that way. She had found out a sheltered seat among the rocks half-way down the cliff—a niche which bore some marks of artificial hollowing, and which had probably once played the part of a smuggler's hiding-hole. Right above it, on the crest of the cliff, a small irregularly oblong enclosure had first attracted her attention to this particular spot of the coast. On nearer inspection this half-obliterated enclosure was found to contain two half-obliterated mounds. They were the graves of two sailors, she was told, who had been found lying one morning, many years ago, side by side, on that little bit of sand in that tiny scrap of a bay straight below. There were no names on the graves, but there was nothing very peculiar in that, seeing that nameless graves are rather more common on the Choughshire coast than graves with names. Sometimes, it is true, inquiries were made and bodies were identified; but these two sailors happened never to have been claimed, so there they lay nameless under their green mounds, and the "uncanny cliff" was generally shunned as a spot of evil repute.

It was exactly its evil reputation that had caused Lady Baby to choose this particular niche in the rocks for her favoured seat. It assured her the greater loneliness. Besides, she took a dreary and almost a fearful interest in those dead sailors. Were there not many other ships afloat besides the one on which those poor nameless men had left their homes? And were not winds as high and waves as cruel to-day as they had been then?

In her daily visit to her rocky niche, Lady Baby never failed before descending the cliff to throw a

scrutinising glance at the irregular enclosure on the top. So low was the enclosing bank that the hungry-looking sheep, limping with hobbled legs up and down the cliff paths, used frequently to scramble into the dismal little graveyard, under the impression, apparently, that the grass there was a trifle richer in quality, or a trifle less battered by the wind. Lady Baby was very sorry for the sheep, but she was sorrier for the sailors, and she never failed to drive off the trespassers before descending to her hidden seat. There, with Brenda and Fulda at her feet, she would sit whole afternoons staring out to sea till her eyes ached. She had a vague notion—this was in her more hopeful moods—that some day the yacht *Fantasca* would come sailing this way and would anchor just in front of this very rock, and that just up that little ledge the yacht's master would step, to lay his fortune and his love at her feet. And then? Why, then, of course she would reject it, as every beggar-maid in her place would do, unless she were a very vile beggar-maid indeed. A great deal in her was changed, but her pride not yet; it would take a yet harder blow to bend its stubborn neck. She never for a moment wavered in her resolve to reject Sir Peter, but she did think it a little hard that he should not come to be rejected.

One day at the beginning of October, when she had already been more than a month at Gullyscombe, Lady Baby was sitting with the two dogs in her usual retreat. Above her head towered the cliff with the buried sailors, before her eyes lay the cove in which they had been found on the morning after the storm—a little curve of coarse-grained sand, shining with its granite particles,

It was dreary and cold; a misty glare hung over the sea. The solitary rocks that stood like islands a little off from the shore were for ever appearing and disappearing under the breaking of the foam. Labour as they would, the poor patient waves could not get the nakedness of those black monsters covered; scarcely was the veil woven than it was pierced, torn into a hundred shreds, and slipping downwards in millions of frothy rags. All along the battered-looking coast the sea was thundering and booming, raving and muttering, growling and hissing, and then beginning again to thunder and to boom. Everything in the look of the sky, in the sharpness of the wind, told that the season was changing fast. Hark! Do you hear that sound? It is the rattle in the throat of the dying summer: and that again,—do you hear? It is the hoarse laugh of the coming winter, who tears along, shrieking in mad glee as he gloats over all the victims he is coming to kill; the green leaves which he will lash to rags with his whistling whips, the flowers he will strangle with his ropes of snow, the old folk and the tender children that he will stab to death with his dagger of ice.

This must be the place, thought Carbury, as he began to descend the rocks. "Disgustingly like a thing in a play," he kept muttering under his breath. "Rocks, too, such stagey things!" and he cast a vindictive glance at the granite walls which surrounded him, almost as though he suspected them of being but pasteboard and tinsel. Personally, Mr. Carbury would have greatly preferred to walk in by the front door; it would have been not only less "stagey," but also more comfortable. In

a decently furnished, well-heated room he would have felt ever so much more at his ease than among those chilly cliffs, with their thin coats of grass battered and matted by the wind into tangled ridges, and their shivering crests of dead sea-pink. He had noted his directions carefully, and yet he might have missed the place had it not been for Brenda and Fulda, who sprang up, growling, at his approach.

A few more steps and he saw her, just as she started from her seat, with one hand clutching the scarlet shawl which was slipping from her shoulder, the other upon Fulda's collar, while the dog struggled to spring forward. He saw her, and yet was not quite sure that he saw aright; for gazing at her now close and face to face, he realised that this was not quite the baby-amazon who, on her shaggy pony, had come breaking through the bushes in the green avenue, and not quite the child who had stamped her foot at him in the conservatory at Kippendale. It had never occurred to him to think that that child was beautiful. That she had been at once his torment and his delight he had known for long—something like the tantalising freshness of dewdrops that hang just out of reach of a man parched with thirst—but beautiful, no; he had seen too many beautiful women to think that Lady Baby was beautiful. And now—oh wonder and delight! oh madness and despair! to all her other crimes against him she had added that of becoming beautiful! It was the months past that had done it; the tears in the night, the heartache in the day;—it was the doubts and the fears and the long hours among the rocks; it was their work which had carved her face into something more

delicate than had lain in the childish roundness of outline, that had taken a little of that nursery bloom from her cheek, and had put into her gaze something at once sadder and wilder than that sweet impudence of the spoiled child. There was a more womanly grace in the lines of her slight figure, something more complete and rounded even in the least movement of her hand. She had grown, too, just perceptibly; her lips were a shade less red, and her eyes burned dark and deep under their sweeping lashes.

“Yes!” cried a voice in Carbury’s heart, “this, this is the flower; the other was the bud, the promise; this is the fulfilment.” And as he thought it they stood opposite each other silently, she gazing in fear and he in wonder.

CHAPTER XIII.

RETRIBUTION.

“Love is the only price of love.”

UPON Mr. Carbury’s first, almost stupid fit of blank admiration, there followed a pang of remembrance—remembrance of where he had seen her last, and how,—with what brilliancy of life about her, with what wealth at her feet and power at her command. Even the red and the blue of the flowers in the Kippendale conservatory, which he was not aware of having so much as noticed, rose up again in memory to contrast themselves with her present surroundings, to make the sea look more grey and the rocks more bare.

This was the moment in which he should have

tasted to its depth that revengeful exultation which he had promised himself, yet now that the moment had come, the emotions pressing on him were too distracting to bear analysis. He had come to the spot almost straight from his interview with Maud, half hopeful with a sort of hopefulness that was more than half suspicious, partially convinced by her arguments, yet all the time mistrustfully aware of the weak points in his case—fearful of a second defeat, and yet too intoxicated by the bare possibility of success to throw aside this more than forlorn hope.

“Mr. Carbury,” said Lady Baby, recovering from her first surprise, “how is it that you always appear as though out of trap-doors? The last time——” and then, remembering when the last time had been, she broke off and hurried into another question. “What do you want?—I mean, why are you here?”

“I am here because——” began Carbury, and then he too broke off short. He had been on the very point of rushing headlong into the disclosure he had to make, when Maud’s warning touching rashness darted across his mind. No—this was nonsensical: he would play his cards carefully; he would be wily, as wily as his storming pulses would allow.

“So this is where you spend your afternoons?” he broke out, with a harsh abruptness which made Lady Baby’s blue eyes open wide.

“Yes,” she stammered—“that is, generally.”

“Your life is very lonely, I suppose? You have no neighbours at all?”

Vaguely Carbury felt that he was not doing the thing as it ought to be done, not as he had done similar

things on many similar occasions,—that if the spirit of Miss Epperton might be supposed to be hovering over the spot, she must forthwith disown him as a pupil. But what was the good of attempting even to modulate his voice—let alone any idea of finessing—when the pulses in his temples were still hammering so as to deafen him?

“Of course it is very lonely; nobody ever comes here, and I don’t understand how you——”

“You shall hear how and why I have come here presently. How does your father bear the change?”

Lady Baby’s eyes filled suddenly with tears. “Poor, *poor* papa!” she burst out, her surprise at Mr. Carbury’s appearance and strange jerky questions swept aside by the tide of a quickly risen emotion. “If it were not for him I think I could bear it better.” Sitting down again on the stone beside her, she covered her eyes with her hands. She had almost forgotten to whom she was speaking.

“Is he ill?” asked Carbury, without any shade of softening in his voice.

“If being ill means being in bed, then he is not ill; but if it means looking grey and haggard and drawn, and gazing at you so wistfully and sadly, and yet so bravely, with his dear old eyes, then he is very ill indeed. He never says anything, but I know that his heart is breaking. Sometimes in the evenings when we are sitting together, and when he has dropped asleep in his chair—he always drops asleep now—I see him making a movement with his hand towards his head just as though he were settling his hat before taking a fence, and I know what he is dreaming of then. It is

getting very near the hunting season, you know. Sometimes—sometimes it rushes over me that he will never sit on a horse again.”

“Does that mean that the engineers have given up all hopes of the copper?”

“The engineers!” Lady Baby made a scornful movement with her shoulders. “Don’t talk to me about them. I think I shall be almost glad when we have reached the point of not having any more money to spend upon the engineers. Their long faces and longer reports are more than I can stand. It is not the engineers that will ever get papa back to Kippendale and to the foxes.”

“Then what will get him back there?”

“I don’t know; I have just told you that I have almost given up hope. Once I hoped that the divining-rod would do it. I cut a great many twigs from hazel-bushes, but I threw them all away in turn. If they had done what I wanted, they might have lived set in gold till the end of the world.”

“You would have framed the lucky rod in gold?” asked Carbury. He stood two paces from the stone, watching her face with a suspicious intentness.

“In diamonds and pearls, if I had them,” said Lady Baby, impetuously. “Don’t you see that nothing could be too good for the thing that had saved papa’s life? For it is the place that is killing him; it is nothing but the place—don’t you see?”

“Yes,” said Carbury, very slowly, “I think I see.” He had taken off his hat and pushed back his hair from his forehead, but his eyes never moved from her face.

"And if this is what you would do for the piece of hazel twig, what would you do for the man?"

"The man! Which man?"

"The man who would act the part of that divining-rod,—who would save your father's life by giving you the clue to the lost copper?"

"There can't be any such man," she began in amazement.

"But if there were," he urged, almost violently. "If, by some chance, the secret of the lost seam had fallen into some stray person's hands, and he were the means of restoring it to you?"

"I should worship him!" cried Lady Baby, clasping her fingers together. "I should go down on my knees to worship such a man; I should never forget his name in my prayers."

"And if, in return, he had a prayer of his own to make?"

"It should be granted, of course," she exclaimed, with childish impetuosity. "Whatever it was, it should be granted unheard; how can you doubt it?"

"Can I tell him so?" asked Carbury, as quietly as he could.

She looked up in his face, astonished, then rose quickly to her feet. "Mr. Carbury, what is it?" she asked. Her heart was beating fast and thick, with some dim apprehension of what was coming. "I don't understand; you look as if something had happened, as if you had some good news. Tell it me quick. There has been so much bad news, anything good would be such a change. Is it about the copper? Have you heard anything? When did you hear it? When did it

happen? Oh, why don't you answer quick?" She had taken hold of his hand quite unconsciously; for, at this moment, he was not exactly a human being to her, but only a possible medium for transmitting to her some longed-for good news. Her eyes were uplifted to his, her cheeks were glowing.

"The copper, I have every reason to suppose, is found," said Carbury deliberately, shuddering a little as her fingers touched his. "At least there is a clue which I——"

"You? Then you yourself are the man you have been talking about? Why didn't you say so at once? It is you who have favours to beg? Oh, Mr. Carbury, as many as you like! Only be quick; what are they?"

"Can you love me?" said Carbury, peering into her eyes with a terrible fear in his own. To himself it seemed as though he were whispering, but in reality he still spoke in that harsh, broken, rough tone in which he had opened the interview. It was all he could do to hear himself speak, so obstinate was the hammering in his temples.

In an instant all the joyous excitement died out of her face, and a panic-stricken look had come instead. She remembered again where she was, and whose hand it was she was holding. Snatching her own away she moved a step aside. "Oh, Mr. Carbury," she said, in the voice of a disappointed child, "now you have spoilt it all."

Carbury's face showed no change as yet, he seemed absorbed in closely following each shade of her expression.

"I see. That means that you could never love me —never? Think well before you speak."

"I don't need to think. If it is really true that you have come to bring us good news, then you shall have my gratitude, my eternal gratitude."

"But nothing more? I see." Suddenly with a laugh, not very loud, but entirely despairing, he struck his forehead with the palm of his open hand. "Ha, ha! serves you right, Laurence Carbury—serves you right! And the best of the joke is, that I saw it all along. Talked over by a woman—ha, ha! I wonder whether anything half so ridiculous has ever happened before?"

With his open hand still on his forehead, he stood during several seconds as though lost in deep thought, while Lady Baby waited, trembling, for she knew not what.

When he spoke again it was in words which came to him quite independent of his will; it was the pain of the months past finding a voice; the passion which had first been ignored and then repressed, now bursting all bonds and insisting on being heard. In no word of this mad confession did there ring any note of appeal; his hopelessness was too complete to allow of that. It was not a declaration which he was making, it was an accusation; he was asking for nothing, he was only telling her what she had done—telling it her without mercy and without disguise.

To Lady Baby this outburst was a revelation. Up to this moment she had never fully realised her guilt towards Carbury. Even after the shock of his self-betrayal in the conservatory at Kippendale she had been far, very far, from giving due importance to that which she had accomplished. Ever since her nursery days she had been used to take exactly what she liked

and as much of it as she liked; to choose her own toys, and to help herself to as many spoonfuls of jam as she thought she could eat. Well, it was only that she had helped herself to Mr. Carbury; she had required him, or at least some of him, and so she had helped herself as usual, and the disturbance of mind which followed was more alarm than remorse. Flirtation in real life was, after all, a more dangerous thing than it generally turned out to be in novels.

Those had been her thoughts at the time, but to-day it was different. Mr. Carbury's wild words had terrified her into recognition of the fearful mistake she had made. Long before he had done speaking she had her hands over her face and was crying in a sort of helpless perplexity. By what irony of fate was it that the very man whom she had so mortally injured should be the one to restore to them their ruined fortunes?

When at length silence fell between them, she could still hear his heavy breathing close by. It was after a pause which seemed to her an eternity that one more word was spoken, a half-choked word that might have been "Good-bye." Looking up, she saw that he had turned to leave the spot. Instinctively she put out her hand in protest: this must not be. She could not let him go thus uncomforted and in anger. Her guilt towards him was great enough without this additional stab.

"Wait, Mr. Carbury!" she cried, as steadily as she could. "You must not go until—I want you to understand that I understand—but, but I never thought of it that way. Won't you say something—something a little less cruel before you go?"

"I have nothing more to say," said Carbury. His tone had completely changed; it was once more the old, weary, indifferent voice which had struck Lady Baby as so strange that first evening at Kippendale. He had said all that he wanted to say, and he had said it so passionately that a sudden mental exhaustion had followed on the outburst.

Lady Baby sprang forward.

"Mr. Carbury, you must not go like that! Think in what a position you are placing me! Think what a coal of fire you are laying on my head! There cannot, no, there cannot be any bitterness between you and me; I, a Bevan, and you the providential benefactor of my family."

"Providential benefactor!" repeated Carbury. "How is that?"

"The clue to the copper. Have you forgotten?"

Mr. Carbury put his hand to his head. "Yes," he said vaguely, "I think I had forgotten."

"Don't you know that you have earned the eternal gratitude of every Bevan alive?"

"I have not earned it yet," said Carbury.

She stared at him in amazement. In his tone and in his face there was still that heavy look—was it sullenness? was it weariness?—into which his excitement had died down as a flame into the ashes.

"But the clue? You said you had the clue?"

"So I have, to the best of my belief."

"And it was to give me that clue that you came here to-day?"

He reflected for a moment. "Yes, but I have changed my mind since then."

"In Heaven's name, why? You cannot mean——"

"Why?" said Carbury, not looking at her, but staring straight out to sea. "I will tell you why: because by putting you on the track of the copper I should be knocking over the only barrier which now stands between you and Sir Peter Wyndhurst, and I don't mean to do that." He seemed not to be speaking to her at all, but simply to be arguing the point to himself.

Lady Baby looked at Carbury somewhat wildly; she tried to say, "It is not true," but all she did was to move her lips, and then silently and with a shudder clasp her hands again before her face.

"Possibly you may get on to the track without me," went on Carbury, speaking as before; "possibly, but not probably. At any rate, I don't intend to do the thing myself—with my own hand—no, that would be simply nonsensical. You have offered me your gratitude," he added, after a second's pause, "and you have even been kind enough to offer me the gratitude of your whole family. I suppose you considered it an inducement. Look here, Lady Baby; do you see that shell here on the rock? Your gratitude has for me the same value as that shell. If it were lying at my feet, a tangible thing, do you imagine that I should take the trouble to pick it up? Look!" and with his heel he ground it slowly into the stone. "Your gratitude will not do for me, Lady Baby; nothing will do for me but—hush! I know *now* that I can never have what I want; it is a pity you could not have managed to let me know it a little sooner."

He turned again and began to mount the rock. She made a movement as though to follow him. "Mr. Car-

bury," she pleaded, in a small, shaking voice, "wait only one minute more; I have something to say. Mr. Carbury, I——" and twisting her hands together in the effort of the moment, she managed at last to stammer, "Mr. Carbury, I want you to forgive me."

Carbury was standing a little higher than she was. He looked down upon her golden head, looked straight into the penitent, blue eyes, glanced at the tear-stained cheeks flushed with a shame-stricken crimson, and turned coldly away.

"No," he said in his tired voice; "if it was only that you had ruined my life—*bah!* Such things are done every day; but you have made me ridiculous—I cannot forgive you."

CHAPTER XIV.

BONNETS AND ECONOMY.

"This is my home of love; if I have ranged,
Like him that travels, I return again."

"AGNES," said Catherine on the day after Lady Baby's interview with Mr. Carbury, "which do you think would look less frivolous in my bonnet, a pink rose or a heliotrope?"

Agnes herself was struggling with a mass of felt and ribbon, for winter bonnet-making on economical principles was now in progress. She looked up, flushed and bewildered; her vocation was to be directed, not to direct.

"You see, the rose is not very fresh," said Catherine, "and I can't get the heliotropes to lie properly. I

wonder why it is that my stitches will not hold like those of other people!" And Catherine dropped her bonnet and looked heart-broken. She had a way of looking heart-broken that was positively fascinating.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said poor, flurried Agnes, who had run her needle into her plump hand four times running. "I was just on the point of asking for your advice when you asked for mine; I don't know whether pearl-grey or chocolate-brown would do best on this bonnet. What do you think, Frances?"

"You had better consult Nicky," said Lady Baby, who with a set expression of face was cutting all the trimming off her hat; "you know that you don't mind what you are like so long as he finds you lovely. Nicky, would you like a chocolate-brown Agnes best, or a pearl-grey one?"

Nicky had been sitting for some time silently in the background, with a paper in his hand; but it was very evident that he was not reading. If he was not sleeping, what could he be doing? He had only returned a few days since from a short journey undertaken immediately after the establishment of the family at Gullyscombe, and as to the object of which he had been rather evasive. He looked ill when he came back, much in the same way that he had looked when he returned to Kippendale after the Derby, only in a more marked degree. His complexion was of an unwholesome yellow, and his eyes were sunken and bloodshot. All day long Agnes had watched him furtively, like a dog watching its master. And once or twice it had looked as though he were about to say something, to give some explanation; once or twice he had walked

quickly to the door of Lord Kippendale's room, and then stopped short and turned again without touching the handle. If then he met Agnes's eyes in turning, he generally swore a little, more or less under his breath.

Hearing himself addressed, Nicky first gave a grunt, and then, with a very bad grace, turned and glared at the ribbons held towards him, and from them, with a deeper scowl, at his wife's deprecating face. He did not seem to find her very lovely this evening. And indeed Agnes was not looking her best. The Lady Agneses of the world are designed exclusively for wealth and comfort; they require to be well lodged, well dressed, well fed, and then they are capable of looking magnificent. But put them in mean surroundings, and they are as capable of looking absurd. It is the slight figure that loses least in a cheap gown or a shabby jacket—economy sits ill on such a large surface as Agnes. She had always looked more or less like a pillow, but the difference was that she now looked like an ill-stuffed pillow. "Out of condition," as Nicky said to himself with disgust. He had more than once observed that Aggie was not so well groomed nowadays as she used to be; for Nicky was particular in these things, and his horses always shone like satin.

"Take whichever is cheapest," he growled after another glare at the ribbons; "it'll be too dear anyway for such a pack of beggars as we are." With this he rose and banged out of the room. There had been a ring at the house-door a few minutes before, and though the others had not noticed it, Nicky, being particularly on the alert, had noticed it very well. "And I have no one to ask for advice," broke out Catherine, who just

then was on the look-out for something to be unhappy about,—“no one who cares what I wear!”

“Don’t you wish you had a Nicky of your own?” said Lady Baby, drily. Nicky was no longer to her the ideal brother-in-law he had once been. She threw down her hat and took up a book. With her elbows on the table and her hands against her cheeks, she had soon forgotten all about chocolate-brown and pearl-grey.

Last night she had slept little. Her strange interview with Mr. Carbury had run continually in her thoughts. She had mentioned it to no one. What he could possibly have meant by that darkly-hinted-at “clue” she could not imagine; but, guilty as she felt towards him, she considered herself bound almost in honour to respect his secret. By dint of lying awake and brooding over the subject, she had come to the conclusion that it would not be fair to try and solve the mystery, behind his back as it were, and thus rob him of the chance of becoming the benefactor of the family; for, of course, he would relent some day and forgive her, and perhaps even marry some one else, as people so often did in novels. The whole thing was very like an occurrence in a novel. Would the other part of it—*her* part of it—end like one, she wondered? All day long she had been deep in her beloved volumes, too excited and feverish to settle to any more prosaic occupation; restlessly ransacking their pages for parallels to her own case, and unconsciously feeding those ideas which once already had made shipwreck of her happiness.

This third volume was particularly thrilling; and so completely were Lady Baby’s sentiments in unison with

those of the superhumanly disinterested hero, that her cheeks began to glow and her eyes to shine as she read: "There *may* be base souls in the world," was Ethelred's majestic reply. "There *may* be contemptible wretches who would stoop to pick from the dust the favours which you throw; but know that I—I——"

"Frances, you are wanted."

The door had opened again without her noticing it, and it was Nicky who was calling her. She started up all dazed from the depths of her chapter, and with the book still open in her hand she walked to the door. Then only she noticed that Nicky's face was quite different from what it had been ten minutes ago—he was flushed and very excited, the hand which he laid upon hers was shaking. "Frances," he said hoarsely, "Sir Peter is here."

"Sir Peter!" She had broken from him already, and with one spring had reached the middle of the passage. "Where is he? Where?" and she glanced with shining eyes around her. "Then he is safe; not drowned?"

"Wait a minute," said the eager Nicky, stepping up to her. "Yes, he is here—he is safe enough; but look here, Frances—it's all right, isn't it? You are not going to turn stiff because of any of those hare-brained ideas about pride and so on. Remember what a stake it is. You'll remember it, won't you?"

"Yes, I will remember it," said Lady Baby, standing all at once as still as a stone, all the joyous tone gone from her voice, all the light from her eyes. Wretched Nicky! Why could he not have held his tongue? Who knows whither the first reaction of gladness might not

have carried Lady Baby?—perhaps so far that she would not have been able to come back again, despite the examples of all the heroines in Mudie's library. She might, by mistake, have done something so very sensible, that with all the will in the world she could not have done the foolish thing afterwards. But Nicky had settled the question. At his words a vision of the past rose up again: the big drawing-room at Kippendale, with the sunlight filtering through rose-coloured curtains, the floating scent of scandal-wood; Lady Euphrosyne's faint smile and pointed words. Then the moment of enlightenment, the rush to the writing-table, and the wildly penned note which she could never think of except as signed with her own heart's blood.

It was with a set and hardened face that Lady Baby entered the room where Sir Peter waited.

CHAPTER XV. THE PARTICULAR REASON.

“Whom Summer made friends of, let Winter estrange.”

SIR PETER was not alone; Lord Kippendale was with him. They stood near the window with their backs turned towards the door, and they were discoursing together in low tones. As Lady Baby entered they turned, and the first remark that she made to herself was that Sir Peter's hair looked rather dishevelled, and his rough travelling-coat unbrushed; he must have come here in a great hurry. Why had he come in such a hurry, after being so long in coming at all? The question roused certain misgivings in her mind. Her second sensation was wonder, incredulous wonder that there could ever have

been a time when she fancied that she did not love him. Then she realised that her father was leaving the room, and though she did not meet his eyes, she felt that the look he sent her in passing was wistfully interrogative. Oh! she knew what that meant: that confession of humbled pride from her father, her proud and impatient father, was more than she could face just then.

Next she became aware that Sir Peter was coming towards her, and coming with outstretched hands and with a smile upon his face, just as though he were still her accepted lover, and as though they had last parted upon the best of terms. And for one maddening moment it flashed through her mind how easy it would be to meet those hands with hers, to sink into those arms, to hide her face on that shoulder, and then let the rest of the world say what it liked. But it was only for a moment. Before Sir Peter had reached the spot where she stood, her face was hard again, her head was high, and her hands were behind her back.

"How now?" said Sir Peter, still with the smile on his lips. "Is this my welcome? all my welcome? Will you not give me your hand?"

"My hand—yes," said Lady Baby, trying to speak as usual, though her quickened breath was much in her way; and she cautiously gave him her hand, as though she were saying, "The tips of my fingers, yes; but nothing more, anything more just at present."

Sir Peter took it, and in the same instant caught it to his lips.

"Sir Peter!" and she tore it away and confronted him with an indignant flush. "What do you mean? With what right?"

"It is not the first time," said Sir Peter.

"No; but it is the first time without a right. The other times were when I was—when our engagement was not broken off."

"And is it broken now?" asked Sir Peter.

"Don't you know that it is?"

"No," he answered unblushingly, "I don't."

"What! have you forgotten what passed between us last? Have you forgotten all that I said?"

"About our unsuitability to each other? No, I have not forgotten it; but I did not believe in it, and I don't think you quite believe in it yourself," he added slowly.

Time was when Lady Baby would have fired up at this, but in spite of herself she had long since recognised the fallacy of those old arguments. She did not want to fight over that old battle-ground again.

"Then why did you stay away so long?" she broke out; for, after all, this was the question which burnt most at her heart, and had burnt there for four months past. "Why did you stay away if you did not believe me—if you did not consider the engagement broken?"

"Why did I stay away? Oh, that would be a long story, and would include an account of tempests and unfriendly gales and over-friendly harbours, and I should have to describe two runnings aground and half a shipwreck, and to give a cursory sketch of the whole quarantine system in those benighted northern parts, besides dwelling upon an Eldorado of models in blue petticoats and red handkerchiefs. If I told you only half of it you would understand why I stayed away."

"I understand it perfectly already," said Lady Baby; "in fact I don't understand why you ever came back."

The mention of the shipwreck had mollified her for an instant, but the models had hardened her again.

"I came back because I knew that you were waiting for me."

"And if you knew, that is to say, if you *imagined* that I was waiting for you, why did you not claim me sooner? There are posts in the north, I suppose, as well as in the south."

"Yes, there are posts," said Sir Peter, looking for a moment rather guilty; "that is to say, the posts go out, but——"

"But what? They don't come in?" she asked, with an inquisitorial glance, for she had her suspicions.

"Oh yes, but of course the movements of a yacht are necessarily a little uncertain."

"Oh!" The suspicions she had lately indulged in were confirmed. "I see. You got no letters all these months; you did not know that we had lost our fortune?"

Sir Peter made a movement as though of deprecation, but checked it at once, and answered quietly, "No, I did not know it."

"But you know it now; you know that I am a beggar."

"The term is a little violent for the case," said Sir Peter, still in that light tone with which he had started; "but since you insist, I subscribe to the fact—with reservations."

"And you know that you are rich, very rich; that you have got thirty thousand a-year?"

"Have I? I am very glad to hear it. I never could discover that I had more than twenty."

"Answer me: you know that you are rich?"

"Yes," said Sir Peter, "I am not a fool; I know that I have plenty of money."

"Well, that is all; there it is!" She drew a long breath and eyed him firmly.

Sir Peter returned her gaze for a minute in silence.

"I am afraid I must be a little dense to-day," he remarked presently, "but I don't see that it is there. Would you mind explaining?"

"You don't see it yet? You still imagine that I could be base enough to accept you on those terms?"

"Which terms? I am making no terms."

"You don't see that the fact of your having all the money and my having none, makes it quite impossible that we should marry?"

Sir Peter appeared to reflect for an instant, then he shook his head. "Pardon my stupidity; but I don't see it. If neither of us had any money it might perhaps be more difficult to marry, but as it happens——"

"When did you get the first news of our misfortune?" she interrupted.

"To-day—this morning, as soon as I reached London. I should have got it two days ago if I had not been detained at Portsmouth."

"And to-day, therefore, you rush off, without even changing your coat, without even brushing your hair, I do believe, in order to claim the renewal of an engagement which you *did* consider broken, which you *were*

content to have at an end, until you heard that I was a beggar, and therefore considered yourself bound in honour to put your fortune at my feet."

Sir Peter laughed—he could not help it. "Is that out of the last novel?" he asked, glancing rather vindictively at the volume which she still held in her hand.

"Enough," she said, turning; "what is the use of prolonging this? I know what you have come for. I knew that you would come, but I can accept no sacrifice and take no charity. And now, let me go,—let me go, or go yourself."

He did not move, and Lady Baby, with a sort of desperate feeling that she must escape while her pride was screwed to this pitch, made a hasty step towards the door, but before she had reached it Sir Peter had walked past her and had put his shoulders against it.

"Yes, Lady Baby," he said gravely, "enough of this. I think we have both had quite enough of this pointless comedy. I have been silent long enough, passive long enough; but there are limits to every mortal thing on earth."

"Will you let me pass?" she panted.

"One moment,—yes, I will let you pass if you command it; but I warn you first that what I have to say shall be said, if not to-day, then to-morrow, if not to-morrow, then the day after. If you prefer it, I shall speak in the presence of your father, of your sisters, of anybody whom you care to choose as witnesses; but speak I shall: I have rights,—I insist on being heard."

His whole aspect was changed. He had come to this interview, as Lady Baby had guessed, straight from

hearing the news of their misfortune. It was Nicky who had conveyed to him the news, not personally nor even directly, for fear of his father-in-law; but Nicky had a certain coarse cunning of his own, and he had found means, at the cost of many ink-blots and more swearing, to frame a little note to Sir Peter, which had been lying in London pending his arrival for some weeks past, and which, while ostentatiously devoted to the question of some desirable carriage-horses, yet contained a clumsily casual but unmistakable allusion to the family ruin. Upon the reading of this note Sir Peter, horrified at the aspect which his silence must have worn, had started instantly for Gullyscombe. The idea that there might be difficulties with Lady Baby had not occurred to him in any distinct shape; he had gone down as a matter of course, without any plan of action beyond the almost unconscious determination to treat the engagement as though having all this time been not in a state of annihilation but only of suspense, and to ignore, as far as possible, the existence of new circumstances, even at the risk of appearing cool in his condolences. That tone of half-tender banter in which he had begun had been adopted more by instinct than by pre-arranged resolve. But now he dropped that tone; there was nothing playful nor even tender in the face of the man who barred Lady Baby's passage with his shoulders against the door. She had never seen him like this, and she stood staring; and at the same time it struck her that she had never seen him look so handsome as now, with his brown hair tossed about his temples, and the careless ease of his habitual look turned to a grave questioning glance. Sun

and wind had somewhat darkened his skin, except where the white forehead showed precisely how low the cap had been worn.

"Will you hear me now or later?" he asked. "Will you sit down, or shall I open the door for you?"

"I will hear you now."

"So much the better," said Sir Peter; and leaving the door, he took up his position opposite to her. "I don't think I shall have to keep you long. I don't think that the strange obstinacy by which you appear to be possessed (pardon me for plain speaking) can stand very long in the face of common-sense. Do you remember how our acquaintance began? It began by your laughing at me."

"Laughing at you?" she repeated. Somehow it did not seem possible now.

"Yes, it was so; but I am bound to say that you did not laugh for long. In spite of yourself, you found out that a man may possibly be a man without having ever shot a grouse or mastered a vicious horse. So far well. Then followed our engagement, but after this came the wrong turn. You wanted demonstration, and I was not demonstrative. You had always got everything that you wanted, and therefore you insisted upon getting this also, and when you found that you did not get it you proceeded to treat me as you had treated your toys in the nursery. I did not know you ten years ago, Lady Baby, but I will be bound that your dolls had a bad time of it then. My experience was theirs; you were not satisfied with the love I gave you, or rather with the expression of it. You wanted to see the inside of the toy, and therefore you stuck

pins into me, very long and sharp pins, in order to find out whether I was stuffed with sawdust or whether I was flesh and blood. Mr. Carbury was the longest and the sharpest of those pins which you stuck into me, and because I did not wince you decided for the sawdust. Well, does it give you any satisfaction to know that you were mistaken?—that I am stuffed with neither sawdust nor cotton-wool, but am like other men?"

Lady Baby said nothing; she sat biting her lip, unwillingly listening and reluctantly recognising each touch of the picture.

"I felt the pins," went on Sir Peter, "and I was rather curious to see how far you would push your experiments. You pushed them further than I had expected, and you next went on to discover that we did not suit one another. Do you remember?"

She made a sign with her head to say that she remembered.

"You said so in order to be contradicted,—I am aware of that; I was aware of it then, but I determined not to contradict you. I said to myself, she wants a fright, let her have it. From Kippendale I went off straight to my yacht, and set sail for the north. I was angry with you, Lady Baby, when I set out, and I made up my mind to frighten you in good earnest, and not to ask to be taken back into favour until you had given me some sign of having recognised your mistake."

"Have I given you any such sign yet?" asked Lady Baby suddenly.

"Not yet, I fear."

"Then why are you asking to be taken back?"

"Because," began Sir Peter, and then stopped short.

"Because we are ruined!" cried Lady Baby, starting from her chair. "Oh, I see it all! You broke your resolve when you heard that I was beggared."

"Will you let me speak, please," said Sir Peter, rising also, and, for the first time in her experience of him, looking as though he were about to lose his temper. Her quickness had taken him just a trifle aback, for the inference was not far wrong. "I would have come back long ago, of course, if I had known that you were in trouble of any sort. Do you doubt that? If you doubt that, you must doubt my love altogether. Do you believe in my love, Lady Baby?"

In her secret heart of hearts she believed in it firmly, but only in her secret heart of hearts. She would not confess it even to herself, far less to him, so she stood obstinately silent.

"You do not? If that were true, then indeed you would be right, and we do not suit each other. But you do not really doubt me, Lady Baby?"

He took her hand again, but she pulled it away with a start.

("I knew that he would say all that," she reminded herself; "I knew that he would go on like that; Lady Euphrosyne said so.") "It doesn't matter what I believe or don't believe, since I cannot marry you. There *may* be base souls in the world, but I am not one of them."

"Listen, Lady Baby," said Sir Peter more quickly, for he was beginning to lose his temper in earnest now. "Let us come to a conclusion. When I saw you

again to-day, I was for one minute both glad and sorry, —sorry because it seemed to me that the child I had known was gone, and glad because I thought that a woman had come in its place. But I see I was mistaken; the child is still here, the same, almost the same as ever. I want my answer now. You have told me what motives you imputed to my coming, and I have told you what those motives really are. Either you believe me or you do not. If you believe me, then your objections to our renewed engagement are disposed of, since there exists no other reason."

"But there does exist another reason," she broke out, "a most particular reason." Before her mind's eye there had again arisen the picture of that rose-coloured drawing-room and that blotted document, now in Lady Euphrosyne's keeping. Perhaps it was the scent of sandal-wood which had conjured up the picture once more, for on the very table beside her there stood some of the sandal-wood boxes which had come from Kippendale. At this moment they smelt in her nostrils like incense, the incense that has been burnt upon an altar of sacrifice.

"Another reason?" repeated Sir Peter, slowly—"you tell me that there is another reason which stands between us?"

"Yes, a most particular reason."

"And you cannot name it?"

She hesitated for an instant. "No, I do not choose to name it."

He gave her a scrutinising glance and then turned his face to the window. Up to this point he had felt quite confident, he had been so sure that her heart

was his. The mention of this "particular reason" was the first real check. Penetrated as he was by the flimsiness of her highstrung arguments, it struck him now as so very probable that some particular reason existed behind it all. Straight upon this idea came the unavoidable question, the question which at those junctures presents itself to the least suspicious and most confident of men.

"Lady Baby," he said quickly, "tell me only one thing—has any one, has any other man got anything to do with this particular reason?"

"I—I can tell you nothing."

He looked at her more keenly. "Are you trying to make me jealous?" he asked with a rather faint smile. "You tried that once before: take care, Lady Baby—you have enough to answer for already. By the way," he added abruptly, "what is Carbury doing here?"

"He is——" she began, and then broke off with a start. No—whatever happened, his presence must not be betrayed; that would be base, that would be mean;—in the excess of her remorse Lady Baby felt that it would be so. Had he not already reproached her with making him ridiculous? And how much greater would the absurdity of the position be were his new quest known? "Have you seen him?" she asked anxiously.

"I have not seen him, but I have caught a glimpse of the inseparable Williams, which means of course that Carbury is here. What is he here for?"

"Nothing; how can I tell? I don't know: I didn't know he was here; that is to say, yes—I did."

"You know and you did not know—how am I to understand that?"

"Any way you will; I can't say anything more. Leave me, Sir Peter," she added in evident distress, "please leave me at once." If he did not leave her at once she felt certain that the whole secret would be out, for she was beginning to lose her head.

Then he left her, but he went with the germ of an idea in his mind, and, unknown to himself, that germ was striking root.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HOUSE IN THE CABBAGE-GARDEN.

"Cold mists of doubt and icy questionings
Creep round him like a nightmare."

THERE had been a sound of hammering coming from the back of the inn all the afternoon, and Maud, to whom the monotonous knock, knock, knock, had become unbearably annoying, sallied forth with the object of ascertaining whether the noise could not possibly be stopped. The hammering sounds came from an open shed at the end of the back-yard, and having picked her way across to where a man with his back towards her was raining blows upon something wooden, Maud could not forbear a start when she perceived that this something wooden was a coffin—a small coffin, not more than three feet long. It was foolish to start, for, after all, the paper in the front window might have familiarised her with the fact that coffins were made here, as well as coffee. An old boat, half broken up, lay under the shed; it was one of the half-dozen that had hitherto adorned the slope in front of the inn-door. Maud had missed it from its place that morning. It was evident that the little coffin was being made from the stoutest and choicest bits of its planks.

"What is it? I mean, who is it for?" inquired Maud, rather nervously.

"It's for Tom Graile's youngest boy," answered the

man without looking up: "and yon one against the wall is for his eldest girl."

"Good heavens! What is it they have died of?" She happened to know the name; it was that of the family in whose house Mr. Carbury had found lodgings.

"Fever," was the answer. A quick patter of blows smothered the word, but to Maud's anxious ears it was distinct enough.

"Fever? Is there fever in the village? What sort of fever? Is it bad?"

What sort of fever it was, was beyond her informant to say: they had it sometimes here in the autumn, when the weather was damp, and when the fish-refuse was particularly abundant. The cases were not as yet very many, but they made up for it by being "vicious," as the coffin-maker put it. Maud made her way back across the yard very thoughtfully. "If it is really true about this fever in the village," she thought, as she watched Hal playing at shipwreck with a footstool and several pillows,— "if it is really true, I suppose I ought to take him from here to-morrow. That would be provoking. What shall I do?" She turned towards the window; and just as she said, "What shall I do?" her eyes fell upon Sir Peter Wyndhurst coming up the street straight towards the inn. Maud started and flushed, and straightway forgot all about Hal and the fever. She had had no notion of Sir Peter's arrival. In a moment she recovered herself, for she saw that the battle was at hand. It had only wanted that passing glimpse of his face to tell her that he had been at Gullyscombe, and that his first attempt there had failed. She wished she could have seen Mr. Car-

bury again,—it was strange that he should not have come near her since the day of his arrival. But however much in the dark she might be concerning what had taken place between Mr. Carbury and Lady Baby, Sir Peter's expression made it quite plain that the main point was still safe. Having carefully arranged her hair before the glass, and having waited a few minutes longer in order to steady her nerves, Maud descended the stairs, smiling and outwardly composed.

It was in the bar-room that the meeting took place,—for Sir Peter was here, trying to convince the landlord that he did not mind what sort of a hole he was put into for the night, so long as he had not to lie on the road. The first words between Maud and Sir Peter were mutual exclamations of surprise, sincere on his side, and a clever imitation of sincerity on hers.

“Sir Peter! You here? I had no notion!”

“Miss Epperton! Do I see aright? Actually Miss Epperton,—and here!”

And then the story of little Hal and Sir Ambrose Cathcart's prescription was told over again.

“This is really too much kindness,” said Sir Peter when she had finished; and the landlord having withdrawn to examine his means of accommodation, they had sat down upon two wooden chairs in the deserted bar-room. “I do not know how we have deserved this of you. Lady Euphrosyne is sometimes a little exacting; you should not allow her to abuse your good-nature.”

“Oh,” said Maud, laughing, “but I like it. I enjoy the seaside of all things in the world.”

“And Hal, I suppose, enjoys it all the more for

having such a companion. And is Sir Ambrose's prescription justified? Has he grown stronger?"

"He is looking very well," said Maud, and then she hesitated. Sir Peter's gratitude had given her a pang. Should she tell him of this fever in the village? It was the honest thing to do—the simple and obvious course. And the next simple and obvious thing to happen would be that Sir Peter would insist upon Hal's immediate removal from Floundershayle, for he was very fond of his little brothers. That meant the relinquishing of this new campaign on which she had barely entered. For a minute Maud was silent. This time she was conscious of standing at a turning-point. Over her head she could hear Hal's feet pattering across the floor; yes, he certainly was quite well,—everything was safe so far. Then she looked at Sir Peter and noted that peculiar look of artistic enjoyment with which his eyes were always wont to rest on her. No, she would not tell him of the fever—at least she would wait till tomorrow before telling him. That would be quite time enough. And besides, really it would be foolish to give way to a panic. After all, it was not the plague that was in the place, and at this season fevers of one sort or another were to be met with almost everywhere. When Maud spoke again, and it was only to make some irrelevant remark, she was conscious of having stood at the parting of two ways, and of having made her choice of one. Presently they entered on a wider range of talk, touching upon Sir Peter's recent journey, and discussing Floundershayle in its various aspects. Everything that Maud said was so sensible, so clear and practical and to the point, that perhaps just because he

had come straight from an interview in which common-sense had not predominated, Sir Peter found Miss Epperton more worth listening to than usual. The irritation of that interview was still upon him; and after that atmosphere of Mudie's library, the atmosphere of sense was refreshing. He did not trouble himself to dive beneath the surface of Miss Epperton's motive,—he was content to take in Maud just what he found in her; and what he found in her to-day was a rational and good-natured woman, who, at the same time, formed a graceful and artistic contrast to the bare walls, the smoked ceiling, the stained floor, and the full and empty beer-jugs of the bar-room.

Presently, however, he discovered that the smell of stale beer which floated from out of these same jugs was a disturbing element in the picture. Would not Miss Epperton take a stroll on the cliffs? He was quite sure that she had sat boxed up with Hal during all this rainy day, but Hal would be having his tea now, and the rain had cleared off. And so it came about that Maud, having put on her cloak and hat, in a little time more was sauntering forth from the inn-door with Sir Peter by her side. Her eyes shone brightly, and her heart was beating high with hope; for the new campaign, or the old campaign renewed, was now fairly entered upon, and the very first step had brought unexpected success. "Yes, I have begun well," thought Maud,—“I have certainly begun well; it all depends now upon whether I can go on well.”

“There is only a ditch dividing Sir Peter from Lady Baby,”—it was thus she further argued,—“but a little judicious widening would very soon turn that ditch into

a gulf." Before evening closed in, Maud found more than one favourable opportunity for operating upon the banks of that ditch, and she worked at them with a will and without a shadow of remorse. Her whole nature was still at the rebound; the mutinous crew of the ship had still got the rightful commanders under the hatchways, gagged and fettered and paralysed.

Maud's first opportunity occurred when, outside the village, they passed a solitary granite house standing in a cabbage-garden that was very abundantly manured with fish remains. A fat pig was revelling among some of the more delicate scraps, while from between the willow-ribs of an old lobster-basket that had been turned into an impromptu hen-coop, a hungry hen poked out her head inquiringly. Upon some furze-bushes beside the wall were displayed the family stockings and woollen jerseys drying in the air.

"That is the residence of an acquaintance of ours," said Maud, with a laugh. "I hope he finds it pretty comfortable,"—and then she suddenly quickened her pace, for she had remembered that this was the infected house.

Sir Peter looked at her curiously. "Do you mean Mr. Carbury?"

"Yes, I mean Mr. Carbury," said Maud, with the flicker of a smile. "Won't you be pleased to meet him again?"

Sir Peter said nothing, but turned and took another long and rather vindictive look at the house.

"It isn't ornamental, is it?" said Maud, pressing on. "Don't stop here, Sir Peter. You don't want to draw the house from memory, do you?" Sir Peter still said

nothing. He did not speak again until they had gone on some hundred yards, and, at Maud's suggestion, had sat down upon the top slab of one of the numerous granite stiles of the country.

"By the way," said Sir Peter, with a very respectable attempt at carelessness, "what is Carbury doing here?"

If Sir Peter had not been looking her so straight in the face, Maud could almost have indulged in a confidential wink to herself, so precisely was this question the one she had expected. As it was, she raised her eyebrows and opened her eyes a little wider.

"Really, Sir Peter, that was just the very question I was going to ask you."

"Me?"

"Yes; I supposed that you would have heard something about him at Gullyscoombe——"

"What have Carbury and Gullyscoombe got to do with each other?" interrupted Sir Peter.

"Oh, nothing in particular, of course—nothing that I know of, at least. I daresay Gullyscoombe has not got anything to do with Mr. Carbury being here. Very likely it is some geological craving that has lured him to these granite rocks; or perhaps he has been seized by a sudden passion for deep-sea fishing, and by some strange coincidence he has hit upon Floundershayle. That is very likely—don't you think so?"

Sir Peter looked at her suspiciously, but Maud's face was serene and perfectly inscrutable. "I must confess that I fail to see the charm of this particular formation of granite," she calmly went on, "but it is quite evident that this bit of coast possesses considerable magnetic properties. You are the second man within

three days who has dropped from the skies on to this bit of Choughshire."

Sir Peter muttered something that was not particularly complimentary to the granite formation. "Oh, I beg your pardon," said Maud, looking straight in front of her, and speaking very distinctly; "no doubt it was my mistake: it was stupid of me to suppose that you had both come here attracted by the same magnet."

Sir Peter switched off the head of a nettle with his stick. "So you would have me suppose," he said presently, with a short laugh, "that it was the granite that brought Carbury here?"

"I would have you suppose nothing at all. I have told you already that I expected to get information from you, not to give it. What account has he given of himself at Gullyscoombe?"

"He has not been there that I know of."

"That is rather rude," said Maud, musingly; "do they not think it so?"

"They don't seem to know that he is here."

"What? None of them?"

"I did not say that," said Sir Peter, almost testily. "If she—if any of them has any knowledge of his presence here, no doubt there are good reasons for keeping silence."

"Oh, no doubt," acquiesced Maud, as she smilingly fastened a piece of furze-bloom in the front of her dress. "If Mr. Carbury has a fancy for playing hide-and-seek, I quite understand that he should find it more convenient to have an accomplice. The rocks here must be a capital place for the game,—at least Mr. Carbury seems to think so."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing that you need to glare at so. I don't see why Mr. Carbury shouldn't spend his afternoons among the rocks as well as anybody else: there are some very pleasantly sheltered nooks among them, where you can sit quite at your ease and actually not have your novel blown out of your hand. If I lived at Gullyscoombe I should spend half my time there, and I fancy that's what some of them do."

In this strain Maud continued to talk, and she talked very well. It was exactly the sort of thing she excelled in,—to insinuate without accusing, to suggest without committing one's self, to tantalise by half-dropped words, keeping one's meaning so safely though transparently covered all the time that the goaded adversary finds no point of attack. If Maud had told Sir Peter to his face that it was Carbury who was the favoured man and not he, her treachery to Lady Baby's cause would not have been deeper, though it would have been coarser. Neither did she press her point too far, but judiciously shifted the subject the instant she perceived that her victim was sufficiently exasperated. Before she got back to the inn she felt that a good deal had been done towards the widening of the ditch into a gulf.

Sir Peter's slumbers that night were not peaceful. I suppose that never since the world began has there been a completely one-sided quarrel,—a quarrel or difference, that is to say, in which the right is all on one side and the wrong all on the other. Even in the most distinct and least equivocal cases, there is pretty sure to be a little bit of wrong on the right side, and

a little bit of right on the wrong one: the sensible person is bound to be just a little foolish, and the foolish one just a little sensible.

In the difference between Lady Baby and Sir Peter, Sir Peter undoubtedly represented the sensible side; and yet, was he entirely free from blame? Had he not—to look back to the time of his engagement—pushed his assumed serenity just a little too far, and thus galled her pride and brought about Heaven knows what mischief? Had he not then been too harsh in his resolve to punish her caprice, and had he not forfeited her affection by staying away too long?

He put these questions to himself during most of the night. Certainly he was “not easily jealous”; certainly he had been very slow to take fire at a suspicion, or to bring himself to believe that Lady Baby’s caprice with regard to their “not suiting” each other, was anything more than just a caprice. But after to-day this could not last. Sir Peter, after all, was a young man; his veins, as he put it, were not stuffed with sawdust. This last pin was too sharp to be borne without crying out. With a slow and creeping sensation, as though only now he were seeing events aright, he began to look back at the different occurrences of the summer, at that week which preceded the rupture, at Lady Baby’s favours accorded to Carbury, her smiles showered upon him, her frequent praises of him. He had looked upon it all then as a farce, but what if it were real? Why, in heaven’s name, *why* had he been so confident? Why had he assumed with such unshakable faith that her heart was his and not Carbury’s? What had he meant by the absurd vanity of taking for

granted that she must prefer him to Carbury? After all, what were his advantages over Carbury? His wealth? No, that was an obstacle, as he had found. His youth? Scarcely: it is a well-known fact that very young girls generally fall in love with men who are past their first youth. The fact of her once having consented to marry him? As if, in that child of caprice, such a consent were a binding proof! And then, in his new fit of despondency, Sir Peter gloomily fell to considering everything that he had ever heard or read about women being fickle and incomprehensible, and deserving to be compared to riddles and sphinxes and other unfathomable things. The rock of his faith once lifted from its base, the band of his self-possession once snapped asunder, it was strange how exactly like any other young man in love the imperturbable Sir Peter became. Not outwardly, for even during the long hours of the wet day that followed, it required all Maud's keen sight to read that which was going forward in his mind,—but in the new and ferocious activity of his blazing thoughts, and in that marvellous ingenuity for self-torture, that admirable aptitude for pressing his breast against thorns, of which only the lover has the secret. The early dusk was falling when Sir Peter put on his hat and went out. He had come to a resolve. He would not carry about with him this unanswered riddle for a day longer; he would not go through another such night of self-torture as had been the last. There had been enough of the passive tactics—indeed there had been too much, he feared. He would go straight to Lady Baby and put the question to her: “Is it I who am the right man, or is it

Carbury?" And if she said "You," then he would win her in the teeth of all the heroes and heroines who ever magnificently waved a fortune to one side; but if she said "Carbury," then he would step back, and never cross her path again.

By the time he got out of the village it was all but dark. The road led him past the same solitary granite house which Maud had pointed out to him last night. There was a light burning in one of the windows, and the shadow of a figure on the blind. Instinctively Sir Peter lingered and looked with jealous scrutiny towards the lighted window. At that moment a light footstep fell upon his ear, drawing nearer along the road from the direction opposite to the one he had been taking. Looking over his shoulder, Sir Peter saw the figure of a woman wrapped in a cloak, and just distinguishable through the dusk. Muffled though she was, there was something either about her walk or the turn of her head which caused him instantly to draw back into the shadow of the wall. The cabbage-garden was entered by a rough gateway, of which there remained little more than the posts, two granite blocks, surmounted by two of the irregularly round boulders which strewed so many of the coves, and which the sea had been obliging enough to lick into some semblance of ornamental gate-tops. It was in the shadow of one of these posts that Sir Peter was standing when he caught sight of the approaching figure. In the next instant she had stopped also, not two paces from him: he could see her face plainly, though she did not see him. He was still debating with himself whether he should show himself or not, when, with one hurried and fearful glance up

and down the road, she turned in at the open gate and walked, or rather ran, straight to the house. In another moment she had disappeared inside. Sir Peter, emerging from his shadowy corner, looked at the house, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. No, there certainly was no mistake; that undoubtedly was the house which Maud had pointed out to him as the one in which Mr. Carbury lodged. He had particularly noted the gate-posts, and he could hear the very cackle of the hen that lived in the lobster-basket beside the doorstep. It undoubtedly was the house; and that woman whom he had just seen enter was undoubtedly Lady Baby.

Sir Peter did not go to Gullyscoombe that night. He walked straight back to the inn, and shut himself into his room.

CHAPTER XVII.

INSIDE THE HOUSE IN THE CABBAGE-GARDEN.

“Child, if it were thine error or thy crime
I care no longer, being all unblest:
Wed whom thou wilt, but I am sick of Time,
And I desire to rest.”

THE hours which had followed upon Sir Peter's yesterday's visit to Gullyscoombe had been hours of storm and agitation. At the moment that Sir Peter had been sitting beside Maud on the top of the granite stile, Lady Baby, pale and dry-eyed, was crouching in the corner of a horse-hair sofa, with her novel cast to one side and her half-trimmed hat to the other, listening to the loud voices which came from her father's

closed room, and vaguely feeling that those angry tones meant something dreadful. Nicky was in there, and so was Agnes. Shortly after Sir Peter had left the house there had been an excited conversation between Nicky and Agnes—excited, that is to say, on Nicky's side; and then Nicky, looking very pale but very fierce, as though having come to an inevitable resolution, had dragged off Agnes to her father's room, and had pushed her in in front of him, and then followed behind her. That had been half an hour ago. Ever since then the three had remained closeted; and Lady Baby, sitting alone, felt a vague presentiment of coming evil.

At last the door opened, and Nicky came bursting out, still dragging Agnes behind him. Agnes was crying, and Nicky's eyes were rolling, while his grin had expanded to a savage breadth. He looked in the humour to bite the first thing that came in his way; and Lady Baby happened to be that first thing.

"Ah, my Lady Baby," he ground out between his teeth, coming to a standstill opposite to her. "So, here we are, twirling our thumbs and never minding whether or not our relations are shown to the door,—whether they are kept in the house or turned out of it."

"Shown to the door!" repeated Lady Baby, aghast.

"Yes, shown to the door," panted the pale Nicky, "and shown to the door by *you*, through *you*, my fine sister-in-law, with your fine parcel of fancies and follies and all that rot about being too high and mighty to take what's being pushed into your hand, and which would have set us all on our legs again. By Jove! I didn't think you would push it to this point. By Jove! I didn't."

"But what—what? I don't understand; what has that to do with it?"

And then came a torrent of explanation. It was very incoherent but very frantic, and to Lady Baby's dazed mind it seemed very appalling. She understood vaguely that Nicky had done something which he ought not to have done (though he did not put it in that light); that he had got entangled in a Derby debt; that he had counted on the helping hand of his future brother-in-law to hoist him out of the difficulty by a brotherly loan; that, with this hope in his mind, he had concealed the state of the case from Lord Kippendale—or, not to put too fine a point upon it, had told a plain fib; that the fib would have been harmless, and even righteous, had not she (Lady Baby) put everything wrong by choosing that very moment to break with Sir Peter; that everything had been done to stave off the explosion, even to having recourse to the Jews, until now, when her renewed and harebrained refusal of Sir Peter had made it necessary to break the truth to Lord Kippendale,—for the Jews were beginning to make themselves unpleasant,—the result of which was that Nicky was ordered from the house, and forbidden ever to enter it again.

"And you are going? You are really going?" cried Lady Baby, wringing her hands.

"By Jove! I should think so. I am going at once, I am going for ever, and Aggie goes with me. If you care twopence for your sister, you had better say good-bye to her. The chances are you'll never see her again. Come along, Aggie!"

"Oh, heavens! One moment—where are you going to? What are you going to do?"

"To starve to death, probably, on a convenient hill-side, unless I'm put in a debtor's prison. What are you crying about? It's your doing, you know."

"Oh, it isn't, it can't be, Nicky; you are too hard! How could I guess about your debts? Agnes, tell him, oh tell him that it is not my doing." But Agnes only sobbed a little louder and said nothing: she was not accustomed to tell Nicky things, but rather to be told things by him, and to accept his judgment as final. Poor, stupid, brave, staunch Agnes! It was in the character of a cushion to interpose between his father-in-law and himself that Nicky had taken her into the room with him, but this time the device had failed. Expose itself as it would, the poor cushion had not been able to keep all the blows from its master, and some of them had fallen upon Nicky, in spite of his shield. There, in that closed room, she had played her part boldly, if in vain: now she had broken down, and was once more nothing but a part of Nicky—his shadow, his echo.

"Agnes!" cried Lady Baby, desperately,—“Agnes, why don't you speak? Do you, too, think that it is my doing? Do you, too, condemn me? You cannot, Agnes; you cannot! Look at me; speak to me!” She was hanging on her sister's arm, pulling down her hands from her eyes, trying to force Agnes's face towards her; but Agnes was not Lady Baby's sister at this moment—she was Nicky's wife: and though she did not in so many words say,—“Nicky is right—it is your doing,” the coldness with which she withdrew

from the tearful embrace said so for her, as did the submission with which she allowed her husband to push her from the room, just as he had pushed her into her father's room half an hour ago.

If there must be such men as Nicky in the world, what on earth would they do if there were not such women as Agnes?

When Nicky and Agnes had left the house, Lady Baby retired to her room to commune with her stormy thoughts. She had gone to her father to plead for the fugitives, but even she had been forced to retire baffled. Never before had he spoken so harshly to her. Instead of listening to her prayers for Nicky, he had passionately reproached her for her renewed refusal of Sir Peter. Her nerves were in one quiver of excitement, her head was in a whirl of desperation, and her heart in a paroxysm of penitence. Agnes's reproachful look still loomed before her eyes; Nicky's accusing words still rang in her ears. In a calmer moment she might have found out that Nicky's accusations were defective in logic, but the sight of the departing exiles had wrought her up to a pitch of self-accusation which scarcely needed Nicky's reproachful words to support it. She was not used to do things by halves; and if, on former occasions, she had obstinately refused to see any fault in her conduct, she now just as obstinately declined to perceive the smallest extenuating circumstance. Had ever so black a criminal as she walked the earth? She had ruined Carbury's life; she had wantonly trifled with Sir Peter's love in the olden days, and by means of this trifling had managed to involve Nicky and Agnes in the wreck. The sum of her offences

crushed her. No; there was no cell dark enough, no scourge sharp enough, wherewith to atone for them. Nicky and Agnes! Yes; that was the present pressing point—they must be saved somehow. She would not rest till they were saved. Money must be got—a great deal of money must be procured, also, “somehow.”

She rushed to her jewel-box, and pulled out her ornaments, remembering that distressed heroines always sold their bracelets. Alas! it was but a very small handful that were her own; the greater part were family jewels. In despair she tossed them back again, and then a new idea came to her—Carbury's secret! Supposing that dimly indicated mystery were in very truth a fact, nothing more would be wanted to re-establish them all in happiness and prosperity. Their fortunes once restored, there could be no difficulty about these few hundred pounds that were wanted to save Nicky, and the general jubilee would of course include a general pardon. The more Lady Baby thought of it, the more did she become convinced that no one but Carbury held the key to that door which could lead them out of this present labyrinth. It was in the vague hope of meeting him again, and hearing from his lips the real solution of the mystery, that Lady Baby sat in her nook among the rocks during almost the whole of the following day. But Carbury did not come. By the evening she was worked up into a feverish desire for action. Just about the time that Sir Peter had come to the conclusion that another night of this uncertainty was not to be faced, the same identical conclusion was reached by Lady Baby; and just about the time that he was setting out for Gullyscombe she was

drawing near to Floundershayle. The resolution she had come to was the outcome of the long strain of suspense throughout the day: if Carbury would not come to her, she must go to him. She could not think of putting her head down on a feather-stuffed pillow that night, while Nicky and Agnes—poor Nicky and Agnes!—were wandering about the bare hillsides; she could not sleep in a warmed room, while the husband of her sister was being loaded with chains and dragged off to a damp dungeon, where spiders crept over the walls, and rats ran across the floor—for that was her idea of a debtor's prison. Wrapping her longest cloak around her, and pulling her thickest veil over her face, Lady Baby slipped in silence and secrecy from the house. She was a great deal too excited to understand what she was actually risking by this step; and so familiar had her novel-reading made her with young ladies who went out on mysterious errands at dusk in long cloaks, that the step itself lost much of the appalling character which it might otherwise have borne. With some difficulty she had succeeded in ascertaining where the "London gentleman" lodged, and in breathless haste she sped along the road.

"Is Mr. Carbury here?" she inquired of the old woman who opened the door to her.

"Yes," answered the woman, staring, "he lodges here; at least——"

"He is not in, then?" asked Lady Baby, more impatiently, wondering at the constrained whisper in which the woman was speaking.

"He is in, but——"

"Then show me in at once, please. I must speak to him immediately."

Before the woman had answered another figure appeared on the scene,—another old woman, but this time a lady. The second old woman whispered something to the first old woman about some more ice being broken, and then, catching sight of Lady Baby, she stopped short in surprise. "Have you come to inquire?" she asked gently, fixing a pair of large dove-like eyes upon the visitor. There was a sort of subdued tint about her whole person, about her dress and her complexion. Nothing about her either darkened to a shadow or brightened to a light. Perhaps she may have had some colour about her once, but it looked as if it had all been rubbed out long ago by something or somebody.

"Yes, I was inquiring for Mr. Carbury," said Lady Baby. To her surprise the mild dove-like eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"Hush, not so loud!" and a soft hand was pressed on hers. "We do not despair yet,—that is all."

"Despair? What about? Is he ill?"

"Did you not know it? They say he is dying."

"They say he is dying!" repeated Lady Baby after her, and then came a step nearer, and stared intently at the neutral-tinted woman as though to see what she was made of. "I don't believe it," she said at last. "He was quite well when I saw him, only a few days ago."

"We do not despair yet," was all the old lady said, and groped tremulously for a handkerchief.

"Who are you?" asked Lady Baby.

"I am his mother." There was just a touch of pride on the *his*, but she did not in return ask Lady Baby who she was; she seemed to accept the visitor's dismay as something quite natural. If the whole of creation had mourned for her son, she would have found it quite natural too.

Lady Baby meanwhile had sat down upon a travelling trunk that stood still corded in the passage. She did not feel able to stand, but otherwise she felt curiously collected. A frosty stillness had come to her mind, and a sort of steely clearness to her thoughts. She began to ask questions about the illness, and she listened very attentively to the answers, and sometimes repeated them aloud. "Infectious fever;" "sudden outbreak;" "hastily summoned from London,"—these were the chief headings of Mrs. Carbury's answers. "And now they want to persuade us that he is dying."

"But you know that can't be," said Lady Baby, and she gravely lifted her eyes to the other's face. "He can't die now; I can't let him die now; I can't let him die at all. Would you let a person die if you had to feel that you had killed him?" She spoke without any excitement. Her nerves were strained to too high a pitch to allow of even a quiver in her voice. "Take me to him," she added, standing up.

"That is impossible," said Mrs. Carbury.

"No, it is not; it is much more possible than that he should die without seeing me again. Will you take me to him now—at once, please?"

"It is impossible," murmured Mrs. Carbury, but she was beginning to look deprecating, which Lady Baby noted; "Launce is so weak, and every new face——"

"My face is not new—oh no, not new at all. If he knew that it was me, he would tell you to let me in."

"But I don't know who you are?"

"I am Lady Baby."

"Lady Baby," repeated Mrs. Carbury, with a startled look. "Then is there a real Lady Baby? I thought it was all in the fever."

"Has he spoken of me?"

"Only in the fever, when his mind was astray. And you are really Lady Baby?" And the old woman looked at her hungrily, jealously, and yet so tenderly, as though she would say, "What, oh what have you done to him?"

"Yes, I am really Lady Baby. And now you see that you must take me to him. Why don't you take me at once?" She still spoke quite quietly, feeling aware that her object could only be gained by a great and obstinate pressure on one point, and instinctively keeping her powers together for that pressure. She felt the strength in her to wait on there for hours, and to go on repeating "Take me to him," until they were wearied and took her.

Up to this point Lady Baby could in after days remember with tolerable clearness what had been said and done, but from now onwards the events of this evening assumed for ever after in her brain the dim but frightful proportions of a nightmare. A great deal of the horror was simple surprise. She had never been in a real sick-room before this evening. She had seen old women laid up with rheumatism in the village at Kippendale, and she had seen accidents in the hunting-field; but there had been nothing appalling in the

first, and the excitement of the moment had carried off what there had been of appalling in the second. This deadly silence, this dread solemnity, was something quite new, and much more terrible than she had pictured it. And most terrible of all that white face on the pillow, that lay so appallingly still, and looked at her with eyes that did not know her. In the first minute that she stood beside him it was scarcely this much even that she saw. The beating of her heart seemed not only to fill her ears, but also to darken her eyes; a leaden weight sat upon her breast, a clammy hand was at her throat.

It was very late that night before Lady Baby reached her own room at Gullyscoombe, and then only it was that the long strain gave way, and she burst into hysterical weeping. No doubt it is a very heartbreaking thing to stand beside what we are told is going to be the deathbed of a friend, but is it not in reality almost more heartbreaking to stand beside the deathbed of an enemy? And if it is frightening to see those die, or about to die, who have been good to us, and to whom we have been good, is it not more frightening to see those die, or about to die, whom we have injured? When the eyes that may be once hung upon us as their star of hope, now pass us over in the same blank gaze that is wandering from ceiling to floor, and from floor again back to ceiling; and when the lips we fearfully watch move only to mutter nonsense, and never more to say, "I forgive you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE END?

“And will he not come again?
And will he not come again?”

THE next day broke damp and still. A reeking wetness hung over everything; sea and sky melted together into a cloud of powdery mist. The rolling thunder of the waves was muffled into a thick and heavy murmur, and upon the surface of the slowly heaving grey, long wreaths of stagnant foam floated lazily along the shore. Upon the solitary black rocks in the sea the shags and the cormorants were sitting in compact masses, quietly huddled together just out of reach of the waves, while at the foot of the rock the water hissed in white circles. All along the coast the drizzly mist was hanging, letting the nearest cliff appear sharp and distinct, glistening black with moisture; then a cloud of mist filling the next hollow, then a second cliff, dim and featureless, another blot of mist, and what might be a third cliff, perchance, looming like a ghost upon the horizon. White mists rolled over the moor, and white mists hung in almost tangible fragments on the furze and bramble bushes. The grass was soaked and heavy, the very stones seemed mildewed and mouldy to their core.

Lady Baby, wrapped once more in her cloak, and muffled once more in her veil, stole cautiously from the house. It was very much more trying to go on this ex-

pedition by daylight than in the darkness, but she dared not delay. She did not venture to risk losing the chance of those three words from Carbury, which she felt would be to her very much what the priest's absolution is to the true Catholic. A return of consciousness, she had been told, might or might not disperse the delirium; but at what moment such a return was to be looked for it was impossible to say.

It was with this hungry craving that she stole from the house. Had she been calm enough to reflect, she would perhaps have found out that there existed no rational cause for doing this thing secretly. The need for concealment had in reality ceased, but by this time she had so worked herself up to the idea of a mystery being necessary, that it never even occurred to her to go to her father, and to say, "Mr. Carbury is here, and he is dying, and I want his forgiveness before he dies."

The shortest way from Gullyscoombe to Flounder-shayle led past the drowned Bluebell Mines; for by following what had once been the cart-track on which the sacks of ore had been carted from the mine, a very considerable angle of the highroad was cut off. Along the edges of this track, on which the ruts were still fresh enough to be visible, ran a border of flowerless furze, with here and there a yellow bush, flat-blown by the wind into the likeness of some wonderfully engraven shield, which wants only the sunshine to make it into gold.

Lady Baby, pursuing this path, had reached the Bluebell Mines this morning, when, on turning the corner of the closed-up engine-house, she found herself, suddenly and without warning, face to face with Sir Peter.

He was leaning with folded arms on a piece of low wall, and looked as if he had been leaning there for some time,—almost as though he had been waiting for her. Instinctively she stood still. In order to pursue her way, she would have to pass quite close to that bit of wall where he was leaning; and somehow she felt a terror of passing him close at that moment. She was bound for Carbury's sick-room. She dared not trust herself to think of anything but that. She had no right even to dwell on the thought of this man until she had been absolved by the other.

Sir Peter, meeting Lady Baby's eyes, made no movement of surprise. "I thought you would come," he said, raising himself from the wall, but not coming a step nearer to her. He spoke in a voice which she had never heard before; and she noticed that his brows were drawn down, and that, from under their shelter, he was watching her face intently.

"How did you know I would come? How do you know where I am going?"

"Because I saw you go there yesterday; I saw you—accidentally." He seemed to swallow something hard in his throat before he said the word.

"You saw me! Then why did you not speak to me?" She gazed at him in perplexity, inwardly puzzling over his look and tone; it was so different from what it had been when they last met. She had felt pretty sure that when they met again he would not make love to her as he had done then, for the terms they had parted on had verged upon coolness; but still she had not expected him to look quite so distant and so unapproachable.

"I did not speak to you yesterday," said Sir Peter, "because I thought it might possibly have been—inconvenient."

"And why do you speak to me to-day?"

Sir Peter said nothing, but stood looking at her in silence,—a sorrowful silence it seemed to her, though she could not understand why he should look exactly like this.

"It is no use," she said hurriedly, making a step forward; "I cannot speak to you now; it is a great deal more inconvenient than it would have been last night. If you must see me, come another time, to-night, to-morrow. But now I must go; it is so terribly urgent." She pressed forward on the path, and he, with the common instinct of civilisation, fell back a little as though to let her pass. Then suddenly something changed in his face; he put out his arm and checked her.

"Stop! It is really true then that you are going to the same house that you went to last night?"

"Yes, I am going there again; I am going to see Mr. Carbury." She looked at him quite straight. She might have passed now, for Sir Peter had dropped his arm, but his face was so inexplicably strange that she paused to look at him.

"Then you have heard nothing?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

His eyes took hold of hers, and held them bound with an intense unspoken question. Gazing at her thus, he said very deliberately, "Then you do not know that Carbury is dead?"

Lady Baby half raised her hand and let it fall

again. "Oh no," she said quickly, "you are mistaken; he is not dead. I saw him yesterday. He is very ill,—perhaps dying,—but not dead."

"He died at half-past five this morning," said Sir Peter; and then, with a sort of wrench, he turned from her, and walking a few steps away, stared out hard over the misty sea. Her eyes followed him helplessly, as though she were expecting more.

"I saw him yesterday," she began, and then, as nothing came from him, it flashed upon her that yesterday was not to-day; and now upon her brain there burst the tremendous idea that what he said was true.

For a short space she stood where he had left her; then she became aware that the engine-house and the mine-buildings were beginning to sway and rock all around her, and that the old mine-shaft was opening and shutting its ugly jaws at her, with an expression of the most hideous derision. She went unsteadily towards the nearest block of stone, and fell there with her face upon her arms.

Dead! Mr. Carbury dead! Well, was it so strange? Was it not almost what they told her yesterday? He was dying then,—yes, but *dead!* What a difference! What a chasm! Dead! That meant that he was gone beyond the sound of her voice, beyond the touch of her hand, and gone without saying, "I forgive you!" It meant that she might shout herself hoarse and the Mr. Carbury who might have heard her yesterday, could not hear her to-day. Mr. Carbury? There *was* no Mr. Carbury. Yesterday there had been one; to-day he was cold, he was clay: no sign could come from him to her, and none could go from her to him.

She had never seen a dead face, and instinctively she began to picture to herself what his would be like: the lips that used to smile so wearily, tight-locked; the languid eyes closed for ever upon the world at which they were so tired of looking!

Presently, as she lay, her frame began to shake and her shoulders to rise and fall: hot tears rushed from between her fingers. What she had done in the old Kippendale days, what she had been guilty of during that week of madness in summer, had never appeared to her so hideous as now. With her tears her excitement rose; it seemed as though her sobs must suffocate her. She began to murmur broken and shuddering words, first below her breath, then above it.

"Dead? No hope! Oh, then I am wretched, wretched!" and with her face thrust lower on her arms, she broke out sobbing anew, and then began to murmur again that she was the most unhappy of all God's creatures. "Oh, why could not God have left him?" she wildly wept. "Why must just he have been taken? Dead! I can't go after him. Oh, if I could! And gone without a sign, without a message? No, that cannot be; there must have been a message!" And now she started up from her stone and stared about her,—her hat unsettled, her hair disordered, and her eyes all blurred with tears. She had not put the question to any one; indeed she had forgotten that she was not alone. Now, as she stared about her—first blindly, because of the drops in her eyes, and by degrees more clearly—she saw Sir Peter at half-a-dozen paces from her. But what was the matter with him? He was standing again beside the bit of low stone wall;

his two hands were resting on it, and he leant a little forward, his brows deep down-drawn and fixed, his face like a mask of stone, his very lips bloodless. She saw it vaguely, without understanding. She asked herself stupidly why he stared so. "Yes, it was you," she said, dashing the tears from her eyes. "It was you who brought me the news."

Sir Peter stood up straight, dropping his stick as he did so. "Yes, it was I." There was that in his voice, even more than in his face, which acted like a violent wrench upon her thoughts. Why did he speak so hoarsely? Why was his glance so high and stern?

"I have been too sudden," he said, standing now straight in face of her; "I should have broken it more gently, more considerately." He drew in his breath sharply for an instant, and his lips gave an indescribable curve.

"No," she replied, with her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands, "it could have made no difference whether you broke it to me gently or roughly; whichever way you told it me it would remain a fatal blow."

Sir Peter had not noticed till now that his stick lay on the ground. He picked it up and said quietly, "Will you be able to get home, do you think, without assistance? It must be very chill sitting here."

"Home!" There came a fresh paroxysm of tears: "I feel as if I would rather never go home again. I am not going there now; I am going first—to that other house. I must speak to his mother; can't you understand that I must speak to his mother?"

"Of course," said Sir Peter in a totally expression-

less voice, closely examining the head of his stick as he spoke, "it would indeed be cruel to debar you from that melancholy satisfaction."

"And there might be a message," she said, speaking her thought aloud, and yet all the time uneasily conscious that he meant more than she understood.

"Yes," he acquiesced, "there might be a message."

"That would be something," she said with a sigh, "don't you see? A message would be so precious!" Then, just as she said it, it occurred to her that of course he could not see. How strange that he should answer without hesitation—

"Infinitely precious, I should imagine—to you." His tone was guarded, and yet something jarred within it. He was looking straight into her face now, and it must have been that his eyes were less guarded than his voice, for suddenly she caught a glimpse of what he meant. "Melancholy satisfaction,"—"infinitely precious—to you," he had said it so strangely. And yet, of course, he could not understand; her whole conduct must appear to him bewildering. How was it then that he did not look bewildered, but simply stunned, reproachful, chilled, and chilling?

She sat for a moment quite still, trying hard to look at herself with his eyes. What had she said? She could not remember. What had she done? She had wept wildly, more wildly perhaps than people generally weep for friends. She was beginning to understand.

"You are surprised," she stammered on an impulse; "but if you knew all——"

"No, I am not surprised; and if I were——"

He did not finish, but there was a just perceptible movement of the hand. It suggested the warding-off of a distasteful confidence, or at least Lady Baby so read it. It was a very slight gesture, but it was enough. She understood still better. Mistrustful, faithless man! So these were his suspicions! She threw up her head, crushing the tears beneath her eye-lashes. Why was he still standing there? Was he waiting for her to justify herself? Instinctively her teeth closed more tightly.

"Have you anything more to say?" she asked, putting her handkerchief in her pocket. Then she met his eyes, and her pride tottered a little. Once more it flew across her mind—"What if I told him everything? I know he would believe me." And immediately a second thought chased the first—"After he has as good as declined the confidence?" But perhaps he would give her another opportunity. No, of course she could not speak first, there was still life enough left in the old dog Pride to keep her stubborn on that point. Her heart began to beat violently as she watched him, but he had already drawn a little aside, and was no longer looking at her.

"Are—are you going back to Floundershayle now?" she asked at last wistfully, after a long sickening pause of suspense. After all, some one had to break the silence, and it was beginning to be borne in upon her that his will was stronger than hers.

"Yes, I am going back to Floundershayle."

"I am going there too, you know," said Lady Baby, getting up from her stone; "so perhaps——"

"You wish that I should accompany you? It will

perhaps be more advisable, you are scarcely recovered yet." Sir Peter's tone was admirably civil, and would have been admirably natural, had it been a trifle less carefully measured.

They moved along the path together,—close together, and yet, as Lady Baby's sinking heart told her, wider apart than though a desert had stretched between them.

"Are—are you going back to London?" she asked presently.

"Yes; the chances are that I shall be in London for a few days this week,—until my sailing preparations are completed."

"Sailing?"

"Yes; I leave England next week."

"For the North Sea?" she asked in a small, thin voice.

"No; for the Mediterranean. The North Sea is rather cold at this season."

"Yes; I suppose the Mediterranean is warmer."

"And more civilised. It is much easier to get provisions."

"Yes; it must be much easier."

With a shock of dismay she discovered that they were talking commonplaces. He was not going to give her the chance of an explanation. The line had been overstepped. The mention of the provisions had built a much higher wall between them than the most passionate reproaches could have done.

In this strain they talked all the way to Flounder-shayle, and in point of fact they never stopped talking. Silence was a thing which neither of them dared face

just then. Lady Baby never forgot that walk; years afterwards, merely by shutting her eyes, she could see that misty melting together of sea and sky, the twisted bushes along the path gradually taking shape through the mist, and cowering so close to the ground, thick with lichen, age, and damp; the broken twigs where still dangled some solitary yellow leaf; the sharp stones pushing their corners through their thin coats of cliff-grass, and the bits of dark red bracken, flapping helplessly on the banks, like some abandoned broken-winged bird.

It was with a mixture of agony and relief that she found herself at the gate of the cabbage-garden, in which stood the solitary granite house. So little aware was she by this time of what she was doing or saying, that she herself would have passed it by unheeding; Sir Peter it was who stood still at the gate.

"This is the house, I believe," he said, "no doubt they are expecting you,"—and he politely held back the bit of a broken gate for her to pass.

"Yes," said Lady Baby, "this is the house;" and at that moment she realised very distinctly that this was not the first time that Sir Peter had seen her enter this house. He had seen her here last night, in the dark,—he had told her so himself,—in a species of semi-disguise. What must he have thought? This aspect of the case had not occurred to her until this moment. She gave him a glance of terrified inquiry; he still held the gate open, with civil patience; yet somehow, at the same time, she felt a curious sensation, the sort of sensation that a person might feel when being trodden under foot by another.

"Good-bye," she said faintly, putting out her hand, yet doubtful whether it would be taken. He just touched it with his.

"Good-bye. Will you kindly remember me to Lord Kippendale? You will have a wet walk home, I fear; I should recommend a glass of claret before starting." He raised his hat and left her. This, then, was the end? And his last words—which she at once concluded were the last she would ever hear from him—had been the recommendation to take a glass of claret.

For quite a minute she stood beside the gate-post, staring after him with widely fixed and tearless eyes. Then the mist swallowed him up; and turning, she walked with shaking knees towards the house.

"It is over," she said to herself; "yes, now it is really quite over."

CHAPTER XIX.

MOLLY'S LOVERS.

"Hark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail!"

ONE of the most curious things about life is the unequal pace at which it moves: how there are weeks that shoot past like hours and days that drag like centuries; how at some periods we live so fast that every minute has its history, while at others experience is beaten out so thin that the days, looked back upon, are not as individual days, but have run into each other and figure in our memory only as the fusion of a formless lump. Lady Baby had gone through the first of these phases and had now reached the second. From the moment that she had ascertained that Carbury had died without recovering consciousness, existence seemed to have come to a final standstill: the wheels had stopped, the machinery had run down. Where there had been tearing torrents there now stood stagnant marshes. She puzzled a good deal in these days—that is, in the weeks that followed upon Carbury's death and her parting with Sir Peter: she puzzled over the meaning of existence, but she did it in a listless and blank manner, not expecting to reach a conclusion. Her stock of mental energy was bankrupt for the moment.

What she could not do for herself others might have done for her: outward influence might have pulled her to her feet. But there was no one to do it. Her

father was now almost an invalid; Agnes was tied to the steps of her banished lord; Catherine had returned to Bournemouth; and Germaine, the affectionate and reticent, was labouring under his own burden of dependency.

Even the seat among the rocks had to be abandoned in these bitter days of early winter. The almost continual blast made the cliffs unbearable and the hillside all but impracticable; and now, in order to supply the imperative need for exercise without which she must have fallen ill, there were days on which Lady Baby had no resource but to pace round the four sides of that piece of waste ground which had once been the garden of Gullyscombe, and where now the old gooseberry-bushes rattled their dry arms and chattered their teeth in the wind; where here and there a belated camomile flower still shivered on its stalk, and the toads hopped through the withered leaves. Nothing had yet been done to reclaim the spot: the wooden Dragon still lay upon its face, and the Mermaid upon her back; the Cherub still imagined himself to be blowing his trumpet, and the Sea-king still reeled against the wall. At present the enclosure did duty as washing-green. Occasionally, as she walked, Lady Baby had to duck her head in order to avoid the ropes that were stretched across, on which rows of shirts flapped their arms wildly, like hanged men asking to be cut down. Even here the air was at most times dim and thick with driving spray, and it was from unseen depths that the roar of the water came up from where the sea was for ever tearing away at the ragged black rocks with its cruel white teeth. The Kippendale days!—sometimes

the thought would sweep down upon her, as she took her caged walk—the days when prosperity had been her complaint, the days when things had gone so smoothly that she had wilfully looked about for means to ruffle them. Not suited to each other! She and Peter not fitted for each other? No, not if the star is out of place in the sky, not if the acorn does not fit its cup. Not suited? They were created for each other! And now she might never touch his hand again, never hear his voice. He had left Choughshire—this much she had succeeded in ascertaining—and by this time was most likely on his way to the Mediterranean. Her heart grew sick within her.

When it became too dark to pace the gooseberry ground, there remained the exciting variation of sitting before the fire, staring at the coals and listening to the wind; sometimes alone, sometimes in company with her father and Germaine, but generally in silence. Often the silence was broken by heavy breathing, for Lord Kippendale now invariably dozed over his newspaper. Then cautiously and fearfully, Lady Baby would scan the sunken white head, the tremble of the closed eyelids, the weary droop of the shrunken figure. "His lordship's fallin' thro' his claes," had been Adam's comment more than once lately, and Lady Baby could not but endorse it. "It is killing him!" she said to herself,—*"It is killing him!"*

It was in the evening also that there came the one moment in the day which, had the spirit been less numb, might have brought with it a thrill of excitement—the moment when the result of the day's investigations was reported to Lord Kippendale by the engineer

still at work. He could not be kept at work very much longer—so Mr. Reid had hinted—for the daily cost was huge, and the daily result was a blank. His lordship could not afford to dig very many more holes to put his money into. His lordship acquiesced, almost with indifference. It meant despair, of course; and yet there would be a measure of relief in not seeing the man's face any longer, and not having to guess by its expression, before even the question was put, that the answer would be,—“Nothing yet.”

Lady Baby neither raised her head at the question, nor sank it lower at the answer. She scarcely noticed when the sensible, middle-aged individual came in; and when he went out again, something, which she believed to be an infallible instinct, told her that the copper was irrevocably lost. If she thought at all in those days of Mr. Carbury's mysterious and strangely worded announcement to her concerning this same copper, she thought of it only as of some wild hallucination of his—some preliminary symptom, perchance, of the fever that had killed him. Her curiosity was for the moment as numb as all her other faculties. But at last there came a day which in one instant caused it to start once more broad awake—a day marked by so strange a discovery that it could not fail to stir up wild expectation, and which yet, at the same time that it brought a hope, brought also what appeared to be a dead check, a blank wall built straight across the promising road which but this moment had opened before the eyes of the unfortunate family. Was it a piece of additional and gratuitous malice on the part of Fate, who sometimes loves to hang a tantalising prize before our

eyes only for the pleasure of snatching it away again as soon as our fingers have clutched at it?

It was one evening after dark, when Lord Kippendale and his son and daughter sat round the fire, pursuing their customary occupations of staring at the grate and listening to the gale. There was a certain variety both in the grate and in the gale to-day. Among the coals there had been thrust some bits of wood, fragments of old boats, of course, that had been broken up as too bad even for coffins or garden-palings, and had been sold very cheap as fuel. It was the only form of firewood to be had about the place; and perhaps because of the sea-salt which saturated its veins, it displayed a much more violent objection to being burnt than is generally displayed by ordinary wood. It was much given to hissing and spitting, in sudden bursts of mad defiance, and then again crackling into tongues of ghastly green and livid blue flame, which furiously licked the black grate, for want, it would seem, of teeth wherewith to tear. "What agony!" it seemed to say—"what agony to die by fire, to us who have lived on the water! We should have been drowned, not burnt. Why were we not drowned? What agony!"

Lady Baby, with her chin resting in her hand, had been watching the rage of the dead boats for an hour and more. And the gale,—it was a real gale to-day; not merely that never-dying wind, which wore out everything but itself, whose voice was magnified by the echoes of the resounding rocks, and whose terrors were exaggerated by the hysterically shivering gooseberry skeletons. Something in this way must the blast have torn over the cliffs on the night when the mines had

been drowned. It shouted in a hundred voices and proclaimed its empire in a hundred ways. Walls and ceilings groaned almost like a ship at sea, as the beams strained under the pressure of the blast. A hungry wolf in the chimney howled an answer to a hungry wolf at the door. Every hinge in the house rattled, every window-fastening jingled; there seemed to be a hand at every latch, a finger tapping at every pane. Those must be the drowned folk that haunt the Choughshire coast, and who, according to popular belief, love nothing so much as to flatten themselves against window-panes, and sob over the life they have lost.

"Adam will be caught in the storm," said Lady Baby, as she sat staring into the fire. "I am sorry I sent him."

"Eh? What? Where did you send him to?" asked Lord Kippendale, awaking from a doze.

"He took my boots to be new-soled. I have worn them out with walking round the garden." And she laid her cheek against her hands and gave a little dreary smile.

"Oh, then he will take shelter at Floundershayle," said Germaine.

"He isn't gone to Floundershayle. It seems that the Floundershayle man is a bungler, and that they all send their boots to that mad shoemaker who lives among the hills, and whom I once visited."

"He must be mad indeed if he lives among these hills."

"Yes; and he is obstinate as well as mad. When I sent the boots yesterday, the boy brought back some message that I couldn't understand; he said the boots

couldn't be mended,—and I know they can, so I sent Adam to-day.”

“But surely not on foot?”

“No; he took the cob. But it is so dark; I wish he were back.”

They fell silent again. The bits of dead boats defiantly put out a few more blue and green tongues, and then began to fall to ashes. The wind took half-a-dozen different voices in quick succession.

“There he is,” said Germaine, suddenly; “that’s his limp in the passage.” In the same instant the door was sharply rapped at, and, without waiting for an answer, Adam, hatless, wet, and dishevelled, stumped in.

“He’s broken the cob’s neck,” groaned Lord Kippendale. “I know he has.”

Adam came to the middle of the room and then stood still, breathing with extreme difficulty. “Please m’ lord,” he painfully uttered, “I’m no’ generally for makin’ assairtions, but, for all that, it’s him, it’s him, m’ lord; and I’d wish to know who’s the handiest magistrate.”

“My poor Adam, I am afraid it’s more a case of the handiest lunatic doctor. Are you mad, man? What are you glaring at? How’s the cob? Did he feed?”

“He’s saidlet and bridled,” answered Adam, with an odd and ominous turn of his eye; “he’s bein’ held outside for me to mount again; and I’ll be obleeged if your lordship ’ll gie me the name o’ the magistrate that comes handiest. I’ hae fand him, m’ lord; it’s him or his wraith.”

“Who? or whose wraith?” asked Lord Kippendale, turning bewildered in his chair.

"The thief, m' lord; the villanous diamond-thief, m' lord. It's Christy Swan or his wraith!" cried Adam, beginning to shout in his excitement. The surprise awakened, the questions poured upon him, calmed him by degrees; gradually the story came out.

"And as I sat in my saidle,"—he took up at the critical point of the narrative,—“as I sat in my saidle, and thocht to mysel' that o' a' the daft places to pit up a shoemaker's sign, this was nearhand the daftest, the door I was watchin' flings open, and oot steps the very queerest-like sicht o' a man that ever I set eyes on. I wouldn't be for sayin' that I kenned him like a shot; it took the best pairt o' five meenits—I to stare frae the saidle, and he frae the doorway—and syne it kind o' dawned on me. First there comes a somethin' creepin' up my back, and syne a somethin' else pokin' at my heid, and a' in a jiffy I hae it. There's no' twa o' them made that shape in the warld, m' lord. And syne I sings oot—'Christy Swan! By all that's thievish, it's Christy Swan!' At this he pits up his arms, and mak's as he would rin at me and pu' me off the horse, but instead he turns back and steeks the door.”

“And you followed, Adam?”

Adam looked haughtily sheepish. “I hadna my leg-doon, m' lord.”

“So you turned and came home?”

“Not afore we'd had anither word thegither. For presently his head comes oot and he skirls, 'What did you do wi' her?' He was speakin' o' Molly, m' lord,” said Adam, in a stern aside. “‘She's a lost cratur,' I said, says I; and up he catches the cat that's rubbing his legs, and begins to caper like ten daft men made

into one, and tosses the cat, and hugs it, and tells it that she's a lost cratur. I'd be almost for assairtin' that it made him happy. M' lord, he looked like a deevil. But richt in the middle I cries oot to him that he's a lost cratur hissel', and that I'm awa' for the magistrate, and that I'm ready to swear to the diamond robbery, morning or evening, midday or midnight. 'Just see if we dinna mak' a job o' ye yet,' I says, says I; and the meenit I says the word 'diamonds,' doon he draps the cat like a stane, and back he flings into his hoose, shakin' all over, m' lord, like a thievish villain as he is. And then, since I couldna get at him, more's the pity, for want o' my leg-doon, I did the next best thing, which was to stick spurs into the cob's sides, and gallop all the way home; and I'd be muckle obleeged for the name o' the handiest magistrate, m' lord."

"In order that you may succeed, after all, in breaking the cob's neck? eh? Nonsense, man! Hear to the wind!"

A sharp tussle ensued. Lord Kippendale scouted the idea of the magistrate. Why should not the wretch run? They had the diamonds. Adam was for instant and stern justice: the thought that no one had gone to jail for the diamond burglary had gnawed at his heart for years. Adam belonged to the order of honest men who make honesty unpopular. Germaine was inclined to side with Adam; Lady Baby with her father. To Adam the discovery of Christopher Swan meant the discovery of the diamond thief; to Lord Kippendale it meant the discovery of the longlost "Swan's copper"—it could scarcely be doubted that this would follow as a matter of course. That much-discussed tradition must

be put to the test as immediately as circumstances would permit. Adam was at last cooled down to the point of recognising that a hurricane and a pitch-dark night were slight objections to the proposed expedition, and, with the worst grace in the world, he limped off to put the cob in its stall. It was arranged that next day he should visit the shoemaker's hut accompanied by Germaine, who would be able to give him the indispensable leg-down.

The storm blew off over-night, and next day dawned with an iron frost. Before mid-day Germaine and the old groom stood among the mine-ruins and rapped at the shoemaker's door. The blast had thrown down an extra foot of wall here and there, and it had made havoc of the once well-raked border where the sweet-smelling flowers used to grow. One of the straw beehives had wrenched itself free of its iron collar and rolled on the frozen ground. To Germaine's loud rap there came no answer.

"He's lyin' close," said Adam; and putting his hand to his mouth as though he were giving a tally-ho! he brought forth an ear-rending shout which cut sharply through the cold air and brought back rattling echoes from the walls around, but no other response. Germaine rapped again, then pushed the door with his foot, then shook it with his hand. No answer yet, and no movement of any sort.

"It's all a d—d make-believe," said Adam, beginning to foam at the lips; "he's in there, sure enough. Did ye try the window, m' lord?" Germaine peered in at the window. He saw a very neat room, composed apparently of several scrap-screens. Boots were ranged

on the bench, and bobbins of thread drawn up on a shelf; only the chimney-piece was bare. There was not a mortal soul in the place.

“He’s here!” shouted Adam,—“he’s here! If he’s no’ in yon room, then he’s lyin’ close somewhere near: he’s ahint yon wa’, he’s roond the next corner, he’s doon the shaft. We’ll hae him yet, m’ lord—we’ll hae him yet!”

But they did not have him. The outlandish boot-maker had vanished for the nonce, and though they went round every corner and peered into every dark recess of the deserted buildings, the only living thing that they set eyes on was a large white cat, which started up from among the stones and disappeared like a flash of white lightning into the thickest of the furze bushes.

CHAPTER XX.

HAL.

“Hath she not then for pains and fears,
The day of woe, the anxious night,
For all her sorrow, all her tears,
An over-payment of delight?”

LITTLE Hall Wyndhust lay in his bed, very white, very still,—his small face shrunk to a wizened copy of itself, his small hands reduced to mere little bundles of bones; such a wretched, thread-paper morsel of a little boy, that the king of terrors must have been hard-up indeed for prey when he thought it worth while to make a snap at this. It was on the day on which Mr. Carbury had died that Hal had caught the infection. The fever had run its course, and had formally taken its departure, or had been declared by the hastily summoned Sir Ambrose Cathcart to have taken its departure, more than a week ago. There had been a few days of sitting-up in bed for Hal, a few slices of chicken-breast to still the first delicious pangs of convalescent hunger; and then, alas! whether it was that the sitting-up had been premature, or the slices of chicken too big, Hal was down on his back again, and not even Sir Ambrose could say whether or not he would remain there for good. This was the night of the crisis. The exhaustion of the little frame had reached an extreme point from want of the food which he refused, and of the sleep that would not come. Spoonfuls of cham-

pagne, dribbled through his lips, had done what they could do in creating fictitious strength, but even champagne is not elixir. One more of these never-ending nights, in which the strained eyes, staring out of the narrow face, roamed and roamed in helpless wakefulness round the room, must put out the little flame for ever. "If he falls asleep before midnight," had been the verdict, "the struggle is gained. Nature will have won a new footing, and she can be trusted to do the rest, always provided that the sleep is not broken. Should the wakefulness continue, or should the sleep be broken by outward causes, then the middle of tomorrow is the utmost limit I give him; but more likely he will die before dawn. My dear lady! Pray do not be agitated; it will not be painful; there will be no agony. An agony, as you know, means a struggle, and there is not strength enough left to struggle." It was not Sir Ambrose who said this, but the local apothecary, a small and snuffy old man, on whom Sir Ambrose had laid a corner of his mantle, and who had a much more painfully direct way of saying things than the great doctor.

And now it was midnight, and Maud, breathlessly bending her head to listen, told herself that Hal was asleep. She was on her knees beside the bed, with one arm thrust under the shoulders of the sick boy, for a few minutes ago Hal had faintly signified that his head was too low. The change of posture seemed to bring him ease, and it was while he lay supported by Maud's arm that his eyelids had softly sunk down.

In a tremor of suspense Maud waited, not daring to hope that the heavy lids would not raise themselves again. At last she looked up, very slowly, as if even

that might make a noise, and glanced at her fellow-watcher, over at the other side of the bed. "Asleep?" said the eyes that questioned. "Thank God, asleep!" the dumb answer came back.

It was Sir Peter who was Maud's fellow-watcher. He had left Choughshire when Hal had first been declared out of danger, but had come down again from London to-day, in answer to a telegram signed by Lady Euphrosyne, but more than half inspired by Maud. Lady Euphrosyne had now for more than a fortnight been wasting her social virtues at Floundershayle. Maud, in a panic, had summoned her at the first alarming turn of the illness, but the great woman of the world—though, to do her justice, she came as fast as Bradshaw would let her—did not quite see what she was wanted for, once there. Her sick cherub clung to Maud, whose face and whose fairy-tales he had got so used to this month past; and Maud clung to him in return, and nursed him with a devotion which at moments even overstepped the necessities of the case. Lady Euphrosyne was much attached to her cherub; but he seemed strange to her in this guise of sickness, and, brought in presence of him, she was conscious of feeling helpless. None of her cherubs had ever been sick, except when they fell off their ponies, and they had always had excellent and highly paid nurses. It is this combination that makes the helpless mother. So, after a few attempts in the sick-room, followed by as many failures, Lady Euphrosyne remembered opportunely that she had four other cherubs, for whose sakes it would be wrong not to spare herself, and, retiring into the room which had been Maud's parlour, she proceeded to turn the largest

available table into the nearest possible resemblance to her writing-table at home, and applied herself to bringing up her arrears of correspondence. Installed at this tribunal, she sat upon questions social, from noon till night, and dispensed instruction to the ignorant in notes, carefully fumigated and freely pricked with the disinfecting pin.

Had Maud any second thought when she inspired the telegram to Sir Peter? Or was it really only because Hal had murmured a feverish and probably whimsical wish to see his step-brother? It was very odd, and at any other time Maud would not have thought it possible, but the telegram was indeed genuine. It was for Hal that she wanted Sir Peter, not for herself. Just for the present, perhaps only just for the present, he had ceased to be a rich baronet to her, and simply struck her in the light of Hal's brother, for whom Hal had asked, and whose appearance might have a beneficial effect upon Hal. It was a mere straw to catch at, but Maud was in a mood to catch at a straw. The first alarm of the illness had been the bugle-note, which shook her sleeping conscience. "My doing," she said to herself,—“my doing. I brought him here for my own ends. I kept him here in cold blood—for my own ends also. He must be saved.” And she nursed him with that fanatical devotion which filled Lady Euphrosyne with as much wonder as admiration. Her whole thoughts were so fixed on this one point, that other things became distant. She heard that Sir Peter was preparing his yacht for another cruise, and it scarcely touched her; she was told of Carbury's death, and it only dimly and indistinctly

affected her; and when, owing to the continual gales which had hindered him in starting, Lady Euphrosyne's telegram found her step-son still in London, it was on Hal's account, in the first place, that Maud felt thankful. If any thankfulness on her own account had smuggled itself into the composition of the sentiment, it was so deeply and darkly smothered as to be unknown even to herself.

Later all that would begin again; it was not resigned, only postponed. Hal must be saved first. "If that boy dies, I shall have killed him," she told herself. It was not for Hal that she was fighting this devoted battle, it was for herself, for her peace of mind, the quiet of her future days, the sleep of her future nights; it was to guard her own pillow from being haunted by the ghost of that weirdly gaunt, unchildlike face, and the helpless roaming of those wakeful eyes.

But now the eyes were closed, and the little emaciated chest began to rise and fall. Lady Euphrosyne in her dressing-gown had glided in and out again at intervals of five minutes, looking haggard and helpless; and when at last it had been telegraphed to her that he slept, she retired exhausted to the sofa in the next room, and there first indulged herself in a stifled shower of tears, and then dozed gradually into oblivion.

Maud and Sir Peter remained at their posts; indeed, Maud was chained to hers by the position of her arm on which Hal's entire weight, or what remained of his weight, reposed. Sir Peter might have moved away, had he been so minded, but he did not seem to be so minded. An hour passed thus; Maud did not look up. There was dead silence in the house, and outside only

a faint moan of wind, once the whirr of a bird's wing, and once the bark of a dog.

When one o'clock struck, Maud drew a freer breath: he had slept for an unbroken hour; the rise and fall of the chest had grown steady. She raised her eyes; Sir Peter was fixedly regarding her. He leant across the bed, and whispered very low, "Can you stay much longer that way?"

"Which way?"

"You are kneeling; don't you know that?"

"No," she smiled faintly. "I had forgotten."

"Is your arm not stiff?"

She shook her head.

"He sleeps so sound; can you not draw it away?"

"Draw it away?" She gazed full at him, with an almost indignant surprise. "Did you hear what the doctor said about broken sleep?"

He was silent, and leant back in his chair.

A few minutes later, Maud looked up again, and found his eyes still upon her.

"Miss Epperton, is it quite impossible that I should relieve you? You cannot kneel like this till morning; you will faint."

Maud's finger stole up to her lips; her brows drew together sharply to a frown. "Hush! It is impossible, quite impossible."

"But you will faint."

"Not before he wakes; and if I faint, then—well, it will be a fainting fit. This is life and death; you heard the doctor."

Again Sir Peter leant back, and the room was still. If but a few days ago Maud had been told that

she would have such an opportunity as this and leave it unimproved, she assuredly would have scouted the idea. Yet here she was alone with the man whom she had determined to marry, able to meet his eye without coquetry, and to return his smile without an *arrière-pensée*; quite reckless as to her unwaved hair, quite callous as to her unrouged cheeks. It was the fear of that small ghost of the future that did it. Had Maud been in a state to analyse herself, she would have known quite well that neither the recklessness nor the callousness could last. Nor did she know how, while they lasted, they did her better service than the most fine-drawn coquetry could have done. One spice of consciousness, one grain of art, might have revealed her as posing for an effect; but here it was patent that she had forgotten herself. The unwaved hair, instead of hindering, rather furthered that cause which a single "Epperton glance" might have upset. Sir Peter had until now always thought of her as of a very beautiful woman,—a sensible woman, a pleasant woman. It had never occurred to him that she was a very loving or tender woman. To-night it began to occur to him. "There is a soul in the picture," he said to himself, as he watched the patient, kneeling figure. "There is the soul of two women in the picture," he thought, as the hours dragged past; and still she knelt there—upright, untiring, betraying only by the increasing pallor of her face the fatigue that was beginning to weigh upon her. Towards three her head began to droop with the strain; but she knelt on, immovable, only that her chin now rested on her breast. Sir Peter softly left his place, went to the farther end of the room, and

then stepped to her side. He had poured champagne into a spoon, and held it to her. She took it, allowing him to feed her like a baby,—in her strained posture she was almost as helpless as one. “Can you really not remove your arm?” he whispered. “I am sure I could slip mine under without rousing him.”

She shook her head vehemently, and the watch was resumed as before.

Four o'clock, and Hal still slept. Lady Euphrosyne had paid three or four more dumbly interrogative visits to the sick-room. Maud had swallowed three or four more spoonfuls of champagne; but the pallor of her face was increasing, and an occasional sharp contraction about the mouth showed what she was suffering.

Five o'clock. An impetuous cock crowed somewhere from the back of the house, and then, finding that the general opinion of the poultry-yard was against getting up, went to sleep again. Through the chinks of the ill-closing shutters the November morning still scowled black as midnight. “She cannot hold out an hour longer,” thought Sir Peter, and kept his eyes upon Maud, expecting every minute to see her fall. Six o'clock passed, seven o'clock came, and she had not fallen yet; but the thin sheet of grey light that came sliding in through the shutters showed her face drawn with pain, and her form beginning to sway just perceptibly, while her right hand closed convulsively over the side of the bedstead. Hal slept on. The impulsive cock tried another crow, and this time found imitators. Poultry-yards close at hand, poultry-yards in the distance and in the middle-distance, proclaimed

their whereabouts. Downstairs a shutter was thrown back; the house-door was unlocked.

It was upon the stroke of the half-hour when Hal stirred his hand, and then, drawing a deep breath, opened his eyes. They were very different eyes from those that had closed seven hours before; they were soft and moist with sleep—dim indeed, but comfortably drowsy—and it was with the puzzled drunkenness of real sleep that they passed from one to the other face before him.

“Hal,” said Sir Peter, bending over him. Hal smiled a little wan smile and put up his hand; it fell back to the coverlet before it had reached Sir Peter’s moustache, which was apparently the object aimed at, but even this was more than he could do yesterday.

Sir Peter came over to Maud. “Your watch is past, Miss Epperton. Here is the nurse to take your place. He will do now; come away.”

“He will do now,” repeated Maud after him, but she did not rise.

“Miss Epperton, come!” said Sir Peter. “Miss Epperton, why don’t you get up?”

Maud made a sort of spasmodic movement with her arm. Then she looked up straight at him. “I can’t,” she said; “I can’t move it.” She tried again, but the arm was numb with the strain. Sir Peter gently shifted Hal’s position and then took out her arm, which allowed itself to be lifted as though it were of wood. Then he helped her to her feet, but the moment he let go her hand she staggered and fell half against him. The nurse by this time had taken her place by Hal’s side.

Putting his arm around Maud, Sir Peter supported her from the room.

"The air!" she gasped. "Take me to the air—open the window!"

"It is bitterly cold," said Sir Peter.

"Take me to the air," she said again, clinging to his arm.

They were in the disordered parlour, where the remains of last night's supper still stood on one table, while the results of Lady Euphrosyne's yesterday's correspondence lay ranged on the other. Sir Peter flung open the window, and the raw November air struck their faces. "Ah!" said Maud, "ah!" and leaving go her hold on his arm, she threw herself forward on the window-sill, and turned her face towards the stripe of whitish light that lay across the water to the east, like a bright, sharp knife ripping up the shadows of the departing night. Sea, and sea alone, filled the horizon: it had a voice, but scarcely yet a face. A vast, flat thing of dim features, it would have appeared unfamiliar to Maud but for the ripple and wash, ripple and wash on the rocks below. How she had feared this day! How she had thought to hate it! And now how she loved that rising sun, and stretched her arms towards it, weeping and laughing, with a pure and sparkling gladness in her heart, and on her lips something that was almost a prayer. Sir Peter stood beside her without speaking, and watched every change upon her face, sideways and apprehensively. He had already made sure that his step-mother's smelling-bottle was in the room.

Presently Maud turned her face towards him; there was a wonderful smile upon her lips. "He is saved," she said quietly, though her voice shook ever so slightly.

Sir Peter took her hand, and his voice also seemed to shake a little. "He is saved; but only because you saved him. Miss Epperton, I can't make speeches, but I should be a fool if I did not know that I owe my little brother to you."

Maud gave a quick shudder. "Oh no, not to me; you don't know,—he had to be saved." As she said it, her eyes fell on the steep slope in front of the inn door, where one solitary old boat now lay, the single remnant of the half-dozen that had once lain there, keel uppermost, and round which the gossips of the place had loved to assemble. Maud shuddered again, and then smiled. She could afford to do so now, though for days past it had been one of her tortures to glance fearfully at that slope every morning, and to mark how, as the fever spread, the store of old boats diminished. How she had sickened at the thought of what might be the possible destination of that last old boat!

"If it is not to you that I owe my brother," Sir Peter was saying, "then to whom? To Sir Ambrose Cathcart, perhaps?"

She gently shook her head and smiled again, leaving her hand still in his. She felt too peaceful and contented to speak much, and there was still that wonderful softness on her face which Sir Peter had never seen there, and which became it so well. For a space he stood watching her, in silence. "It has always been my theory," he said at last, "that there is one feather

of an angel's wing in every woman's composition, but it takes moments like these, nights like these, to bring it to light." Then, quite unexpectedly to Maud, he bent and kissed the white fingers he held, with something that was very near reverence. The action was slight, and, considering the circumstances, not in the least unnatural, but it pulled Maud in one instant from the skies to the earth. As Sir Peter's lips touched her hand she gave a slight start, as though she remembered something, till now lost sight of, and the first streak of colour sprang back to her face. She looked out at the dawn again, but it was with a different look already, and it suddenly struck her that this white light must make her look terribly old. "Yes, you are right, it is chill," she said, drawing sharply back. "Please close the window." Walking to the darkest corner of the room, she sank into a chair and closed her eyes to reflect.

By the time Sir Peter had done with the window, Maud Epperton was already more than half herself again. She opened her eyes languidly as he drew near.

"Shall I leave you? Do you wish to rest?"

She laughed feebly. "Don't look at me so appallingly, please. Do you still expect me to faint?"

"No. I underrated your nerve; or rather it was the size of your soul that I taxed too low. But the reaction will come, the later the worse. You must promise me to rest. I don't mean an hour on your bed; I mean a real, long, complete rest to set up your nerves again. You have been living in a strain for weeks. Will you promise me this before I go?"

"When are you going?"

"To-morrow or next day,—as soon as Hal will let me. Once he has turned the corner I become a useless encumbrance here, and the wind blows fair now for the Mediterranean."

"The Mediterranean!" said Maud. "How the word smells of orange-groves! I was there once; Lady Carringsford took me as a sort of unsalaried court-jester, I believe. Why do you stare? I assure you I used to be almost amusing in those days, but I was younger then."

"And you liked it?"

"*Liked* it? I can only say, Happy man!"

"Then, why not go again?"

She stared. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Sir Peter, "that a yacht is a capital thing for setting up people's nerves. If you think mine comfortable enough, why should you not take your rest on the Mediterranean?"

Maud's eyes remained upon his face; no, he was not joking. She was honestly amazed, and at the same time secretly thrilled with the beginnings of quite another exultation than the one she had felt over Hal's safety. She gave a rather loud laugh, threw back her head against the cushions and felt strangely light-hearted, almost light-headed, as one who has passed through a horrifying dream and wakes to find that it was all mist and vapour, and that everything is still safe. She felt herself set free again, her hands untied to mould and shape the future.

"Well?" said Sir Peter. "What do you say?"

Maud laughed again hysterically, till the tears came

to her eyes. "Sir Peter Wyndhurst and Miss Epperton, for the Mediterranean. Fancy how well it would look in the 'Morning Post'!"

"Hang the 'Morning Post'!" said Sir Peter, curtly. "But seriously, Miss Epperton, you have an aunt somewhere, have you not? Is she transportable?"

"Sir Peter Wyndhurst and the two Miss Eppertons, for the Mediterranean," laughed Maud; "does that sound much better?"

"Scarcely as well as the other," said Sir Peter, sitting down opposite to Maud, as though seriously to discuss the question. She put up her hand uneasily to her hair, and sharply pulled back her foot. She had only just become aware of her big felt slippers; they had been of extreme value in the sick-room, but they were not becoming. "The matter lies in the neatest of all nutshells," Sir Peter was saying. "You save my brother's life and injure your own health in so doing; Sir Ambrose Cathcart prescribes a dose of Mediterranean. *Fantasca* offers herself to you as the humble medicine-cup which is to work the cure. We have an aged spinster-aunt on board. What can the 'Morning Post' make of that?"

"But how do you know that my health is injured?" Maud kept her eyes upon him: he was talking recklessly, and she saw it. She saw also now, for the first time, how ill he looked, how aged since their last meeting. This could not be the effect of one sleepless night.

He leant forward eagerly towards her. "Will you come, Miss Epperton? Say you will come! It would be a kind turn—a kinder turn than you think."

"Why?"

"Why?" and he laughed strangely. "Because I have half a mind to hang myself from the topmast, and I couldn't do it if there were ladies on board,—it would be bad manners. Will you come?"

"I don't know," said Maud, standing up. She was startled by his tone, and she was excited. The opportunity thrust under her hand was so appallingly mighty, that she felt the need of just a little reflection before she grasped it. This mood of his was the very one which moulds the fate of lifetimes, like melted iron ready to run into shape. She saw it all: once upon the boards of the good yacht *Fantasca*, what endless chances would be hers! What a choice of roads, all leading to one goal! And when every other way had been tried, would there not always remain the way of discovering that there had, after all, been a disagreeable paragraph in that tiresome "Morning Post"? And then to step ashore in some retired Italian coast-village, and send for the nearest approach to an English clergyman?

The panorama of pictures took but one moment to dart through her brain, and in the midst of her excitement she retained just calmness enough to tell herself that her "Yes" must not be given too cheaply. "I don't know," she said, as she stood up, though inwardly she knew quite well already. "I shall think of it; but now, now I fancy that I ought to rest, after all. I will lie down; perhaps I can sleep."

She lay down, but sleep did not come. Her tingling nerves gave her no rest. She was aching with fatigue, yet thrilled from head to foot with the dazzling glitter

of this new future that beckoned to her from on board a yacht. At last she sat up, pushing her hair from her temples: it was no use, she could not lie still. She wanted movement, she wanted air.

It had been broad daylight now for some hours, and wrapping herself in her cloak, Maud slipped down the staircase and out into the winter-day, hoping to cool this glow on her cheek and forehead, which first relief and then triumph had kindled there.

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY BABY SPOILS EVERYTHING.

“Tout savoir c'est tout comprendre, et tout comprendre
c'est tout pardonner.”

“VICTORY!” Maud's heart cried within her. “Victory!” and her parted lips drank in the bitter breeze, as though it had been wine distilled specially to suit her taste. Then, between these trumpet-calls of victory, there would come a lower, purer note—“He is saved! Little Hal is saved!” And the softening which had been on her face at dawn came back to her and stirred vaguely, somewhere in a corner of her heart. But she bade it lie still; for to remember that one moment when her thankfulness had been spontaneous and unmixed, was to understand that it was no longer so; but the thought was so vague and faint that it lay still, or all but still, at her bidding. Victory was, after all, the loudest note in her ears.

She walked along the little, steep, twisted village street, wishing to get to the cliffs; but presently her eye chanced to fall on the bobbing cap of the post-mistress behind a window-pane. She thought she would go in and see if there were any letters for her. She had not read a letter for a week, but to-day her appetite for life was reviving, and, consequently, also for its details. In the doorway she ran against somebody who was reading a letter. She started back.

"Frances!"

"Maud!"

"What are you doing here?" asked Maud, with a sudden, unaccountable chill upon her.

"Doing here? Fetching the letters: Agnes had not written for so long. This is the post-office, you know."

"Oh, to be sure!" said Maud, stupidly. "This is the post-office."

"How is he, Maud? Little Hal, I mean. I should have come to help you if they had let me. It would have been something to do."

"The danger is over. Three? Yes, thanks." The last words were to the post-mistress, who pushed three letters towards her. One of them slid over the table and fell to the ground. Lady Baby was nearest; she stooped to pick it up. As she did so her eye took in the address, which lay face uppermost. She said nothing, but flushed crimson as she handed the letter to Maud. Maud snatched it rather brusquely, and they went out in silence together; nor was the silence broken until the very last houses of the street were reached. Maud busied herself with a letter from her aunt, but she could not go on reading four pages for ever—she had at last to look up. Lady Baby's eyes, very wide and very hungry, were hanging on her face.

Maud looked away rather hastily. "I think we shall have snow before midday," she remarked.

"Is he here, Maud?" said Lady Baby, in reply. "Is he here?" and she clutched Maud's hand.

If Maud had been quite certain that Sir Peter would not take a morning-stroll she would have greatly preferred to say that he was not here; but the risk was

too great. "He is going to-morrow," she said, after an instant's hesitation. "I wish they would not clean their fish out of doors," she added immediately. "Look at that child! She is steeped in scales to the eyes."

"Oh Maud, he is here? He is really here? Oh, how happy I am!" as a proof of which, Lady Baby burst into tears.

"What is it?" said Maud, impatiently. "I thought you said you were happy."

"Yes,—no; I mean only a little less miserable than I have been all those weeks—those wretched weeks. If you knew how I hate those gate-posts with the round stones on the top. And all the same I love that place more than any other place in the world," sobbed Lady Baby, lucidly. "It was there, you know, Maud, it was there——"

"But I don't know; and I don't want to know," said Maud, vehemently disengaging her hand.

"It was there; I thought it was the last time, I was quite sure of it; but now—oh Maud, do you think that I might have another last time? Only one more? He needn't shake hands with me; he needn't know anything; but just once again, you know, Maud! Only one little moment again." She spoke with that broken eagerness, with those catches of the breath, which betray an excitement become incontrollable. It was the silence of the weeks past finding utterance, the dim regrets and the dull pangs heaped beyond endurance, the heavy languors panting for expression.

"Child, you are in a fever," said Maud, painfully startled. "You are raving. What do you mean? I

can't help you,—no, I certainly can't help you," she repeated, decisively.

"No, I know that nobody can help me," said Lady Baby, frantically drying her eyes, and making great effort to steady her voice; "but only I should have liked——"

"What is it you want to see him for?" asked Maud, abruptly. "If there is a message, I could take it, perhaps." She had reflected that a message would be safer than an interview.

Lady Baby shook her head, and her chin went up, somewhat in the old fashion, only that it was rather a miserable imitation of the old fashion. "No, I have no message, and I can't speak to him; it is no use. It was all a mistake; but it is no use. If he can live without asking for the explanation, I must be able to live without giving it, I suppose."

"A mistake? What mistake?" said Maud. She said it in spite of herself, for only a minute before she had been quite resolved to ask no questions. Her face was hard, but that something soft which had been stirring faintly in her heart stirred again, not so faintly this time. It was from there the question came.

"May I tell you, Maud?" asked Lady Baby. "There was no one I could tell it to. Do you remember how we talked at Kippendale at the time he first went away? Somehow you were the only one I could talk to about it. You were always very good to me, Maud."

"Go on, go on," said Maud, with a frown. She did not like remembering that time.

"It was when Mr. Carbury died. Mr. Carbury

knew a secret about the copper. It must have been that he had discovered that the man at the old Tally-ho Mine was really Christopher Swan. We found that out two days ago, but now he has disappeared again—Christopher Swan, I mean—so we are exactly at the same point we were at before; but at that time I didn't know anything about it, and I thought that Mr. Carbury alone could save Aggie and Nicky, and that is why I went to him that night in the dark, and Peter saw me go in, and he seemed to think—I don't know, Maud, what he really thought. And next day it was he who told me of his death, and I cried so dreadfully; he must have thought it was all for Mr. Carbury, and of course in one sense it was, because I knew that if it hadn't been for me he never would have come to Floundershayle, and never would have died. Don't you see?"

"I see," said Maud, looking out fixedly across the water. It did not strike Lady Baby as odd that, despite the slight entanglement of pronouns, and the general haziness of the sketch, Maud should grasp the situation with such intelligent rapidity. She had always had for her friend's intellect an awestruck deference, just as she had always felt for her friend's beauty a passionate admiration.

"Why don't you look at me, Maud?" she said, plucking at the other's sleeve, for Maud still stared out to sea. "Why don't you give me an answer?"

"I don't know what you want."

"I want you to help me."

"To help you to explain the mistake? Are you asking for my advice? I really cannot undertake to

disentangle people's *affaires du cœur*," said Maud, with a shrug.

Lady Baby opened her blue eyes very wide. "Oh no!" she said promptly, "I am not asking for your advice. I know that there is only one course open to me; but I thought, I fancied, that perhaps you might have helped me in one thing—one little thing that would be very precious."

"What is that?" asked Maud, roughly.

"Only that I thought, I fancied, that perhaps I could have sat somewhere in some place where he could not see me—behind a window, perhaps, and where I could see him pass. I could look through the curtains, you know."

"Well; and then?"

"Then? Why, I should have seen him then, Maud."

Maud did not turn her head; she was very intent upon the sea.

"And after that," went on Lady Baby, "I should wait until we were both very old, perhaps fifty or so, so that he could not think I was doing it for my own sake; and then I should write him a letter, and tell him that it was all a mistake, and that I never cared for anybody in the world but him. Or else, supposing I were to fall very ill, then I might even write to him before I was fifty,—of course only if I was quite, *quite* sure that I should die immediately afterwards. I think I should like that better, because thirty-three years is such a long time to wait."

Maud did not move. If she had opened her lips, it could only have been to burst into a peal of indecent laughter. Silence was just now her only bulwark.

“Maud!” cried Lady Baby, and flung one arm round her neck. “What is the matter? Won’t you look at me? Am I going to lose you too? I can’t lose everybody—I can’t!” and now she trembled and clung wildly round the other’s neck. Slowly Maud turned her face from the sea, and for a minute she stood passive, not returning the caresses, but suffering herself to be clung to, outwardly as unmoved as marble.

“You are so kind, Maud—you are so very kind; and oh! you are so beautiful!” The tone now was something like Germaine’s, and the words were very like Germaine’s words. Maud shivered. This was the shadow of that terrible faith which had been her torment for so long, and had ended by being her undoing.

“Don’t!” she cried. “Don’t hold me! Don’t kiss me!” for just then Lady Baby’s lips fell softly on her cheek. The very spot she had touched seemed to tingle with shame. “Do you hear me? Let me go!” she almost screamed. “Let me go!”

Lady Baby dropped back, staring.

“What is the matter with you, Maud? I have never seen you like this. Are you angry with me?”

“Yes,” said Maud, between her teeth. “I am very angry with you.”

“But what? But why? Have I done anything?”

“Yes. You have done me a great deal of harm; you have spoilt everything. I am very angry with you.” With her lips closed and her eyes gleaming, she seized hold of Lady Baby’s two hands, stood for one minute fiercely scanning the small, tremulous, white face—the large, hungry, blue eyes; then, pushing the girl to one side, she turned and went back towards the village,

leaving the other to stand and gaze after her, alone on the deserted road. She passed the post-office, this time without a glance at the bobbing cap of the post-mistress, and when the identical scaly child that had awakened her disgust ten minutes before ran straight across her path, she saw nothing peculiar in its appearance. "And she loves him that way, she loves him that way!" was all that she said to herself from one end of the village to the other.

The barmaid was at the doorway when she reached the inn.

"Where is Sir Peter Wyndhurst?" she inquired.

"Breakfasting in the coffee-room," was the answer.

Maud went straight to the coffee-room. Sir Peter was there, with a newspaper and a cup of coffee, but other people were there too,—the landlord propping the leg of a table, the landlord's son washing a window-pane.

"Send them away; I want to speak to you," said Maud in French, walking up to where Sir Peter sat.

He rose and looked at her.

"Send them away," she repeated quietly; "I want to speak to you."

Sir Peter turned and expressed the necessary wish.

"Now," said Maud, bringing back her eyes from the closing door and fixing them full upon Sir Peter's face. "Now, tell me; what do you think I am?"

Sir Peter was standing in face of her, with his napkin still in his hand. He looked down at it blankly, as though in search of inspiration; then he looked again at Maud, and half pushed a chair towards her.

"No," said Maud, meeting his eyes; "you are

mistaken. I am not mad—I am in a perfectly sane condition of mind; and I want to know what you think of me.”

“I think very highly of you,” said Sir Peter, while with one hand he still mechanically offered the chair; “but I don’t seem quite to understand. Would you explain——”

“Presently; that is coming. So you think highly of me? You believe me to be an honest and good woman?”

Sir Peter returned her gaze still blankly.

“Yes, I do. I know you to be beautiful, to be brave, and I believe you to be honest.”

“Well distinguished, artist! You know me beautiful, and think me honest. And now, answer me another question.” She leant across the table towards him. “Now, tell me what you think of Lady Baby. You know her to be beautiful too, I suppose, and you believe her to be fickle? Is that the definition?”

“Let us keep to the point, please,” said Sir Peter, haughtily. His face grew rigid on the instant, and his eyes icy.

“Yes, I mean to keep to the point. The point is that you believe me to be honest, and that you believe her to be fickle. Now, listen; I am going to tell you the story.”

“Would it not do as well at another time?” asked Sir Peter, gnawing his moustache, and fixing his eyes on a corner of the ceiling. “If, indeed, there is such a story to tell.”

“No, it would not do at another time; it must be told this instant. If it is not now, it will be never. Leave me alone; I know myself.”

"You seem excited——"

"Excited? Does my hand tremble? Feel it—it is as calm as death. And now, hush! I am going to tell you the story."

Then she told him the story from the very beginning—from the day when she had first got herself invited to Kippendale on his account, up to the last words that had passed between her and Lady Baby in this same hour. She told him how she had transferred her hopes from him to Germaine, and how, after her final interview with the latter, she had conceived the desperate idea of transferring them back again to him; how, in pursuance of this object, she had deliberately suppressed her discovery of Christopher Swan's identity—confiding the secret to Mr. Carbury alone, under the firm conviction that he would sell it but at one price; how she had used all her ingenuity to fan into flame Sir Peter's jealous suspicions which he had brought away with him from the interview at Gullyscoombe; how, finally, she had, with an equally deliberate purpose, concealed from him the existence of fever at Floundershayle, and thus been the direct cause of Hal's catching the infection. All this she told him briefly, clearly, with a certain graphic and business-like plainness all her own, and she looked him straight in the face while she spoke. She saw the blood mount slowly to his temples, and the wonder grow apace in his fixed eyes.

"Do you believe me?" she asked when she had finished. She was leaning heavily on the table; for now that the thing was done, it appeared to her rather terrible: her throat was scorched as though from the

passage of fire, and by the bewildered, wavering look which Sir Peter turned upon her, she could guess that there must be wildness in her face.

"No," said Sir Peter, "I don't believe you." His own unsteady, questioning gaze belied his words. He did not quite disbelieve her, but neither did he quite believe her. He was in a maze. A blind man does not submit without a struggle to have his eyes torn open—and torn open, too, in this point-blank cut-and-dry fashion—without a single preliminary stage.

"You must believe me," said Maud, desperately and deliberately calm—"you must!" Was the thing not quite done, after all? Was there still a dangerous loop-hole left? Quick, quick! It must be closed up at any price.

"You have been overstrained," said Sir Peter, watching her. "I don't understand you. This story you tell me is very wonderful, but it is a great deal more like a thing in a book than a thing in real life. To begin with, everybody knows that Christopher Swan died years ago. You have got some idea into your head; you speak so quietly, but your colour, your eyes! You are feverish, Miss Epperton."

"If I prove to you the truth of my story in that particular, if I assure you that Christopher Swan really was alive within a few days and within a few miles of here, will you then believe whatever else I have told you?" And, without waiting for his answer, Maud went to the door and called for the landlady. The fact of the shoemaker on the moor having been identified by Adam two days ago as Christopher Swan, had already spread to Floundershayle, as also the fact of the shoe-

maker having since disappeared trackless, and with him, consequently, all trace of the copper-vein. It was supposed that in an access of terror he had fled the country, but search and inquiries had hitherto proved unavailing. All this information was elicited from the landlady by Maud's questions, and in Sir Peter's presence. In point of fact, a great deal more than this was elicited, for the landlady was more easily set agoing in the conversational line than stopped, and the event had naturally produced some sensation at Floundershayle. Under cover of the voluble stream of details, Maud walked to the window. The stream flowed on for a little longer, and then ceased. After that the door opened and closed again, and there was silence in the room.

Maud waited; she did not quite know whether this waiting lasted a very long or a very short time, but suddenly she became aware that Sir Peter was walking rapidly across the room. "Now!" thought Maud; "he believes me now! What is he going to do to me? Will he kill me? I suppose he can't well strike me," and she swung round to face him, believing him to be scowling above her; but, lo and behold! he was not there at all: he had passed her, and was at the door already, with his fingers on the handle.

"Stop!" she cried, amazed; "where are you going to?"

"I am going to her," said Sir Peter. His voice shook, his eyes were alight. Maud was right; he did believe her now. The one point of her story which she had proved to him by the landlady's testimony, had vouched for the veracity of the whole. It had been as the touchstone of the intrinsic credibility of the tale,

and it wanted but that to disperse his bewilderment and to make him eagerly accept the proof. To believe in the story was to believe in Lady Baby's love for him; it was that that made his eyes shine so.

"And I?" said Maud. "You go like this? without the smallest word—of abuse? Without the tiniest shadow of a curse upon my head? We have not done our talk yet. I want to know *now* what you think of me?" She had come up to him where he stood beside the door; and, still fingering the handle, he turned and eyed her in a curious startled way, as though violently recalled to a sense of her identity. It was evident to her that the man's soul, released from its bondage of suspicion, had flown straight to the feet of its queen, soaring over her head, in a lover's ecstatic oblivion. "Do you remember who I am?" she asked, almost laughing.

"Yes, to be sure." His memory was returning. He came back upon his steps, as it were, to consider the practical aspect of the case. "And she really never cared for Carbury?" he asked, gazing urgently into Maud's eyes.

"Never. Carbury never was more to her than the possible family saviour."

"But, in mercy's name, why did she not say so then?"

"Ah yes, exactly; and over there, with just that look, she says: 'Why did he not ask?' When once you people with the big, proud souls get to quarrelling, there is nothing for it but for a small soul to go between you. Do you know what her plan was? Oh, she had got plans! She was going to have looked at you over the top of a blind this afternoon, and then she

meant to go home and wait till she was fifty, at which date she would write you a letter to explain that it had been all right all along, and her heart empty of everything but your image. I am not joking; she had it all pat."

Sir Peter shuddered; he seized Maud's hand. "And *you* have saved us both from this!"

"Yes," said Maud, looking down oddly at the hand he held; "and I also have, up to twenty minutes back, been doing all I could to bring you both to this. How is it that we stand exactly? I can't make it out, and I can't make you out either. Do you see no objection to shaking hands with the woman who has just been expounding to you how she put herself up for sale, and how she was prepared to be bought and paid for, exactly on the same terms that you would buy and pay for your furniture or your china? Are you quite sure that you have understood all I told you? Are you aware that, once on board your yacht, I should have stuck at nothing that could have widened the gulf between you and Lady Baby; and that, if I have not actually committed any particularly villainous act in pursuance of this object, it is only because the opportunity did not happen to present itself?"

Sir Peter's gaze grew troubled. "What made you tell me all this to-day?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders. "A fit of the virtues, suppose. I have them sometimes; it generally lasts about twenty-four hours. I believe my nerves were a little upset after the night. The chances are that to-morrow at this hour I shall be tearing out my hair at the thought of what I have done."

Sir Peter stood staring at her with wrinkled brow.

"Well? You are waiting to be dismissed. How are we to part? Have you made up your mind?"

"I am wondering," said Sir Peter. "I don't understand. What are you, Maud Epperton? and what shall I say to you? Are you a very heroic woman, or a very despicable one? You have deceived me, and you have enlightened me; you have betrayed me, and you have saved me. It is the maddest mixture. What shall I do? Shall I decline to shake hands with you because you treacherously plotted to steal my love from me? Or shall I fall at your feet and kiss the hem of your dress because you courageously gave it me back again? I have seen you to be so great and brave, and you have proved yourself to be so small and base. What are you?" He had taken her two hands now, and was examining her anxiously, as one examines a curious and unprecedented phenomenon, for Sir Peter was marvelously ignorant in the ways of women.

"Make a compromise," said Maud, her mouth quivering a little under his scrutiny. "Give me a little of each, *à la* Brutus, you know: As she was brave I esteem her, as she was desperate I excuse her, as she was unfortunate I weep for her, but as she was false I spurn her. There is esteem for her courage, excuse for her despair, tears for her—no, we will skip them—and so on to the bottom of the page."

"You would skip what you cannot escape," said Sir Peter; "they are on your cheeks already. Oh, Maud, the pity of it! Do you know that you are a grand woman wasted?"

"No, I did not know it," said Maud. "And now

go. I scent the artist coming to the surface. Have you nothing better to do this morning than to discover artistic possibilities?"

It needed no more than these words of hers to sink her, as it were, in one instant out of sight, and to conjure up another vision in her place. Before Maud had quite realised that the door had been opened, Sir Peter had already passed the window, striding rapidly, his face towards Gullyscoombe.

"I see," said Maud, standing alone in the middle of the room, "I see how it is: if I had not called him back when his fingers were on the door-handle,—if I had not flaunted my treason in his face, he would have forgotten even to be angry with me; and if I had lain down before him and grovelled for his pardon, he would have walked over my head to get at her, and would not have thought it worth while to give me so much as a knock in passing. Is it that he loves better than he hates? or is it that my influence upon him was less even than I thought? Perhaps,"—and she laughed abruptly, brushing her hand over her eyes,—“perhaps I should not have got him after all! There is some comfort in that.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SEA-KING.

“With her, as with a desperate town,
Too weak to stand, too proud to treat;
The conqueror, though the walls are down,
Has still to capture street by street.”

BEFORE Lady Baby was half-way home the ground had begun to be powdered with snow, and so rapidly did the flakes thicken, that, before she had reached the house, the road was sheeted white. She did not go in; she hated the inside of the house even more than the outside. There was nothing to do in there, and out here at least there was the snow to look at. Passing round the corner of the house, she entered the odiously familiar, often-paced gooseberry-garden; and sitting down on a corner of the wall there, where the stones had crumbled to a convenient height, she gazed vacantly around her.

And yet this winter pageantry would have been well worth scanning with a less vacant gaze. Even the gooseberry-ground, had she but taken the trouble to notice it, wore quite a different face to-day; for fresh snow is a coat of whitewash that makes everything that grows very nearly akin. Wrapped in their white cloaks, the starved gooseberry-bushes might dream themselves rose-trees, and who would care to give them the lie? Shrouded in their white veils, the dead chamomile plants

might advertise themselves as red carnations, and who would be at the pains to prove the contrary?

Fresh white winding-sheets had almost succeeded in covering up the wooden Dragon, the Mermaid, and the Cherub. Against the wall of the house, and just dimly visible through the ever-descending curtain, the Sea-king loomed, manfully hugging the remains of his sceptre to his heart, and swelling now with every instant, slowly and steadily, into a monstrous caricature of himself,—a species of impromptu snow-man. To Lady Baby, gazing vacantly at him across the garden, he gave the impression of continually shifting the position of his limbs, as though to gain ease in his stiffened posture; the moving snow between her and him appeared to endow him with a sort of galvanised movement of his own, uncanny to behold.

But it was outside, beyond the limits of the garden-wall, that the snow-pageantry was at its height; for here the wide, unobstructed horizon made a fit stage for the spectacle. The sweep of the jagged hills lay blotted against the sky in a maze of floating flakes, while the black rifts, gaping along their flanks, dumbly and mysteriously swallowed the white shower. And, over there, the same shower hovered down to die in the sea, the snow-flakes taking up each other's work with an unwearying patience, as though the little feathery imps did not yet despair of making the ocean as white as the land.

It was a pity that their cause was not better, thought Lady Baby, as she wearily watched the doings of the snow-imps; would they really leave no mark upon that unconquerable sea? Would they——and

then she turned her head, for the door upon the steps had creaked. Was there somebody in the garden? Somebody besides that snow-laden Sea-king? Or was that the Sea-king coming towards her with that rapid stride, grown quite alive at last by dint of stretching his limbs?

He was white enough for a snow-man, or very nearly so; powdered from head to foot, crowned with snow, shod with snow, a snow-fringe about his moustache, and a snow-cape upon his shoulders. But his face was not like snow, nor were his eyes.

She stood up from the wall, trembling a little, and immediately there tumbled down and around her a shower of so many flakes that she gasped for a moment in the cold. She had not noticed how still she had sat all this time on the wall, so of course she could not know what she had grown into in the half-hour. Subsequently it was explained to her that she had carried an uncompleted sugar-loaf upon her hat.

But now the sugar-loaf lay at her feet in pieces, and for just about a minute the snow-man and the snow-woman stood and stared at one another's whiteness. Then he took her hands and said—

“I have come to ask your forgiveness. I know it all now. I was in the wrong; I doubted you atrociously. Lady Baby, can you forgive my want of faith?”

She did not say whether she could forgive him; she asked neither “how?” nor “why?” She dimly understood that the snowy man was taking her to his snowy arms; and drooping her head, with an exquisite shudder, she softly wavered towards him and fell in silence upon his breast. All around them the snow-

flakes danced and whispered, and set to weaving thicker and thicker veils in the air. But they were too hasty these well-meaning snow-imps, and much too quick to jump to conclusions; what could they know of the mysterious perversities of a human heart? of the many ingenious excuses which women can invent for holding back their lips from the cup they are thirsting for, pushing it from them, setting it aside, and not infrequently upsetting it at the very last moment?

All at once the veils were disturbed; she had started from his arms, and now retreated from before him, until, with her back against the wall, she stood and faced him with cheeks that still flamed from his kiss, and eyes in which a sudden wild panic was shining.

"No, no, not that!" she said, putting out her two hands before her as he approached. "It must not be that. I forgot—you came so quickly; I can live now, since you know that I have been true: I can live; but we shall have to part all the same. I had forgotten that. No, of course, it must not be that."

"Why must it not be that, Lady Baby?" asked Sir Peter, gravely.

"I told you once before; don't you remember?"

"I remember a time when you talked some great folly, some very wicked folly; but that is over, I presume."

She stood for a minute, upright and silent, intrenched, as it were, against her wall. Then she clasped her hands over her face. "But my promise!" she cried wildly,—*"my declaration to Lady Euphrosyne!"*

"The particular reason?" he said with a smile. "Yes, I heard of that too. Is it so hard to break it

when I ask you?" He came up and gently took her hands down from her face.

"Break it? Break a promise? You ask that of me?"

"I ask you to break your false pride, from which that false and nonsensical promise sprang. Is it so hard?"

Again she gazed at him wildly, yearningly, but with a little gleam of her old obstinacy lurking just in the bluest depths of her eyes. From out of the curtain of snowflakes over Sir Peter's shoulder, Lady Euphrosyne's faint but supercilious countenance seemed indistinctly to loom. "You ask that of me?" she repeated; "and I am still a beggar and you are still the rich man?"

"Child, child!" he said impatiently, and let go her hands, "I thought you might have spared me that. We have discussed that point once; I decline to discuss it again. The doubt is pitiable; unworthy of you and unworthy of me. Put it away."

By the quiver of her lip it was clear that she was struggling. "But we could wait," she said, tremulously,

"For what?"

"For the copper to be found. They are still searching for Christopher Swan, you know; when they find him the copper is most likely found too; and when the copper is found I am released from my promise."

"And you think that you have only to dismiss me to-day and to recall me when the copper is found?" There was something ominous in his voice; it struck her silent.

The snowflake veil was falling between them now, and the little white imps were playing all manner of tricks with her hair and with her eyelashes. She was very nearly blind with them, and yet something told her that there was anger on his face. His voice, when he spoke, was not angry, but it was sorrowfully grave, almost a little severe.

"If that is your plan, Lady Baby, then we have indeed mistaken each other all along. What do you take me for? A glove to be dropped and picked up again? a slave to be alternately caressed and banished? Is the lesson we have learned not yet hard enough for both of us?" He stopped and looked at her half-wistfully. Her face had grown very pale, and her head drooped.

"You can banish me, Lady Baby," he said; but understand that, this time, banished means banished for ever. I am no longer at your beck and call. Let me go from you in this way to-day, and I go in earnest; and let the copper be found to-morrow, and with it any amount of fantastical pledges be redeemed, it will alter no further jot about the case. I don't know what you think; perhaps you think it is a grand action: I think it is an unworthy game, and I protest against it. You are not a child, and I am not a toy; I protest most vehemently. I do not want your love on the terms you give it; if you love your pride better than you love me, I abdicate in favour of your pride, and make my bow to your love and sail away over the sea."

"Over the sea?" she echoed in a scared tone, as if this, after all, was the upshot of his words. "Oh, you are not going over the sea?"

"Not if you ask me to stay here, Lady Baby."

"Ask you? How am I to ask you? Would you have me say, 'Take me in spite of my poverty, in spite of everything'?"

"Yes, I would have you say that." He waited a minute longer, looking at her more with curiosity than with anxiety, for in truth he had not much doubt of the result. Her eyes were upon the ground, and her fingers nervously clasping and unclasping each other. The last sword-thrusts of a very, very old battle were being fought out within her breast. The vision of Lady Euphrosyne's face was still hovering in the snow, but surely it was fading fast.

"You bid me go?" said Sir Peter; and then, having given her one minute more, he turned slowly, and took a few steps towards the entrance. It was nothing but a miserable feint, as transparent a sham retreat as ever enticed a rather *naïf* enemy to abandon his citadel and charge in the open.

At this movement she put up her head. She saw him pass the first gooseberry-bush, and her lips fell apart; she saw him pass the second, and began to breathe rather hard. Somewhere about the fifth bush she thought she must be choking; somewhere about the seventh she uttered a stifled cry. Lady Euphrosyne and her supercilious smile vanished in a black gulf; everything and every one vanished, and in the whole vast, snow-coloured world there was no one real but this inexorable snow-man and this foolish snow-woman.

"Stop!" she cried, indistinctly, "Peter, stop!" Then, as he turned and stood looking at her gravely, and

waiting for her decision, she made two steps towards him. "Take me, Peter," she faltered; "take me. I have nothing of my own, not even my heart, for that was yours long ago. I will owe everything to you. Peter, take me, beggar as I am!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEW YORK.

"Comes the blind Fury with the abhorréd shears."

THE SUN was making its exit from the skies in a glow of sombre magnificence, a pageantry of orange and grey. Grey vapours, warmed by a smouldering fire of orange, grey mountains reflected in orange lakes, grey islands floating in orange seas. Over the snow-covered ground the orange light glanced, strewing the white carpet with stains of gold; through the window of the ruined engine-house it glowed, as through the empty socket of a sightless eye; on the crest of the hill it lay, binding that granite brow with a dazzling band; over the little frozen pools it slid, polishing them for a moment into the brilliancy of cut jewels. It was the hour when foxes are supposed to go to their holes and rabbits to their burrows; when seagulls seek their nooks in the rocks, and when fowls begin to jostle each other for the best place on the perch; when many a dog drags himself sleepily into his kennel, and many a cat stretches herself on the hearth-rug, or curls herself into her basket.

But what of the unhappy cat to whom the existence of either a hearth-rug or a basket is now no more than an aching memory? who is acquainted, indeed, with

such things as saucers, and with such delicacies as cream, but who has given up all hope of ever renewing that pleasant acquaintance? In the thin and shabby, dirtily white, raggedly fluffy animal that crouched, shivering, upon the doorstep of Samuel Foote's abandoned dwelling-house, who indeed would have recognised the once so magnificent New York? Furze and bramble thorns had done what they could to tear to tatters that once so silky fur; cruel stones had cut the soft paws, hunger had shrivelled the plump flesh, cold had stiffened the supple joints, terror and anxiety had distended the blue eyes into a piteous stare. A diet of birds may, of course, be nourishing, but only when available in sufficient quantities; and this particular white cat, having since the earliest recollections of its kittenhood led a life of modest but secure comforts, very soon discovered that it is one thing to feel your mouth water at sight of a fat sparrow, and quite another thing to secure that fat sparrow for your dinner. As for field-mice, they were all lying snug in their holes, locked in the arms of their winter-sleep, so no chance of variety in the meagre diet was to be looked for from that quarter. Everything that had a hole was lying in it, or wending its way towards it; everything that had a nest was nestling into it just now. Alone upon this wide hillside the white cat sat upon the doorstep,—homeless; the more acutely homeless, perhaps, for crouching beside the door of what had once been home.

It was close upon a week now since this doorstep had been all that remained to New York of home; but it was not upon this doorstep alone that the week had

been passed. Rather the time had been divided between this spot and another, whose rival claims were the cause of many weary pilgrimages to and fro. That he had not yet died of the cold was in all probability owing to these journeys backwards and forwards, even more than to what remained to him of his long-haired coat. It was hard, indeed, to decide which of the spots to cling to. There was much to be said for the doorstep; for behind those boards there lay so many memories, shut up, as it were, in a box. What happy moments had not been spent in there, chasing some fugitive bobbin of thread that rolled opportunely from the table, or clawing at a dangling boot-tag which happened to hang at a convenient height. Then, when the age for these frivolities had been outgrown, what peaceful snatches of slumber had been enjoyed before the fire, or among the half-completed boots! with what skilful evolutions each one of those crowded wooden shelves on the wall had been trodden, with never so much as a packet of needles displaced, or a grease-pot upset!

Yes, there certainly was much to be said for the doorstep. And yet the other spot had its attraction too; a more fearful fascination of its own. Every now and then, therefore, it came about that the white watcher would rise from his post and steal off towards the steep flank of the hill which at a few hundred paces from the old buildings rose with a more sudden and abrupt sharpness. Impossible to stay away long from the secret that was hidden in that dark recess of the mountain; useless to attempt to sit for any length of time peacefully on the doorstep, without ascertaining

whether that other spot was still the same as it had been ten minutes ago, whether there was no change about that stiff, horrifying, inexplicable *thing* that lay there so immovable, and that was at once so familiar and so strange. Once or twice, too, in the course of this week, the white cat had flown from this spot to the other as towards a refuge,—scared away from the doorstep by the appearance of strange figures, men who came to hammer at the door and at the windows, even to break their way into the house, and to come out talking volubly and gesticulating in what looked like excited disappointment. They had appeared at various times of day, at morning, at noon,—and oh, ye guardian spirits of homeless wanderers, was even this sweet hour not sacred from their intrusion? Were those two fresh samples of the enemy looming round the corner of the engine-house, just as the doorstep had been reached and once more taken possession of?

New York had dined off one very thin robin that day, and he had torn out one of his claws in an attempt to climb a sharp rock in pursuit of another. He was much annoyed by the appearance of these two lads on the scene, but at the same time exceedingly indisposed to disturb himself again on so short a notice. For a moment he nursed the vain hope of remaining unobserved, but only for a moment. A second glance had told the unhappy cat that this case was likely to be an aggravated one. Deep as had been the seclusion of his life, New York knew the natural enemy of his race when he saw him; a painful experience had long ago taught him that human beings of this size never miss an opportunity of bullying anything that has four

legs and can be hit with a stone. A big and sharp one whizzed through the air and fell beside him at this very moment; and, limping off the doorstep, the white cat hobbled sadly across the snow and towards his place of refuge, as fast as the wounded paw would let him.

“Bet ye a ha’penny I’ll hit him afore ye do,” said Bob to Will.

“Done!” said Will, stooping to pick up a bigger and heavier stone; but it fell ahead of the limping cat this time; and failure producing excitement, and rivalry developing determination, both lads had very soon freed themselves of the bundles of dead furze they had been carrying homeward, and were in hot and emulous pursuit of their quarry.

Is it a fine spirit of sport or is it a base spirit of brutality that makes us so loath to be beaten in the pursuit of anything that we have once undertaken to chase? Neither of those boys wanted that cat in the smallest degree; neither would have gained anything by its possession, nor lost anything by its loss. They had no gastronomic object in view, for neither Bob nor Will was acquainted with either boiled or roast cat; they were making themselves hot and breathless only for “the fun of the thing,” and perhaps also partly because they ought to have been cutting more furze for their parents’ winter stack.

“He’s gone clean into the ground,” gasped Bob, staring at the face of a rock into which the white cat had to all appearance bodily vanished.

“No,” said Will, parting the loops of bramble that hung in a knotted and twisted curtain from the ledge

above; "he's gone into a hole, and it's big enough for us to go into after him."

"It's a cave," said Bob.

"It's a cave that's uncommon like a passage, then," said Will. "Why, it's one of the old Tally-ho workings; it goes right into the hill, and there's the cat slinking on ahead." And they pressed on deeper into this cavernous dungeon, heedless of possible pitfalls and reckless as to the fact that a dozen lucifer-matches was all that remained them from the kindling of their camp-fire on the hills. For the first hundred yards or so they had indeed no need of their matches, for here the crust of rock above their heads was at intervals rent asunder, disclosing patches of sky, cut into whatever pattern the opening in the rocks afforded, and admitting rays of uncertain light, from one to the other of which they could without much difficulty guide themselves.

It was when passing under these impromptu light-holes that the two young adventurers had their best opportunities of judging of the sort of place they were in. Up there near the daylight there were narrow ledges, tufted and cushioned sometimes with snow, but in more sheltered spots fringed with tiny ferns that were yet green. From one of those upper ledges a furze-bush had fallen, uprooted most likely by its own weight, and now lay, a shrivelled brown ball, in the passage below. The rough-hewn walls of rock were green and glistening with ooze; great patches of mildew clung everywhere to the stone, like daubs of some bright metallic paint, or like smooth pieces of velvet studded profusely with the tiniest beads of water, as

thick as they could crowd. The presence of water was indeed manifest everywhere. When they could no longer see it they could hear it, trickling or dripping, whispering or gurgling, sometimes close at hand, sometimes far off in the many deserted passages of the abandoned mine. And still they pushed on, splashing through the pools, clambering over the fallen blocks, almost oblivious now of the original object of their pursuit, but led on by the excitement of their discovery, and by that irresistible impulse to find out what "lies beyond" which is more or less implanted in every human breast. Once or twice the passage branched to the right or to the left, and sometimes they could hear the whir of wings in a side-drift, or catch the flutter of some startled bird which their echoing steps had frightened from its nest somewhere away in the darkness. Most of the entrances were so blocked with stones and choked with fallen rubbish as to be inaccessible, and yet at every cross-way they came to there was always one passage which appeared to have been at some time or other partially cleared of its encumbrances, so that there could be no hesitation as to the choice of ways. And groping on in this fashion with their store of matches grown very low indeed, they found themselves suddenly brought up by an obstacle in their path. The foremost of the two lads had stumbled over something that lay straight across the passage. Also there was a strange spluttering and hissing noise, and the gleam of two fiery lights that shone like coals through the darkness.

Another match was struck, and having stooped towards the object on the ground, the boys, with a yell

of terror, started upright again, and stared into each other's horror-stricken eyes. For there, on the floor of the old mine, with his pick in his hand, and his broken lantern beside him, lay Samuel Foote, the "outlandish bootmaker," the missing diamond-thief, who was supposed to have fled the country a week ago. Across his dead body the half-starved cat stood at bay, and at his head, still fresh from the strokes of the pick, glittered the vein of copper that had for so long been the cherished secret of his life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

“Time, which none can bind,
While flowing fast away leaves Love behind.”

It was spring again at Kippendale, the second spring since the drowning of the Bluebell mines. The green avenue showed symptoms of becoming green once more, the ribbon border curved once more along the grass, the hyacinths flashed behind the conservatory panes. Nothing to show that there had ever been a dismal blank in the annals of Kippendale.

Spring at Gullyscombe, too; for spring comes to Gullyscombe as well as to any other place, though it comes in a guise and in a shape of its own. The tyrant breeze, blustering over the hills, might flatter itself that it had things all its own way, but this time the reigning despot flattered himself just a little too much; for though, on the face of it, his authority was unquestioned, and the open rebellion of bramble and furze was put down without much difficulty wherever it broke out, yet all the time, hidden away in the many clefts of the ground, there were countless sly conspiracies being hatched. There, in the shelter of the winding ravines, while the blast stormed past over their heads, juicy green leaves dared to spread themselves up and down the banks, the small celandine turned up its pert face to the light,

and the yellow primrose peacefully reared whole families of buds, under the very nose of the tyrant.

A new engine-house now stands at the head of the old Tally-ho mine, and there is noise and movement around it all day long—trucks running, wheels turning, buckets swinging, and men and women at work above the earth and below it.

The discovery of the body of Christopher Swan, starved to death in the hiding-place whither in his imbecile terror he had fled (for fear, no doubt, of being made "a job of," as Adam had exultantly threatened), had been equally the discovery of that long-sought vein of copper popularly known as "Swan's Copper," which had caused so much heartache and bitter disappointment. In all the surmises that had been started concerning it—in all the possibilities canvassed,—it had never occurred to any one of the surmisers that the vein they were wandering over hill and dale in search of was all the time safely stored away in one of the side-drifts of the old and despised Tally-ho mine. Even after Christopher's identification by Adam, people had been a great deal too busy starting wild conjectures as to the fugitive to give any attention to the simple inference to be drawn from the fact of his presence at Tally-ho, which now appeared so exceedingly—even humiliatingly—obvious. We are often so taken up with scanning the horizon, that we look right away over the head of the explanation that is staring us in the face the whole time not a yard away. Tally-ho? Why, every one knew that Tally-ho had from the beginning been more or less of a failure; that for years it had been worked at a loss; that the quality of the metal had

grown poorer and poorer with every barrowful that was brought "to grass," until a collapse of one of the passages had been gladly seized on as an opportune excuse for shutting up the whole concern. That had all happened somewhere about thirty years ago, but the facts were well known. There was just one fact that was not known at all, and that was the discovery which Christopher Swan, "the sly and sleekit ane," had shortly ere that made of a distinctly new and distinctly promising "departure" in one of the less frequented portions of the mine. How, indeed, should any one trouble himself about the comings and goings, the grubblings and pokings of the crooked, half-witted lad, who was treated with a mixture of repulsion and jocularly, and who was a sort of privileged and unnoticed intruder into every mine of the country-side?

The rest of the story, read in the light of present knowledge, was as plain as daylight. That Christopher had found it preferable at the time to keep his discovery to himself, was only the natural result of the system on which mines are commonly worked in Choughshire. This system consists in the different portions of the mine being put up to auction at the expiration of every two months, and let for that period to not less than two men (technically a "pair") who agree to work it for whatever "tribute" the bargain may be clenched at. As this "tribute" or percentage varies greatly according to the promising or unpromising nature of the pitch to be let—ranging from as little as sixpence to as much as thirteen shillings in the pound—it follows that every favourable report circulated about any particular portion of the mine causes that portion to rise in the

market. It was only by hushing up his discovery that Christopher could hope to get the desired pitch cheap enough to enable him to become comparatively rich within the two prescribed months. This was the reason of all the trouble he took to draw off the public attention from the real scene of his discovery by those ostentatious journeyings to and fro over the surface of the Gullyscoombe estate, flourishing his divining-rods, as it were, in the face of the credulous villagers; and it was thus that the idea had taken root as to Christopher's boasted copper-vein being a discovery in a totally new direction, and entirely unconnected with any mine already at work. The necessity imposed upon him by the terms of the system of taking at least one other man into partnership, was so bitter a thought to Christopher that he put off the evil moment until the next "settling-day" should be close upon him. It has long ago been told how, before that day had come, events occurred which forced him to fly the country, leaving his treasure to the mercy of chance. And now, upon this same treasure, is being built up the second prosperity of the House of Kippendale. A period of suspense had first to be passed through, when engineers, muttering of spurious veins and "false departures," still withheld their verdict, and urged, in professional language, the wisdom of not applying arithmetic to chickens before they are clear of the egg-shell, or culinary treatment to hares that are still at large. But it was very soon and very decisively that the balance went down on the side of good luck, and the vein was pronounced workable. In time it turned out to be more than this; and now, the first year of its activity

being complete, the engineers made bold to say that the memory of the drowned Bluebells had reason to pale beside the promise of this newly resuscitated Tally-ho.

Whenever Lord Kippendale gets a new assurance of this, he listens more patiently to the broaching of business subjects than he used to do of old. Transplanted back again to the Kippendale soil, he has, out of pure gratitude to Providence, taken a new lease of life, and upon the altar of his gratitude many foxes will bleed. Nor does he mean for a long time yet to find out what "next thing" comes after the final shuffling off of this mortal coil.

The combination of triumphant circumstances naturally brought a general pardon in its train. Nicky's teeth gleam once more cheerfully under the shadow of the Kippendale beeches, and Agnes, groomed to perfection, shines and sails along by his side, or, to be quite truthful, at his heels.

Germaine goes about with a big wound in his big heart. When his turn comes to marry, he will probably select somebody fair and unclassical, and exactly the opposite of Cleopatra—or at least his idea of her.

And Cleopatra herself? For her Fortune's wheel had held an unexpected turn in reserve; "luck," the world called it; "degradation," it was styled by one or two of her personal acquaintances. It was while Maud was still only half recovered from surprise at herself and at the whimsical impulse which had caused her to upset her own chances, when a more than elderly tallow-candle manufacturer of fabulous wealth came forward and laid the produce of all his candles at her

feet. There was a short period of indecision, but it ended in Maud's consenting to become Mrs. Budge, and undertaking the charge of the two Misses Budge, who had early been deprived of their mother. It was not what she had once dreamt, of course; and despite damask, and Sèvres china, and liveries, and theatre-boxes, there were many moments when Maud's sensitive nostrils sniffed the tallow-candles, but at least it put an end to the "everlasting Miss Epperton."

Perhaps the person most entirely taken by surprise and most keenly disappointed by the marriage was Sir Peter. Somewhere in the corners of his artist-mind there had still existed a sneaking faith in Maud, and in her power of yet becoming the grand woman for which he considered that Nature had obviously designed her. He was so much disturbed that he sent her a serious letter on the subject, receiving a flippant one in return. "Principles? Of course, I've got lots of principles," she wrote, "but I don't have them in daily use for fear of their wearing out, don't you see? What do you mean by singing that sort of dirge over what you call the good part of me? Quite contrariwise, sir, you should sing a resurrection song. I have been scraping the rust off my conscience, and looking at the machinery. I believe the thing will work again. I quite look forward to indulging my virtuous inclinations, and to the repose of no more fibs. You were misinformed when you heard that he was sixty-five; he will be sixty-eight next birthday." But on the next page there was a just perceptible change of mood. "Do you know with what alternative before my eyes I consented to become Mrs. Budge? Have you ever heard

of a place called Brackford? I know you have not; so I had better tell you at once that there *is* such a place, and that it is there that my only near relative, my father's sister, lives by herself in a 'flat.' When I am not visiting, I live with her; when people cease to invite me, I should live there always, always; do you understand? There are tatted antimacassars on the chairs, and Berlin wool canary-birds on the tables, and you can always be sure of every dish that is being cooked in every 'flat,' whether above or below you; and sometimes Miss Brown calls, and sometimes Miss Jones. It sounds like a paradise, does it not? And it is very wonderful, is it not, that I should have walked round and round the delightful enclosure in search of a gate, and, not finding one, should have crept away under the hedges, even though I had to do it on my knees, and at the expense of the whiteness of my hands?"

In a blotted postscript there was added: "Make Germaine forget me; make him forget me quite."

"It is a wicked letter," said Sir Peter, as he tore it to shreds; "and yet she has written it with the tears in her eyes,—oh, it is a great pity!"

"From an artistic point of view, you mean," said Lady Baby, when he made the remark to her. She herself felt it from a human point of view, as the drops upon her own eyelashes betrayed, but she preferred to hold him to the artistic aspect of the case.

After this Maud was rarely mentioned between them; her name was like a dark spot on the days of the past, and yet not the darkest that was there. One other name there was, unspoken by either, a reproach

to one of them, an indelible memory to both. It lay between them, not dividing them, but rather drawing her to him with the remorseful gratitude for a happiness so nearly forfeited, so undeserved; and drawing him to her with the yearning instinct of protection.

When Sir Peter Wyndhurst and his wife are in London, there is always one visit which she pays without him; and though it is almost as painful to her as it could be to him to hear so much conversation on the one topic of "Launce," yet Lady Baby goes through with it for the comfort of those desolate, grey women, who like to look at her as the thing which Launce had loved "too well."

And now there is no more Lady Baby, but there is at Nolesworth Castle a small bundle of white muslin that kicks and crows, and about which Sir Peter pretends to have discovered an absurd quantity of artistic possibilities.

Lady Baby has been forced to resign half of her title in favour of a claimant with a better right.



POSTSCRIPTUM.

Various of my readers having requested me to set their minds at rest regarding the ultimate fate of one or two of the (four-footed) characters of this story, I take this opportunity of doing so. Let it therefore be understood that nothing but a slip of memory prevented my mentioning before at this place that the house-keeper's room at Wyndhurst Castle used for years to be haunted by a certain fluffy, white cat with large blue eyes and a slight limp, for whom a cosy rug and a saucer of cream were perpetually in readiness.

Neither was this fluffy cat the only pensioner of the establishment,—witness that ancient chestnut quadruped majestically pacing the shady paddock at the rear of the stables, and noisily snorting at the daisies ere he nibbles off their heads. Every now and again old Ajax lays his gaunt head upon the glossy neck of the black pony beside him, and the two stand motionless, plunged in deep and seemingly melancholy reflection. Does Ajax hear again in spirit the whine of that barrel-organ and the crack of that whip to whose sound he has so often in the last terrible months trodden the sawdust of the arena?—does Zet once more feel the

prodding heels of those brats for whose delectation he has spent so many hard-worked afternoons on Portobello sands, hired out at a paltry shilling an hour?

But see, they shake their manes as though to rid themselves of the last haunting recollection, and side by side they fall to work once more upon the daisies.

THE END.

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