

At Love's Cost

Charles Garvice

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By CHARLES GARVICE

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CHAPTER 1

"Until this moment I have never fully realised how great an ass a man can be. When I think that this morning I scurried through what might have been a decent breakfast, left my comfortable diggings, and was cooped up in a train for seven hours, that I am now driving in a pelting rain through, so far as I can see for the mist, what appears to be a howling wilderness, I ask myself if I am still in possession of my senses. I ask myself why I should commit such lurid folly. Last night I was sitting over the fire with a book--for it was cold, though not so cold as this," the speaker shivered and dragged the collar of his overcoat still higher--"at peace with all the world, with Omar purring placidly by my side, and my soul wrapped in that serenity which belongs

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to a man who has long since rid himself of that inconvenient appendage--a conscience, and has hit upon the right brand of cigarettes, and now--"

He paused to sigh, to groan indeed, and shifted himself uneasily in the well-padded seat of the luxurious mail-phaeton.

"When Williams brought me your note, vilely written--were you sober, Stafford?--blandly asking me to join you in this mad business, I smiled to myself as I pitched the note on the fire. Omar smiled too, the very cigarette smiled. I said to myself I would see you blowed first; that nothing would induce me to join you, that I'd read about the lakes too much and too often to venture upon them in the early part of June; in fact, had no desire to see the lakes at any time or under any conditions. I told Omar that I would see you in the lowest pit of Tophet before I would go with you to--whatever the name of this place is. And yet, here I am."

The speaker paused in his complaint to empty a pool water from his mackintosh, and succeeded--in turning it over his own leg.

He groaned again, and continued.

"And yet, here I am. My dear Stafford, I do not wish to upbraid you; I am simply making to myself a confession of weakness which would be pitiable in a stray dog, but which in a man of my years, with my experience of the world and reputation for common sense, is simply criminal. I do not wish to reproach you; I am quite aware that no reproach, not even the spectacle of my present misery would touch your callous and, permit me to frankly add, your abominably selfish nature; but I do want to ask quite calmly and without any display of temper: what the blazes you wanted to come this way round, and why you wanted me with you?"

The speaker, a slightly built man, just beyond the vague line of "young," glanced up with his dark, somewhat sombre and yet softly cynical eyes at the face of his companion who was driving. This companion was unmistakably young, and there was not a trace of cynicism in his grey-blue eyes which looked out upon the rain and mist with pleasant cheerfulness. He was neither particularly fair nor dark; but there was a touch of brighter colour than usual in his short, crisp hair; and no woman had yet found fault with the moustache or the lips beneath. And yet, though Stafford Orme's face was rather too handsome than otherwise, the signs of weakness which one sees in so many good-looking faces did not mar it; indeed, there was a hint of strength, not to say sternness, in the well-cut lips, a glint of power and masterfulness in the grey eyes and the brows above them which impressed one at first sight; though when one came to know him the impression was soon lost, effaced by the charm for which Stafford was famous, and which was perpetually recruiting his army of friends.

No doubt it is easy to be charming when the gods have made you good to look upon, and have filled your pockets with gold into the bargain. Life was a pageant of pleasure to Stafford Orme: no wonder he sang and smiled upon the way and had no lack of companions.

Even this man beside him, Edmund Howard, whose name was a by-word for cynicism, who had never, until he had met Stafford Orme, gone an inch out of his self-contained way to please or benefit a fellow-man, was

the slave of the young fellow's imperious will, and though he made burlesque complaint of his bondage, did not in his heart rebel against it.

Stafford laughed shortly as he looked at the rain-swept hills round which the two good horses were taking the well-appointed phaeton.

"Oh, I knew you would come," he said. "It was just this way. You know the governor wrote and asked me to come down to this new place of his at Bryndermere--"

"Pardon me, Stafford; you forget that I have been down South--where I wish to Heaven I had remained!--and that I only returned yesterday afternoon, and that I know nothing of these sudden alarms and excursions of your esteemed parent."

"Ah, no; so you don't!" assented Stafford; "thought I'd told you: shall have to tell you now; I'll cut it as short as possible." He paused for a moment and gently drew the lash of the whip over the wet backs of the two horses who were listening intently to the voice of their beloved master. "Well, three days ago I got a letter from my father; it was a long one; I think it's the first long letter I ever received from him. He informed me that for some time past he has been building a little place on the east side of Bryndermere Lake, that he thought it would be ready by the ninth of this month; and would I go down--or is it up?--there and meet him, as he was coming to England and would go straight there from Liverpool. Of course there was not time for me to reply, and equally, of course, I prepared to obey. I meant going straight down to Bryndermere; and I should have done so, but two days ago I received a telegram telling me that the place would not be ready, and that he would not be there until the eleventh, and asking me to fill up the interval by sending down some horses and carriages. It occurred to me, with one of those brilliant flashes of genius which you have so often remarked in me, my dear Howard, that I would drive down, at any rate, part of the way; so I sent some of the traps direct and got this turn-out as far as Preston with me. With another of those remarkable flashes of genius, it also occurred to me that I should be devilish lonely with only Pottinger here," he jerked his head towards the groom, who sat in damp and stolid silence behind. "And so I wrote and asked you to come. Kind of me, wasn't it?"

"Most infernally kind," said Howard, with a sigh of a ton weight. "Had you any idea that your father was building this little place? By the way, I can't imagine Sir Stephen building anything that could be described as 'little'.

"You are right," assented Stafford, with a nod. "I heard coming down that it was a perfect palace of a place, a kind of palace of art and--and that sort of thing. You know the governor's style?" His brows were slightly knit for just a second, then he threw, as it were, the frown off, with a smile. "No, I knew nothing about it; I knew as little about it as I do of the governor himself and his affairs."

Howard nodded.

"When you come to think of it, Howard, isn't it strange that father and son should know so little of each other? I have not seen the governor for I forget how many years. He has been out of England for the last fourteen or fifteen, with the exception of a few flying visits; and on

the occasion of those visits I was either at school on the Continent or tramping about with a gun or a rod, and so we never met. I've a kind of uneasy suspicion that my revered parent had no particular desire to renew his acquaintance with his dutiful offspring; anyway, if he had, he would have arranged a meeting. Seems rather peculiar; for in every other respect his conduct as a parent has been above reproach."

"Those are scarcely the terms by which I should designate a liberality which can only be described as criminally lavish, and an indifference to your moral progress which might more properly belong to an unregenerate Turk than to an English baronet. Considering the opportunities of evil afforded you by the possession of a practically unlimited allowance, and a brazen cheek which can only be described as colossal, the fact that you have not long since gone headlong to the devil fills me with perpetual and ever-freshening wonder."

Stafford yawned and shrugged his shoulders with cheerful acquiescence.

"Should have gone a mucker ever so many times, old man, if it hadn't been for you," he said; "but you've always been at hand just at the critical moment to point out to me that I was playing the giddy goat and going to smash. That's why I like to have you with me as a kind of guide, monitor, and friend, you know."

Howard groaned and attempted to get rid of another miniature pool of water, and succeeded--as before.

"I know," he assented. "My virtue has been its own reward--and punishment. If I had allowed you to go your way to the proverbial dogs, after whose society gilded youths like yourself appear to be always hankering, I should not be sitting here with cold water running down my back and surrounded by Nature in her gloomiest and dampest aspects. Only once have I deviated from the life of consistent selfishness at which every sensible man should aim, and see how I am punished! I do not wish to be unduly inquisitive, but I should like to know where the blazes we are going, and why we do not make for a decent hotel--if there is such a thing in these desolate wilds."

Stafford handed him the reins so that he himself might get out his cigar-case, and with some little difficulty, and assisted by Pottinger's soaked hat, the two gentlemen got their cigars alight.

"There isn't a decent hotel for miles," explained Stafford. "There is only a small inn at a little place called Carysford. I looked it out on the map. I thought we'd drive there today, put up for the night to give the horses a rest, and go on to this place of my governor's the next day. It's on the opposite side of the lake."

He jerked his whip to the right.

"Which side, what lake?" asked Howard, hopelessly. "I see nothing of the lake, nothing but mist and sodden hills. No wonder the word 'poet' instinctively arouses one's animosity. When I think of the number of well-meaning and inspired idiots who have written reams of poetry about this place, I feel at this present moment as if I could cheerfully rend even a Wordsworth, a Southey, or a Coleridge; and I look back with remorse upon the hours, the throbs of admiration, I have expended upon what I once deemed their inspired pages. If I remember rightly, most of the lake poets went off their heads; when I gaze around me I must admit

that I am not surprised."

Stafford laughed absently; he was quite accustomed to Howard's cynical vein.

"They're all right enough," he said. "That is, I suppose they are, for I never read any of 'em since I left school. Oh, yes, they're right enough about the beauty of the place; you should see it on a fine day."

"Has anyone seen it on a fine day?" inquired Howard, with the innocent air of one simply seeking information. "I asked a countryman in the train if it always rained here, and he replied, 'No; it sometimes snows.'"

"That's a chestnut," remarked Stafford, with a laugh. "But it's all nonsense about its always being wet here; they tell me it's fine for weeks together; that you can never tell any instant whether it's going to clear up or not; that the weather will change like a woman--Good heavens, look at that!"

He nodded to the east as he spoke.

Unnoticed by them, the sky had been clearing gradually, the mists sweeping, dissolving, away; a breath of wind now wafted them, like a veil thrown aside, from hill and valley and lake, and a scene of unparalleled beauty lay revealed beneath them. The great lake shone like a sapphire; meadows of emerald, woods of darker green, hills of purple and grey, silver and gold, rose from the bosom and the edge of the great liquid jewel; the hills towering tier on tier into the heavens of azure blue swept by clouds like drifting snow.

The two men gazed in silence; even Pottinger, to whom his losses generally represented all that was beautiful in nature, gaped with wide-open mouth.

"How's that for lofty, you unbeliever?" demanded Stafford. "Ever seen anything like that before?"

Howard had been considerably startled, but, of course, he concealed his amazed admiration behind a mask of cynicism.

"Rather a crib from Val Prinsep, isn't it, with a suggestion of a Drury Lane pantomime about it? Good heavens! And there's the Fairy Palace all complete," he added, as, the mists still rising, was discovered on the slope of the other side a long and extremely ornate building, the pure whiteness of which was reflected in the marvellous blue and opal of the lake. "Can that be Sir Stephen's 'little place'?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Stafford. "It looks like the governor," he added, with a touch of gravity.

"Well, it's very big, or, rather, long; and it's very white, but one's bound to admit that it doesn't spoil the landscape," said Howard; "in fact, standing there amidst the dark-green trees, with its pinnacles and terraces, it's rather an ornament than otherwise. I suppose there are flowers on those velvety lawns; and the interior, I'll wager my life, matches the exterior. Fortunate youth to possess a Croesus for a father:"

"Yes; I suppose the governor must be tremendously oafish," said Stafford.

"The man who can build such a palace as that, and have the cool cheek to call it 'a little place,' must in common decency be a multi-millionaire."

Stafford nodded and smoked thoughtfully for a minute as Pottinger left the horses' heads and climbed into his seat behind, and the mail-phaeton moved along the road, which began to dip down at this point.

"I know so little about my father," he said again.

"And yet the world knows so much," remarked Howard, throwing open his waterproof and basking in the sun which shone as warmly and unreservedly as if it had never heard of such a thing as rain. "One can't take up the paper without seeing some mention of Sir Stephen Orme's great name. One day he is in Paris negotiating a state loan; another you read he is annexing, appropriating, or whatever you call it, a vast tract in Africa or Asia; on the third you are informed with all solemnity that he has become director of a new bank, insurance company, or one of those vast concerns in which only Rothschilds and Barings can disport themselves. Now and again you are informed that Sir Stephen Orme has been requested to stand for an important constituency, but that he was compelled to decline because of the pressure of his numerous affairs. There may be a more famous and important individual in the world than your father, my dear Stafford, but I can't call him to mind at this moment."

"Chaff away," said Stafford, good-humouredly. "At any rate, he has been a jolly liberal father to me. Did I tell you that just before he came home he placed a largish sum at his bank for me; I mean over and above my allowance?"

"You didn't tell me, but I'm not at all surprised," responded Howard. "A truly wonderful father, and a model to all other parents. Would that I possessed such a one. You don't remember your mother, Stafford?"

The young fellow's handsome face softened for an instant; and his voice was low and grave as he replied:

"No--and yet sometimes I fancy that I do; though, seeing that she died when I was quite a kid, it must be only fancy. I wish she'd lived," his voice became still lower; "I wish I had a brother, or a sister, especially a sister--By George! that's a fine stream! Did you see that fish jump, Howard?"

"No, I was too much occupied in jumping myself. I thought by your exclamation that something had happened to the carriage or the horses, and that we were on the verge of a smash-up. Let it jump if it amuses it."

"So it may--if I don't catch it," said Stafford, pulling up the horses near the bank of the stream.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going to fish?" demanded Howard, with a groan. "My dear Stafford, I know that being that abominable thing--a sportsman--you are consequently mad; but you might have the

decency to curb your insanity out of consideration for the wretched man who has the misfortune to be your companion, and who plainly sees that this period of sunshine is a gilded fraud, and that presently it will rain again like cats and dogs."

Stafford laughed. He had got down and dragged out a rod and a fishing-basket.

"Sorry, old chap," he said, "but no fisherman could lose such a chance as this, even to save his best friend from rheumatic fever. I thought we should come across a stream or two, and I put on these togs accordingly." He wore a Norfolk suit of that wonderful Harris tweed which, strange to say, keeps out the rain, the heat, and the cold; and flies were stuck in his cap of the same material. "But, look here, there's no need for me to keep you; Pottinger will drive you to this place, Carysford, where we stay the night--I've engaged rooms--and you can have a warm bath and get into the dress-clothes after which you are hankering. When I've caught a fish or two I'll come on after you. Don't argue, now!"

"My dear Stafford, I haven't the least intention of doing so; I'm simply dying for a bath, a change, and a huge fire; and when you arrive you'll find me sitting over the latter humbly thanking God that I'm not a sportsman."

Stafford nodded, with his eyes on the stream.

"I should give the nags some gruel, Pottinger, and put an extra coat on them: it'll be cold to-night. Ta, ta, Howard! Tell 'em to get a nice dinner; I'll be there in time for 'em to cook the fish; but don't wait if I should be late--say half past seven."

"I promise you I won't," retorted Howard, fervently. "And I am one of those men who never break a promise--unless it's inconvenient."

The phaeton drove on, Stafford went down to the stream, put up his rod, chose a fly as carefully as if the fate of a kingdom depended on it, and began to fish.

There is this great advantage in the art of fly-fishing: that while you are engaged in it you can think of nothing else: it is as absorbing as love or scarlet fever. Stafford worked his fly steadily and systematically, with a light and long "cast" which had made him famous with the brethren of the craft, and presently he landed a glittering trout, which, though only a pound in weight, was valued by Stafford at many a pound in gold. The fish began to rise freely, and he was so engrossed in the sport that he did not notice that Howard's prophecy had come true, that the mist had swept over the landscape again, and that it was raining, if not exactly cats and dogs, yet hard enough to make even the opposite bank a blur in his vision.

But Stafford was utterly indifferent to rain and mist while the trout were rising, and his basket was half full before he looked around him. It is wonderful, when you are fishing, how great a distance you can walk without noticing it. He had followed the winding course of the stream until it had left the road far behind and struck into a valley, the wildness, the remoteness of which was almost awe-inspiring; and he stood still for a moment and looked up at the sky into which the tall, sharp peaks of the hills lost themselves. The stream, broken by huge

boulders, rumbled with a soft roar which was the only sound that broke the stillness. It was the silence, a profound stillness, which makes one feel as if one has wandered into an unknown world newly made and as yet untouched by the foot of man, unsullied by his presence.

Stafford could not have quoted a verse of poetry to save his life; it wasn't in his line; he could ride straight, was a first-rate shot, waltzed like an angel, and so far his dictionary did not contain the word "fear;" but he knew nothing of poetry or art, and only liked some kinds of music, amongst which, it is to be feared, "Soldiers of the Queen," and the now much-abused chorus from "Faust," ranked high in his estimation. He was just simply a healthy young Englishman, clean-limbed and clean-minded, with a tremendous appetite for pleasure, a magnificent frame, and a heart as light and buoyant as a cork; therefore, though an artist or a poet would have been thrilled to the marrow by the wild grandeur of the secluded valley and the grimly towering hills, and would have longed to put them on canvas or into verse, Stafford only felt suddenly grave, and as if it were playing it low down to throw an artificial fly, even of the best make, in such a spot.

But in a moment or two the sportsman's instinct woke in him; a fish stirred in a pool under a boulder, and pulling himself together he threw a fly over the rise. As he did so, the brooding silence was broken by the deep musical bark of a collie, followed by the sharp yap, yap of a fox-terrier. The sudden sound almost startled Stafford; at any rate, caused him to miss his fish; he looked up with a little frown of annoyance, and saw on the break of the opposite hill some of the mountain sheep which had stared at him with haughty curiosity running down towards the green bottom of the valley followed by the two dogs.

A moment afterwards a horse and rider were silhouetted on the extreme top of the high hill. The horse was large whereby the rider looked small; and for a moment the pair were motionless, reminding Stafford of a bronze statue. The hill was fearfully steep, even the dogs ran with a certain amount of caution, and Stafford wondered whether the rider--he couldn't see if it was man or boy--would venture down the almost precipitous slope. While he was wondering, the small figure on the horse sent up a cry that rang like the note of a bell and echoed in sweet shrillness down the hill and along the valley. The collie stopped as if shot, and the fox-terrier looked round, prepared to go back to the rider. It looked for a moment as if the rider were going down the other side of the hill again; then suddenly, as if he detected something wrong in the valley below, he turned the horse and came down the hill-side at a pace which made Stafford, hard and fearless rider as he was, open his eyes.

It seemed to him impossible that the horse could avoid a false step or a slip, and such a false step he knew would send steed and rider hurtling down to something that could be very little short of instant death. He forgot all about the big trout in the pool, and stood with his fly drifting aimlessly in the water, watching with something like breathless interest this, the most daring piece of horsemanship he had ever witnessed; and he had ridden side by side with the best steeplechaser of the day, and had watched a crack Hungarian cavalry corps at its manoeuvres; which last is about the top notch of the horse-riding business.

But the big horse did not falter for a moment; down it came at a hard

gallop, and Stafford's admiration was swallowed up in amazement when he saw that the rider was a young girl, that she was riding with about half an ounce on the reins, and that, apparently, she was as much at ease and unconscious of danger as if she were trotting on a tame hack in Rotten Row.

As she came nearer, admiration romped in ahead of amazement, for the girl was a young one--she looked like the average school-girl--and had one of the most beautiful faces Stafford had ever seen. She was dark, but the cheek that was swept by the long lashes was colourless with that exquisite and healthy pallor which one sees in the women of Northern Spain. Her hair was black but soft and silky, and the wind blew it in soft tendrils, now across her brow and now in dazzling strands about the soft felt hat which sat in graceful negligence upon the small and stately head. She wore a habit stained by use and weather, and so short that it was little better than a skirt, and left her almost as absolute a freedom as that enjoyed by the opposite sex. Her hands were covered by well-worn gauntlets, and she held a stout and workman-like crop with a long huntsman's thong.

A poet would instantly have thought that it was a vision of the Spirit of the Mountains; Stafford only thought it was the most lovely piece of girlhood he had ever looked at. She did not see him for a moment, all her attention being engrossed by the sheep which were now wandering up the valley; then suddenly, as if she felt his presence rather than saw it, her dark eyes flashed round upon him and she pulled up the big horse on its haunches with a suddenness which ought to have sent her from the saddle like a stone from a catapult; but she sat back as firm as a rock and gazed at him steadily, with a calmness which fascinated Stafford and kept him staring back at her as if he were the veriest plough-boy.

And to put it frankly, it was something like fascination. She had come upon him so suddenly, her feat of horsemanship had been so audacious, her beauty was so marvellous that Stafford, perhaps for the first time in his life, found himself unable to utter a word in the presence of one of the opposite sex. It was only for a moment or two, of course, that he lost his presence of mind; then he pulled himself together and raised his cap. She gave him the very slightest of bows. It was the faintest indication only of response to his salute; her eyes rested on his face with a strange, ungirlish calm, then wandered to the last trout which lay on the bank.

Stafford felt that something had to be said, but for the life of him, for the first time in his experience, he couldn't hit upon the thing to say. "Good-afternoon" seemed to him too banal, commonplace; and he could think of nothing else for a moment. However, it came at last.

"Will you be so good as to tell me if I am far from Carysford?" he asked.

"Four miles and three-quarters by the road, three miles over the hill," she replied, slowly, as calmly as she had looked at him, and in a voice low and sweet, and with a ring, a tone, in it which in some indefinable way harmonised with her appearance. It was quite unlike the conventional girl's voice; there rang in it the freedom of the lonely valley, the towering hills, the freedom and unconventionality of the girl's own figure and face and wind-tossed hair; and in it was a note of dignity, of independence, and of a pride which was too proud for

defiance. In its way the voice was as remarkable as the beauty of the face, the soft fire of the dark eyes.

"I had no idea it was so far," said Stafford; "I must have wandered away from the place. I started fishing on the road down below, and haven't noticed the distance. Will you tell me the name of this place?"

"Herondale," she replied.

"Thank you," said Stafford. "It's a grand valley and a splendid stream." She leant forward with her elbow on the saddle and her chin in the small gauntletted hand, looked up the valley absently and then back at him, with a frank speculation in her eyes which was too frank and calm to be flattering, and was, indeed, somewhat embarrassing.

"I suppose she takes me for a tourist, or a cheap tripper," thought Stafford, with an uncomfortable kind of amusement; uncomfortable, because he knew that this girl who was acting as shepherd in an old weather-stained habit and a battered hat, was a lady.

She broke the silence again.

"Have you caught many fish?" she asked.

Up to now they had been separated by the stream; Stafford seized the opportunity, waded across in a fairly shallow place, and, opening the lid of his basket, showed her the contents.

"Yes, you have done fairly well," she said; "but the trout run larger higher up the valley. By the way," her brows came together slightly, though the very faintest of smiles for an instant curved the delicately cut lips, "do you know that you are poaching?"

This would have been a staggerer coming from a mere keeper, but from this exquisitely beautiful, this calm statue of a girl, it was simply devastating. Stafford stared at her.

"Doesn't this river belong to Sir Joseph Avory?" he asked.

"No," she replied, uncompromisingly. "Sir Joseph Avory's river is called the Lesset water, and runs on the other side of that hill."

She raised her hunting-crop and pointed with an exquisite movement, as graceful as that of a Diana, to the hill behind her.

"I am very sorry," said Stafford. "I thought this was his river. I met him in London and got permission from him. Do you know to whom this water belongs?"

"To Mr. Heron, of Herondale," she replied.

"I beg Mr. Heron's pardon," said Stafford. "Of course I'll put up my rod at once; and I will take the first opportunity of apologising for my crime; for poaching is a crime, isn't it?"

"Yes," she assented, laconically.

"Can you tell me where he lives--where his house is?"

She raised her whip again and pointed to an opening on the left of the valley, an opening lined on either side by a wild growth of magnificent firs.

"It is up there. You cannot see it from here," she said. As she spoke, she took her chin from her hand and sat upright, gathered up her reins, and, with another of the faint inclinations of her head, by way of adieu, rode on up the valley.

Stafford stood with his cap in his hand looking after her for a moment, in a brown study; and, still watching the back of the slight figure that sat the big horse with the grace of an Indian maiden, he began to take down his rod, and, having packed it in his case and fastened his basket, he followed her along the broken bank of the stream. Presently, when she had gone some little distance, he heard the dogs start barking again, the crack of her whip rang like a pistol-shot, and her bell-like voice echoed amongst the hills, joined with the troubled baaing of the sheep. Stafford stopped and watched her: there was evidently something wrong; for the dogs had become excited, the sheep were running wildly; but the girl's exquisite voice was as clear and calm as ever, and the big horse cantered over the broken ground, taking a big boulder now and again with lilted jump, as if he were going by his own volition and was well up in all the points of the game. After a time the dogs got the sheep into a heap, and the young girl rode round them; but something still seemed to be wrong, for she got down, and, leaving the horse quite free, made her way into the flock.

At that moment Stafford saw a sheep and a lamb break from the mob and make for the stream; the sheep jumped to a boulder with the agility of a goat, the lamb attempted to follow, but missed the boulder and fell into the stream. The water was wild here and the pools deep; and as the lamb was swept down toward Stafford he saw that it was struggling in an ineffectual way, and that it looked like a case of drowning.

Of course he went for it at once, and wading in made a grab at it; he got hold of it easily enough, but the lamb--a good sized one--struggled, and in the effort to retain his hold Stafford's feet slipped and he went headfirst into a deep pool. He was submerged for a second only, and when he came up he had the satisfaction of feeling that he had still got the lamb; and gripping the struggling thing tightly in his arms, he made for the opposite bank. And looking up, saw the girl standing waiting for him, her face alive, alight, dancing with delight and amusement! The laughter shone in her eyes like dazzling sunlight and quivered on the firm but delicate lips. But it was only for a moment; before Stafford had fully taken it in and had responded to it with one of his own short laughs, her face was grave and calm again. "Thank you." she said, with a gravity matching her face, and very much as one is thanked for passing the salt. "It would have drowned if you had not been there. It is lame and couldn't swim. I saw, from the top of the hill, that it was lame, and I was afraid something would happen to it."

As she spoke, she took the lamb, which was bleating like mad, laid it on the ground and holding it still, firmly but gently, with her knee, examined it with all the confidence and coolness of a vet.

"You'll make yourself most frightfully wet," said Stafford.

She glanced up at him with only faint surprise.

"You are a Londoner," she said, "or you would know that here, in these parts, we are so often more wet than dry that it makes no matter. Yes, I thought so; there was a thorn in its foot. May I trouble you to hold him a minute?"

Stafford held the lamb, which was tolerably quiet now; and she slowly took off her gauntlets, produced a little leather wallet from the saddle--the horse coming at her call as if he were a dog--took out a serviceable pair of tweezers, and, with professional neatness, extracted an extremely ugly thorn. Stafford stood and watched her; the collie and the fox-terrier upright on their haunches watching her also; the collie gave an approving bark as, with a pat she liberated the lamb, which went bleating on its way to join its distracted mother, the fox-terrier leapt round her with yaps of excited admiration; and there was admiration in Stafford's eyes also. The whole thing had been done with a calm, almost savage grace and self-possession, and she seemed to be absolutely unconscious of his presence, and only remembered it when the lamb and its mother had joined the flock.

"Thank you again," she said. "It was very kind of you. I am afraid you are wet."

As Stafford had gone completely under the water, this was a fact he could not deny, but he said with a laugh:

"Though I am a Londoner, in a sense, I don't mind a wetting--in a good cause; and I shall be dry, or as good as dry, before I get to the inn. You must have eyes like a hawk to have seen, from the top of the hill, that that lamb was lame," he added, rather with the desire to keep her than to express his admiration for her sight.

"I have good eyes," she said, indifferently. "One has to have. But I saw that the lamb was lame from the way it kept beside its mother and the fuss she made over it: and I knew, too, by Donald's bark, that something was wrong. I am sorry you are wet. Will you--" She glanced towards the opening in the hills, paused, and for the first time seemed slightly embarrassed; Stafford fancied that a faint touch of colour came to the clear pallor of the lovely young face. She did not finish the sentence, but with another "Thank you," and "I should not have liked to have lost the lamb," went towards her horse.

Stafford advanced to put her in the saddle; but, with a little shake of the head and a "Don't trouble," she sprang into her place and rode off.

Stafford looked after her, as he had done before; then he said, "Well, I'm d-----d!"

He felt for his pouch, filled his pipe and lit it, and in doing so his eyes fell upon the little wallet from which she had taken her tweezers. He picked it up and quickly shouted to her; but the dogs were barking with furious delight, she was cracking her whip, and she had ridden too far for her to hear him through the noise. It would have been sheer folly to have run after her; so, with a shrug of his shoulders, Stafford put the little wallet in his pocket, waded the stream and, after a moment or two of consideration, made for the inn by the nearest way, to wit, across the hill.

The girl rode along the strip of level moorland beside the river until

she came to a narrow and not particularly well--kept road which led through the opening of the hills towards which she had motioned her whip. Once or twice a smile crossed her face, and once she laughed as she thought of the comical picture which the young man had made as he struggled to dry land with the wet lamb in his arms; and the smile and her laugh made her face seem strangely girlish, because it was usually so calm, so gravely self-reliant. Some girls would have been quick to detect the romantic side of the incident, and would have dwelt with a certain sense of satisfaction upon the fact that the young man was tall and handsome and distinguished looking. But this girl had scarcely noticed it; at any rate, it had not affected her in any way. She had too much to do; there was too much upon her well-formed and graceful shoulders to permit her to indulge in romance: Diana herself was not more free from sentiment than this young girl who rode her horse just like a Mexican, who was vet enough to perform a surgical operation on a lamb, and who knew how many bushels of wheat should run to an acre, and the best dressing for permanent pastures. It did occur to her that she might, at any rate after he had rescued the lamb, have given him permission to go on fishing; but she was not very sorry for having failed to do so, for after all, he had been poaching, and, as she had said, poaching was in her eyes a crime.

She went down the road at a swift trot, and presently it was blocked by a pair of wrought-iron gates, so exquisite in their antique conscientiousness that many a mushroom peer would have given almost their weight in gold to place them at the beginning of his newly made park; but no one came to open them, they were closed by a heavily padlocked chain, and the lodge beside them was empty and dilapidated; and the girl rode beside the lichen-covered wall in which they stood until she came to an opening leading to an old arch which faced a broad and spacious court-yard. As she rode beneath the arch a number of dogs yelped a welcome from kennels or behind stable half-doors, and a bent old man, dressed like something between a stableman and a butler, came forward, touching his forehead, to take her horse. She slipped from the saddle, patted the horse, and murmured a word or two of endearment; but her bright eyes flashed round the court-yard with a glance of responsibility.

"Have you brought the colt in, Jason?" she asked.

Jason touched his forehead again.

"Yes, Miss Ida. It took me three-quarters of an hour; it won't come to me like it does to you. It's in a loose stall."

"Saddle it to-morrow morning," she said, "and I will come and try it. The brindle cow has got into the corn, and the fence wants mending down by the pool; you must get William to help you, and do it at once. He has taken the steers to market, I suppose? I didn't see them in the three acre. Oh, and, Jason, I found someone fishing in the dale; you must get a notice board and put it up where the road runs near the river; the tourists' time is coming on, and though they don't often come this side of the lake, some of them may, and we can't afford to have the river poached. And, Jason, look to Ruppert's off-hind shoe; I think it's loose; and--" She stopped with a short laugh. "But that's enough for one time, isn't it? Oh, Jason, if I were only a man, how much better it would be!"

"Yes, miss," assented Jason, simply, with another touch of his

forehead.

She sighed and laughed again, and gathering up her habit--she hadn't to raise it much--she went through an open door-way into a wild, but pretty garden, and so to the back of one of the most picturesque houses in this land of the picturesque. It was built of grey stone which age had coloured with a tender and an appreciative hand; a rich growth of ivy and clematis clung lovingly over a greater portion of it so that the mullioned windows were framed by the dark leaves and the purple flower. The house was long and rambling and had once been flourishing and important, but it was now eloquent of decay and pathetic with the signs of "better times" that had vanished long ago. A flight of worn steps led to a broad glass door, and opening the latter, the girl passed under a curved wooden gallery into a broad hall. It was dimly lit by an oriel window of stained glass, over which the ivy and clematis had been allowed to fall; there was that faint odour which emanates from old wood and leather and damask; the furniture was antique and of the neutral tint which comes from age; the weapons and the ornaments of brass, the gilding of the great pictures, were all dim and lack-lustre for want of the cleaning and polishing which require many servants. In the huge fire-place some big logs were burning, and Donald and Bess threw themselves down before it with a sigh of satisfaction. The girl looked round her, just as she had looked round the stable-yard; then, tossing her soft hat and whip on the old oak table, she went to one of the large heavy doors, and knocking, said in her clear voice:

"Father, are you there?"

Inside the room an old man sat at a table. It was littered with books, some of them open as if he had been consulting them; but before him lay an open deed, and at his elbow were several others lying on an open deed-box. He was thin and as faded-looking and as worn with age as the house and the room, lined with dusty volumes and yellow, surface-cracked maps and pictures. He wore a long dressing-gown which was huddled round him as if he were cold, though a fire of logs almost as large as the one in the hall was burning in the open fire-place.

At the sound of the knock he raised his head, an expression, which was a mixture of fear and senile cunning came into his lined and pallid face, his dull eyes peered from under their lids with a flash of sudden alertness, and with one motion of his long hands he hurriedly folded the deed before him, crammed it, with the others, into the box, locked it with a hurried and trembling hand, and placed it in a cupboard, which he also locked; then he drew one of the large books into the place where the deed had been, and with a cautious glance round the room, shuffled to the door, and opened it.

As the girl entered, one would have noticed the resemblance between her and the old man, and have seen that they were father and daughter; for Godfrey Heron had been one of the handsomest men of his time, and though she had got her dark eyes and the firm, delicate lips from her mother, the clear oval of her face and its expression of aristocratic pride had come from the Herons.

"Are you here still, father?" she said. "It is nearly dinner-time, and you are not dressed. You promised me that you would go out: how wicked of you not to have done so!"

He shuffled back to the table and made a great business of closing the book.

"I've been busy--reading, Ida," he said. "I did not know it was so late. You have been out, I see; I hope you have enjoyed your ride. Have you met anyone?"

"No," she replied; then she smiled, as she added: "Only a poacher."

The old man raised his head, a faint flush came on his face and his eyes flashed with haughty resentment.

"A poacher! What are the keepers about! Ah, I forgot; there are no keepers now; any vagrant is free to trespass and poach on Herondale!"

"I'm sorry, father!" she said, laying her hand on his arm soothingly.

"It was not an ordinary poacher, only a gentleman who had mistaken the Heron water for the Ivory's. Come now, father, you have barely time to dress."

"Yes, yes, I will come in a moment--a moment," he said.

But after she had left the room, he still lingered, and when at last he got to the door, he closed it and went back to the cupboard and tried it, to see if it were locked, muttering, suspiciously:

"Did she hear me? She might have heard the rustle of the parchment, the turn of the lock. Sometimes I think she suspects--But, no, no, she's a child still, and she'd say something, speak out. No, no; it's all right. Yes, yes, I'm coming, Ida!" he said aloud, as the girl called to him on her way up the stairs.

CHAPTER II.

As Stafford climbed the hill steadily, he wondered who the girl was. It did not occur to him that she might be the daughter of the Mr. Heron to whom the stream belonged and from whose family name the whole dale had taken its own; for, though she had looked and spoken like a lady, the habit, the gauntlets, the soft felt hat were old and weather-stained: and her familiarity with the proper treatment of a sheep in difficulty indicated rather the farmer's daughter than that of the squire.

She was not by any means the first pretty girl Stafford had seen--he had a very large acquaintance in London, and one or two women whose beauty had been blazoned by the world were more than friendly with the popular Stafford Orme--but he thought as he went up the hill, which seemed to have no end, that he had never seen a more beautiful face than this girl's; certainly he had never seen one which had impressed him more deeply. Perhaps it was the character of the loveliness which haunted him so persistently: it was so unlike the conventional drawing-room type with which he was so familiar.

As he thought of her it seemed to him that she was like a wild and graceful deer--one of the deer which he had seen coming down to a mountain stream to drink on his father's Scotch moor; hers was a wild, almost savage loveliness--and yet not savage, for there had been the

refinement, the dignity of high race in the exquisite grey eyes, the curve of the finely cut lips. Her manner, also, prevented him from forgetting her.

He had never met with anything like it, she had been as calm and self-possessed as a woman of forty; and yet her attitude as she leant forward in the saddle, her directness of speech, all her movements, had the _abandon_ of an unconscious child; indeed, the absence of self-consciousness, her absolute freedom from anything like shyness, combined with a dignity, a touch of hauteur and pride, struck him as extraordinary, almost weird.

Stafford was not one of your susceptible young men; in fact, there was a touch of coldness, of indifference to the other sex which often troubled his women-friends; and he was rather surprised at himself for the interest which the girl had aroused in him. He wondered if he should meet her again, and was conscious of a strong, almost a very strong, desire to do so which, he admitted to himself, was strange: for he did not at that moment remember any girl whom, at his first meeting with her, he had hankered to see again.

He got to the top of the hill at last and began to drop down; there was nothing but a wandering sheep-path here and there, and the mountain was by no means as easy to descend as the classic Avernus; so that when he got to the bottom and came in sight of the little inn nestling in a crook of the valley he was both tired and hungry. Howard, beautiful in evening-dress, came sauntering to the door with his long white hands in his pocket and a plaintive reproach on his Vandyke face.

"I was just about to send off the search party, my dear Stafford," he said. "Is it possible that you have just come down that hill? Good heavens! What follies are committed in thy name, O Sport! And of course there are no fish--there never are! The water is always too thin or too thick, the sky too bright or too dull, the wind too high or too low. Excuses are the badge of all the angling tribe."

Stafford took his basket from his shoulder and made a pretence of slinging it at Howard's head; then tossed it to the landlord, who stood by, smiling obsequiously.

"Cook some of 'em as soon as you can," he said; then he followed the neat and also smiling chamber-maid up to his room, where, for all his pretended indolence and cynicism, Howard had caused his friend's things to be laid out in readiness for him. Stafford dressed slowly, smoking a cigarette during the operation, and still thinking of the strange "farmer's daughter." And then he went down and joined Howard in the room he had ordered.

Lake hotels may lack the splendour to which we are all growing accustomed, and of which, alas! we are also growing rather wearied, but they are most of them extremely comfortable and cosy; and The Woodman at Carysford was no exception to the rule. Stafford looked round the low-pitched room, with its old-fashioned furniture, its white dinner-cloth gleaming softly in the sunset and the fire-light, and sighed with a nod of satisfaction.

"This is something like, eh, old man?" he said; and even Howard deigned to nod approvingly.

"Yes," he said. "If anything could compensate one for the miseries of travel, especially that awful drive, this should do so. I confess I had looked forward to a crowning discomfort in the shape of a cold and draughty and smelly room, fried chops or a gory leg of mutton and a heel of the cheese made by Noah in the Ark. I fancy that we are going to have a decent dinner; and I trust I may not be disappointed, for it is about the only thing that will save my life. Are you dry yet? You looked as if you had been walking through a river instead of beside it."

"That's just what I have been doing," said Stafford, with a laugh. "I've had an adventure--"

"I know," interrupted Howard, with a sigh. "You are going to tell me how you hooked a trout six foot in length, how it dragged you a mile and a half up the river, how you got it up to the bank, and how, just as you were landing it, it broke away and was lost. Every man who has been fishing has that adventure."

Stafford laughed with his usual appreciation of his friend's amusing cynicism; but he did not correct him; for at that moment, the neat maid-servant brought in the trout, which proved to be piping hot and of a golden-brown; and the two men commenced a dinner which, as compared with the famous, or infamous one, of the London restaurant, was Olympian. The landlord himself brought in a bottle of claret, which actually was sound, and another of port, in a wicker cradle, which even Howard deigned to approve of; and the two men, after they had lingered over their dinner, got into easy-chairs beside the fire and smoked their cigars with that sweet contentment which only tobacco can produce, and only then when it follows a really good meal.

"Do you know how long you are going to stay in your father's little place?" Howard asked, after a long and dreary silence.

Stafford shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"'Pon my word, I don't know," he answered. "I'm like the school-boy: 'I don't know nothink.' I suppose I shall stay as long as the governor does; and, come to that, I suppose he doesn't know how long that will be. I've got to regard him as a kind of stormy petrel; here to-day and gone to-morrow, always on the wing, and never resting anywhere for any time. I'm never surprised when I hear that, though his last letter was dated Africa, he has flown back to Europe or has run over to Australia."

"Y-es," said Howard, musingly, "there is an atmosphere of mystery and romance about your esteemed parent, Sir Stephen Orme, which smacks of the Arabian Nights, my dear Stafford. Man of the world as I am, I must confess that I regard him with a kind of wondering awe; and that I follow his erratic movements very much as one would follow the celestial progress of a particularly splendacious comet. He never ceases to be an object of wonderment to me; and I love to read of his gigantic projects, his vast wealth, his brilliant successes; and I tell you frankly that I am looking forward to seeing him with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Do not be surprised, if, at my introduction, I fall on my hands and knees in Oriental abasement. I have admired him so much and so long at a distance that he has assumed in my eyes an almost regal, not to say imperial, importance." "I hope you will like him," said Stafford, with a touch of that simplicity which all his friends

liked.

"If he resembles his son, I am sure to do so," said Howard. "Indeed, in any case I am pretty sure to do so. For how often have I read of his wonderful charm of manner, his winning smile and brilliant conversational powers? When do we get to this fairy palace?"

"I suppose if we get there before dinner, it will be time enough," replied Stafford. "By the way, I'd better ask how far it is. Don't ring. I want to go up for some more cigars."

He went up to his room, and in getting them from his bag, saw the little instrument case which he had thrown into his bag when he was changing. Back came the vision of the strange girl with the beautiful face.

He slipped the wallet in his pocket, and when he reached the hall he turned to the open door of the little room which served as the landlord's office, or bar-room.

The landlord was enjoying a cigar and a glass of whiskey and water, and he opened the door still wider and gave a respectful smile of welcome.

"You have a very comfortable hotel here, Mr. Groves," said Stafford, by way of opening the conversation. "We have had a capital dinner, and have enjoyed it tremendously; was that '72 port you gave us?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Groves, much gratified. For you go straight to a landlord's heart when you guess a good vintage and appreciate it. "I am glad you like it, sir; there's more of it at your service. Will you take a seat, sir, and may I offer you a glass of whiskey? It is as good as the port, if I may say so."

Stafford accepted, and presented his cigar case. He asked the distance to the new house on the other side of the lake, and having been informed, spoke of the fishing.

"You did very well to-day, sir," said Mr. Groves. "You were fishing in the Heron water, I suppose?"

This was what Stafford wanted.

"Yes," he said. "I was poaching. I mistook it for the Lesset water. I must go over and apologise to Mr. Heron. By the way, I was told I was poaching by a young lady who rode down to the stream while I was fishing. I had some little conversation with her, but I did not learn her name. She was a young lady with dark hair, rode a big horse, and had a couple of dogs with her--a collie and a fox-terrier." The landlord had nodded assentingly at each item of the description.

"That must have been Miss Ida--Miss Heron, the squire's daughter, sir," he said.

Stafford's brows went up.

"No wonder she stared at me," he said, almost to himself. "But are you sure? The young lady I saw was not dressed, well--like a squire's daughter, and she was looking after some sheep like--like a farmer's girl."

The landlord nodded again.

"That was Miss Ida, right enough, sir," he said, with a touch of respect, and something like pride in his tone. "Indeed, it couldn't be anyone else. No doubt Miss Ida had come down to look after the sheep in the valley; and there's no farmer's daughter in the vale that could do it better, or half so well, as she. There isn't a girl in the county, or, for that matter, a man, either, who can ride like Miss Ida, or knows more about the points of a horse or a dog--yes, and you may say a cow--than the squire's daughter. And as to her being poorly dressed--well, there's a reason for that, sir. The family's poor--very poor."

"Yet the dale seems to be called after them?" Stafford remarked.

"It is, sir!" assented the landlord. "At one time they owned more land than any other of the big families here; miles and miles of it, with some of the best farms. But that was before my time, though I've heard my father tell of it; there's not very much left now beyond the dale and the home meadows." He sighed as he spoke and looked sadly at the costly cigar which he was smoking. The feudal spirit still exists in the hearts of the men who were born in these remote dales and towering hills, and the landlord of the little inn was as proud of the antiquity of the Heron family, and as sorry for its broken fortune as any villein of the middle ages could have been for the misfortunes of his feudal baron.

"Heron Hall used to be a fine place at one time, sir. I can remember my father describing what it was in his and his father's days; how there used to be scores of servants, and as many as fifty horses in the stables; with the great place filled with guests summer and winter, spring and autumn. The Squire Heron of that time never rode behind less than four horses, and once, when he was high sheriff, he rode to meet the judges with six. It was open house to every poor man in the place, and no wanderer was ever turned from the door. The squire of my father's time was the county member, and the day he was elected there were two hogsheads of port and two of brandy broached on the lawn in front of the terrace; and for a week afterwards there was scarcely a sober man in the town for miles round. He was master of the hounds, and the hunt breakfasts and the hunt balls were more splendid than anything else of that kind in the kingdom; in fact, people used to come from all parts of the kingdom to attend them. Yes, the Herons made Herondale famous, as you may say, sir."

He paused and shook his head, and Stafford remained silent: he was too wise to break in upon the narrative. The landlord sighed and looked lovingly at his cigar, then went on:

"They offered that squire--Miss Ida's grandfather--a peerage; the Herons had often been offered a baronetcy; but they'd always refused, and the squire declined the peerage. He said that no man could wish to be higher than Heron, of Herondale; that better men than he had been contented with it, and he was quite satisfied with the rank which had satisfied his forefathers. When he died, the followers at the funeral made a procession a mile and a quarter long."

"How did the family lose its money, drop its greatness?" Stafford asked.

The landlord screwed up his eyes thoughtfully.

"Well, it's hard to tell, sir," he replied. "Of course there was always a tremendous drain going on; for it was not only down here that the squire spent the money freely; but it was just the same or worse when he was in London; he had a big house there, and entertained as splendidly, perhaps more so, than he did at the Hall. In those days, too, sir, there was as much gaming and betting as there is now, perhaps more--though I'm told that great folks are more given nowadays to gambling on the Stock Exchange than at cards or race-horses; begging your pardon, sir!"

"I'm afraid you're right," assented Stafford, with his short laugh. "I prefer the old way myself."

"Just so, sir," said the landlord, with an approving nod. "Well, what with the money going here and there and everywhere, they found when the present squire's father died that there was very little left; and worse than all, that some of the land was sold, and what remained was heavily mortgaged. It's what often happens to old families, sir, more's the pity!"

"Yes," said Stafford. "And is the present squire like his father?"

"No, sir, not a bit," replied the landlord, with a thoughtful and somewhat puzzled frown. "Quite the reverse. His father was free and easy with everybody, and had a pleasant word and shake of the hand for everyone he met; but the present squire was always shy and quiet as a boy; kind of reserved and stand-offish, if you know what I mean, sir. When he came into the property, he became more reserved than ever, avoided all his father's old friends and shut himself up at the Hall and kept himself to himself. He was a college gentleman and fond of books, and he spent all his time alone in his library like a--a hermit. He went abroad for a time, to Italy, they thought, and he came back with a wife; but she didn't make things more lively, for she died soon after Miss Ida was born. Miss Ida was the only child. She was sent away for some time to be taken care of by one of the relatives, and she's only been back for a couple of years."

"Poor girl," said Stafford, involuntarily.

"Well, yes, you may say that, sir," said the landlord, but doubtfully, "though it don't seem as if Miss Ida was in need of much pity; she is so bright and--and high-spirited, as you may say; though it's a wonder she can be so, seeing the life she leads, alone in that great place with her father, who never goes beyond the garden, and who shuts himself up with his books all day. Yes, it's a wonder, when you come to think of it, that she can smile and laugh and be as cheerful as she is. I often hear her singing when she's riding through the dale or along the road here. Miss Ida's wonderfully liked by all the people, sir; in fact, you might say that they worship her."

"I can understand it," said Stafford, almost to himself.

"It must have been great change to her," continued the landlord, "coming down here from London to such a wild, out-of-the-way place; many young ladies would have lost heart and pined and fretted; but she's a true Heron, is Miss Ida, and she faced the thing fairly and

buckled to, as you may say. She took the whole thing on her shoulders, and though she couldn't coax the squire out of his shell, she takes care of him and runs the whole place as if she were a man. Yes, sir, though she's only a girl, as you saw yourself, she manages the house and the farm as if she were a woman of forty. It's wonderful how she's picked it up. I honestly believe there isn't a man in the place as knows more about horses, as I said, than she does; but that's in the blood, sir, and she can ride--well, you saw for yourself."

"And has she no society, no amusements; doesn't she go out, have friends, I mean?"

The landlord shook his head.

"No, sir; she just lives there with the squire, and they see no one, receive no visits and pay none. You see, sir, the Herons are proud; they're got cause to be, and I've heard it told that the squire is too proud to let the old family friends see the poverty of the house, and that he hates the new people who bought land and built houses in the place--I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir--I was forgetting for the moment that your father, Sir Stephen, had just built that beautiful place the other side of the lake."

Stafford smiled.

"That's all right, Mr. Groves," he said. "I can quite understand Mr. Heron thinking it confounded cheek of a stranger to come here and stick up a great white place which no one can fail to see five miles off. I suppose you think if I were to present myself at the Hall, I should get a very cold reception, eh?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't get any reception at all, sir," replied Groves, with respectful candour. "I am afraid neither Mr. Heron nor Miss Ida would see you. The old butler would just say: 'Not at home,' as he says to the county people when they try and call there, especially if they knew who you were, sir. If I remember rightly, the part of the land Sir Stephen bought belonged to the Herons."

"I see," said Stafford. "It strikes me it is rather a sad story, Mr. Groves; it's a case of the children paying for the sins of their fathers."

"That's it, sir," assented the landlord. "It takes ages to build up a house and a family like the Herons; but one man can knock it down, so to speak. It's hard lines for Miss Ida, who is as well-born as any of the titled people in the county, and far better than most. They say that she's been wonderful well educated, too; though, of course, she hasn't seen anything of the world, having come straight from some small place in foreign parts to be shut up in the dale. And it's quite out of the world here, sir, especially in the winter when the snow lies so thick that we're almost imprisoned. But wet or fine, hot or cold, Miss Ida can always be seen riding or driving or walking; she's a regular Westmoreland lass for that; no weather frights her."

At this juncture Howard sauntered out of the sitting-room, and he and Stafford went to the open door and looked out on the exquisite view which was now bathed in the soft light of a newly risen moon.

"It still has a smack of Drury Lane, hasn't it?" said Howard. "Strange

that whenever we see anything beautiful in the way of a landscape we at once compare it with a stage 'set.' The fact of it is, my dear Stafford, we have become absolutely artificial; we pretend to admire Nature, but we are thinking of a theatre all the time; we throw up our eyes ecstatically when we hear a nightingale, but we much prefer a comic singer at the Tivoli. We talk sentiment, at least, some of us, but we have ceased to feel it; we don't really know what it means. I believe some of the minor poets still write about what they call Love, but in my private opinion the thing itself has become instinct. Who knows anything about it? Take yourself, for instance; you've never been in love, you've everything that you can desire, you're clad in purple and fine linen, you fare sumptuously every day, you flirt six days in the week, and rest not on the seventh--but love! You don't know what it means; and if you do, you're far too wise in your generation to go in for such an uncomfortable emotion."

Stafford smiled rather absently; he was scarcely listening; he was so accustomed to Howard's cynical diatribes that more often than not they made no more impression on him than water on a duck's back. Besides, he was thinking of Ida Heron, the girl whose strange history he had just been listening to.

There was silence for a minute or two, and while they stood leaning against the door-way two men came out of another door in the inn and stood talking. They were commercial travellers, and they were enjoying their pipes--of extremely strong tobacco--after a hard day's work. Presently one of them said:

"Seen that place of Sir Stephen Orme's on the hill? Splendacious, isn't it? Must have cost a small fortune. I wonder what the old man's game is."

The other man shook his head, and laughed.

"Of course he's up to some game. He wouldn't lay out all that money for nothing, millionaire as he is. He's always got something up his sleeve. Perhaps he's going to entertain some big swell he wants to get into his net, or some of the foreign princes he's hand-in-glove with. You never know what Sir Stephen Orme's up to. Perhaps he's going to stand for the county; if so, he's bound to get in. He always succeeds, or, if he don't, you don't hear of his failures. He's the sort of man Disraeli used to write about in his novels. One of the chaps who'd go through fire and water to get their ends; yes, and blood too, if it's necessary. There's been some queer stories told about him; they say he sticks at nothing. Look at that last Turkish concession."

The speaker and his companion sauntered down the road. Stafford and Howard had heard every word; but Stafford looked straight before him, and made no sign, and Howard yawned as if he had not heard a syllable.

"Do you raise any objection to my going to my little bed, Stafford?" he asked. "I suppose, having done nothing more than clamber about a river, get wet through, and tramp a dozen miles over hills, you do not feel tired."

"No," said Stafford, "I don't feel like turning in just yet. Good-night, old man."

When Howard had gone Stafford exchanged his dress-coat for a shooting-jacket, and with the little wallet in his pocket and his pipe in his mouth, he strode up the road. As he said, he did not feel tired--it was difficult for Stafford, with his athletic frame and perfect muscular system, to get tired under any circumstances--the night was one of the loveliest he had ever seen, and it seemed wicked to waste it by going to bed, so he walked on, all unconsciously going in the direction of Heron Hall. The remarks about his father which had fallen from the bagman, stuck to him for a time like a burr: it isn't pleasant to hear your father described as a kind of charlatan and trickster, and Stafford would have liked to have collared the man and knocked an apology out of him; but there are certain disadvantages attached to the position of gentlemen, and one of them is that you have to pretend to be deaf to speeches that were not intended for your ears; so Stafford could not bash the bagman for having spoken disrespectfully of the great Sir Stephen Orme.

But presently, almost suddenly, Stafford came in sight of the magnificent iron gates, and he forgot his father and the talkative commercial traveller, and his interest in the girl of the dale flashed back upon him with full force. He saw that the gates were chained and locked, and, with a natural curiosity, he followed the road beside the wall. It stopped almost abruptly and gave place to a low railing which divided the lawn in front of the house from the park beyond; and the long irregular facade of the old building was suddenly revealed.

CHAPTER III.

Stafford looked at it with admiration mingled with pity. In the light of the story the landlord had told him he realised the full pathos of its antique grandeur. It was not a ruin by any means: but it was grim with the air of neglect, of desolation, of solitude. In two only, of the many windows, was there any light; there was no sound of life about the vast place; and the moonlight showed up with cruel distinctness the ravages made in stone-work and wood-work by the clawlike hand of Time. A capital of one of the pillars of the still handsome portico had crumbled, several of the pillars were broken and askew; the great door was blistered and cracked by the sun; evidently no paint had touched the place for years. The stone balustrade of the broad terrace had several gaps in it, and the coping and the pillars were lying where they had fallen; the steps of the terrace had grass growing in the interstices of the stones; one of the lions which had flanked the steps had disappeared, and the remaining one was short of a front leg. The grass on the lawn was long and unkempt, the flower beds weedy and straggly, and the flowers themselves growing wild and untrained.

But for the smoke which ascended from two or three of the many chimneys the place might well have seemed deserted and uninhabited, and Stafford with this feeling upon him stood and gazed at the place unrestrainedly. It was difficult for him to realise that only a few hours ago he had left London, that only last night he had dined at his club and gone to the big Merrivale dance; it was as if he were standing in some scene of the middle ages; he would not have been greatly surprised if the grass-grown terrace had suddenly become crowded by old-world forms in patches and powder, hoops and ruffles.

"Good Lord, what would some of the people I know give to belong to--to own this place!" he said to himself. "To think of that girl living

alone here with her father!"

He was turning away when he heard a slight sound, the great door opened slowly, and "that girl" came out on to the terrace. She stood for a moment on the great marble door sill, then she crossed the terrace, and leaning on the balustrade, looked dreamily at the moonlit view which lay before her. She could not see Stafford's tall figure, which was concealed by the shadow of one of the trees; and she thought herself alone, as usual. Her solitude did not sadden her, she was accustomed to it; and presently, as if moved by the exquisite beauty of the night, her lips parted and she half sang, half hummed the jewel song from "Faust." She had looked beautiful enough in her old riding-habit and hat, but she seemed a vision of loveliness as she stood in the moonlight with the old house for a background. There was something bewitchingly virginal in the rapt and dreamy face with its dark eyes and long lashes, in the soft, delicately cut lips, the pure ivory pallor; at the same time something equally bewitching in the modernness of her dress, which was of soft cream cashmere, made rather long and in accord with the present fashion; she had placed a rose in the bosom of her dress and it stood out redly, richly from the soft cream. Her hair was no longer rough and tousled by the wind, but brushed in rippling smoothness and coiled in dainty neatness in the nape of her graceful neck. No wonder Stafford caught his breath, held it, as it were, as he gazed at the exquisite picture, which formed so striking a contrast to her surroundings.

She leant her chin on her hand and looked before her as she sung softly; and at that moment her thoughts strayed from the question of what she should do to keep the cows from the lawn, to the young man who had rescued her lamb for her. She did not think of him with anything like interest or curiosity, but she was recalling the ludicrous picture he made as he struggled to the bank with the lamb in his arms, and a faint smile crossed her face. At this moment Donald and Bess strolled out to join her. They would much have preferred to have remained roasting themselves in front of the Hall fire, but, ridiculous as it was for their mistress to leave the warm house for the comparatively cold terrace, they felt themselves in duty bound to join her. Perhaps they might catch sight of a rabbit to repay them for their exertions. Donald walked with stately steps toward his mistress, and Bess was following, with a shiver of reluctance and a backward glance towards the fire-light which shone through the open door, when suddenly she sniffed the presence of a stranger, and, with a sharp yap, hurled herself down the broad steps and towards the spot where Stafford still stood. Donald, with a loud bay, followed with his long stride, and Ida, startled from her reverie, followed as far as the top of the steps, and waited.

"I might have expected the faithful watch-dog," said Stafford to himself. "Now, what on earth am I to do? I suppose they'll spring on me--the collie, at any rate. It's no use running; I've got to stop and face it. What a confounded nuisance! nuisance! But it serves me right. I've no business to be loafing about the place."

As the dogs came up, he put on that air of conciliation which we all know, and murmuring "Good dog! All right, old chap!" tried to pacify Donald and Bess. But they were not accustomed to intruders, especially at that time of night, and they were legitimately furious. Dancing round him, and displaying dazzling teeth threateningly, they drew nearer and nearer, and they would certainly have sprung upon him; but

the girl came, not running, but quickly, down the steps and straight across the dewy grass towards them, calling to the dogs as she came in her clear, low voice, which had not a trace of fear in it. Their loud barking changed to sullen growls as she approached; and, motioning them to be still, she stopped and gazed at Stafford, who stepped out into the moonlight.

She said not a word, but, as she recognised him, a faint colour came into the ivory pallor of her cheek and an expression of surprise in the dark, fearless eyes.

Stafford raised his cap.

"I am very sorry!" he said. "I am afraid you must think me a great nuisance; this is the second time I have been guilty of trespass."

She was silent for a moment, not with shyness, but as if she were noticing the change in his dress, and wondering how he came to be in evening-clothes, and where he had come from. The expression was one of simple girlish curiosity, which softened in a delicious way the general pride and hauteur of her face.

"You are not trespassing," she said, and the voice sounded very sweet and musical after the din of the dogs. "There is public right of way along this road."

"I am immensely relieved," said Stafford. "It looks so unfrequented, that I was afraid it was private, and that I had made another blunder; all the same, I am very sorry that I should have disturbed you and made the dogs kick up such a row. I would have gone on or gone back if I had known you were coming out; but the place looked so quiet--"

"It does not matter," she said; "they bark at the slightest noise, and we are used to it. The place is so quiet because only my father and I live here, and there are only a few servants, and the place is so big."

All this was said not repiningly, but softly and a little dreamily. By this time Donald and Bess had recovered their tempers, and after a close inspection of the intruder had come to the conclusion that he was of the right sort, and Donald was sitting close on his launches beside Stafford, and thrusting his nose against Stafford's hand invitingly. The girl's beauty seemed to Stafford almost bewildering, and yet softly and sweetly a part of the beauty of the night; he was conscious of a fear, that was actually a dread, that she would bow, call the dogs and leave him; so, before she could do so, he made haste to say:

"Now I am here, will you allow me to apologise for my trespass of this afternoon?"

She inclined her head slightly.

"It does not matter," she said; "you were very kind in helping me with the lamb; and I ought to have told you that my father would be very glad if you would fish in the Heron; you will find some better trout higher up the valley."

"Thank you very much," said Stafford.

Calling the dogs, she turned away; then, fortunately, Stafford

remembered the case of instruments.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he said; "I forgot this wallet. I found it by the stream after you had gone."

"Oh, my wallet!" she cried. "I am so glad you have found it. I don't know what I should have done if you had not; I should have had to send to Preston or to London; and, besides, it was a present from the old veterinary surgeon; he left it to me. There were some beautiful instruments in it."

Still smiling, she opened it, as if to show him. Stafford drew near, so near as to become conscious of the perfume of the rose in her bosom, of the still fainter but more exquisite perfume of her hair. He bent over the case in silence, and while they were looking a cloud sailed across the moon.

The sudden disappearance of the light roused her, as it were, to a sense of his presence.

"Thank you for bringing it to me," she said; "it was very good of you."

"Oh, I hadn't to bring it far," said Stafford. "I am staying at The Woodman Inn, at Carysford."

"Oh," she said; "you are a tourist--you are fishing?"

Stafford could not bring himself to say that he was the son of the man who had built the great white house, which, no doubt, her father and she resented.

"You have a very beautiful place here," he said, after a pause.

She turned and looked at the house in the dim light, with a touch of pride in her dreamy eyes.

"Yes," she said, as if it were useless to deny the fact.

"It is very old, and I ma very fond--"

She stopped suddenly, her lips apart, her eyes fixed on the farther end of the terrace; for while she had been speaking a figure, only just perceptible in the semi-darkness, had moved slowly across the end of the terrace, paused for a moment at the head of the flight of steps, and then slowly descended.

Stafford also saw it, and glancing at her he saw that she was startled, if not frightened. She scarcely seemed to breathe, and she turned her large, dark eyes upon him questioningly, somewhat appealingly.

"What is that?" she said, in a whisper, more to herself than to him.

"Someone--a man has gone down the steps from the house," he said. "Don't you know who it is?"

"No," she replied in as low a voice. "It is not Jason--there is no one else--who can it be? I will go and see."

She moved towards the terrace, and Stafford said:

"I will come with you; you will let me?"

She did not refuse; indeed, she appeared to have forgotten his presence: together they crossed the lawn and reached the corner of the house near which the figure had disappeared. It struck Stafford as strange that the dogs did not bark. In profound silence they went in the direction the figure had taken, and Stafford presently saw a ruined building, which had evidently been a chapel. As they approached it the figure came out of it and towards them. As it passed them, so close that they instinctively drew back, Stafford saw that it was an old man in a dressing-gown; his head was bare, his hair touched the collar of the gown. His eyes were wide open, and gazing straight in front of him.

Stafford was about to step forward and arrest his progress, when suddenly the girl's hand seized his and gripped it.

"Hush!" she whispered, with subdued terror. "It is my father. He--yes, he is asleep! Oh, see, he is asleep! He will fall--hurt himself--"

She, in her turn, was about to spring forward, but Stafford caught her arm.

"No, no, you must not!" he said, in a hurried whisper. "I think it would be dangerous. I think he is all right if you let him alone. He is walking in his sleep. Don't speak--don't cry out."

"No, no," she breathed. "But it is dreadful."

Instinctively, unconsciously, she drew closer to Stafford, almost clung to him, watching her father over her shoulder until the figure, with its ghastly, mechanical movement and vacant stare, had passed into the house; then, with a long breath, and with her hands clasping her throat, as if she were stifling, she broke from Stafford and sprang quickly and noiselessly up the steps and disappeared also. Wondering whether he was awake or dreaming, Stafford waited for over an hour to see if she would appear again; and he was turning away at last, when her figure appeared in the open door-way, like that of a wraith. She waved her hand to him, then disappeared, and the door closed.

Still asking himself if he were not in a land of dreams, but tingling with the touch of her small hand, with the haunting perfume of the soft black hair, Stafford gained the road and walked towards the inn.

CHAPTER IV.

Ida had followed her father across the terrace, across the hall, lit weirdly by the glow of the sinking fire and the pale moonlight, up the broad stairs, along the corridor to the open door of his room. He had walked slowly but steadily with his usual gait, and his head bent slightly; though his eyes were wide open, he seemed to see nothing, yet he did not stumble or even hesitate. Ida followed behind him with absolute noiselessness. They were both ghostlike in their movements, and the dogs stood and watched them intently, ears erect, and with that gravity in their eyes which dogs wear when they are puzzled.

The old man closed his door softly, still without any hesitation, and Ida, grasping the broad rail of the staircase, waited breathlessly. She heard him moving about, as leisurely and precisely as before; then all was still. She stole to the door and opened it; the light was streaming into the room and fell athwart the bed in which he was lying, his eyes closed, his face calm and peaceful; she went on tiptoe to the bed and bent over him, and found that he was in a deep, profound sleep. With a long breath of relief, she left him, and sat on the stairs and waited; for it was just possible that he might rise again and resume the dreadful walk--that motion of death in life.

She waited for an hour, so absorbed in her anxiety that she did not remember the man she had left outside. After another quarter of an hour she went to her father's room, and found that he was still sleeping. Then she remembered Stafford, remembered him with a start of discomfort and embarrassment. Was he waiting there still? She went down-stairs, and from the open door-way she saw dimly his figure under the trees. There was something in the attitude of the erect figure that reminded her of a soldier on guard, a sentinel standing faithful at his post; and when she had waved her hand in dismissal she did not quite close the door, but watched him through the narrow opening as he paced slowly down the road, looking back at the house now and again as if to see if she wanted him.

Then she closed the door, signed to the dogs to be down before the fire, and went up to her room, after pausing beside her father's door and listening to his regular breathing. Her room was a large one--nearly all the rooms in the place were large; and as she undressed herself slowly she looked round it with a novel sense of loneliness. The tall shadows of her graceful yet girlish figure were cast grotesquely on the wall by the candles beside her glass. She had never felt lonely before, though her life ever since she had arrived at the Hall might be called one almost of solitude.

She had been so absorbed in the duties which had so suddenly fallen upon her young shoulders that there had been no time in which to feel the want of companionship. There had always been something to think of, something to do; her father demanded so much attention; the house, the land, the farm--she had to look after them all; there had not been time to think even of herself; and it had never occurred to her that she was leading a life so different to that led by most girls. But to-night the silence of the great house, large enough to hold fifty people, but sheltering only five persons--her father and herself and the three servants--weighed upon her.

That sense of loneliness had come upon her suddenly as she had watched the young man's retreating figure. She could not help thinking of him even when her mind was oppressed with anxiety on her father's account. In a vague way she remembered how kind this stranger had been; how quietly, and with what an air of protection, he had stood by her and restrained her from crying out and alarming her father. As vaguely, she remembered that in the moment of her terror she had clung to him, had forgotten under the great strain that he was a stranger--and a man. Even now she did not know his name, knew nothing of him except that he was staying at The Woodman Inn.

Kind and considerate as he had been she thought of him with something like resentment; it was as if he had stepped into her life, had

intruded upon its quiet uneventfulness. He had no right to be there, no right, to have seen her father in that terrible condition, that death in life. And she had behaved like a frightened servant-maid; had not only clung to him--had she clung to him, or was it only fancy?--but had left him without a word of thanks, had allowed him to wait there, and then had waved her hand to him just as she had seen Jessie, the maid, wave her hand to her "young man" after they had parted, and she was going into the house.

She bit her lip softly and a faint flush rose to the clear pallor of the lovely, girlish face reflected in the glass. Yes, she had behaved just like a servant-maid, she who in her heart of hearts knew that she prided herself upon her dignity and the good manners which should belong to a Heron of Herondale. It was characteristic of her that while she thought of his conduct and what she considered her bad behaviour, she gave no thought to the fact that the stranger who had so "intruded" was singularly handsome and possessed of that strange quality which at once impresses women. Most girls would have remembered the fact, but Ida was different to the general run of her sex. She had been brought up in an out-of-the-way place in which the modern novel, the fashionable pastime of flirtation, were not known; and her secluded life in the lonely dale had deepened that sense of aloofness from the world, that indifference to the sentiment which lurks in most girls' bosoms. This tall, handsome man who had stepped into her life and shared the secret of her father's strange affliction, weakness, was nothing more to her than one of the other tourists whom she sometimes chanced to see on her lonely rides and walks.

When she had undressed she went again to her father's door and listened to his deep and regular breathing; then, at last, she went to bed; but the sense of loneliness was so intense that she lay awake for hours thinking of that bent figure walking in its sleep from the shadows of the ruined chapel. For the future she would have to watch her father closely, would perhaps have to lock the door of his room. Why had he gone to the chapel? So far as she knew he was not in the habit of going there; indeed, she did not remember having seen him go there in his waking moments. She knew nothing of somnambulism; but she imagined that he had gone in that direction by mere chance, that if he had happened to find any impediment in his way he might as easily have gone in another direction.

She fell asleep at last and slept an hour beyond her usual time, and so deeply that Jessie had filled the cold bath without waking her beloved young mistress. Ida dressed quickly, all the incidents of the preceding night rushing through her mind, and hurried to her father's room; the door was open, the room empty, and, with a sudden fear, she ran down the stairs and found him in his usual seat in the library. She drew a long breath and went and kissed him, wishing him good-morning as casually as she could.

"You are up early this morning, father," she said, trying to keep her tone free from any anxiety.

He glanced at the clock calmly.

"No, you are later," he said.

His eyes met hers with their usual expression of absentminded serenity.

"I--I was a little tired and overslept myself," she said. "Are--are you quite well this morning, father?"

"Yes, quite well. Why not?" he replied, with slight surprise.

She drew a breath of relief: it was quite evident that he knew nothing of that weird walk, and that it had not affected him injuriously.

"Nothing," she said, forcing a smile.

As she spoke, Jason, in his in-door livery, which, in some strange way, looked as if it had shrunken with the figure which had worn, it so long, came to the door, and in his husky voice said that breakfast was ready; and Ida, taking her father's arm, led him into the dining-room in which all their meals were served.

As she went to her place she glanced through the window, from which she could see the steps at the corner of the terrace and a small part of the ruined chapel, and she shuddered.

When she had poured out her father's coffee, she took it round to him and let her hand rest on his shoulder lovingly; but Jason had brought in the post-bag and Mr. Heron was unlocking it and taking out the few letters and papers, and seemed unconscious of the little anxious caress.

"Are there any for me, father?" she asked, lingering beside him, and she stretched out her hand to turn the envelopes on their right side; but he stopped her quickly and swept them together, covering them with his long hand--the shapely Heron hand.

"No, no," he said, almost sharply; "they are all for me; they are business letters, booksellers' catalogues, sale catalogues--nothing of importance."

She went back to her place and he waited until she had done so before he began to open the letters. He merely glanced at some of them, but presently he came to one which, after a sharp, quick look at her, he read attentively; then he returned it to its envelope and, with a secretive movement, slipped it into the pocket of his dressing-gown. "Yes, nothing but catalogues and bills; you'd better take them, Ida; the bills, at any rate."

And he threw them across to her.

When she had first come home to be mistress of the Hall the bills had overwhelmed her; they had been so many and the money to meet them had been so inadequate; but she had soon learnt how to "finance" them, and come to know which account must be paid at once, and which might be allowed to stand over.

She took them now and glanced at them, and the old man watched her covertly, with a curious expression on his face.

"I'm sure I don't know how you will pay them," he said, as if she alone were responsible.

"I can't pay all of them at once," she replied, cheerfully. "But I can some, and the rest must wait. I can send four--perhaps five--of the

steers to the monthly market, and then there are the sheep--Oh, father, I did not tell; you about the gentleman I saw fishing in the dale--"

She stopped, for she saw that he was not listening. He had opened a local paper and was reading it intently, and presently he looked up with an eager flush on his face and a sudden lightening of the dull eyes.

"Have you seen this--this house--they call it a palace--which that man has built on the lake side?" he asked, his thin voice quavering with resentment.

"Do you mean the big white house by Brae Wood?"

"Yes. Judging by the description of it here, it must be a kind of gim-crack villa like those one sees in Italy, built by men resembling this--this _parvenu_."

"It is a large place," said Ida; "but I don't think it is gim-crack, father. It looks very solid though it is white and, yes, Continental. It is something between a tremendous villa and a palace. Why are you so angry? I know you don't like to have new houses built in Bryndermere; but this is some distance from us--we cannot see it from here, or from any part of the grounds, excepting the piece by the lake."

"It is built on our land," he said, more quietly, but with the flush still on his face, the angry light in his eyes. "It was bought by fraud, obtained under false pretences. I sold it to one of the farmers, thinking he wanted it and would only use it for grazing. I did not know until the deeds were signed that he was only the jackal for this other man."

"What other man, father?"

"This Stephen Orme. He's _Sir_ Stephen Orme now. They knighted him. They knight every successful tradesman and schemer; and this man is a prince of his tribe; a low-born adventurer, a _parvenu_ of the worst type."

"I think I have read something about him in the newspapers," said Ida, thoughtfully.

Mr. Heron emitted a low snarl.

"No doubt; he is one whom the world delights to honour; it bows before the successful charlatan, and cringes to his ill-gotten wealth. I'm told that such a man is received, yes, and welcomed by society. Society! The word is a misnomer. In my time a man of that class was kept at arm's-length, was relegated to his proper place--the back hall; but now"--he gazed angrily at the paper--"here is a whole column describing Sir Stephen Orme's new 'palatial villa,' and giving an account of his achievements, the success of his great undertakings. And this man has chosen to build his eyesore on Heron lands, within sight of the house which--which he would not have been permitted to enter. If I had known, I would not have sold the land."

"But you wanted the money, father," she said, gently.

He looked at her swiftly, and a change came over his face, a look of

caution, almost of cunning.

"Eh? Yes, yes, of course I wanted it. But he knew I should not have sold it for building on; that is why he got Bowden, the farmer, to buy it. It was like him: only such a man can be capable of such an underhand act. And now I suppose he will be welcomed by his neighbours, and the Vaynes and the Bannerdales, and made much of. They'll eat his dinners, and their women will go to his balls and concerts--they whose fathers would have refused to sit at the same table with him. But there is one house at which he will not be welcome; one man who will not acknowledge him, who will not cross the threshold of Sir Stephen Orme's brand-new palace, or invite him to enter his own. He shall not darken the doors of Heron Hall."

He rose as he spoke and left the room with a quicker step than usual. But half an hour later when Ida went into the library she found him absorbed in his books as usual, and he only glanced up at her with absent, unseeing eyes, as she stood beside him putting on her gloves, her habit skirt caught up under her elbow, the old felt hat just a little askew on the soft, silky hair.

"Do you want anything before I go out, father?" she asked.

"No, no!" he replied abstractedly, and bending over his book again as he answered. Ida crossed the hall in the sunlight, which lit up her beauty and made it seem a more striking contrast than usual to the dull and grim surroundings of the dark oak, the faded hangings and the lack-lustre armour, and Donald and Bess bounded, barking, before her down the terrace at which Jason was holding thy big chestnut. The horse pricked up its ears and turned its head for her morning caress, the touch of the small, soft, but firm hand which it had come to regard as its due, and Ida sprang lightly from the last step into the saddle. It was an informal way of mounting which few girls could have accomplished gracefully; but Ida did it as naturally and as easily as a circus rider, for the trick was a necessity to her who had so often to dismount and mount alone.

The lovely face was rather grave and thoughtful for some time after she had started, for the remembrance of last night weighed upon her, and her father's unusual display of anger at breakfast troubled her vaguely; but, presently, after she had cleared a hedge and one of the broken rails, her spirits rose: the sky was so blue, the sun so bright; it was hard to be depressed on such a morning.

She rode to a distant part of the dale where, in a rough meadow the steers were grazing; she surveyed them critically, chose those that should go to market, then turned, and leaping a bank, gained an ill-kept road. A little farther on she came to an opening on the verge of the lake, and she pulled up, arrested by the great white house on the other side, which was literally glittering in the brilliant sunlight. It certainly did not detract from the beauty of the view; in fact, it made the English lake look, for the moment, like an Italian one.

She regarded it thoughtfully for a moment, then returned to the road, and as she did so she saw a tall figure coming towards her.

For an instant the colour rose to her face, but for an instant only, and before Stafford had reached her, she was as pale, as calm as usual.

She noticed that he was dressed in a serge suit, noticed vaguely how well it sat upon him, that his gait had a peculiar ease and grace which the men of the dale lacked, that his handsome face flushed lightly as he saw her; but she gave no sign of these quick apprehensions, and sat cold and sphinx-like waiting for him.

Stafford's heart leapt at sight of her with a sudden pleasure which puzzled him; for he would not have admitted to himself that he had walked in this direction in the hope, on the chance, of meeting her.

"Good-morning," he said, in his direct fashion, raising his cap. "I am very fortunate to meet you. I hope Mr. Heron is no worse for--is not ill?"

"No," she said in her low, clear voice. "My father is quite well; he is just as he usually is this morning."

"I am very glad," said Stafford. He stood close beside the horse and looked up at her; and for the first time in his life he was trying to keep the expression of admiration out of his eyes; the expression which he knew most women welcomed, but which, somehow or other, he felt this strange girl would resent. "I was afraid he would be upset. I am afraid you were frightened last night--it was enough to alarm, to startle anyone. What a splendid morning!" he went on, quickly, as if he did not want to remind her of the affair. "What a libel it is to say that it is always raining here! I've never seen so brilliant a sunshine or such colours: don't wonder that the artists rave about the place and are never tired of painting it."

She waited until he had finished, her eyes downcast, as if she knew why he had turned from the subject, then she raised them and looked at him with her direct gaze.

"I am glad I have met you," she said. "I wanted to thank you for your kindness last night--"

"Oh, but--" Stafford tried to break in, but she went on slowly, as if he had not spoken.

--"I was--frightened: it was sudden, so unexpected. My father had never done it before--that I know of--and he looked"--her voice broke for a moment--"so strange, so ghost-like. I thought at first that it was the Heron ghost which, they say, haunts the dale, though I have never seen it."

A faint smile curved her lips and shone in her eyes, and Stafford was so fascinated by the sudden gleam of girlishness that he had to bend and pat Bess, who was planting dusty impression on his trousers in her frantic efforts to gain his attention.

"I did nothing; in fact, as I walked away I was fuming because I couldn't help you--couldn't do more."

"You did help me," she said, gravely; then she looked across the lake to Sir Stephen's "little place." "I was admiring that new house. Don't you think it is very beautiful, rising so white and gracefully above the lake?"

"Ye-es," said Stafford, "Rather--conspicuous, though, isn't it?"

She laughed suddenly, and Stafford asked, with surprise: "Why did you laugh?"

"Oh, I was thinking of my father," she said, with a delicious frankness; "he was quite angry about it this morning. It seems that it is built on our land--or what was ours--and he dislikes the idea of anyone building at Bryndermere."

"So should I," said Stafford, laconically.

"And besides," she went on, her eyes fixed on the great white building, so that she did not see his embarrassment, "my father does not like the man who built it. He thinks that he got the land unfairly; and he--my father--calls him all sorts of hard names."

Stafford bit his lips, and his face wore the expression which came into it when he was facing an ugly jump. He would have shirked this one if he could, but it had to be faced, so he rushed it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "My father built it."

She did not start, but she turned her head and looked at him, with a sudden coldness in the glorious eyes.

"Your father--Sir Stephen Orme? Then you are--"

"I am his son, yes; my name is Stafford Orme."

She gathered her reins up, as if no comment, no remark were necessary, but Stafford could not let her go, could not part from her like that.

"I'm sorry to hear that Mr. Heron has some cause of complaint, some grievance against my father. I can understand his not liking the house; to tell you the truth, I don't care for it much myself. Yes; I can understand Mr. Heron's annoyance; I suppose he can see it from your house?"

"No," she said, simply. "This is the only part of our land from which it can be seen, and my father never comes here: never leaves the grounds, the garden." She paused a moment. "I don't know why you should mind--except that I said that the land was got unfairly--I wish I had not said that."

Stafford coloured.

"So do I," he said; "but I hope it isn't true. There may be some mistake. I don't know anything about my father's affairs--I haven't seen him for years; I am almost a stranger to him."

She listened with a grave face, then she touched the big chestnut; but Stafford, almost unconsciously, laid his hand on the rein nearest him. His mouth and chin expressed the determination which now and again surprised even his most intimate friends.

"Miss Heron, I'm afraid--" He paused, and she waited, her eyes downcast and fixed on the horse's ears.

"I scarcely know how to put what I want to say," he said. "I'm rather

bad at explaining myself; but I--well, I hope you won't feel angry with me because of the house, because of anything that has passed between your father and mine--Of course I stand by him; but--well, _I_ didn't build the confounded place--I beg your pardon! but I think it's rather hard that you should cut me--oh, I can see by your face that you mean to do it!--that you should regard me as a kind of enemy because--"

The usually fluent Stafford stopped helplessly as the beautiful eyes turned slowly upon him with a slight look of wonder in them.

"Why should you mind?" she said, with almost childish innocence. "You do not know me; we only met yesterday--we are not friends--Oh I am not forgetting your kindness last night; oh, no!--but what can it matter to you?"

In another woman Stafford would have suspected the question of coquetry, of a desire to fish for the inevitable response; but looking in those clear, guileless eyes, he could not entertain any such suspicion.

"I beg your pardon; but it does matter very much," he retorted. "In the first place, a man does not like being cut by a lady; and in the next, we shall be neighbours--I'm going to stay there--" he nodded grimly at the beautiful "little place."

"Neighbours?" she said, half absently. "It is farther off than you think; and, besides, we know no one. We have no neighbours in that sense--or friends. My father does not like to see anyone; we live quite alone--"

"So I've heard--" He stopped and bit his lip; but she did not seem to have noticed his interruption.

--"So that even if my father did not object to the house or--or--"

"My father," said Stafford with a smile.

A smile answered his candour.

"It would be all the same. And why should it matter to you? You have a great many friends, no doubt--and we should not be likely to meet."

"Oh, yes, we should!" he said, with the dogged kind of insistence which also sometimes surprised his friends. "I was going to avail myself of your permission, and fish the stream--but, of course, I can't do that now."

"No--I suppose not," she assented. "But we should be sure to meet on the road--I should be riding--walking."

"But not on this side often," she argued.

A faint, very faint colour had stolen into the clear pallor of her cheek, her eyes were downcast. She was honestly surprised, and, yes, a little pleased that he should protest against the close of their acquaintance; pleased, though why, she could not have told; for it did not seem to matter.

"Oh, yes, I should," he retorted. "It's very pretty this side, and--See

here, Miss Heron." He drew a little nearer and looked up at her with something like a frown in his eagerness. "Of course I shall speak to my father about--well, about the way the land was bought, and I'm hoping, I'm sure, that he will be able to explain it satisfactorily; and I want to tell you that it is a mistake. I don't know much of my father, but I can't believe that he would do anything underhand." He stopped suddenly as the bagman's remarks flashed across his memory. "If your father's grievance against him is just, why--ah, well, you'll have to cut me when we meet; but I don't think it is; and I don't think it would be fair to treat me as if _I_'d done something wrong."

Her brows came together, and she looked at him as if she were puzzled.

"I don't know why it matters," she said.

"Well, I can't tell you," he said, helplessly. "I only know that I don't want to part from you this morning, knowing that the next time we meet we should meet as strangers. I wanted to come to the Hall, to enquire after Mr. Heron."

Her face flushed.

"Do not," she said in a low voice.

"I won't, of course," he responded, quickly. "It would only make matters worse; your father would naturally dislike me, refuse to see me; but--well, it's very hard on me."

She looked at him again, gravely, thoughtfully, as if she were still puzzled by his persistence. Her eyes wandered to the dogs. Bess was still standing up against him, and Donald had thrown himself down beside him, and was regarding Ida with an air that said, quite plainly, "This new friend of yours is all right."

"You have made friends with the dogs," she said, with a slight smile.

Stafford laughed.

"Oh, yes. There must be some good in dumb animals, for most of 'em take to me at first sight."

She laughed at this not very brilliant display of wit. "I assure you they wouldn't cut me next time we met. You can't be less charitable than the dogs, Miss Heron!"

She gave a slight shrug to her straight, square shoulders. The gesture seemed charming to Stafford, in its girlish Frenchness.

"Ah, well," she said, with a pretty air of resignation, as if she were tired of arguing.

Stafford's face lit up, and he laughed--the laugh of the man who wins; but it died away rather suddenly, as she said gravely:

"But I do not think we shall meet often. I do not often go to the other side of the lake: very seldom indeed; and you will not, you say, fish the Heron; so that--Oh, there is the colt loose," she broke off. "How can it have got out? I meant to ride it to-day, and Jason, thinking I had changed my mind, must have turned it out."

The colt came waltzing joyously along the road, and catching sight of the chestnut, whinnied delightedly, and the chestnut responded with one short whinny of reproof. Ida rode forward and headed the colt, and Stafford quietly slid along by the hedge and got behind it.

"Take care!" said Ida; "it is very strong. What are you going to do?"

Stafford did not reply, but stole up to the truant step by step cautiously, and gradually approached near enough to lay his hand on its shoulder; from its shoulder he worked to its neck and wound his arms round it.

Ida laughed.

"Oh, you can't hold it!" she said as the colt plunged.

But Stafford hung on tightly and yet, so to speak, gently, soothing the animal with the "horse language" with which every man who loves them is acquainted.

Ida sat for an instant, looking round with a puzzled frown; then she slipped down, took the bridle off the chestnut and slipped it on the colt, the chestnut, who evidently understood the business, standing stock still.

"Now I'll hold it--it will be quieter with me--if you will please change the saddle."

Unthinkingly, Stafford obeyed, and got the saddle on the jiggling and dancing youngster. As unthinkingly, he put Ida up; and it was not until the colt rose on its hind legs that he remembered to ask her if the horse were broken.

"Scarcely," she said with a laugh; "but it will be all right. Good-morning--and thank you!" And calling to the chestnut she turned the colt and tore off, the chestnut and the dogs scampering after her.

Stafford's face grew hot for a moment with fear for her, then it grew hotter with admiration as he watched her skimming across the moor in the direction of the Hall. Once, just before she vanished from his sight, she turned and waved her hand to him as if to assure him that she was safe. The gesture reminded him of the white figure standing in the doorway last night, and something stirred in his heart and sent a warm thrill through him. In all his life he had never seen anyone like her!

CHAPTER V.

"You look rather serious, oh, my prince!" said Howard, as, some few hours later, he leisurely climbed into the phaeton beside Stafford. "I have noticed with inward satisfaction that as we approach the moment of meeting with your puissant parent, the Sultan, an air of gravity and soberness has clouded that confoundedly careless, devil-may-care countenance of yours. I say with inward satisfaction, because, with my usual candour, I don't mind admitting that I am shivering in my shoes. The shadow of the august presence is already falling on me, and as the hour draws near I feel my littleness, my utter insignificance, with an

acuteness which almost compels me to ask you to let me get down and make my way back to London as best I can."

"Don't be an ass," retorted Stafford, rather absently.

"You ask an impossibility of me, my dear fellow; but I will try and conceal my asininity as best I can. May I ask, to change the subject, where you were wandering all the morning?"

Stafford coloured slightly and bestowed minute attention to the off horse.

"Oh, just prowling round," he replied, leisurely.

"You tempt me to finish the quotation. Did you find anyone to devour? Apropos, has his majesty, the Sultan, ever mentioned matrimony to you, Staff?"

Stafford looked round at him for an instant.

"No," he said, curtly. "What the devil made you ask?"

"Merely my incessant speculation as to your future, my dear fellow," replied Howard, blandly. "Most fathers are ambitious for their sons, and I should imagine that Sir Stephen would be extremely so. When a man is simply a plain 'Mr.,' he longs for the 'Sir;' when he gets the 'Sir,' he wants the 'my Lord' for himself, or for his son and heir. That is the worst of ambition: you can't satisfy it. I have no doubt in my mind that at this very moment Sir Stephen is making for a peerage for himself--or you. He can possibly gain his; but you, having no brains to speak of--the fact that good-looking men are always deficient in that respect is a continual and blessed consolation to us plain ones, Staff--will have to make what the world calls a 'good marriage.' Doubtless your father already has the future bride in his eye; the daughter of a peer--high in the government, perhaps in the cabinet--probably. Probably that is why he has asked you to meet him here. I hope, for your sake, that she is good-looking. I fancy"--musingly--"that you would be rather particular. If rumour does you no injustice, you always have been."

Stafford laughed shortly.

"I've never thought about marrying," he said, rather absently.

"No one does, my dear fellow. It comes, like measles and other unpleasant things, without thought; and when it comes, it is generally as unpleasant. Aren't we going at a tremendous rate, Stafford? Don't think I am nervous; I have ridden beside you too often for that. You destroyed what nerve I possessed long ago."

"We are late, and it's farther round than I thought," said Stafford. "The horses are fresh."

"I daresay; very probably Pottinger has given them a double feed; he would naturally like them to dash up in fine style. But if it's all the same to you"--as the horses broke into a gallop--"I should prefer to arrive at your father's 'little place' in a more dignified fashion than on a stretcher."

Stafford smiled and checked the high-spirited pair.

"You talk of women as if they were a--a kind of plague; you were never in love, Howard?" he asked.

"Never, thank Heaven!" responded Howard, devoutly. "When I think of it, I acknowledge that I have much to be thankful for. I was once: she was a girl with dark eyes--but I will spare you a minute description. I met her in a country rectory--_is_ that horse, I think you call it the near one--going to jump over the bank? And one remarkably fine evening--it was moonlight, I remember--I was on the point of declaring my love; and then the gods saved me. The thought flashed upon me that, if she said 'yes,' I should have to sit opposite her at dinner for the rest of one of our lives. It saved me. I said that I thought it was chilly, and went in and up to bed, grateful for my escape. Why don't you laugh?"

Stafford only smiled in a perfunctory fashion. He was thinking of the girl he had watched riding off on the unbroken colt; of what it would seem like if she were seated opposite him, with the candle-light falling on her soft white dress, with diamonds gleaming in it, diamonds outshone by the splendour of those dark, violet-grey eyes; of what it would seem like if he could rise from his seat and go to her and take her in his arms and look into those dark grey eyes, and say, "You are mine, mine!" with no one to say him nay.

"It was a lucky escape for her," he said, dreamily.

"It was," assented Howard, solemnly. "Not one man in a thousand can love one woman all his life; and I've the strongest conviction that I am not that one. In less than six months I should have grown tired of her--in less than a year I should have flown from the joys of matrimony--or killed the partner of those joys. Has Pottinger a wife and family, my dear Stafford? If so, is it wise to risk his life in this fashion? I don't care for myself--though still young, I am not afraid to die, and I would as soon meet it hurled from a phaeton as not--but may I beg of you to think of Pottinger?"

Stafford laughed.

"The horses are all right," he said. "They are only fresh, and want to go."

He could not have driven slowly, for his mind, dwelling on the girl in the well-worn habit, was electric.

"I have spared you, hitherto, any laudation of the scenery, my dear Staff," said Howard, pleasantly, "but permit me to remark that it really is very beautiful. Trust the great and powerful Sir Stephen to choose the best nature and art can produce! What is this?"

"This" proved to be a newly built lodge which appeared on the left of the road. Stafford slowed up, and a lodgekeeper came and flung open the new and elaborately wrought iron gates.

"This the way to--to Sir Stephen's house?" asked Stafford.

The man touched his hat reverentially.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "Sir Stephen's arrived. Came an hour ago."

Stafford nodded, and drove on.

The road was certainly a new one, but it was lined with rhododendrons and costly shrubs, and it wound and wound serpentine fashion through shrubberies and miniature plantations which indicated not only remarkably good taste, but vast expenditure. At intervals the trees had been felled to permit a view of the lake, lying below, like a sapphire glowing in the sunlight.

Presently they came in sight of the house. It was larger than it had looked in the distance; a veritable palace. An architect had received carte-blanche, and disporting himself right royally, had designed a facade which it would be hard to beat: at any rate, in England.

Stafford eyed it rather grumpily. Most Englishmen dislike ostentation and display; and to Stafford the place seemed garish and "loud." Howard surveyed it with cynical admiration.

"A dream of Kubla Kahn--don't know whether I've got the name right: poem of Coleridge's, you know--but of course you don't know; you don't go in for poetry. Well I'm bound to admit that it's striking, not to say beautiful," he went on, as the horses sprang up the last ascent and rattled on in an impatient, high-spirited trot along the level road to the terrace fronting the entrance.

As Stafford pulled up, a couple of grooms came forward; the hall door--enamelled in peacock blue--opened and a butler and two footmen in rich maroon livery appeared. They came down the white marble steps in stately fashion and ranged themselves as if the ceremony were of vast importance, and as Howard and Stafford got down they bowed with the air of attendants receiving royalty.

As Stafford, flinging the reins to one of the grooms, got down, he caught sight of a line of liveried servants in the hall, and he frowned slightly.

Like most young Englishmen, he hated ostentation, which he designated as "fuss."

"Rub 'em down well, Pottinger," he said, and he leisurely patted the horses while the gorgeous footmen watched with solemn impressiveness.

"We've brought 'em along pretty well," he said, turning to Howard, who stood beside him with a fine and cynical smile; then he went up the white marble steps slowly, carefully ignoring the footmen who had drawn themselves into a line as if they were a guard of honour, specially drilled to receive him.

Followed by Howard, his cynical smile still lingering about his thin lips, Stafford entered the hall.

It was Oriental in shape and design, with a marble fountain in the centre, and carved arches before the various passages. The principal staircase was also of white marble with an Indian carpet of vivid crimson. Palms reared their tall and graceful heads at intervals, shading statuary in the prevailing white marble. Hangings of rose colour broke the sameness and accentuated the purity of the predominate whiteness.

Howard looked round with an admiration which obliterated his usual cynicism.

"Beautiful!" he murmured.

But Stafford frowned. The luxury, the richness of the place, though chaste, jarred on him; why, he could not have told.

Suddenly, as they were making their way through the lines of richly liveried servants, a curtain at one of the openings was thrown aside, and a gentleman came out to meet them.

He was rather a tall man, with white hair, but with eyebrows and moustache of jet-black. His eyes were brilliant but sharp, and he moved with the ease and alertness of youth.

There was something in his face, in its expression, which indicated strength and power; something in his manner, in his smile, peculiarly electric and sympathetic.

Howard stopped and drew back, but Stafford advanced, and Sir Stephen caught him by the hand and held it.

"My dear Stafford, my dear boy!" he said, in a deep but musical voice. "I expected you hours ago; I have been waiting! But better late than never. Who is this? Your friend, Mr. Howard? Certainly! How do you do, Mr. Howard! Welcome to our little villa on the lake!"

CHAPTER VI

Stafford's heart warmed at his father's greeting; indeed it would have been a very callous heart if it had not; for the emotion of genuine affection shone in Sir Stephen's brilliant eyes, and rang in his musical voice. Stafford was all the more impressed and touched, because the emotion was unusual, or rather, the expression of it.

This is a "casual" age, in which a man parts from or meets his relations and friends with the real or assumed indifference which is ordained by fashion. It is bad form to display one's affection, even for the woman one loves, excepting in extreme seclusion and privacy. If you meet your dearest chum who has just come out of the Transvaal War by the skin of his teeth, it is not permitted you to say more than: "Ah--er--how d'ye do. Got back, then, old man?" and at parting from one's nearest relative, perhaps for the remainder of his life, one must hide the grief that racks the heart, with an enquiry as to whether he has got a comfortable berth and has remembered his umbrella.

But Sir Stephen was evidently not ashamed of his pleasure and delight at the sight of his son, and he wrung his hand and looked him up and down with an affectionate and proud scrutiny.

"You're looking fit, Stafford, very fit! By George, I--I believe you've grown! And you've got--uglier than ever!"

Then, still holding Stafford's hand, he turned with a smile to Howard.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Howard! I've not seen this boy of mine for a devil of a time, and I've been looking forward to this meeting very keenly. The fond parent, you know, eh? But now let me say again how pleased I am to see you. Stafford has often mentioned you, his closest chum, and I was almost as anxious to see you as I was to see him."

"You are very kind, Sir Stephen," said Howard--his slow drawl unusually quickened--for he, too, was touched, though he would have died rather than have admitted it, by the warmth of Sir Stephen's reception of his son. "I was afraid that I should be rather *_de trop_*, if not absolutely intrusive--"

"Not at all--not at all!" Sir Stephen broke in. "My boy's friends are mine, especially his own particular pal. You are David and Jonathan, you two, I know; and Heaven forbid that I should part you! If you'll consider yourself one of the family, free to come and go just as you choose, I shall feel grateful to you; yes, that's the word--grateful!"

All this was said in the heartiest way, with the crowd of servants looking on and listening--though, like well-trained servants, they appeared both deaf and blind for all the expression that could be seen in their faces--then Sir Stephen led the way into the drawing-room.

"You've just time to dress," he said, consulting his watch; "your man Measom has turned up, Stafford. Mr. Howard will permit me to offer him the services of my valet--I don't trouble him much. And now I'll show you your rooms. Like this?" he added, as he paused at the door and looked round. "It's one of the smaller rooms; the ladies can keep it for themselves if they like."

"Charming!" said Howard; and the word was appropriate enough to the dainty apartment with its chaste decorations of crushed strawberry and gold, with hangings and furniture to match; with its grand piano in carved white wood and its series of water colours by some of the best of the Institute men.

"I'm glad!" responded Sir Stephen. "But I mustn't keep you. We'll go over the place after dinner--or some other time. To-night we are alone; the party doesn't come up till to-morrow. I wanted to have you, Stafford--and your friend--to myself before the crowd arrived."

They followed him up the broad stairs, which by low and easy steps led up to the exquisite corridor, harmonising perfectly with the eastern hall, on to which it looked through arches shaped and fitted in Oriental fashion.

"Here is your room. Ah, Measom! here is Mr. Stafford, Got everything ready for him, I hope?--and here, next door almost, is Mr. Howard's. This is a snugger in between--keep your books and guns and fishing-rods in it, don't you know. Mr. Howard, you play, I think? There's a piano, Hope you'll like the view. Full south, with nothing between you and the lake. I'm not far off. See? Just opposite, You may find the rooms too hot, Stafford--Mr. Howard--and we'll change 'em, of course. Don't hurry: hope you'll find everything you want!"

He laid his hand on Stafford's shoulder and nodded at him with frank affection, before he went, and as he closed the door they heard him say

to some one below:

"Don't serve the dinner till Mr. Stafford comes down!"

Stafford went to the window, and Howard stood in silence beside him for a moment, then he said--Measom had left the room:

"I congratulate you, Staff! In sackcloth and ashes, I confess I thought that kind of father only existed in women's books and emotional plays."

Stafford nodded.

"He's--he's kindness itself," he said, in a very low voice and not turning his head. "I didn't know that he was like--this. I didn't know he cared--"

"It's evident he cares very much!" said Howard, gravely. "If you were the Prodigal Son he couldn't have felt it more."

"And yet they say--that bagman said--" muttered Stafford with smouldering rage and indignation.

"There are few things in my life that I regret, my dear Staff; but till my dying day I shall regret that I did not turn and rend that bagman! He's a splendid fellow--splendid! Now I've seen him I don't wonder at his success. Envy is not one of my numerous vices, Staff; but frankly I envy you your father! Wake up, old man! We mustn't keep him waiting! What quarters!" He looked round the room as he moved to go. "Fit for a prince! But you are a prince! Why, dash it, I feel like a prince myself! How are you, Measom? Got down all right, then?--I'll give you a knock when I'm ready, Stafford!"

Stafford dressed quickly, thinking all the while of his father; of his good looks, his deep, pleasant voice, his affectionate welcome; and thrusting from him the unfavourable impression which the ornate splendour of the place had made.

Howard knocked presently and the two men went down. Sir Stephen was waiting in the hall; and Stafford, with a little thrill of pride, noticed that he looked still more distinguished in his evening-dress, which was strikingly plain; a single pearl--but it was priceless one--was its only ornament.

"By George, you have been quick!" said Sir Stephen, with his genial smile.

"That's one for yourself, sir," said Stafford.

"Oh, I? I can dress in five minutes," responded Sir Stephen, linking his arm in Stafford's. "I'm almost as good as a 'quick-change artist.'"

He drew aside to let Howard follow the butler between the two footmen drawn up beside the door, and they entered the dining-room.

It was of choice American walnut, and lit by rose-shaded electric lights, in which the plate and the glass, the flowers and the napery glowed softly: an ideal room which must have filled the famous decorator who had designed it with just pride and elation. The table had been reduced to a small oval; and the servants proceeded to serve a

dinner which told Howard that Sir Stephen had become possessed of a _chef_ who was a _cordon bleu_. The wines were as choice as the _menu_; but Sir Stephen watered his Chateau claret, and ate but little, excusing himself in the middle of a sentence with:

"I'm setting you a bad example. But there's always a skeleton at my feast--a rather common one nowadays; they call him Gout. And so you drove down? That must have been pleasant! It's a pretty country--so I'm told. I didn't see much of it from the train. But the lake--ah, well, it's indescribable, isn't it! After all one sees, one is bound to admit that there is nothing to beat English scenery; of course I include Irish. We've a strain of Irish blood in us, Mr. Howard, and I always stand up for the ould counthry. Things are looking up there lately; we're beginning to be appreciated. Give us a year or two, and we'll have all the world and his wife scampering over it. I've a little Irish scheme of my own--but I mustn't bore you the first night. Mr. Howard, if that wine is too thin--"

Howard clutched his glass with dramatic intensity.

"Chateau Legrange, if I'm not mistaken, sir," he said; "but let it be what it may, it's simply perfect."

"I'm glad. See here, now, it's understood between us that if there's anything you want, anything you'd like altered, you'll say so, eh, Stafford?" he said, with an affectionate anxiety. "I'm a rough-and-ready kind of man, and anything pleases me; but you--ah, well, you two have the right to be particular; and I'll ask you to ask for just what you want--and be sure you get it."

Stafford glanced round the room with its costly appointments, and Sir Stephen caught the glance, and smiled.

"You're thinking--ah, well, no matter. Mr. Howard, try those strawberries. I don't think they're forced. They tell me that they get them on the slope even earlier than this. This port--now see how nice the people in these parts are! this port came from the landlord of the--the--yes, The Woodman Inn. He sent it with his respectful compliments, saying you did him the honour to praise it last night. You stayed there, I suppose? Surprisingly kind: quite a Spanish bit of courtesy. I wrote Mr.--yes, Mr. Groves a note thanking him on your behalf, and I sent him some dry sherry which Stenson here"--he smiled at the butler--"tells me is rather good, eh, Stenson?"

The solemn gravity of Stenson's face did not relax in the slightest, as he murmured:

"Count de Meza's '84, sir."

"Right! So long as it was the best we had. You approve, Stafford, eh?"

Stafford nodded with something more than approval.

"Thank you, sir," he said, simply. "We admired Mr. Groves's port."

"He's a good fellow. I hope he'll enjoy the sherry. I shall take the first opportunity of calling and expressing my sense of his kindness--No more? Shall we have the coffee with the cigars in the billiard room?"

The footmen escorted them through the billiard-room to the smoking-room, only divided from it by a screen of Eastern fret-work draped by costly hangings. There were inlaid tables and couches of exquisite workmanship, and a Moresque cabinet, which the butler unlocked and from which he took cigars and cigarettes.

Sir Stephen waved them to seats, and sank into a low chair with a sigh of satisfaction and enjoyment. The footmen placed the exquisite coffee-service of Limoges enamel on one of the tables, and, as they left the room, Howard, as if he could not help himself, said:

"This is a veritable Aladdin's Palace, Sir Stephen! Though I can imagine that fabulous erection cannot have been as comfortable as this."

"I'm glad you like it," he said. "But do you like it?" he put in, with a shrewd gleam in his eyes, which could be keen as well as brilliant and genial. "I fancy you think it too fine--eh, Stafford?" He laid his hand on Stafford's knee with a somewhat appealing gesture and glance. "I've seen a doubt on your face once or twice--and, by George! you haven't seen half the place yet. Yes, Mr. Howard, I'll admit that it is rather luxurious; that's the result of giving these new men carte-blanche. They take you at your word, sir. I'll own up I was a little surprised to-day; for I told them to build me a villa--but then I wanted thirty or forty bedrooms, so I suppose they had to make it rather large. It seemed to me that as it overlooks the lake it ought to be after the style of those places one sees in Italy, and I hinted that for the interior an Oriental style might be suitable; but I left them a free hand, and if they've overdone it they ought to have known better. I employed the men who were recommended to me."

There was a pause for a moment. Stafford tried to find some phrase which would conceal his lack of appreciation; and his father, as if he saw what was passing through Stafford's mind, went on quickly but smoothly:

"Yes, I see. It is too fine and ornamental. But I don't think you'll find that the people who are coming here tomorrow will agree with you. I may not know much about art and taste, but I know my world. Stafford--Mr. Howard--I'll make a clean breast of it. I built this place with an object. My dear sir, you won't think me guilty of sticking it up to please Stafford here. I know his taste too well; something like mine, I expect--a cosy room with a clean cloth and a well-cooked chop and potato. I've cooked 'em myself before now--the former on a shovel, the latter in an empty meat-tin. Of course I know that Stafford and you, Mr. Howard, have lived very different lives to mine. Of course. You have been accustomed to every refinement and a great deal of luxury over since you left the cradle. Quite right! I'm delighted that it should be so. Nothing is too good for Stafford here--and his chum--nothing!"

Stafford's handsome face flushed.

"You've been very generous to me, sir," he said, in his brief way, but with a glance at his father which expressed more than the words.

Sir Stephen threw his head back and laughed.

"That's all right, Staff," he said. "It's been a pleasure to me. I just wanted to see you happy--'see you' is rather inappropriate, though, isn't it, considering how very little I have seen you? But there were reasons--We won't go into that. Where was I?"

"You were telling us your reasons for building this place, sir," Howard reminded him quietly.

Sir Stephen shot a glance at him, a cautious glance.

"Was I? By George! then I am more communicative than usual. My friends in the city and elsewhere would tell you that I never give any reasons. But what I was saying was this: that I've learnt that the world likes tinsel and glitter--just as the Sioux Indians are caught by glass beads and lengths of Turkey red calico. And I give the world what it wants. See?"

He laughed, a laugh which was as cynical as Howard's.

"The world is not so much an oyster which you've got to open with a sword, as the old proverb has it, but a wild beast. Yes, a wild beast: and you've got to fight him at first, fight him tooth and claw. When you've beaten him, ah! then you've got to feed him."

"You have beaten your wild beast, Sir Stephen," remarked Howard.

"Well--yes, more or less; anyhow, he seemed ready to come to my hand for the tit-bits I can give him. The world likes to be feted, likes good dinners and high-class balls; but above all it likes to be amused. I'm going to give it what it wants."

Stafford looked up. This declaration coming from his father jarred upon Stafford, whose heart he had won.

"Why should you trouble, sir?" he said, quietly. "I should have thought you would have been satisfied."

"Because I want something more from it; something in return," said Sir Stephen, with a smile. "Satisfied? No man is satisfied. I've an ambition yet ungratified, and I mean to gratify it. You think I'm vaunting, Mr. Howard?" "No, I think you are simply stating a fact," responded Howard, gravely.

"I thank you, sir," said Sir Stephen, as gravely. "I speak so confidently because I see my way clearly before me. I generally do. When I don't, I back out and lie low."

Stafford found this too painful. He rose to get a light and sauntered into the billiard-room and tried the table.

Sir Stephen looked after him musingly, and seemed to forget Howard's presence; then suddenly his face flushed and his eyes shone with a curious mixture of pride and tenderness and the indomitable resolution which had helped him to fight his "wild beast." He leant forward and touched Howard's knee.

"Don't you understand!" he said, earnestly, and in a low voice which the click of the billiard balls prevented Stafford from hearing. "It is for him! For my boy, Mr. Howard! It's for him that I have been working,

am still working. For myself--I am satisfied--as he said; but not for him. I want to see him still higher up the ladder than I have climbed. I have done fairly well--heaven and earth! if anyone had told me twenty years ago that I should be where and what I am to-day--well, I'd have sold my chances for a bottle of ale. You smile. Mr. Howard, it was anything but beer and skittles for me then. I want to leave my boy a--title. Smile again, Mr. Howard; I don't mind."

"I haven't a smile about me, sir," said Howard.

"Ah, you understand. You see my mind. I don't know why I've told you, excepting that it is because you are Staff's friend. But I've told you now. And am I not right? Isn't it a laudable ambition? Can you say that he will not wear it well, however high the title may be? Where is there such another young fellow? Proud--pride is too poor a word for what I feel for him!"

He paused and sank back, but leant forward again.

"Though I've kept apart from him, Mr. Howard, I have watched him--but in no unworthy sense. No, I haven't spied upon him."

"There was no need, sir," said Howard, very quietly.

"I know it. Stafford is as straight as a dart, as true as steel. Oh, I've heard of him. I know there isn't a more popular man in England--forgive me if I say I don't think there's a handsomer."

Howard nodded prompt assent.

"I read of him, in society, at Hurlingham. Everywhere he goes he holds his own. And I know why. Do you believe in birth, Mr. Howard?" he asked, abruptly.

"Of course," replied Howard.

"So do I, though I can't lay claim to any. But there's a good strain in Stafford and it shows itself. There's something in his face, a certain look in his eyes, in his voice, and the way he moves; that quiet yet frank manner--oh, I can't explain!" he broke off, impatiently.

"I think you have done it very well," said Howard. "I don't like the word--it is so often misapplied--but I can't think of any better: distinguished is the word that describes Stafford."

Sir Stephen nodded eagerly.

"You are right. Some men are made, born to wear the purple. My boy is one of them--and he shall! He shall take his place amongst the noblest and the best in the land. He shall marry with the highest. Nature has cast him in a noble mould, and he shall step into his proper place."

He drew a long breath, and his brilliant eyes flashed as if he were looking into the future, looking into the hour of triumph.

"Yes; I agree with you," said Howard; "but I am afraid Stafford will scarcely share your ambition."

He was sorry he had spoken as he saw the change which his words had

caused in Sir Stephen.

"What?" he said, almost fiercely. "Why do you say that? Why should he not be ambitious?" He stopped and laid his hand on Howard's shoulder, gripping it tightly, and his voice sank to a stern whisper. "You don't know of anything--there is no woman--no entanglement?"

"No, no!" said Howard. "Make your mind easy on that point. There is no one. Stafford is singularly free in that respect. In fact--well, he is rather cold. There is no one, I am sure. I should have known it, if there had been."

Sir Stephen's grip relaxed, and the stern, almost savage expression was smoothed out by a smile.

"Right," he said, still in a whisper. "Then there is no obstacle in my way. I shall win what I am fighting for. Though it will not be an easy fight. No, sir. But easy or difficult, I mean winning."

He rose and stood erect--a striking figure looking over Howard's head with an abstracted gaze; then suddenly his eyelids quivered, his face grew deathly pale, and his hand went to his heart.

Howard sprang to his feet with an exclamation of alarm; but Sir Stephen held up his hand warningly, moved slowly to one of the tables, poured out a glass of liqueur and drank it. Then he turned to Howard, who stood watching him, uncertain what to do or say, and said, with an air of command:

"Not a word. It is nothing."

Then he linked his arm in Howard's and led him into the billiard-room.

"Table all right, Stafford?"

"First-rate, sir," replied Stafford. "You and Mr. Howard play a hundred."

"No, no," said Sir Stephen. "You and Howard. I should enjoy looking on."

"We'll have a pool," said Stafford, taking the balls from the cabinet. Howard watched Sir Stephen as he played his first shot: his hand was perfectly steady, and he soon showed that he was a first-rate player.

"That was a good shot," said Stafford, with a touch of pride in his voice. "I don't know that I've seen a better. You play a good game, sir."

Sir Stephen's face flushed at his son's praise, as a girl's might have done; but he laughed it off.

"Only so, so, Staff. I don't play half as good a game as you and Mr. Howard. How should I?--Mr. Howard, there is the spirit-stand. You'll help yourself? Servants are a nuisance in a billiard-room."

Not once for the rest of the evening did he show any sign of the weakness which had so startled Howard, and as they went up the stairs he told them a story with admirable verve and with evident enjoyment.

"Sorry our evening has come to an end," he said as they stood outside his door. "It is the last we shall have to ourselves. Pity. But it can't be helped."

Unconsciously he opened the door as he spoke, and Stafford said:

"Is this your room, sir?"

"Yes; walk in, my boy," replied Sir Stephen.

Stafford walked in and stood stock-still with amazement. The room was as plainly furnished as a servant's--more plainly, probably, than the servants who were housed under his roof. Saving for a square of carpet by the bed and dressing-table the floor was bare; the bed was a common one of iron, narrow and without drapery, the furniture was of painted deal. The only picture was a portrait of Stafford enlarged from a photograph, and it hung over the mantel-piece so that Sir Stephen could see it from the bed. Of course neither Stafford nor Howard made any remark.

"Remember that portrait, Stafford?" asked Sir Stephen, with a smile. "I carry it about with me wherever I go. Foolish and fond old father, eh, Mr. Howard? It's a good portrait, don't you think?"

Stafford held out his hand.

"Good-night, sir," he said in a very low voice.

"Good-night, my boy! Sure you've got everything you want? And you, Mr. Howard? Don't let me disturb you in the morning. I've got a stupid habit of getting up early--got it years ago, and it clings, like other habits. Hope you'll sleep well. If you don't, change your rooms before the crowd comes. Good-night."

"Did you see the room?" asked Stafford, huskily, when he and Howard had got into Stafford's.

Howard nodded.

"I feel as if I could pitch all this"--Stafford looked at the surrounding luxuries--"out of the window! I don't understand him. Great Heaven! he makes me feel the most selfish, pampered wretch on the face of the earth. He's--he's--"

"He is a man!" said Howard, with an earnestness which was strange in him.

"You are right," said Stafford. "There never was such a father. And yet--yet--I don't understand him. He is such a mixture. How such a man could talk as he did--no I don't understand it."

"I do," said Howard.

But then Sir Stephen had given him the key to the enigma.

CHAPTER VII

Stafford slept well, and was awake before Measom came to call him. It was a warm and lovely morning, and Stafford's first thoughts flew to a bath. He got into flannels, and found his way to the lake, and as he expected, there was an elaborate and picturesque bathing-shed beside the Swiss-looking boat-house, in which were an electric launch and boats of all descriptions. There also was a boatman in attendance, with huge towels on his arm.

"Did you expect me?" asked Stafford, as the man touched his hat and opened the bathing-shed.

"Yes, sir; Sir Stephen sent down last night to say that you might come down."

Stafford nodded. His father forgot nothing! The boatman rowed him out into the lake and Stafford had a delightful swim. It reminded him of Geneva, for the lake this morning was almost as clear and as vivid in colouring: and that is saying a great deal.

The boatman, who watched his young master admiringly--for Stafford was like a fish in the water--informed him that the launch would be ready in a moment's notice, or the sailing boat either, for the matter of that, if he should require them.

"I've another launch, a steamer, and larger than this, coming to-morrow; and Sir Stephen told me to get some Canadian canoes, in case you or any of the company that's coming should fancy them, sir."

As Stafford went up to the house in the exquisite "after-bath" frame of mind, he met his father. The expression of Sir Stephen's face, which a moment earlier, before he had turned the corner of the winding path, had been grave and keen, and somewhat hard, softened, and his eyes lit up with a smile which had no little of the boatman's admiration in it.

"Had a swim, my boy? Found everything right, I hope? I was just going down to see."

"Yes, everything," replied Stafford. "I can't think how you have managed to get it done in so short a time," he added, looking round at the well-grown shrubs, the smooth paths and the plush-like lawns, which all looked as if they had been in cultivation for years.

Sir Stephen shrugged his shoulders.

"It is all a question of money--and the right men," he said. "I always work on the plan, and ask the questions: 'How soon, how much?' Then I add ten per cent. to the contract price on condition that the time is kept. I find 'time' penalties are no use: it breaks the contractor's back; but the extra ten per cent. makes them hustle, as they say on the 'other side.' Have you seen the stables yet? But of course you haven't, or I should have seen you there. I go down there every morning; not because I understand much about horses, but because I'm fond of them. That will be your department, my dear Stafford."

At each turn of their way Stafford found something to admire, and his wonderment at the settled and established "Oh, I stipulated that there shouldn't be any newness--any 'smell of paint,' so to speak. Here are the stables; I had them put as far from the house as possible, and yet get-at-able. Most men like to stroll about them. I hope you'll like

them. Mr. Pawson, the trainer, designed them."

Stafford nodded with warm approval.

"They seem perfect," he said as, after surveying the exterior, he entered and looked down the long reach of stalls and loose boxes, many of which were occupied, as he saw at a glance, by valuable animals. "They are a fine lot, sir," he said, gravely, as he went down the long line. "A remarkably fine lot! I have never seen a better show. This fellow--why, isn't he Lord Winstay's bay, Adonis?"

"Yes," said Sir Stephen. "I thought you'd like him."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Stafford. "You don't mean that you have bought him for me, sir! I know that Winstay refused eight hundred guineas for him."

"I daresay," replied Sir Stephen. "Why shouldn't I buy him for you, my boy? There's another one in the box next that one; a little stiffer. I'm told he's up to your weight and--"

Stafford went into the box and looked at the horse. It was a magnificent, light-weight hunter--the kind of horse that makes a riding-man's heart jump.

"I should say that there are not two better horses of their sort in the county," Stafford said, solemnly, and with a flush of his handsome face.

Sir Stephen's eyes gleamed.

"That's all right: they can't be too good, Stafford."

The head groom, Davis by name, stood, with Pottinger and some underlings, at a little distance in attendance, and the men exchanged glances and nods.

"Have you seen these, Pottinger?" asked Stafford, turning to him, and speaking in the tone which servants love.

Pottinger touched his forehead.

"Yes, sir; they're first rate, and no mistake. I've just been telling Mr. Davis he's got a splendid lot, sir--splendid!"

"Not but what your own pair 'ud be hard to beat, sir," said Davis, respectfully. "There's a mare here, Sir Stephen, I should like to show Mr. Stafford."

The mare was taken out into the yard, and Stafford examined her and praised her with a judgment and enthusiasm which filled Davis's heart with pride.

"Your young guv'nor's the right sort, Pottinger," he remarked as Stafford at last reluctantly tore himself away from the stables. "Give me a master as understands a horse and I don't mind working for him."

Pottinger nodded and turned the straw in his mouth.

"If you're alludin' to Mr. Stafford, then you'll enjoy your work, Mr. Davis; for you've got what you want. What my gov'nor don't know about a 'oss isn't worth knowing."

"So I should say," assented Davis, emphatically. "I do hate to have a juggins about the place. Barker, _is_ that a spot o' rust on that pillar-chain, or is my eyesight deceiving me? No, my men, if there's the slightest thing askew when Mr. Stafford walks round, I shall break my heart--and sack the man who's responsible for it. Pottinger, if you'd like that pair o' yours moved, if you think they ain't comfortable, you say so, and moved they shall be."

As Sir Stephen and Stafford strolled back to the house the former paused now and again to point out something he wished Stafford to see, always appealing for his approval.

"Everything is perfect, sir," Stafford said at last. "And, above all, the situation," he added as he looked at the magnificent view, the opal lake mirroring the distant mountains, flecked by the sunlight and the drifting clouds.

"Yes, I was fortunate in getting it," remarked Sir Stephen.

Instantly there flashed across Stafford's mind--and not for the first time that morning--the words Ida Heron had spoken respecting the way in which Sir Stephen had obtained the land. Looking straight before him, he asked:

"How did you get it, sir? I have heard that it was difficult to buy land here for building purposes."

"Yes, I fancy it is," replied Sir Stephen, quite easily. "Now you speak of it, I remember my agent said there was some hitch at first; but he must have got over it in some way or other. He bought it of a farmer." Stafford drew a breath of relief. "This is the Italian garden; the tennis and croquet lawns are below this terrace--there's not time to go down. But you haven't seen half of it yet. There's the breakfast-bell. Don't trouble to change: I like you in those flannels." He laid his hand on Stafford's broad, straight shoulder. "You have the knack of wearing your clothes as if they grew on you, Staff."

Stafford laughed.

"I ought to hand that compliment on to Measom, sir," he said; "he's the responsible person and deserves the credit, if there is any." He looked at his father's upright, well-dressed and graceful figure. "But he would hand it back to you, I think, sir."

There was a pause, then Stafford said:

"Do you know any of your neighbours--any of the people round about?"

"No; I was never here until yesterday, excepting for an hour or two. But we shall know them, I suppose; they'll call in a little while, and we will ask them to dinner, and so on. There should be some nice people--Ah, Mr. Howard, we've stolen a march on you!"

"I'm not surprised, sir," said Howard, as he came up in his slow and languid way. "I am sorry to say that Stafford has an extremely bad

habit of getting up at unreasonable hours. I wait until I am dragged out of bed by a fellow-creature or the pangs of hunger. Of course you have been bathing, Staff? Early rising and an inordinate love of cold water--externally--at all seasons are two of his ineradicable vices, Sir Stephen. I have done my best to cure them, but--alas!"

They went in to breakfast, which was served in a room with bay windows opening on to the terrace overlooking the lake. Exactly opposite Stafford's chair was the little opening on the other side from which he and the girl from Heron Hall had gazed at the villa. He looked at it and grew silent.

A large dispatch-box stood beside Sir Stephen's plate. He did not open it, but sent it to his room.

"I never read my letters before breakfast," he remarked. "They spoil one's digestion. I'm afraid the mail's heavy this morning, judging by the weight of the box; so that I shall be busy. You two gentlemen will, I trust, amuse yourselves in your own way. Mr. Howard, the groom will await your orders."

"Thanks," said Howard; "but I propose to sit quite still on a chair which I have carried out on to the terrace. I have had enough of driving to last me for a week;" and he shuddered.

Stafford laughed.

"Howard's easily disposed of, sir," he said. "Give him a hammock or an easy-chair in the shade, and he can always amuse himself by going to sleep."

"True; and if half the men I know spent their time in a similar fashion this would be a brighter and a better world. What you will do, my dear Stafford, I know by bitter experience. He will go and wade through a river or ride at a break-neck pace down some of those hills. Stafford is never happy unless he is trying to lay up rheumatism for his old age or endeavouring to break his limbs."

Sir Stephen looked across the table at the stalwart, graceful frame; but he said nothing: there was no need, for his eyes were eloquent of love and admiration.

Stafford changed into riding things soon after breakfast, went down to the stables and had Adonis saddled. Davis superintended the operation and the stablemen edged round to watch. Davis expressed his approval as Stafford mounted and went off on a splendid creature, remarking as he started:

"Beautiful mouth, Davis!"

"Yes, Pottinger," said Davis, succinctly, "he's worthy of him. That's what I call 'hands' now. Dash my aunt if you'd find it easy to match the pair of 'em! There's a class about both that you don't often see. If you'll step inside my little place, Mr. Pottinger, we'll drink your gov'nor's health. I like his shape, I like his style; and I'm counted a bit of a judge. He's a gentleman, and a high-bred 'n at that."

Stafford rode down the winding drive at which the gardeners were at work on borders and shrubberies, and on to the road. The air was like

champagne. The slight breeze just ruffled the lake on which the sun was glittering; Stafford was conscious of a strange feeling of eagerness, of quickly thrilling vitality which was new to him. He put it down to the glorious morning, to the discovery of the affection of his father, to the good horse that stepped as lightly as an Arab, and carried him as if he were a feather; and yet all the while he knew that these did not altogether account for the electric eagerness, the "joy of living" which possessed him.

He pulled up for a moment at The Woodman Inn to thank Mr. Groves for the port, and that gentleman came out, as glad to see him as if he were an old friend.

"Don't mention it, sir," he said. "I thought a long time before I sent it, because I wasn't sure that Sir Stephen and you might think it a liberty; but I needn't have done so, I know now. And it was kind of Sir Stephen to send me a note with the sherry. It was like a gentleman, if you'll excuse me saying so, sir."

Stafford rode over the hill and along the road by the stream, and as he rode he looked round him eagerly and keenly. In fact, as if he were scouting. But that for which he was looking so intently did not appear; his spirits fell--though the sun was still shining--and he sighed impatiently, and putting Adonis through the stream, cantered over the moor at the foot of the hills. Suddenly he heard the bark of a dog, and looking eagerly in the direction of the sound, he saw Ida Heron walking quickly round the hill, with Donald and Bess scampering in front of her.

The gloom vanished from Stafford's face, and he checked Adonis into a walk. The dogs were the first to see him, and they tore towards him barking a welcome. Ida looked up--she had been walking with her eyes bent on the ground--the colour rose to her face, and she stopped for an instant. Then she came on slowly, and by the time they had met there was no trace of the transitory blush.

Stafford raised his hat and dismounted, and tried to speak in a casual tone; but it was difficult to conceal the subtle delight which sprang up within him at the sight of her; and he looked at the beautiful face and the slim, graceful figure in its tailor-made gown--which, well worn as it was, seemed to him to sit upon her as no other dress had ever sat upon any other woman--he had hard work to keep the admiration from his eyes.

"I begin to count myself a very lucky man, Miss Heron," he said.

"Why?" she asked, her grave eyes resting on him calmly.

"Because I have chanced to meet you again."

"It is not strange," she said. "I am nearly always out-of-doors. What a beautiful horse!"

"Isn't it!" he said, grateful for her praise. "It is a new one--a present from my father this morning."

"A very valuable present! It ought to be able to jump."

"It is. I put it at a bank just now, and it cleared it like a bird. I

am very glad I have met you. I wanted to tell you something."

She raised her eyes from the horse and waited, with the quietude, the self-possession and dignity which seemed so strange in one so young, and which, by its strangeness, fascinated him. "I--spoke to my father about the land: he is innocent in the matter. It was bought through his agent, and my father knows nothing of anything--underhand. I can't tell you how glad I am that this is so. So glad that--I'll make a clean breast of it--I rode over this morning in the hope of meeting you and telling you."

She made a little gesture of acceptance.

"I am glad, too. Though it does not matter...."

"Ah, but it does!" he broke in. "I should have been wretched if you had been right, and my father had been guilty of anything of the kind. But, as a matter of fact, he isn't capable of it--as you'd say if you knew him. Now, there's no reason why we shouldn't be friends, is there?" he added, with a suppressed eagerness.

"Oh, no," she responded. She glanced up at the sky. Unnoticed by him a cloud had drifted over the Langdale pikes, as the range of high mountain is called. "It is going to rain, and heavily."

"And you have no umbrella, waterproof!" exclaimed Stafford.

She laughed with girlish amusement.

"Umbrella? I don't think I have such a thing; and this cloth is nearly waterproof; besides, I never notice the rain--here it comes!"

It came with a vengeance; it was as if the heavens had opened and let down the bottom of a reservoir.

Stafford mechanically took off his coat.

"Put this on," he said. "That jacket is quite light; you'll get wet through."

Her face crimsoned, and she laughed a little constrainedly.

"Please put your coat on!" she said, gravely and earnestly. "_You_ will be wet through, and you are not used to it. There is a shed round the corner; ride there as quickly as you can."

Stafford stared at her, then burst into a laugh which echoed hers.

"And leave you here! Is it likely?"

"Well, let us both go," she said, as if amused by his obstinacy.

"Is it far?" he asked. "See if you can manage to balance on the saddle--I would run beside you. It's all very well to talk of not minding the rain, but this is a deluge."

She glanced at the horse.

"I couldn't get up--I could if he were barebacked, or if it were a

lady's saddle--it doesn't matter. Look, Donald and Bess are laughing at you for making a fuss about a shower."

"Will you try--let me help you?" he pleaded. "I could lift you quite easily--Oh, forgive me, but I'm not used to standing by and seeing a girl get soaked."

"You are walking--not standing," she reminded him, solemnly.

Perhaps her smile gave him courage: he took her just below the shoulders and lifted her on to the saddle, saying as he did so, and in as matter-of-fact a voice as he could:

"If you'll just put your hand on my shoulder, you'll find that you can ride quite safely--though I expect you could do it without that--I've seen you ride, you know."

He kept his eyes from her, so that he did not see the hot blush which mantled in the clear ivory of her face, or the sudden tightening of the lips, as if she were struggling against some feeling, and fighting for her usual self-possession.

She succeeded in a moment or two, and when he looked up the blush had gone and something like amusement was sharing the sweet girlish confusion in her grey eyes.

"This is absurd!" she said. "It is to be hoped Jason or none of the men will see me; they would think I had gone mad; and I should never hear the last of it. The shed is by that tree."

"I see it--just across the road. Please keep a tight hold of my shoulder; I should never forgive myself if you slipped."

"I am not in the least likely to slip," she said.

Then suddenly, just as they were on the edge of the road, she uttered an exclamation of surprise rather than embarrassment, for a carriage and pair came round the corner and almost upon them.

Stafford stopped Adonis to let the carriage pass, but the coachman pulled up in response to a signal from someone inside, and a man thrust his head out of the window and regarded them at first with surprise and then with keen scrutiny.

He was an elderly man, with a face which would have been coarse but for its expression of acuteness and a certain strength which revealed itself in the heavy features.

"Can you tell me the way to Sir Stephen Orme's place?" he asked in a rough, harsh voice.

Ida was about to slip down, but she reflected that the mischief, if there were any, was done now; and to Stafford's admiration, she sat quite still under the gaze of the man's keen, sarcastic eyes.

"Yes; keep straight on and round by The Woodman: you will see the house by that time," said Stafford.

"Thanks! Drive on, coachman," said the man; and he drew in his head

with a grim smile, and something like a sneer on his thick lips that made Stafford's eyes flash.

CHAPTER VIII.

Stafford and Ida remained, unconscious of the rain, looking after the carriage for a moment or two.

The sneer on the man's heavy yet acutely sharp face, still incensed Stafford. He had the usual desire of the strong man--to dash after the rapidly disappearing vehicle, lug the fellow out and ask him what he was sneering at.

Ida was the first to speak.

"What a strange-looking man," she said.

Stafford started slightly, awaking to the fact that it was still pouring.

"I--I beg your pardon. I'm keeping you out in the rain."

He put Adonis, not at all unwillingly, to a trot, and they gained the rough cattle-shed, and he would have lifted the girl down, but she was too quick for him, and slipped gracefully and easily from the saddle.

Stafford, leading the horse, followed her into the shed. Bess sat on the extreme end of her haunches shivering and blinking, and all too plainly cursing the British climate; but Donald threw himself down outside as if he regarded the deluge as a cheap shower-bath.

Stafford looked at Ida anxiously.

"You are fearfully wet," he said. "I think I could wipe off the worst of it, if you'll let me."

He took out his pocket handkerchief as he spoke and wiped the rain from her straight, beautifully moulded shoulders. She drew back a little and opened her lips to protest at first, but with a slight shrug she resigned herself, her eyes downcast, a faint colour in her face.

"I must be quite dry now," she said at last.

"I'm afraid not," said Stafford. "I wish I had something bigger--a towel."

She laughed, the sweet girlish laugh which seemed to him the most musical sound he had ever heard.

"A towel? Fancying carrying a towel to wipe oneself with when it rained! It is evident you don't know our country. There are weeks sometimes in which it never ceases to rain. And you must be wet through yourself," she added, glancing at him.

He was on his knees at the moment carefully wiping the old habit skirt with his saturated handkerchief as if the former were something

precious; and her woman's eye noted his short crisp hair, the shapely head and the straight broad back.

"I'm afraid that's all I can do!" he said, regretfully, as he rose and looked at her gravely. "Do you mean to say that you habitually ride out in such weather as this?"

"Why, yes!" she replied, lightly. "Why not? I am too substantial to melt, and I never catch cold. Besides, I have to go out in all weathers to see to the cattle and the sheep."

He leant against one of the posts which supported the shed, and gazed at her with more intense interest than any other woman had ever aroused in him.

"Isn't there a foreman, a bailiff, whatever you call him, in these parts?"

She shook her head.

"No; we cannot afford one; so I do his work. And very pleasant work it is, especially in fine weather."

"And you are happy?" he asked, almost unconsciously.

Her frank eyes met his with a smile of amusement.

"Yes, quite happy," she answered. "Why? Does it seem so unlikely, so unreasonable?"

"Well, it does," he replied, as if her frankness were contagious. "Of course, I could understand it if you did it occasionally, if you did it because you liked riding; but to be obliged, to have to go out in all weathers, it isn't right!"

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"Yes, I suppose it seems strange to you. I suppose most of the ladies you know are rich, and only ride to amuse themselves, and never go out when they do not want to do so. Sir Stephen Orme--you--are very rich, are you not? We, my father and I, are poor, very poor. And if I did not look after things, if I were not my own bailiff--Oh, well, I don't know what would happen."

Stafford gnawed at his moustache as he gazed at her. The exquisitely colourless face, in which the violet eyes glowed like two twin flowers, the delicately cut lips, soft and red, the dark hair clustering at the ivory temples in wet rings, set his heart beating with a heavy pulsation that was an agony of admiration and longing--a longing that was vague and indistinct.

"Yes, I suppose it must seem strange to you," she said, as if she were following out the lines of her own thoughts. "You must be accustomed to girls who are so different."

"Yes, they're different," he admitted. "Most of the women I know would be frightened to death if they were caught in such a rain as this; would be more than frightened to death if they had to ride down that hill most of 'em think they've done wonder if they get in at the end of

a run over a fairly easy country; and none of 'em could doctor a sick sheep to save their lives."

"Yes," she said, dreamily. "I've seen them, but only at a distance. But I didn't know anything about farming until I came home."

"And do you never go away from here, go to London for a change and get a dance, and--and all that?" he asked.

She shook her head indifferently.

"No, I never leave the dale. I cannot. My father could not spare me. Has it left off raining yet?"

She went to the front of the shed and looked out.

"No, it is still pelting; please come back; it is pouring off the roof; your hair is quite wet again."

She laughed, but she obeyed.

"I suppose that gentleman, the man in the carriage, was a friend of Sir Stephen's, as he asked the way to your house?"

"I don't know," replied Stafford. "I don't know any of my father's friends. I knew very little of him until last night."

She looked at him with frank, girlish interest.

"Did you find the new house very beautiful?" she asked.

Stafford nodded.

"Yes," he said, absently. "It is a kind of--of palace. It's beautiful enough--perhaps a little too--too rich," he admitted.

She smiled.

"But then, you are rich. And is it true that a number of visitors are coming down? I heard it from Jessie."

"Who is Jessie?" he asked, for he was more interested in the smallest detail of this strange, bewilderingly lovely girl's life than his father's affairs.

"Jessie is my maid. I call her mine, because she is very much attached to me; but she is really our house-maid, parlour-maid. We have very few servants: I suppose you have a great many up at the new house?"

He nodded.

"Oh, yes," he said, half apologetically. "Too many by far. I wish you could, see it," he added.

She laughed softly.

"Thank you; but that is not likely. I think it is not raining so hard now, and that I can go."

"It is simply pouring still," he said, earnestly and emphatically. "You would get drenched if you ventured out."

"But I can't stay here all day," she remarked, with a laugh. "I have a great deal to do: I have to see that the sheep have not strayed, and that the cows are in the meadows; the fences are bad in places, and the stupid creatures are always straying. It is wonderful how quickly a cow finds a weak place in a fence."

Stafford's face grew red, a brick-dust red.

"It's not fit work for you," he said. "You--you are only a girl; you can't be strong enough to face such weather, to do such work."

The beautiful eyes grew wide and gazed at him with girlish amusement, and something of indignation.

"I'm older than you think. I'm not a girl!" she retorted. "And I am as strong as a horse." She drew herself up and threw her head back. "I am never tired--or scarcely ever. One day I rode to Keswick and back, and when I got home Jason met me at the gate and told me that the steers had 'broken' and had got on the Bryndermere road. I started after them, but missed them for a time, and only came up with them at Landal Water--ah, you don't know where that is; well, it is a great many miles. Of course I had a rest coming back, as I could only drive them slowly."

Something in his eyes--the pity, the indignation, the wonder that this exquisitely refined specimen of maidenhood should be bent to such base uses--shone in them and stopped her. The colour rose to her face and her eyes grew faintly troubled, then a proud light flashed in them.

"Ah, I see; you are thinking that it is--is not ladylike, that none of your lady-friends would do it if even if they were strong enough?"

Stafford would have scorned himself if he had been tempted to evade those beautiful eyes, that sweet, and now rather haughty voice; besides, he was not given to evasion with man or woman.

"I wasn't thinking quite that," he said. "But I'll tell you what I was thinking, if you'll promise not to be offended."

She considered for a moment, then she said:

"I do not think you will offend me. What was it?"

"Well, I was thinking that--see here, now, Miss Heron, I've got your promise!--it is not worthy of you--such work, I mean."

"Because I'm a girl?" she said, her lip curving with a smile.

"No," he said, gravely; "because you are a lady; because you are so--so refined, so graceful, so"--he dared not say "beautiful," and consequently he floundered and broke down. "If you were a farmer's daughter, clumsy and rough and awkward, it would not seem to inappropriate for you to be herding cattle and counting sheep; but--now your promise!--when I come to think that ever since I met you, whenever I think of you I think of--of--a beautiful flower--that now I have seen you in evening-dress, I realise how wrong it is that you

should do such work. Oh, dash it! I know it's like my cheek to talk to you like this," he wound up, abruptly and desperately.

While he had been speaking, the effect of his words had expressed itself in her eyes and in the alternating colour and pallor of her face. It was the first time in her life any man had told her that she was refined and graceful and flower-like; that she was, so to speak, wasting her sweetness on the desert air, and the speech was both pleasant and painful to her. The long dark lashes swept her cheek; her lips set tightly to repress the quiver which threatened them; but when he had completely broken down, she raised her eyes to his with a look so grave, so sweet, so girlish, that Stafford's heart leapt, not for the first time that morning, and there flashed through him the unexpected thought:

"What would not a man give to have those eyes turned upon him with love shining in their depths!"

"I'm not offended," she said. "I know what you mean. None of your lady-friends would do it because they are ladies. I'm sorry. But they are not placed as I am. Do you think I could sit with my hands before me, or do fancy-work, while things went to ruin? My father is old and feeble--you saw him the other night--I have no brother--no one to help me, and--so you see how it is!"

The eyes rested on his with a proud smile, as if she were challenging him, then she went on:

"And it does not matter. I live quite alone; I see no one, no other lady; there is no one to be ashamed of me."

Stafford reddened.

"That's rather a hard hit for me!" he said. "Ashamed! By Heaven! if you knew how I admired--how amazed I am at your pluck and goodness--"

Her eyes dropped before his glowing ones.

"And there is no need to pity me: I am quite happy, quite; happier than I should be if I were playing the piano or paying visits all day. It has quite left off now."

Half unconsciously he put his hand on her arm pleadingly, and with the firm, masterful touch of the man.

"Will you wait one more moment?" he said, in his deep, musical voice. She paused and looked at him enquiringly. "You said just now that you had no brother, no one to help you. Will you let me help you? will you let me stand in the place of a friend, of a brother?"

She looked at him with frank surprise; and most men would have been embarrassed and confused by the steady, astonished regard of the violet eyes; but Stafford was too eager to get her consent to care for the amusement that was mixed with the expression of surprise.

"Why--how could you help me?" she said at last; "even if--"

--"You'd let me," he finished for her. "Well, I'm not particularly clever, but I've got sense enough to count sheep and drive cows; and I

can break in colts, train dogs, and, if I'm obliged, I daresay I could drive a plough."

Her eyes wandered thoughtfully, abstractedly down the dale; but she was listening and thinking.

"Of course I should have a lot to learn, but I'm rather quick at picking up things, and--"

"Are you joking, Mr. Orme?" she broke in.

"Joking? I was never more serious in my life," he said, eagerly, and yet with an attempt to conceal his earnestness. "I am asking it as a favour, I am indeed! I shall be here for weeks, months, perhaps, and I should be bored to death--"

"With your father's house full of visitors?" she put in, softly, and with a smile breaking through her gravity.

"Oh, they'll amuse themselves," he said. "At any rate, I sha'n't be with them all day; and I'd ever so much rather help you than dance attendance on them."

She pushed the short silky curls from her temples, and shook her head.

"Of course it's ridiculous," she said, with a girlish laugh; "and it's impossible, too."

"Oh, is it?" he retorted. "I've never yet found anything I wanted to do impossible."

"You always have your own way?" she asked.

"By hook or by crook," he replied.

"But why do you want to--help me?" she asked. "Do you think you would find it amusing? You wouldn't." The laughter shone in her eyes again. "You would soon grow tired of it. It is not like hunting or fishing or golfing; it's work that tries the temper--I never knew what a fiendish temper I had got about me until the first time I had to drive a cow and calf."

"My temper couldn't be worse," he remarked, calmly. "Howard says that sometimes I could give points to the man possessed with seven devils."

"Who is Mr. Howard?" she asked.

"My own particular chum," he said. "He came down with me and is up at the house now. But never mind Howard; are you going to let me help you as if I were an old friend or a--brother? Or are you going to be unkind enough to refuse?"

She began to feel driven, and her brows knit as she said:

"I think you are very--obstinate, Mr. Orme."

"That describes me exactly," he said, cheerfully. "I'm a perfect mule when I like, and I'm liking it all I know at this moment."

"It's absurd--it's ridiculous, as I said," she murmured, half angrily, half laughingly, "and I can't think why you offered, why you want to--to help me!"

"Never mind!" said Stafford, his heart beating with anticipatory triumph; for he knew that the woman who hesitates is gained. "Perhaps I want to get some lessons in farming on the cheap, or--"

--"Perhaps you really want to help the poor girl who, though she is a lady, has to do the work of a farmer's daughter," she said, in a low voice. "Oh, it is very kind of you, but--"

"Then I'll come over to-morrow an hour earlier than this, and you shall show me how to count the sheep, or whatever you do with them," he put in, quickly.

"But I was going to refuse--very gratefully, of course--but to refuse!"

"You couldn't; you couldn't be so unkind! I'll ride a hunter I've got; he's rather stiffer than Adonis, and better up to rough work. I will come to the stream where we first met and wait for you--shall I?"

He said all this as if the matter were settled; and with the sensation of being driven still more strongly upon her, she raised her eyes to his with a yielding expression in them, with that touch of imploration which lurks in a woman's eyes and about the corners of her lips when for the first time she surrenders her will to a man.

"I do not know what to say. It is absurd--it is--wrong. I don't understand why--. Ah, well," she sighed with an air of relief, "you will tire of it very quickly--after a few hours--"

"All right. We'll leave it at that," he said, with an exasperating air of cheerful confidence. "It is a bargain, Miss Heron. Shall we shake hands on it?"

He held out his hand with the smile which few men, and still fewer women, could resist; and she tried to smile in response; but as his strong hand closed over her small one, a faint look of doubt, almost of trouble, was palpable in her violet eyes and on her lips. She drew her hand away--and it had to be drawn, for he released it only slowly and reluctantly--and without a word she left the shed.

Stafford watched her as she went lightly and quickly up the road towards the Hall, Bess and Donald leaping round her; then, with a sharp feeling of elation, a feeling that was as novel as it was confusing, he sprang on his horse, and putting him to a gallop, rode for home, with one thought standing clearly out: that before many hours--the next morning--he should see her again.

Once he shifted his whip to his left hand, and stretching out his right hand, looked at it curiously: it seemed to be still thrilling with the contact of her small, warm palm.

As he came up to The Woodman Inn he remembered, what he had forgotten in the morning, that he had left his cigar-case on the dining-room mantel-shelf. He pulled up, and giving Adonis to the hostler, who rushed forward promptly, he went into the inn. There was no one in the

hall, and knowing that he should be late for luncheon, he opened the dining-room door and walked in, and straight up to the fireplace.

The cigar-case was where he had left it, and he turned to go out. Then he saw that he was not the only occupant of the room, for a lady was sitting in the broad bay-window. He snatched off his cap and murmured an apology.

"I beg your pardon! I did not know anyone was in the room," he said.

The lady was young and handsome, with a beauty which owed a great deal to colour. Her hair was a rich auburn, her complexion of the delicate purity which sometimes goes with that coloured hair--"milk and roses," it used to be called. Her eyes were of china blue, and her lips rather full, but of the richest carmine. She was exquisitely dressed, her travelling costume evidently of Redfern's build, and one hand, from which she had removed the glove, was loaded with costly rings; diamonds and emeralds as large as nuts, and of the first water.

But it was not her undeniable beauty, or her dress and costly jewellery, which impressed Stafford so much as the proud, scornfully listless air with which she regarded him as she leant back indolently--and a little insolently--tapping the edge of the table with her glove.

"Pray don't apologise," she said, languidly. "This is a public room, I suppose!"

"Yes, I think so," said Stafford, in his pleasant, frank way; "but one doesn't rush into a public room with one's hat on if he has reason to suppose that a lady is present. I thought there was no one here--the curtain concealed you: I am sorry."

She shrugged her shoulders and gave him the faintest and most condescending of bows; then, as he reached the door, she said:

"Do you think it will be moonlight to-night?"

Stafford naturally looked rather surprised at this point-blank meteorological question.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it were," he said. "You see, this is a very changeable climate, and as it is raining now it will probably clear up before the evening."

"Thanks!" she said. "I am much obliged--"

"Oh, my opinion isn't worth much," he put in parenthetically, but she went on as if he had not spoken.

--"I should be still further obliged if you would be so kind as to tell my father--he is outside with the carriage somewhere--that I am tired and that I would rather not go on until the cool of the evening."

"Certainly," said Stafford.

He waited a moment to see if she had any other requests, or rather orders, and then went out and found the gentleman with the strongly marked countenance, in the stable-yard beside the carriage to which the

hostler and the help were putting fresh horses.

Stafford raised his hat slightly.

"I am the bearer of a message from the young lady in the dining-room, sir," he said. "She wishes me to tell you that she would prefer to remain here until the evening."

The man swung round upon him with an alert and curious manner, half startled, half resentful.

"What the devil--I beg your pardon! Prefers to remain here! Well!" He muttered something that sounded extremely like an oath, then, with a shrug of his shoulders, told the hostler to take the horses out. "Thank you!" he said to Stafford, grudgingly. "I suppose my daughter is tired: very kind of you."

"Not at all," responded Stafford, politely; and he got on to Adonis, which Mr. Groves himself had led out, and rode away.

The gentleman looked after him with knitted brows.

"What is the name of that young fellow?" he asked of Groves.

"That is Mr. Stafford Orme, Sir Stephen's son, sir," replied Groves.

The gentleman was walking towards the house, but he pulled up short, his eyes narrowed themselves to slits and his thick lips closed tightly.

"A fine young fellow, sir!" said Groves, with respectful enthusiasm. "A splendid specimen of an English gentleman!"

The gentleman grunted and went on to the dining-room.

"What whim is this, Maude?" he asked, irritably.

She yawned behind her beringed hand.

"I am tired. I can't face that stuffy carriage again just yet. Let us dine here and go on afterwards in the cool."

"Oh, just as you like," he said. "It makes no difference to me!"

"I know," she assented. Then, in an indolently casual way, she asked:

"Who was that gentleman who rode by just now?"

Her father glanced at her suspiciously as he took off his overcoat.

"Now, how on earth should I know, my dear Maude!" he replied, with a short, harsh laugh. "Some young farmer or cattle dealer, I imagine."

"I said _gentleman_," she retorted, with something approaching insolence. "You will permit _me_ to know the difference."

Her father coloured angrily, as if she had stung him.

"You'd better go upstairs and take off your things while I order

dinner," he said.

CHAPTER IX.

As Stafford rode homewards he wondered whom the strange pair could be. It was evident they were not going to stay at the Villa, or they would have driven straight there; but it was also evident that the gentleman had heard of Sir Stephen's "little place," or he would not have asked where it was; but, as Stafford reflected, rather ruefully, it would be difficult for any traveller passing through the neighbourhood not to see the new, great white house, or to hear something, perhaps a very great deal, of the man who had built it.

Howard sauntered down the hall to meet him.

"Good heavens, how wet you look, and, needless to add, how happy. If there is anything in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, my dear Stafford, your future embodiment will be that of a Newfoundland dog. Such an extremely strong passion for cold water is almost--er--indecent. I've had a lovely morning in the library; and your father is still at work with his correspondence. I asked him what he thought of Lord Palmerston's aphorism: that if you left your letters unanswered long enough they answered themselves; and he admitted it was true, and that he had sometimes adopted the plan successfully. There is a secretary with him--a dark and silent man named Murray, who appears to have an automatic, double-action brain; anyway he can write a letter and answer questions at the same time. And he watches your father's lips as if he--the secretary, not Sir Stephen--were a dog waiting for a stone to be thrown. It is interesting to watch--for a time; then it gets on one's nerves. May I ask where you have been?"

"Oh, just for a ride; been trying the new horse: he's a clinker! The governor couldn't have got hold of a better if he'd searched all Arabia, and Hungary to boot. I'll just change and get some lunch. I hope you haven't waited?"

"Your hope is not in vain, young man," replied Howard, suavely; "but I will come and sit beside you while you stoke."

With Measom's aid Stafford was soon into dry clothes and seated at lunch, and, as he had promised, Howard drew a chair to the table, and contemplated him with vicarious enjoyment.

"What an appetite you have!" he drawled, admiringly. "I imagine it would stand by you, even if you were in love. As a specimen of the perfectly healthy animal you stand preeminent, my dear Stafford. By the way, shall I spoil your lunch if I read you out a list of the guests whom we are expecting this afternoon? Sir Stephen was good enough to furnish me with it, with the amiable wish that I might find some friend on it. What do you say to Lord and Lady Fitzharford; the Countess of Clansford; the Baron Wirsch; the Right Honourable Henry Efford; Sir William and Lady Plaistow--"

Stafford looked up and smiled.

"Any more?"

"Oh, yes. There are the two Beltons and George Levinson, to say nothing of Mr. Griffinberg, the railroad king."

Stafford stared at his claret glass.

"I wonder why the governor has asked such a crowd?" he said, musingly.

"A perfectly arranged symphony in colours, I call it," said Howard.

"Fashion is represented by the Fitzharfords and old Lady Clansford; politics by Efford and the Beltons, and finance by Plaistow and Wirsch. That Griffinberg is coming is a proof that Sir Stephen has got 'a little railway' in his mind; there are several others who seem to have been thrown in, not to increase weight, but to lighten it. It will be rather amusing--a kind of menagerie which, under less skilful guidance than Sir Stephen's, might be sure to disagree and fight."

Stafford sighed.

"Oh, you'll be all right," he said; "but I don't quite see where I shall come in."

Howard laughed.

"My dear Stafford, there are some extremely pretty girls with whom you can flirt, and I've no doubt some of the men will join you in your eccentric attempts to drown yourself or break your neck. Is that the sun coming out, and is it going to clear?"

"I hope so," said Stafford, laughing. "For I prophesied a fine evening, and a lady was weak enough to take my word for it. Let us go and rake my father out of the library, and get him into the garden with a cigar."

"You may venture upon such an audacity, but not I," said Howard, with simulated fear. "I'll wait for you on the terrace."

Sir Stephen looked up with a frown as Stafford entered, and the dark-faced secretary stared aghast at the intrusion; but Sir Stephen's face cleared as he saw who it was.

"Back, Stafford?" he said. "What? Come into the garden--cigar? Certainly! You can finish up, can't you, Murray? Thanks!" He looked at his watch as they went through the hall. "I suppose some of the people will be here before long. Did Mr. Howard show you the list? Do you know any of them. Stafford?"

"Yes, I've met Lady Clansford and the Fitzharfords, of course; but most of them are too great and lofty. I mean that they are celebrated personages, out of my small track. One doesn't often meet Sir William Plaistow and Mr. Griffinberg at at homes and afternoon teas." Sir Stephen laughed.

"Oh, well, you mustn't let them bore you, you know, my boy. You must consider yourself quite free to cut off and amuse yourself some other way whenever you get tired of them."

"And leave it all to you, sir!" said Stafford, with a smile; but as he

spoke he drew a breath of relief; he should be free to help the beautiful, lovely girl of Herondale.

A few hours later the visitors arrived, and before dinner the superb drawing-room was, if not crowded, sufficiently well filled with the brilliant company.

Nearly all the guests were extremely wealthy, most of them were powerful, either in the region of politics or finance; and the fashionable world was represented by some beautiful women with dresses and diamonds above reproach, and some young men whose names stood high at Hurlingham and Prinses.

Stafford stood beside his father as Sir Stephen went from group to group, greeting one and another in his frank and genial yet polished manner, which grew warm and marked by scarcely repressed pride, as he introduced Stafford.

"My son, Lady Fitzharford. I think he has had the pleasure of meeting you? I scarcely know who are his friends: we have been separated so long! But we are restored to each other at last, I am happy to say! Lady Clansford, you know my boy? Ah, he has had the advantage of me all these years; he has not had to rush all over Europe, but has been able to bask in the sunshine of grace and beauty. Griffinberg, I want my son to know you. You and I are such old friends that you won't mind me showing that I am proud of him, eh?" and he laid his hand on Stafford's shoulder with an air of pride and affection.

"What a lovely place Sir Stephen has made of this, Mr. Orme," said Lady Clansford; "we were quite startled as we drove up, and simply bewildered when we got inside. This room is really--oh well, I'm beggared for adjectives!"

Stafford went about, listening to the encomiums on his father or the house, and making appropriate responses; but he was rather relieved when the butler announced dinner.

The dining-room received its meed of praise from the guests, and the elaborate menu caused some of the men to beam with inward satisfaction. It was a superb dinner, served with a stateliness which could not have been exceeded if royalty had been amongst the guests. The plate was magnificent, the flowers arranged by an artist's hand, in rich and yet chaste abundance. Stafford, as he looked from the bottom of the table to Sir Stephen at the head, felt with a thrill of pride that his father was the most distinguished-looking man of them all; and he noticed that in the tone of both the men and the women who addressed him there was that subtle note which indicates respect and the consideration which men and women of the world pay to one who has achieved greatness.

And yet, he noticed also, that not one of them was more perfectly at his ease than Sir Stephen, who laughed and talked as if his only aim was that of enjoyment, and as if he had never "planned a plan or schemed a scheme." Every now and then Stafford caught his father's eye, and each time he did so, Sir Stephen smiled at him with that air of pride and affection which he made no attempt to conceal or check. Once or twice Howard, too, caught his eye and smiled significantly as if he were saying, "How is this for a successful party?"

The dinner went swimmingly, and when the ladies had retired Sir Stephen begged the men to close up, and passed the wine freely. The talk was of everything but politics or business--Stafford remarked that not a word was said of either topic; and Sir Stephen told one or two stories admirably and set the laughter going.

"What sort of a night is it, Stafford?" he asked, presently.

Stafford drew the curtain from the open French window, and the moonlight streamed in to fight with the electric lamps.

"Shall we go out on to the terrace?" said Sir Stephen. "Quite warm enough, isn't it?"

They went out; servants brought coffee and cigars, and some of the gentlemen sauntered up and down the terrace, and others went down into the garden. Sir Stephen linked his arm in Stafford's, and they walked a little apart along one of the smooth paths.

"Not bored, I hope, my boy?" he asked.

"Good gracious, no, sir!" replied Stafford. "I don't think I remember a more successful dinner. Why should I be bored?"

"That's all right!" said Sir Stephen, pressing his arm. "I was afraid you might be. They are not a bad set--the men, I mean--if you keep them off their hobbies; and we managed to do that, I think."

"Yes, I noticed you managed them very well, sir," said Stafford. "What a lovely night." They had reached a gate opening on to the road, and they stood and looked at the view in silence for a moment, listening to a nightingale, whose clear notes joined with the voices and laughter of the guests.

Suddenly another sound came upon the night air; a clatter of horses' hoofs and the rattle of wheels.

"Someone driving down the road," said Sir Stephen.

"And coming at a deuce of a pace!" said Stafford. He opened the gate and looked up the road; then he uttered an ejaculation.

"By George! they've bolted!" he said, in his quiet way.

"What?" asked Sir Stephen, as he, too, came out. The carriage was tearing down the hill towards them in the moonlight, and Stafford saw that the horses were rushing along with lowered heads and that the driver had lost all control of them.

As they came towards the two men, Stafford set off running towards them. Sir Stephen called him; Stafford took no heed, and as the horses came up to him he sprang at the head of the nearer one. There was a scramble, a scuffing of hoofs, and a loud, shrill shriek from the interior of the carriage; then the horses were forced on to their haunches, and Stafford scrambled to his feet from the road into which he had been hustled.

The driver jumped down and ran to the horses' heads, the carriage door was flung open and the gentleman of the inn leapt out. Leapt out almost

on to Sir Stephen, who ran up breathless with apprehension on Stafford's account. The two men stood and looked at each other in the moonlight, at first with a confused and bewildered gaze, then Sir Stephen started back with a cry, a strange cry, which brought Stafford to his side.

At the same moment, the girl he had seen in the sitting-room at the inn, slipped out of the carriage.

"Are we safe?" she asked faintly. "How did we stop? Who--"

She stopped abruptly, and both she and Stafford stared at the two men who were standing confronting each other. Sir Stephen was as white as a ghost, and there was a look of absolute terror in his dark eyes. On the face of the other man was an enigmatical smile, which was more bitter than a sneer.

"You are all right?" said Stafford; "but I am afraid you were very much frightened!"

The girl turned to him. "You!" she said, recognising him. "Did you stop them?"

"Yes; it was easy: they had had almost enough," he said.

While they were speaking, the two elder men drew apart as if instinctively.

"_You_, Falconer?" murmured Sir Stephen, with ashy lips.

"Yes," assented the other, drily; "yes, I am here right enough. Which is it to be--friend or foe?"

Sir Stephen stood gnawing his lip for a moment, then he turned to Stafford.

"Stafford, this--most extraordinary--this is an old friend of mine. Falconer, this is my boy, my son Stafford!"

CHAPTER X.

"A very old friend of your father!" said Mr. Falconer, and his keen eyes looked into Stafford's as he held out his hand. Then he turned to Sir Stephen, whose face had resumed its usual serenity, and was fixed in the smile appropriate to the occasion. "Mr. Stafford Orme and I have met before to-day--"

Sir Stephen shot an enquiring glance from one to the other.

--"At the inn at the other side of the lake. My daughter, Maude, and I have been resting there for a few hours. Maude," he said to that young lady, who was standing looking on at the group generally, but more particularly, under her lids, at Stafford's tall figure; "this is a very strange meeting between old friends. Sir Stephen Orme and I haven't met for--how long ago is it, Orme?"

Sir Stephen shook his head, and raised his thick, dark brows.

"Too long for us to go back--especially in the presence of these young people, whom we are always trying to persuade that we are not old. I am delighted to see you, my dear young lady, and I am devoured by curiosity to know how it is that you are here."

"Well, we owe it to your son, Mr. Orme here, I should imagine, Sir Stephen," she replied. She had fully recovered her self-possession, and her manner and voice had all the tone of pride and indolence which Stafford had noticed when he met her at the inn. "If he had not stopped the horses, I suppose we should have either been killed or on the way to the nearest hospital. By the way, have you thanked Mr. Orme yet, father?"

"Not yet; and I shall find it difficult to do so," said Mr. Falconer.

"Thanks are poor return for one's life, Mr. Orme. I hope you were not hurt." He glanced at Stafford's usually immaculate dress-clothes, which were covered with dust on one side, and displayed a rent in the sleeve of the coat.

"Oh, that's all right, sir," returned Stafford, with all an Englishman's dread of a fuss. "They stopped short the moment I got hold of them, and I only slipped, and got up directly."

"You are not hurt, then, Stafford?" said Sir Stephen. "As I came up I thought, was afraid that you were smashed up--and I daresay I showed my fear: it's my only boy, Falconer."

He looked at his old friend meaningly, and Falconer promptly backed him up.

"Well, yes, you looked fairly startled and scared," he said. "But now, if the horses are all right, we may as well get on. We have given you quite trouble enough."

"The horses are all right, sir," said the driver. "I've managed to take up the broken trace; it was that that startled them, sir, and they'll be quiet enough now."

"Oh, but where are you going?" said Sir Stephen, with hospitable eagerness. "Were you not coming to us, to the Villa?"

"No; we were going to Keswick," said Mr. Falconer. "My daughter had a fancy for seeing the lake district, and we are making a kind of tour."

"You have no other engagement? I am delighted to hear it," said Sir Stephen. "Oh, I'll take no denial! What! Do you think I shall part with an old friend so quickly--and after such a--er--sudden and unexpected meeting! Miss Falconer, let me beg you to plead with your father for me!"

Mr. Falconer regarded Sir Stephen for a moment curiously, then looked towards his daughter. Her fine eyes rested on Stafford's face, and he could do not less than repeat his father's invitation.

"I hope you'll consent, Miss Falconer," he said. "You have no doubt been a little upset by the accident, and it is rather late to go on."

Pray stay with us!"

"Thanks. I shall be delighted." she said, with her indolent, regal air.

By this time, as they went towards the gate, some of the men who had been walking in the garden came up, and Howard's voice called out:

"Hallo, Stafford! Anything the matter?" "No; nothing whatever," said Stafford, promptly; and Sir Stephen seized the opportunity to steer the Falconers through the group. "Some old friends of mine, Mr. Howard; their carriage broke down--fortunately at our very door--this way, Falconer. Stafford, will you give Miss Maude your arm?"

"Strange, our meeting again so soon, and under such circumstances," she said. "You must have stopped those horses very pluckily. I thought that kind of thing was out of date now, and that gentlemen only called the police on such occasions. You are sure you are not hurt? I thought from your father's face you must be. He must be very fond of you to look so scared. He was as white as a ghost."

"He is fond of me, I hope and think," said Stafford. "Candidly, I did not think he would be so alarmed--but I don't know him very well yet--we have been living apart until just recently."

"Why, that is my case," she said. "My father and I were strangers until the other day, when he came from abroad--What a beautiful house! It is like a miniature palace."

She looked at the Villa and then at Stafford with renewed interest.

"I suppose your father is the Sir Stephen Orme of whom one has heard so much? I did not think of it until this moment."

Stafford was giving instructions that the Falconers' carriage should be seen to, and so was spared a reply. She stood in the hall looking round with a kind of indolent admiration and surprise, and perfectly self-possessed, though the hall was rapidly filling with the men from the garden.

"You would like to go to your rooms at once," said Sir Stephen, in his serene and courtly voice. "If you should be too tired to come down again to-night I will have some dinner sent up to you--but I hope you won't be. It would be a great disappointment."

"Oh, I am not at all tired," said Miss Falconer, as she followed the housekeeper and the two demure maids up the exquisite staircase.

Sir Stephen looked after them with a bland smile, then he turned to Stafford and caught his arm.

"Not hurt, my boy?" he said, in a tone of strained anxiety.

Stafford was beginning to get tired of the question, and answered rather impatiently: "Not in the least sir--why should I be! I'll change my things and be down in five minutes!"

"Yes, yes!" Sir Stephen still eyed him with barely concealed anxiety. "Strange coincidence, Stafford! I--I haven't seen Ralph Falconer for--for--ever so many years! And he is thrown at my very gate! And

they say there is no such thing as Fate--"

"Hadn't you better go into the drawing-room, sir," Stafford reminded him. "They'll think something has happened."

"Eh? Yes, yes, of course!" said Sir Stephen, with a little start as if he had been lost in thought; but he waited until he saw Stafford walk up the stairs, without any sign of a limp, before he followed his son's advice.

The butler, who was too sharp to need any instructions, quickly served a choice little dinner for the unexpected guests, and Stafford, who had waited in the hall, accompanied them into the dining-room. Miss Falconer had changed her travelling-dress for a rich evening-frock, and the jewels Stafford had noticed were supplemented by some remarkably fine diamonds.

"I wish you had come in time for dinner!" he said, as he conducted her to her seat.

"So do I!" she returned, serenely. "We are giving a great deal of trouble; and we are keeping you from your guests. The maid who waited on me told me that you had a large house party."

"Yes," said Stafford. "It is a kind of house-warming. My father intends settling in England for some time, I think," he added. "And he has built this place."

Mr. Falconer looked up from his plate in his alert, watchful way.

"Sir Stephen's plans rather uncertain?" he said. "I remember he always used to be rather erratic. Well, if he means settling, he's made himself a very cosy nest." He looked round the magnificent room with a curious smile. "A wonderful man, your father, Mr. Orme!"

"Yes?" said Stafford, with a non-committal smile.

"Yes; of course, I've heard of his great doings--who hasn't! Did you ever hear him speak of me--we were great friends one time?"

"No, I don't think I have," replied Stafford. "But as I was telling Miss Falconer, I have not seen very much of him." "Ah, yes, just so," assented Mr. Falconer, and he went on with his dinner.

Stafford had taken a seat at the table and poured out a glass of wine so that they might not hurry; but he felt that he need not have been anxious on that account, for the girl ate her dinner in a most leisurely manner, talking to him in her soft, slow voice and looking at him from under her half-closed lids. She talked of the scenery, of the quaint inns and hotels they had put up at, of the various inconveniences which she had suffered on the way; then suddenly she raised her lids and looked at him fully and steadily.

"I suppose the young lady we saw with you this morning is your sister?"

With all his natural simplicity, Stafford was a man of the world, and he did not redden or look embarrassed by the suddenness of the question and the direct gaze of the luminous eyes.

"No," he said. "I have neither sister nor brother--only my father. She was a friend."

"Oh," she said; then after a pause: "She was very pretty."

Stafford nodded. Like a flash floated before him the exquisite loveliness of Ida Heron.

"Do you think so?" he said, with affected indifference.

"Why, yes; don't you?" she retorted.

"Oh, yes," he assented; "but I didn't know whether you would; men and women so very seldom agree upon the question of looks. I find that most of the women I think pretty are considered next door to plain by my lady-friends."

"Well, there can't be any doubt as to your friend's good looks," she said. "She made rather a striking, not to say startling figure perched sideways on that horse, in the pelting rain. I suppose she is one of your neighbours?"

"Yes," replied Stafford, as easily and casually as he could, for the face still floated before him--"yes; but not a very near one. Let me give you some more wine."

"No, thanks. Father, haven't you nearly finished? Mr. Orme has kept us company so nicely that we've been tempted to forget that we are keeping him from his guests."

She rose, and with a peculiarly sinuous movement threw out the train of her dress, and swept languidly to the door Stafford offered her his arm and they entered the drawing-room.

Her appearance naturally caused a little sensation, for some of the men had learnt and told of the story of Stafford's plucky arrest of the bolting horses, and the people were curious to see the father and daughter who had been rescued, and who had proved to be friends of Sir Stephen.

By a sort of tacit understanding, Lady Clausford, who was a good-natured individual, was playing the part of hostess and general chaperon, and Stafford led Miss Falconer up to her.

Before a quarter of an hour had passed Miss Falconer seemed to be quite at home in her novel surroundings; and leaning back in her chair, and slowly fanning herself, received with perfect self-possession the attentions which her beauty, her costly dress, and her still more costly jewels merited. Presently Stafford heard Lady Clansford ask her to sing; and he went to conduct her to the piano.

"My music is upstairs in my box--but it does not matter: I will try and remember something," she said. "I wonder what you like?" She raised her eyes to his, as her fingers touched the keys. "The simple ballad would be rather out of place, wouldn't it? Do you know this thing of Wagner's?"

As she began to sing the talking died down and gradually ceased; and every eye was fixed upon her; for it was evident that she not only had

an exquisite voice, but knew how to use it. She sang like an artist, and apparently without the least effort, the liquid notes flowing from her red lips like the water of a mountain rill.

Stafford was surprised, almost startled, but as he stood beside her, he was thinking, strangely enough, not so much of the singer as of the girl he was going to meet on the morrow. When she had finished, there was a general murmur of applause, and Lady Clansford glided to the piano and asked her to sing again.

"You have a really wonderful voice, Miss Falconer. I don't think Melba ever sang that better."

"Melba's register is ever so much greater than mine," remarked Miss Falconer, calmly. "No, thanks; I won't sing again. I think I am a little tired."

She went back to her seat slowly, her fan moving languidly, as if she were too conscious of the worth of her voice to be affected by the murmurs of applause and admiration; and Stafford, as his eyes followed her, thought she resembled a superb tropical flower of rich and subtle colouring and soft and languorous grace.

None of the women would venture to sing after this exhibition, and one of the young men went to the piano and dashed off a semi-comic song which belated the tension produced by Miss Falconer's magnificent voice and style. Then the woman began to glance at the clock and rise and stand about preparatory to going to bed, and presently they went off, lingering, talking, and laughing, in the hall and in the corridors.

The men drifted into the billiard and smoking-room, and Sir Stephen started a pool. He had been at his very best in the drawing-room, moving about amongst the brilliant crowd, with a word for each and all, and pleased smile on his handsome face, and a happy, genial brightness in his voice. Once or twice Sir Stephen approached Mr. Falconer, who leant against the wall looking on with the alert, watchful eyes half screened behind his lids, which, like his daughter's had a trick of drooping, though with a very different expression.

"Your daughter has a magnificent voice, Falconer," Sir Stephen had said in a congratulatory voice; and Falconer had nodded.

"Yes. She's been well taught, I believe," he had responded, laconically; and Sir Stephen had nodded emphatically, and moved away.

"Will you play, Falconer?" he asked, as Stafford gave out the balls. "You used to play a good game."

Falconer shrugged his shoulders.

"Haven't played for years: rather look on," he said.

"Let me give you a cigar. Try these; they are all right, Stafford says."

Falconer seated himself in one of the lounges and looked at the players and round the handsome room in contemplative silence. Sir Stephen's eye wandered covertly towards him now and again, and once he said to

Stafford:

"See if Mr. Falconer has some whiskey, my boy?"

As Stafford went up to Mr. Falconer's corner he saw that Mr. Griffinberg and Baron Wirsch had joined him. The three men were talking in the low confidential tone characteristic of city men when they are discussing the sacred subject of money, and Stafford caught the words--"Sir Stephen"--"South African Railway."

Mr. Falconer looked round sharply as Stafford stood at his elbow.

"Eh? Whiskey? Oh, yes, thanks, I have some," he said.

As Stafford returned to the billiard-room, Falconer nodded after him.

"Is the son in this?" he asked, sharply.

"Oh, no," replied the baron, with a smile. "He knows nothing; he ees too young, too--vat do you say?--too vashionable, frivolous. No, Sir Stephen doesn't bring him in at all. You understand? He is ze ornamental, shleeping' pardner, eh?" And he chuckled.

Falconer nodded, and leaning forward, continued the conversation in a low voice. The men went off to bed one by one, and presently only Sir Stephen, Stafford and Falconer remained; and as the latter rose as if to retire, Sir Stephen laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't go yet! I should like to have a little chat with you--about old times."

Falconer sank into his seat again and took a fresh cigar, and Stafford left them.

CHAPTER XI.

Sir Stephen closed the door after him, then went back to the smoking-room and stood looking down at Falconer, who leant back in his chair with his cigar in his mouth and eyed Sir Stephen under half-closed lids with an expression which had something of mastery and power in it.

Sir Stephen bit at the end of his moustache, his thick black brows lowered, as if he scarcely knew how to begin the "chat," and Falconer waited without any offer of assistance. At last Sir Stephen said:

"You asked me outside just now, Falconer, if it was to be 'friend or foe?' I'm thinking the question ought to have come from me."

"Yes," assented Falconer, his eyes growing still narrower. "Yes, I suppose it ought."

"Would your answer have been the same as mine--'friends'?" asked Sir Stephen in a low voice.

Falconer was silent for a moment, then he said:

"It oughtn't to have been. If ever a man had cause to regard another as an enemy, I've had cause to regard you as one, Orme!"

Sir Stephen flushed, then went pale again.

"There is no use in raking up the past," he muttered.

"Oh, I've no need to rake it up; it's here right enough, without raking," retorted Falconer, and he touched his breast with his thick forefinger. "I'm not likely to forget the trick you played me; not likely to forget the man who turned on me and robbed me--"

"Robbed!" echoed Sir Stephen, with a dark frown.

Falconer turned his cigar in his mouth and bit at it.

"Yes, robbed. You seem to have forgotten: my memory is a better one than yours, and I'm not likely to forget the day I tramped back to the claim in that God-forsaken Australian hole to find that you'd discovered the gold while I'd been on the trail to raise food and money--discovered it and sold out--and cleared out!"

His eyes flashed redly and his mouth twitched as his teeth almost met in the choice Havana.

Sir Stephen threw out his hand.

"I heard you were dead," he said, hoarsely. "I heard that you had died in a street row--in Melbourne."

Falconer's heavy face was distorted by a sneer.

"Yes? Of course, I don't believe you: who would?"

"As Heaven is my witness--!" exclaimed Sir Stephen; but Falconer went on:

"You didn't wait to see if it were true or not; you cleared out before I'd time to get back, and you took precious good care not to make enquiries. No; directly your partner's back was turned you--sold him; got the price and levanted."

Sir Stephen paced up and down, his hands clenched behind him; his fine leonine head bent; then he stopped in front of the chair, and frowned down into the scowling face.

"Falconer, you wrong me--it was not so bad, so black as it looked. It's true I sold the claim; but I swear that I intended saving half for you. But news was brought in that you were dead--a man said that he had seen you fall, that you were dead and buried. I had to leave the camp the night the money was paid: it would not have been safe to remain: you know what the place was, and that the man who was known to have money carried his life in his hand. I left the camp and tramped south. Before a month had passed, the money had gone; if I had had any doubts of your death, it was too late to enquire; it would have been useless; as I tell you, the money was gone. But I hadn't any doubts; in simple truth, I thought you were dead."

Falconer looked round the luxurious room.

"You lost the money? But you appear to have picked it up again; you seem to be pretty flourishing, my friend; when you got on your feet again and made your pile, why didn't you find out whether your old pal was alive or dead?"

Sir Stephen was silent for a space, then he raised his head and met the other's accusing gaze unflinchingly.

"I'll tell you--I'll tell you the whole truth, Falconer; and if you can make excuse for me, if you can put yourself in my place--"

He drew his hand across his brow as if the sweat had broken out upon it. "The luck was dead against me for a time, the old luck that had haunted you and me; then it swung round completely--as it generally does when it changes at all. I was out in Africa, on the tramp, picking up a day's work now and again at the farms--you know the life! One day I saw a Kaffir boy playing with some rough stones--"

Falconer nodded.

"Diamonds. I fancy I've read an account of the great Sir Stephen Orme's first beginnings," he put in with a touch of sarcasm.

Sir Stephen reddened.

"I daresay. It was the start, the commencement of the luck. From the evening I took those stones in my hands--great Heaven! I can see the place now, the sunset on the hill; the dirty brat playing in the dust!--the luck has stood by me. Everything I touched turned out right. I left the diamond business and went in for land: wherever I bought land towns sprang up and the land increased in value a thousandfold. Then I stood in with the natives: you've heard of the treaty--"

Falconer nodded.

"The treaty that enabled you to hand over so many thousand square miles to the government in exchange for a knighthood."

"No," said Sir Stephen, simply. "I got that for another business; but I daresay the other thing helped. It doesn't matter. Then I--I married. I married the daughter of a man of position, a girl who--who loved and trusted me; who knew nothing of the past you and I know; and as I would rather have died than that she should have known anything of it, I--"

"Conveniently and decently buried it," put in Falconer. "Oh, yes, I can see the whole thing! You had blossomed out from Black Steve--"

Sir Stephen rose and took a step towards the door, then remembered that he had shut it and sank down again, his face white as ashes, his lips quivering.

--"To Sir Stephen Orme, the African millionaire, the high and lofty English gentleman with his head full of state secrets, and his safe full of foreign loans; Sir Stephen Orme, the pioneer, the empire maker--Oh, yes, I can understand how naturally you would bury the past--as you had buried your old pal and partner. The dainty and

delicate Lady Orme was to hear nothing--" Sir Stephen rose and stretched out his hand half warningly half imploringly.

"She's dead, Falconer!" he said, hoarsely. "Don't--don't speak of her! Leave her out, for God's sake!"

Falconer shrugged his shoulders.

"And this boy of yours--he's as ignorant as her ladyship was, of course?"

Sir Stephen inclined his head.

"Yes," he said, huskily. "He--he knows nothing. He thinks me--what the world sees me, what all the world, saving you, Falconer, thinks me: one who has risen from humble but honest poverty to--what I am. You have seen him, you can understand what I feel; that I'd rather die than that he should know--that he should think badly of me. Falconer, I have made a clean breast of it--I'm in your hands. I'm--I'm at your mercy. I appeal to you"--he stretched out his white, shapely hands--"you have a child of your own: she's as dear to you as mine is to me--I've watched you to-night, and I've seen you look at her as she moved about and talked and sang, with the look that my eyes wear when they rest on my boy. I am at your mercy--not only mine, but my son's future--"

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and drew a long breath.

Falconer leant back and smoked contemplatively, with a coolness, an indifference to the other's emotion which Sir Stephen found well-nigh maddening.

"Yes," said Falconer, after a pause, "I suppose your house of cards would come down with a crash if I opened my mouth say, at breakfast to-morrow morning, and told--well, all I know of the great Sir Stephen Orme when he bore the name of Black Steve. Even you, with all you colossal assurance, could not face it or outlive it. And as for the boy--it would settle his hash now and forever. A word from me would do it, eh, Orme? And upon my soul I don't know why I shouldn't say it! I've had it in my mind, I've kept it as a sweet morsel for a good many years. Yes, I've been looking forward to it. I've been waiting for the 'physiological moment,' as I think they call it; and it strikes me that it has arrived."

Sir Stephen's face grew strained, and a curious expression crept into it.

"If you ask me why you should not, I can give you no reason," he said. "If you were poor I should offer you money--more, a great deal more than I received for the old claim; but I can see that that would not tempt you to forego your revenge. Falconer, you are not poor; your daughter wears diamonds--"

Falconer shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I'm not in want of money. You're not the only man who has had a change of luck. No, you can't bribe me; even if I were hard up instead of rather flush, as I am, I wouldn't take a hundred thousand pounds for my revenge."

Sir Stephen rose. There was an ominous change in his manner. His nervousness and apprehension seemed to have suddenly left him, and in its place was a terrible, stony calmness, an air of inflexible determination.

"Good!" he said; and his voice had changed also, changed from its faltering tone of appeal to one of steadfast resolution, the steadiness of desperation. "I have made my appeal to you, Falconer, and I gather that I have failed to move you; that you intend to exact your revenge by--denouncing me!"

Falconer nodded coolly.

"And you think that I could endure to live under such a threat, to walk about with the sword of Damocles over my head? You ought to know me better, Falconer. I will not live to endure the shame you can inflict on me, I will not live to tempt you by the sight of me to take your revenge. I shall die to-night."

Falconer eyed him intently, and carefully selected a fresh cigar. When he had as carefully lit it, he said callously:

"That's your business, of course. I shouldn't venture to interfere with any plan of that kind. So you'd sneak out of it, eh, Orme? Sneak out of it, and leave that young fellow to bear the brunt? Well, I'm sorry for him! He seems the right sort--deuced good-looking and high-class--yes, I'm d----d sorry for him!"

Once again Sir Stephen's lips twitched and the big drops of sweat stood on his brow. He stood for a minute looking from right to left like a hunted animal at bay--then with something between a groan and a cry of savagery, he spring towards Falconer with his hands outstretched and making for his tormentor's throat.

Before he could sweep the table aside and get at him, Falconer whipped a revolver from his pocket and aimed it at Sir Stephen.

"You fool!" he said in his harsh, grating voice, "did you think I was such an idiot as to trust myself alone with you unarmed? Did you think I'd forgotten what sort of man you were, or imagined that you'd so changed that I could trust you? Bah! Sit down! Stand back, or, by Heaven, I'll shoot you as I would a dog!"

Sir Stephen shrank back, his hand to his heart, his eyes distended, his face livid as if he were choking and sank into a chair. Falconer returned the revolver into his pocket, and with his foot pushed the inlaid Oriental table towards his host and victim.

"There! Take some brandy! You're too old to play these tricks! That heart of yours was never worth much in the old days, and I daresay it's still more groggy. Besides, we're not in a mining camp or the backwoods now." He sneered. "We're in Sir Stephen Orme's palatial villa on Lake Bryndermere."

Sir Stephen stretched out his hand and felt for the decanter, as if he were suddenly blind and could not see it, and poured himself out some brandy. Falconer watched him narrowly, critically.

"Better? Look here, Orme, take my advice and keep a guard on your

emotions: you can't afford to have any with a heart like that."

He paused and waited until Sir Stephen's ashy face had resumed a less deathly pallor.

"And now I'll answer your appeal--I don't intend to denounce you!"

Sir Stephen turned to him with a gesture of incredulity.

"Sounds strange, doesn't it? Humph! Doesn't it strike you that I've had my revenge already? If there is a sweeter one than to see the man who has sold you grovelling at your feet, and praying for mercy, than I don't know it! The great Sir Stephen Orme, too!" He laughed sneeringly. "No, if I'd meant to give you away, Orme, I should have done it to-night in your swell drawing-room, with all your swell guests round you, with your son--ay, and my daughter--to hear the story--the story of Black Steve! But I didn't mean it, and I don't--"

Sir Stephen drew a long breath of relief, and drank some more brandy.

"Thank God!" he murmured. "What can I say--what can I do--to express my gratitude--my sense of your forbearance, Falconer?"

Falconer, with his eyes narrowed to slits, looked at him keenly.

"Oh, I'll dispense with your gratitude, Orme. We'll agree to forgive and--forget. This is the last word we'll say about it."

Sir Stephen, as if he could scarcely believe his ears, gazed at his magnanimous foe in silence.

"No half measures with me--you remember me of old," said Falconer. "The subject's done with," he moved his thick hand as he were sweeping it away. "Pass the whiskey. Thanks. Now, let's have the chat you kept me up for."

Sir Stephen wiped his lips and forced a smile.

"Tell me about yourself; what you have been doing since we--er--all this long time."

Falconer shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, it isn't as interesting a story as yours," he said. "I've just rubbed along with bad and good luck in streaks; fortunately for me, the good ones were thicker and more frequent than the bad ones. Like yourself I married; like yourself, I'm a widower. I've one child--Maude. She's been at school and under the care of some people on the Continent, while I've been at work; and I've come to England now to settle down. That tells enough of my story. I know yours, as the rest of the world does. You're famous, you see."

There was a pause; then he looked over his glass, and said:

"What's your little game at the present moment, Orme?"

Sir Stephen looked at him interrogatively, as if he were still rather confused by the terrible scene which they had gone through.

"Why have you built this place and got all these people here?" said Falconer. "I know enough of Wirsch and Griffinberg and the Beltons to

be aware that they wouldn't come down to the lakes at this time of the year unless there was something worth coming for, something--and a pretty good sum--to be made."

Sir Stephen looked down at the floor for a moment, as if he were considering; then he leant forward.

"I'll tell you," he said, with an air of decision, and with a return of his usual coolness and aplomb. A dash of colour rose to his face, his fine eyes grew bright; he was the "man of affairs," the great financier again. "It's Africa this time," he said, in a low voice, and with a glance at the door. "I've another treaty--"

Falconer nodded.

"I am making for a concession--a charter from the government." Falconer nodded again.

"And I want a railway from Danville to Bualbec." His voice almost sank to a whisper. "Griffinberg, Wirsch, and the rest are with me--or nearly so--I have got them down to clench the matter. There are millions in it--if I can bring it off; there is what is worth more than millions to me--"

Falconer nodded.

--"A peerage for Sir Stephen Orme," said Falconer, with a grim smile.

"For Sir Stephen Orme's boy!" said Sir Stephen, with a flush, and a flash of the dark eyes. "It is for his sake that I am making this last throw; for my boy's, Falconer. For myself I am content--why shouldn't I be? But for him--ah, well, you've seen him! You'll understand!"

Falconer leant back and smoked in silence.

"Plaistow is working the Colonial Office, the Beltons are feeling their way in the city; Wirsch--but you know how the thing is done! I've got them down here that they may work it quietly, that I may have them under my eye--"

"And the lords and ladies--they're to have a finger in the pie because, though they can't help you in the African business, they can in the matter of the peerage?"

Sir Stephen smiled. "You'll stand in with us, Falconer? Don't refuse me! Let me make some reparation--some atonement for the past!" He rose and stood smiling, an imposing figure with his white hair and brilliant eyes. Falconer got up slowly and stiffly.

"Thanks. I'll think it over. It's a big thing, as you say, and it will either make you--"

--"Or break me!" said Sir Stephen, but he laughed confidently.

Falconer nodded.

"I'll go up now," he said.

Sir Stephen went to the door with him, and held out his hand.

"Good-night, Falconer!" he said. "Thank you--for my boy's sake!"

Falconer took the warm hand in his cold one and held it for a moment, then dropped it.

"Good-night!" he said, with a nod and a sidelong glance.

Sir Stephen went back and poured himself out another _liqueur_ glass of brandy and heaved a sigh of relief. But it would have been one of apprehension if he could have seen the cruel smile which distorted Falconer's face as he went through the exquisitely beautiful hall and corridors to the luxurious room which had been allotted to him.

There was in the smile and the cold glitter of the eyes the kind of look which the cat wears when it plays with a mouse.

CHAPTER XII.

Ida walked home through the rain very thoughtfully; but not sadly; for though it was still pelting in the uncompromising lake fashion, she was half conscious of a strange lightness of the heart, a strange brightness in herself, and even in the rain-swept view, which vaguely surprised and puzzled her. The feeling was not vivid enough to be happiness, but it was the nearest thing to it.

And without realising it, she thought, all the way home, of Stafford Orme. Her life had been so secluded, so solitary and friendless, that he had come into it as a sudden and unexpected flash of sunlight in a drear November day. It seemed to her extraordinary that she should have met him so often, still more extraordinary the offer he had made that morning. She asked herself, as she went with quick, light step along the hills, why he had done it; why he, who was rich and had so many friends--no doubt the Villa would be full of them--should find any pleasure in learning to herd cattle and count sheep, to ride about the dale with only a young girl for company.

If anyone had whispered, "It is because he prefers that young girl's society to any other's; it is because he wants to be with you, not from any desire to learn farming," she would have been more than surprised, would have received this offer of a solution of the mystery with a smile of incredulity; for there had been no candid friend to tell her that she possessed the fatal gift of beauty; that she was one of those upon whom the eyes of man cannot look without a stirring of the heart, and a quickening of the pulse. Vanity is a strong plant, and it flourishes in every soil; but it had found no root in Ida's nature. She was too absorbed in the round of her daily tasks, in the care of her father and her efforts to keep the great place from going to rack and ruin, to think of herself; and if her glass had ever whispered that she was one of the loveliest of the daughters of Eve, she had turned a deaf ear to it.

No; she assured herself that it was just a whim of Mr. Orme's, a passing fancy and caprice which would soon be satisfied, and that he would tire of it after a few days, perhaps hours. Of course, she was wrong to humour the whim; but it had been hard to refuse him, hard to

seem churlish and obstinate after he had been so kind on the night her father had frightened her by his sleep-walking; and it had been still harder because she had been conscious of a certain pleasure in the thought that she should see him again.

For the first time, as she went into the great silent house, she realised how lonely her life was, how drear and uneventful. Now and again, while cantering along the roads on the big chestnut, she had met other girls riding and driving: the Vaynes, the Avorys, and the Bannerdales; had heard them talking and laughing merrily and happily, but it had never occurred to her to envy them, to reflect that she was different to other girls who had friends and companions and girlish amusements. She had been quite content--until now. And even now she was not discontented; but this acquaintanceship which had sprung up so strangely between her and Mr. Orme was like the touch of a warm hand stretched out from the great world, and its sudden warmth awoke her to the coldness, the dreariness of her life.

As she entered the hall, Jessie came in by the back door with her apron full of eggs.

"I saw you come in, Miss Ida, so I thought I'd just bring you these to show you; they're laying finely now, ain't they?"

Ida looked round, from where she stood going through the form of drying her thick but small boots against the huge log that glowed on the wide dog-iron.

"Yes: that is a splendid lot, Jessie!" she said, with a smile. "You will have some to send to market for the first time this season."

"Yes, miss," said Jessie, deftly rolling the eggs into a basket. "But I'm thinking there won't be any need to send them to Bryndermere market. Jason's just been telling me that the new folks up at Brae Wood have been sending all round the place for eggs and butter and cream and fowls, and Jason says that he can get so much better prices from them than from Bryndermere. He was thinking that he'd put aside all the cream he could spare and kill half a dozen of the pullets--if you don't object, Miss Ida?"

Ida's face flushed, and she looked fixedly at the fire. Something within her protested against the idea of selling the dairy produce to the new people at Brae Wood; but she struggled against the feeling.

"Oh yes; why not, Jessie?" she said; though she knew well enough.

"Well, miss," replied Jessie, hesitatingly, and with a questioning glance at her young mistress's averted face, "Jason didn't know at first; he said that selling the things at the new house was different to sending 'em to market, and that you mightn't like it; that you might think it was not becoming."

Ida laughed.

"That's pride on Jason's part; wicked pride, Jessie," she said. "If you sell your butter and eggs, it can't very much matter whether you sell them at the market or direct. Oh, yes: tell Jason he can let them have anything we can spare."

Jessie's face cleared and broke into a smile: she came of a race that looks after the pennies and loves a good "deal."

"Thank you, miss!" she said, as if Ida had conferred a personal favour. "And they'll take all we can let 'em have, for they've a mortal sight of folk up there at Brae Wood. William says that there's nigh upon fifty bedrooms, and that they'll all be full. His sister is one of the kitchen-maids--there's a cook from London, quite the gentleman, miss, with, rings on his fingers and a piano in his own room--and Susie says that the place is all one mass of ivory and gold, and that some of the rooms is like heaven--or the queen's own rooms in Windsor Castle."

Ida laughed.

"Susie appears to have an enviable acquaintance with the celestial regions and the abode of royalty, Jessie."

"Yes, miss; of course, it's only what she've read about 'em. And she says that Sir Stephen--that's the gentleman as owns it all--is a kind of king, with his own body servant and a--a--I forget what they call him; it's a word like a book-case."

"A secretary," suggested Ida.

"Yes, that's it, miss! But that he's quite simple and pleasant-like, and that he's as easily pleased as if he were a mere nobody. And Susie says that she runs out after dinner and peeps into the stables, and that it's full of horses and that there's a dozen carriages, some of 'em grand enough for the Lord Mayor of London; and that there's a head coachman and eight or nine men and boys under him. I'm thinking, Miss Ida, that the Court"--the Court was the Vaynes' place--"or Bannerdale Grange ain't half so grand."

"I daresay," said Ida. "Is the lunch nearly ready, Jessie?"

"Yes, miss; I was only waiting for you to come in. And Suzie's seen the young Mr. Orme, Sir Stephen's son, and she says that he's the handsomest gentleman she ever saw; and she heard Mr. Davis tell one of the new hands that Mr. Stafford was a very great gentleman amongst the fashionable people in London; and that very likely he'd marry one of the great ladies that is coming down. Mr. Davis says that a duchess wouldn't be too fine for him, he stands so high; and yet, Susie says, he's just as pleasant and easy as Sir Stephen, and that he says 'thank you' quite like a common person. But there, how foolish of me! I'm standing here chattering while you're wet through. Do ye run up and change while I put the lunch on, Miss Ida, dear!"

When Ida came down her father was already at the table with his book open at his elbow, and he scarcely looked up as she went to her place.

Now, as a rule, she gave him an account of her rides and walks, and told him about the cattle and the progress of the farm generally, of how she had seen a kingfisher or noticed that the trout were rising, or that she had startled a covey of partridges in the young wheat; to all of which he seemed scarcely ever to listen, nodding his head now and again and returning often to his book before she had finished speaking; but to-day she could not tell him of her morning walk and her meeting with Stafford Orme.

She would have liked to have assured him that he had done Sir Stephen an injustice in thinking him guilty of buying the Brae Wood land in an underhand way, but she knew it would be of no use to do so; for once an idea had got into Mr. Heron's head it was difficult to destroy it. For the first time in her life, too, she was concealing something from him. Once or twice she tried to say:

"Father, the gentleman who was fishing on the river was Sir Stephen Orme's son; I have met him two or three times since, and he has asked me to meet him to-morrow;" but she could not.

She knew he would fly into one of the half-childish passions in which he could not be persuaded to listen to reason, and that he would insist upon the breaking off of her acquaintance with Mr. Orme; and there was so much pain in the mere thought of it that her courage failed her. If she were not to meet him, or if she met him, and told him that she could not remain with him, must not speak to him again, it would be tantamount to telling him that she did not believe his father was innocent; and she did believe it. Though she knew so little of Mr. Orme, she felt that she could trust him.

So she sat almost silent, thinking of what Jessie had told her, and wondering why Stafford Orme should leave the gay party at the Villa to ride with her. Once only in the course of the meal did her father speak. He looked up suddenly, with a quick, almost cunning, glance, and said:

"Can you let me have some money, Ida? I want to order some books. There's a copy of the Percy 'Reliques' in the catalogue I should like to buy."

"How much is it, father?" she asked.

"Oh, five pounds will do," he said, vaguely. "There are one or two other books."

She made a hasty calculation: five pounds was a large sum to her; but she smiled as she said:

"You are very extravagant, dear. There is already a copy of the 'Reliques' in the library."

He looked confused for a moment, then he said:

"But not with these notes--not with these notes! They're valuable, and the book is cheap."

"Very well, dear," she responded; and she went to the antique bureau and, unlocking it, took a five-pound note from a cedar box.

He watched her covertly, with a painful eagerness.

"I suppose you have a large nest egg there, eh, Ida?" he remarked, with a quavering laugh.

"No: a very little one," she responded. "'Not nearly enough to pay the quarterly bills. But never mind, dear; there it is. You must show me the books when they come; I never saw the last you ordered, you know!'"

He took the note with an assumption of indifference but with a gleam of satisfaction in his sunken eyes.

"Didn't you?" he said. "I must have forgotten. You're always so busy; but I'll show you these, if you'll remind me. You must be careful of the money, Ida; you must keep down the expenses. We're poor, very poor, you know; and the cost of living and servants is very great--very great."

He wandered off to the library, muttering to himself, with his book under his arm, and the five-pound note gripped tightly in the hand which he had thrust into the pocket of his dressing-gown; and Ida, as she put on her habit and went into the stable-yard to have the colt saddled, sighed as she thought that it would be nice to have just, for once, enough money to meet all the bills and buy all the books her father coveted.

But her melancholy was not of long duration. The colt was in high spirits, and the task of impressing him with the fact that he had now reached a responsible age and must behave like a horse, with something else before him in life than kicking up his heels in the paddock, soon drove the thought of their poverty from her mind and sent the blood leaping warmly and wildly in her veins.

She spent the afternoon in breaking in the colt, and succeeded in keeping Stafford Orme out of her thoughts; but he slid into them again as she sat by the drawing-room fire after dinner--the nights are often cool in the dales all through early summer--and recalled the earnestness in his handsome face when he pleaded to be allowed to "help her."

She sat up for some little time after her father had gone to bed, and as usual, she paused outside his door and listened. All was quiet then; but as she was brushing her hair she thought she heard his door open.

She laid down the brush and stood battling with the sudden fear which possessed her; then she stole out on to the corridor. The old man was standing at the head of the stairs as if about to descend; and though she could not see his face she knew that he was asleep.

She glided to him noiselessly and put her hand upon his arm softly. He turned his sightless eyes upon her, evidently without seeing her, and, fighting against the desire to cry out, she led him gently back to his room.

He woke as they crossed the threshold, woke and looked at her in a stupefied fashion.

"Are you ill, father? Is there anything you want?" she asked, as calmly as she could.

"No," he replied. "I am quite well; I do not want anything. I was going to bed--why have you called me?"

She remained with him for a few minutes, then left the room, turning the key in the door. When she had gone he stood listening with his head on one side; then he opened his hand and looked with a cunning smile at the five-pound note which had been tightly grasped in it.

"She didn't see it; no, she didn't see it!" he muttered; and he went stealthily to the bed and thrust it under the pillow.

CHAPTER XIII.

The morning broke with that exquisite clearness which distinguishes the lakes when a fine day follows a wet one; and, despite her anxiety on her father's account, Ida, as she went down-stairs, was conscious of that sense of happiness which comes from anticipation. She made her morning tour of inspection of the stables and the dairy, and ordered the big chestnut to be saddled directly after breakfast.

When her father came down she was relieved to find that he seemed to be in his usual health; and in answer to her question whether he had slept well, he replied in the affirmative, and was mildly surprised that she should enquire. Directly he had gone off to the library she ran upstairs to put on her habit.

For the first time she was struck by its shabbiness; she had never given a thought to it before. Her evening-dresses, though plain and inexpensive, were always dainty and fresh, but she wore her habit as long as it would hold together, and cared nothing for the fact that her hat was stained by the rain: they were her "working clothes," and strictly considered as such. But this morning she surveyed the skirt ruefully, and thought of the trim and apparently always new habits which the Bannerdale girls wore; and she brushed it with a care which it had never yet received. As a rule she wore a black scarf, or none at all; but as she looked at herself in the glass she was not satisfied, and she found a scarlet tie which she had bought in a fit of extravagance, and put it on. The touch of colour heightened the beauty of her clear ivory face and brightened up the old habit; but she looked at herself in the glass with something like shamefacedness: why was she so anxious about her appearance this morning of all the mornings? For an instant she was tempted to snatch off the tie; but in the end she let it remain; and she brushed the soft tendrils of her hair at her forehead with unusual care before she fastened on her hat.

Her father was walking up and down the terrace slowly as she came out, and he raised his head and looked at her absently.

"I shall probably ride into Bryndermere, father," she said. "Shall I post your letters? I know you will be anxious for that one to the book-sellers to go," she added, with a smile.

His eyes dropped and he seemed disconcerted for a minute, then he said:

"No, no; I'll send it by Jason; I've not written it yet;" and he turned away from her and resumed his pacing to and fro.

Ida went to the stable-yard and got on to Rupert by the aid of the stone "mounting block" from which Charles the Second had climbed, laughingly, to the white horse which figures in so many pictures of the Merry Monarch, and rode out of the court-yard, watched with pride by Jason. Before she had gone far he ran after her.

"If you're riding by West Hill, Miss Ida, perhaps you'd look at the

cattle-shed there. Williams says that the roof's falling in."

"Very well," she called back in her clear voice.

"Oh, and, Miss Ida, there's a big stone washed out of the weir; I'm thinking it ought to be put back or we'll have the meadows above flooded this winter."

She laughed and nodded and put Rupert to a trot, for she knew that while she was within hearing Jason would bombard her with similar tales of woe. Not a slate slid from the old roof of the Hall, or a sheep fell lame, but the matter was referred to her.

She rode down the road in the sunlight, the big chestnut moving under her as if he were on springs and she were a feather, and, half unconsciously, she began to hum an air--not one of those modern ones one hears in many drawing-rooms, but an old-fashioned melody which she had found in an ancient music-book in the antique cabinet beside the grand piano. She left the road where it touched the wild moorland of the valley, and Rupert broke into a canter, Donald and Bess, settling into the stride with which they managed to keep up with the big horse.

She had resolved that she would not ride straight to the stream, and she kept up the hill-side, but her eyes wandered to the road expectantly now and again; but there was no sign of a horseman, and after half an hour had passed a sense of disappointment rose within her. It was quite possible that he had forgotten the engagement; perhaps on reflection he had seen that she was quite right in her objections to his strange proposal, and he would not come. A faint flush rose to her face, and she turned Rupert and rode up and over the hill where she could not see the road. But she had no sooner got on top than she remembered that no time had been mentioned, or, if it had, that she had forgotten it. She turned and rode up the hill again, and looking down, saw Stafford riding along the valley in desperate haste, and yet looking about him uncertainly. Her heart beat with a quickened pulse, sending the delicate colour into her face, and she pulled up, and, leaning forward with her chin in her hand, watched him dreamily.

He rode a heavier horse than Adonis; and he had made a change in his dress; in place of the riding-suit, which had smacked of London and Hyde Park, he wore a rough but light coat, thick cord breeches, and brown leather gaiters. She smiled as she knew that he had tried to make himself look as much like a farmer as possible; but no farmer in the dales had that peculiar air of birth and breeding which distinguished Stafford Orme; the air which his father had been so quick to detect and to be proud of.

She noticed how well he sat the great horse, with what ease and "hands" he rode over the rough and treacherous ground. Suddenly he turned his head and saw her, and with a wave of his hand came galloping up to her, with a smile of relief and gladness on his handsome face, as he spoke to the dogs, who clamoured round him.

"I was so afraid I had missed you," he said. "I am late, am I not? Some people kept me after breakfast."

"You are not late; I don't think any time was mentioned," she responded, quickly, though her heart was beating with a strange and novel sensation of pleasure in his presence. "I scarcely expected you."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Not expect me! But why?"

"I thought you might change your mind," she said.

He checked a quick response, and said instead:

"And now, where do we go first? You see I have got a bit heavier horse. He's a present, also, from my father. What do you think of him?"

She eyed him gravely and critically.

"He's nice-looking," she said, "but I don't like him so well as the one you rode yesterday. Didn't I see him slip just now, coming up the hill?"

"Did he?" said Stafford. "I didn't notice. To tell you the truth, I was so delighted at seeing you that I don't think I should have noticed if he had tumbled on his nose."

"Oh, it wasn't much of a slip," she said, quickly, to cover her slight confusion at his candid confession. "Shall we go down to the sheep first?"

"Anywhere you like," he assented, brightly. "Remember, I'm your pupil."

She glanced at him and smiled.

"A very big pupil."

"But a very humble one," he said. "I'm afraid you'll add, 'a very stupid one,' before long."

As they rode down hill, Stafford stole a look at her unobserved. Ever since he had left her yesterday her face had haunted him, even while Maude Falconer, in all her war paint and sparkling with jewels, had been singing, even in the silent watches of the night, when--strange thing for him!--he had awakened from a dream of her; he had recalled the exquisitely lovely face with its grave yet girlish eyes, and he felt now, with a thrill, that she was even more lovely than she had been in his thoughts and his dreams; that the nameless charm which had haunted him was stronger, more subtle, than even his fancy had painted it. He noticed the touch of colour just below her white slender column of a neck, and wondered why no other woman had ever thought of wearing a crimson tie with her habit.

"What a grand morning," he said. "I don't think I ever saw a morning like this, so clear and bright; those hills there look as though they were quite near."

"It's the rain," she explained. "It seems to wash the atmosphere. My father says there is only one other place which has this particular clearness and brightness after rain: and that's Ireland. There are the sheep. Now," she smiled, "do you know how to count them?"

He stared at her.

"You begin at number one, I suppose," he said.

She smiled.

"But where is number one?"

She spoke to Donald in a low voice, then the collie began to work the sheep up into a heap; Bess assisting with her sharp yap.

"Now they're ready," said Ida. "You must be quick."

Stafford began to count, but the sheep moved and the ones he had counted got mixed up with the others, and he began again and yet again, until he turned with a puzzled and furrowed brow.

"I can't count them," he said. "They won't keep still for a single moment."

She turned to him with a smile.

"There are fifty-two," she said.

"Do you mean to say that you've counted them already?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; I could have counted them twice over by this time. Now, begin again, and begin from the farthest row; and remember when you come to a black one. Keep your eye on that one and start again front him. It's quite easy when you know how." He began again.

"I make it forty-eight."

She shook her head and laughed.

"That would be four missing, and we should have to hunt for them. But they are all there. Try again." He tried--and made it fifty-six.

"Didn't I tell you that I was an idiot!" he said, in despair.

"Oh, you can't expect to learn the first time," she said, consolingly. "It was weeks before I could do it; and I almost cried the first few times I tried: they would move just as I was finishing."

"Oh, well, then I can hope to get it in time," he said. "Did it ever strike you that though we think ourselves jolly clever, that there are heaps of things which a workingman--the men we look down upon--can do which we couldn't accomplish if it were to save our lives. For instance, I couldn't make a horseshoe if my existence depended upon it, and yet it looks as easy as--"

--"Counting sheep," she finished, with a twinkle in her grey-blue eyes.

"Just so," he said, with a laugh. "Shall I have another try?"

"Oh, no; you'd be here all day; and we've got to see if the others are all right; but first I think we'd better go and look at the weir; Jason says that a stone has got washed down, and that means that when the autumn rains come the meadows would be flooded."

"All right: I'm ready," he said, with bright alacrity. "I'm enjoying this. I know now why you look so happy and contented. You're of some use in the world, and I--the rest of us--That's the weir?" he broke off to enquire, as they came in sight of a rude barrier of stones which partially checked the stream.

"That is it," she said. "And Jason is right. Some of the big stones have been washed down. What a nuisance! We shall have to get some men from Bryndermere to put them up again."

Stafford rode up to the weir and looked at it critically.

"Thank Heaven I haven't got to count the stones!" he said. "If you'll kindly hold my horse--he's not so well trained as yours, and would bolt, I'm afraid." He slipped from the saddle as he spoke, and she caught the reins.

"What are you going to do? she asked.

"I don't know yet," Stafford called back, as he waded into the river.

She held the horse and sat reposeful in the saddle and watched him with a smile upon her face. But it grew suddenly grave as she saw Stafford stoop and put his arms round one of the fallen stones; and she cried to him:

"Oh, you can't lift them; it's no use trying!"

Stafford apparently did not hear her, for, exerting all his strength, he lifted the big stone and gradually slid and hoisted it into its place. Then he attacked the other two, and with a still greater effort raised them into a line with their fellows.

Ida watched him as--well, as one watches some "strong man" going through his performance.

It was a well-nigh incredible feat, and she held her breath as one stone followed the other. It seemed to her incredible and impossible, because Stafford's figure was slight and graceful, and he performed the feat with the apparent ease which he had learnt in the 'varsity athletic sports.

The colour rose to her face and her heart beat quickly. There is one thing left for women to worship; and they worship it readily--and that is strength. Stafford could not count sheep--any woman could do that--but he could do what no woman could do: lift those great stones into their places.

So that, as he waded out of the river, she smiled on him instead of at him--which is a very different thing--as she said:

"How strong you must be! I should have thought it would have required two or three men to lift those stones."

"Oh, it's easy enough, as easy as--counting sheep when you know how."

She laughed.

"But you must be very wet," she said, glancing at the water as it dripped from his clothes.

"Oh, it's all in the day's work," he said, cheerfully, more than cheerfully, happily. "Now for the steers."

"They're in the dale," she said; and she looked at him as she spoke with a new interest, with the interest a woman feels in the presence of her master, of the man who can move mountains.

He shook the water from him and rode at her side more cheerfully than he had done hitherto, for he had, so to speak, proved his helpfulness. He might be an idiot, but he could lift weir stones into their place.

"There they are," she said. "And, oh, dear! One of them has got loose. There ought to be fourteen and there are only thirteen!"

"Good heavens! You must have eyes like a hawk's"

She laughed. "Oh, no; I'm used to it, that is all. Now, where can it be? I thought all the fences were mended. I must find it!"

"Stop!" he said. "At any rate, I can find a cow--bullock--steer. Let me go. You wait here."

He rode off as he spoke, and she pulled up the big chestnut and looked after him. Once more the question rose to perplex her: why had he come, why was he riding about the dale with her, counting sheep, wading in the stream, lifting weir stones, and herding cattle? It seemed to be so strange, so inexplicable. And as she followed him with her eyes, his grace and strength were impressed upon her, and she dwelt upon them dreamily. Were there many such men in the world of which she knew so little, or was he one alone, and unique? And how good, how pleasant it was to have him with her, to talk to her, to help her! She had often longed for a brother, and had pictured one like this, strong and handsome, with frank eyes and smiling lips--someone upon whom she could lean, to whom she could go when she was in trouble.

A shout awoke her from her reverie; and looking up she saw the missing steer forcing its way through a hedge on top of a bank. Stafford was riding after it at an easy canter and coming straight for the bank. The steer plunged through the hedge and floundered through the wide ditch, and Ida headed it and drove it towards the rest of the herd. Then she turned in her saddle to warn Stafford of the ditch; but as she turned he was close upon the bank, and she saw the big hunter rise for the leap.

A doubt as to how he would land rose in her mind, and she swung Rupert round; and as she did so, she saw the hunter crash through the hedge, stumble at the ditch, and fall, lurching forward, on its edge.

No man alive could have kept his seat, and Stafford came off like a stone thrown from a catapult, and lay, face downwards, in the long, wet grass.

Something like a hot iron shot through Ida's heart, and sent her face white, and she rode up to him and flung herself from Rupert and knelt beside the prostrate form.

He lay quite still; and she knew quite well what had happened: that he had fallen on his head and stunned himself.

She remembered, at that moment, that she herself had once so fallen; but the remembrance did nothing to soften her present anxiety. She knelt beside him and lifted his head on her knee, and his white face smote her accusingly. He was still, motionless so long that she began to fear--was he dead? She asked herself the question with a heavy pulsation of the heart, with a sense of irrevocable loss. If he was dead, then--then--what had she lost!

Trembling in every limb, she laid her hand upon his heart. It beat, but slowly, reluctantly. She looked round her with a sense of helplessness. She had never been placed in such a position before. Not far from her was a mountain rill, and she ran to it with unsteady steps and soaked her handkerchief in it, and bathed the white, smooth forehead.

Even at that moment she noticed, half unconsciously, the clear-cut, patrician features, the delicate lines of the handsome face.

He had come to this mishap in his attempt to help her. He was dying, perhaps, in her service. A thrill ran through her, a thrill that moved her as by an uncontrollable impulse to bend still lower over him so that her lips almost touched his unconscious ones. Their nearness, the intent gaze of her eyes, now dark as violets, seemed to make themselves felt by him, seemed by some mysterious power to call him back from the shadow-land of unconsciousness. He moved and opened his eyes.

She started, and the colour flooded her face as if her lips had quite touched his, and her eyes grew heavy as, breathing painfully, she waited for him to entirely recover his intelligence and to speak.

"The steer!" he said at last, feebly.

She moistened her lips, and looked away from him as if she were afraid lest he should see what was in her eyes. "The steer is all right; but--but you!"

He forced a laugh. "Oh, I'm all right, too," he said. He looked around hazily. "I must have come a smasher over that bank!"

Then he saw that he was lying with his head upon her knee, and with a hot flush, the man's shame for his weakness in the presence of a woman, he struggled into a sitting posture and looked at her, looked at her with the forced cheerfulness of a man who has come an unforeseen, unexpected cropper of the first magnitude.

"It was my fault. You--you were right about the horse: he ought not to have slipped--Where's my hat? Oh here it is. The horse isn't lame, I hope?"

"No," she said, setting her teeth in her great effort to appear calm and unmoved. "He is standing beside Rupert--" She had got thus far when her voice broke, and she turned her face away quickly; but not so quickly that he did not see her exceeding pallor, the heavy droop of the lids, the sweep of the dark lashes on her white cheek.

"Why--what's the matter, Miss Heron?" he asked, anxiously, and with all a man's obtuseness. "_You_ didn't happen to come to grief in any way? I

didn't fall on you?--or anything? I--"

She tried to laugh, tried to laugh scornfully; for indeed she was filled with scorn for this sudden inexplicable weakness, a weakness which had never assailed her before in all her life, a weakness which filled her breast with rage; but from under the closed lids two tears crept and rolled down her cheek; and against her will she made confession of this same foolish weakness.

"It is nothing: I am very foolish--but I--I thought you were badly hurt--for the moment that you might even be--killed!"

He staggered to his feet and caught her hand and held it, looking at her with that look in a man's eyes which is stronger and fiercer than fire, and yet softer than water; the look which goes straight to a woman's heart.

"And you cared--cared so much?" he said, in a voice so low that she could scarcely hear it, hushed by the awe and wonder of passion.

She tried to withdraw her hand, biting her lips, setting them tightly, in her battle for calmness and her old hauteur and indifference; but he held the small hand firmly, felt it quiver and tremble, saw the violet eyes raised to his with a troubled wonder in them; and her name sprang to his lips:

"Ida!" he breathed.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Ida!" The name had sprung from his lips, from his heart, almost unconsciously; it did not seem strange to him, for he knew, as he spoke it, that he had called her so in his thoughts, that it had hovered on his lips ever since he had heard it. But to her--Who shall describe the subtle emotion which thrills through a girl's heart when she hears, for the first time from a strange man's lips, the name whose use hitherto has been reserved for her kith and kin?

She stood erect, but with her head bent, her eyes fixed on the ground, the name, his voice, ringing in her ears; her heart was beating almost painfully, as if with weight of a novel kind of fear, that yet was not altogether fear. Stafford looked at her with the man's, the lover's eagerness, but her face told him nothing. She was so ignorant of the very A B C of love that there was no start of surprise, no word or movement which might guide him; but his instant thought was that she was offended, angry.

"Forgive me!" he said. "You are angry because I called you--Ida! It was wrong and presumptuous; but I have learned to think of you by your name--and it slipped out. Are you very angry? Ah, you knew why I called you so? Don't you know that--I love you!"

She raised her eyes for a moment but did not look at him; they were fixed dreamily on the great hills in the distance, then drooped again, and her brows came together, her lips straightened with a still more marked expression of trouble, doubt, and wonder.

"I love you," he said, with the deep note of a man's passion in his voice. "I didn't mean to tell you, to speak--I didn't know until just now how it was with me: you see I am telling you everything, the whole truth! You will listen to me?"

For she had made a movement of turning away, a slow, heavy gesture as if she were encumbered by chains, as if she were under some spell from which she could not wake.

"I will tell you everything, at the risk of making you angry, at the risk of your--sending me away."

He paused for a moment, as if he were choosing his words with a care that sprang from his fear lest he should indeed rouse her anger and--lose her.

"The first day I saw you--you remember?"

As if she could forget! She knew as he asked the question that no trifling detail of that first meeting was forgotten, that every word was engraven on her memory.

"When I saw you riding down the hill, I thought I had never seen any girl so beautiful, so lovely--"

The colour rose slowly to her face, but died away again: the least vain of women is moved when a man tells her she is beautiful--in his eyes, at any rate.

"And when you spoke to me I thought I had never heard so sweet a voice; and if I had, that there had never been one that I so longed to hear again. You were not with me long, only a few minutes, but when I left you and tramped over the hill to the inn I could not get you out of my mind. I wondered who you were, and whether I should see you again." The horses moved, and instinctively she looked over her shoulder towards them.

"They will not go: they are quite quiet," he said. "Wait--ah, wait for a few minutes! I have a feeling that if I let you go I shall not see you again; and that would--that would be more than I could bear. That night at the inn the landlord told me about you. Of course he had nothing but praise and admiration for you--who would have any other? But he told me of the lonely life you led, of the care you took of your father, of your devotion and goodness; and the picture of you living at the great, silent house, without friends or companions--well, it haunted me! I could see it all so plainly--I, who am not usually quick at seeing things. As a rule, I'm not impressed by women--Howard says I am cold and bored--perhaps he's right; but I could not get you out of my mind. I felt that I wanted to see you again."

He paused again, as if the state of mind he was describing was a puzzle to himself--paused and frowned.

"I left the inn and started up the road--I suppose I wanted to get a glimpse of the house in which you lived. Yes; that must have been it. And then, all at once, I saw you. I remember the frock you wore that night--you looked like an angel, a spirit standing there in the moonlight, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Are you angry

with me for saying so? Don't be; for I've got to tell you everything, and--and--it's difficult!"

He was silent a moment. Her head was still down-bent, her small white hand hung at her side; she was quite motionless but for the slow, rhythmic rise and fall of her bosom.

"When you came to me, when you spoke to me, my heart leapt as if--well, as if something good had happened to me--something that had never happened before. When I went away the picture of you standing at the door, waving your hand, went with me, and--stayed with me. I could not get you out of my mind--could think of nothing else. Even in the meeting with my father, whom I hadn't seen for so long, the thought of you kept with me. I tried to get rid of it--to forget you, but it was of no use: sleeping and waking, you--_you were with me!_"

His voice grew almost harsh in its intensity, and the hand that had hung so stilly beside her closed on the skirt of her dress in her effort to keep the hot blush from her face.

"When I rode out the next day it was only with the hope of seeing you. It seemed to me there was only one thing I wanted: to see you again; to look into your eyes, to hear you speak. All that I had heard about you--well, I dwelt upon it, and I felt that I must help you. It seemed as if Fate--Chance--oh, I don't know what to call it!--had _sent_ me to help you. And when I saw you--ah, well, I can't expect you to understand what I felt!"

He stopped again, as if he himself were trying to understand it.

"The feeling that fate had something to do with it--you see, it was quite by chance I started fishing that afternoon, that I saw you at the house--gave me courage to ask you to let me help you. It sounded ridiculous to you--of course it did!--but if you only knew how much it meant to me! It meant that I should see you again; perhaps every day for--for a long time: ah, well, it meant just life and death to me. And now--!"

His breath came fast, his eyes dwelt upon her with passionate eagerness; but he forced himself to speak calmly than he might not frighten her from his side, might not lose her.

--"Now the truth has come upon me, quite suddenly. It was just now when I saw that you cared what had happened to me, cared if I were hurt!--Oh, I know, it was just because you were frightened, it was just a woman's pity for a fellow that had come to harm, the fear lest I had broken any bones; but--ah, it showed me my heart, it told me how much I loved you! Yes; I love you! You are all the world to me: nothing else matters, _nothing!_"

Her lips quivered, but she did not speak, and the look of trouble, of doubt, did not leave her face. He waited, his eyes seeking hers, seeking them for some sign which might still the passion of fear and suspense with which he was battling, then he said in a low voice that thrilled with the tempest of emotion which raged under his forced calm:

"Will you not speak to me? Are you angry?"

She raised her head and looked at him--a strange look from so young a

girl. It was as if she were fighting against the subtle spell of his words, the demand for her love which shone in his eyes.

"No, I am not angry," she said at last; and her voice, though very low, was calm and unshaken.

He made a movement towards her, but she shrank back, only a little, but perceptibly, and he checked the movement, the desire to take her in his arms.

"You are not angry? Then--Ida--I may call you so?--you don't mind my loving you? Dearest, will you love me just a little in return? Wait!" for she had shrunk again, this time more plainly. "Don't--don't answer without thinking! I know I have startled you, that I ought not to have spoken so soon, while you only know so little of me--you'd naturally say 'no,' and send me away. But if you think you can like me--learn to love me--"

He took her hand, hanging so temptingly near his own; but she drew it away.

"No; don't touch me!" she said, with a little catch in her voice. "I want to think--to understand." She paused for a moment, her eyes still seeking the distant hills, as if in their mysterious heights she might find something that should explain this great mystery, this wonderful thing that had happened to her. At last, with a singular gesture, so girlish, so graceful that it made him long still more intensely to take her in his arms, she said in a low voice:

"I do not know--No! I do not want you to touch me, please!" His hand fell to his side. "I can't answer you. It is so--so sudden! No one has ever spoken to me as you have done--"

He laughed from mere excess of joy, for her pure innocence, her unlikeness, in her ignorance of love and all pertaining to it, to the women he knew, made the charm of her well-nigh maddening. To think that he should be the first man to speak of love to her!

"I am not angry--ought I to be? Yes, I suppose so. We are almost strangers--have seen so little of each other."

"They say that love, all true love, comes at first sight," he said in his deep voice. "I used to laugh at the idea; but now I know it is true. I loved you the first time I met you, Ida!"

Her lip quivered and her brows knit.

"It seems so wonderful," she said, musingly, "I do not understand it. The first time! We scarcely spoke--and I was almost angry with you for fishing in the Heron. And I did--did not think of you--"

He made a gesture, repudiating the mere idea.

"Is it likely! Why should you?" he said. "I was just an ordinary man, crossing your path for the first and perhaps the only time. Good heavens! there was no reason why you should give a thought to me, why I should linger in your mind for half a moment after I was out of your sight. But for me--Haven't I told you how beautiful you are, Ida! You are the loveliest, the sweetest.--But, even if you had not been--I mean

it is not because you are so beautiful that I love you--" She looked at him with a puzzled, troubled look.

"No! I can't explain. See, now, there's not a look of yours, not a feature that I don't know by heart as if I'd learnt it. When I am away from you I can see you--see the way your hair clusters in soft little curls at your forehead, the long lashes sweeping your cheek, the--the trick your eyes have of turning from grey to violet--oh, I know your face by heart, and I love it for its beauty; but if you were to lose it all, if you were not the loveliest creature God had ever made, it would make no difference. You would still be you: and it is you I want. Ida--give yourself to me--trust me! Oh, dearest, you don't know what love is! Let me teach you!"

Once again he got hold of her hand; and she let it remain in his grasp; but her quiescence did not mean yielding, and he knew it.

"No," she said, with a deep breath. "It is true that I do not know. And I am--afraid." A wan little smile that was more piteous than tears curved her lips: for "afraid" seemed strange coming from her, the fearless child of the hills and dales. "If--if I said 'yes'--Ah, but I do not!" she broke off as he made to draw her to him, and she shrank back. "I do not! I said 'if,' it would not be true; it would not be fair. For I do not know. I might be--sorry, after--after you had gone. And it would be too late then."

"You're right," he assented, grimly. "Once I got you, no power on earth should make me let you go again."

Her lips quivered and her eyes drooped before his. How strange a thing this love was, that it should change a man so!

"I don't want to force you to answer," he said, after a pause. "Yes, I do! I'd give half the remainder of my life to hear you say the one word, 'yes.' But I won't. It's too--too precious. Ah, don't you understand! I want your love, your love, Ida!"

"Yes, I understand," she murmured. "And--and I would say it if--if I were sure. But I--yes, I am all confused. It is like a dream. I want to think, to ask myself if--if I can do what you want."

She put up her hand to her lips with a slight gesture, as if to keep them from trembling.

"I want to be alone to think of all--all you have told me."

Her gauntlet slipped from her hand, and he knelt on one knee and picked it up, and still kneeling, took both her hands in his. It did not occur to him to remember that the woman who hesitates is won; something in her girlish innocence, in her exquisitely sweet candour, filled him with awe.

"Dearest!" he said, in so low a voice that, the note of the curlew flying above them sounded loud and shrill by contrast. "Dearest!--for you are that to me!--I will not press you. I will be content to wait. God knows you are right to hesitate! Your love is too great, too precious a thing to be given to me without thought. I'm not worthy to touch you--but I love you! I will wait. You shall think of all I have said; and, let your answer be what it may, I won't complain!"

But--Ida--you mustn't forget that I love you with all my heart and soul!"

She looked down at his handsome face, the face over which her lips had hovered only a short time since, and her lips moved.

"You--you are good to me," she said, in a faintly troubled voice. "Yes, I know, I feel that. Perhaps I ought to say 'no!'"

"Don't!" he said, almost fiercely. "Wait! Let me see you again--you scarcely know me. Ah, Ida, what can I do, how can I win your love?"

She drew her hands from his with a deep breath.

"I--I will go now," she said. "Will you let me go--alone?"

He rose and went towards the horses. His own raised its head and seemed inclined to start, but stood uncertain and eventually remained quiet beside the chestnut. Stafford brought them to where Ida still stood, her eyes downcast, her face pale.

With his own bridle over his arm he put her into the saddle, resisting even in that supreme moment the almost irresistible desire to take her in his arms.

She murmured a "Thank you," as she slowly put on her left gauntlet. He drew the other from her, and as she looked at him questioningly, he put it to his lips and thrust it under his waistcoat, over his heart.

The colour flooded her face, but the blush was followed by the old look of trouble and doubt. She held out her ungloved right hand and he took it and held it for a moment, then raised it to his lips; but he did not kiss it.

"No!" he said, with stern repression. "I will take nothing--until you give it me."

She inclined her head the very slightest, as if she understood, as if she were grateful; then letting her eyes rest on his with an inscrutable look, she spoke softly to the horse and rode away, with Donald and Bess clamouring joyously after her, as if they had found the proceedings extremely trying.

Stafford flung his arm across his horse, and leaning against it, looked after her, his eyes fixed wistfully on the slight, graceful figure, until it was out of sight; then he gazed round him as if he were suddenly returning from a new, mysterious region to the old familiar world. Passion's marvellous spell still held him, he was still throbbing with a half-painful ecstasy of her nearness, of the touch of her hand, the magic of her voice.

For the first time he was in love. In love with the most exquisite, the most wonderful of God's divine creatures. He knew, as he had said, that her answer meant life or death to him, the life of infinite, nameless joy, the death of life in death.

Was he going to lose her?

The very question set him trembling. He held out his quivering hand and

looked at it, and set his teeth. Heaven and earth, how strange it was! This girl had taken possession of him body and soul; every fibre of his being clamoured for her. To be near her, just to be able to see her, hear her, meant happiness; to be torn from her--

The sweat broke out on his forehead and he laughed grimly.

"And this is love!" he said, between his teeth. "Yes--and it's the only love of my life. God help me if you say 'no,' dearest! But you must not--you must not!"

CHAPTER XV.

Quite an hour after Stafford had started to meet Ida, Miss Falconer made her appearance, coming slowly down the stairs in the daintiest of morning frocks, with her auburn hair shining like old gold in the sunlight, and an expression of languor in her beautiful face which would have done credit to a hot-house lily.

She had slept the sleep of the just--the maid who had gone to wake her with her early cup of tea had been almost startled by the statuesqueness of her beauty, as she lay with her head pillowed on her snow-white arm and her wonderful hair streaming over the pillow--had suffered herself to be dressed with imperial patience, and looked--as Howard, who stood at the bottom of the stairs--said to himself, "like a queen of the Incas descending to her throne-room."

"Good-morning, Miss Falconer," he greeted her. "It's a lovely morning; you'll find it nicely aired." She smiled languidly.

"That means that I am late." she said, her eyes resting languidly on his cynically smiling face.

"Good heavens, no!" he responded. "You can't be late or early in this magic palace. Whenever you 'arrive' you will find things--'things' in the most comprehensive sense--ready for you. Breakfast at Brae Wood is the most moveable of feasts. I've proved that, for I'm a late bird myself; and to my joy I have learned that this is the only house with which I am acquainted that you can get red-hot bacon and kidneys at any hour from eight to twelve; that lunch runs plenteously from one to three, and that you can get tea and toast--my great and only weakness, Miss Falconer--whenever you like to ring for it. You will find Lady Clansford presiding at the breakfast-table: I believe she has been sitting there--amiable martyr as she is--since the early dawn."

She smiled at him with languid approval, as if he were some paid jester, and went into the breakfast-room. There were others there beside Lady Clansford--most of them the young people--it is, alas! only the young who can sleep through the bright hours of a summer's morn--and a discussion on the programme of the day was being carried on with a babel of voices and much laughter.

"You shall decide for us, Miss Falconer!" exclaimed one of the young men, whose only name appeared to be Bertie, for he was always addressed as and spoken of by it. "It's a toss-up between a drive and a turn on the lake in the electric launch. _I_ proposed a sail, but there seemed

to be a confirmed and general scepticism as to my yachting capacities, and Lady Plaistow says she doesn't want to be drowned before the end of the season. What would you like to do?"

"Sit somewhere in the shade with a book," she replied, promptly but slowly.

There was a shout of laughter.

"That is just what Mr. Howard replied," said Bertie, complainingly.

"Oh, Mr. Howard! Everyone knows that he is the laziest man in the whole world," remarked Lady Clansford, plaintively. "What is Mr. Orme going to do? Where is he? Does anyone know?"

There was a general shaking of heads and a chorus of "Noes."

"I had a swim with him this morning, but I've not seen him since," said Bertie. "It's no use waiting for Orme; he mightn't turn up till dinner-time. Miss Falconer, if I promise not to drown you, will make one for the yacht? The man told me it would be all ready."

She shook her head as she helped herself to a couple of strawberries.

"No, thanks," she said, with her musical drawl. "I know what that means. You drift into the middle of the lake or the river, the wind drops, and you sit in a scorching sun and get a headache. Please leave me out. I shall stick to my original proposal. Perhaps, if you don't drown anyone this time, I may venture with you another day."

She leant back and smiled at them under her lids, as the discussion flowed and ebbed round her, with an air of placid contempt and wonder at their excitement; and presently, murmuring something to Lady Clansford, who, as chaperone and deputy hostess was trying to coax them into some decision, she rose and went out to the terrace.

There, lying back in a deck-chair, in a corner screened from any possible draught by the glass verandah, was Mr. Howard with one of Sir Stephen's priceless Havanas between his lips, a French novel in his hand, and a morning paper across his knees. He rose as she approached, and checking a sigh of resignation, offered her his chair.

"Oh, no," she said, with a smile which showed that she knew what the effort of politeness cost him. "You'd hate me if I took your chair, I know; and though, of course, I don't in the least care whether you hate me or not, I shouldn't like putting you to the trouble of so exhaustive an emotion."

Howard smiled at her with frank admiration.

"Let's compromise it," he said. "I'll drag that chair up here--it's out of the sun, you know--so, and arrange these cushions so, and put up the end for your feet so, and--how is that, Miss Falconer?"

"Thanks," she murmured, sinking into the soft nest he had made.

"Do you object to my cigar? Say so, if you do, and--"

"You'll go off to some other nook," she put in. "No, I like it."

His eye shone with keen appreciation: this girl was not only a beauty--which is almost common nowadays--but witty, which is rare.

"Thanks! Would you like the paper? Don't hesitate if you would; I'm not reading it; I never do. I keep it there so that I can put it over my face if I feel like sleeping--which I generally do."

She declined the paper with a gesture of her white hand. "No, I'd rather talk; which means that you are to talk and I'm to listen: will it exhaust you too much to tell me where the rest of the people are? I left a party in the breakfast-room squabbling over the problem how to kill time; but where are the others? My father, for instance?"

"He is in the library with Baron Wirsch, Mr. Griffenberg, and the other financiers. They are doubtless engaged in some mystic rites connected with the worship of the Golden Calf, rites in which the words 'shares,' 'stocks,' 'diamonds,' 'concessions,' appear at frequent intervals. I suppose your father, having joined them, is a member of the all-powerful sect of money-worshippers."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose so. And Mr. Orme--is he one of them?" she asked, with elaborate indifference.

Howard smiled cynically.

"Stafford! No; all that he knows about money is the art of spending it; and what he doesn't know about that isn't worth knowing. It slips through his fingers like water through a sieve; and one of those mysteries which burden my existence is, how he always manages to have some for a friend up a tree."

"Is he so generous, then?" she asked, with a delicate yawn behind her hand.

Howard nodded, and was silent for a moment, then he said musingly:

"You've got on my favorite subject--Stafford--Miss Falconer. And I warn you that if I go on I shall bore you."

"Well, I can get up and go away," she said, languidly. "He is a friend of yours, I suppose? By the way, did you know that he stopped those ridiculous horses last night and probably saved my life?"

"For goodness sake don't let him hear you say that, or even guess that you think it," he said, with an affectation of alarm. "Stafford would be inexpressibly annoyed. He hates a fuss even more than most Englishmen, and would take it very unkindly if you didn't let a little thing like that pass unnoticed. Oh, yes, I am his greatest friend. I don't think"--slowly and contemplatively--"that there is anything he wouldn't do for me or anything I wouldn't do for him--excepting get up early--go out in the rain--Oh, it isn't true! I'm only bragging," he broke off, with a groan. "I've done both and shall do them whenever he wants me to. I'm a poor creature, Miss Falconer." "A martyr on the altar of friendship," she said. "Mr. Orme must be very irresistible."

"He is," he assented, with an air of profound melancholy. "Stafford has

the extremely unpleasant knack of getting everybody to do what he wants. It's very disgusting, but it's true. That is why he is so general a favourite. Why, if you walk into any drawing-room and asked who was the most popular man in London, the immediate and unanimous reply would be 'Stafford Orme.'

She settled the cushions a little more comfortably.

"You mean amongst men?" she said.

Howard smiled and eyed her questioningly.

"Well--I didn't," he replied, drily.

She laughed a little scornfully.

"Oh, I know the sort of man he is," she said. "I've read and heard about them. The sort of man who falls in love with every woman he meet. 'A servant of dames!'"

Howard leant back and laughed with cynical enjoyment.

"You never were further out," he said. "He flirts--oh, my aunt, how he flirts!--but as to falling in love--Did you ever see an iceberg, Miss Falconer?"

She shook her head.

"Well, it's one of the biggest, the most beautiful frauds in the world. When you meet one sailing along in the Atlantic, you think it one of the nicest, sweetest things you ever saw: it's so dazzlingly bright, with its thousand and one colours glittering in the sunlight. You quite fall in love with it, and it looks so harmless, so enticing, that you're tempted to get quite close to it; which no doubt is amusing to the iceberg, but is slightly embarrassing for you; for the iceberg is on you before you know it, and--and there isn't enough left of you for a decent funeral. That's Stafford all the way. He's so pleasant, so frank, so lovable, that you think him quite harmless; but while you're admiring his confounded ingratiating ways, while you're growing enthusiastic about his engaging tricks--he's the best rider, the best dancer, the best shot--oh, but you must have heard of him!--he is bearing down upon you; your heart goes under, and he--ah, well, he just sails over you smiling, quite unconscious of having brought you to everlasting smash."

"You are indeed a friend," she said with languid irony.

"Oh, you think I'm giving him away?" he said. "My dear Miss Falconer, everybody knows him. Every ball-room every tennis-court, is strewed with his wrecks. And all the time he doesn't know it; but goes his way crowned with a modesty which is the marvel and the wonder of this most marvellous of ages."

"It sounds like a hero out of one of 'Ouida's' novels," she remarked, as listlessly as before.

But behind her lowered lids her eyes were shining with a singular brightness.

Howard turned to her delightedly.

"My dear Miss Falconer, if you were a man I should ask to shake hands with you. It so exactly describes him. That's just what he is. As handsome as the dew--I beg your pardon!--as frank as a boy, as gentle as a woman, as staunch, as a bull-dog, as brave--he would have stopped a drayman's team just as readily as yours last night--and as invulnerable as that marble statue."

He pointed to a statue of Adonis which stood whitely on the edge of the lawn, and she raised her eyes and looked at it dreamily.

"I could break that thing if I had a big hammer," she said.

"I daresay," he said. "But can't break Stafford. Honestly"--he looked at her--"I wish you could!"

"Why?" she asked, turning her eyes on him for the first time.

Howard was silent for a moment, then he looked at her with a curious gravity.

"Because it would be good for him: because I am afraid for him."

"Afraid?" she echoed.

"Yes," he said, with a nod. "Some day he will run against something that will bring him to smash. Some woman--But I beg your pardon. Do you know, Miss Falconer, that you have a dangerous way of leading one to speak the truth--which one should never--or very rarely--do. Why, on earth am I telling you all this about Stafford Orme?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You were saying 'some woman,'" she said.

He gave a sigh of resignation.

"You are irresistible! Some woman who will be quite unworthy of him. It's always the case. The block of ice you can not smash with your biggest hammer is broken into smithereens by a needle. That's the peril before Stafford--but let us hope he will prove the exception to the rule and escape. He's safe at present, at any rate."

She thought of the scene she had witnessed, the girl sitting sideways on Stafford Orme's horse, and her face flushed for an instant.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Quite!" he responded, confidently. "I know all Stafford's flirtations, great and small: if there was anything serious he would tell me; and as he hasn't--there isn't."

She laughed; the slow, soft laugh which made Howard think suddenly, strangely, of a sleepy tigress he had once watched in a rajah's zoo, as she lay basking in the sun: a thing of softness and beauty and--death.

"We've had a most amusing conversation, Mr. Howard," she said. "I don't know when I've been so interested--or so tempted."

"Tempted?" He looked at her with a slow, expectant smile.

"Oh, yes," she murmured, turning her eyes upon him with a half-mocking light in them. "You have forgotten that you have been talking to a woman."

"I don't deny it," he said. "It's the finest compliment I could pay you. But--after?"

"And that to a woman your account of your hero-friend is--a challenge."

He nodded and paused, with his cigar half-way to his lips.

"I'm greatly tempted to accept it, do you know!" she said.

He laughed.

"Don't: you'll be vanquished. Is that too candid, too--brutal?" he said.

"So brutal that I will accept it," she said. "Is that ring of yours a favorite?"

"I've had it ever since I can remember. It was my mother's," he said, rather gravely.

She held out her hand, upon which the costly gems glittered in the sunlight.

"Choose one to set against it," she said quite quietly.

Howard, roused for once from his sleepy cynicism, met her gaze with something like astonishment.

"You mean--?" he said, in a low voice.

"I mean that I am going to try to meet your iceberg. You will play fair, Mr. Howard? You will stand and look on and--be silent?"

He smiled and leant back as if he had considered her strange, audacious proposal, and felt confident.

"On my honour," he said, with a laugh. "You shall have fair play!" She laughed softly. "You have not chosen my stake," she said meaningly.

"Ah, no. Pardon! Let me see." He took her hand and examined the rings. "This--I think it's the most valuable."

"It does not matter," she said. "You will not win it. May I look at yours?"

He extended his hand with an amused laugh; but without a smile, she said:

"Yes, it is a quaint ring; I like quaint things. I shall wear it on my little finger."

She dropped his hand quickly, for at that moment Stafford rode round the bend of the drive. His face was grave and almost stern in its preoccupation, but he caught sight of them, and raised his hat, then turned his horse and rode up to the terrace.

"Good-morning, Stafford," exclaimed Howard. "Where have you been? Hallo! Anything happened? You're coated all over with mud: had a fall?"

He nodded carelessly as he turned to the beautiful girl, lying back now and looking up at his handsome face with an air of languid indifference.

"What a lovely day, Miss Falconer! Where are all the others? Are you not going for a drive, on the lake, somewhere?"

"I have just been asking Mr. Howard to take me for a row," she said, "but he has refused."

Stafford laughed and glanced at his watch.

"I can quite believe it: he's the laziest wretch in existence. If you'll transfer the offer to me, we'll go after lunch. By George, there's the bell!"

"Thanks!" she murmured, and she rose with her slow grace. "I'd better get into an appropriate costume. Mr. Howard, what will you bet me that it does not rain before we start. But you never bet, you tell me!"

"Not unless I am sure of winning, Miss Falconer," he said, significantly.

She looked after Stafford as he rode away to the stable.

"Nor I," she retorted, with a smile. "As you will see."

CHAPTER XVI.

When Stafford and Maude Falconer went down to the lake after luncheon, they found a party from the Villa just embarking on board one of the launches; the air was filled with laughter and chatter, and the little quay was bright with the white flannels of the men and the gay frocks of the women. The party greeted the two with an exuberant welcome, and Bertie called out to ask them if they were coming on board.

"Perhaps you would rather go on the launch, Miss Falconer?" said Stafford; but she shook her head.

"No, thanks," she said, languidly. "I hate crowds of that kind. I'd rather stick to our original proposition; it will bore me less. But perhaps you'd rather join them?"

"Is it likely?" said Stafford, with a smile, as he signed to the man to bring up a skiff. "Now, let me make you as comfortable as I can. We ought to have had a gondola," he added, as he handed her to the seat in the stern.

She leant back with her sunshade over her shoulder, and Stafford, as he slipped off his blazer and rowed out towards the centre of the lake, looked at her with unconscious admiration. She was simply, perfectly dressed in a yachting costume of white and pale-blue, which set off to the fullest advantage her exquisite complexion and her red-gold hair. But it was admiration of the coldest kind, for even at that moment he was thinking of the girl in the well-worn habit, the girl he loved with a passion that made his slightest thought of her a psalm of worship.

And Maude, though she appeared half asleep, like a beautiful wild animal basking in the warmth of the sun, glanced at him now and again and noted the strength and grace of his figure, the almost Grecian contour of the handsome face. She had made her wager with Howard on the spur of the moment, prompted by the vanity of a woman piqued by the story of Stafford's indifference to her sex; but as she looked at him she wondered how a woman would feel if she fell in love with him. But she had no fears for herself; there was a coldness in her nature which had hitherto guarded her from the fever which men call love, and she thought herself quite secure. There would be amusement, triumph, in making him love her, in winning her wager with that cynical Mr. Howard, who boasted of his friend's invulnerability; and when she had conquered, and gratified her vanity--Ah, well, it would be easy to step aside and bring the curtain down upon her triumph and Stafford's discomfiture. She would wear that Mr. Howard's ring, and every time she looked at it, it should remind her of her conquest.

Stafford rowed on in silence for some minutes. His beautiful companion did not seem to want him to talk and certainly showed no desire to talk herself; so he gave himself up to thinking of Ida--and wishing that it was she who was sitting opposite him there, instead of this girl with the face of a Grecian goddess, with the lustrous hair of an houri. At last, feeling that he ought to say something, he remarked, as he gazed at the marvellous view:

"Very beautiful, isn't it?"

She raised her eyes and let them wander from the glittering water to the glorious hills.

"Yes, I suppose it is. I'm afraid I don't appreciate scenery as much as other people do. Perhaps it is because one is always expected to fall into raptures over it. Does that shock you? I'm afraid I shock most people. The fact is, I have been brought up in a circle which has taught me to loathe sentiment. They were always gushing about their feelings, but the only thing they cared for was money!"

"That ought to have made you loathe money," said Stafford, with a smile, and a certain kind of interest; indeed, it was difficult not to feel interested in this beautiful girl, with the face and the form of a goddess, and, apparently, as small a capacity of emotion.

"Oh, no," she said, languidly; "on the contrary, it showed me the value of money. I saw that if I had not been rich, the daughter of a rich man, I should have been of no account in their eyes. They were always professing to love me, but I was quite aware that it was because I was rich enough to be able to buy pleasure for them."

"Unpleasant kind of people," remarked Stafford.

"No; just the average," she said, coolly. "Nearly all men and women are alike--worldly, selfish, self-seeking. Look at my father," she went on, as coolly as before. "He thinks of nothing but money; he has spent his life fighting, scrambling, struggling for it; and look at yours--"

"Oh, hold on!" said Stafford, laughing, but reddening a little. "You're very much mistaken if you think my father is that kind of man."

She smiled.

"Why, everybody has some story of his--what shall I call it?--acuteness, sharpness; and of the wonderful way in which he has always got what he wanted. I don't want to be offensive, Mr. Orme, but I'm afraid both our fathers are in the same category. And that both would sacrifice anything or anyone to gain their ends."

Stafford laughed again.

"You're altogether wrong, Miss Falconer," he said. "I happen to know that my governor is one of the most generous and tender-hearted of men and that whatever he has gained it is by fair means, and by no sacrifice of others."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I envy your faith in him. But then you are a very enviable man, I'm told."

"As how?" asked Stafford. "Pretty here, isn't it? Here's one of those beastly steamers coming: they spoil the lake, but they're very convenient, I suppose."

She glanced at the big steamer puffing towards them obtrusively and sending a trail of smoke across the green and violet of the hills.

"Oh, I'm told you are the most popular man in London; that you have the world at your feet, that you are only waiting to see which duchess you prefer to throw your handkerchief to--"

Stafford coloured.

"What rot!--I beg your pardon, Miss Falconer. Of course, I know you are only chaffing me."

"Isn't it true--about the duchess, I mean?" she asked, so coolly, so indifferently, that Stafford was compelled to take her seriously.

"Nary a word," he said, brightly; then, with a sudden gravity: "If you happen to hear such nonsense again, Miss Falconer, you can, if you care to, contradict it flatly. I am not in the least likely to marry a duchess; indeed, I wouldn't marry the highest and greatest of them, if she'd have me, which is highly improbable."

"Do you mean to say that you have no ambition, that you would marry for--love?" she asked.

Stafford stopped rowing for a moment and looked at her grimly.

"What on earth else should I marry for?" he asked. "Wouldn't you?"

Before she could answer, the steamer came abreast of them, and so close that the swell from its screw set the slight, narrow skiff dancing and plunging on the waves.

Maude uttered a faint cry and leant forward, and Stafford, fearing she was going to rise, stretched out his hand, and touching her knee, forced her into her seat again, and kept her there until the swell had subsided.

The colour flooded her face at the pressure of his strong hand, which was like a steel weight, and she caught her breath. Then, as he took his hand away and resumed rowing, he said: "I beg your pardon! I was afraid you were going to get up--a girl I once had in a boat did so and we upset."

"The boat is very small," she said, in a low voice, almost one of apology.

"Oh, it's all right, so long as you sit still, and keep your head," he said. "It could ride over twice as big a swell as this."

She looked at him from under her lowered lids with a new expression in her face, a faint tremor on her lips; and, as if she could not meet his eyes, she glanced back with an affectation of interest at the steamer. As she did so, something dropped from it into the lake.

"What was that?" she said. "Something fell overboard."

"Eh? A man, do you mean?" he asked, stopping.

"Oh, no; something small."

"A parcel, somebody's lunch, perhaps," he said; and he rowed on.

She leant back, her eyes downcast; she still seemed to feel that strong, irresistible pressure of his hand under which she had been unable to move.

"There ought to be an echo somewhere here," he said, as they came opposite one of the hills, and he gave the Australian "coo-ee!" in a clear, ringing voice, which the echo sent back in a musical imitation.

"How true it was!" she said, and she opened her lips and sang a bar or two of the "Elsie" song.

Stafford listened to the echo, which was almost as soft and sweet as the girl's notes.

"What a wonderful voice you have!" he said, almost unconsciously. "I never heard a sweeter. What was that you sang?"

"That thing of Wagner's," she replied; and quite naturally she began the air and sang it through.

Stafford let the boat drift and leant upon the oars, his eyes fixed on her face, a rapt and very eloquent admiration in his own.

"Ah--beautiful!" he said in a low voice. "What a delight it must be to you to be able to sing like that! I can understand a whole theatre crying over that song sung as you sing it!"

She glanced at him with an affectation of languid amusement; but she was watching him intently.

"That's not the best in the opera," she said. "I like this better;" and she sang the "Swan" song; sang it so low that he leant forward to catch the notes which flowed like silver from her soft, red lips; and when she finished it he drew a long breath and still leant forward looking at her.

"Thank you, thank you!" he said, with so much of admiration and gratitude in his voice, that, as if to apologise for it, he said: "I'm fond of music. But I'm forgetting your tea! Shall we pull back to the Ferry Hotel and get some?"

"I'm in your hands," she replied, languidly.

He turned-the boat and pulled back along the centre of the lake in silence. Suddenly she bent forward.

"There is something in the water," she said; "something alive."

"It's a--yes, it's a dog," he said. "That is what you saw drop over the steamer. By George! the poor little chap looks in distress: seems as if he were nearly done. Can you steer?" he asked, sharply.

"Oh, yes," she replied, languidly. "Why?"

"Because I'm going for him, and it will help me if you can steer straight for him. He looks nearly played out."

"Why should you trouble--it's a long way off; it will be drowned before you can get to it," she said.

"I'll have to go for it anyway," he said, cheerfully; and he began to row hard.

Distance is deceptive on a lake, and the dog was farther off than they thought; but Stafford put his back into it as hard as he had done in his racing days, and Maude Falconer leant back and watched him with interest, and something even stronger than interest, in her masked eyes. He had turned up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, and the muscles on his arms were standing out under the strain, his lips were set tightly, and there was the man's frown of determination on his brow.

"It has gone down: it's no use," she said. "You may as well stop and rest."

He looked over his shoulder.

"No! He has come up again!" he exclaimed: it was noticeable that he called the dog "he," while she spoke of it as "it." "We shall get him in time. Keep the boat straight!"

The words were uttered in a tone of command, and they moved her as the

touch of his hand had done; and she set her mind upon the task as she had never before set it upon anything.

Reaching well forward, pulling with the long, steady stroke of the practised oarsman, Stafford sent the boat along like an arrow, and presently he drove it up to the spot where the dog strove in its death straggle.

It was a tiny black-and-tan terrier, and Stafford, as he looked over his shoulder, saw the great eyes turned to him with a piteous entreaty that made his heart ache.

"Turn the boat--quick!" he cried; and as the skiff slid alongside the dog, he swooped it up.

The mite gave a little gasping cry like a child, and closing its eyes sank into Stafford's arms with a shudder.

"Is it dead?" asked Maude Falconer, looking not at the dog but at Stafford, for his face, which had been red with exertion a moment ago, had become suddenly pale.

"I don't know--no!" he said, absently, all his thoughts centered on the dog.

He wiped it as dry as he could with his blazer, then turning aside, he opened his shirt and put the cold morsel in his bosom.

"Poor little beggar, he's like ice!" he said, in a low voice. "He would never have got to the shore; he's so small. If I'd some brandy! We'll get some at the ferry. Can you row?"

"No," she said. "Yes; I mean, I'll try."

He held out his hand.

"Mind how you cross. Take off your gloves first, or you'll blister your hands."

She obeyed, her eyes downcast. They exchanged places and he showed her how to hold the sculls.

"You'll do very well. You can row as slowly as you like. He's alive; I can feel him move! Poor little chap! Sorry to trouble you, Miss Falconer, but the only chance of saving him is to keep him warm."

She was silent for a moment, then she glanced at him.

"You're fond of dogs?"

"Why, of course," he answered. "Aren't you?"

"Y-es; but I don't think I'd risk pneumonia for one. You were feverishly hot just now, and that little beast must be stone cold; you'll get bronchitis or something, Mr. Orme."

"Not I!" he laughed, almost scornfully. "He's pulling round, poor little beast! Here we are."

He reached for his coat and wrapped the terrier in it, and quite unconscious of the girl's watchful eyes, held the little black-and-tan head to his face for a moment.

"All right now?" he murmured. "You've had a narrow squeak for it, old chappie!" With the dog under his arm, he helped Maude Falconer ashore and led the way to the hotel.

"Tea," he said to the waiter; "but bring me some brandy and milk first--and look sharp."

Maude sank on to one of the benches in the beautiful garden in the centre of the lake and looked straight before her; and Stafford cuddled the dog up to him and looked impatiently for the waiter, greeting him when he came with:

"What an infernal time you're been!"

Then he poured a little of the brandy down the dog's throat, and bending over him repeated the close three or four times; and presently the mite stirred and moved its head, and opening its eyes looked up into Stafford's, and weakly putting out its tongue, licked his hand.

Stafford laughed--for the well-known reason.

"Plucky little chap, isn't he?" he said, with a moved man's affectation of levity. "He's made a splendid fight for it and won through. He's a pretty little morsel--a well-bred 'un: wonder whom he belongs to?"

"To you--at least his life does," said Maude Falconer. "You couldn't have fought harder for it if it had been a human being."

"Oh, a dog's the next thing, you know," he said, apologetically. "I'm afraid it's been an awful nuisance and trouble for you. You haven't blistered your hands, I hope? Let me see!"

She stretched out her hands, palm upwards, and he took them and examined them.

"No. That's all right! 'All's well that ends well.' You want a few lessons with the sculls, Miss Falconer, and you'd make a splendid boat-woman. Perhaps you'd let me give you one or two?"

"Thank you; yes," she said; and to his surprise with less of her usual half-scornful languor.

"Here's the tea. Any particular kind of cake you fancy?"

She said that the cakes would do, and poured out the tea; but he put some milk into his saucer and gave some to the terrier, slowly, methodically, and with a tenderness and gentleness which was not lost upon the girl who watched him covertly before paying any attention to his own tea.

"I wonder whether you could stand, my little man," he said, and he put the terrier on the ground.

It stood upright and shivering for a moment, then it put its tiny paws on Stafford's knee and looked up into his face appealingly. "Not up to

your usual form just yet, eh?" said Stafford, and he picked it up gently and put it on his knee.

Maude Falconer looked at him.

"Give it to me," she said. "Men have no lap. He'll be more comfortable with me."

"But he's wet still," he said. "He'll spoil that pretty dress of yours."

"My pretty dress was made to be spoiled," she said, "Give it to me, please, and get your tea."

"Do you mean it?" he asked, with a surprise which made her flush with resentment, and something like shame.

For reply, she bent forward, took the dog from him, and tried to settle it on her lap; but the mite looked piteously at Stafford and whined, its big eyes imploring him to let it come back.

But Stafford stroked it and bade it sit still, and presently it curled itself up.

"It has gone to sleep," said Maude. "It has soon forgotten its trouble."

"It's a way dogs have," said Stafford. "May I smoke? George! what a lovely afternoon!"

She glanced at him as he leant back in his chair, his long legs stretched out and crossed before him.

"You look happy," she said, with a faint smile.

"Oh, I am," he said, with a sudden flush and a start; for now the dog was off his mind, it had instantly swung back to Ida.

"It's the reward of a generous action," she said, and again, the mocking note was absent from her voice.

Stafford laughed.

"That's putting it rather high," he said.

They sat on in silence: Stafford thinking of Ida, Maude looking down at the sleeping dog, and thinking that only a few minutes ago it had been lying in the bosom of the man who sat beside her: the man whom she had backed herself to fool; but for whom a strange sensation of admiration--and was it a subtle fear?--was stirring within her.

"By George! we must be going!" he said, suddenly.

When they got to the boat he proposed to roll the terrier in his coat, but Maude shook her head.

"I'll nurse it going home," she said.

"You will? That's very good of you!" he said, quite gratefully.

"He's a lucky little beggar!" he remarked, after awhile, as he looked at the black little morsel curled up on the pretty dress. "Supposing he isn't claimed, would you care to have him, Miss Falconer?"

She looked down at the dog.

"Thank you," she said. "But what shall I give you in return. It's unlucky to give an animal without some consideration."

"Oh, give me another song," he replied. "There is nobody about."

She opened her lips, then checked herself.

"No, I can't sing again," she said, in a low voice.

"Oh, all right. It isn't good for you to sing too much in the open air. I'll wait till this evening, if you'll be good enough to sing for us then."

They landed and walked up to the house. As they reached the bend leading to the entrance path, she stopped and held out the dog, which had been staring at Stafford and whining at intervals.

"Take it, please. It is fretting for you, and I'd rather not keep it."

"Really?" he said, and she saw his face brighten suddenly. "All right, if you'd rather. Come here, little man! What's your name, I wonder? What shall we call him while we've got him?"

"Call him 'Tiny;' he's small enough," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Tiny it is!" he assented, brightly. "He'll answer to it in a day or two, you'll see. I hope you haven't quite spoilt your dress, Miss Falconer, and won't regret your row!"

She looked at her dress, but there was a sudden significance in her slow, lingering response.

"I--don't--know!"

As she went up the stairs she looked over the rail and saw Stafford's tall figure striding down the hall. He was softly pulling the terrier's ears and talking to it in the language dogs understand and love; and when she sank into a chair in her room, his face with its manly tenderness was still before her, his deep musical voice, with its note of protection and succour, still rang in her ears.

She sat quite motionless for a minute or two, then she rose and went to the glass and looked at herself; a long, intent look.

"Yes, I am beautiful," she murmured, not with the self-satisfaction of vanity, but with a calculating note in her voice. "Am I--am I beautiful enough?"

Then she swung away from the glass with the motion which reminded Howard of a tigress, and, setting her teeth hard, laughed with self-scorn; but with something, also, of fear in the laugh.

"I am a fool!" she muttered. "It can't be true. So soon! So suddenly! Oh, I can't be such a fool!"

CHAPTER XVII.

If everybody was not enjoying himself at the Villa it certainly was not the fault of the host, Sir Stephen Orme. Howard, as he drew his chair up beside Stafford, when the ladies had left the room after dinner, and the gentlemen had begun to glance longingly at the rare Chateau claret and the Windermere port, made a remark to this effect:

"Upon my word, Staff, it is the most brilliant house-party which I have ever joined; and as to your father in his character of host--Well, words fail to express my admiration."

Stafford glanced at his father at the head of the table and nodded. Sir Stephen had been the life and soul and spring of the dinner; talking fashionable gossip to Lady Fitzharford on one side of him, and a "giddy girl of twenty" on the other; exchanging badinage with "Bertie," and telling deeply interesting stories to the men; and he was now dragging reluctant laughter from the grim Baron Wirsch and the almost grimmer Griffenberg, as he saw with one eye that the wine was circulating, and with the other that no one was being overlooked or allowed to drop into dullness.

"A most marvellous man! Nearly all the morning he was closeted with the financiers; in the afternoon he went for a ride with Lady Clansford; he was in attendance at the solemn function of afternoon tea; he played croquet--and played it well--at half-past five; at six I saw him walking round the grounds with the Effords and the Fitzharfords, and now he is laughing and talking with the _abandon_ of a boy of five-and-twenty, while the boy of five-and-twenty sits here as grave and silent as if he had been working like a horse--or a Sir Stephen Orme--instead of fooling about the lake with the most beautiful woman in the party."

"And his friend has spent the day in a deck-chair on the terrace," retorted Stafford.

"At any rate, I have been out of mischief," said Howard. Then he remembered his wager with Maude Falconer, and added, rather remorsefully: "At least I hope so. By the way, don't you echo my expression of opinion that Miss Falconer is the most beautiful woman here--or elsewhere?"

Stafford woke from the reverie into which he nearly always dropped when Howard was talking, and nodded indifferently.

"Oh, yes; she is lovely, of course."

"How good of you, how kind and gracious!" retorted Howard, ironically. "So my prince deigns to approve of her? And you also condescended to admit that she is--er--rather clever?"

"I daresay," said Stafford. "I've seen so little of her. She seems to me rather _blase_ and cold."

Howard nodded.

"Yes; but the worst of it is, you can't count upon that kind of girl: they are apt to warm up sometimes, and quite unexpectedly: and when they do they--well, they boil like a geyser or a volcano. And then--well, then it is wise to get out of reach. I once knew a woman who was considered to be as cold as charity--or a rich relation--but who caught fire one day and burnt up the man who ignited her. Of course this is my delicate way of saying: 'Beware, oh, my prince!'"

Stafford smiled. Miss Falconer's nature was a matter of profound indifference to him. There was only one woman on whom he could bestow a thought, and he was thinking of her now, wondering when he should see her, whether he might dare to tell her of his love again, to ask her for her answer.

Once or twice his father looked across at him, and nodded and smiled as if he loved to see him, and wanted to speak to him; and Stafford smiled and nodded back, as if he understood.

When the men rose to go to the drawing-room, Sir Stephen caught him up at the door, and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Happy, dear boy?" he asked in a low voice, full of affection. "I've seen scarcely anything of you. No, no, I'm not complaining! It was understood that you were to have a free hand--but--but I've missed you! Never mind; this crowd will have gone presently, and then--ah, then we'll have a jolly time to ourselves! Things are going well," he added, with a significant smile, as he glanced at Wirsch and Griffenberg, who, well-fed and comfortable, were in front of them.

"I'm glad, sir," said Stafford.

Sir Stephen smiled, but checked a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes, my little schemes are flourishing; but"--he looked at the financiers again--"they are rather a hard team to drive!"

As Stafford entered the drawing-room, he heard Lady Clansford enquiring for Miss Falconer.

"We want her to sing, Mr. Orme, and I cannot find her."

"I think she is on the terrace," said Bertie, who always seemed to know where everybody was.

Stafford went out by one of the windows, and saw Maude Falconer pacing up and down at the end of the terrace. She was superbly dressed, and as he looked at her, he involuntarily admired the grace of her movements. Mr. Falconer was walking with bent head and hands behind his back; but now and again he looked at her sideways with his sharp eyes. Stafford did not like to interrupt them, and withdrew to the other end of the terrace, with a cigarette, to wait till they joined him.

"Young Orme has come out to look for you," said Mr. Falconer, without

turning his head.

"I know," she said, though she also had not turned. "They want me to sing. I will go in directly. You have not answered my question, father. Is Sir Stephen very rich, or is all this only sham? I have heard you say so often that display very often only covers poverty."

Falconer eyed her curiously.

"Why do you want to know? What does it matter to you?"

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently, resentfully, and he went on:

"Yes, he's rich; confoundedly so. But he is playing a big game, in which he is running some risks; and he'll want all his money to help him win it."

"And are you joining him in the game?" she asked.

He looked at her with surprise. There was a note in her voice which he had never heard before, a note which conveyed to him the fact that she was no longer a girl, but a woman.

"Upon my soul, I don't know why you ask! Well, well!"--she had repeated the impatient gesture. "I haven't made up my mind yet. He wants me to join him. I could be of service to him; on the other hand, I could--yes, get in his way; for I know some of the points of the game he is playing. Yes, I could help him--or spoil him."

"And which are you going to do?" she asked, in a low voice, her eyes veiled, her lips drawn straight.

Falconer laughed grimly. "I don't know. It all depends. Which would you do?" he asked, half sarcastically.

She was silent for a moment, then she said: "You knew Sir Stephen some time ago--years ago, father?"

Falconer nodded. "I did," he said, shortly.

"And you were friends, and you quarrelled?"

He looked at her with an air of surprise.

"I saw you both when you stood opposite each other after the carriage accident," she said, coolly. "I am not blind, and I am not particularly stupid. It didn't strike me at the time that there had been anything wrong between you, but I have since seen you look at Sir Stephen, and--you have an expressive face sometimes, oh, my father!"

He grinned grimly.

"You appear to keep your eyes open, Maude. Yes; there was a row between us, and there was a grudge--"

--"Which you mean to pay off?" she said, as impassively as if they were speaking of the merest trivialities.

"Which I could pay off--gratify, if I liked," he admitted.

"How?" she asked.

He did not reply, but glanced at her sideways and bit at the cigar which he had stopped to light.

"Shall I tell you, if I were a man and I wanted revenge upon such a man as Sir Stephen Orme, what I should do, father?" she asked, in a low voice, and looking straight before her as if she were meditating.

"You can if you like. What would you do?" he replied, with a touch of sarcastic amusement.

She looked round her and over her shoulder. The windows near them were closed, Stafford with his cigarette was too far off to overhear them.

"If I were a man, rich and powerful as you are, and I owed another a grudge, I would not rest night or day until I had got him into my power. Whether I meant to exact my revenge or not, I would wait and work, and scheme and plot until I had him at my mercy so that I could say, 'See now you got the better of me once, you played me false once, but it is my turn now.' He should sue for mercy, and I would grant it--or refuse it--as it pleased me; but he should feel that he was in my power; that my hand was finer than his, my strength greater!" He shot a glance at her, and his great rugged face grew lined and stern.

"Where did you get those ideas? Why do you talk to me like this?" he muttered, with surprise and some suspicion.

"I am not a child," she said, languidly. "And I have been living with you for some time now. Sir Stephen Orme is a great man, is surrounded by great and famous people, while you, with all your money, are"--she shrugged her shoulders--"well, just nobody."

His face grew dark. She was playing on him as a musician plays on an instrument with which he is completely familiar.

"What the devil do you mean?" he muttered.

"If I were a man, in your place, I would have the great Sir Stephen at my feet, to make or to break as I pleased. I would never rest until I could be able to say: 'You're a great man in the world's eyes, but I am your master; you are my puppet, and you have to dance to my music, whether the tune be a dead march or a jig.' That is what I should do if I were a man; but I am only a girl, and it seems to me nowadays that men have more of the woman in them than we have."

He stopped and stared at her in the moonlight, a dark frown on his face, his eyes heavy with doubt and suspicion.

"Look here, my girl," he said, "you are showing up in a new light to-night. You are talking as your mother used to talk. And you aren't doing it without a purpose. What is it? What grudge can you, a mere girl who has only known him for a couple of days, have against Sir Stephen?"

She smiled.

"Let us say that I am only concerned for my father's wounded pride and

honour," she said. "Or let us say that I _have_ a game of my own to play, and that I am asking you to help me while you gratify your own desire for revenge. Will you help me?"

"Tell me--tell me what your game is. Good Lord!"--with a scowl. "Fancy you having a game: it's--it's ridiculous!"

"Almost as ridiculous as calling me a girl and expecting to see me playing with a doll or a hoop," she returned, calmly. "But you needn't reply. I can see you mean to do it, like a good and indulgent father; and some day, perhaps soon, I will, like a good and dutiful daughter, tell you why I wanted you to do it. Is that you, Mr. Orme? Will I come and sing? Oh, yes, if you wish it. Where is the little dog?" she asked, looking up at him with a new expression in her languorous eyes, as she glided beside him.

"Asleep on my bed," replied Stafford, with a laugh. "My man has turned him off and made him a luxurious couch with cushions three or four times, but he would persist on getting on again, so he'll have to stay, I suppose?"

"Are you always so good-natured?" she asked, in a low voice. "Or do you reserve all your tenderness of heart for dogs and horses--as Mr. Howard declares?"

"Mr. Howard is too often an ass," remarked Stafford, with a smile.

"You shall choose your song, as a reward for your exertions this afternoon," she said, as he led her to the piano.

Most of the men in the crowd waiting eagerly for the exquisite voice would have been moved to the heart's core by her tone and the expression in her usually cold eyes, but Stafford was clothed in the armour of his great love, and only inclined his head.

"Thanks: anything you like," he said, with the proper amount of gratitude.

She shot a glance at him and sank into the music-seat languidly. But a moment afterwards, as if she could not help herself, she was singing a Tuscan love-song with a subdued passion which thrilled even the _blase_ audience clustered round her. It thrilled Stafford; but only with the desire to be near Ida. A desire that became irresistible; and when she had finished he left the room, caught up his hat and overcoat and went out of the house.

As he did so, Mr. Falconer walked past him into the smoking-room. Mr. Griffenberg was alone there, seated in a big arm-chair with a cigar as black as a hat and as long as a penholder.

Falconer wheeled a chair up to him, and, in his blunt fashion, said:

"You are in this railway scheme of Orme's, Griffenberg?" Mr. Griffenberg nodded.

"And you?"

"Yes," said Falconer, succinctly. "I am joining. I suppose it's all right; Orme will be able to carry it through?"

Griffenberg emitted a thick cloud of smoke.

"It will try him a bit. It's a question of capital--ready capital. I'm helping him: got his Oriental shares as cover. A bit awkward for me, for I'm rather pushed just now--that estate loan, you know."

Falconer nodded. "I know. See here: I'll take those shares from you, if you like, and if you'll say nothing about it."

Mr. Griffenberg eyed his companion's rugged face keenly.

"What for?" he asked.

Mr. Falconer smiled.

"That's my business," he said. "The only thing that matters to you is, that by taking the shares off your hands I shall be doing you a service."

"That's true: you shall have 'em," said Mr. Griffenberg; "but I warn you it's a heavy lot."

"You shall have a cheque to-morrow," said Mr. Falconer. "Where did you get that cigar: it takes my fancy?"

Mr. Griffenberg produced his cigar case with alacrity: he liked Mr. Falconer's way of doing business.

At the moment Stafford left the Villa, Ida was standing by the window in the drawing-room of Heron Hall. On the table beside her lay a book which she had thrown down with a gesture of impatience. She was too restless to read, or to work; and the intense quietude of the great house weighed upon her with the weight of a tomb.

All day, since she had left Stafford, his words of passionate love had haunted her. They sang in her ears even as she spoke to her father or Jessie, or the dogs who followed her about with wistful eyes as if they were asking her what ailed her, and as if they would help her.

He loved her! She had said it to herself a thousand times all through the long afternoon, the dragging evening. He loved her. It was so strange, so incredible. They had only met three or four times; they had said so little to each other. Why, she could remember almost every word. He loved her, had knelt to her, he had told her so in passionate words, with looks which made her heart tremble, her breath come fast as she recalled them. That is, he wanted her to be his wife, to _give herself_ to him, to be with him always, never to leave him.

The strangeness, the suddenness of the thing overwhelmed her so that she could not think of it calmly. He had asked her to think of it, to decide, to give him an answer. Why could she not? She had always, hitherto, known her own mind. If anyone had asked her a question about the estate, about the farm, she had known what to answer, important as the question might have been. But now she seemed as if her mind were paralyzed, as if she could not decide. Was it because she had never thought of love; because she had never dreamt that anyone would love her so much as to want to have her by his side for all his life?

As she looked through the window at the moonlight on the lawn, she thought of him; called up the vision of his tall, graceful figure and handsome face--yes; he was handsome, she knew. But she had scarcely given a thought to his face; and only felt that it was good to have him near her, to hear him talk in his deep voice, broken sometimes by the short laugh which sounded almost boyish. It had been good to have him near her--But then, she had been so lonely, had seen so few men--scarcely any at all--Suppose when she met him next she said "No," told him that she could not love him, and he went away, leaving her forever; would she be sorry?

She turned away from the window suddenly, nearly stumbling over Donald, who was lying at her feet, his nose on his paws, his great eyes fixed sadly and speculatively on her face, and caught up the book. But his face came between her and the page, and she put the book down and went into the hall.

Her father was in the library, there was no sound in the house to drown the voice, the passionately pleading voice which rang in her ears.

"I must go out," she said, "I shall be able to think in the air, shall be able to decide."

She caught up a shawl and flung it carelessly over her head, quite unconscious that the fleecy, rose-coloured wool made an exquisite frame for the girlish loveliness of her face, and opening the door, went slowly down the broken, lichen-covered steps, the two dogs following at her heels.

She drew in the keen but balmy air with a long breath, and looked up at the moon, now a yellow crescent in the starry sky; and something in the beauty of the night, something subtly novel thrilled her with a strange sense of throbbing, pulsing joy and happiness, underneath which lurked as subtle a fear and dread, the fear and dread of those who stand upon the threshold of the unknown; who, in passing that threshold, enter a world of strange things which they never more may leave.

Love: what was it? Did she feel it? Oh, if she could only tell! What should she say to him when she met him; and when should she meet him? Perhaps he had come to regret his avowal to her, had been wearied and disappointed by her coldness, and would not come again! At the thought her heart contracted as if at the touch of an icy hand. But the next moment it leapt with a suffocating sense of mystery, of half-fearful joy, for she saw him coming across the lawn to her, and heard her name, spoken as it had never yet been spoken excepting by him; and she stood, still as a statue, as he held out his hand and, looking into her eyes, murmured her name again.

"Ida!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Ida!"

It was the lover's cry of appeal, the prayer for love uttered by the heart that loves; and it went straight to her own heart.

She put out her hand, and he took it and held it in both his.

"I have come for your answer," he said in the low voice that thrills; the voice which says so much more than the mere words. "I could not wait--I tried to keep away from you until to-morrow; but it was of no use. I am here, you see, and I want your answer. Don't tell me it is 'No!' Trust me, Ida--trust to my love for you. I will devote my life to trying to make you happy. Ah, but you know! What is your answer? Have you thought--you promised me you would think?"

"I have thought," she said, at last. "I have thought of nothing else--I wanted to tell you the truth--to tell you truly as I would to myself--but it is so hard to know--Sometimes when I think that you may go away, and that I may not see you again, my heart sinks, and I feel, oh! so wretched."

He waited for no more, but caught her to him, and as she lay in his arms only slightly struggling, her face upturned, he bent his own, almost white with passion, and kissed her on the lips, and not once only.

The blood rushed to her face, her bosom rose and fell, and, her face grown pale again, her eyes gazed up into his half fiercely, half appealingly; then suddenly they grew moist, as if with tears, her lips quivered, and from them came, as if involuntarily, the words of surrender, the maiden confession:

"I love you!"

He uttered a low, sharp cry, the expression of his heart's delight, his soul's triumph.

"You love me! Ida! How--how do you know--when?" She shook her head and sighed, as she pressed her cheek against his breast.

"I don't know. It was just now--the moment when you kissed me. Then it came to me suddenly--the knowledge--the truth. It was as if a flash of light had revealed it to me. Oh, yes, I love you. I wish--almost I wish that I did not, for--it hurts me!"

She pressed her hand to her heart, and gazed up at him with the wonder of a child who is meeting its first experience of the strange commingling of pain and joy.

He raised her in his arms until her face was against his.

"I know--dearest," he said, almost in a whisper. "It is love--it is always so, I think. My heart is aching with longing for you, and yet I am happy--my God, how happy! And you? Tell me, Ida?"

"Yes, I am happy," she breathed, with a deep sigh, as she nestled still closer to him. "It is all so strange--so unreal!"

"Not unreal, dearest," he said, as they walked under the trees, her head against his shoulder, his arm round her waist and supporting her. "It is real enough, this love of mine--which will last me till my

death, I know; and yours?"

She gazed straight before her dreamily.

"There can be no heaven without you, without your love," she answered, with a solemn note in her sweet voice.

He pressed her to him.

"And you have thought it all out. You have realised that you will be my wife--my very own?"

"Yes," she said. "I know now. I know that I am giving you myself, that I am placing all my life in your hands."

"God help me to guard it and make it happy!" he said; then he laughed. "I have no fear! I will make you happy, Ida! I--I feel that I shall. Do you understand what I mean? I feel as if I had been set apart, chosen from all the millions of men, to love you and cherish you and make you happy! And you, Ida?"

She looked up at him with the same far-away, dreamy expression in her wonderful eyes.

"Now at this moment I felt that I, too, have been set apart for you: is it because you have just said the same? No, because I felt it when you kissed me just now. Ah, I am glad you did it! If you had not I might not have known that I loved you, I might have let you go forever, thinking that I did not care. It was your kiss that opened my heart to me and showed me--."

He bent over her until his lips nearly touched hers. "Kiss me in return--of your own accord, Ida! But once, if you will; but kiss me!"

Without a blush, solemnly as if it were a sacrament, she raised her head and kissed him on the lips.

There fell a silence. The world around them, in the soft shimmer of the crescent moon, became an enchanted region, the land that never was on earth or sea, the land of love, in which all that dwell therein move in the glamour of the sacred Fire of Love.

Stafford broke it at last. It is the man who cannot be contented with silence; he thirsts for his mistress's voice.

"Dearest, what shall I do? You must tell me," he said, as if he had been thinking. "I will do whatever you wish, whatever you think best. I've a strong suspicion that you're the cleverest of us; that you've got more brains in this sweet little finger of yours than I've got in my clumsy head--"

She laughed softly and looked at the head which he had libelled, the shapely head with its close-cut hair, which, sliding her hand up, she touched caressingly.

"Shall I come to your father to-morrow, Ida? I will ride over after breakfast--before, if you like: if I had my way I'd patrol up and down here all night until it was a decent time to call upon him."

She nestled a little closer to him, and her brows came level with sudden gravity and doubt.

"My father! I had not thought of him--of what he would say--do. But I know! He--he will be very angry," she said, in a low voice.

"Will he? Why?" Stafford asked. "Of course I know I'm not worthy of you, Ida; no living man is!"

"Not worthy!"

She smiled at him with the woman's worship already dawning in her deep grey eyes.

"It is I who am not worthy. Why, think! I am only an inexperienced girl--living the life of a farmer's daughter. We are very poor--oh, you do not know how poor! We are almost as poor as the smallest tenant, though we live in this big house, and are still regarded as great people--the Herons of Herondale."

"That's one of the things I have been thinking of," said Stafford. "What lovely hair you have, Ida! It is not often that dark hair is so soft, is it?"

He bent down and drew a look, which his caresses had released, across her lips, and kissed her through it.

"You are lords of the soil, people of importance and rank here, while we are--well, just ordinary folk. I can quite understand your father objecting. Dearest, you are worthy of a duke, a prince--"

She put her hand up to his lips to silence the lover's extravagant flattery.

"It is not that--the difference--which is all to your advantage," she said. "My father may think of it," she went on with innocent candour. "But it would be the same if you were of the highest rank. He does not want me to leave him."

"And if he were less anxious to keep you he would not give you to me, who am, in his opinion, and rightly, so much your inferior," said Stafford. "But I ought to go to him, dearest. I ought to go to-morrow."

She trembled a little as she nestled against him. "And--and--your father, Sir Stephen Orme?" she said. "What will he say?"

Stafford laughed slowly and confidently.

"Oh, my father? He will be delighted. He's the best of fathers, a perfect model for parents. Ever since I can remember he has been good to me, a precious sight better, more liberal and generous, than I deserved; but lately, since I've known him--Ah, well, I can only say, dearest, that he will be delighted to hear that I have chosen a wife; and when he sees you--"

He stopped and held her at arm's length for a moment and looked down into the lovely face upturned to his with its sweet, girlish gravity.

--"Why, he will fall in love with you right out of hand! I think you

will like my father, Ida. He--well, he's a taking sort of fellow; everybody likes him who knows him--really knows him--and speaks well of him. Yes, I'm proud of him, and I feel as safe as if he were here to say, in his hearty, earnest way: 'I wish you good luck, Stafford! And may God bless you, my dear!'"

He flushed and laughed as if a little ashamed of his emotional way of putting it.

"He's full of--of the milk of human kindness, is my father," he said, with a touch of simplicity which was one of the thousand and fifteen reasons why Ida loved him.

She gazed up at him thoughtfully and sighed.

"I hope he will like me," she said, all the pride which usually characterized her melted by her love. "I am sure that I shall like him--for loving you."

"You will see," said Stafford, confidently. "He will be as proud as a duke about you. You won't mind if he shows it a little plainly and makes a little fuss, Ida? He's--well, he's used to making the most of a good thing when he has it--it's the life he has led which has rather got him into the way of blowing a trumpet, you know--and he'll want a whole orchestra to announce you. But about your father, dearest? Shall I come to-morrow and ask for his consent?"

She looked up at him with doubt and a faint trouble in her beautiful eyes, and he heard her sigh regretfully.

"I am afraid," she said, in a low voice.

"Afraid?" He looked at her with a smile of surprise. "If anyone were to tell me that it was possible for you to be afraid, I shouldn't believe them," he said. "Fear and you haven't made acquaintance yet, Ida!"

She shook her head.

"I am so happy, so intensely happy, that I am afraid lest the gods should be jealous and snatch my happiness from me. I am afraid that if you come to-morrow, my father will say 'No,' will--"

--"Will have me shown out," said Stafford, gravely. "I see. I shouldn't be surprised."

"And--and then I should not be able to see you again."

He laughed at the idea.

"My dearest, if all the fathers in the world said 'No,' it wouldn't make any difference to me," he said, with that air of masterfulness, that flash of the eye which a woman loves in a man. "Do you think I should give you up, that I should be content to say, 'I'm very sorry, sir,' and go off--leave you--keep away from you!" He laughed again, and she nestled a little closer, and her small hand closed a little more tightly on his arm. "And you wouldn't give me up, refuse to see me, even if your father withheld his consent, would you, Ida?" he asked.

She looked straight before her dreamily. Then raised her eyes to his

gravely.

"No; I could not. It is just that. I could not. Somehow I feel as if I had given you the right to myself and that nothing could alter it, nothing could take me away from you!"

How was it possible for him to refrain from lifting her in his arms and kissing the sweet, soft lips which made such a confession.

They walked on for a minute or two in silence, when she went on, as if she had been still considering the matter:

"No, you must not come, Stafford. My father is not strong, and--and--ah! well, you know, you saw him that other night--the first night we met--do you remember? And he was walking in his sleep again the other evening. If you were to come--if I were to tell him that--that you had asked me to be your wife, he might fly into a passion; it might do him harm. Some time ago, when he was ill, the doctor told me that he must be kept quite quiet, and that nothing must be allowed to excite or irritate him. He is very old and leads so secluded a life--he sees no one now but myself. Oh, how I would like you to come; how good it would be if--if he would give me to you as other fathers give their daughters! But I are not risk it! I cannot! Stafford"--she put her hands on his breast and looked up at him--"am I wrong to tell you all this--to let you see how much I love you? Is it--unmaidenly of me? Tell me if it is, and I will not do so for the future. I will hide my heart a little better than I am doing at present. Ah, see, it is on my sleeve!"

He took her arm and kissed the sleeve where her heart was supposed to be.

"I've read that men only love while they are not sure of a woman's love; that with every two persons it is one who loves and the other who permits himself or herself to be loved. Is that true, Stafford? If so, then it is I who love--alas! poor me!"

He drew her to him and looked into her eyes with a passionate intensity.

"It's not true," he said, almost fiercely. "For God's sake don't say such things. They--they hurt, and hurt badly; they leave a bitter taste in the mouth, a nasty pang behind. And if it were true--but it isn't, Ida!--it is I who love. Good Lord! don't you know how beautiful you are? Haven't you a looking-glass in your room? don't you know that no girl that ever was born had such wonderful eyes, such beautiful hair? Oh, my heart's love, don't you know how perfect you are?"

They had stopped under some trees near the ruined chapel, and she leant against one of them and looked up at him with a strange, dreamy, far-away look in her eyes which were dark as the purple amethyst.

"I never thought about it. Am I--do you think I am pretty? I am glad; yes I am glad!"

"Pretty!" he laughed. "Dearest, when I take you away from here, into the world, as my wife--my wife--the thought sends my blood coursing through my veins--you will create so great a sensation that I shall be half wild with pride; I shall want to go about calling aloud: 'She is

my wife; my very own! You may admire--worship her, but she is mine--belongs to me--to unworthy Stafford Orme!"

"Yes?" she murmured, her voice thrilling. "You will be proud of me? Of me, the poor little country girl who rode about the dales in a shabby habit and an old hat? Stafford, Jessie was telling me that there is a very beautiful girl staying at the Villa at Brae Wood--one of the visitors. Jessie said she was lovely, and that all the men-servants, and the maids, too, were talking about her. She must be more beautiful than I am."

"Which of the women do you mean?" he said, indifferently, with the supreme indifference which the man who is madly in love feels for every other woman than the one of his heart.

"She is a fair girl, with blue eyes and the most wonderful hair; 'chestnut-red with gold in it,' as Jessie described it to me. And she says that this girl wears the most beautiful diamonds--I am still quoting Jessie--and other precious stones, and that she is very 'high and mighty,' and more haughty than any of the other ladies. Who is it?"

"I think she must mean Miss Falconer--Miss Maude Falconer," said Stafford, as indifferently as before, as he smoothed one of the silken tresses on her brow, and kissed it as it lay on his finger. "It is just the way a slave would describe her."

"And is she very beautiful?" asked Ida.

"Yes, I suppose she is," he said.

"You suppose!" she echoed, arching her brows, but with a frank smile about her lips, the smile of contentment at his indifference. "Don't you know?"

"Well, yes, she is," he admitted. "I've scarcely noticed her. Oh, but yes, she is; and she sings very well. Yes, I can understand her making a sensation in the servants' hall--she makes one in the drawing-room. But she's not my style of beauty. See here, dearest: it doesn't sound nice, but though I've spent some hours with Miss Falconer and listened to her singing, I have only just noticed that she is good-looking, and that she has a wonderful voice: they say up at the Villa that there's nothing like it on the stage--excepting Patti's and Melba's; but all the time she has been there I have had another face, another voice, in my mind. Ever since I saw you, down there by the river, I have had no eyes for any other woman's face, however beautiful, no ears for any other woman's voice, however sweet." She was silent a moment, as she clasped her hands and laid them against his cheek.

"How strange it sounds! But if you had chanced to see her first--perhaps you would not have fallen in love with me? How could you have done so? She is so very lovely--I can see she is, by Jessie's description."

He laughed.

"Even if I had not seen you, there was no chance of my falling in love with Miss Falconer, dearest," he said, smiling at her gravity and earnestness. "She is very beautiful, lovely in her way, if you like; but it is not my way. She is like a statue at most times; at others,

just now and again, like a--well, a sleek tigress in her movements and the way she turns her head. Oh, there wasn't the least danger of my falling in love with her, even if I hadn't seen the sweetest and loveliest girl in all the wide world."

"And you will feel like that, feel so sure, so certain that you love me, even though you have seen and will see so many women who are far more beautiful than I am?" she said, dreamily.

"Sure and certain," he responded, with a long sigh. "If I were as sure of your love as I am of mine for you--Forgive me, dearest!" for she had raised her eyes to his with an earnestness that was almost solemn.

"You may be sure," she said, slowly. "I shall love you as long as I live. I know it! I do not know why. I only--feel it. Perhaps we may be parted--"

He laughed--but his hand closed on hers, and gripped them tightly.

--"But I shall always love you. Something has gone out of me--is it my heart?--and I can never take it back from you. Perhaps you may grow tired of me--it may be. I have read and heard of such things happening to women--you may see someone more beautiful than Miss Falconer, someone who will lead you to forget the little girl who rode through the rain in Herondale. If so, there will be no need to tell me; no need to make excuses, or ask for forgiveness. There would be no need to tell me, for something here"--she drew her hand from his and touched her bosom--"would tell me. You would only have to keep away from me--that is all. And I--ah well I should be silent, quite silent."

"Dearest!" he murmured, reproachfully, and with something like awe, for her brows were knit, her face was pale as ivory, and her eyes glowed.

"Why do you say this now, just as--as we have confessed our love for each other? Do you think I shall be faithless? I could almost laugh! As if any man you deigned to love could ever forget you, ever care a straw for any other woman!"

She turned to him with a shudder, a little cry that was tragic in its intensity, turned to him and clenched her small hands on his breast.

"Swear to me!" she panted; then, as if ashamed of the passion that racked her, her eyes dropped and the swift red flooded her face. "No! you shall not swear to me, Stafford. I--I will believe you love me as I shall love you forever and forever! But if--if the time should come when some other girl shall win you from me, promise me that you will not tell me, that you will just keep away from me! I could bear it if--if I did not see you; but if I saw you--Oh!"--something like a moan escaped her quivering lips, and she flung herself upon his breast with the _abandon_, the unself-consciousness of a child.

Stafford was moved to his inmost heart, and for a moment, as he held her within the embrace of his strong arms, he could not command his voice sufficiently for speech. At last he murmured, his lips seeking hers:

"Ida! I swear that I will love you forever and forever!"

"But--but--if you break your vow, you promise that you will not come to me--tell me? I shall know. Promise, ah, promise!"

"Will nothing less content you? Must I?" he said, almost desperate at her persistence. "Then I promise, Ida!"

CHAPTER XIX.

There is something solemn and awe-inspiring in perfect happiness.

How many times in the day did Ida pull up Rupert and gaze into the distance with vacant, unseeing eyes, pause in the middle of some common task, look up from the book she was trying to read, to ask herself whether she was indeed the same girl who had lived her lonely life at Herondale, or whether she had changed places with some other personality, with some girl singularly blessed amongst women.

Jessie and Jason, even the bovine William, who was reputed the stupidest man in the dale, noticed the change in her, noticed the touch of colour that was so quick to mount to the ivory cheek, the novel brightness and tenderness in the deep grey eyes, the new note, the low, sweet tone of happiness in the clear voice. Her father only remained unobservant of the subtle change, but he was like a mole burrowing amongst his book and gloating secretly over the box which he concealed at the approach of footsteps, the opening of a door, and the sound of a voice in a distant part of the house.

But though the servants remarked the change in their beloved mistress, they did not guess at its cause; for, by chance rather than design, none of them had seen Ida and Stafford together. And yet they met daily. Sometimes Stafford would ride over from Brae Wood and meet her by the river. There was a hollow there, so deep that it hid not only themselves but the horses, and here they would sit, hand in hand, or more often with his arm round her and her small, shapely head with its soft, but roughened hair, upon his breast. Sometimes he would row across the lake and they would walk side by side along the bank, and screened by the trees in which the linnet and the thrush sang the songs which make a lover's litany; at others--and these were the sweetest meeting of all, for they came in the soft and stilly night when all nature was hushed as if under the spell of the one great passion--he would ride or walk over after dinner, and they would sit in the ruined archway of the old chapel and talk of their blank past, the magic present, and the future which was to hold nothing but happiness.

Love grows fast under such conditions, and the love of these two mortals grew to gigantic proportions, absorbing the lives of both of them. To Stafford, all the hours that were not spent with this girl of his heart were so much dreary waste.

To Ida--ah, well, who shall measure the intensity of a girl's first passion? She only lived in the expectation of seeing him, in his presence and the whispered words and caresses of his love; and, in his absence, in the memory of them. For her life meant just this man who had come and taken the heart from her bosom and enthroned his own in its place.

They told each other everything. Stafford knew the whole of her life

before they met, all the little details of the daily routine of the Hall, and her management of the farm; and she learnt from him all that was going on at the great, splendid palace which in his modesty Sir Stephen Orme had called the Villa. She liked to nestle against him and hear the small details of his life, as he liked to hear hers; and she seemed to know all the visitors at the Villa, and their peculiarities, as well as if she were personally acquainted with them.

"You ought not to leave them so much, Stafford." she said, with mock reproof, as they sat one afternoon in the ballow by the river. "Don't you think they notice your absence and wonder where you are?"

"Shouldn't think so," he replied. "Besides, I don't care if they do. All my worry is that I can't come to you oftener. Every time I leave you I count up the hours that must pass before I see you again. But I expect most, if not all, of the visitors will be off presently. Most of 'em have been there the regulation fortnight; a good many come backwards and forwards; they're the city men, the money men. My father is closeted with them for hours every day--that big scheme of his seems to be coming off satisfactorily. It's a railway to some place in Africa, and all these fellows--the Griffenbergs, and Beltons, that fat German baron, Wirsch, and the rest of them, are in it. Heaven knows why my father wants to worry about it for. I heard one of them say that he calculated to make a million and a half out of it. As if he weren't rich enough!"

"A million and a half," she said. "What a large sum it seems. What one could do with a half, a quarter, a tenth of it!"

"What would you do, dearest?" he asked.

She laughed softly.

"I think that I would first buy you a present. And then I'd have the Hall repainted. No, I'd get the terrace rails and the portico mended; and yet, perhaps, it would be better to have the inside of the house painted and papered. You see, there are so many things I could do with it, that it's difficult to choose."

"You shall do 'em all," he said, putting his arm round her. "See here, Ida, I've been thinking about ourselves--"

"Do you ever think of anything else? I don't," she said, half unconsciously.

--"And I've made up my mind to take the bull by the horns--"

"Is that meant for my father or yours?"

"Both," he replied. "We've been so happy this last fortnight--is it a fortnight ago since I got you to tell me that you cared for me? Lord! it seems a year sometimes, and at others it only seems a minute!--that we haven't cared to think of how we stand; but it can't like this forever, Ida. You see, I want you--I want you all to myself, for every hour of the day and night instead of for just the few minutes I've the good luck to snatch. Directly this affair of my governor's is finished I shall go to him and tell him I'm the happiest, the luckiest man in the world; I shall tell him everything exactly how we stand--and ask him to help us with your father."

Ida sighed and looked grave.

"I know, dearest," he said, answering the look. "But your father has to be faced some time, and I--Ida, I am impatient. I want you. Now, as I daresay you have discovered, I am rather an idiot than otherwise, and the worst man in the world to carry out anything diplomatically; but my father--" He laughed rather ruefully. "Well, they say he can coax a concession out of even the Sultan of Turkey; that there is no one who can resist him; and I know I shall be doing the right thing by telling him how we stand."

She leant her elbows on her knees and her chin in the palms of her hands.

"It shall be as you say, my lord and master," she said; "and when you tell him that you have been so foolish as to fall in love with a little Miss Nobody, who lives in a ruined tumble-down house, and is as poor and friendless as a church mouse, do you think he will be delighted--that the great and all-powerful Sir Stephen Orme will throw up his hat for joy and consider that you have been very wise?"

"I think when he sees you--What is that?" he broke off.

"That" was a lady riding across the moor behind them. She was mounted on one of the Orme horses, was habited by Redfern, who had done justice to her superb and supple figure, and the sunlight which poured from between the clouds fully revealed the statuesque beauty of her face.

"I know," said Ida, quietly, as she looked at the graceful horsewoman, at the lithe, full figure, the cold perfection of the Grecian face. "That is Miss Falconer: it is, is it not?"

He nodded indifferently.

"And she has seen us," said Ida.

"It doesn't matter in the least," said Stafford. "Why shouldn't she? But I don't think she has; she did not turn her head as she rode by."

"That is why," said Ida, with her woman's acuteness. "She saw us from the top of the hill--see, the groom is just riding down."

She was silent a moment or two, watching Maude Falconer as she cantered away, then she shivered as if with cold.

"What is the matter, dearest?" he asked, drawing her to him. "Why did you shudder?"

She tried to laugh, but her eyes were grave and almost solemn. "I don't know. It was as if someone had walked over my grave; as if I felt the presentiment of some coming evil. I never felt like it before--Yes: she is very beautiful, Stafford. She is like a picture, a statue--no, that is not fair; for no picture had ever such magnificent hair, no statue was ever so full of life and--Oh, I want a word--power. Yes; she is like a tigress--a tigress asleep and in a good temper just for the present; but--"

Stafford laughed, the strong and healthy man's laugh of good-natured

tolerance for the fancies of the woman he loves.

"My dear Ida, I assure you Miss Falconer is quite an ordinary young woman with nothing mysterious or uncanny about her. And if she has seen us, I am rather glad. I--well, I want to take you by the hand and exclaim aloud to the whole world: 'Behold the treasure I have found! Look upon her--but shade your eyes lest her beauty dazzle you--and worship at her feet.' Only a day or two more and I'll tell my father and have him on our side."

She made a gesture of consent.

"It shall be as you will," she murmured again. "But go now, dearest; I shall have to ride fast to reach home in time to give my father his tea."

Maude Falconer cantered easily until she had turned the corner of the hill and was out of sight of Stafford and Ida, then she pulled up the high-bred horse who fretted under her steel-like hands and tossed the foam from his champing lips, pulled up and looked straight before her, while the colour came and went on her smooth cheek; a sombre fire gleamed in the usually coldly calm eyes, and her bosom heaved under the perfect moulding of the riding-habit. She sat and looked before her for a moment or two as if she were battling with an emotion which threatened to master her and to find expression in some violent outburst; but she conquered, and presently rode on to the Villa; and half an hour later Stafford, coming up the steps, found her lying back in her favourite chair with a cup of tea in her hand.

"You are just in time," she said, looking up at him, and he looked back at her rather vacantly; for Ida had been in his arms too recently, for his mind, his whole being, to be sufficiently clear of her to permit him to take any interest in anything else "for tea," she said. "Here it comes. Shall I pour it out for you? Have you been riding far?"

"Not very far," he said. "You have been riding, too. Is it a wonder we did not meet."

"Yes," she assented, languidly. "I met no one, saw no one, while I was out. Here comes your shadow," she added, as Tiny, having heard his beloved master's voice, came helter-skelter, head over heels, and leapt on Stafford's lap. "How fond he is of you."

Stafford nodded.

"Yes; I'm jolly glad no one answered the advertisement for its owner."

She bent over and stroked the terrier, who always seemed uneasy under her caress, and her hand touched Stafford's. She glanced at him as it did so, but the white hand so soft and warm might have been a piece of senseless wood for all its effect upon him whose soul was still thrilling with Ida Heron's touch; and with a tightening of the lips, she took her hand away and leant back, but her eyes still clung to him, as, all unconscious, he bent over the dog.

At that moment a carriage drove up, and Mr. Falconer alighted. He came up the steps, his heavy face grave and yet alert; and his keen eyes glanced at the pair as they sat side by side. Stafford looked up and nodded.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Falconer," he said, pleasantly. "Stands London where it did?"

"Pretty much so, yes," responded Mr. Falconer, grimly. "Yes, plenty of other things change, have their day and cease to be, but the little village keeps its end up and sees things--and men--come and go, flare up, flicker and fizzle out. No, thanks; I'll have some tea in my room."

"And like a dutiful daughter, I will go and pour it out for him," said Maude.

She rose--Tiny rose also, and barked at her--followed her father to his room and stood watching him as he took off his frock-coat--he had no valet--and slowly put on a loose jacket.

"Well?" she said, at last.

He sank into a chair and looked up at her with a sardonic smile on his face.

"Yes, I'm back," he said. "I hurried back because Sir Stephen is going to sign the articles to-night, going to bring the thing to a conclusion."

She nodded, her eyes fixed on his hawk-like ones with a calm but keen watchfulness.

"And you? Have you--"

He leant forward, and held out one claw-like hand, open.

"Yes, I've got him fast and tight." His hand closed, and his eyes shot a swift, lurid gleam from under their half-lowered lids. "I've got him as in a vice; I've only to turn the screw and--I squeeze him as flat and dry as a lemon." She drew a long breath of satisfaction, of relief.

"You are clever!" she said. "And in one fortnight."

He smiled grimly.

"Yes; it is sharp work; and it has taken some doing--and some money. But I've worked it. Black Steve--I mean Sir Stephen Orme, the great Sir Stephen--is under my thumb. To-night, the night of his triumph, I am going to crack him like an egg."

"You will ruin him?" she said.

"That is it," he said, with a nod. "I shall ruin him!"

"Is there no escape?" she asked in a low voice.

"None," he replied, grimly. "I tell you that nothing can save him."

"Excepting one thing," she said in so low a voice that it sounded as if she were speaking to herself.

"Eh?" he said, as if he had not caught the words. "What is it you mean:

what can save him, what is this one thing?"

His heavy brows came down, and he frowned at her.

She raised her eyes, cold and glittering like steel, and met his frown unflinchingly.

"The marriage of his son Stafford with your daughter," she said, slowly, calmly.

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Falconer started and stared at her, his heavy face growing a dust-red, his eyes distended with amazement and anger.

"Are you out of your mind?" he said at last, and frowning at her in a kind of perplexity. "Pon my soul, Maude, I'm never quite certain whether you are in jest or earnest! If this is intended for a joke, permit me to tell you I consider it in vilely bad taste."

"I am not jesting," she said, very quietly, her chin in her hand, her blue eyes fixed on his unblushingly. "I am in the most sober, the most serious earnest, I assure you."

He rose, then sank into the chair again, and sighed impatiently.

"Do you mean to say that you--that he--Confound it! If ever there was a man to be pitied, it is the one who has the honour to be your father, Maude."

"Why?" she asked, calmly. "Have I not been a dutiful daughter? Have I ever given you any trouble, deceived you? Am I not perfectly frank with you at this moment?" He rose and paced to the mantel-shelf, and leaning against it, looked down upon her, the frown still on his heavy face, his hands thrust deeply in his pockets.

"You've always been a puzzle to me," he said, more to himself than to her. "Ever since you were born I've felt uncertain about you--you're like your mother. But never mind that. What game is this you're carrying on?"

"One in which I mean to win," she replied, slowly, meditatively. "Have you not seen--How slow to perceive, even you, a reputedly clever man, can be! I don't suppose there is a woman in the house who has not detected the fact that I am in love with Stafford Orme, though I have tried to hide it from them--and you will admit that I am not a bad actress."

"In love with Stafford Orme!" His face darkened. "No, I did not know it. Why---what the devil does he mean by not coming to me!" he broke out angrily, harshly.

She smiled.

"He hasn't come to ask you for me, because--well, he doesn't want me,"

she said in a low voice.

"What!" he exclaimed below his breath. "Do you mean to tell me that--that--Why, you can't have the shamelessness to care for the man without--until--"

She broke in upon his burst of indignation with a low, clear laugh, and there was no shame in her voice or eyes, as she said:

"Would it be so shameful if I have? My dear father, you and I should differ on that point. We are told that we are made for love and to be loved, that it is our proper and natural destiny. Why, then, should we be ashamed of it. None of us are in reality; we only pretend to be. It is part of the world's system of hypocrisy to assume an incapacity for loving a man until he has asked you; to pretend an utter indifference until he has said the magic words, 'I love you.' As if love could wait, ever did wait, ever will! Anyway, mine did not! And I am no different to other women--only more candid."

"By Heaven, you make me feel--mad!" he said, with suppressed anger. "You tell me unblushingly, to my face, that you have fallen in love with the son of my old enemy, that you want to marry him--you ask me to help you, to--to forego my just revenge, to use my hold over him as a lever, to induce him, force him--Good God! have you no sense of right or wrong, are you utterly devoid of--of modesty, of womanly pride!"

He glowered down upon her with flushed face and angry eyes; but she was quite unmoved by his outburst, and still met his gaze steadily, almost reflectingly.

"A fortnight ago I should have asked myself that question--and as angrily as you; but I can't now. It has gone too far."

"Gone too far! You mean--"

"That I have grown to love him so much, so dearly, that life without him--"

"By God! you will have to live without him, for I'll not help you to get him," he said, fiercely. "Stafford Orme, Stephen Orme's boy! No! Put the thing out of your mind, Maude! See here--I don't want to be angry; I'll take back all I said: you--well, you surprised me, and shocked me, too, I'll admit--you're a strange girl, and say things that you don't mean, and in a cold-blooded way that gives me fits. Say no more about it; put the idea out of your head."

She laughed, and rose, and gliding to him, put her hand on his arm.

"My dear father," she said in a low voice, but with a strange and subtle vibration in it, as if the passion with which she was struggling threatened to burst forth, "you don't know what you ask; you don't know what love is--and you don't know what I am! I didn't know myself until the last few days; until a gradual light shone on the truth and showed me my heart, the heart I once thought would never grow warm with love! Oh, I was a fool! I played with fire, and I have been burned. I am burning still!" She pressed her hand against her bosom, and for an instant the passion within her darted from her eyes and twisted the red, perfectly formed lips. Her hand tightened on his arm, her breath came pantingly, now quickly, now slowly. "Father I have come to you."

Most girls go to their mother. I have none. I come to you because I--must! You ask me to put the--the idea out of my head." She laughed a low laugh of self-scorn and bitterness. "Do you think I have not tried to steel, to harden, my heart against this feeling which has been creeping insidiously over me, creeping, stealing gliding like a cloud until it has enveloped me? I have fought against it as never woman fought against the approach of love. The first day--it was the day he took me on the lake--ah, you don't remember, but I--Shall I ever forget it!--the first day my heart went out to him I tried to call it back, to laugh at my weakness, to call myself a fool! And I thought I had succeeded in driving the insidious feeling away. But I was wrong. It was there in my heart already, and day by day, as I saw him, as I heard him speak, the thing grew until I could not see him cross the lawn, hear him speak to the dog, without thrilling, without shivering, shuddering! Father, have pity on me! No, I won't ask for pity! I won't have it! But I ask, I demand, sympathy, your help! Father," she drew nearer to him and looked into his eyes with an awful look of desperation, of broken pride, of the aching craving of love, "you must help me. I love him, I must be his wife--I cannot live without him, I will not!"

He paled and gnawed at his thick lip.

"You talk like a madwoman," he said, hoarsely.

She nodded.

"Yes, I am mad; I know it; I know it! But I shall never be sane again. All my days and all my nights are consumed in this madness. I think of him--I call up his face--ah!" She flung her hands before her face and swayed to and fro as if she were half dazed, half giddy with passion. "And all day I have to fight against the risk, the peril of discovery. To feel the women's eyes on me when he comes near, to feel that their ears are strained to catch the note in my voice which will give me away, place me under their scorn--and to know that, try as I will, my voice, my eyes will grow tender as they rest on him, as I speak to him! To have to hide, to conceal, to crush down my heart while it is aching, throbbing with the torture of my love for him!"

He strode from her, then came back. The sight of the storm within her had moved him: for, after all, this strange girl was his daughter, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. He swore under his breath and struggled for speech.

"And--and the man Stafford?" he said. "He--he has not said--D--n it! you don't mean to tell me that he is absolutely indifferent, that he--he doesn't care?"

"I'll tell you the truth," she said. "I swore to myself that I would. There is too much at stake for me to conceal anything. He does--not--care for me."

Ralph Falconer uttered a sharp snarl of shame and resentment.

"He doesn't? and yet you--you want to marry him!"

She made a gesture with her hands which was more eloquent than words.

"Perhaps--perhaps there is someone else? Someone of the other women

here?" he suggested, moodily.

"Yes, there is someone else," she said, with the same calm decision. "No, it is not one of the women here; it is a girl in the place; a farmer's daughter, I think. It is only a liaison, a vulgar intrigue--"

He uttered an exclamation.

"And yet that doesn't cure you!"

She shook her head and smiled.

"No; my case is incurable. Father, if he were engaged to anyone of the women here, to someone his equal, I should still love him and want him; yes, and move heaven and earth to get him. But this is only a flirtation with some country girl--she meets him on the hill-side by the river--anywhere. I have seen them, at a distance, once or twice. She is of no importance. She has caught his fancy, and will soon fail to hold it."

She waved her hand as if she were moving the obstacle aside. Her father stared at her in a kind of stupefaction.

"My girl, don't you know what you are asking for? A life of wretchedness and misery; the hell of being married to a man who doesn't love you."

She laughed and drew herself up, her eyes flashing, a warm glow on her cheeks.

"Who doesn't love me! Not now, perhaps; but do you think I should not teach him to love me, make him love me? Look at me, father!"

He looked at her reluctantly, in a kind of dazed admiration and resentment.

"Do you think any man could resist me if I set my mind upon winning him? No! Oh, it's not the language of hysterical vanity! I know my power; every woman knows how far her power will go. Let me have him to myself for one week, and--" She caught her breath. "Love! Yes, he shall return mine tenfold! I will teach him!" She caught her breath again and pressed her hands to her bosom. "Don't be afraid, father, I will take care of the future. Help me in the present; help me as I have asked you!"

"By God, you ask too much!" he said, sternly, fiercely.

She stood and looked at him. The colour slowly left her face until it was white as death, the light faded from her eyes until they were dull and lifeless, the red of her lips paled and the lips themselves relaxed and drooped, and as he looked at her a ghastly fear smote his heart and a question shot into and a question shot into his eyes. She inclined her head as if he had put the question in words.

"Yes," she said. "I shall die. You remember my mother? I shall follow her--"

He uttered a low, hoarse cry, and caught her hands and held them; then

he flung them from him, and standing with his back to her, said, thickly, as if every word were forced from him:

"You shall have your way! You always have had, like your mother before you--you always will. But mark my words: you'll live to curse the hour you forced me to do this!"

She drew a long breath--it was almost a sigh--of relief, and she laid her hands on his arms and kissed him on the forehead.

"I'll risk that," she said, with a tremulous laugh.

There was a silence for a moment, then she said, calmly:

"You will play your part carefully, father? You will let Sir Stephen think that Stafford desires it: you will be careful?"

He turned upon her with an oath.

"You'd best leave it to me," he said, savagely. "I'll try and save you from shame all I can. For God's sake go and leave me alone!"

CHAPTER XXI.

While Stafford was dressing for dinner that night, and wondering whether even if he should get an opportunity of speaking to his father, it would be wise to tell him of Ida, Howard knocked at the door. Stafford told him to come in, and sent Measom away, and Howard, who was already dressed, sank into an easy-chair and surveyed his friend with bland approval.

"A white tie to-night, Staff? Anything on?"

"Yes; there is a dance," replied Stafford, rather absently. What would his father say and do? Would he go over to Heron Hall the next morning? Yes, that is what he would do!

"A dance? Is that all? From the undercurrent of suppressed excitement animating most of the guests I should think it was something more important. Have you noticed the air of suspense, of fluctuating hope and doubt, triumph and despair which has characterized our noble band of financiers during the last few days?"

Stafford shook his head.

"No; I haven't noticed 'em particularly. In fact, I scarcely see them, or do more than exchange the usual greetings. They seem to me to move and look and speak just about as usual." Howard smiled.

"To be young and happy and free from care is to be blind: puppies, for instance, are blind!"

Stafford grinned.

"That's complimentary, anyhow. What do you think is up?"

"I think Sir Stephen is going to pull off his great event, to make his grand _coup_," said Howard. "So you find a black-and-tan terrier improves a dress-coat by lying on it?"

Tiny had coiled himself up on that garment, which Measom had laid ready on the chair, and was lying apparently asleep, but with his large eyes fixed on his beloved master.

"Oh, he's a peculiar little beast, and is always getting where he shouldn't be. Hi! young man, get off my coat!"

He picked the terrier up and threw him softly on the bed, but Tiny got down at once and curled himself up on the fur mat by Stafford's feet.

"Seems to be fond of you: strange dog!" said Howard. "Yes, I think Sir Stephen's 'little scheme'--as if any scheme of his could be 'little!'--has worked out successfully, and I shouldn't be surprised if the financiers had a meeting to-night and the floating of the company was announced."

"Oh," said Stafford, as he got into his coat. "Yes, I daresay it's all right. The governor seems always to pull it off."

Howard smiled.

"You talk as if an affair of thousands of thousands, perhaps millions, were quite a bagatelle," he said. "My dear boy, don't you understand, realise, the importance of this business? It's nothing less than a railway from--"

Stafford nodded. "Oh, yes, you told me about it. It's a very big thing, I daresay, but what puzzles me is why the governor should care to worry about it. He has money enough--"

"No man has money enough," said Howard, solemnly. "But no matter. It is a waste of time to discuss philosophy with a man who has no mind above fox-hunting, fishing, pheasant-shooting, and dancing. By the way, how many times do you intend to dance with the Grecian goddess?"

"Meaning--" said Stafford.

"Miss Falconer, of course. Grecian goddesses are not so common, my dear Stafford, as to permit of more than one in a house-party."

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Stafford, eyeing him with faint surprise. "What the devil made you ask me that?"

Howard eyed the handsome face with cynical amusement.

"Pardon, if I was impertinent; but I assure you the question is being asked amongst themselves by all the women in the house--"

Stafford stared at him and began to frown with perplexity rather than anger.

"My dear Stafford, I know that you are not possessed of a particularly brilliant intellect, but you surely possess sufficient intelligence to see that your attentions to Miss Falconer are somewhat obvious."

"What?" said Stafford. "My attentions to Miss Falconer--Are you chaffing, Howard?"

"Not in the least: it's usually too great a waste of time with you, my dear boy: you don't listen, and when you do, half the time you don't understand. No, I'm quite serious; but perhaps I ought to have said her attentions to you; it would have been more correct."

Stafford coloured.

"Look here, old man," he said. "If you think--Oh, dash it all, what nonsense it is! Miss Falconer and I are very good friends; and of course I like to talk to her--she's so sharp, almost as smart and clever as you are, when she likes to take the trouble; and of course I like to hear her sing--Why, my dear Howard, it's like listening to one of the big operatic swells; but--but to suggest that there is anything--that--there is any reason to warn me--Oh, dash it! come off it, old man, you're chaffing?"

"Not in the least. But I didn't intend any warning: in fact, I am in honour bound to refrain from anything of the kind--"

"In honour bound?" said Stafford.

Howard almost blushed.

"Oh, it's nothing; only a silly wager," he said. "I can't tell you, so don't enquire. But all the same--well, there, I won't say more if you are sure there is nothing between you."

"I have the best of reasons for saying so," said Stafford, carelessly, and with a touch of colour in his face. "But it's all dashed nonsense! The women always think there's something serious going on if you dance twice with a girl, or sit and talk to her for half an hour."

"Right!" said Howard, rising. "There's the bell!"

As Howard had said, there was an air of suppressed excitement about the people; and it was not confined to the financiers who clustered together in the hall and discussed and talked in undertones, every now and then glancing up the stairs down which Sir Stephen would presently descend. Most of the other guests, though they had no direct and personal interest in the great scheme, more or less had heard rumours and come within reflective radius of the excitement; as for the rest, who knew nothing or cared less for Sir Stephen's railway, they were in a pleasant condition of excitement over the coming dance.

Stafford, as he stood in the hall talking about the night's programme to Bertie--who had been elected, by common and tacit consent, master of the ceremonies--saw Maude Falconer descending the stairs. She was even more exquisitely dressed than usual; and Stafford heard some of the women and men murmur admiringly and enviously as she swept across the hall in her magnificent ball-dress; her diamonds, for which she was famous, glittering in her hair, on her white throat, and on her slender wrists. The dress was a mixture of grey and black, which would have looked bizarre on anyone else less beautiful; but its strange tints harmonised with her superb and classic class of beauty, and she looked like a vision of loveliness which might well dazzle the eyes of the beholders.

She paused in her progress--it might almost be called a triumphant one, for the other women's looks were eloquent of dismay--and looked at Stafford with the slow, half-dreamy smile which had come into her face of late when she spoke to him.

"Have you seen my father? Has he come down, Mr. Orme?" she asked.

"No," said Stafford. He looked at her, as a man does when he admires a woman's dress, and forgetting Howard's words of warning, said: "What a splendacious frock, Miss Falconer!"

"Do you like it? I am glad," she said. "I had my doubts, but now--"

Her eyes rested on his for a moment, then she passed on.

"I shouldn't like to have to pay Miss Falconer's dress bill," remarked a young married woman, looking after her. "That 'frock' as you call it, in your masculine ignorance, must have cost a small fortune."

Stafford laughed.

"We men always put our foot in it when we talk about a woman's dress," he said.

A moment after, the dinner was announced, and Sir Stephen, who had come down at the last moment, as he went up to take in Lady Clansford, nodded to Stafford, and smiled significantly. He was as carefully dressed as usual, but on his face, and in his eyes particularly, was an expression of satisfaction and anticipatory triumph which was too obvious to escape the notice of but very few. He was not "loud" at dinner, but talked even more fluently than usual, and once or twice his fine eyes swept the long table with a victorious, masterful glance.

Directly the ladies had gone, the little knot of financiers drew up nearer to their host, and Griffenberg raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

Sir Stephen nodded.

"Yes," he said, in an undertone. "It's all right! I heard this morning. My man will be down, with the final decision, by a special train which ought to land him about midnight. We'll meet in the library, say at half past twelve, and get the thing finished, eh, baron?"

Wirsch grunted approval.

"Vare goot, Sare Stephen; dee sooner a ting ees concluded, de bedder. 'Arf bast dwelve!"

There was but a short stay made in the drawing-room, and before ten o'clock the guests streamed into the magnificent ball-room.

There were a number of the neighbouring gentry who were making their acquaintance with the Villa for the first time, and they regarded the splendour around them with an amazement which was not without reason; for to-night the artistically designed and shaded electric lamps, the beautiful rooms with their chaste yet effective decorations, on which money had been lavished like water, were seen to their greatest

advantage; and the Vaynes, the Bannerdales, and the local gentry generally exchanged glances and murmured exclamations of surprise and admiration, and wondered whether there could be any end to the wealth of a man who could raise such a palace in so short a time.

From the gallery of white-and-gold the famous band, every man of which was a musician, presently began to send forth the sweet strains of a Waldteufel waltz, and Stafford found Lady Clansford for the first dance. Though he had paid little attention to Howard's remarks about Maude Falconer, he remembered them, and he did not ask her for a dance until the ball had been running about an hour; then he went up to where she was standing talking to Lord Bunnerdale, her last partner. His lordship and Stafford had already met, and Lord Bannerdale, who admired and liked Stafford, nodded pleasantly.

"I was just saying to Miss Falconer that I wish Fate had made me a great financier instead of a country squire, Orme! By Jove! this place is a perfect--er--dream; and, when I think of my damp old house--"

"What frightful language!" said Stafford.

Lord Bannerdale laughed.

"If Miss Falconer had not been present, I might just as well have used the other word. I say I can't help envying your father that magician's wand with which he manages to raise such marvels. I'm going to find him and tell him so!"

"A dance?" said Maude, as Stafford proffered his request. "Yes, I have one, only one; it is this."

He put his arm round her, and as he did so her eyes half closed and her lip quivered at his touch. Stafford waltzed well, and Maude was far and away the best dancer in the room; they moved as one body in the slow and graceful modern waltz, and Stafford, in the enjoyment of this perfect poetry of motion, forgot everything, even his partner; but he came back from his reverie as she suddenly paused.

"Are you tired?" he asked. "By George! how perfectly you waltz! I've never enjoyed a dance more."

A faint colour rose to her face--it had been very pale a moment before--and she looked at him with an earnestness which rather puzzled him.

"They say that to agree in waltzing is an unfortunate thing for those who wish to be friends."

"Do they?" he said, with a smile. "I wonder who it is says all those silly things? Now, what nonsense this one is, for instance! To enjoy a dance as I've just enjoyed this, puts a man in a good temper with himself and his partner; and, of course, makes him feel more friendly. I'm not a good logician, but that sounds all right, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "No, I won't dance any more. I--I am a little tired to-night and disinclined for dancing."

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry--both that you won't dance and the cause. You have been doing too much to-day--too long a ride, I expect."

These hills are rather trying to those who are not used to them. Shall we go and sit in that recess? I'll bring you some wine--"

"No, thanks," she said, quickly; she could not bear him to leave her.

He led her to one of the recesses leading on to the fernery, and found her a seat near a softly plashing fountain. The lights were shaded with rose-coloured silk and threw a soft, warm glow upon her face and snowy neck.

For the hundredth time, as he looked at her, he thought how beautiful she was, and for the hundredth time compared her to Ida, of course to his sweetheart's advantage. She leant back in the luxurious lounge with her eyes bent on her jewelled fan, and seemed lost in thought. Then suddenly she said:

"Do you know how long we have been here, Mr. Orme? It is a tremendous time. I told my father to-night that we must take our departure."

"Oh, no!" he said. "Pray don't think of it--if you care to stay, if you are happy. You would be a very serious loss to us."

"If I care--if I am happy!" She laughed a low, strange laugh and raised her eyes to his for an instant. "Do you think I have not been happy?"

"Oh, I hope so," he said. "My father would be awfully cut up if he thought you had not: if he thought there had been anything to prevent your being happy he would remove it even if it--it were one of those mountains outside," he added, with a laugh.

"You admire your father?" she said. "You--are fond of him?"

Stafford nodded. It seemed an unnecessary question.

"Rather!" he said. "There never was such a father as mine!"

"And Sir Stephen thinks there never was such a son as his," she said in a low voice. "I suppose you are both quite willing to make sacrifices for each other. Would you do--would you give up much for your father, Mr. Orme?"

She raised her eyes again, and let them rest on his.

Stafford tried to smile, but his face grew grave.

"Just my life, if it were any use to him," he said.

Her lips moved.

"That is so little!" she said. "We can all die for those we love, but few of us can live for them--go on living a life which has to be moulded to a plan, bent on another's will--Could you do that?"

"Yes," he said, after a pause. "There is no sacrifice I would not make for my father's sake; but"--he laughed and cleared the gravity from his brow--"all the sacrifice seems to be on his side. He has worked for me all his life, is working still, I'm afraid--Here is your father, Miss Falconer; and looking for you, I'm afraid."

Ralph Falconer stood in the doorway looking round, his heavy face seeming heavier than usual, his thick lips drooping. As he saw the two young people, his lips straightened and he went over to them slowly.

"I hope you are not going to take Miss Falconer away, sir?" said Stafford.

Ralph Falconer shook his head, and, avoiding his daughter's eye, said:

"Sir Stephen wants to see you in the library, Mr. Orme, and wishes me to accompany you."

"Certainly, if Miss Falconer will excuse me."

He rose, and he fancied her hand trembled slightly as it rested almost as lightly as a feather on his arm.

"I'll take you to Lady Clansford--"

"There is no need: here is my next partner," she said, as the "beautiful, bountiful Bertie" came up smiling and buoyant.

"Anything the matter, sir?" asked Stafford, as he and Falconer made their way round the room through which was floating the last thing in waltzes, a soft and sensuous melody which sang the soul to rest.

"I think not. A matter of business, I think," said Ralph Falconer. "His secretary, Mr. Murray, has just come from London: it may be something to do with the papers he had brought."

Stafford nodded, though the explanation seemed unsatisfactory: for what concern had Stafford with the "papers"? As they went through the hall they saw the financiers clustered together with an expectant air, as if they were waiting for the result of the arrival of the man by the special train; and they stared at Falconer and exchanged glances as he and Stafford passed them and went to the library door.

Sir Stephen's voice came cheerily in response to Stafford's knock, and Stafford entered; Falconer following him with bent head and the same heavy look.

Sir Stephen was sitting at the table before a despatch box, and he held out his hand and uttered a little cry of pleasure as he saw who it was.

"Stafford, my boy! You could not have come at a better moment--Don't go, Falconer! I'd like you to hear me tell him the good news. I've got it here!"

He patted the despatch case. "This is Pandora's box, Staff! With something better than Hope at the bottom: Certainty!"

He laughed quietly, confidently, and his bright eyes flashed under their dark brows from one to the other.

"Murray has just arrived, Falconer, with the good news!" he took out the gold chain to which the key of the despatch box was fastened, and inserted it in the lock. "The good news, Staff! I haven't bothered and bored you with details; but you know, my dear boy, that I have had a big scheme on hand for some time past--a very big scheme. It has been

rather a touch-and-go business, but I think I have managed to pull it off--eh, Falconer? The last day or two has been one of suspense--great suspense--but success has come. You don't care for money, Staff, I know. Nor do I. Honestly, no! Not for the mere money, but for what it can buy and bring. But even you will have some respect for a million and a half, Staff."

He laughed.

"A large sum, and this means more than money. There ought to be something in the way of an honour--"

Falconer nodded.

"_If_ the scheme is successful, your father will be a peer of the realm, Mr. Stafford," he said drily, with an emphasis on the "if."

"_If!_" echoed Sir Stephen, laughing and nodding. Stafford could see by the brilliance of his eyes, the flush on his face, that he was excited and was struggling with excitement. "If!"

Falconer nodded at the despatch-case, and, with another bantering laugh, Sir Stephen opened it and took out a large envelope. He held this for a moment poised between finger and thumb, then he tore it open and took out a sheet of paper, and turned his flashing eyes from the two men to the document.

He rose for a moment with the smile still on his face; then they saw it fade, saw the flush slowly disappear, and in its place a dull grey steal over the face.

Stafford, startled, went round to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What is the matter, sir?" he asked. "Bad news?"

Sir Stephen looked at him as if he did not see him, then turned his eyes upon Falconer, who stood regarding him with a fixed, sardonic gaze.

"Hast thou found me, oh, mine enemy?" came at last from Sir Stephen's white lips.

Stafford looked from one to the other.

"What--what on earth is the matter? What do you mean?" he said.

Sir Stephen raised his hand and pointed to Ralph Falconer.

"This--this man!" he gasped; then he shook his head impatiently, as if he were fighting against his weakness. "This man Falconer has betrayed me!"

Stafford drew himself up, as he stood by his father's side, and eyed Falconer sternly.

"Will you explain, Mr. Falconer?" he said.

"Certainly," said Falconer, with a grim calmness. "Your father uses unwarrantably strong language, Mr. Orme, for an action of mine which is

quite a common one amongst business men."

"No!" gasped Sir Stephen, as he sank back into the chair. "Treachery is not common--"

"Treachery is the wrong word," said Falconer, as coldly as before. "Better let me explain to Mr. Stafford. I can do so in a few words, Mr. Orme. The fact is, your father and I have been, quite unknown, to each other, engaged in the same scheme. It is nothing more nor less than the acquisition of certain land and rights which carry with them the privilege of constructing a railway in the most promising part of South Africa--"

Sir Stephen leant forward, his head on his hands, his eyes fixed on the heavy, stolid face of the speaker, the face which the keen, hawk-like eyes flashed under the lowered lids with a gleam of power and triumph.

--"Your father had reason to hope that he would acquire those lands and rights; he did not know that I had been waiting for some years past to obtain them. If knowledge is power and money, ignorance is impotence and ruin. My knowledge against your father's ignorance has given me the victory. Last night I gained my point: the news to that effect is no doubt contained in that document. It was a question of price--it always is. I knew your father's bid, and--I went a few thousands higher and got the prize. That's the story in a nutshell. Of course there are a number of complications and details, but I spare you them; in fact, I don't suppose you understand them. It is a mere matter of business"

"No, of revenge!" said Sir Stephen's hollow voice. "Stafford, years ago I did this man a wrong. I--I have repented; I would have made atonement, reparation; but he put the offer aside. Here, in this house, he professed to have forgiven and forgotten--professed friendship. It was a piece of treachery and deceit; under that specious mask, behind that screen, he has worked my ruin!"

"Ruin!" said Stafford, in a low voice. "Surely you exaggerate, father! You mean that you will lose a lot of money--Oh, I can understand that, of course. But not ruin!"

"Yes, _ruin!_" said Sir Stephen, hoarsely. "If you doubt it, look at him!"

Falconer was standing with a sardonic smile in his eyes.

Stafford started.

"Is this true, Mr. Falconer?"

Falconer was silent for a moment, then he said, slowly, grimly:

"In a sense--yes. Your father's fate lies in my hands."

"In your hands!" echoed Stafford, with amazement.

Sir Stephen groaned and rose, supporting himself by the arm of the chair.

"It is true, Stafford. He--he has planned it with the skill of a general, a Napoleon! I see it all now, it is all plain to me. You held

my shares and securities, of course, Falconer?"

Falconer nodded.

"Of course!" he said, drily.

"And you have run them down to meet this scheme of yours."

"Yes, of course!" said Falconer, again. "My dear Steve--Sir Stephen--pardon!--your fate, as I have said, is in my hands. It is simply a matter of tit-for-tat. You had your turn some years ago out there"--he waved his hand. "It is my turn now. You can't complain. Do you admit the justice of the thing?"

Sir Stephen sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands for a moment, then he looked up at Stafford.

"He's right. It was his turn. He has taken it--and with it every penny I possess. It means ruin--complete ruin! Worse even than the loss of every penny; for--for--I--God help me!--can't afford to go into court and have the past raked up--And he knows it--he knows it, Stafford!"

The sight of the old man's anguish almost drove Stafford mad.

"Have you no mercy, sir?" he said to Falconer. "Grant that my father had injured you--isn't this rather too awful a revenge to exact? I--I--I--don't understand all that I have heard; but--but"--an oath broke from his hot lips--"will nothing less than the ruin of my father satisfy you?"

Falconer looked from one to the other and moistened his lips, while his hands gripped each other behind his back.

"I think you have misunderstood me," he said, in a dry, harsh voice; "I have no intention of ruining your father or of depriving him of his good name. Mind! if I did I should only be taking my pound of flesh: and I may tell you that before I entered this house this afternoon I had resolved to have it. But I heard something that induced me to change my mind."

Sir Stephen leant forward, his eyes fixed eagerly on the speaker, and Stafford in his anxiety held his breath and pressed his father's shoulder encouragingly.

"You heard something, sir?" Stafford asked, as calmly as he could.

Mr. Falconer was silent for a moment, then he said:

"Yes. I heard that you were desirous of marrying my daughter, Maude, Mr. Orme; and I need not say that a man does not ruin his son-in-law!"

There was an intense silence. Stafford stood as if he were turned to stone, as if he were trying to persuade himself that he had misunderstood the meaning of Falconer's words. Marry Maude Falconer--he! Was he dreaming, or was this man, who stood regarding him with cold, glittering eyes, mad!

CHAPTER XXII.

We do not, nowadays, strike attitudes, or ejaculate and swear when we are startled or shocked; Stafford stood perfectly still, still as a piece of Stonehenge, and gazed with an expressionless countenance at Mr. Falconer. That the man was indeed and in truth mad, occurred to him for a moment; then he thought there must be some mistake, that Mr. Falconer had made a blunder in the name, and that it was a case of mistaking his man.

But as the moments fled, and the two elder men gazed at him, as if expecting him to speak, he remembered Howard's warning. The colour rushed to his face and his eyes dropped. Merciful Heaven! was the man speaking the truth when he said that he, Stafford, was in love with Maude Falconer? His face was hot and scarlet for a moment, then it grew pale under the shame of the thought that he should have to correct the impression; decline, so to speak, the implied honour.

Sir Stephen was the first to speak. He had sunk back in his chair, but was now leaning forward again, his hands gripping the table.

"Stafford!" he said, still thickly, but with the beginning of a note of relief in his voice. "I did not know this--you did not tell me!"

Stafford turned to him helplessly. What could he say--before Falconer, the girl's father?

"You did not tell me. But I don't complain, my boy," said Sir Stephen. "You were right to choose your own time--young people like to keep their secret to themselves as long as possible."

Falconer looked from one to the other with an impassive countenance.

"I feel that I am rather *de trop*," he said; "that I have spoken rather prematurely; but my hand was forced, Orme. I wanted to set your mind at rest, to show you that even if I hankered after revenge, it was impossible under the circumstances." He glanced at Stafford. "It's not the first time in history that the young people have played the part of peace-makers. This is a kind of Romeo and Juliet business, isn't it? I'll leave you and Mr. Stafford to talk it over!"

He moved to the door, but, with his hand upon it, paused and looked round at them again.

"I ought to aid that, like most modern fathers, I am entirely in the hands of my daughter. I can't go so far as to say, Orme, that if I had been permitted to choose, I should have chosen a son of yours for my son-in-law, but, you see, Maude doesn't give me the option. The young people have taken the bit between their teeth and bolted, and it seems to me that the only thing we have to do is to sit tight and look as cheerful as possible. Oh, one word more," he added, in a business-like tone. "Of course I make over this concession to you, Orme; just taking the share I should have received if you had won the game and I had only stood in as proposed. That is to say, you will be in exactly the same position as if you had won all along the line--as you thought you had." And with a nod, which included father and son, he went out.

Stafford unconsciously drew back a little, so that he was almost behind

Sir Stephen, who had covered his eyes with his hands and sat perfectly motionless, like a half-stunned man looking back at some terrible danger from which he had only escaped by the skin of his teeth. Then he dropped his hands from his face and drew a long breath, the kind of breath a man draws who has been battling with the waves and finds himself on the shore, exhausted but still alive.

Stafford laid a hand on his shoulder, and Sir Stephen started and looked up at him as if he had forgotten his presence. A flush, as if of shame, came upon the great financier's face, and he frowned at the papers lying before him, where they had dropped from his hand.

"What an escape, Stafford!" he said, his voice still rather thick and with a tremour of excitement and even exhaustion in its usually clear and steady tone. "I am ashamed, my boy, that you should have been a witness to my defeat: it humiliates, mortifies me!"

"Don't let that worry you, father," said Stafford, scarcely knowing what he said, for the tumult in his brain, the dread at his heart.

"It is not the first defeat I have suffered in my life; like other successful men, I have known what it is to fall; and I have laughed and got up and shaken the dust off myself, so to speak, and gone at the fight again, all the harder and more determined because of the reverse. But this--this would have crushed me utterly and forever."

"Do you mean that it would have ruined you completely, father?" said Stafford.

"Completely!" replied Sir Stephen in a low voice, his head drooping. "I had staked everything on this venture, had staked even more than I possessed. I cannot explain all the details, the ramifications, of the scheme which I have been working. You could not understand them if I were to talk to you for a week. Suffice it, that if I had failed to get this concession, I should have been an utterly ruined man, should have had to go through the bankruptcy court, should have been left without a penny. And not only that: I should have dragged a great many of the men, of the friends who had trusted to my ability, who have believed in me, into the same pit; not only such men as Griffenberg and Wirsch and the Beltons, but the Plaistows, the Clansdales, and the Fitzharfords. They would have suffered with me, would have, considered themselves betrayed."

Stafford drew a long breath. There seemed to him still a chance of saving himself, the girl he loved, above all--his honour.

"But even if it were so, father," he said; "other men have failed, other men have been defeated, ruined, and left penniless, and yet have risen and shaken the dust from them and fought their way again to the heights. You're not an old man, you are strong and clever, and you are not alone." he said, in a lower voice. "I'm not much use, I know. But I'll try and help you all I can. I've often felt ashamed of myself for living such an idle, useless life; often felt that I ought to do something to justify my existence. There's a chance now; at any rate, there's an occasion, a necessity for my waking up and stepping into the ring to do a little fighting on my own account. We may be beaten by Mr. Falconer; but don't say we're utterly crushed. That doesn't sound like you, sir; and I don't understand why you should chuck up the sponge so quickly."

Sir Stephen raised his head and looked at Stafford with a curious expression of mingled surprise and apprehension.

"What is it you are saying, Stafford?" he asked. "What is it you mean? I don't understand. We're not beaten; Ralph Falconer has offered to make the concession over to me; and no one need know that I have failed, that he had stolen the march on me. You heard what he said: that you were in love with his daughter Maude, and that of course he could not injure his future son-in-law. Stafford!" He sprang to his feet and began to pace up and down the room. "I know that this has touched your pride--I can give a pretty good guess as to how proud you are--but, for God's sake! don't let your pride stand in the way of this arrangement."

"But--" Stafford began; for he felt that he could not longer keep back the truth, that his father must be told not only that there was nothing between Maude and himself, but that he loved Ida Heron.

But before he could utter another word Sir Stephen stopped before him, and with hands thrown out appealingly, and with a look of terror and agony in his face, cried in broken accents:

"If you going to raise any obstacle, Stafford, prompted by your pride, for God's sake, don't say the word! You don't know, you don't understand! You speak of ruin as if it meant only the loss of money, the loss of every penny." He laughed almost hysterically, and his lips twitched. "Do you think I should care for that, except for your sake? No, a thousand times, no! I'm young still, I could begin the world again! Yes, and conquer it as I have done before; but"--his voice sank, and he look round the room with a stealthy glance which shocked and startled Stafford--"the ruin Ralph Falconer threatens me with means more than the loss of money. It means the loss of everything! Of friends, of good name--of hope!"

Stafford started, and his face grew a trifle hard; and Sir Stephen saw it and made a despairing, appealing gesture with his hand.

"For God's sake don't turn away from me, my boy; don't judge me harshly. You can't judge me fairly from your standpoint; your life has been a totally different one from mine, has been lived under different circumstances. You have never known the temptations to which I have been subjected. Your life has been an easy one surrounded by honour, while mine has been spent half the time grubbing in the dust and the mire for gold, and the rest fighting--sometimes with one hand tied behind me!--against the men who would have robbed me of it. I have had to fight them with their own weapons--sometimes they haven't been clean--sometimes it has been necessary to do--to do things!--God! Stafford, don't turn away from me! I would have kept this from you if I could, but I am obliged to tell you now. Ralph Falconer knows all the details of my past, he knows of things which--which, if they were known to the world, would stain the name I have raised to honour, would make it necessary for me to hide my head in a suicide's grave."

A low cry burst from Stafford's lips, and he sank into a chair, and bowed his head upon his hands.

Sir Stephen stood a little way off and looked at him for a minute, then he advanced slowly, half timidly and ashamedly, and laid a trembling

hand on Stafford's shoulder.

"Forgive me, Stafford!" he said, in a low, broken voice. "I was obliged to tell you. I'd have kept it from you--you would never have known--but Falconer has forced my hand; I was bound to show you how necessary it was that we should have him as friend instead of foe. You are not--ashamed of me, my boy; you won't go back on me?"

In the stress and strain of his emotion the old digger's slang came readily to his lips.

Stafford took one hand from his face and held it out, and his father grasped it, clinging to it as a drowning man clings to a rock.

"God bless you, my boy!" he said. "I might have known you wouldn't turn your back upon me; I might have known that you'd remember that I wasn't fighting for myself only, but for the son I'm so proud of."

"I know, I know, sir," said Stafford, almost inaudibly.

Sir Stephen hung his hand, released it, and paced up and down the room again, fighting for composure, and facing the situation after the manner of his kind. Like all successful adventurers, he was always ready to look on the bright side. He came back to Stafford and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"Try and forget what I said, about--about the past, Stafford," he said. "Let us look at the future--your future. After all, we're not beaten! It's a compromise, it's an alliance!" His voice grew more cheerful, his eyes began to brighten with something of their wonted fire. "And it's a bright future, Staff! You've chosen a beautiful girl, a singularly beautiful and distinguished-looking girl--it's true she's only Ralph Falconer's daughter, and that I'd loftier ideas for you, but let that pass! Maude is a young lady who can hold her own against the best and the highest. Falconer must be rich, or he would not have been able to have managed this thing, would not have been able to beat me. With your money and hers, you can go as far as you please!"

He took a turn up and down the room again, a flush on the face that had been pallid only a minute or two ago, his finely shaped head thrown back.

"Yes, Stafford, I should like you to have married into the nobility. In my eyes, there is no one too high in rank for you. But no matter! The title will come. They cannot do less than offer me a peerage. This railway will be of too much service to the government for them to pass me over. The peerage must come; there is no chance of my losing it. Why, yes! The future is as bright as the sunlight on a June morning! You will have the girl you love, I shall have the peerage to leave to you. I shall have not lived and struggled and fought in vain. I shall have left a name unstained, unsullied, to the son I love!"

There was a catch in his voice, and it broke as he turned suddenly with outstretched hand.

"Why, God forgive me, Stafford, my boy! I'm talking of what I've done for you and what I'm meaning to do as if I were forgetting what you are doing for me! Stafford, a father often finds that he has worked for his children only to meet with ingratitude and to be repaid by

indifference; but you have returned my affection--Oh, I've seen it, felt it, my boy! And now, as fate would have it, you are actually saving my honour, shielding my good name, coming between me and utter ruin! God bless you, Stafford! God bless you and send you all the happiness you deserve and I wish you!"

A silence fell. Into the room there floated the soft, languorous strains of a waltz, the murmur of voices, the laughter of some of the people in the conservatory. Stafford sat, his head still upon his hands, as if he were half stupefied. And indeed he was. He felt like a man who has been seized by the tentacles of an octopus, unable to struggle, unable to move, dumb-stricken, and incapable even of protest. Sir Stephen had spoken of fate: Fate held Stafford under its iron heel, and the mockery of Fate's laughter mingled with the strains of the waltz, the murmur of voices. Unconsciously he rose and looked round as if half dazed, and Sir Stephen came to him and laid both hands on his shoulders.

"I must not keep you any longer, my dear boy!" he said, with a fond, proud look. "I must not forget I am keeping you from--her! She will be missing you--wanting you. You have kept your secret well, Stafford--though once or twice I have fancied, when I have seen you together--but it was only a fancy!--Are you going to announce the engagement tonight? It is rather a good opportunity, isn't it? It will make the night memorable."

The music danced madly through Stafford's brain as his father waited, looking at him smilingly. What should he say?

"Not to-night, sir!" he answered. "I should like to speak to Miss Falconer first."

Sir Stephen nodded and smiled.

"I understand, my boy," he said. "This kind of thing is not done now as it was in my time. We used to take the girl of our choice by the hand and throw back our heads, and announce the fact that we have secured the prize, with all the pride imaginable. But that's all altered now. I suppose the new way is more delicate--more refined. At any rate, you belong to the new age and have a right to follow its manners and customs; so you shall say nothing to-night, unless you like. And, if I am asked why I look so happy, so free from care, I must say that it is because the great Railway Scheme is settled and that I have won all along the line."

As he said the last words there came a knock at the door, and Murray entered with an injured look.

"Mr. Griffenberg and Baron Wirsch, would like to see you, Sir Stephen," he said, significantly.

Sir Stephen sprang to the table almost with the alertness of a boy, and caught up the papers lying on his desk.

"All right, Murray!" he cried. "Sorry I'm late! Been having a talk with Mr. Stafford. Come on!"

With a nod, a smile, a tender look of love and gratitude to Stafford, the brilliant adventurer, once more thrown by the buoyant wave upon the

shore of safety and success, went out to communicate that success to his coadjutors.

Stafford sank into his father's chair, and with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and his chin upon his chest, tried to clear his brain, to free his mind from all side issues, and to face the fact that he had tacitly agreed, that by his silence he had consented to marry Maude Falconer.

But, oh, how hard it was to think clearly, with the vision of that girlish face floating before him! the exquisitely beautiful face with its violet eyes now arched and merry, now soft and pleading, now tender with the tenderness of a girl's first, true, divinely trusting love. He was looking at the book-case before him, but a mist rose between it and his eyes, and he saw the mountain-side and the darling of his heart riding down it, the sunlight on her face, the soft tendrils of hair blown rough by the wind, the red lips apart with a smile--the little grave smile which he had kissed away into deeper, still sweeter seriousness.

And he had lost her! Oh, God, how he loved her! And he had lost her forever! There was no hope for him. He must save his father--not his father's money. That counted for nothing--but his father's honour--his father's good name.

And even if he were not bound to make this sacrifice, to marry Maude Falconer, how could he go to Heron Hall and ask Godfrey Heron, the man of ancient lineage, of unsullied name, to give his daughter to the son of a man whose past was so black that his character was at the mercy of Ralph Falconer? Stafford rose and stretched out his arms as if to thrust from him a weight too grievous to be borne, a cup too bitten to be drained; then his arms fell to his sides and, with a hardening of the face, a tightening of the lips which made him look strangely like his father, he left the library, and crossing the hall, made his way to the ball-room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The ball was at its height. Even the coldest and most _blase_ of the guests had warmed up and caught fire at the blaze of excitement and enjoyment. The ball-room was dazzling in the beauty of its decorations and the soft effulgence of the shaded electric light, in which the magnificent jewels of the titled and wealthy women seemed to glow with a subdued and chastened fire. A dance was in progress, and Stafford, as he stood by the doorway and looked mechanically and dully at the whirling crowd, the kaleidoscope of colour formed by the rich dresses, the fluttering fans, and the dashes of black represented by the men's clothes, thought vaguely that he had never seen anything more magnificent, more elegant of wealth and success. But through it all, weird and ghost-like shone Ida's girlish face, with its love-lit eyes and sweetly curving lips.

He looked round, and presently he saw Maude Falconer in her strange and striking dress. She was dancing with Lord Fitzharford. There was not a touch of colour in her face, her lips were pensive, her lids lowered;

she looked like an exquisite statue, exquisitely clothed, moving with the exquisite poetry of motion, but quite devoid of feeling. Suddenly, as if she felt his presence, she raised her eyes and looked at him. A light shot into them, glowed for a moment, her lips curved with the faintest of smiles, and a warm tint stole to her face.

It was an eloquent look, one that could not be mistaken by the least vain of men, and it went straight through Stafford's heart; for it forced him to realise that which he had not even yet quite realised--that he had tacitly pledged himself to her. Under other circumstances, the thought might have set his heart beating and sent the blood coursing hotly through his veins; but with his heart aching with love for Ida, and despair at the loss of her, Maude Falconer's love-glance only chilled him and made him shudder with apprehension of the future, with the thought of the cost of the sacrifice which he had taken upon himself. The music sounded like a funeral march in his ears, the glitter, the heat, the movement, seemed unendurable; and he threaded his way round the room to an ante-room which had been fitted up as a buffet.

"Give me some wine, please," he said to the butler, trying to speak in his ordinary tone; but he knew that his voice was harsh and strained, knew that the butler noticed it, though the well-trained servant did not move an eyelid, but opened a bottle of champagne with solemn alacrity and poured out a glass. Stafford signed to him to place the bottle near and drank a couple of glasses.

It pulled him together a bit, and he was going back to the ball-room when several men entered. They were Griffenberg, Baron Wirsch, the Beltons and the other financiers; they were all talking together and laughing, and their faces were flushed with triumph. Close behind them, but grave and taciturn as usual, came Mr. Falconer.

At sight of Stafford, Mr. Griffenberg turned from the man to whom he was talking and exclaimed, gleefully:

"Here is Mr. Orme! You have heard the good news, I suppose, Mr. Orme? Splendid isn't it? Wonderful man, your father, truly wonderful! He can give us all points, can't he, baron?" The baron nodded and smiled.

"Shir Stephen ish a goot man of pishness. You have a very glever fader, Mr. Orme!" he said, emphatically.

Efford caught Stafford's arm as he was passing on with a mechanical smile and an inclination of the head.

"We've come in for a drink, Orme," he said. "We're going to drink luck to the biggest thing Sir Stephen has ever done; you'll join us? Oh, come, we can't take a refusal! Dash it all! You're in the swim, Orme, if you haven't taken any active part in it."

Stafford glanced at Mr. Falconer, and noticed a grim smile pass over his face. If these exultant and flushed money-spinners only guessed how active a part he had taken, how amazed they would be! A wave of bitterness swept over him. At such a moment men, especially young men, become reckless; the strain is too great, and they fly to the nearest thing for relief.

He turned back to the buffet, and the butler and the couple of footmen

opened several bottles of champagne--none of the men knew or cared how many; several others of the financial group joined the party; the wine went round rapidly; they were all talking and laughing except Stafford, who remained silent and grave and moody for some little time; then he too began to talk and laugh with the others, and his face grew flushed and his manner excited.

Falconer, who stood a little apart, apparently drinking with the others, but really with care and moderation, watched him under half-lowered lids; and presently he moved round to where Stafford leant against the table with his champagne-glass in his hand, and touching him on the arm, said:

"I hear them enquiring for you in the ball-room, Stafford."

It was the first time he had called Stafford by his Christian name, and it struck home, as Falconer had intended it should. Stafford set his glass down and looked round as a man does when the wine is creeping up to his head, and he is startled by an unexpected voice.

"All right--thanks!" he said.

He made his way through the group, who were too engrossed and excited to notice his desertion and went into the ball-room. As he did so, his father entered by an opposite door, and seeing him, came round to him, and taking Stafford's hand that hung at his side, pressed it significantly.

"I have told them!" he said. "They are almost off their heads with delight--you see, it's such a big thing, even for them, Staff! You have saved us all, my boy; but it is only I and Falconer who know it, only I who can show my gratitude!"

His voice was low and tremulous, his face flushed, like those of the men whom Stafford had just left, and his dark eyes flashing and restless.

"Where are they all?" he asked; and Stafford nodded over his shoulder towards the buffet.

Sir Stephen looked round the room with a smile of triumph, and his glance rested on Maude Falconer, standing by a marble column, her eyes downcast, her fan moving to and fro in front of her white bosom.

"She is beautiful, Staff!" he whispered. "The loveliest woman in the room! I am not surprised that you should have fallen in love with her."

Stafford laughed under his breath, a strangely wild and bitter laugh, which Sir Stephen could not have failed to notice if the music had not commenced a new waltz at that moment.

Stafford went straight across the room to Maude Falconer. She did not raise her eyes at his approach, but the colour flickered in her cheeks.

"This is our dance, I think," he said.

She looked up with a little air of surprise, and consulted her programme.

"No; I think this is mine, Miss Falconer," said the man at her side.

"No," she said, calmly; "the next is yours, Lord Bannerdale; this is Mr. Orme's."

Though he knew she was wrong, of course Lord Bannerdale acquiesced with a bow and a smile, and Stafford led Maude away.

Wine has a trick of getting into some men's feet and promptly giving them away; but Stafford, though he was usually one of the most moderate of men, could drink a fairly large quantity and remain as steady as a rock. No one, watching him dance, would have known that he had drunk far too many glasses of champagne and that his head was burning, his heart thumping furiously; but though his step was as faultless as usual and he steered her dexterously through this crowd. Maude knew by his silence, by his flushed face and restless eyes, that something had happened, and that he was under the influence of some deep emotion. He was dancing quite perfectly, but mechanically, like a man in a dream, and though he must have heard the music, he did not hear her when she spoke to him, but looked straight before him as if he were entirely absorbed in some thought.

When they came, in the course of the dance, to one of the doors, she stopped suddenly.

"Do you mind? It is so hot," she murmured.

"N--o," he said, as if awaking suddenly. "Let us go outside."

He caught up a fur cloak that was lying on a bench, and disregarding her laughing remonstrance that the thing did not belong to her, he put it round her and led her on to the terrace. She looked up at him just as they were passing out of the stream of light, saw how set and hard his face was, how straight the lips and sombre the eyes, and her hand, as it rested lightly on his arm, quivered like a leaf in autumn. When they had got into the open air, he threw back his head and drew a long breath.

"Yes; it was hot in there," he said.

They walked slowly up and down for a minute, passing and repassing similar couples; then suddenly, as if the presence of others, the sound of their voices and laughter, jarred upon him, Stafford said:

"Shall we go into the garden? It is quiet there--and I want to speak to you."

"If you like," she said, in a low voice, which she tried to make as languid as usual; but her heart began to beat fiercely and her lips trembled, and he might have heard her breath coming quickly had he not been absorbed in his own reflections.

They went down the steps and into the semi-darkness of the beautiful garden. The silence was broken by the hum of the distant voices and the splashing of a fountain which reflected the electric light as the spray rose and fell with rhythmic regularity. Stafford stopped at this and looked at the reflection of the stars in the shallow water. Something in its simplicity and the quiet, coming after the glitter and the noise of the ball-room, called up the remembrance of Herondale, and the

quiet, love-laden hours he had spent there with Ida. The thought went through him with a sharp pain, and he thrust it away from him as one thrusts away a threatening weakness.

"What is it you wanted to say to me?" asked Maude, not coldly or indifferently as she would have asked the question of another man, but softly, dreamily.

He walked on with her a few paces, looking straight before him as if he were trying to find words suitable for the answer; then he turned his face to her and looked at her steadily, though his head was burning and the splash of the fountain sounded like the roar of the sea in his ears.

"I wonder whether you could guess?" he said, as he thought of her father's words, his assertion that Stafford was to be his son-in-law. "I suppose you must."

Her gaze was as steady as his, but her lips quivered slightly.

"I would rather you should tell me than that I should I guess," she said in a low voice. "I might be wrong."

He was not in a condition to notice the significance of her last words, and he went on with a kind of desperation.

"I brought you here into the garden, Miss Falconer, to ask you if you'd be my wife."

They had stopped just within the radius of an electric light, held aloft by a grinning satyr, and Stafford saw her face grow paler and paler in the seconds that followed the momentous question. He could see her bosom heaving under the half-open fur cloak, felt her hand close for an instant on his arm.

"Do you wish me to say 'Yes'?" she asked in a low voice.

The red flooded Stafford's face for a moment, and his eyes fell under her fixed regard.

"What answer does one generally hope for when one puts such a question?" he said, trying to smile. "I want you to be my wife, and I hope, with all my heart, that you will say 'Yes.'"

"With all your heart," she echoed, slowly, almost inaudibly. "With all your heart." "With all mine, I answer 'Yes.'"

As she murmured the words--and, like that of most cold women when they are intensely moved, her voice could be exquisitely sweet with its thrill of passion, all the sweeter for its rarity--she insensibly drew nearer to him and her hand stole to his shoulder. Her eyes were lifted to his, and they shone with the love that was coursing through her veins, almost stopping the beating of her heart. Love radiated from her as the light radiated from the lamp the mocking satyr held above them. Stafford was at his best and worst, a man and not a block of stone and wood, and touched, almost fired, by the passion so close to him, he put his arm round her waist and bent his head until his lips nearly touched hers.

Her eyes closed and she was surrendering herself to the kiss, when

suddenly she drew her head back, and, keeping him from her, looked up at him. "Is it with all your heart?" she whispered. "You have never spoken to me--love before. Is it with all your heart?"

His brow contracted in a frown, he set his teeth hard. If he were to lie, 'twere better that he lied thoroughly and well; better that his sacrifice should be complete and effectual. Scarcely knowing what he said, what he did, with the fumes of the champagne confusing his brain, the misery of his lost love racking his heart, he said, hoarsely:

"I did not know--till to-night. You can trust me. I ask you to be my wife--I will be true to you--it is with all my heart!"

If Jove laughs at lovers' perjuries, the angels must weep at such false oaths as this. Even as he spoke the words, Stafford remembered the "I love you?" he had cried to Ida as he knelt at her feet, and he shuddered as Maude drew his head down and his lips met hers.

* * * * *

Half an hour later they went slowly up the steps again. Stafford's head was still burning, he still felt confused, like a man moving in a dream. Since he had kissed her he had said very little; and the silences had been broken more often by Maude than by him. She had told him in a low voice, tremulous with love, and hesitating now and again, how she had fallen in love with him the day he had rowed her on the lake; how she had struggled and striven against the feeling, and how it had conquered her. How miserable she had been, though she had tried to hide her misery, lest he should never come to care for her, and she should have to suffer that most merciless of all miseries--unrequited love. She seemed as if she scarcely wanted him to speak, as if she took it for granted that he had spoken the truth, and that he loved her; and as if it were a joy to her to bare her heart, that he might see how devotedly it throbbed for him and for him alone. Every now and then Stafford spoke a few words in response. He scarcely knew what he said, he could not have told what they were ten minutes after they were said; he sat with his arm round her like a man playing a part mechanically.

In the same condition he moved beside her now as arm and arm they entered the house, he looking straight before him with a set face, a forced smile, she with now raised, now drooping eyes glowing with triumph, a flush on her usually pale face, her lips apart and tremulous. The ball was breaking up, some of the women had already gone to the drawing-room or their own apartments; a stream of men were making their way to the billiard-room from which came the popping of champagne-corks and the hissing of syphons.

As they entered the hall, Howard came lounging out, in his leisurely way, from the drawing-room, and at sight of him Stafford seemed to awake, to realise what he had done and how he stood. He looked from Howard to Maude, then, he said:

"Howard, I want you to congratulate me. Miss Falconer--Maude--has promised to be my wife."

Howard did not start, but he stared in silence for an instant, then his eyelids flickered, and forcing the astonishment from his face, he took Stafford's left hand and shook it, and bowed to Maude.

"I do congratulate you with all my heart, my dear Stafford, and I hope you'll both be as happy as the happiest pair in a fairy story."

She drew her arm from Stafford's.

"I will go up now," she said. "Good-night!"

Stafford stood until she had got as far as the bend of the stairs; then Howard, who had discreetly gone on, turned to go back to him. But as he came up with a word of wonder and repeated congratulations, he saw Stafford put his hand to his forehead, and, as it seemed to Howard, almost stagger.

There are moments when the part of even one's best friend is silence, blindness. Howard turned aside, and Stafford went on slowly, with a kind of enforced steadiness, to the billiard-room. While Howard, with dismay and apprehension, was looking after him, he heard "Mr. Howard!" called softly, mockingly, from the stairs, and looking up, saw Maude Falconer leaning over, with her arm extended, her hand open.

He understood in a moment, and, removing his ring as he ran up the stairs, put it in the soft, pink palm. She gave a little triumphant, mocking laugh, her hand closed over the ring, and then she glided away from him.

The smoking-room was crowded as Stafford made his way in. Through the clouds of smoke he saw his father standing at one end, surrounded by the money-spinning crew, Falconer seated in a chair near him with a black cigar between his lips. The group were laughing and talking loudly, and all had glasses in their hands. Some of the younger men, who had just come from the hall-room, were adding their laughter and chatter to the noise. Dazed and confused, half mad with rage and despair, with a sense that Fate was joining her mocking laughter with that of the men round him. Stafford took a glass of wine from the butler who advanced with it, and drinking it off, held it out to be refilled. The man refilled it twice, and Stafford, his eyes aflame, almost pushed his way through the various groups to where his father stood.

"I have come for your congratulation, sir," he said, in a voice which, though not loud, was so clear as to break through the row. "Miss Falconer has promised to be my wife!"

A silence, so sudden as to be startling, fell upon the hot and crowded room; then, as Sir Stephen grasped his son's hand, a din of voices arose, an excited buzz of congratulations and good wishes. Stafford faced them all, his face pale and set, his lips curved with a forced smile, his eyes flashing, but lit with a sombre fire. There was a smile on his lips, a false amiability in his eyes, but there was so much of madness in his heart that he was afraid lest at any moment he should dash the glass to the ground and break out into cursing.

An hour later he found himself in his room, and waving Measom away from him, he went to the window and flung it wide open, and stood there with his hands against his throbbing brow; and though no word came from his parched lips, his heart cried:

"Ida! Ida!" with all the agony of despair.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The hours dragged along as Stafford faced the tragedy of his life. As he paced the room or flung himself into a chair, with his head bowed in his hands, the effects of the wine he had taken, the suppressed excitement under which he had laboured, passed away, and in the reaction his brain cleared and he began to realise the terrible import of the step he had taken, the extent of the sacrifice he had made. His own life was wrecked and ruined irreparably; not only his own, but that of the girl he loved.

The step he had taken was not only irreparable but irrevocable; he could not go back. He had asked Maude Falconer to be his wife, he had spoken words which must have sounded to her as words of love, he had kissed her lips. In a word, he was pledged to her, and the pledge could not be broken.

And Ida! What should he do in regard to her? He had promised that if his feelings underwent any change towards her he would not go and tell her. And at that moment, he felt that the promise had not been a vain one; for he knew that he could not go to her, that at sight of her his resolution would melt like snow in the sun, that his love for her would sweep him away on a torrent of passion, and that he would be as false to Maude Falconer as he had been to Ida.

And yet he could not leave her, desert her--yes, that was the word!--without making some sign, without speaking one word, not of excuse, but of farewell. What could he say to her? He could not tell her the truth; for his father's sake that must never be divulged; he could give her no explanation, must permit her to think him base and faithless and dishonorable. There was only one thing he could do, and that was to write to her. But what could he say?

He went to his writing-table and took up a pen. His hand was cold as ice and shaking, and he held it before him until it grew steadier. At the best of times, Stafford was not much of a letter-writer; one does not learn the epistolary art either at public schools or the 'varsities, and hitherto Stafford's letter-writing had been confined to the sending or accepting of invitations, a short note about some meet, or horse dealing. How was he to address her? She was his dearest still, the only woman in the world he had loved or ever would love, but he dared not call her so, dared not tell her so. He wrote her name, but the sweet word seemed to look up at him reproachfully, accusingly; and though he had written only that name, he tore up several sheets of paper, and at last, in desperation, scarcely knowing what he was writing, he wrote, quickly, hurriedly and without pausing, the following lines:

"I am writing this because you made me promise that if anything happened, let it be what it might, to separate us, I would not come and tell you. Something has happened. I have discovered that I am not only unworthy of calling you mine as any man in the world, even the best, would be, but that I am unworthy in the sense that would justify you in the eyes of your father, of everybody belonging to you, in sending me adrift. If I could tell you what it is you would understand and see how great a gulf yawns between us. You would not marry me, I can never be

anything to you but a painful memory. Though you know how much I loved you, you will never guess what it costs me to relinquish all claim to you, to tear myself away from you. But I must do so--and forever. There is no hope, none whatever, for me. I do not ask you to forgive me--if I had known what I know now I would rather have died than have told you that I loved you, but I do ask you to forget me; or, if you remember me, to think of me as the most wretched and ill-fated of men; as one who is bound hand and foot, and compelled, driven, along a path against his will. I dare not say any more, dare not tell you what this sacrifice costs me. Whether you forget or remember me, I shall never forget you for a single instant, shall never cease to look back upon my lost happiness, as a man looks back upon a lost heaven.

"STAFFORD."

He read it over a dozen--twenty times, and every time it seemed weaker, meaner, less inexplicable; but he knew that if he destroyed it he could write nothing better, nothing that could satisfy him, though it seemed to him that his heart would have expressed itself more fully if he had written only, "Good-bye! Forget me!"

At last, and reluctantly he put it in an envelope and addressed it, and turned it face downwards on his table, so that he might not see the name which had such power to torture his heart.

By the time he had succeeded in writing the letter the dawn was creeping over the hills and casting a pearly light upon the lake; he drew the curtains, and in the weird light caught sight of his face in the mirror: a white and haggard face, which might well have belonged to a man ten years his senior; such a face as would not fail to attract attention and provoke comment by its appearance at the breakfast-table. He flung himself on the bed, not to sleep, for he knew that that would be impossible, but to get some rest; but rest was as impossible as sleep. When he closed his eyes Ida's face was near him, her voice was in his ears, inextricably mixed with the slow and languorous tones of Maude Falconer. He undressed and got into his flannels before Measom came, and went down to the lake for a bath.

He was, as a rule, so moderate in drinking that the wine he had taken, supplemented by his misery, made him feel physically ill. He shuddered with cold as he dived into the water, and as he swam out he felt, for the first time in his life, a slight twinge of cramp. At another time he would have been somewhat alarmed, for the strongest swimmer is absolutely helpless under an attack of cramp, but this morning he was indifferent, and the thought struck him that it would be well for him if he flung up his arms and went down to the bottom of the lake on the shores of which he had experienced such exquisite joy, such unutterable misery. He met no one on his way back to the house, and went straight to his room. The swim had removed some of the traces of last night's work, but he still looked haggard and worn, and there was that expression in his eyes which a man's wear when he has been battling with a great grief or struggling against an overwhelming fate.

As Measom was dressing him he asked himself how he should get the letter to Ida--the only letter he had ever written her, the only letter he would probably ever write to her. He decided that he would send it over by Pottinger, whom he knew he could trust not only to deliver the letter, but to refrain from telling anyone that he had been sent with it. He put it in the pocket of his shooting-coat and went downstairs,

intending to go straight to the stables to find Pottinger; but as he went through the hall, Murray, the secretary, came out of the library, and Sir Stephen caught sight of Stafford through the open door, and called to him. Stafford went in, and his father rose from the table on which was already piled a heap of letters and papers, and taking Stafford's hand, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You are early, my boy," he said. "I did not expect to see you for hours yet; couldn't you sleep? You look rather tired, Stafford; you were late last night, and--ah, well! there was some excuse for a little excitement and exaltation."

He smiled whimsically, as a father does at a son who has for once gone beyond the strict bounds of moderation and looked upon the wine cup too often.

"Yes, I've rather a head on this morning, sir," said Stafford, quietly, accepting the suggestion as an excuse for his ill-looks. "I drank and smoked, last night, more than I usually do. You look as fresh as usual, sir," he added, with unconscious irony.

Sir Stephen threw up his head with a short laugh.

"Oh, my work wasn't finished last night, my dear boy!" he said. "And Murray and I have been at it since seven o'clock. I want to put some of these papers straight before Griffenberg and the rest leave to-day."

"They are going to-day?" said Stafford.

"Oh, yes; there will be a general exodus. A great many of the people were only staying on until we could be sure we had pulled this railway scheme through. Falconer and his daughter--I beg your pardon, my dear Stafford, I mean Maude!--talk of going to-day. But I persuaded them to stay until to-morrow. I thought you would like to go to London with them."

He smiled as a father smiles when he is planning a pleasure for his son.

"Yes, I should like it," said Stafford, quietly. "But could I leave you here?"

"Oh, yes," said Sir Stephen. "They'll entertain themselves. Besides, it was an understood thing you should be free to go and come as you pleased. Of course, you would like to go with Maude."

"Of course," echoed Stafford, his eyes on the ground. As he was leaving the room his father took a letter from the table, held it up and dropped it.

"You'll be wanting to buy a little present for your lady-love, Stafford," he said. "I am placing a thousand pounds to your credit at your bank, I don't know whether you'll think that is enough--"

"Quite enough," said Stafford, in a low voice. "Thank you! You are very generous--"

Sir Stephen winced and held up his hand.

"What is mine is yours from this moment, my dear Stafford," he said.

Stafford went out by the door at the other end of the hall, and made his way to the stables. Just as he was crossing the lawn the temptation to ride over to Heron Hall and leave the note himself assailed him strongly. He took the letter from his pocket and looked at it wistfully. But he knew that he dared not run the risk of meeting Ida, and with a sigh he went on towards the stables, carrying the note in his hand. And as he turned away Maude Falconer let fall the curtain which she had raised at her window so that she might watch him.

She stood for a moment with her costly dressing-gown held together with one white hand, her lids half closed.

"He has written to her," she said to herself. "Has he broken with her for good, or will he try and keep her? I would give something to see that letter, to know exactly how he stands. And how I stand! I wonder how he will send it? He is taking it to the stables." She thought a moment, then she smiled. "Pottinger!" she murmured.

Stafford found Pottinger giving the last loving touches with a silk handkerchief to Adonis. His coat and waistcoat were off, his shirt open at the neck and his sleeves turned up. He touched his forehead with a respectful and welcoming greeting, and without any surprise; for Stafford very often paid an early visit to the stable, and had more than once lent a hand in grooming a favourite horse.

"Looks well, sir, don't he?" said Pottinger, passing a hand over the glossy black and finishing up with a loving smack. "I'm rather late this morning, sir." He smiled and looked a little sheepish. "We had a little bit of jollification in the servants' hall, on our own account, sir, and were enjoying ourselves like our betters."

"That's right," said Stafford. Something in his voice caused Pottinger to glance at him with surprise and apprehension; but, of course, he could not say anything, and he dropped his eyes respectfully after the one glance at Stafford's haggard face.

"I want you take a letter for me this morning, Pottinger," said Stafford. "You can take Adonis; it will exercise him, as I shall not ride him to-day. Here is the letter. Heron Hall lies on the other side of the river. I want the letter taken there early this morning."

Pottinger touched his forehead. "I know the Hall, sir; I've ridden over there with messages from the housekeeper and from Mr. Davis."

"There will be no answer," said Stafford. "Simply leave it."

"Yes, sir," said Pottinger. "Would you mind putting it in my saddle-wallet, sir? I won't touch it till my hands are clean."

Stafford put the letter in the wallet, said a few words to Adonis and some of the other horses, and then left the stable. He heard voices on the terrace, and, to avoid meeting anyone until he was compelled, he went down the slope of the lawn, and, seating himself on a bank, lit a cigarette.

From her window, Maude Falconer, now attired in a simple but exquisitely effective morning frock, could see him. After watching him

for a minute or two, she went to her writing-table and wrote two or three notes quickly, and, with these in her pocket, went down-stairs and through the hall to the stable court-yard. Pottinger was still finishing off Adonis, and he drew himself up and saluted as she entered the stables. As a rule her manner to the servants and her inferiors was cold and haughty, but, as Stafford had discovered last night, she could be soft and gentle when she chose, and she smiled now at Pottinger and the horse in a fashion that almost dazzled that ingenuous youth. At the same time her eye had noted Pottinger's coat and waistcoat which hung on a hook at the stall-post with the saddle-wallet slung over them. The coat was an old one with gaping pockets, and there was no sign of a letter in them, or in the waistcoat. Instinctively, she knew that it was in the wallet.

"What splendid condition that horse is in, Pottinger," she said. "His coat is like satin. I suppose you were in the army?"

Of course Pottinger was flattered, and answered in the negative very reluctantly.

"Not but what Mr. Stafford, miss, isn't as particular as any army gent could be. I should be sorry to turn out a badly groomed 'oss for Mr. Stafford's eyes to rest on, miss. He's as kind-hearted a master as a man could desire to have, but that's about the one thing Mr. Stafford wouldn't stand, miss."

"I suppose not," she said. "Are you going to ride into Bryndermere this morning, Pottinger? If so, I should be glad if you would take these notes to the linen draper's and the chemist's, and bring me back the things I have written for."

"Certainly, miss," said Pottinger; then he remembered Stafford's order, and looked anything but certain. "Would it do late in the morning, miss? I have to go somewhere first."

"Oh, yes," she replied, "where shall I put the letters--in this wallet?"

Pottinger answered in the affirmative and thanked her, and she unfastened the wallet, talking to him as she did so. "Is that a swelling on that near fore leg, Pottinger?" she said, suddenly, pointing to Adonis.

Pottinger started and regarded her with a look of horror, and, of course, instantly knelt down to examine the suspected member. Long before he had come up again with a breath of relief and a smiling "No, miss, there is nothing the matter with it," she had looked into the wallet and seen Stafford's letter.

"Oh, I thought there was," she said. "Have you finished your horses?"

"No, miss," he replied. "I have the master's hunter and the mare you ride to do yet."

She nodded and went out of the stable, humming one of her songs; but she did not go very far. In five minutes she back again.

"Oh, Pottinger, don't trouble about those letters. I will ride into Bryndermere myself."

Pottinger was in the mare's stall, and Mause stopped him as he was coming forward, by saying:

"Don't trouble; I'll take the letters from the wallet."

With Stafford's letter amongst her own in her pocket, she went quickly, and yet without apparent hurry, to her own room, sent away her maid on an errand, and slipped the bolt in the door. Rapidly she lit her silver spirit-lamp and heated the water almost to boiling-point, and held the envelope of Stafford's letter over it until the gum was melted and the flap came open. Then she took out the letter, and, throwing herself back in an easy-chair, read it slowly.

At first, as she read, her face burned, then it grew pale, and still paler; every word of the bitter farewell, of the renunciation, written as if with a man's heart's blood, stabbed her and tortured her with the pangs of jealousy. Once she started to her feet, her hands clenched, her head thrown back her eyes flashing; a superb figure--the tigress aroused. At that instant she was minded to take the letter and fling it in Stafford's face, and with it fling back the pledge which he had given her the night before; then she collapsed, as it were, and sank into a chair, dropping the letter and covering her face with her hands. She could not. The strength of her love made her weak as water where that love was concerned. Though her pride called upon her to surrender Stafford, she could not respond to it.

Swaying to and fro, with her eyes covered as if to hide her shame, she tried to tell herself that Stafford's was only a transient fancy for this girl, that it was mere flirtation, a vulgar *liaison* that she would teach him to forget.

"He shall, he shall!" she cried behind her hands, as if the words were wrung from her in her anguish of wounded pride and rejected love. "I will teach him! There is no art that woman ever used that I will not use--they say I am beautiful: if I am, my beauty shall minister to him as no woman's beauty has ever ministered before. Cold to all the rest of the world, I will be to him a fire which shall warm his life and make it a heaven--It is only because he saw her first: if he had seen me--Oh, curse her, curse her! Last night, while he was talking to me, even while he was kissing me, he was thinking of her. But she shall not have him! She has lost and I have won and I will keep him!"

She dashed her hand across her eyes, though there were no tears in them, and stood upright, holding herself tensely as if she were battling for calm; then she replaced the poignant note in its envelope, and went back to the stables. Again she met no one, for those who were down were in at breakfast.

"I have changed my mind, Pottinger," she said; "and will be glad if you will take the notes, please. See, I have put them back in the wallet."

"Certainly, miss!" said Pottinger, and he touched his forehead two or three times, and coloured and smiled awkwardly and looked at her with a new and vivid interest. One of the maids had run into the stable, during Maud's absence, and had told him the news that his master was engaged to Miss Maude Falconer; for the servants, who are so quick to discover all our little secrets, had already learnt this one, and the servants' hall was buzzing with it.

CHAPTER XXV.

That morning Ida came down-stairs singing, not loudly, but in the soft undertone which a girl uses when she is supremely happy and she has hopes of seeing the cause of her happiness very soon. All through breakfast, while Mr. Heron read his letters, opening them and reading them stealthily as usual, her heart was singing its love-song to her, and she was wondering whether she would meet Stafford by the stream or among the hills. That she should meet him she felt quite sure, for he had never failed to leave the gay party at the Villa to come over to her every day.

Perhaps he had spoken to his father, and, in the wonderful way men have, had swept aside all the obstacles which stood against their union. He was so strong, so self-reliant, so masterful--though so gentle with her--that surely no obstacles could stand against him. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she almost started when Jason appeared and, looking from her to Mr. Heron, announced that Mr. Wordley, the family lawyer, was in the library.

Mr. Heron flushed and scrambled his letters and papers together as he rose.

"Won't Mr. Wordley come in and have some breakfast?" suggested Ida. But her father, shaking his head impatiently, said that Mr. Wordley was sure to have had his breakfast, and shuffled out of the room.

A few minutes after he had gone, Jessie came in for the day's orders, and Ida dragged her thoughts away from the all-absorbing subject and plunged into housekeeping. It was not a lengthy or a very elaborate business, alas! but when it was over Jessie lingered and began collecting the breakfast things, glancing shyly at Ida, as she always did when she wanted to gossip.

"There was fine doings up at the Villa last night, Miss Ida!" she began, rather timidly, for Ida seldom encouraged her chatter. "There was a ball there. Such a tremendous grand affair! There hasn't been anything like it ever known in this country. Williams was up there this morning, and Susie told him that it was like fairyland, what with the beautiful rooms and the music and the ladies' rich dresses and jewels. She got a peep through one of the open doors, and she says it quite took her breath away."

Ida smiled. She was not envious; for would not Stafford come over presently and tell her all about it: who was there, with whom he had danced, and how all the time he had been longing to be by her side?

"Susie says that the ladies was beautiful, Miss Ida, and that the most beautiful of them all was Miss Falconer. Susie says she had the most lovely dress, like a cloud of smoke, with diamonds sparkling all over it like stars."

"That sounds very pretty and poetical, Jessie," said Ida.

What would he care for a dress like a cloud, or the diamonds that shone like stars on it? Did she not know that he loved the little rain-washed

habit which a certain rustic country girl wore, better than the choicest production of Worth?

"Yes, miss," Jessie went on, "and Susie says that Mr. Stafford, the lord's son"--the simple dale folk as often called Sir Stephen "my lord" as "sir"--"danced ever so many times with her, and the servants was saying that he was making love to her, and that they shouldn't be surprised to hear that Mr. Stafford was going to marry Miss Falconer."

Ida could not prevent the colour rising to her face, but she laughed unforcedly, and with no misgiving; for she had looked into Stafford's eyes and read his soul through them. He was hers, let all the women in the world be beautiful and decked in silks and satins.

She ran upstairs to put on her habit, leaving Jessie rather disappointed at the effect of her news, and she sang while she tied the little scarlet sailor's knot, and presently came down the stairs with a step as light as her heart. As she was mounting and talking to Jason about the last lot of steers, Mr. Wordley came out of the house to get his horse, and hurried to her, bare-headed, in the good old way.

"No, I can't stay," he said in answer to her invitation. "I have to be back at the office; but I'll ride a little way with you, if I may. It isn't often I get the chance of riding with the prettiest girl in the county. There now, I've made you blush, as I used to when you sat upon my knee, and I told you that little girls had no right to stars for eyes."

Ida laughed.

"But I'm a big girl now," she said, "and too old for compliments; besides, lawyers should always speak the truth."

"For goodness sake! don't spread that theory, my dear, or we shall all have to put our shutters up," he retorted, with mock alarm.

He got on his old red-roan rather stiffly, and they rode out of the court-yard and on to the road, where, be sure, Ida's "star-like" eyes swept the hills and the valleys lest perchance a young man should be riding there. They rode in silence for a few minutes, during which the old lawyer seemed very thoughtful, and glanced at her sideways, as if he were trying to make up his mind about something. At last he said, with an affectation of casualness:

"Father been pretty well of late, my dear?"

Ida hesitated for a moment. She could not bring herself to tell even Mr. Wordley of her father's painful habit of walking in his sleep.

"Yes," she said, "fairly well. Sometimes he is rather restless and irritable as if he were worried. Has he anything to worry him, Mr. Wordley--I mean anything more than usual?"

He did not answer, and she looked at him as if waiting for his reply.

"I was thinking of what you just said: that you were a big girl. So you are, though you always seem to me like the little child I used to nurse. But the world rolls on and you have grown into a woman and I ought to tell you the truth," he said, at last.

"The truth!" she echoed, with a quick glance.

"Yes," he said, nodding gravely. "Does your father ever talk to you of business, my dear? I know that you manage the house and the farm; ay, and manage them well, but I don't know whether he ever tells you anything about the business of the estate. I ask because I am in rather an awkward position. When your father dismissed his steward I thought he would consult me on the matters which the steward used to manage; but he has not done so, and I am really more ignorant about his affairs than anyone would credit, seeing that I have been the Herons' family lawyer--I and mine--since, well, say, since the Flood." "No; my father tells me nothing," said Ida. "Is there anything the matter, is there anything I should know?"

He looked at her gravely, compassionately.

"My dear, I think there is," he said. "If you had a brother or any relative near you I would not worry you, would not tell you. But you have none, you are quite alone, you see."

"Quite alone," she echoed. And then she blushed, as she remembered Stafford, and that she was no longer alone in the world.

"And so I think you ought to be told that your father's affairs are--are not as satisfactory as they should be."

"I know that we are very poor," said Ida in a low voice.

"Ah, yes," he said. "And so are a great many of the landed gentry nowadays; but they still struggle on, and I had hope that by some stroke of good luck I might have helped your father to struggle on and perhaps save something, make some provision, for you. But, my dear--See now! I am going to treat you as if you were indeed a woman; and you will be brave, I know, for you are a Heron, and a Heron--it sounds like a paradox!--has never shown the white feather--your father's affairs have been growing worse lately, I am afraid. You know that the estate is encumbered, that the entail was cut off so that you might inherit; but advantage has been taken of the cutting off the entail to raise fresh loans since the steward was dismissed and I have been ignorant of your father's business matters. I came to-day to tell him that the interest of the heaviest mortgage was long overdue, and that the mortgagee, who says that he has applied several times, is threatening foreclosure. I felt quite sure that I should get the money from your father this morning, but he has put me off and makes some difficulty. He made a rambling statement, almost incoherent, which I did not understand, though, to be sure, I listened very intently, and from a word or two he incautiously let drop, I am afraid that--"

He stopped and frowned and puckered his lips as if reluctant to continue. Ida looked at him steadily with her deep grey eyes.

"Go on," she said. "Do not be afraid to tell me the truth. I can bear it. I would rather know the worst, know what I have to face. For some time past I have feared my father was in trouble. Do you think I am afraid? Please tell me all."

"In a word, then, my dear," said the old lawyer, with a sigh, "I am afraid your father has been speculating, and, like ninety-nine out of a

hundred that do so, has been losing. It is like playing against the bank at Monte Carlo; one man may break it, but the advantage is on the bank's side, and for the one who wins thousands lose. Can you tell me if there are any grounds for my apprehension?"

Ida was silent for a moment as she recalled her father's manner of late, his habit of shutting himself up in the library, of keeping his letters from her, of secreting papers, and, above all, the furtive glances which she had now and again seen him cast at her.

"I am afraid that it is only too true," she said. "My poor father! What is to be done, Mr. Wordley? Can I do anything?"

The old man shook his head. He knew too well that once a man has really taken to gambling, whether it be on the Stock Exchange, or at a green table, or on the turf, there is very little hope of saving him.

"I fear you can do nothing," he replied, sadly. "A Heron never yet brooked interference even by his nearest and dearest. No, you must say nothing about it. Even I must be careful how I approach him; for this morning he was testy and irritable and resented the few questions I ventured to put to him. Don't make yourself unhappy about it. I will try and arrange about the mortgage, and I will come over again as soon as possible and try and persuade your father to confide in me as he used to do. Now, come, remember! You are not to worry yourself, my dear, but to leave it entirely to me. Things are rarely as bad as they seem, and there is always a gleam of light in the darkest sky. Perhaps, some day, we shall see Heron Hall and the good old family in all its old glory; and when that day comes, my little girl with the star eyes will queen it in the dale like one of the Heron ladies of the past."

He patted her hand as he held it, patted and stroked it and looked at her with a tender and encouraging smile, which made Ida's eyes grow moist.

She rode down the dale gravely and sadly for some minutes: then the thought flashed through her mind, warming her heart, that she was not alone, but there was one who loved her and to whom she could fly for consolation and encouragement. Yes, it was only right that she should tell Stafford all; there should be no concealment from him.

She rode down the dale looking for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. When she came to the opening by the lake she saw the large, white Villa gleaming in the sunlight; a launch was patting off from the landing-place with men and women on board, and she could almost fancy that she heard the sound of laughter. The contrast of the prosperity typified by the great white place and the poverty of Heron Hall smote her sharply. She was poorer even than she had thought: what would the great, the rich Sir Stephen say to such a daughter-in-law? She watched the launch dreamily as it shot across the lake, and wondered whether Stafford was on board, laughing and talking perhaps with the beautiful Miss Falconer. In this moment of her trouble the thought was not pleasant, but there was no jealousy in it, for in her assurance of his love he was free to talk and jest with whom he pleased. She turned, and after making her usual circuit, rode home-wards. As she reached the cross-road she heard the sound of a horse coming from the Hall, and she pulled up, her heart beating fast; then it sank with disappointment, for the horseman came round the bend and she saw that it was a groom. He touched his hat as he passed, and rode on at a sharp trot in the

direction of Bryndremere. Ida wondered why he had been to the Hall, but concluded that he had gone there with some message about the farm produce.

When she rode into the stable-yard, she saw Jessie and Jason standing by the small hall door and talking eagerly, and Jessie came forward, and taking a letter from under her apron, held it out with a smile.

"It's just come from the Villa, Miss Ida," she said. "And oh, miss, what I told you this morning--it's quite true. It was Mr. Stafford's own groom as brought the note, and he says that his master is engaged to Miss Falconer, and that the whole place is in excitement over it. He was as proud as Punch, Miss Ida; for he says that his new mistress is terrible rich as well as beautiful, and that there'll be the grandest of grand doings up there."

The blood rushed to Ida's face for a moment, then faded, and she slipped the note into the pocket of her habit and laughed. For it sounded too ridiculous, too incredible to cause her even a shadow of annoyance. She gave one or two orders to Jason, then went into the hall, took the note from her pocket and looked at the address lovingly, lingeringly: for instinctively she knew whose hand had written it. It was the first letter she had received from him; what would it say to her? No doubt it was to tell her why he had not been able to meet her that morning, to ask her to meet him later in the day. With a blush of maidenly shame she lifted the envelope to her lips and kissed each written word.

Then she opened it, slowly, as lingeringly as she had looked at it, spinning out the pleasure, the delight which lay before her in the perusal of her first love-letter. With her foot upon the old-fashioned fender, her head drooping as if there was someone present to see her blushes, she read the letter; and it is not too much to say that at first she failed utterly to grasp its meaning. With knit brows and quaking heart, she read it again and again, until its significance was, so to speak, forced upon her; then the letter dropped from her hand, her arms fell limply to her sides, and she looked straight before her in a dazed, benumbed fashion, every word burning itself upon her brain and searing her heart.

The blow had fallen so suddenly, so unexpectedly, like a bolt from the blue, smiting the happiness of her young life as a sapling is smitten by summer lightning, that for the moment she felt no pain, nothing but the benumbing of all her faculties; so that she did not see the portrait of the dead and gone Heron upon which her eyes rested, did not hear her father's voice calling to her from the library, was conscious of nothing but those terrible words which were dinning through her brain like the booming of a great bell. Presently she uttered a low cry and clasped her head with her hand, as if to shut out the sound of the words that tortured her.

It could not be true--it could not be true! Stafford had not written it. It was some cruel jest, a very cruel jest, perpetrated by someone who hated them both, and who wantonly inflicted pain. Yes; that was it! That could be the only explanation. Someone had written in his name; it was a forgery; she would meet Stafford presently, and they would laugh at it together. He would be very angry, would want to punish the person who had done it; but he and she would laugh together, and he would take her in his arms and kiss her in one of the many ways in which he had

made a kiss an ecstasy of delight, and they would laugh together as he whispered that nothing should ever separate them.

She laughed now as she pictured the scene that would be enacted. But suddenly the laugh died on her lips, as there flashed across her mind the words Jessie had said. Stafford was engaged to Maude Falconer, the girl up at the Villa, whose beauty and grace and wealth all the dale was talking of.

Oh, God! Was there any truth in it, was there any truth in it? Had Stafford, indeed, written that cruel letter? Had he left her forever, forever, forever? Should she never see him again, never again hear him tell her that he loved her, would always love her?

The room spun round with her, she suddenly felt sick and faint, and, reeling, caught at the carved mantel-shelf to prevent herself from falling. Then gradually the death-like faintness passed, and she became conscious that her father's voice was calling to her, and she clasped her head again and swept the hair from her forehead, and clenched her hands in the effort to gain her presence of mind and self-command.

She picked up the letter, and, with a shudder, thrust it in her bosom, as Cleopatra might have thrust the asp which was to destroy her; then with leaden feet, she crossed the hall and opened the library door, and saw her father standing by the table clutching some papers in one hand, and gesticulating wildly with the other. Dizzily, for there seemed to be a mist before her eyes, she went to him and laid a hand upon his arm.

"What is it, father?" she said, "Are you ill? What is the matter?"

He gazed at her vacantly and struck his hand on the table, after the manner of a child in a senseless passion.

"Lost! Lost! All lost!" he mumbled, jumbling the words together almost incoherently.

"What is lost, father?" she asked.

"Everything, everything!" he cried, in the same manner. "I can't remember, can't remember! It's ruin, utter ruin! My head--I can't think, can't remember! Lost, lost!"

In her terror, she put her young arm round him as a mother encircles her child in the delirium of fever.

"Try and tell me, father!" she implored him. "Try and be calm, dearest! Tell me, and I will help you. What is lost?"

He tried to struggle from her arms, tried to push her from him.

"You know!" he mumbled. "You've watched me--you know the truth! Everything is lost! I am ruined! The mortgage! Herondale will pass away! I am a poor man, a very poor man! Have pity on me, have pity on me!"

He slipped, by their weight, from her arms and fell into the chair. She sank on to her knees, her arms still round him, and stroked and caressed his withered hand that twitched and shook; and to her horror

his stony eyes grew more vacant, his jaw dropped, and he sank still lower in the chair. "Jessie! Jason!" she called, and they rushed in. For a space they stood aghast and unhelpful from fright, then Jason tried to lift his master from the heap into which he had collapsed. The old man's eyes closed, he struggled for breath, and when he had gained it, he looked from one to the other with a smile, a senile smile, which added to Ida's grief and terror.

"It's all right!" he whispered, huskily, pantingly. "It's all right; they don't know. They don't guess!" Then his manner changed to one of intense alarm and dismay. "Lost! Lost!" he gasped. "I'm ruined, rained! Herondale has gone, gone--all is gone! My poor child--Ida!"

"Father!" broke from Ida's white lips. "Father, I am here. Look at me, speak to me. I am here--everything is not lost. I am here, and all is well."

His lips twisted into a smile, a smile of cunning, almost of glee; then he groaned, and the cry rose again:

"I can't remember--all is lost! Ruined! My poor child! Have pity on my child!"

As she clung to him, supporting him as she clung, she felt a shudder run through him, and he fell a lifeless heap upon her shoulder.

The minutes--were they minutes or years?--passed, and were broken into fragments by a cry from Jessie.

"Miss Ida! Miss Ida! He's--the master's dead!"

Ida raised her father's head from her shoulder and looked into his face, and knew that the girl had spoken the truth.

He was dead. She had lost both father and lover in one day!

CHAPTER XXVI.

Ida sat in the library on the morning of the funeral. A pelting rain beat upon the windows, over which the blinds had been drawn; the great silence which reigned in the chamber above, in which the dead master of Heron lay, brooded over the whole house, and seemed in no part of it more intense than in this great, book-lined room, in which Godfrey Heron had spent so much of his life.

Ida lay back in the great arm-chair in which he had sat, her small brown hands lying limply in her lap, her eyes fixed absently upon the open book which lay on the table as he had left it. The pallor of her face, increased by her sorrow, was accentuated by the black dress, almost as plainly made as that which the red-eyed Jessie wore in her kitchen. Though nearly a week had elapsed since her father had died in her young arms, and notwithstanding her capacity for self-reliance, Ida had not yet recovered from the stupor of the shock.

She was scarcely thinking as she lay back in his chair and looked at the table over which he had bent for so many monotonous years; she scarcely realised that he had passed out of her life, and that she was alone in the world; and she was only vaguely conscious that her sorrow had, so to speak, a double edge; that she had lost not only her father, but the man to whom she had given her heart, the man who should have been standing beside her now, shielding her with his strong arms, comforting her with words of pity and love. The double blow had fallen so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that the pain of it had been dulled and blunted. The capacity of human nature for suffering is, after all not unlimited. God says to physical pain and mental anguish, "Thus far and no farther;" and this limitation saved Ida from utter collapse.

Then, again, she was not free to indulge in idle grief, in the luxury of woe; the great house had still to be run, she had to bury her beloved dead, the mourning which seems such a hopeless mockery when the heart is racked with misery, had to be seen to; and she did it, and went through it all, with outward calm, sustained by that Heron spirit which may be described as the religion of her class--_noblesse oblige_. Jessie had wept loudly through the house ever since the death, and could weep as loudly now; but if Ida shed any tears she wept in the silence and darkness of her own room, and no one heard her utter a moan. "To suffer in silence and be strong" was the badge of all her tribe, and she wore it with quiet stoicism.

Godfrey Heron's death had happened so suddenly that the news of it scarcely got beyond the radius of the estate before the following morning, and Stafford had gone to London in ignorance of this second blow with which Fate had followed up the one he had dealt Ida: and when the neighbours--the Vaynes, the Bannerdales, and the Avorys--came quickly and readily enough to offer their sympathy and help, they could do nothing. The girl solitary and lonely in her grief as she had been solitary and lonely through her life, would see no one but the doctor and Mr. Wordley, and the people who had once been warm and intimate friends of the family left reluctantly and sully, to talk over the melancholy circumstance, and to wonder what would become of the daughter of the eccentric man who had lived the life of a recluse. Mr. Wordley would have liked to have persuaded her to see some of the women who had hastened to comfort her; but he knew that any attempt at persuasion would have been in vain, that he would not have been able to break down the barrier of reserve which the girl had instinctively and reservedly erected between her suffering soul and the world. His heart ached for her, and he did all that a man could do to lighten the burden of her trouble; but there was very little that he could do beyond superintending the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

His first thought was of the relatives; but, somewhat to his own dismay, he found that the only one whom he could trace was a certain cousin, a more than middle-aged man who, though he bore the name of Heron, was quite unknown to Ida, and, so far as Mr. Wordley was aware, had not crossed the threshold of the Hall for many years. He was a certain John Heron, a retired barrister, who had gone in for religion, not in the form of either of the Established Churches, but of that of one of the least known sects, the members of which called themselves some kind of brothers, were supposed to be very strict observers of the Scriptural law, and were considered by those who did not belong to them both narrow-minded and uncharitable.

Mr. John Heron was a prominent member of this little sect, and was

famous in its small circles for his extreme sanctity and his eloquence as a lay preacher. Mr. Wordley, with much misgiving, had invited this, the only relative he could find, to the funeral, and Ida was now awaiting this gentleman's arrival.

The stealthy footsteps which belong to those who minister to the dead passed up and down the great house, Jason was setting out the simple "funeral baked meats" which are considered appropriate to the occasion, and Mr. Wordley paced up and down the hall with his hands behind his back, listening to the undertaker's men upstairs, and glancing through the window in expectation of the carriage which had been sent for Mr. John Heron. Presently he saw it rounding a bend of the drive, and went into the library to prepare Ida.

She raised her head but not her eyes as he entered, and looked at him with that dull apathy which denotes the benumbed heart, the mind crushed under its heavy weight of sorrow.

"I came in to tell you, my dear, that Mr. John Heron is coming," he said. "The carriage is just turning the bend of the drive." "I will come," she said, rising and supporting herself by the heavy, carved arm of the great chair.

"No, no" he said. "Sit down and wait here." He did not want her to hear the stealthy tread of the undertaker's men, to meet the coffin which they were going to bring downstairs and place in the hall. "I will bring him in here. Is there anything you would like me to say to him, my dear?" he asked, and spoke with a certain hesitancy; for as yet he had not spoken of her future, feeling that her grief was too recent, too sacred, to permit of the obtrusion of material and worldly matters.

"To say to him?" she repeated, in a low, dull voice, as if she did not understand.

"Yes," he said. "I did not know whether you had formed any plan, whether"--he hesitated again, "you had thought of going--of paying a visit--to these relations of yours. He lives in the north of London, and has a wife and son and daughter, as you know."

Ida passed her hand across her brow, trying to remember.

"Ah, yes," she said at last, "I remember you told me about them. I never heard of them before--until now. Why should I go to them? Do they want me? Have they asked me?"

Mr. Wordley coughed discreetly. They certainly had not asked her, but he felt quite assured that an individual whose reputation for sanctity stood so high could not be so deficient in charity as to refuse a home to his orphan cousin.

"They have not sent you any definite invitation yet, but they will be sure to want you to go and stay with them, for a time, at any rate; and I think you ought to go."

"I do not think I should like it," said Ida, but indifferently, as if the question were of no moment. "I would rather stay here"

Mr. Wordley polished his glasses very intently.

"I am afraid you'd find it very lonely at the Hall, my dear," he said. "In fact, I don't think you could remain here by yourself," he added, evading the direct gaze of the great, sad eyes.

"I should feel lonely anywhere," she said. "More lonely with people I don't know, probably, than I should feel here, with Jessie and Jason--and--and the dogs."

"Well, well, we can't discuss the question now, and will endeavour to act for the best, my dear," said the old man, still intent upon his glasses. "I hear the carriage. I will bring Mr. John in." He returned in a minute or two, accompanied by a tall and gaunt individual, who, in his black clothes and white necktie, looked a cross between a superior undertaker and a Methodist preacher. His features were strongly marked, and the expression of his countenance was both severe and melancholy, and, judging by his expression and his voice, which was harsh and lachrymose, his particular form of religion did not appear to afford him either amusement or consolation.

"This is your cousin, Mr. John Heron," said poor Mr. Wordley, who was evidently suffering from the effects of his few minutes' conversation with that gentleman.

Mr. John Heron surveyed the slight figure and white face with its sad, star-like eyes--surveyed it with a grim kind of severity, which was probably intended for sympathy, and extending a cold, damp hand, which resembled an extremely bony shoulder of mutton, said, in a rasping, melancholy voice:

"How do you do, Ida? I trust you are bearing your burden as becomes a Christian. We are born to sorrow. The train was three-quarters of an hour late."

"I am sorry," said Ida in her low voice, leaving him to judge whether she expressed regret for our birthright of misery or the lateness of the train. "Will you have some lunch--some wine?" she asked, a dull, vague wonder rising in her mind that this grim, middle-class man should be of kith and kin with her dead father.

"Thank you; no. I had an abernethy biscuit at the station." He drew back from, and waved away, the tray of wine which Jason at this moment brought in. "I never touch wine. I, and all mine, are total abstainers. Those who fly to the wine-cup in moments of tribulation and grief rely on a broken reed which shall pierce their hand. I trust you do not drink, Cousin Ida?"

"No--yes; sometimes; not much," she replied, vaguely, and regarding him with a dull wonder; for she had never seen this kind of man before.

Mr. Wordley poured out a glass of wine, and, in silent indignation, handed it to her; and, unconscious of the heavy scowl with which Mr. John Heron regarded her, she put her lips to it.

"A glass of wine is not a bad thing at any time," said the old lawyer; "especially when one is weakened and prostrated by trouble. Try and drink a little more, my dear."

"It is a matter of opinion, of conviction, of principle," said Mr. John Heron, grimly, as if he were in the pulpit. "We must be guided by the

light of our consciences; we must not yield to the seductive in fineness of creature comfort. We are told that strong drink is raging--" This was rather more than Mr. Wordley could stand, and, very red in the face, he invited Mr. John Heron to go up to the room which had been prepared for him.

When that gentleman had stalked out, the old lawyer looked at Ida with a mixture of dismay and commiseration.

"Not a--er--particularly cheerful and genial person, my dear; but no doubt Mr. John Heron is extremely conscientious and--er--good-hearted."

"I daresay," assented Ida, apathetically. "It does not matter. It was very kind of him to come so far to--to the funeral," she added. "He might have stayed away, for I don't think my father knew him, and I never heard of him. Is it not time yet?" she asked, in a low voice.

As she spoke, Jessie came in and took her upstairs to her room to put on the thick black cloak, the bonnet with its long crape veil, in which Ida was to follow her father to the grave; for in spite of Mr. Wordley's remonstrances, she had remained firm in her resolve to go to the church-yard.

Presently the procession started. Only a few carriages followed the hearse which bore Godfrey Heron to his last resting-place; but when the vehicles cradled beyond the boundary of the grounds, across which the dead man had not set foot for thirty years, the cavalcade was swelled by a number of tenants, labourers, and dalesmen who had come to pay their last respects to Heron of Herondale; and marching in threes, which appears to be the regulation number for a funeral, they made a long and winding tail to the crawling coaches, quite filled the little church, and stood, a black-garbed crowd, in the pelting rain round the oblong hole which would suffice for the last bed of this one of the last of the lords of the dale.

But though all were present to show respect to the deceased squire, the attention of every man and woman was fixed upon the slight, girlish figure standing by the side of the grave, her head bent, her great mournful eye fixed upon the coffin, her hands clenched tightly as they held together the thick mourning cloak. She looked so young, so almost child-like in the desolation of her solitude, that many of the women cried silently, and the rough men set their lips hard and looked sternly and grimly at the ground.

The old clergyman who had christened her and every Sunday had cast glances of interest and affection at her as she sat in the great "loose box" of a pew, found it very difficult to read the solemn service without breaking down, and his old thin voice quavered as he spoke the words of hope and consolation which the storm of wind and rain caught up and swept across the narrow church-yard and down the dale of which the Herons had been so long masters.

Mr. John Heron stood grim and gaunt opposite Ida, as if he were a figure carved out of wood, and showed no sign of animation until the end of the service, when he looked round with a sudden eagerness, and opened his large square lips as if he were going to "improve the occasion" by an address; but Mr. Wordley, who suspected him of such intention, nipped it in the bud by saying:

"Will you give your arm to Miss Ida, Mr. Heron? I want to get her back to the Hall as soon as possible."

Ida was led to the carriage, passing through a lane of sympathisers amongst whom were representatives of all the great dale families; and all bent their heads with a respectful pity and sympathy as the young girl made her way down the narrow path. About half a dozen persons had been asked to go to the Hall for the funeral lunch, at which Mr. John Heron, as representative of the family, presided. It was a melancholy meal; for most of those present were thinking of the orphan girl in her room above. They spoke in lowered voices of the dead man and of the great family from which he had sprung, and recalled stories of the wealth and lavishness of past Herons; and when the meal was over, there suddenly fell a silence, and all eyes were turned upon Mr. Wordley; for the moment had arrived for the reading and expounding of the will.

Mr. Wordley rose, coughed, and wiped his eye-glasses, and looked round gravely.

"As the legal adviser of my late client, Mr. Godfrey Heron, I have to inform you, gentlemen, that there is no will. My client died intestate."

The listeners exchanged glances, and looked grave and concerned.

"No will?" said Lord Bannerdale, anxiously; then his kindly face cleared. "But of course everything goes to his daughter; the estate is not entailed?"

Mr. Wordley inclined his head.

"The estate is not entailed, as you observed, Lord Bannerdale; and my client, Miss Ida Heron, inherits everything."

They drew a breath of relief, and nodded assentingly; and presently they made a general movement of departure. Lord Bannerdale lingered behind the others. "I won't ask the poor child to see me, Mr. Wordley," he said. "Will you therefore be good enough to give her Lady Bannerdale's love, and to tell her that, as Lady Bannerdale has written to her, we shall be more than pleased if she will come to us at the Court. She is to consider it her home for just as long as she should please; and we shall feel it a pleasure and an honour to have her amongst us as one of our own. Of course she cannot remain alone here, in this great place."

The old lawyer bowed.

"I will give her your kind message, for which I thank you on her behalf, Lord Bannerdale. I do not know what she will do, or where she will go; at present she is not in a condition to discuss any plans for her future, though to-day she expressed a desire to remain at the Hall." He paused for a moment before he added: "I do not know whether she can do so."

"My cousin is young, and a mere child, and she must follow the advice of her elders and her guardian. The future of even the sparrow is in higher hands than ours, and we know not what a day may bring forth," said Mr. John Heron, grimly, and with an uplifting of his heavy brows.

"Quite so," said Lord Bannerdale, who had taken a great dislike for the sanctimonious speaker, and who could scarcely repress a shudder as he shook Mr. John Heron's cold and clammy hand.

When they had all gone, Mr. Wordley said:

"We had better go into the library and talk matters over. I will send for Miss Ida. It seems cruel to disturb her at such a moment, but there is no help for it."

"You speak as if you had bad tidings, Mr. Wordley, to give us," said John Heron.

"I am afraid I have," responded the old lawyer, shaking his grey head sadly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

When Ida came down, he led her to a chair beside the fire which he had ordered to be lit, and laid his hand gently and tenderly on her shoulder by way of preparation and encouragement.

"Your cousin and I want to talk to you about the future, Ida," he said. "You will have to be told some time or other exactly how your father's affairs stood, and I have come to the conclusion that it is better you should know at once than that you should be permitted to remain in ignorance of the gravity of the situation. I have gone over your father's papers and looked into his affairs very carefully and closely, and I am sorry to say that they are in a very unsatisfactory condition. As I told you the other day, the estate has been encumbered and very seriously embarrassed for some time past, and the encumbrance has been increased of late, notwithstanding the admirable way in which you have managed the estate and the household affairs."

Ida raised her eyes to his and tried to regard him calmly and bravely, but her lips quivered and she checked a sigh.

Mr. Wordley coughed and frowned, as a man does when he is engaged in a disagreeable and painful task.

"The principal mortgagee has given me notice of foreclosure, and the amount of the debt is so large that I am afraid--it would be cruel and useless to conceal the truth from you--I know that the property sold would not be sufficient to meet it. Of ready money there appears to be none--"

Mr. John Heron groaned and raised his melancholy eyes to the ceiling with an expression of reprobation. Ida appeared unconscious of his presence and kept her sad eyes steadily fixed on the lawyer's kind and mournful face.

--"In a word, my dear child, your poor father appears to have left absolutely no effects behind him."

Ida drew a long breath and was silent for a moment, as she tried to

realise the significance of his words.

"Do you mean that I am quite penniless?" she said, in a low voice.

Mr. Wordley blew his nose and coughed two or three times, as if he found it difficult to reply; at last he said, in a voice almost as low as hers:

"Put shortly, I am afraid, my dear, that is what I must tell you. I had no idea that the position was so grave. I thought that there would be something left; sufficient, at any rate, to render you independent; but, as I told you, I have been kept in ignorance of your father's affairs for some years past, and I did not know how things were going. I am surprised as well as grieved, deeply grieved; and I must confess that I can only account for the deplorable confusion and loss by the theory that I suggested to you the other day. I cannot but think that your poor father must have engaged in some disastrous speculation."

Mr. Heron groaned again, and shook his head.

"The prevailing vice of this most wicked of ages," he said. "The love of money, the gambling on the race-course and the Stock Exchange, are the root of all evil."

Ida seemed not to hear him, and Mr. Wordley ignored the comment.

"It now remains for you, my dear child, to decide what to do. I do not think you could possibly live on here; you have not the means to do so, though you should be as economical as you have been in the past; the house must pass away from you in six months' time or little more, and there would be nothing gained by your lingering hopelessly here for that period."

"I must go, then," said Ida, as if there were a stab in every word.

Mr. Wordley bent his head, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, I fear you must go," he assented. "But, thank God, you are not without friends, many friends. Lord Bannerdale charges me to tell you what his good wife has already written you--that a home awaits you at the Court, where you will be received gladly and lovingly; and I am quite sure that the door of every house in the dale is wide open for you."

Ida shrank in her chair. Clothe the offer as kindly as he might, it spelt Charity, not cold charity, but charity still: and what Heron had ever tamely accepted charity from mere friends and strangers? Mr. Wordley saw the shrinking, the little shudder, and understood.

"I understand, my dear!" he said, in a low voice. "But there is another offer, another home which you can accept without humiliation or compunction. Your cousin, Mr. John Heron here, will, I am sure, be only too glad, too delighted to--to--"

He waited and glanced at Mr. Heron impatiently, and at last that gentleman rose, but not too eagerly, to the occasion.

"I need scarcely say," he said, slowly and solemnly, "that I should not approve of my cousin's accepting these offers of charity, which, though

no doubt kindly meant, appear to me somewhat--er--obtrusive. I am not a wealthy man; my simple home cannot compare in size and grandeur with Heron Hall and the estate which my late unfortunate cousin appears to have squandered, but such as it is, Ida will be welcome in it. I am not one to turn a deaf ear to the cry of the orphan and fatherless."

Mr. Wordley frowned and reddened, and cut in before Mr. John Heron could finish his sentence even more offensively, and so rouse Ida's spirit, and render his offer impossible of acceptance.

"Quite so, quite so, my dear sir," he said. "I am quite sure you will feel only too delighted and honoured at the prospect of taking this dear child into your family."

"Yes," said Mr. Heron, unctuously, "we will take her in as a lamb gathered into the fold, as a brand is plucked from the burning."

Ida looked at him half stupefied, and it is to be feared some doubts of his sanity arose in her mind.

"Quite so, quite so," interrupted Mr. Wordley again. "Then I think the sooner Miss Ida joins you the better; and I would suggest that she goes with you to-morrow. I will close the house and leave Jessie, the maid-servant, and Jason in charge. You and Miss Ida can depend on my guarding her interests as jealously as if they were my own. I will have a sale of the stock and other things which we are free to sell, and, meanwhile, Miss Ida must permit me to advance her some money on account of the proceeds."

He handed her an envelope in which he had already placed some bank-notes; but Ida looked at him and slowly shook her head.

"No, no, my dear!" he said. "I should not be guilty of such presumption. Though you are leaving Heron Hall, though it may be passing away from you forever, you are still, in my eyes, Miss Heron of Herondale, and I should not presume to offer you--" His voice broke, and his eyes filled with tears. "The money is yours, and you can take it without any loss of the pride which is your rightful heritage. If I have not offered you a home where you would indeed be an honoured guest, it is because I know that it would not be fitting for me to offer it, or you to accept it. Mr. John Heron is your natural guardian; but though that is so, I will ask you to remember that I claim the privilege of being your father's friend and yours, and that in any trouble you will be but honouring that privilege when you come to me for advice and assistance."

His voice was almost inaudible before he had finished, and Ida, down whose cheek tears were running for the first time, extended both hands in mute but eloquent gratitude. They had both forgotten Mr. John Heron's presence but were reminded of it by something between a cough and a sniff from him; and at a glance from Mr. Wordley, Ida turned to the gaunt figure and held out her hand.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice, "I will come with you and stay with you until--until--I can find something to do, something at which I can earn my own living. Surely there must be something I can do?" She turned to Mr. Wordley with a little anxious, eager gesture. "I am strong--very strong; I have managed Herondale--I can ride, and--and understand a farm. I am never tired. Surely there is something I can

do!"

Her voice broke, she began to tremble, and the tears started to her eyes again.

"Yes, yes; no doubt, no doubt, my child!" said Mr. Wordley, whose own eyes were moist. "We will think about all that later on. You must go now and rest; you are tired."

He drew her arm within his, and patting her hand tenderly and encouragingly, led her out of the room; and stood in the hall watching her as she slowly went up the great stairs; such a girlish, mournful figure in her plain black dress.

Ida lay awake that night listening to the wind and the rain. She was familiar enough with the dale storms, but never had their wild music wailed so mournful an accompaniment to her own thoughts. Compared with her other losses, that of her home, dearly as she loved it, weighed but little; it was but, an added pang to the anguish of her bereavement; and behind that, the principal cause of her grief, loomed the desertion of her lover. She tried not to think of Stafford; for every thought bestowed on him seemed to rob her dead father and to be disloyal to his memory; but, alas! the human heart is despotic; and as she lay awake and listened to the wailing of the wind and the rain as it drove against the window, Stafford's voice penetrated that of the storm; and, scarcely consciously, her lips were forming some of the passionate words of endearment which he had whispered to her by the stream and on the hill-side. Though she knew every word by heart of the letter he had written her, she did not yet understand or comprehend why he had broken his solemn engagement to her. She understood that something had risen between them, something had happened which had separated them, but she could form no idea as to what it was. He had spoken of "unworthiness," of something which he had discovered that had rendered him unfit to be her husband; but she could not guess what it was; but confused and bewildered as she was, there was at present, at any rate, no resentment in her heart.

The lover had been taken from her just as her father and her home had been. There was no help for it, there was no appeal from the decrees of Fate. Fate had decreed that she should love Stafford and lose him; and she could only go on living her grey and dreary life, made all the greyer and drearier by her short spell of joy and happiness. Sorrow's crown of sorrow is still the remembrance of happier things; and she would have to wear that crown in place of the crown of his love, wear it through all her days; for, young as she was, she knew that she had given her heart once and for all, that though she might never see Stafford again, she would love him to the end.

A mist hung over the dale on this, the day of her departure from the Hall, and all the hills over which she had so loved to ride and walk were shrouded as if in tears.

She stood and looked at them from the hall window with vacant eyes, as if she did not yet realise that she was leaving them, perhaps forever; but she had not long for gazing, for Mr. Heron and she were going by an early train, and the moment for farewell came swiftly upon her.

With Donald and Bess close at her heels, as if they were aware of their coming loss, she went round to say good-bye. She crossed the lawn and

went to the spot under the tree where she had met Stafford that never-to-be-forgotten night, and from thence walked to the corner of the terrace where they had stood and watched her father coming, in his sleep, from the ruined chapel. Then she went to the stable to say good-bye to Rupert, who whinnied as he heard her approaching footsteps, and thrust his soft, velvety nose into her neck. She had to fight hard against the tears at this point, and she hid her face against that of the big horse, with her arms thrown round his neck, as she murmured her last good-bye.

But the tears would not be kept back when it came to saying farewell to the two faithful souls, Jessie and Jason, with whom she had grown up from a girl all legs and wings, and whom she had learnt to regard rather as devoted friends than servants. Jason broke down completely and hurried away, his old and feeble frame shaking like an autumn leaf; and Jessie, her arms thrown round her young mistress, and with sobs and ejaculations, implored her to take her faithful Jessie with her.

Perhaps the parting with the two dogs was as bitter as any, for, as if they knew quite well that she was going, they clung closely to her, and when she hugged them and kissed them on the forehead, they had to be dragged off by Jason, and locked up in the stables lest they should follow the carriage which was to bear their beloved mistress away.

That carriage came all too soon, though Mr. John Heron had awaited its arrival impatiently and with watch in hand. He seemed grimmer and gaunter than ever that morning, and as he looked around the great Hall, he shook his head at its faded grandeur reprehensively, as if he could, if time permitted, deliver a sermon on the prodigality, the wicked wastefulness, which had brought ruin on the house, and rendered it necessary for him to extend his charity to the penniless orphan.

Mr. Wordley was there to say good-bye to Ida and put her into the carriage; but it proved a difficult good-bye to say, and for once the usually fluent old lawyer was bereft of the power of speech as he held Ida's small hand, and looked through tear-dimmed eyes at the white and sorrowful face. He had intended to say all sorts of kind and encouraging things, but he could only manage the two words, "Good-bye;" and they were almost inaudible.

She sank back into the carriage as it drove away from the Hall, and closed her eyes that she might not see the familiar trees in the avenue, the cattle, everyone of which she knew by name, grazing in the meadow, the pale and woe-begone faces of the servants who stood by the steps to catch the last glimpse of their beloved; and for some time her eyes remained closed; but they opened as she came to the clearing by the lake, from which one could see the long stretching facade of Sir Stephen Orme's white villa. She opened them then and looked at the house, wondering whether Stafford was there, wondering why he had not come to her, despite the promise she had exacted from him; wondering whether he knew that her father was dead, and that she was left penniless.

She was not capable of any more tears, and a dull apathy crushed down upon her, so that she did not notice that at the station Mr. John Heron improved the occasion, as he would have put it, by distributing tracts to the station-master and porters. The journey to London passed as if it were made in a dream; and wearied in mind and body and soul, she found herself, late in the evening, standing in the centre of the

Heron's dreary drawing-room, awaiting her reception by the Heron family.

She had been told by her cousin, as they drove in a four-wheeled cab through the depressing streets of a London suburb, that the family consisted of his wife and a son and a daughter; that the son's name was Joseph and the daughter's Isabel; that Joseph was a clerk in the city, and that Isabel was about the same age as Ida.

"We are a very quiet family," Mr. Heron had said, "and you will no doubt miss the space and grandeur of Heron Hall, but I trust we are contented and happy, and that though our means are limited, our sphere of usefulness is wider than that of some wealthier people. My wife is, unfortunately, an invalid, and requires constant care and attention; but I have no doubt she will find strength to bear any fresh burden which Providence may see fit to put upon her. Though our circumstances are comfortable, we are not surrounded by the luxuries which so often prove a stumbling-block to weaker brethren. I trust you may be happy in our humble home, and that you may find some opportunity of usefulness in this new state of life to which you are called."

Ida tried to remember all this as she stood in the centre of the drawing-room and looked round upon the modern but heavy and ugly objects with which it was furnished.

The room was seedy and shabby, but with a different seediness and shabbiness from that of Heron Hall; for there was an attempt to conceal its loss of freshness with antimacassars, large in size and hideous of pattern. A grim and ugly portrait of Mr. John Heron occupied a great portion of one of the walls, and was confronted by a portrait, of a similar size, of his wife, a middle-class woman of faded aspect and languishing expression. The other pictures were of the type that one usually sees in such houses; engravings printed from wornout plates, and third-class lithographs. There was a large sofa covered with dirty cretonne, and with a hollow in the middle showing that the spring had "gone;" the centre-table was adorned by several well-known religious books arranged at regular intervals. A cage containing a canary hung between the curtains in the window, and the bird, a wretched-looking animal--it was moulting--woke up at their entrance and shrilled in the hateful manner peculiar to canaries. This depressing room was lit by one gas-burner, which only permitted Ida to take in all that had been described but vaguely and dimly.

She looked round aghast and with a sinking of the heart. She had never been in any room like this before, and its lack of comfort, its vulgarity, struck upon her strained nerves like a loud discordant note in music; but its owner looked round complacently and turned the gas a little higher, as he said:

"I will go and fetch your cousin. Won't you sit down?"

As he spoke, the door opened and the original of the portrait on the wall entered, followed by her daughter Isabel. Ida rose from the bumpy sofa and saw a thin, harassed-looking woman, more faded even than the portrait, and a tall and rather a good-looking girl whose face and figure resembled, in a vague, indefinite way, those of both her father and mother; but though she was not bad-looking, there was a touch of vulgarity in her widely opened eyes, with a curious stare for the newcomer, and in her rather coarse mouth, which appalled and repelled

poor Ida; and she stood looking from one to the other, trying to keep her surprise and wonder and disapproval from revealing themselves through her eyes. She did not know that these two ladies, being the wife and daughter of a professional man, considered themselves very much the superior of their friends and neighbours, who were mostly retired trades-people or "something in the city;" and that Mrs. Heron was extremely proud of her husband's connection with the Herons of Herondale, and was firmly convinced that she and her family possessed all the taste and refinement which belong to "the aristocracy."

A simpler and a homelier woman would have put her arm round the girl's neck and drawn her towards her with a few loving words of greeting and welcome; but Mrs. Heron only extended a hand, held at the latest fashionable angle, and murmured in a languid and lackadaisical voice:

"So you have come at last, my dear Miss Heron! Your train must have been very late, John; we have been expecting you for the last hour, and I am afraid the dinner is quite spoilt. But anyway, I am glad to see you."

"Thank you," said poor Ida.

It was Isabel's turn, and she now came forward with a smile that extended her mouth from ear to ear, and in a gushing manner said, in staccato sentences:

"Yes, we are so glad to see you! How tired you must be! One always feels so dirty and tumbled after a long journey. You'll be glad of a wash, Miss Heron. But there! I mustn't call you that; it sounds so cold and formal! I must call you Ida, mustn't I? 'Ida!' It sounds such an _odd_ name; but I suppose I shall get used to it in time."

"I hope so," said poor Ida, trying to smile and speak cheerfully and amiably, as Miss Isabel's rather large hand enclosed round hers; but she looked from one to the other with an appalling sensation of strangeness and aloofness, and a lump rose in her throat which rendered the smile and any further speech on her part impossible; and as she looked from the simpering, lackadaisical mother to the vulgar daughter with meaningless smile, she asked herself whether she was really awake, whether this room was indeed to be her future home, and these strange people her daily companions, or whether she was only asleep and dreaming, and would wake to find the honest face of Jessie bending over her, and to see the familiar objects of her own room at Heron Hall.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

When Ida went upstairs for the wash, the need for which Miss Isabel had so kindly informed her of, she found that her room was clean and fairly comfortable, though its appearance seemed strange after the huge and old-fashioned one at the Hall. The furniture was cheap and unsubstantial, the towels were small and thin; in place of pictures, aggressively illuminated texts scarred the walls like freshly made wounds, and the place had a bare, homeless look which made Ida shudder.

The dining-room, when she went down to it, did not impress her any more favourably; for here, too, the furniture was new and shiny with a

sticky kind of shininess, as if the treacly varnish had not yet dried; there was not a comfortable chair in the room; the pictures were the most gruesome ones of Dore's, and there was a text over the mantel-piece as aggressive and as hideous in colouring as those in her room. A lukewarm leg of mutton, very underdone, was on the table, the cloth of which was by no means clean; the dishes, which contained quite cold vegetables, were cracked and did not match; the bread was of the commonest kind, that which is called "household;" the knives were badly cleaned, and the plate was worn off the forks and spoons. It was considered inelegant to have gas in the dining-room, therefore a cheap paraffin-lamp was in the centre of the table, and was more liberal of scent than light. The curtains to the window were of that annoying red which shrieks down any other colour near it; they made Ida's tired eyes ache.

While she was trying to eat the slice of gory mutton, Mrs. Heron and Isabel watched her, as if she were some aboriginal from a wild and distant country, and they shot glances at each other, uneasy, half-jealous, half-envious glances, as they noted the beauty of the face, and the grace of the figure in its black dress, which, plain as it was, seemed to make theirs still more dowdy and vulgar. In the midst of this lugubrious account of the annoyances and worries of the journey, Mr. Heron broke off to ask:

"Where is Joseph? He is late to-night."

"He is kept at the office," replied his mother. "Poor boy! I hope he is not working too hard; he has been kept nearly every night this week."

Isabel smiled at Ida, for what reason Ida could not guess; and while she was wondering, there came a knock at the outer door, and presently Joseph entered.

He was an unprepossessing young man with small eyes and thick lips, over which it would have been wise of him to wear a big moustache; but it was the fashion in the city to be clean-shaven, and Mr. Joseph considered himself the pink of fashion. His clothes fitted him too tightly, he wore cheap neckties, and ready-made boots, of course, of patent leather. His dark hair was plastered on the low, retreating forehead; his face was flushed instead of being, as one would expect, pale from overwork.

Ida disliked him at the first glance, and disliked him still more at the second, as she caught his shifty eyes fixed on her with a curious and half-insolently admiring expression.

He came round and shook hands--his were damp and cold like his father's--as Mr. Heron introduced them, and in a voice which unpleasantly matched his face, said that he was glad to see her.

"Tired, Joseph, dear?" murmured his mother, regarding him with a mixture of pride and commiseration.

"Oh, I'm worn out, that's what I am," he said, as he sank into a chair and regarded the certainly untempting food with an eye of disfavour. "Been hard at it all the evening"--he spoke with a Cockney, city accent, and was rather uncertain about his aspirates--"I work like a nigger."

"Labour is prayer," remarked his father, as if he were enunciating something strikingly original. "Nothing is accomplished without toil, my dear Joseph."

My dear Joseph regarded his father with very much the same expression he had bestowed upon the mutton.

"And how do you like London, Cousin Ida?" he asked.

He hesitated before the "Cousin Ida," and got it out rather defiantly, for there was something in the dignity of this pale, refined face which awed him. It was perhaps the first time in his life Mr. Joseph had sat at the same table with a lady; for Mr. John Heron had married beneath him, and for money; and in retiring from the bar, at which he had been an obvious failure, had sunk down to the society of his wife's class.

"I have seen so little of it," replied Ida. "I have only passed through London twice, on my way from France to Herondale, and from Herondale here." Mr. Joseph was duly impressed by the sound of Herondale.

"Oh, you must tell me all about your old home," he said, with an air of overconfidence to conceal his nervousness; "and we must show you about London a bit; it's a tidy little place."

He grinned with an air of knowingness, and seemed rather disconcerted that Ida did not return his smile.

"Shall I give you some water, Ida?" said Mr. Heron. "I regret that I cannot offer you any wine. We have no intoxicants in the house. We are all total abstainers, on principle."

The other members of the family looked down uncomfortably, and, to Ida's surprise, as if they were ashamed.

"Thank you," she said; "I do not care for wine."

"I am afraid there are a great many things you will miss here," said Mr. Heron. "We are a plain, but I trust, Godfearing family, and we are content with the interest which springs from the daily round, the common task. You will find no excitements at Laburnum Villa."

Ida, as she glanced at the family, could not help feeling that they were indeed plain, but she made haste to say that she did not need any excitements and that her life had hitherto been devoid of them. They seemed to think that it was the proper thing to sit round the table while she was making her pretence of a meal; but when it was finished, Mr. Joseph stretched himself out in what was erroneously called an easy-chair, and proceeded to monopolise the conversation.

"Regular busy time in the city," he remarked to his father. "Never saw such a hum. It's all over this boom in South Africa. They're floating that new company I was telling you about, and the Stock Exchange is half wild about it. They say the shares will run to a hundred per cent. premium before the week's out; and if you've got any money to spare, guv'nor, I should recommend you to have a little flutter; for it's a certainty."

Mr. Heron seemed to prick up his ears with an amount of worldly interest which scarcely harmonised with his saintly character.

"What company is that?" he asked Joseph.

"The company started to work Sir Stephen Orme's," replied Joseph, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, and stretching out his legs still farther so that he could admire his large, patent-leather clad feet. "It's about the biggest thing on record, and is going to sweep the market. All the big 'uns are in it, Griffenberg and Wirsch and the Beltons. They say Sir Stephen has made half a million of money out of it already, and that he will make a couple of millions before he has done with it. There was a rumour in the city to-day that he was to get a peerage; for it's a kind of national affair, you see."

Ida was sitting beyond the radius of the light from the evil-smelling lamp, so that the others did not perceive the sudden pallor of her face. It seemed to her a cruel fate that she could not escape, even here, so many miles away from Herondale, from the reminder of the man she had loved and lost. The name struck on her heart like a stroke causing actual physical pain. She sat perfectly still, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, as the wave of misery swept over her.

"Here is an instance of toil rewarded," said Mr. Heron, promptly improving the occasion. "The labourer is worthy of his hire; and no doubt Sir Stephen Orme, by bringing vast tracts under the beneficent influence of civilisation, merits the approval of his sovereign and a substantial reward at the hands of his fellow-subjects. Let us trust that he will use his wealth and high position for the welfare of the heathen who rage in the land which he has--er--"

"Collared," put in Mr. Joseph, in an undertone and with a grin.

--"Added to the queen's dominions," said Mr. Heron. "I will consider about the shares. I do not approve of speculation--the pursuit of Mammon--but as I should use the money for charitable purposes, I may on this occasion--"

"Better make up your mind pretty soon," remarked Joseph, with a yawn. "There's a rush for them already."

"Now that the gentlemen have got on to business, my dear, I think we had better retire to the drawing-room," said Mrs. Heron, with an attempt at the "grand lady."

They returned to that apartment--Mr. Joseph did not open the door for them--and Mrs. Heron and Isabel at once started on a series of questions calculated to elicit all the details of Ida's past life, her father's death and her present deplorable condition. Women can be much more merciless than men in this kind of inquisition; and Ida, weary in mind and body and spirit, suffered acutely under the ordeal. The two women did not intend to be unkind--they were really sorry for the homeless orphan; they were prepared to like her; they reluctantly and grudgingly admired her beauty and her grace, and had a sneaking kind of awe of her higher social position, of which they were reminded by every word she spoke, the high-bred accent, and that indescribable air of delicacy and refinement which indicate good birth; but they were devoured by curiosity as to her mode of life and her friends, a curiosity which they were too vulgar, too inconsiderate to restrain. So poor Ida had to describe the Hall, and the servants, and the way she managed the farm, and the way in which she rode about Herondale.

They were very much impressed, specially so when she mentioned Lord and Lady Bannerdale's kind offer, and they exchanged glances as the titles left Ida's lips "quite as naturally as if they were common names," as Mrs. Heron afterwards remarked to Isabel.

"I'm afraid you'll find it very dull here, Ida," said Mrs. Heron, with a sniff. "You won't find any society in Woodgreen; they're nearly all city people, and there aren't many large houses--this is as large as most--and John is very strict." She sighed; and it was evident to Ida that though her cousin John's "religion" might be some amusement to him, it was rather a bugbear and nuisance to his family. "But we must get Joseph to take you about; and perhaps you and Isabel might go to a _matinee_ or two; but John mustn't know anything about it."

Ida made haste to assure them that she did not need any amusement, that she preferred to be quiet, and that she hoped her cousin Joseph would not take any trouble on her account. At this point Mr. Heron and his elegant son came in, a bell was rung, and the two servants came up for family prayers. Ida noticed that both the maids looked bored and discontented, and that the "parlour maid," a mere bit of a girl, appeared to be tired out. Mr. Heron read a portion of Scripture and offered up a long prayer in a harsh and rasping voice, with the manner of a judge pronouncing a sentence of seven years; and as the servants were leaving the room, called them back, and remarked sternly:

"I notice in the housekeeping book that a larger quantity of candles than usual has been used during the past week, and I fear that there has been grievous waste of this useful article. Do not let it occur again."

The servants went out suddenly, and Mrs. Heron suggested, much to Ida's relief, that Ida would no doubt like to go to bed.

While Ida was brushing her hair and fighting against the natural fit of depression caused by her introduction to this cheerful household, there came a knock at the door, and she admitted Mrs. Heron. That lady was in a soiled dressing-gown, bought at a sale and quite two sizes too large for her, and with a nervous flush, she took from under this capacious garment a small decanter of wine.

"I thought you might like a little, my dear," she said, as Ida eyed it with astonishment. "Of course we are all total abstainers here, but we keep a little in the house for medicinal purposes, unknown to John; and it's a great comfort sometimes when you're tired and in low spirits. Let me give you a glass."

Ida would have liked to have accepted it, and was sorry that her refusal seemed to disappoint Mrs. Heron, who retired as nervously as she had entered. A few minutes afterwards, before Ida had got over her astonishment at the incident, there came another knock at the door, and Isabel entered in a dressing-gown which was own sister to Mrs. Heron's.

"I thought there might be something you wanted," she said, her bold eyes wandering over Ida curiously, and then roaming to the contents of Ida's dressing-bag which glittered and shone on the dressing-table.

"What long hair you have! Do you brush it every night? I don't mine, not every night; it's too much trouble. Are the tops of all those

things real silver? What a lot of money they must have cost! What a pretty _peignoir_ you have on: is it real lace? Yes, I see it is. You have nice things!" with an envious sigh. "Don't you ever have more colour than you've got now? Or perhaps it's because you're tired. You must be quite knocked up, when I come to think of it." She dropped her voice and glanced round cautiously. "Would you like to have a little brandy-and-water? I've got some in my room--of course the rest don't know anything about it, father's teetotal mad--but I keep a little for when I'm tired and down in the mouth; and when I run out I get some from Joseph's room. Of course, he isn't a total abstainer. I daresay you guessed that directly you saw him to-night, and weren't taken in by his 'late at the office' business?"

Ida looked at her in amazement, and Isabel laughed knowingly.

"Joseph goes to the theatre and plays billiards," she said, with sisterly candour. "He works it very cleverly; he's artful, Joseph is, and he takes father and mother in nicely; but sometimes I find a theatre programme in his pocket, and marks of chalk on his coat. Oh, I don't blame him! The life we lead in this house would make a cat sick. It's like being on a tread-mill; nothing happens; it's just one dreary round, with mother always whining and father always preaching. You heard what he said to the servants to-night? I wonder they stand it. I should go out of my mind myself if I didn't get a little amusement going up to the shops and sneaking into a _matinee_ on the sly. I'm sure I don't know how you'll stand it, after the life you've led. What do you use for your hair? It's so soft and silky. I wish I had black hair like yours. Do you put anything on your hands? They're rather brown; but that's because you've lived in the open air so much, I suppose. I'll lend you some stuff I use, if you like."

Ida declined the brandy and the infallible preparation for whitening the hands; and not at all discouraged, Isabel went on:

"Were there any young men at Herondale? You didn't say anything about them down-stairs, but I thought perhaps you would like to tell me when we were alone. I suppose there was someone you were sorry to part from?" she added, with an inviting smile.

Ida repressed a shudder and plied her brush vigorously, so that her hair hid the scarlet which suffused her face.

"I knew so few of the people," she said. "As I told you down-stairs, my father and I led the most secluded of lives, and saw scarcely anyone."

Isabel eyed Ida sharply and suspiciously.

"Oh, well, of course, if you don't like to tell me," she said, with a little toss of her head; "but perhaps it's too soon; when we know each other better you'll be more open. I'm sure I shall be glad of someone to tell things to."

She sighed, and looked down with a sentimental air; but Ida did not rise to the occasion; and with a sigh of disappointment, and a last look round, so that nothing should escape her, Isabel took her departure, and Ida was left in peace.

Tired as she was, it was some time before she could get to sleep. The change in her life had come so suddenly that she felt confused and

bewildered. It had not needed Joseph Heron's mention of Sir Stephen Orme's name to bring Stafford to her mind; for he was always present there; and she lay, with wide-open eyes and aching heart, repeating to herself the letter he had sent her, and wondering why he who, she had thought, loved her so passionately, had left her. Compared with this sorrow, and that of her father's death, the smaller miseries of her present condition counted as naught.

CHAPTER XXIX.

As Isabel had intimated, life at Laburnum Villa was not altogether hilarious. The environs of London are undeniably pretty, prettier than those of any other capital in Europe, but there is no shirking the fact that the Northern suburbs of our great metropolis are somewhat grim and soul-depressing. Laburnum Villa was in a long street, which resembled the other streets as one tree resembles another; and you had to traverse a great many of these streets before you got into the open country, that is, away from the red-bricked and stucco villas, and still smaller and uglier houses, which had been run up by the enterprising jerry-builder.

But Ida would have been glad enough to have gone through this purgatory to the paradise of country lanes which lay beyond, if she could only have gone alone; but Mrs. Heron and Isabel never left her alone; they seemed to consider it their duty to "keep her company," and they could not understand her desire for the open air, much less her craving for solitude. Until Ida's arrival, Isabel had never taken a walk for a walk's sake, and for the life of her she could not comprehend Ida's love of "trapesing" about the dusty lanes, and over the commons where there was always a wind, Isabel declared, to blow her hair about. If she went out, she liked to go up to London, and saunter about the hot streets, gazing in at the shop windows, or staring enviously at the "carriage people" as they drove by.

Ida didn't care for London, took very little interest in the shops, and none whatever in the carriage folks. She was always pining for the fresh air, the breezy common, the green trees; and on the occasions when she could persuade Isabel to a country ramble, she walked with dreamy eyes that saw not the cut-and-dry rusticity of Woodgreen and Whetstone, but the wild dales and the broad expanse of the Cumberland hills.

She was, indeed, living in the past, and it was the present that seemed a dream to her. Of course she missed the great house, where she had ruled as mistress, her horses and her cows and dogs; but what she missed more than all else was her freedom of motion.

It was the routine, the dull, common routine, of Laburnum Villa which irked so badly. Neither Mrs. Heron nor Isabel had any resources in themselves; they had few friends, and they were of the most commonplace, not to say vulgar type; and a "Tea" at Laburnum Villa tried Ida almost beyond endurance; for the visitors talked little else but scandal, and talked it clumsily. Most of Isabel's time was spent in constructing garments by the aid of paper-patterns which were given away by some periodical; admirable patterns, which, in skilful hands,

no doubt, produced the most useful results; but Isabel was too stupid to avail herself of their valuable aid, and must always add something which rendered the garment _outré_ and vulgar.

Mrs. Heron subscribed to a library, and she and Isabel read the latest six-shilling novels with avidity, stuffing them under the sofa cushion at the sound of Mr. Heron's approaching footsteps. They always chose the worst books, and forgot one as soon as they took up another. Ida examined one and dropped it with disgust; for it happened to be a problem novel of the most virulent type, a novel which was selling by scores of thousands, and one which Isabel had recommended to Ida as "delicious."

Of all the days, Ida found Sunday the worst; for on that day they went twice to a little chapel at which Mr. Heron "ministered." It was a tin chapel, which by its construction and position struck a chill to one's very bones. Here Mr. Heron ranted and growled to his heart's content; and Ida learnt from his sanctimonious lips that only a small portion of mankind, his own sect, to wit, was bound for heaven, and that the rest of the world was doomed to another place, the horrors of which he appeared to revel in. As she sat in the uncomfortable pew, Ida often wondered whether her cousin really believed what he preached, or whether he was a hypocrite of the first water.

All this was very hard to bear; but a burden still heavier was provided for her in the conduct of her cousin Joseph. On the evening of her arrival he had been gracious enough to bestow upon her an admiration of which she was then unconscious; but his admiration grew, and he began to pay her what persons of his class call "attentions." He came in much earlier of an evening than he did before, and he sat beside her, and, with his small eyes fixed on her pale and downcast face, told her anecdotes of the office and his fellow-clerks. He was under the impression that he possessed a voice, and with a certain amount of artfulness he got her to play his accompaniments, bestowing killing looks at her as he sang the "Maid of Athens," or "My Pretty June"--with a false note in every third bar. Sometimes he came home to lunch, explaining to them that there was nothing doing in the city, and went with Ida and Isabel on one of their walks. On these occasions he was got up in a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, and enjoyed the flattering conviction that he looked like a country gentleman. He addressed his conversation exclusively to Ida, and endeavoured, as he would have said, to make himself agreeable.

It was all lost upon Ida, whose head was in the clouds, whose mind was dwelling on the past; but his mother and sister noticed it, and Mrs. Heron began to sniff by way of disapproval of his conduct. With a mother's sharp eyes, Mrs. Heron understood why Joseph had launched out into new suits and brilliant neckties, why he came home earlier than was his wont, and why he hung about the pale-faced girl who seemed unconscious of his presence. Mrs. Heron began to feel, as she would have expressed it, that she had taken a viper into her bosom. She was ambitious for her only son, and wanted to see him married to one of the daughters of a retired city man who had settled in Woodgreen. Ida was all very well, but she was absolutely penniless and not a good enough match for so brilliant and promising a young man as Joseph. Mrs. Heron began to regard her with a certain amount of coldness and suspicion; but Ida was as unconscious of the change in Mrs. Heron's manner as she was of the cause of Mr. Joseph's attention; to her he was just an objectionable young man of quite a new and astonishing type, to whom

she was obliged to listen because he was the son of the man whose bread she ate.

He had often invited Ida to accompany him and Isabel to a _matinee_, but Ida always declined. Not only was her father's death too recent to permit of her going to the theatre, but she shrank from all public places of amusement. When she had left Herondale it had been with the one desire to conceal herself, and, if possible, to earn her own living. Mr. Joseph was very sulky over her refusal, and Isabel informed her that he had been so ill-tempered at the theatre that she did not know what to make of him.

One day he came in soon after luncheon, and, when Mrs. Heron had left the room, informed Ida and Isabel that he had got tickets for a concert at the Queen's Hall that evening.

"It's a sacred concert," he said, "so that you need have no scruples, Ida. It's a regular swell affair, and I tell you I had great difficulty in getting hold of the tickets. It's a charity concert got up by the big nobs of the Stock Exchange, and there'll be no end of swells there. I got the tickets because the gov'nor's going into the country to preach to-night, and while the cat's away we can slip out and enjoy ourselves; not that he'd object to a sacred concert, I suppose, especially if he were allowed to hold forth during the intervals," he added, with a sneer.

"It is very kind of you to ask me," said Ida; "but I think I would rather stay at home."

"I thought you were fond of music," Joseph remarked, beginning to look sullen. "We shall go quite quietly, and no one need know anything about it, for I got tickets for the upper circle and not the stalls on purpose; and they're in a back row. I thought you'd enjoy this concert, and if you don't go I shall tear up the tickets."

"Oh, do let us go, Ida!" pleaded Isabel. "A sacred concert isn't as good as a theatre, but it will be a break in the monotony; besides, Joseph must have had a lot of trouble to get the tickets, for I read in the paper that there was a regular rush for them. Don't be selfish, Ida, and spoil our enjoyment."

"I wish you would go without me," said Ida, with a sigh; but ultimately she yielded.

Mrs. Heron, of course, knew that they were going, but she was not told in so many words, that she might deny all knowledge of it if the outing came to Mr. Heron's ears; and she watched them with a peevish and suspicious expression on her face as they started for the train. They went up second-class, and Mr. Joseph, who was in the best of humours, and wore a new pair of patent-leather boots and a glossy hat, to say nothing of a dazzling tie, enlivened the journey by whispering facetious remarks on their fellow-passengers to Ida, who in vain leant away from him, as far as possible, in her corner of the carriage, and endeavoured to concentrate her attention on the programme. But though her eyes were fixed on it and she could not entirely shut out Joseph's ill-bred jokes, her thoughts were wandering back to a certain afternoon when she had sat beside the Heron stream and listened to Stafford planning out their future. He had been telling her something of the great world of which she knew nothing, but into which he was going to

take her, hand in hand, as it were; he was going to take her to the theatres and the concerts and the dances of which she had read and heard, but of which she knew nothing by experience. Now, she was going to her first concert with Mr. Joseph Heron.

There was a larger crowd than usual outside Queen's Hall that evening, for the concert was really an important one for which some of the greatest singers had been engaged. In addition to Patti, Santley, Edward Lloyd, and other famous professionals, some distinguished amateurs were to perform, and royalty, as represented by the ever-popular and amiable prince, had promised to patronise the affair.

"Quite a swell show, ain't it?" said Joseph, as he pushed his way into the crowd and looked over his shoulder at the long line of carriages setting down their occupants. "I'm glad you consented to come; it would have been a pity if you'd missed it."

"I hope we shall be able to see the prince from our seats!" said Isabel, whose eyes were more widely open than usual, and her mouth half agape with excitement. "I'm always stuck in some corner where I can't see them, when the royal family's present."

They succeeded in making their way into the hall, and after Joseph had held a dispute with the man who had shown them into their place, and who had muddled the tickets and their numbers, they settled down, and Ida looked round.

Though their seats were in the third row, she could see nearly the whole of the large hall, and she found the sight a novel and impressive one. Her interest increased as the admirable band played the first number with the precision and feeling for which the orchestra at the Queen's Hall is famous. In the interval between the selection and the song which was to follow, Joseph pointed out some of the celebrities who were present, and whom he recognised by their portraits in the illustrated papers.

"Regular swell mob, isn't it?" he said, exultingly; "there isn't a seat in the house, excepting those three in the stalls, and I suppose they'll be filled up presently by some swells or other; they always come late. Aren't you glad you've come?" he added, with a languishing glance.

Amidst a storm of welcome, Patti came forward to sing, and Ida, listening with rapture, almost forgot her sorrow as she passed under the spell of the magic voice which has swayed so many thousands of hearts. During the cries of encore, and unnoticed by Ida, three persons, a lady and two gentlemen, entered the stalls, and with a good deal of obsequiousness, were shown by the officials into the three vacant seats.

One great singer followed rapidly after another, and Ida, with slightly flushed face and eyes that were dim with unshed tears--for the exquisite music thrilled her to the core--leant back, with her hands tightly clasped in her lap, her thoughts flying back to Herondale and those summer evenings which, in some strange way, every song recalled.

She was unconscious of her surroundings, even of the objectionable Joseph, who sat beside her as closely as he could; and she started slightly as he whispered:

"Those seats are filled up now. I wonder who they are? They look classy--particularly so."

Ida nodded mechanically, and paid no heed. Presently Joseph, who was one of those individuals who can never sit still or be silent for long at a theatre or concert, nudged Ida and said: "Look! there is one of them standing up! Why, I believe it is--" He borrowed an opera-glass from the man sitting in front of him and levelled it at the stalls. One of the new-comers, one of the gentlemen, had risen from his seat, and with his back to the platform, was scanning the house with a pleasant smile on his handsome face. "Yes, it is!" exclaimed Joseph, excitedly. "It's Sir Stephen Orme! Here, take the glasses and look at him! That gentleman looking round the house, the one standing up with the white waistcoat, the one that came in with the other two! That's the great Sir Stephen himself! I saw him once in the city; besides, I've seen his portraits everywhere. That's the man who has created more excitement on the Stock Exchange than any man in our time."

Ida took the glasses which he had thrust into her hand and held it to her eyes; but her hand shook, and for a moment or two she could distinguish nothing; then, as the mist passed away and her hand grew steadier, so that she could see Sir Stephen, he bent down and said something to the lady sitting beside him. She looked round, and Ida saw distinctly, and for the first time, though fashionable London was tolerably familiar with it now, the beautiful face of Maude Falconer.

With her heart beating painfully Ida looked at her, noting with a woman's quickness every detail of the handsome face with its wealth of bronze-gold hair. A presentiment flashed into her mind and weighed upon her heart as she looked, a presentiment which was quickly verified, for the man on the other side of the beautiful woman rose and looked round the house, and Ida saw that it was Stafford.

Her hand gripped the opera-glass tightly, for it was in danger of falling. She felt as if she were stifling, the great place, with its sea of faces and its rings of electric light, swam before her eyes, and she felt sick and giddy. It seemed to her that Stafford was looking straight at her, that he could not fail to see her, and she shrank back as far as the seat would allow, and a sigh that was a gasp for breath escaped her lips, which had grown almost as white as her face. In taking the glasses from her, Joseph noticed her pallor.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Do you feel ill? It's beastly hot. Would you like to come outside?"

"No, no," she panted, with difficulty. "It is the heat--I am all right now--I beg of you not to move--not to speak to me."

She fought against the horrible faintness, against the shock which had overwhelmed her; she bit her lips to force the colour back to them, and tried to keep her eyes from the tall figure, the handsome face against which she had so often pressed her own; but she could not; it was as if they were drawn to it by a kind of fascination. She saw that he looked pale and haggard, and that the glance with which he swept the house was a wearied one, in strange contrast to the smiling, complacent, and even triumphant one of his father.

"Are you all right now?" asked Joseph. "I wish I'd brought a bottle of

smelling-salts. Will you come out and get something to drink--water--brandy? No? Sure you're all right? Did you see Sir Stephen? I wonder who the lady is beside him? Some swell or other, I'll be bound. The other man must be Sir Stephen's son, for he's like him. He's almost as great a personage as Sir Stephen himself; you see his name amongst those of people of the highest rank in the fashionable columns in the newspapers. The lady's got beautiful 'air, hasn't she?" he went on, after a pause. "Not that I admire that colour myself; I'm gone on black 'air." He glanced insinuatingly at Ida's.

When the interval expired, Sir Stephen and Stafford resumed their seat, and, with a sigh of relief, Ida tried to listen to the music; but she could hear Stafford's voice through it, and was obliged to shut her eyes that she might not see him. Instinctively, and from Jessie's description, she knew that the beautiful girl, with the complexion of a lily and the wealth of bronze-gold hair, was Maude Falconer. Why was she with Sir Stephen and Stafford? Was it, indeed, true that they were engaged? Up to the present moment she had cherished a doubt; but now it seemed impossible to doubt any longer. For how many minutes, hours, years would she have to sit with those two before her, her heart racked with the pangs of jealousy, with the memory of happier days, with the ghastly fact that he had gone from her life forever, and that she was sitting there a spectator of his faithlessness. Every song seemed to mock her wretchedness, and she had to battle with the mad desire to spring to her feet and cry aloud.

In a kind of dream she heard the strains of the national anthem, and saw Stafford rise with the rest of the audience, and watched him as he drew the costly cloak round Maude Falconer's white shoulders; in a dream allowed Joseph to draw her arm through his and lead her down the crowded staircase into the open air.

"Splendid concert!" he said, triumphantly. "But you look tired, Ida. We'll have a cab to the station. But let's wait a minute and see the prince come out."

They stood in the crowd which had formed to stare at his royal highness; and as luck would have it, Stafford, with Maude Falconer on his arm, and followed by Sir Stephen, passed in front of them, and so close that Ida shrank back in terror lest Stafford should see her. Some of the crowd, some Stock Exchange people probably, recognised Sir Stephen, and spoke his name aloud, and a cheer arose. He bowed and smiled and shook his head in a deprecatory way, and Ida saw Stafford's face darken with a frown, as if he were ashamed of the publicity, as he hurried Maude Falconer to the carriage. A moment or two after, the prince appeared, there was an excited and enthusiastic burst of cheering; and at last Joseph forced his way out of the crowd and found a cab.

They had some little time to wait for the train, and Joseph, after vainly pressing some refreshment on Ida, went into the refreshment-room and got a drink for himself and a cup of coffee for Isabel, while Ida sank back into a corner of the carriage and waited for them. Joseph talked during the whole of the journey in an excited fashion, darting glances every now and then from his small eyes at the white face in the corner. When they got out at the station, he offered Ida his arm and she took it half-unconsciously. The path was too narrow to permit of three to walk abreast, and Joseph sent Isabel on in front; and on some trivial excuse or another contrived to lag some little distance behind

her. Every now and then he pressed Ida's arm more closely to his side, looking at her with sidelong and lingering glances, and at last he said, in a kind of whisper, so that Isabel should not hear:

"I hope you've enjoyed yourself, Ida, and that you're glad you came? I don't know when I've had such a jolly night, and I hope we may have many more of them. Of course you know why I'm so happy? It's because I've got you with me. Life's been a different thing for me since you came to live with us; but I dessay you've seen that, haven't you?" He laughed knowingly.

"I have seen--what?" asked Ida, trying to rouse herself and to pay attention to what he was saying.

"I say I suppose you've seen how it is with me, Ida, and why I am an haltered being? It is you who have done it; it's because I'm right down in love with you. There, I've said it now! I've been going to say it for days past; but, somehow, though I dessay you don't mean it, you seem so cold and standoffish, and quite different to other girls when a man pays them attention. But I dessay you understand now, and you'll treat me differently. I'm awfully in love with you, Ida, and I don't see why we shouldn't be engaged. I'm getting on at the office, and if I can squeeze some money out of the gov'nor, I shall set up for myself. Of course, there'll be a pretty how-d'y-do over this at home, for they're always wanting me to marry money, and unfortunately you've lost yours. Not that I mind that, mind you. I believe in following the dictates of your 'eart, and I know what my 'eart says. And now what do you say, Ida?"

And he pressed her arm and looked into her face with a confident smile.

Ida drew her disengaged hand across her brow and frowned, as if she were trying to grasp his meaning.

"I--I beg your pardon, Joseph," she said. "I didn't quite understand--I was thinking of something else. You were asking me--"

He reddened and pushed his thick lips out with an expression of resentment.

"Well, I like that!" he said, uneasily, but with an attempt at a laugh. "I've just been proposing to you--asking you to be my wife; and you're going to, aren't you?"

Ida drew her arm from his, and regarded him with stony amazement. For the moment she really thought that either he had been drinking too much spirits at the refreshment-room at the station and that it was an elaborate joke on his part, or that she had lost her senses and was imagining a hideously ridiculous speech, too absurd and grotesque for even Joseph to have uttered. Then she saw by his face that he was sober and that he had actually proposed to her, and, in a kind of desperation, she laughed.

He had been going to take her arm again, but his hand fell to his side, and he looked at her with a mixture of astonishment and indignation, with such an expression of wounded vanity and resentment, that Ida felt almost forced to laugh again; but she checked the desire, and said, as gently and humbly as she could:

"I--I beg your pardon, Joseph. I thought it was a--a joke. I am very sorry. But though you didn't mean it as a jest, it is, of course, absurd. I don't think you quite know what you were saying; I am quite sure you don't mean it--"

"Oh, yes, but I do!" he broke in eagerly, and with a little air of relief. "I'm in earnest, 'pon my word, I am. I'm awfully in love with you; and if you'll say yes, I'll stand up to the gov'nor and make it all square for you."

"But I say 'No,'" said Ida, rather sternly, her lips setting tightly, her eyes flashing in the darkness, which, fortunately for Joseph, hid them from his sight. "Please do not speak to me in this way again."

"But look here!" he stammered, his face red, his thick lips twisted in an ugly fashion, "do you know what you're doing--saying?"

"Yes," she said, more sternly than before. "I think it is you who do not know what you are saying. You cannot mean to insult me. I beg your pardon, Joseph. I do not mean to be angry, to hurt your feelings. I think you mean to pay me a great honour; and I--I thank you; but I cannot accept it. And please take this as my final answer, and never, never, speak to me again in this manner."

"Do you mean to say--" he began angrily.

"Not another word, please," said Ida, and she hurried forward so that they came within hearing of Isabel.

Nothing more was said until they reached Laburnum Villa. Mrs. Heron was waiting up for them, and was expressing a hope that they had enjoyed themselves--she had a woollen shawl round her shoulders and spoke in an injured voice and with the expression of a long-suffering martyr--when she caught sight of Joseph's angry and sullen face as he flung himself into a chair and thrust his hands in his pockets, and she stopped short and looked from him to Ida, and sniffed suspiciously and aggressively.

"Oh, yes," said Joseph, with an ugly sneer and a scowl at Ida as she was leaving the room, "we have had a very happy time--some of us--a particularly happy time, I don't think!"

CHAPTER XXX.

It was hot at Woodgreen; but it was hotter still in Mayfair, where the season was drawing to a close with all the signs of a long-spun-out and exhausting dissolution. Women were waxing pale under the prolonged strain of entertainments which for the last week or two had been matters of duty rather than pleasure, and many a girl who had entered the lists of society a blushing and hopeful *debutante* with perhaps a ducal coronet in her mind's eye, was beginning to think that she would have to be content with, say, the simpler one of a viscountess; or even to wed with no coronet at all. Many of the men were down at Cowes or golfing at St. Andrews; and those unfortunates who were detained in attendance at the house which continued to sit, like a "broody hen," as Howard said, longed and sighed for the coming of the magic 12th of

August, before which date they assured themselves the House must rise and so bring about their long-delayed holiday.

But one man showed no sign of weariness or a desire for rest; Sir Stephen's step was light and buoyant as ever on the hot pavement of Pall Mall, and on the still hotter one of the city; his face was as cheery, his manner as gay, and his voice as bright and free from care as those of a young man.

There is no elixir like success; and Sir Stephen was drinking deeply of the delicious draught. He had been well known for years: he was famous now. You could not open a newspaper without coming upon his name in the city article, and in the fashionable intelligence. Now it was a report of the meeting of some great company, at which Sir Stephen had presided, at another time it occurred in a graphic account of a big party at the house he had rented at Grosvenor Square. It was a huge mansion, and the rent ran into many figures; but, as Howard remarked, it did not matter; Sir Stephen was rich enough to rent every house in the square. Sir Stephen had taken over the army of servants and lived in a state which was little short of princely: and lived alone; for Stafford, who was not fond of a big house and still less fond of a large retinue, begged permission to remain at his own by no means over-luxurious but rather modest rooms.

It is not improbable that he would have liked to have absented himself from the grand and lavish entertainments with which his father celebrated the success of his latest enterprise; but it was not possible, and Stafford was present at the dinners and luncheons, receptions and concerts which went on, apparently without a break, at Clarendon House.

Indeed, it was necessary that he should be present and in attendance on his fiancee who appeared at every function. Maude was now almost as celebrated as Sir Stephen; for her beauty, her reputed wealth, and the fact that she was engaged to the son of Sir Stephen, had raised her to an exalted position in the fashionable world; and her name figured in the newspapers very nearly as often as that of the great financier.

She had stepped from obscurity into that notoriety, for which we all of us have such a morbid craving, almost in a single day; and she queened it with a languid grace and self-possession which established her position on a firm basis. Wherever she went she was the centre and object of a small crowd of courtiers; the men admired her, and the women envied her; for nowadays most women would rather marry wealth than rank, unless the latter were accompanied by a long rent roll--and in these hard times for landlords, too many English noblemen, have no rent roll at all, short or long.

Excepting his father's, Stafford went to very few houses, and spent most of his time, when not in attendance on Maude, in the solitude of his own chambers, or in the smoking-room of one of the quietest of his clubs. Short as the time had been, the matter of a few weeks only since had parted from Ida, he had greatly changed; so changed that not seldom the bright and buoyant and overbright Sir Stephen seemed to be younger than his son. He was too busy, too absorbed in the pursuit of his ambition, the skilful steering of the enterprise he had so successfully launched to notice the change; but it was noticed by others, and especially by Howard. Often he watched Stafford moving moodily about his father's crowded rooms, with the impassive face which men wear when

they have some secret trouble or anxiety which they conceal as the Spartan boy concealed the fox which was gnawing at his vitals; or Howard came upon him in the corner of a half-darkened smoking-room, with an expired cigar in his lips, and his eyes fixed on a newspaper which was never turned.

By that unwritten code by which we are all governed nowadays, Howard could not obtrude by questioning his friend, and Stafford showed no signs of making any voluntary statement or explanation. He suffered in a silence with which he kept at arm's-length even his closed friend; and Howard pondered and worried in a futile attempt to guess at the trouble which had changed Stafford from a light-hearted man, with an immense capacity for pleasure, to a moody individual to whom the pleasures of life seemed absolutely distasteful.

One afternoon Howard sauntered into Stafford's room and found him sitting in his easy-chair with a book turned face downwards on his knee, and his pipe in his mouth. Tiny, the black-and-tan terrier, who was lying coiled up on a cushion at his master's feet, heard Howard step on the stairs and barked sharply for a moment, then glancing at Stafford, with a reassuring air, coiled himself up again and subsided into spasmodic growls and whines of welcome; for the mite was fond of Howard.

"Asleep, Staff?" he asked, as, with a kind of groan at the heat, he dropped his hat on the table and sank on to the couch. "By Jove, you have the best of it in here--it is out of the sun, at any rate. How that dog can lie on a stuffy cushion! I thought you were going down to Lady Brook's, at Richmond, this afternoon?"

"Was it this afternoon?" said Stafford. "I'd forgotten. I'm sorry: but my father will be there and will look after Maude."

Howard glanced at the weary-looking face as he helped himself to a cigarette.

"You're well out of it! A lady who would give a garden-party on such an afternoon as this, is, indeed, *la belle dame sans merci!* Good heavens! when I think of the suffering the votaries of fashion undergo in one season, I've no pity left for the benighted Hindoo women who sacrifice themselves to Juggernaut. Which reminds me that there is a tremendously swagger function on at Clarendon House tonight, isn't there?"

Stafford nodded, and refilled and relit his pipe.

"Yes," he said, "I had forgotten it; but Maude sent me round a note to remind me of it, and, of course, I must go. I envy you, Howard: you can stay away."

"That's what I can't do," said Howard, with a whimsical smile. "I am drawn, into the vortex; I am dragged at the chariot wheels of that wonderful father of yours. I am the victim of a peculiar kind of fascination which is as irresistible as the mesmeric influence or hypnotism. I feel towards Sir Stephen as I should feel towards Napoleon the Great, if he were alive. I follow and gaze at him, so to speak, with my mouth agape and a fatuous smile over a countenance which I once flattered myself was intelligent. I am dazed, bewildered by his genius, his audacity, his marvellous courage and resource. Do you know,

Stafford, I think it would be an excellent idea to abolish the House of Lords, the House of Commons, the monarchical government, and place the whole business in the hands of a Board to be presided over by Sir Stephen."

Stafford drew at his pipe grimly and said nothing, and Howard went on in the gentle monotone characteristic of him:

"By the way, the mysterious and proverbial little bird has whispered to me that Sir Stephen will not be Sir Stephen much longer. In fact, that they are going to make a peer of him very shortly. And upon my word, they couldn't find a better man for the place; for, unlike some noble lords you and I could mention, Staff, he will wear his robes and coronet--do they ever wear them now--right nobly; and for once the House of Lords will get a man who knows his own mind, knows what he wants and the way to get it. And if you won't take offence, Staff, and throw things at me, I should like to remark that his son will prove a worthy successor. Can you fancy yourself in a peer's robe with a velvet-lined coronet, Staff?"

Stafford grunted for reply, and there was silence for a minute, during which Howard turned over the pages of one of the illustrated weeklies which lay on the table, and suddenly he looked up and exclaimed:

"Have you seen this?"

Stafford shook his head.

"I mean this portrait of Miss Falconer," said Howard, in a low voice. "It is wonderfully good," he went on, as he contemplated the full-length picture; "wonderfully like her."

He handed the paper across and Stafford looked at it. It was an admirable reproduction of a photograph of Maude in evening-dress, and made a truly splendid picture; and looking at it, one felt instantly how well a coronet, even a ducal one, would fit those level brows, beneath which the eyes looked out upon the world with a scarcely masked hauteur and disdain. A man might well be proud of such a woman for his future wife; but there was no pride in Stafford's face as his eyes dwelt moodily on the almost perfect face, the tall, svelt figure in its long-trained robe. The splendour of her beauty oppressed him with a sense of shame; and with an involuntary exclamation, which sounded something like a groan, he let the paper slip from his hand, and drooped still lower in his chair. The sight of her was more than Howard could bear in silence, and he rose and laid a hand upon Stafford's shoulder.

"What's wrong, old man?" he enquired in a very low voice. "You are out of sorts; you've been off colour for some time past. Of course, I've noticed it. I've seen the look you wear on your face now come over it at moments when you ought to have been at your best and brightest. I've seen a look in your eyes when your lips have been smiling that has made me--uncomfortable. In short, Staff, you are getting on my nerves, and although I know it's like my cheek to mention the matter, and that you'll probably curse my impudence, I really should be grateful if you'd tell me what ails you, still more grateful if you'd let me help you to get rid of it. I know I'm an interfering idiot, but I'm fool enough to be fond of you--it's about the only weakness I've got, and I am ashamed of it--but there it is."

He laughed with a touch of self-contempt, with an attempt at his old cynicism; but Stafford understood the fictitious character of the laugh, and as he leant his chin in his hand, he gave a short nod of acknowledgment.

"Howard, do you remember that time when you and I were at Palmero?" he said, in a low voice, and as if he were communing with himself rather than answering his friend. "Do you remember that Italian we met there; the man who seemed so gay and careless, the man who seemed to have everything a fellow could desire, and to be the embodiment of prosperity and success? Do you remember how once or twice you and I saw a strange look on his face, perhaps while he was at dinner or fooling with the women in the _salon_--a look as if he had suddenly remembered something, as if something had flashed upon his mind in the midst of the laughter and music and brought him face to face with hell? You pointed him out to me one night; and we wondered what was the matter with him--until he fell off his horse that day you and I were riding with him? Do you remember how, when we had unbuttoned his riding-shirt, we found the 'D' that had been branded on his chest? We knew then what was the matter with him. He had been a deserter. The pain of hot iron had died out long ago, but the scar remained. He was no longer a common soldier, but rich and prosperous, a social success with, perhaps, his ambition gratified; but the 'D' was there all the time, and every now and then, even while he was enjoying himself, he could feel the hot iron burning into his flesh, and he knew within the miserable little soul of him that he was a cur and a coward; that, driven by fate, perhaps by some devilish accident of circumstance, he had lost his honour and sold himself to the devil."

Howard's face went pale and grave.

"I don't see where the application comes in, Staff," he said. "I don't see that anything in your case--position, resembles that poor wretch's."

Stafford rose, his face grim and stern.

"No; and I can't show you, Howard," he said. "Do you think that poor devil would have bared his breast and shown that 'D' to even his dearest friend? Good God, man, why do you badger me! Am I to wear the cap and bells always, do you expect me to be dancing like a clown every moment of the day? Do I not play my part as well as I can? Who gave you the right to peer and pry--"

He recovered suddenly from the fit of fury and gripped Howard's arm as he almost shrank back from the burst of despairing rage.

"Forgive me, old man! I didn't mean to turn and rend you like this. I know you see there is something wrong. There is. But I can't tell you or any other man. There are some things that have to be borne in silence, some marks of the branding-iron, which one dare not show to even one's dearest friend."

Howard turned aside and began to put on his gloves with great care. His hand shook and his voice also, slightly, as without raising his head, he said:

"Sure there's no help for it, Staff?"

"Sure and certain," responded Stafford. "Not even your wit and wisdom can be of any avail. I won't ask you not to speak of this again; it isn't necessary; but I will ask you never, by look or sign, to remind me of what I have just said to you. It escaped me unawares; but I'll keep a better watch on myself for the future, and not even the knowledge of your sympathy shall lure another moan out of me." He made a gesture with his hand and threw his head back as if he were sweeping something away; and in something like his usual voice he said, with perfect calmness: "By the way, Maude asked me to tell you not to be late to-night; to come before the crush arrives. I think she is relying on you to help her in some way or other."

Howard nodded, and speaking with his usual drawl, said:

"'Awake and call me early, mother.' I will be there in good time. Miss Falconer does me the great honour of permitting me to flatter myself that I am sometimes of some slight service to her. I imagine it is something about the cotillon, concerning which I am absolutely ignorant, and am therefore capable of offering any amount of advice. I am a whale at giving advice, and my only consolation is that no one is ever foolish enough to follow it; so that I can humour my little foible without suffering the terrors of responsibility. *Au revoir*, my dear Stafford, until this evening. Good-bye, Tiny! What a selfish little beast it is; he won't even raise his head!"

Stafford laughed and picked up the dog by the scruff of its neck, and it nestled against him lovingly, and licked his cheek.

Howard went down-stairs, still putting on his gloves, and as he opened the door, he swore under his breath fervently.

CHAPTER XXXI.

In obedience to Miss Falconer's command, Howard presented himself at Clarendon House at a comparatively early hour that evening. There were some guests staying in the house, amongst them Lady Clansford, who was still obliging enough to play the part of presiding genius; but they were all resting, or dressing for the ball, and the drawing-room, into which a couple of superbly liveried footmen showed Howard, was empty. But presently he heard the *frou-frou* of satin, and Maude Falconer swept in; her beauty, the splendour of her dress, the flashing of the diamonds in her hair and on her neck and arms, her queenly presence, almost made Howard catch his breath.

She came in with a languid grace, the air of *hauteur* which suited her so well, but as she saw that Howard was alone, the languor and the *hauteur* almost disappeared, and she came forward and gave him her hand, and he saw a look on her face which reminded him of that upon the ill-fated Italian, though it did not resemble it. For the first time he noticed a shade of anxiety on the level brow, something like a pathetic curve in the perfectly moulded lips; and he fancied that the gloved hand, which he held for a moment, quivered.

"Is Stafford not with you?" she asked. "I thought he was coming early."

His father expected him."

"No, I came alone," replied Howard. "But, no doubt, Stafford will be here presently."

She stood, calm and statuesque, but with her eyes downcast for a moment, then she raised them and looked at him. "About this cotillon," she said; then she broke off: "Do you know what is going to happen to-night? It is a secret, but--but I feel as if I must tell you, though I am betraying Sir Stephen's confidence. He tells me everything--more than he tells even Stafford. Strange as it may seem, he--he is fond of me."

"That does not seem strange to me," said Howard, with a little bow.

She made a slight gesture of impatience.

"It seems strange to me," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "So few persons are fond of me."

Howard smiled.

"For once I must be guilty of contradicting a lady," he said. "When I reflect that to-night I shall form one of a band of devoted courtiers who will throng round you in the hopeless pangs of despair--"

She repeated the gesture of impatience.

"Have you seen Stafford to-day?" she asked, looking down.

"I saw him a few hours ago," he replied, "at his rooms."

"At his rooms," she repeated, with a slight frown and a quick glance at him. "He promised to come to Richmond. Why did he not do so? Is he--ill?"

"Ill?" said Howard, raising his brows and smiling, for he knew the meaning of loyalty to a friend. "I never saw him in better spirits in my life, he was quite hilarious."

Her eyes flashed upon him keenly, but he met them with his slow, cynical smile.

"He must have been very different to what he usually is," she said. "I have not seen him laugh since--since we left Bryndermere." Her lips came tightly together, and she looked at him and then away from him. "Mr. Howard, you are his friend, his closest friend. I want you to tell me--But, no; you would not speak if you were on the rack, would you? No one sees, no one speaks; it is only I who, always watching him, see that there is something wrong. And I--I am so helpless!"

The outburst was so unlike her, the dropping of the mask of pride and self-possession was so sudden that Howard was startled; but no sign of his emotion revealed itself upon his placid face, upon which his serene smile did not waver for an instant.

"I think you are availing yourself of a lady's privilege and indulging in a fancy, Miss Falconer," he said. "Stafford is perfectly well, and, of course, is perfectly happy--how could he be otherwise?" He bent his

head slightly. "Perhaps he may be a little tired. Alas! we are not all endowed with the splendid energy which the gods have bestowed on you and Sir Stephen; and the heat is enough to take the backbone out of anyone less gifted."

She checked a sigh, as if she understood that it was useless to appeal to him, and after a pause Howard said:

"You haven't told me the great secret yet."

She seemed to wake from a reverie, and said, listlessly:

"It will not be a secret for many hours. Sir Stephen is expecting the peerage to-night. The official intimation should have reached him by midday; but the prime minister did not return to London till this afternoon and the formalities were not completed. I think it will be announced to-night."

Her eyes shone and a spot of colour started to her cheeks.

"You are glad?" Howard said, with a smile of sympathy that had something of mockery in it, for your worldly cynic is always amused by worldliness in others.

"Yes, I am glad; but not for my own sake. You think I am pining for a coronet? I do not care--it is for Stafford's sake that I am glad. Nothing is too good for him, no title too high!"

"Do you think Stafford cares?" asked Howard.

She flushed and her eyes fell before his.

"No," she said, with a deep sigh. "I do not think he cares. He seems quite indifferent. All the time Sir Stephen and I have been working--"

"Have you been working?" said Howard, raising his eyebrows.

She laughed a little wearily.

"Indeed, yes. I have been--what do you men call it?--log-rolling for weeks. It is I who have found out what is wanted by the people who can help us. And it is generally, always, in fact, money. Always money! I get 'tips' from Sir Stephen and my father, and whisper them to the lords and ladies who have influence in the political drawing-rooms and clubs."

"And Sir Stephen?"

She laughed.

"His task is much simpler and easier than mine. He just goes down to his political club and subscribes so many thousand pounds towards the party expenses. The other night he gave them--but I must not tell the secrets of the Tories even to you, Mr. Howard. But it was a very large sum. It is always done that way, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he assented. "It must be; for, come to think of it, a man isn't made a peer simply because he brews good beer; and a great many of our peers were and are good brewers, you see. Oh, it's all

right, it pans out very satisfactorily, as the miners say. And so Stafford will be the future Earl of--"

"Earl of Highcliffe," she said. "He has declined anything less than an earldom. He has given so much. Sir Stephen owns some land there, and--and some of his people come from there."

Howard laughed.

"I see. Been there since they came over with the Conqueror. The Herald's College will have no difficulty in finding a coat-of-arms. Something with a Kaffir and a railway in it."

She smiled tolerantly.

"You always make fun of everything, Mr. Howard. If only Stafford would care--"

She sighed, and a moment afterwards her hand went to her lip with the gesture of a nervous school-girl. She had heard Stafford's voice in the hall.

He came in and greeted her gravely, and, Howard being present, merely took her hand.

"You two conspiring as usual?" he said, with a smile, with the smile which indicates a mind from which mirth has been absent for some time.

"Yes," said Howard; "we have been plotting the cotillon and very properly arranging that the prize shall go to the wisest, the nicest, and best-looking man in the room. I need not tell you his name?" He spread his hand on his heart, and bowed with mock complacency. "And now I will go and find Sir Stephen and get a cigarette before the battle begins. Au revoir."

When he had gone, almost before the door had closed on him, Maude moved closer to Stafford, and with a mixture of shyness and eagerness, put her arm round his neck.

"How good of you to come so early!" she murmured, in the voice which only a woman in love can use, and only when she is addressing the man she loves. "You did not come to Richmond? Never mind! Stafford, you know that I do not wish to hamper or bind you, do you not?--Are you well?" she broke off, scanning his face earnestly, anxiously. "Quite well," he responded. "Why do you ask, Maude?"

"I thought you looked tired, pale, that you have looked so for some weeks," she said, her eyes seeking his.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am quite well. The hot weather makes one feel rather limp, I suppose. At any rate, there is nothing else the matter with me but a fit of laziness."

"As if you were ever lazy!" she said, with a smile.

"There is a large party to-night?" he said, presently.

She nodded.

"Yes: immense. The biggest thing we--I mean Sir Stephen--has done." Her eyes fell for a moment. "You will dance with me to-night--twice, Stafford?"

"As many times as you like, of course," he said. "But I shall not get so many opportunities. You will be too much sought after, as usual."

She sighed.

"That is the one disadvantage of being engaged to you," she said. "Twice, then. The second and the eleventh waltz."

He nodded, and stood with the same absent preoccupation in his eyes; and she drew a little closer to him still; and as her eyes dwelt on his face with love's hunger in them, she whispered:

"You have not kissed me yet, Stafford."

He bent and kissed her, and her lips clung to his in that most awful of appeals, the craving, the prayer from the soul that loves to the soul that refuses love in return.

"Ah, Stafford, if--if it were all over, and we were away in the country somewhere?"

"Why don't we go?" he asked, with absolute indifference to the social plots and schemes which were being woven round him.

She laughed.

"In a little while! Sir Stephen wants a change; he is looking rather fagged--"

"I'm not surprised!" said Stafford. "It seems to me that my father rests neither night nor day--"

"Ah, well, it will soon be over--perhaps before you expect," she said, smiling mysteriously. "Hush! Here he comes! You bad boy, you have spoilt my hair,"--she herself had disarranged it as she pressed against his breast. "I must run away and have it put straight."

Sir Stephen entered a moment after she had left the room. He looked fagged to-night, as she had said; but his face lit up at sight of Stafford.

"Ah, my boy!" he exclaimed, holding Stafford's hand for a moment or two and scanning him with his usual expression of pride and affection. "We are going to have a big night: the greatest crush we have had. Didn't I hear Maude's voice?"

Stafford said that she had just gone out. Sir Stephen nodded musingly, and glanced at Stafford's grave face.

"I suppose the hurly-burly will be over presently," he said, "and we can go down to the country. Where would you like to go?"

Stafford shrugged his shoulders, and Sir Stephen eyed him rather sadly

and anxiously. This indifference of Stafford's was quite a new thing.

"Don't mind? What do you say to Brae Wood, then?"

Stafford's face flushed.

"Not there--Wouldn't it be rather hot at Bryndermere, sir? Why not Scotland?"

Sir Stephen nodded.

"All right. Wherever you like, my boy. We've still got some years of the Glenfare place. We'll go there. And, Stafford--do you ever remember that I am getting old?"

Stafford laughed and looked at the handsome face affectionately and with the admiration and pride with which a son regards a good-looking father.

"Yes; I suppose you must be nearly thirty, sir!"

Sir Stephen laughed, not ill-pleased at the retort.

"Seriously, Staff, I'm older than you think, and--er--Ah, well, we're all mortal! Do you think you could oblige me in a little matter--"

He paused.

Stafford looked at him with a half smile.

"Sounds as if you wanted to borrow money, sir. Anything I can do--"

Sir Stephen laughed.

"No, I'm not in want of money: but I'm in want of a daughter-in-law, of grandchildren to sit upon my knee--" He laughed again, as if he were a little ashamed of the touch of sentiment. "Seriously, Staff, is there any reason for waiting? I know that the engagement is a short one; but, well why should you and Maude not be happy? I can make arrangements," he went on, eagerly. "There is Brae Wood. I'll make that over to you--"

Brae Wood again! Stafford's face grew set and impassive.

--"Or there is that place I bought in Warwickshire. But, there, perhaps you and Maude would like to find a place for yourselves. Very natural! Well, there's no difficulty! Come, Staff! Why delay! 'Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,' you know! Why shouldn't the marriage take place directly the House rises and we leave London?"

Stafford turned away so that his father might not see the sudden pallor of his face.

"I'll--I'll speak to Maude, sir," he said, trying to make his tone cheerful, if not enthusiastic.

Sir Stephen laid his hand upon Stafford's broad shoulder.

"Thank you, my boy!" he said. "You are always good to me! Always! God bless you, Staff!"

His voice was husky, there was a moisture in his eyes which almost made Stafford's grow dim; then, with a swift return to his usual alert and sanguine manner, Sir Stephen withdrew his hands and swung round.

"I must be off: Maude likes me to be in the room when the people come: and, by George! Staff, I find myself doing what she likes all the time!"

His laugh rang out as he hurried with his brisk step from the room.

He was there at his post, when the guests began to arrive; and not far from him stood Maude in the splendour of her beauty; not tremulous now, as Howard had seen her, but statuesque and calm, and gracious with a stately graciousness which was well suited to the coronet which all knew would some day glitter on the bronze-gold hair.

Every now and then as the crowd increased her eyes would wander in search of Stafford, and she noticed that though he took his part, did his duty, the listless, half-wearied expression was still on his face, and a pang shot through her. Was it possible that he was still thinking of that girl at Bryndermere--She thrust the thought, the sickening dread, from her and forced the conventional smile to her face.

She danced the first dance with a popular duke who stood high in the government, and a word or two he let drop: "Sir Stephen: a man worthy of the highest honors," made her heart beat with anticipatory triumph.

The second waltz came, and--Ah, well, with Stafford's arm round her, with her head almost pillowed on his shoulder she was happy, and her fears, her vague doubts and presentiments fell from her.

"Ah, that was good," she said, with a sigh. "Do not forget--the eleventh, dearest! Take me to the prince--he is over there."

She dropped her curtsey to his royal highness, and Stafford left her with him. As he made his way to the end of the room he saw Griffenberg and several of the other financiers in a group, as usual; and they were talking with even more than their ordinary enthusiasm and secretiveness. Griffenberg caught his arm as he was passing.

"Heard the news, Mr. Orme?" he asked.

"No; what is it?" said Stafford.

Griffenberg smiled, but rather gravely.

"They say that the peerage will be announced to-night."

Stafford nodded. And Griffenberg after a stare at Stafford's impassive face which evinced no flush of exultation, glanced at the others curiously, seemed about to add something, then checked himself and turned away, and as Stafford went on, said in a low voice to Wirsch:

"Do you think he has heard? Looked rather glum, didn't he?"

The baron shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know. He's a strange gentleman. He keeps himself to himself

doesh Mishter Shtafford."

Stafford went on, and at one of the anterooms came upon Mr. Falconer. He was standing looking on at the dancing with a grim countenance, and seemed lost in thought; so much so that he was almost guilty of a start when Stafford spoke to him.

"Yes! Great crowd. Just come in? Father all right?"

"Quite well, thanks," said Stafford, rather surprised by the question.

At that moment a servant brought a foreign cablegram to Falconer. Falconer tore it open, glanced at it, and went pale.

"Anything the matter?" asked Stafford.

Falconer looked at him fixedly and curiously, then with a shake of his head moved away.

Stafford smoked a cigarette and sauntered back to the ballroom. He passed the group of city men again, and caught a word or two in the baron's gruff voice:

"I want to know how we shtand! The plow will shmash him; but the rest of us--us who are in de shwim. If de natives have risen--"

But Stafford paid little heed--forgot the words as soon as he had heard them; and went in search of his partner. While he was dancing, he was aware of that peculiar stir, that flutter and wave of excitement which agitates a crowd when something momentous is happening. He looked round and saw his father standing in the centre of a group of persons, men and women, who all seemed excited. There was loud talking, and sudden and spasmodic movements as fresh auditors to the restless group came up hurriedly and curiously.

"What is the matter, Mr. Orme?" asked the girl with whom he was dancing.

As she spoke he saw Maude detach herself from the group and approach them.

"Stafford--forgive me, Lady Blanche! but will you let him come to Sir Stephen? He has just heard news--"

They followed her, and Sir Stephen seeing Stafford, held out his hand. The old man was flushed and his dark eyes sparkled.

"Stafford!" he said, and his rich voice shook. "I have just heard--they have just brought me--"

He held up an official-looking paper with the great red seal on the envelope.

"It is from the prime minister--it is the peerage," said Maude, in a voice thrilling with restrained triumph.

Stafford shook his father's hand.

"I congratulate you, sir," he said, trying all he knew to force

congratulation, rejoicing, into his voice.

Sir Stephen nodded, and smiled; his lips were quivering.

"Congratulations, Sir Stephen!" said a man, coming up. "I can see the good news in your face."

"Not Sir Stephen--Lord Highcliffe!" said another, correctingly.

Maude slid her arm in Stafford's, and stood, her lovely face flushed, her eyes sparkling, as she looked round.

"And no title has been more honourably gained," a voice said.

"Or will be more nobly borne!" echoed another.

Stafford, with all a man's hatred of fuss, and embarrassment in its presence, drew nearer to his father.

"Won't you come and sit down--out of the crowd?" he added, in a low voice.

Sir Stephen nodded, and was moving away--they made a kind of lane for him--when a servant came up to him with a cablegram on a salver. As he did so, Howard stepped forward quickly.

"Take it into the study!" he said, almost sharply, to the man; then to Stafford he whispered: "Don't let him open it. It is bad news. Griffenberg has just told me--quick! Take it!"

But before Stafford, in his surprise, could take the cablegram, Sir Stephen had got it. He stood with his head erect, the electric light falling on his handsome face: the embodiment of success. He opened the telegram with the smile still on his lips, and read the thing; then the crowd of staring--shall it be written, gaping?--persons saw the smile fade slowly, the flushed face grow paler, still paler, then livid. He looked up and round him as if he were searching for a face, and his eyes, full of anguish and terror, met Stafford's.

"Stafford--my boy!" he cried, in accents of despair.

Stafford sprang to him.

"Father--I am here!" he said, for Sir Stephen's gaze grew vacant as if he had been stricken blind.

The next moment he threw up his arms and, with a gasp, fell forward. Stafford caught him as a cry of terror rose from the crowd which fell back as if suddenly awed by some dreadful presence; and forcing his way through it a famous doctor reached the father and son.

There was a moment of awful suspense, then--the music sounded like a mockery in the silence--all knew, though no word had been spoken, that the great Sir Stephen--pardon! the Right Honourable the Earl of Highcliffe--was dead.

CHAPTER XXXII.

By a stroke, as of Heaven's lightning, the house of joy was turned into the house of mourning.

They bore the dead man to his room, plain and simple, even in that mansion of luxury; the guests departed, some of them flying as from a pestilence, some of them lingering with white and dazed faces and hushed whispers, and Stafford was left alone with his dead; for he had shut the door even upon Howard, who paced up and down outside, not daring to force his sympathy upon his beloved friend.

The morning papers gave a full account of the grand ball, the announcement of Sir Stephen's peerage, and the sudden and tragic ending to a life which had been lived full in the public gaze, a life of struggle and success, which had been cut down at the very moment of extreme victory. They recited the man's marvellous career, and held it up to the admiration and emulation of his fellow Englishmen. They called him a pioneer, one who had added to the Empire, they hinted at a public funeral--and they all discreetly ascribed telling upon a weak heart. Sir Stephen's precarious condition had been known, they said, to his medical adviser, who had for some time past tried to persuade him to relinquish his arduous and nerve-racking occupations, and to take repose.

Not a word was said about the cablegram which had been delivered to him a few moments before his terribly sudden death; for it was felt by all that nothing should be allowed to blur the glory of such a successful career--not for the present, at any rate.

There was no need for an inquest; the great physician who had been in attendance, quite vainly, was prepared to certify to the cause of death, and Stafford's feelings were spared thus far. Someone high in authority suggested the idea of a public funeral, through Howard, whom alone Stafford saw, but Stafford declined the honour, and the first Earl of Highcliffe was carried to his last rest as quietly as circumstances would permit.

The press and the men of the city, with whom the dead man had worked, kept silence about the catastrophe that had happened until after the funeral; then rumours arose, at first in whispers and then more loudly, and paragraphs and leaderettes appeared in the papers hinting at something wrong in connection with Lord Highcliffe's last great scheme, and calling for an enquiry.

The morning after the funeral, Howard found Stafford sitting in a darkened room of the great house, his head in his hand, a morning paper lying open on the table before him. He raised his white and haggard face as Howard entered and took his friend's hand in silence. Howard glanced at the paper and bit his lip.

"Yes," said Stafford, "I have been reading this. You have seen it?"

Howard nodded.

"You know what it means? I want you to tell me. I have been putting off the question day by day, selfishly; I could not face it until--until he

was buried. But I can put it off no longer; I must know now. What was that cablegram which they brought him just before--which you tried to keep from him?"

"You have not read any of the newspapers?" asked Howard, gravely, bracing himself for the task from which his soul shrank.

Stafford shook his head.

"No; I have not been able to. I have not been able to do anything, scarcely to think. The blow came so suddenly that I have felt like a man in a dream--dazed, bewildered. If I have been able to think at all it is of his love for me, his goodness to me. There never was such a father--" His voice broke, and he made a gesture with his hand. "Even now I do not realise that he is gone, that I shall never see him again. I was so fond of him, so proud of him! Why do you hesitate? If it is bad news, and I suppose it is, do you think I can't bear it? Howard, there is nothing that you could tell me that could move me, or hurt me. Fate has dealt me its very worst blow in taking him from me, and nothing else can matter. The cablegram, this that the paper says, what does it mean?"

Howard sat on the table so that he could lay his hand, with a friend's loving and consoling touch, on Stafford's arm.

"I've come to tell you, Staff," he said. "I know that you ought to know--but it's hard work--that cablegram contained news that the Zulus had risen *en masse*, and that for a time, perhaps for years, the railway scheme was blocked, if not utterly ruined. It was the one weak link in the chain, and your father was aware of it and had taken what measures he could to guard against the danger; but Fate, circumstances, were too much for him. A silly squabble, so silly as to be almost childish, between some squatters on the border and the discontented natives, upset all his carefully laid plans, and turned a gigantic success, at its very zenith, into a tragic failure."

Stafford leant his head upon his hand and looked steadily at Howard.

"It was that that killed him?" he said. "It meant ruin, I suppose, ruin for him and others?"

Howard nodded.

"Yes; he had staked all upon this last throw, and the sudden reverse came at a moment when his nerves were strained to the utmost, when he was excited with the honour and glory he had achieved. The blow was too sudden, the revulsion of feeling from exultation to despair too swift, too great. It is one of the most awful things of which I have ever heard or read. Men are speaking about it with bated breath. There is nothing but pity for him, nothing but regret at the stroke of misfortune which cut him down in the moment of his triumph."

"And others?" repeated Stafford. "It has brought ruin upon others. What, can I do? Is there anything I can do? I am so ignorant, I do not even know whether I sit here absolutely penniless, or whether there is anything left that I can give them."

"Mr. Falconer and Murray and the lawyer are in the library," said Howard. "They have been going into affairs. They would have liked to

have had you with them; but I begged you off. I knew you would be of no use to them."

Stafford looked his thanks.

"No, I could not have helped them," he said. "No one knew less of my poor father's affairs than I, no one is less capable of dealing with them than I. Mr. Falconer will know what to do. It is very good of him to come to my assistance. I have scarcely seen him; I have not seen anyone but you."

"And Maude?" said Howard, interrogatively.

"No," said Stafford, his brows drawn together. "I have not seen her. She has been ill--"

"Yes," said Howard, in a low voice. "She is prostrated by the shock, poor girl! You will go to her as soon as she is able to leave her room?"

"Yes, of course," said Stafford, very gravely and wearily.

There was a knock at the door, and the footman, in his mourning livery, came in and said, solemnly:

"Mr. Falconer would like to know if you will see him, my lord?"

A frown crossed Stafford's pale face at the "my lord." It sounded strange and mockingly in his ears.

"I will come at once," he said. "Come with me, Howard."

They went to the library, and the three men who were sitting there before a mass of papers rose to receive him; Falconer with a face as if it were carved out of wood; Murray with anxious brow; the lawyer with a grave and solemn countenance, and sharp, alert eyes. Stafford waved them to their seats and took a chair at the table, and Falconer, with a straight underlip, and eyes half concealed by their thick lids, spoke for the others.

"Very sorry we cannot leave you in peace for a little longer, Lord Highcliffe," he said. "But I am quite sure you would have blamed us had we done so. We have been going into your father's affairs, and I very much regret that we cannot give you a favourable report of them. As you know the will, which Mr. Chaffinch," he nodded at the lawyer, "read this morning, leaves you everything, and names Mr. Chaffinch and Mr. Murray here executors. That's all very proper and satisfactory as it goes, but, unfortunately, we find that there is no estate." Murray, the secretary, passed his hand over his wrinkled forehead and sighed, as if he himself had made away with the vast sum of money, and the lawyer frowned and shuffled the papers before him. Stafford sat with his hands clasped on the table, his eyes fixed on Falconer's impassive face.

"Your father's immense fortune was wholly embarked in this last business," continued Mr. Falconer; "he believed in it and staked everything on it. A very large number of the shares were held by him. They are down to nothing to-day; it is very unlikely that they will recover; it is possible that they never may; and if they should it would be too late, for the shares your father held will, of course, go

to meet the claims--and they are heavy--on the estate. I don't know whether I make myself understood: I am aware that you are not a business man."

Stafford inclined his head.

"My father's debts--will they not be paid, will there not be sufficient?" he asked, in a dry voice.

Mr. Falconer pursed his lips and shook his head.

"I'm afraid not; in fact, I can say definitely that they will not," he replied, in a hard, uncompromising way.

Stafford looked round the large, superbly furnished room, with its book-cases of ebony and wedgewood, its costly pictures and bronzes, and recalled the Villa with its luxury and splendour, and the vast sums which Sir Stephen had spent during the last few months. It seemed difficult to realise that the wealth was all gone.

"What is to be done?" he asked, in a low voice.

Mr. Falconer was silent for a moment, as he regarded the handsome face, which seemed to have lost its aspect of youth and taken on the lines and hollows of age.

"I do not know. It is not for me to say. There will be a meeting of the directors of the South African Company and others to-morrow, and some decision will be come to, I have no doubt."

"And I--I can do nothing?" said Stafford, huskily. "I am penniless, I suppose?"

Both Murray and Mr. Chaffinch raised their heads with an air of surprise.

"Penniless" echoed Mr. Chaffinch. "Certainly not, my lord! Surely you know?"

Stafford regarded him gravely; it seemed as if he himself were too crushed by his grief for surprise.

"Know?" he said. "What is in I should know? I do not understand." Mr. Falconer coughed.

"We thought you were aware of the existence of the deed; that your father had informed you, Lord Highcliffe."

"What deed?" asked Stafford, dully. "I am sorry to appear so dense; but I have not the least idea of your meaning. As you say, Mr. Falconer, I know nothing of business."

"It is evident that your father did not tell you that he executed a deed of gift in your favour, a gift of one hundred thousand pounds," said Mr. Falconer.

"Which deed, being made when he was quite solvent, cannot be upset. The money was placed in trust, and is quite beyond the reach of the creditors," said Mr. Chaffinch. "We thought you were aware of this, my

lord."

Stafford shook his head. He evinced no sign of relief, the colour did not rise to his face, and his eyes were still fixed on Falconer.

"It was a very wise provision," said Mr. Chaffinch, approvingly. "And distinctly one I should have recommended; but Sir Stephen--Lord Highcliffe--did it of his own accord. He was a far-seeing man, and he was aware that fortune might fail him, that it was necessary he should place you, my lord, out of danger. I can well believe that, even at that time, he saw the peerage coming, and felt that you should be made secure, that you should have a sufficient income to support the title. It is not a tenth, a twentieth of the sum you would have inherited, but for this unfortunate accident of the native rising, and the collapse of the South African Company."

Stafford scarcely heard him. He was thinking of his father's loving foresight and care for his son's future. A pang of bereavement shot through him.

"Very wise," said Mr. Falconer, grimly. "Whatever happens, Lord Highcliffe is safe, high and dry above water mark. Carefully invested, the capital sum may be made to produce an income of four thousand, or thereabouts. Not too much for an earldom, but--Ah, well, it might be so much worse."

"The servants--the small debts--this house--is there enough for them?" asked Stafford, after a pause.

Mr. Chaffinch waved his hand.

"No need to trouble about that, my lord. There will be sufficient at the bank to pay such small claims. Your lordship will keep the house on?"

Stafford looked up with a sudden energy. "No," he said; "not a moment longer than is necessary. I shall return to my old rooms."

"There is no occasion," began Mr. Chaffinch. "I need scarcely say that the bank will honour your lordship's cheques for any amount."

"Please get rid of this house as soon as possible," said Stafford. He rose as he spoke. "You will remain to lunch?"

They murmured a negative, and Stafford begging to be excused, left the room, signing to Howard to follow him. He did not mean it, but his manner, in the abstraction of his grief was as lordly as if he had inherited an earldom of five centuries. When they had got back to the little darkened room in which he had sat since his father's death, Stafford turned to Howard:

"At what time and place is this meeting to-morrow, Howard?" he asked.

"At Gloucester House, Broad Street. Four."

Stafford nodded, and was lost in thought for a moment or two, then he said:

"Howard, will you send my horses to Tattersall's? And the yacht to the

agents, for sale? There is nothing else, I think. I used to have some diamond studs and rings, but I've lost them. I was always careless. Great Heaven! When I think of the money I have spent, money that I would give my life for now!"

"But, my dear old chap, a hundred thousand pounds! Four thousand a year--it's not too much for a man in your position, but there's no need to sell your horses."

Stafford laid his hand on Howard's shoulder and looked into his eyes and laughed strangely; then his hands dropped and he turned away with a sigh.

"Leave me now, Howard," he said, "I want to think--to think."

He sank into a chair, when Howard had gone, and tried to think of his future; but it was only the past that rose to his mind; and it was not altogether of his father that he thought, but of--Ida. In his sacrifice of himself, he had sacrificed her. And Fate had punished him for his forced treachery. He sat with his head in his hands, for hours, recalling those eyes, and yes, kissed her sweet lips. God, what a bankrupt he was! His father, his sweetheart, his wealth--all had been taken from him.

He did not think of Maude.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

At noon the following day there was a large meeting at Gloucester House. There gathered the Beltons, Baron Wirsch, Griffenberg, and the titled and untitled folk who had been concerned in Sir Stephen Orme's big scheme. And they were all gloomy and in a bad temper; for all of them had lost money and some of them were well-nigh ruined by the collapse of the company which was to have made their fortunes. They came before noon, the appointed hour, and talked, sometimes in undertones, but not seldom in loud and complaining voices. By one and all the dead man was blamed for the ruin in which he had involved them. They had left the whole thing in his hands: he ought to have foreseen, ought to have taken proper precautions. They had been--well, if not duped and deceived, the victims of his criminal sanguineness and carelessness.

Griffenberg, being one of the heaviest losers, was elected to the chair, but beyond making a statement which told them nothing, he could do little. When he informed them that Lord Highcliffe had died practically insolvent, a murmur arose, a deep guttural murmur which was something between a hiss and a groan, and it was while this unpleasant sound was filling the room that Stafford entered.

The groan, if groan it can be called, died away, and they all turned and looked at his pale and careworn face. The tall figure in its deep mourning dress silenced them for the moment.

Griffenberg signed Stafford to a seat beside him.

"I am sure we can tell Lord Highcliffe that we are glad to see him, that we are much obliged for his attendance."

Some few said "Hear! hear!" but the rest were silent and watchful. As Griffenberg spoke the door opened again and Ralph Falconer entered. He glanced at Stafford and knit his brows, but dropped heavily into a chair, and sat with stony face and half-lowered lids. He had scarcely taken his seat when Howard entered in his quiet fashion, and he went and stood just behind Stafford.

"I was just telling the meeting, Lord Highcliffe, that I was afraid we were in a bad way." said Griffenberg. "We all relied so completely on Sir Stephen--I beg pardon, Lord Highcliffe, your father--that we feel ourselves helpless now--er--left in the lurch. The company is in great peril; there has already been heavy loss, and we fear that our property will be swallowed up--"

"Ask him what Sir Stephen did with all his money!" cried an excited shareholder.

"Order!" said Mr. Griffenberg. "Lord Highcliffe is not here to answer questions."

"Then what's he here for?" retorted another man whose loss amounted to a few hundreds, but who was more excited and venomous than those who had many thousands at stake. "He's all right. He's a lord--a pretty lord!--and I'm told the gentleman he's next to is his future father-in-law, and is rolling in money--"

"Order! order!" called Griffenberg.

But the man declined to be silenced.

"Oh, it's all very well to call 'Order!' But I've a question to ask. I want to know whether it's true that Sir Stephen--blow 'Lord Highcliffe,' Sir Stephen's good enough for me!--made over a hundred thousand pounds to his son, the young gentleman sitting there. Some of us is ruined by this company, and we don't see why we should be sheared while Lord Highcliffe gets off with a cool hundred thousand. I ask the question and I wait for an answer."

Stafford rose, his pale, handsome face looking almost white above his black frock-coat and black tie.

"Sit down! Don't answer him," said Griffenberg.

"It is quite true," he said. "The money--a hundred thousand pounds--was given to me. It was given to me when my father"--his voice broke for a moment--"was in a position to give it, was solvent--"

"I said so, didn't I?" yelled the man who had put the question.

"Order! order!" said Griffenberg.

"And I am informed that the gift was legal, that it cannot be touched--"

"Of course it can't! Trust Sir Stephen to look after his own!" wailed the man.

"But I yield it, give it up," said Stafford in the same level voice.

Falconer started from his seat and laid a hand on Stafford's arm.

"Don't be a fool!", he whispered in his thick voice.

But Stafford did not heed him.

"I give it up, relinquish it," he said in the same low, clear tones.

"When my father"--his voice again shook for a moment, but he mastered his emotion--"made the deed, he thought himself a rich man. If he were alive to-day"--there was a pause, and the meeting hung on his words--"he would entirely agree with what I am doing. I give up the deed of gift, I relinquish it. My lawyers have made me the proper document, and I now give it to your chairman. It is all I possess; if I had more, I would give it to you. My father was an honourable man, if he were here now--"

He placed the deed before Griffenberg, and sank into his seat.

There was a moment of intense silence, then a cheer arose, led by the very man who had put the question.

Griffenberg sprang to his feet.

"I hope you are satisfied, gentlemen," he said, with as much emotion as a city man can permit himself. "Lord Highcliffe has behaved like a gentleman, like a nobleman. I can assure you that his sacrifice is a real one. The deed of gift which he has surrendered is a perfectly sound one, and could not have been touched. All honour to him for his surrender, for his generosity."

Another cheer arose--again it was started by the very man who had attacked poor Stafford, and before it had ceased to ring through the crowded room, Stafford had made his way out.

Mr. Falconer caught him by the arm as he was going down the stairs.

"Do you know what you have done?" he demanded in his dry, harsh voice. "You have made yourself a pauper."

Stafford stopped and looked at him with a dull, vacant gaze.

"A pauper!" repeated Falconer, huskily.

"I daresay," said Stafford, wearily.

"And you an earl!" said Falconer, his face a brick-dust red. "Do you think they will have any pity? Not they. They'll take you at your word. They'll have every penny! How do you mean to live? You, the Earl of Highcliffe!"

Stafford passed his hand across his brow; and a smile, a grim smile, curved his lips.

"I don't know," he said. "The money was theirs, not mine."

"Stuff and rubbish!" said Falconer. "You thought only of yourself, of

your father's good name. I need scarcely tell you that Maude..."

Stafford waited, his pale face set like a statue's.

--"That Maude--well, you don't expect her to consider the engagement binding after--after this?" The blood rushed to Stafford's face.

"I understand," he said. "Miss Falconer is free. I resign all claim to her."

At this moment Howard came out. He had almost fought his way from the crowded room.

"Stafford!" he cried. "It is not too late! You can take it back! They are friendly!"

Stafford smiled.

"I've nothing to take back!" he said.

Howard linked his arm in his friend's.

"Good Lord! But it was splendid! But all the same--Stafford, have you considered? It will leave you practically penniless!"

"I know," said Stafford. "I have considered. Let us go home."

They went home to Stafford's room. Howard was hot with the enthusiasm of admiration, and with the effort to suppress it; for nowadays men do not tolerate praise even from their dearest friend. It seemed to Howard as if Stafford's act of renunciation had brought him a certain sense of relief, as if some portion of the heavy weight had been lifted from his heart.

"Of course now we have to go into a committee of ways and means, my dear Staff; you won't mind my asking you what you're going to do? I need not say that there is no need for any precipitate action. I--er--the fact is, Staff, I have a sum of money lying at the bank which absolutely annoys me by its uselessness. The bank manager has been bothering me about it for some time past, and it was such a nuisance that I thought of tossing him whether he should take or I. It isn't much--a man doesn't amass a large fortune by writing leaders for the newspapers and articles for reviews--but of course you wouldn't be so mean as to refuse to borrow what there is. I'm very much afraid that you'll suffer by this absurdly quixotic action of yours, which, mind you! though I admire it, as I admire the siege of Troy, or the battle of Waterloo, is a piece of darned foolishness. However, let that go! What do you mean to do?"

"I don't know yet," said Stafford. He didn't thank Howard for the offer; no thanks were necessary. "The thing is so sudden that I have not made any plans. I suppose there's something I can do to earn my living. I've no brains, but I'm pretty strong. I might drive a hansom cab or an omnibus, better men than I have done worse. Leave me alone, old man, to have a pipe and think of it." Howard lingered for an hour or two, for he felt that though Stafford had dismissed him, he had need of him; and when he had gone Stafford took his hat and went out. He did not call a hansom, but walked on regardless of his route, and lost in thought. Something of the weight that had crushed him had been lifted

from his heart: he was penniless, the future stretched darkly before him with a darkness through which there appeared no road or sign of light; but he was free. He would not be compelled to go to the altar, there to perjure himself with an oath to love and cherish one woman while he loved another. I am afraid he did not feel much pity for Maude, simply because he did not realise how much she cared for him.

He walked on for some time and at last found himself somewhere down by the Minories, in that mysterious East End, of which we hear so much and of which we know so little. A little farther on he came upon the river and he stood for a moment or two watching some sheep and cattle being driven on board an ocean tramp. The sight of them recalled Herondale and Ida; and he was turning away, with a sigh, when a burly man with a large slouch hat stuck on the back of his head came lurching out of one of the little wooden offices on the quay. He was apparently the owner of the sheep, or in some way concerned with them, for he harangued the drovers in a flow of language which though rich in profanity, was poured forth in a pleasant and jovial voice. He had been drinking unwisely and too well, and as he wobbled richly about the small quay he happened to lurch against Stafford, who was attempting to avoid him. He begged Stafford's pardon profusely and with such good-natured penitence that Stafford in addition to granting him the forgiveness he requested, asked him where the sheep and cattle were going.

"To my little place, Salisbury Plain." Seeing the astonishment which Stafford could not keep out of his face, the man laughed and explained. "Not your Salisbury Plain, not the place here in England, but in the Burra-Burra country, Australia," he pointed with his fat hand downwards. "Right underneath. They're prize rams and bulls. I like to have the best, and I paid a devil of a long price for them; but I've got enough left for a drink if you'll come and have one."

Stafford declined, but the man clung on to his arm, and thinking it the easiest way of getting rid of him, and to avoid a scene, Stafford accompanied him to the clean and inviting little public at the corner of the quay, and permitted the man to order a glass of ale for him; the bar-maid, without receiving any intimation, placed a large joram of rum before the man, who remarked, after raising his glass to Stafford's health:

"Yes, sir, and I'm going with those beasts. I've nothing to say against Old England so long as you don't ask me to live here. I've been here six weeks, and there's only one thing that I feel I want and can't get--no, miss, it ain't rum, there's plenty of that, thank God!--it's air, air. I suppose the city gents are used to living without it, though some of you look pale enough. You don't look quite the thing yourself, sir; rather white about the gills, and not enough meat on you. Ah! I'd soon alter that if I had you at Salisbury Plain. Lord! I should like to take out a whole shipload of you; and mind, I could do with a few, and pay you better wages than you get in the City of London. And the life! Why, you'd think yourselves kings, with a horse to ride and plenty to eat, and plenty of fun. But there! you can't tell what it's like unless you've seen it, and if ever you should have a fancy to see it, you come out to Salisbury Plain, to my little place on the Burra-Burra; for I like the look of you, young man; you're a gentleman, though I've an idea you're down on your luck--I ain't so drunk that I can't see through a man's eyes, and there's trouble in yours; been outrunning the constable, eh? And you're not too proud to take a drink with an honest man--honest, though rough, maybe."

"Not at all," said Stafford, "and now you will take a drink with me, or shall we make it a cigar?" for he did not want to lead the man any further on the road of inebriety.

"A cigar? Right you are," the settler replied, promptly. He took out an envelope, intending to screw it up for a light, but suddenly caught sight of the address, and with genial gravity handed the envelope to Stafford. "There's my name--Henery Joffler, and there's my address, and anybody at Melbourne will tell you the best way of getting there. Come when you like, winter or summer, and you'll find Henery Joffler ready to receive you with a welcome. _Now_ I will have a drink," he remarked, as if he had not partaken of one for a calendar month.

When Stafford left the little public house, he held the envelope in his hand and was about to tear it up, when he checked himself and mechanically put it into his pocket. The incident, if it had not actually amused him, had diverted his mind in a wholesome manner for a short space; but he had almost forgotten it when he reached his rooms. The time had slipped by him and it was now twilight and as he was crossing the room in the dusk to ring the bell for a light, a woman rose from his chair and came towards him with out-stretched hands and his name on her lips.

"Maude!" he exclaimed, startled out of his self-possession. Then it flashed upon him that she should not be there, in his rooms, alone; and he looked at her gravely.

"Why have you come, Maude?" he said. "Wait but one moment and I will call a cab--go home with you."

"No," she said, presently. "Did you think I should not come, Stafford? I have been here for hours." She drew nearer to him, her eyes, so cold to others, burning like sapphires as they were raised to his. "Did you think when I had heard what you had done that I should keep away? No! I--I am proud of you--can you not guess how proud?--my heart is aching with it. Ah, but it was like you, Stafford!"

As she put her hand on his shoulder and looked at him with a smile of pride, and of adoration, Stafford's eyes fell before hers.

"I could do nothing else," he said. "But I am sorry you came, Maude. Didn't Mr. Falconer tell you?"

She laughed and threw back her head with a defiant gesture.

"Yes--as if it mattered! As if anyone--even he--could separate us! Besides, what he said was in a fit of temper, he was annoyed by your surrendering the money. And he could not speak for me--could not control me."

"Let me get a light," said Stafford.

"No matter," she said, as if she could not bear him to leave her side, even for a moment. "Stafford, dearest, you will not think of, you will forget, what he said? It was spoken in a moment of irritation. Oh, my dearest, let me look at you--it is so long since I saw you, so long, so long! How pale you are, and how weary looking!"

Her other arm went round his neck, and she would have drawn his face down to her lips, but Stafford checked her.

"You should not be here," he stammered.

She laughed.

"How proud you are! Yes, and I love you for it! You think that I should desert you, as most women would do!" She laughed again. "If you were a pauper--"

"It is what your father called me," he said, gravely

She smiled up into his gloomy eyes defiantly, temptingly.

"What does it matter? I am rich--my father is rich--"

Stafford winced and his face flamed, but she had turned aside for a moment and did not see the effect of her words.

--"And you have more than wealth," she laughed. "I reminded him of that, and it sobered him. Oh, believe me! for all his pretended stoicism, my father values a title as keenly as most men, and at heart is anxious to see his daughter a countess."

Stafford bit his lip.

"I will take you home now," he said. Something in his voice told her that she had made a wrong step, that she had failed. With a cry she clung to him more tightly, and drawing back her head, scanned his face.

"Stafford! You--you don't mean to leave me--to throw me off! Say it--promise me!" She laughed hysterically and would have slipped to her knees at his feet; but he held her firmly. "See, dearest, I would plead to you, pray to you! I am--so afraid. But you won't do that--you won't let anything separate us? Hush! there is my father. Stafford, you will listen, you will agree!"

As Falconer knocked at the door, she released Stafford, but stood near him, with her hand resting on his arm.

Falconer came in and regarded them from under his lowered lids.

"I might have expected to find you here," he said harshly to Maude.

"Yes; I came to him," she said, with a little gesture. "Why should I not? Why should I care--"

Falconer shrugged his shoulders, and turned from her to Stafford.

"I've come to take back what I said this morning," he said, in his dry voice. "I was hasty, and your--insensate folly in giving up the money upset me. I have been talking the matter over with Maude, and we have agreed to--to--continue the engagement."

Stafford lit a couple of candles and the scant light fell upon the faces of the three, the white one of the woman, the stern and set one of Stafford, and the hard and impassive one of Mr. Falconer.

"Of course a large sum of money will have to be found; and I must find it. It will be settled upon Maude--with, of course, a suitable allowance for a nobleman of your rank--"

"One moment," said Stafford, very quietly. "Before you go any further, I have to correct a misapprehension, Mr. Falconer. I do not intend to use my title."

"What!" exclaimed Falconer, his face growing darker.

"I intend dropping the earldom," said Stafford.

"But I don't intend you should," retorted Falconer, brutally. "If I consent to my daughter's marrying a pauper--"

"A pauper is one who begs," said poor Stafford, his face white as marble. "I have not yet begged--"

"Stafford!" cried Maude. Then she swung on her father. "Why do you speak to him--to _him_--like this?--Stafford, you will yield--"

"In everything, in every way, but this," he said, with the same ominous quietude. "If you are content to drop the title, to share the life of a poor and an ordinary working-man--as I hope to be--"

He held out his hand, and she would have taken it, clung to it, but her father strode between them, and with a harsh laugh, exclaimed:

"You fool! Don't you see that he is wanting to get rid of you, that he is only too glad of the excuse? Great God! have you no touch of womanliness in you, no sense of shame--"

She swept him aside with a gesture, and advancing to Stafford, looked straight into his eyes.

"Is--is it true?" she asked hoarsely. "Tell me! Is what he says true? That--that rather than marry me you would go out into the world penniless, to earn your living--you? Answer! Do--do you love me?"

His eyes dropped, his teeth clenched, and the moment of silence hung heavy in the room. She turned from him, her hand going to her brow with a gesture of weariness and despair.

"Let us go," she said to her father. "He does not love me--he never did. I thought that perhaps in time--in time--"

The sight of her humiliation was more than Stafford could bear. He strode to her and laid his hand on hers.

"Wait--Maude," he said, hoarsely. "I must lay the title aside; I cannot accept your father's money. I must work, as other and better men have done, are doing. If you will wait until I have a home to offer you--"

She turned to him, her face glowing, her eyes flashing.

"I will go with you now, now--this moment, to poverty--to peril, anywhere. Oh, Stafford, can't you see, can't you value the love I offer you?"

When her father had led her away, Stafford sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands. He was no longer free, the shackles were upon him. And he was practically penniless. What should he do?

He got his pipe and felt in his pocket for his matches. As he did so he came upon Mr. "Henery" Joffler's envelope. He looked at it vacantly for a moment or two; then he laughed, a laugh that was not altogether one of derision or amusement.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Ida had found her life at Laburnum Villa hard enough in all conscience before the night of the concert, but it became still harder after Mr. Joseph's condescending avowal of love to her and her inevitably scornful refusal. She avoided him as much as possible, but she was forced to meet him at the family breakfast, a meal of a cold and dismal character, generally partaken of by the amiable family in a morose and gloomy silence or to an accompaniment of irritable and nagging personal criticism. Mr. Heron, who suffered from indigestion, was always at his worst at breakfast time; Mrs. Heron invariably appeared meaner and more lachrymose; Isabel more irritable and dissatisfied; and Joseph, whose bloodshot eyes and swollen lips testified to the arduous character of his "late work at the office," went through the pretence of a meal with a sullen doggedness which evinced itself by something like a snarl if any one addressed him.

Hitherto he had, of course, been particularly, not to say unpleasantly, civil to Ida, but after his repulse his manner became marked by a covert insolence which was intended to remind her of her dependent position, and the fact that her most direct means of escape from it was by accepting him as her lover. This manner of his, offensive as it was intended to be, Ida could have borne with more or less equanimity; for to her, alas! Joseph Heron seemed of very little more account than one of the tradesmen's boys she saw occasionally coming up to the house; but after treating her to it for a day or two in the hope of breaking her spirit, as he would have expressed it, his manner changed to one of insinuating familiarity. He addressed her in a low voice, almost a whisper, so that his sister and mother could not hear, and he smiled and nodded at her in a would-be mysterious manner, as if they were sharing some secret.

Though Ida did not know it, it was meant to rouse Mrs. Heron's suspicions; and it succeeded admirably. Her thin, narrow face would flush angrily and she would look across at Isabel significantly, and Isabel would snigger and toss her head, as if she quite understood.

Ida often went to her own room before Mr. Joseph returned at night, but sometimes he came in before she had gone; and he made a practice of sitting near her, even venturing on occasions to lean over the back of her chair, his mother watching him out of the corners of her eyes, and with her thin lips drawn down; and although Ida invariably got up and went to another part of the room, her avoidance of Joseph did not lull his mother's suspicions. Ida's contempt for the young man was too profound to permit of such a sentiment as hatred--one can scarcely hate that which one scorns--but whenever he came near her with his tobacco

and spirit-laden breath, she was conscious of an inward shudder which closely resembled that with which she passed through the reptile house at the Zoological Gardens.

Mr. Joseph, the house, the whole life, began to get on her nerves; and in the solitude of her own room she spent many an anguished hour trying to discover some way of escape. She read all the advertisements of situations vacant in the newspaper; but all the employers seemed to require technical knowledge and accomplishments which she did not possess. She knew she could not teach even the youngest of children, she was unacquainted with the mysterious science of short-hand, and had never seen a typewriter. No one appeared to want a young lady who could break horses, tend cattle, or run a farm; and this was the only kind of work she could do.

So she was forced to the bitter conclusion that she would have to go on living the life, and eat the bread of the Herons, with as much patience as she could command, in the hope that some day "something would happen" to release her from her bondage, which was gradually robbing her eyes of their brightness and making her thin and listless. It seemed that nothing ever would happen, that the weeks would drag into months and the months into years; and one day as she toiled slowly home from a country walk, she almost felt inclined to turn to that last refuge of the destitute and answer one of the advertisements for a lady's help: anything would be better than to go on living the life in death which was her lot at Laburnum Villa.

As she approached the house, she saw that the gas was lit in the drawing-room, and the sound of voices, in which a strange one mingled, penetrated through the thin door as she passed through the hall to her room. While she was taking off her hat, there came a hurried knock, and Isabel entered in her best dress. She was flushed and in a flutter of suppressed excitement.

"Oh, Ida, can you lend me a clean collar?" she asked, in a stage whisper, and with a giggle which was intended to invite question; but, as Ida had asked none, Isabel said, with another giggle: "You've heard me speak of George Powler?"

Ida looked doubtful: Isabel had mentioned so many men, generally by their Christian names, who were supposed to be smitten by her, that Ida, often listening absently enough to the foolish girl's confidences, not seldom "got mixed."

"The one who went to South Australia," Isabel went on, with an affectation of coy shyness. "We used to see a great deal of him--at least he used to call--before he went away; and though there really was nothing serious between us, of course--But one doesn't like to speak of these things, even to one's bosom friend. But he's down-stairs just now. I just had time to run up, and he actually almost saw me on the stairs! Yes, this one will do: you always have such good-shaped collars, and yet you have always lived in the country! I must be quick and hurry down: men do so hate to be kept waiting, don't they? You'll come down presently, won't you, Ida? I'm sure you'll like him: he's so steady: and it's a very good business. Of course, as I said, nothing definite has passed between us, but--"

She giggled and simpered significantly; and Ida, trying to force herself to take some interest, fastened the collar for Isabel, and

gently and with much tact persuaded that inartistic young lady to discard a huge crimson bow which she had stuck on her dress with disastrous results. When, some little time after, Ida went down to the drawing-room, she found that the visitor was like most of those who came to Laburnum Villa, very worthy people, no doubt, but uninteresting and commonplace. This Mr. George Powler was a heavy thick-set man, approaching middle age, with the air of a prosperous merchant, and with a somewhat shy and awkward manner; it seemed to Ida that he looked rather bored as he sat on one of the stiff, uncomfortable chairs, with the mother and daughter "engaging him in conversation," as they would have called it. His shyness and awkwardness were intensified by the entrance of the tall, graceful girl in her black dress, and he rose to receive the introduction with a startled kind of nervousness, which was reasonable enough; for the young women with whom he associated were not dowered with Ida's very palpable grace and refinement.

Ida bowed to him, made some remark about the weather, and went over with a book to the sofa with the broken spring--and promptly forgot his existence. But her indifference was not reciprocated; the man was painfully aware of her presence, and after endeavouring to carry on the conversation with Isabel, grew absent-minded and incoherent, and presently, as if he could not help himself, got up and, edging to the sofa nervously, sat down and tried to talk.

Ida closed her book, and, as in duty bound, was civil to him, though not perhaps so civil as she would have been to a man of her own age and class; but Mr. George Powler, no doubt encouraged by her gentleness, serenity, and perfect self-possession--qualities none too common in the class to which he belonged--grew less nervous, and, to his own amazement, found himself talking presently quite fluently to this distinguished-looking young lady whose entrance of the drawing-room had struck him with awe. With instinctive courteousness and kindness, Ida had asked him some question about South Australia, and he was led to talk of his life there, and to describe the country.

Ida found her thoughts wandering after a few minutes, and grew absent-minded; but Mr. George Powler was launched, on his favourite subject, was delighted with the condescension of the beautiful and stately listener, and did not notice that she was scarcely listening; did not notice also that Mrs. Heron was looking discontented and sniffing peevishly, and that Isabel's face wore an expression of jealousy and resentment. The fact was, that the poor man had quite forgotten the other young woman--and the other young woman knew it.

Suddenly their silence bore down upon Ida's absent-mindedness, she felt rather than saw that something was the matter, and she got up, in the middle of one of Mr. George Powler's fluent but badly constructed sentences, and going over to Isabel asked her to play something.

Isabel flushed.

"Oh, you had better sing," she said; "Mr. Powler would like that better, _I'm_ sure."

"Oh, yes; please do!" pleaded the man; and Ida, trying to conceal her weariness and distaste, went to the piano and sang the shortest song she knew.

Her acquiescence was unfortunate in its result, for it completed in Mr.

George Powler's bosom the havoc which her face and voice had wrought. He pressed her to sing again, beat time with his large hand and badly groomed head, and was enthusiastic in his praises and seemed so disappointed when she refused, that he seconded her appeal to Isabel with an obviously forced politeness.

Isabel went to the piano, but she was at no time a very brilliant performer, and the poor girl was so upset by Ida's unconscious and unwilling superiority, that she broke down in the middle of one of those hideous drawing-room pieces which seem specially "arranged" for the torture of those who are blessed or cursed with musical taste.

The conversation naturally lagged and languished under these circumstances, and Mr. George Powler presently rose to take his leave. He was not asked to remain to dinner though Mrs. Heron had intended inviting him, and had made secret and flurried preparations. He shook hands with Ida with marked empressement and nervousness, and seemed as if he could scarcely tear himself away.

When he had gone the mother and daughter sat bolt upright in their chairs and stared before them in a pregnant silence; and Ida, wondering what was the matter, was about to leave the room, when Mrs. Heron said in a hard, thin voice:

"One moment, Ida, if you please."

Ida paused at the door with her book in her hand, startled from her dreaminess by the woman's tone and manner.

"You had better close the door, Ida. I should not like the servants to overhear what it is my duty to say to you."

Ida closed the door and stood expectantly, and Mrs. Heron continued:

"I trust I am not one to find fault unnecessarily. I know it is the duty of a Christian to be patient and long-suffering; but there is a limit to one's endurance, and I regret to say that you have passed that limit. I should not be fulfilling my duty to a young person who is under my charge if I refrained from pointing out to you that your conduct, since you have been under our roof, has been reprehensible and disgraceful."

Ida was too amazed for a moment to realise the full significance of the spiteful speech; and then, as it gradually dawned upon her, the blood rose to her face and an indignant protest rose to her lips; but she checked it, and merely repeated the objectionable phrase.

"Yes, disgraceful," said Mrs. Heron. "I am sorry to be compelled to use such a word to a young girl and to one in your position; and I do not think you make matters better by pretending not to know what I mean."

"It is no pretence, Mrs. Heron," said Ida, quite calmly. "I do not in the least know what you mean."

"Then I'll tell you," retorted Mrs. Heron, with suppressed fury. "You are one of the most shameless flirts I ever knew."

Ida felt an almost irresistible desire to laugh; she had been tired when she came in, Mr. George Powler's attentions had made her still

more weary, and the sight of the two women seated bolt upright and evidently boiling over with anger, was full of a grotesque humour which affected her hysterically. She managed to stifle the laugh, and looked at them patiently and calmly as she stood by the mantel-piece with one arm resting on the shelf. The unconscious ease and grace of her attitude increased Mrs. Heron's irritation; her thin lips trembled and her eyes grew red.

"Oh, I am not blind," she said. "I've been quite aware of your conduct for some time past; but I have refrained from speaking to you because, as I say, you are under my roof and I did not wish to hurt your feelings--though I am sure you have had very little regard for ours. I have been greatly deceived in you, Ida. I thought when you came that you were a quiet, well-conducted young woman, and I could scarcely believe my eyes when I first saw that I was mistaken, and that your quietness was only slyness. I suppose you didn't think I saw that you were trying to entrap my poor boy; but a mother's eyes are sharp, and a mother will protect her own at any cost. Oh, you needn't try to stare me out of countenance, or to put on that surprised and innocent look. You may have been able to deceive me once, but you can't now. I've been watching you, and I've seen with my own eyes your carryings on."

"Mrs. Heron--" began Ida, very quietly; but Mrs. Heron tore on with breathless vehemence.

"I suppose you only did it for your amusement; I don't suppose you thought there would be any good in it, that his father or I would allow Joseph to make such a fool of himself as to throw himself away upon a girl without any means; but it's all the more shameful. You succeeded very well; you've turned the poor boy's head and made him miserable. It's to be hoped that it will stop there, and that he won't be driven to drink or desperate courses, as some young men are. Of course you'll say that you never meant anything of the kind. I'm quite prepared for that--you can be plausible enough when you like; with that quiet, cat-like manner of yours."

Ida had passed beyond the laughing stage by this time; her face was pale, her eyes flashing; but she was able to say, with an appearance of calm:

"You are quite right, Mrs. Heron; I have no hesitation in saying that I did not wish your son to pay me any attention, much less--Oh, do you not see how ridiculous it is?" she broke out, indignantly, and with a little desperate laugh. Mrs. Heron's face flamed. "I don't know what you mean by ridiculous," she snapped. "I should say Joseph was quite good enough a match for you; and I've no doubt you think so, though you pretend to sneer at him."

"Let me assure you, Mrs. Heron, that I have never thought of your son as a possible husband," said Ida. "His attentions to me are more than unwelcome--and he knows it."

"Oh! then you admit that the poor boy is in love with you, that he has told you? You see, you can't deceive me; I knew it. I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself; at any rate, having caused trouble in the house that shelters you, that you haven't shame enough to refrain from flirting, before our very eyes, with the first man that appears."

Ida stared at her in amazement, too great for the moment to permit of

resentment.

"What is this you accuse me of?" she asked. "Oh, pray, pray, do not be so unreasonable, so unjust!"

Mrs. Heron wagged her head, as one who is not to be deceived by any affectation of innocence.

"No, thank you, Ida!" she exclaimed. "That won't do for us. We've seen it with our own eyes, haven't we, Isabel?"

Isabel took out her handkerchief and began to whimper.

"I should never have thought it of you, Ida," she sobbed. "And with George, too! And I'd only just told you that--that there had been things between us. I do think you might have left him alone."

Ida was half distracted.

"But you really cannot mean it!" she pleaded. "I have done nothing, said nothing. You surely do not complain of his speaking to me, of his being simply civil and polite! Heaven knows I had no desire to exchange a word with him. I would not have come down if Isabel had not asked me, and I had thought you would have considered it rude of me to remain upstairs. Oh, what can I say to convince you that you are mistaken, that I never gave a thought to this gentleman--I forget his name--that I do not care if I never see him again, and that--Isabel, surely you do not think me capable of the--vulgarity, the stupidity, with which your mother charges me!"

Isabel's sniffs and sobs only grew louder, and her demonstrative misery worked Mrs. Heron to a higher pitch of resentment and virtuous indignation.

"That is right, Isabel, do not answer her. It is all pretence and deceit on her part. She knows very well that she was doing her best to attract his attention, smiling and making eyes at him, and attempting to catch him just as she has caught poor Joseph."

Ida's slight figure sprang erect, her face grew crimson and her eyes flashed with a just wrath which could no longer be suppressed.

"I think you must be mad," she said in a low voice. "Indeed, you must be mad, or you would not insult me in this way. If I were guilty of the conduct of which you accuse me, I should not be fit to live, should not be fit to remain in any respectable house."

"You are guilty," retorted Mrs. Heron. "And as to your being fit to remain under this roof--and it was a respectable and happy one until you came--you are the best judge. I shall inform your cousin John of what has passed--it is my duty to do so--and he shall decide whether you are to remain, a firebrand, and a disturber of the peace of a Christian household. It is my duty to protect my poor boy."

At that moment the hall door was opened and closed, and the "poor boy," after shuffling about in the hall for a moment or two, opened the drawing-room door. His hat was on the back of his head, one end of his collar was unfastened, his face was flushed, and there was mud on his coat, as if he had fallen--which he had. He lurched into the room with

a tipsy leer, and nodded to them with an affectation of extreme sobriety, which is unfortunately always assumed by the individual who is hopelessly intoxicated. Mrs. Heron rose with outstretched hands.

"Oh, Joseph, are you ill? My poor boy!"

"Ill?" he repeated, with a hiccough. "No, I'm not ill. Yes, I am, though; it's mental worry, it's a 'arassed 'eart;" he looked at Ida and shook his head reproachfully. "_She_ knows, but she don't care--But whatsh the matter," he broke off, staring at Isabel, who was still struggling with her sniffs and sobs. "Whatsh up? Whatsh Isabel cryin' for? Ida been cryin' too? Look 'ere, I won't shtand that. If they've bin ill-treating you, Ida, my dear, you shay so, and I'll know the reashon why. You come to me, my dear."

He lurched towards Ida, and as she drew back with a shudder of horror and loathing, Isabel and his mother caught the wretched young man by the arm, and with cries of alarm and commiseration, endeavoured to soothe him.

"Don't speak to her, don't think of her; she's not worth it!" said Mrs. Heron. "She's not worth any sensible man's thoughts, least of all a man like you, Joseph. You are ill, you must come to bed!"

"Stuff an' 'umbug," he hiccoughed, as he struggled feebly with them, and cast enamoured and would-be reassuring glances at Ida's white and stern face. "She's a shplendid girl; she's a good girl; finest gal I know; and she an' me undershtand one another; twin shouls. We've kep' our secret from you, mother, but the time has come--the time has come to reveal the truth. I love Ida. It'sh no good your frowning at me like that; I shay I love Ida."

CHAPTER XXXV.

At this point John Heron's ring and knock were heard at the door; with a cry of terror, the unfortunate mother succeeded in dragging the feebly struggling Joseph out of the room, and with Isabel's assistance, hustled and pushed him up the stairs before his father was let in. After a time Mrs. Heron came down again, and Ida heard her and her husband talking together--you couldn't whisper in one room of Laburnum Villa without being heard in another one--and presently the drawing-room door opened and John Heron entered; Ida had waited, for she had expected him. He was red and swollen with pomposity and resentment, though he assumed a "more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger" air, and threw a deeply grieved tone into his harsh, raucous voice.

"I am deeply grieved and shocked, Ida," he began, "to hear from your cousin so deplorable an account of your conduct. I am not so unwise as to look for gratitude in this world, but I did not think you would repay our kindness and consideration by attempting to wreck the happiness of a quiet and godly home. Of course, I make all allowances for your bringing-up; I am aware that in the state of life from which we rescued you, the spiritual and the religious were entirely absent; but I had hopes that our precept and, I may say, example, the influence of a deeply religious family--" by this time his voice had slid into

the nasal whine and growl which it assumed in the pulpit; and Ida, notwithstanding her wretchedness, again felt an almost irresistible desire to laugh.

"Please tell me, Cousin John, what it is I have done, what it is you complain of?" she broke in.

Angered by the interruption, for there is nothing a man like John Heron hates worse, he snapped out:

"You have been trying to snare the affections of my son; you have even cast lascivious eyes at the stranger within our gates."

The blood rushed to Ida's face; then she laughed outright, the laugh of desperation; for indeed, she despaired of convincing these stupid people of her innocence. The laugh naturally exasperated John Heron, and his gaunt face grew pallid for an instant.

"I understand!" he said. "You treat our remonstrances with scorn, you scoff at our rebuke."

"Yes; I am afraid I can't help it, Cousin John," said Ida. "I am sorry that you should think me so wicked and so--dangerous, and I quite agree with Isabel and her mother that if I am as bad as you say, I am not fit to live in a respectable house and with--decent people. It would be useless for me to assure you that you are all ridiculously mistaken."

"My wife and daughter saw with their own eyes. I am informed that my son is at this very moment in bed, prostrated by your heartless conduct; you have trifled with that most delicate and sacred of things, a human heart. Go to your chamber, Ida, and there I trust you will seek repentance on your knees."

There was silence for a moment, then Ida said, very quietly:

"Have you anything more to say to me?"

"Not to-night," said John, sternly. "I am wearied with well-doing. I have been preaching, calling sinners, like yourself, to a better life. To-morrow I will speak with you again, I will endeavour to snatch a brand from the burning."

"Good-night," said Ida. She paused with her hand on the door. "Cousin John, you came to me when I was in great trouble; you offered me a home when I was homeless; I think you have been as kind as you knew how to be, and I want to thank you. I daresay it is my fault that I have not got on better with you all. I am not so bad as you think--but we will say no more about that. I do not want you to consider me ungrateful; for indeed, I am grateful for the shelter you have given me, and I shall always remember that you came to my aid when I was in sore need. Will you please ask my cousin and Isabel to forgive me--for having unwittingly caused them so much trouble? Good-night."

"Good-night," said John Heron, grimly. "I should be comforted if I could think that you were speaking from your heart; but I fear that you are not--I fear that you are not! Oh, may that heart be melted! may you be brought to see the peril of your evil ways!" Followed by this devout prayer, Ida went up to her room. As she paced up and down she tried to tell herself that the whole thing was too ridiculous, was too much like

a farce to make her wretched; but she felt unutterably miserable, and she knew that she could no longer endure Laburnum Villa and the petty tyranny and vindictiveness of these relations.

Poverty, hardship, she could have borne patiently and without complaining; but there are some things more intolerable to a high-spirited girl, such as Ida, than poverty or physical hardship--there are some things which hurt more than actual blows. She felt stifling, choking; she knew that, happen what might, she could not remain under her cousin's roof, eat the bread of his charity, for another day. She shuddered as she pictured herself meeting them at the breakfast-table, facing Mrs. Heron's spiteful face, Isabel's tear-swollen eyes, and her cousin John's sanctimonious sermon.

She would have to go.

She thrust a few things into a bag and took out her purse and counted the contents. They amounted to six pounds and a few shillings; but small though the sum was, she thought that it would maintain her until she could find some way of earning a livelihood, though at the moment she had not the least idea what she could find to do. Without undressing, she threw herself on the bed and tried to sleep; but her heart ached too acutely and her brain was too active to permit of sleep; and, try as she would, her mind would travel back to those brief days of happiness at Herondale, and she was haunted by the remembrance of Stafford and the love which she had lost; and at times that past was almost effaced by the vision of Stafford seated beside Maude Falconer at the concert.

As soon as she heard the servants moving about the house she rose, pale and weary, and putting on her outdoor things, stole down-stairs with her bag in her hand. The servants were busy in the kitchen, and she unfastened the hall door and left the house without attracting any attention. The fresh, morning air, while it roused her to a sense of her position, revived and encouraged her. After all, she was young and strong and--she looked up at the house of bondage which she was leaving--she was free! Oh, blessed freedom! How often she had read of it and heard it extolled; but she had never known until this moment how great, how sweet a thing it was.

She waited at the mean little station until a workmen's train came up, and, hustled by the crowd of sleepy and weary toilers, got into it. When she left the terminus, she walked with a portion of the throng which turned up Bishopsgate Street, though any other direction would have suited her as well--or as little; for she had no idea where to go, or what to do, beyond seeking some inexpensive lodging. She knew well enough that she could not afford to go to a hotel; that she would have to be content with a small room, perhaps an attic, and the plainest of food, while she sought for work. It was soon evident to her that she was not likely to find what she was looking for in the broad thoroughfare of shops and offices, and, beginning to feel bewildered by the crowd, which, early as it was, streamed along the pavements, she turned off into one of the narrower streets.

The long arm of Coincidence which thrusts itself into all our affairs, led her to the Minories, and to the very quay which Stafford had reached in his aimless wanderings; and, mechanically she paused and looked on dreamily at the bustle and confusion which reigned there. Perhaps the presence of the sheep and cattle attracted her: she felt

drawn to them by sympathy with their hustled and hurried condition, which so nearly resembled her own.

With one hand resting on a rail, and a bag in the other, she watched the men as they drove the cattle up the gangways or lowered huge casks and bales into the hold. A big, fat man, with a slouch hat on the back of his head and a pipe in the corner of his mouth--which did not prevent him shouting and bawling at the men and the animals--lurched here and there like one of the casks, and in the midst of his shouting and bawling, he every now and then glanced at a watch of the frying-pan order.

It was evident even to the inexperienced Ida, that the vessel was about to start; the sailors were rushing about on deck in the haste and excitement of ordered disorder, chains were clanking, and ropes and pulleys were shrieking; and a steam whistle shrieked at intervals and added to the multitudinous noises.

"Poor sheep, poor bulls!" murmured Ida, as the last of the beasts were driven up the gangway and disappeared. "Perhaps you have come from another Herondale! Do you remember, do you look back, as I do?"

She drew back, for the big man suddenly lurched in her direction, and, indeed, almost, against her.

"Beg pardon, miss," he said, touching his slouch hat. "Anything I can do for you, anybody you're looking for?"

"No, oh, no!" said Ida, blushing and turning away. Mr. Joffler, for it was that genial Australian, nodded and stretched his moon-like face in a smile.

"Thought you'd come to say 'good-bye' to someone, p'raps. Wish it was me! Though, if it was, I've an idea that I should stay on--air or no air--and I'm blest if there ain't precious little about this morning! Hi, there! All ready? Bless it all, we'll be too late for the tide if he don't come," he said to the captain, who stood with one foot on the taffrail, an expression of impatience on his weather-beaten face.

"Like enough he ain't comin', Mr. Joffler," he said. "Them kind o' gents is always slippery."

"I dessay. Though I didn't think as this one was one of that kind. Too much grit about him--ah, and I was not mistaken! Here he is! Get ready there!"

He turned, and Ida, instinctively turning with him, saw a tall figure clad in a serge suit making its way quickly through the crowd of busy dock-men and idly lounging spectators. He came straight to the big, fat man, who greeted him jovially and loudly, and they passed side by side on to the vessel.

Ida drew a long breath and passed her hand over her brow. It was absurd, of course, it was a trick of the imagination, of a wearied and overstrained brain--but the tall figure in the blue serge--ah, how like it was to that of Stafford!

It disappeared with that of the big man into the vessel, and, with a sigh, she was coming away when she saw the two men coming along the

deck and mount to the quarter. The fat man was talking and laughing, but the man in the blue serge was grave and silent, as if he was lost in thought and not listening.

Suddenly, as she paused, the younger, slimmer figure turned in her direction and uttered a cry, a cry almost of terror. Was she demented? Had her longing, her aching longing for a sight of him called up this vision of Stafford? Unless she were out of her mind, the victim of a strange hallucination, it was he himself who stood there, his face, pale and haggard, turned towards her.

"Stafford!" she cried, unconsciously, and her hand gripped the iron rail in front of her.

As if he had heard her--though it was impossible that her voice could reach him through the shouts of the sailors, the lowing and bleating of the cattle--he raised his head and looked in her direction. Their eyes met and were enchained for a moment, which seemed an eternity; then the blood flew to his face, leaving it the next moment paler than before. He swung round to the fat man by his side and clutched his arm.

"Wait! Stop the vessel! I want to go ashore!" he said, hoarsely.

Mr. Joffler stared at him, then laughed.

"Hold on, sir!" he said, not unsympathetically. "Hold on! Took queer like! Lor' bless you, I know how the feelin' is! It catches at you right in the middle of the waistcoat. It's the thought of the land going back from you--we're moving, we're well away. Here, take a sip of this! You'll get over it in a brace o' shakes."

He thrust a flask into Stafford's hand, but Stafford put it away from him.

"Let me go ashore! I'll join you later," he said, breathlessly.

Mr. Joffler caught his arm as he was about to jump for the quay.

"Steady, steady, sir!" he admonished, soothingly. "We can't stop--and you'd break your neck trying to jump it! And all for a fancy, too, I'd stake my life! Hearten up, man, hearten up! You're not the first to feel sick and sorry at leavin' home and friends."

Stafford bit his lip and tried to pull himself together; but his eyes were still fixed on the pale face, the girlish, black-clad figure, and his voice was shaky, as he said:

"You're right, Mr. Joffler. It is too late now. I--I thought I saw someone on the quay there. But it must have been fancy; it is impossible, quite impossible!"

"That's it," said Mr. Joffler, with a sympathetic wink. "Lor' love you, I've had them kind o' fancies myself, especially after a hot night on shore. If you'd only take a pull at this, you'd be all right directly. It don't do to come aboard too sober, 'specially when you're leavin' old England for the first time. Do you see 'em now?"

Ida had moved away, and Stafford drew a long breath and forced a smile.

"No," he said, huskily, and almost to himself. "Yes; it must have been fancy. She could not have been there. It is impossible!"

Mr. Joffler whistled and winked to himself comprehendingly.

"She!" he murmured. "Ah, that's it, is it? Ah, well I've been there myself! Don't you let the fancy upset you, sir! It 'ull pass afore we gets into the open. Nothing like the sea for teachin' you to forget gals you've left behind you! Come down below and try and peck a bit. There's cold beef--_and_ pickles. That'll send them kind o' fancies to the right about."

Ida turned and walked quickly away. Her head swam, she looked like one in a dream. It was, of course, impossible that the man she had seen could be Stafford: Stafford on board a cattle-ship! But the hallucination had made her feel faint and ill. She remembered that she had eaten nothing since yesterday at noon, and she ascribed this freak of her imagination to the weakness caused by want of food.

She left the quay slowly--as if her heart and her strength and all her life's hope had gone with the dingy vessel--and emerging on the narrow, crowded street, looked for some shop at which she could buy a roll of bread. Presently she saw a baker's at the opposite side of the road to that on which she was walking, and she was crossing, when a huge empty van came lumbering round the corner. She drew back to let it pass; and, as she did so, a lighter cart came swiftly upon her. She was so dazed, so bewildered by the vision she had seen, and the noise of the street, that she stood, hesitating, uncertain whether to go on or retreat to the pavement she had left.

The woman--or man--who hesitates in the middle of a busy London street is lost: the cart was upon her before she had moved, the shaft struck her on the shoulder and down she went into the muddy road!

The driver jerked the horse aside, and leapt from his seat, the usual crowd, which seems to spring instantaneously from the very stones, collected and surged round, the usual policeman forced his way through, and Ida was picked up and carried to the pavement.

There was a patch of blood on the side of her head--the dear, small head which had rested on Stafford's breast so often!--and she was unconscious.

"Orse struck 'er with 'is 'oof," said the policeman, sententiously.
"Ere, boy, call a keb. I'll have your name and address, young man."

A cab was brought, and Ida, still unconscious, was carried to the London Hospital.

And lay there, in the white, painfully clean, carbolic-smelling ward, attended by the most skillful doctors in England and by the grave and silent nurses, who, notwithstanding their lives of stress and toil, had not lost the capacity for pity and sympathy. Indeed, no one with a heart in her bosom could stand up unmoved and hear the girl moaning and crying in a whisper for "Stafford."

Day and night the white lips framed the same name--Stafford, Stafford!--as if her soul were in the cry.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

When Ida came to she found the sister of the ward and a young nurse bending over her with placid and smiling faces. Why a hospital nurse should under any and every circumstance be invariably cheerful is one of those mysteries worthy to rank with the problem contained in the fact that an undertaker is nearly always of a merry disposition.

Of course Ida asked the usual questions:

"Where am I?" and "How long have I been here?" and the sister told her that she was in the Alexandria ward of the London Hospital, and that she had been there, unconscious, for ten days.

The nurse smiled as if it were the best joke, in a mild way, in the world, and answered Ida's further questions while she administered beef tea with an air of pride and satisfaction which made her plain and homely face seem angelic to Ida.

"You were knocked down by a cart, you know," said Nurse Brown. "You weren't badly injured, that is, no bones were broken, as is very often the case--that girl there in the next bed but two had one arm, one leg, and two ribs broken: mail cart; and that poor woman opposite, got both arms and a collar-bone broken--But I mustn't harrow you with our bad cases," she said, quickly, as Ida seemed to wince. "Of course you feel very strange--I suppose this is the first time you have been in a hospital ward?"

"Yes," replied Ida, glancing round timidly.

"Ah, yes, of course," said Nurse Brown, nodding and smiling encouragingly. "And you feel shy and nervous; but, if you only knew it, you are better off here than you would be anywhere else; you have the very best surgeons in the world--we are awfully proud of them; and, though I ought not to say it, the best of nursing. You are watched night and day, and you get the least wee little thing you want if it's good for you. I daresay you won't care to stay here, but will like to be taken away as soon as you are well enough to be moved; for, of course, we all know that you are a lady. Oh, it isn't the first time we have had a lady in the ward. A great many of them come down here 'slumming,' and sometimes they get run over, as you have been, or they fall down some of the dark and rickety stairs, or hurt themselves in some other way--it's wonderful what a choice of accidents you can have in this busy and crowded part of London."

After a pause she went on:

"Of course you will go away as soon as you can; but it's a pity, it really is; you're ever so much better off here, and you'd soon get used to the other people in the ward, though they are of a different class to yourself. But though most of them are very poor and some of them are usually rough when they are at home, it is wonderfully how patient they are--you will scarcely ever hear a murmur; only a sigh now and again--and they are so grateful that sometimes they bring the tears to your eyes, and it's quite hard to part from them when they get well and

are discharged. But I really mustn't talk to you any more," she murmured, penitently, and the soft, placid voice ceased.

Ida looked round the ward, her heart beating as fast as her condition would allow. As Nurse Brown had said, she felt terribly strange and nervous in the long, whitewashed ward which, however, was rendered cheerful enough by the dozens of pictures from illustrated papers, which had been fastened to the walls, and by the vases and great bowls of flowers which seemed to occupy every suitable spot.

She closed her eyes and tried to think; but she fell asleep instead and dreamt that she had fallen off Rupert and was lying on the moss beside the river, quite comfortable and most absurdly content. When she woke the sister was standing beside her, and nodded with cheerful approval.

"That's better, Miss Heron," she said. "It is quite pleasant to watch you asleep and not to hear you rambling."

Ida's face flushed.

"Have I been rambling?" she asked. "What have I said? You know my name!"

The nurse smiled.

"Your things are marked," she explained. "But there was no address, nothing which could help us to communicate with your friends, or we would have done so. You will tell us where to send now, will you not?"

Ida blushed again and felt troubled. Why should she annoy and worry the Herons? She shuddered slightly as she pictured her cousin John standing beside the bed where the sweet and pleasant-faced sister now stood, and preaching at her. They would want to take her back to Loburnum Villa; and Ida regarded the prospect of return to that cheerful abode of the Christian virtues as a prisoner might regard the prospect of returning to his gaol. The sister regarded her keenly without appearing to do so.

"Perhaps you would rather remain quietly for a few days, Miss Heron?" she suggested, sweetly.

Ida's eyes--they looked preternaturally large, violet orbs in her white face--beamed gratefully.

"Oh, yes, yes! if I may. Shall I be ill long?--how soon will it be before I can go?"

It is about as difficult to get a definite answer from a nurse as from a doctor.

"Oh, some days yet," replied the sister, cheerfully. "You must not go until you are quite strong; in fact, we should not let you. Now you lie quite still and try and sleep again if you can; and you can think over whether you would like to communicate with your friends or not. If you ask my advice, I shall say, like Mr. Punch, 'Don't!'"

"I won't," said Ida, with her rare smile.

The sister nodded and left her, and Ida closed her eyes again: but not to sleep. She recalled her flight from Laburnum Villa, her wandering

through the streets, the crowded and noisy quay, and the strange hallucination, the vision of Stafford standing on the stern of the vessel. Of course, it was only a vision, an hallucination; but how real it had seemed! So real that it was almost difficult to believe that it was not he himself. She smiled sadly at the thought of Stafford, the son of the great Sir Stephen Orme, sailing in a cattle-ship!

The hours passed in a kind of peaceful monotony, broken by the frequent visits of Nurse Brown and the house surgeon, with his grave face and preoccupied air; and for some time Ida lay in a kind of semi-torpor, feeling that everything that was going on around her were the unreal actions in a dream; but as she grew stronger she began to take an interest in the life of the great ward and her fellow-patients; and on the second day after her return to consciousness, began a conversation with her next-door neighbour, a pleasant-looking woman who had eyed her wistfully several times, but who had been too shy to address "the young lady." She was a country woman from Dorsetshire--up to London on a visit "to my daughter, miss, which is married to a man as keeps a dairy." It was her first visit to London; she had wandered from her daughter's lost her, and, in her confusion, tumbled down the cellar of a beer-shop. She told Ida the history of some of the other cases, and Ida found herself listening with an interest which astonished her.

Nurse Brown, seeing the two talking, nodded approvingly.

"That's right," she said, with a smile. "You keep each other company. It passes the time away."

Very soon, Ida found herself taking an interest in everything that went on, in the noiseless movements of the nurses, in the arrival of a new case, in the visit of the doctors and the chaplain, and the friends of the other patients. Let the pessimists say what they may, there is a lot of good in human nature; and it comes out quite startlingly in the ward of a hospital. Ida was amazed at the care and attention, the patience and the devotion which were lavished on herself and her fellow-sufferers; a devotion which no money can buy, and which could not have been exceeded if they had one and all been princesses of the blood royal.

One instance of this whole-souled devotion and unstinting charity occurred on the third day and brought the tears to her eyes, not only then but whenever she thought of it in the after years. A tiny mite of a baby, only a few weeks old was brought into the ward and laid in a cot not very far from Ida's bed. The nurses and the doctors crowded round it with eager attention. It was watched day and night; if it cried, at the first note of the feeble wail, a couple of nurses flew to the cot, and, if necessary, a famous physician was telephoned for: and came promptly and cheerfully. The whole ward was wrapped up in the tiny mite, and Ida leant on her elbow and craned forward to get a glimpse of it; and felt towards it as she would have felt if it had been a little sick or wounded lamb in Herondale.

"What is the matter with it, poor little thing?" she asked the sister.

"The spine," replied the sister, bending tenderly over the cot and taking the emaciated little paw in her comforting, ministering hand.

"Will it get well?" asked Ida, quite anxiously.

The sister shook her head.

"Lor' bless me!" said Ida's neighbour, pityingly. "It 'ud be almost better if the pore little thing died!"

The sister looked up with mild surprise.

"Oh, yes; it can't live longer than three weeks," she said, as sadly as if she had not seen a score of similar cases.

Ida lay down, her eyes filled with tears, her heart filled with awe and wonder. Perhaps for the first time in her life she understood what charity meant. Here was a waif of the slums, doomed to die in so many weeks, and yet it was the object of the loving devotion of every nurse in the ward, with every comfort and luxury which an age of civilisation could supply, and the recipient of the enthusiastic attention of a great surgeon whose name was famous throughout the world.

The woman in the next bed was crying too.

"It makes you think of 'eaven, don't it, miss," she said, with a sniff. "If I was rich I'd leave all my money to a 'orspital; that I would!"

The speech suddenly reminded Ida of her own poverty, of which she had not thought very much, for the need of money is not very keenly felt in a hospital ward, where everything is "free, gratis, for nothing." The time came when she was permitted to get up, and nothing could exceed her amazement on finding herself so weak that her legs trembled under her, and the walls and the floor seemed to rock and heave; but in a day or two she was able to walk a little, and she at once begged permission to help nurse the baby. It was against the rules, but it was very difficult for anyone to resist Ida when she turned those great violet eyes upon them imploringly: and much to her delight she was permitted to hover about the cot and assist in an unofficial way. When the baby was asleep, which was not particularly often, Ida was permitted to read to some of the other patients; and, in fact, make herself generally useful in an unobtrusive fashion.

This was all very well, but the day arrived when she was strong enough to leave the hospital and once more face that world which has been described as the best of all possible worlds, and no doubt is for those who have plenty of money and friends, but which is not far from being the worst of all possible worlds for those who have not. She took five pounds from her little store and went to the sister.

"I am rather poor," she said, with a smile, "and I cannot afford more than this. I wish it were a hundred times as much; indeed, no money could repay your goodness and kindness to me, the wonder of which I shall never cease to feel."

The sister looked at her keenly, but said very gently:

"You can put it in the box in the hall when you go out; but you will not go to-day. I will arrange for you to stop until to-morrow; in fact, the baby--none of us--could spare you. I want you to have some ten with me in my room to-night and a little talk, Miss Heron."

So Ida turned away quickly, that the sister might not see her tears, and accepted the reprieve.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

The Herons were not very much surprised at Ida's flight, but though John and his wife and daughter were anything but sorry to get rid of her, they were rather uncomfortable, and Joseph, who was in the doldrums after his drinking-fit, did not make them more comfortable by assuring them that he was perfectly certain she had committed suicide.

He and his father set out to look for her, but, as Ida had left no clue behind, they could find no trace of her, though they procured the assistance of Scotland Yard, and inserted guarded advertisements in the newspapers. John Heron comforted himself with the reflection that she could have come to no harm or they would have heard of it; and at last it occurred to him, when nearly a fortnight had elapsed, that she might have returned to Herondale, probably to the care of Mr. Wordley, and that he had been too indignant to acquaint the Herons with the fact.

"I think I had better run down to Herondale, Maria, and ascertain if the erring and desperate girl has returned there," he said, one morning after prayers. "Seeing that she left my roof in so unseemly a fashion, with no word of regret or repentance, I do not consider that she has any further claim upon me; but I have a tender heart, and on this occasion I will be generous before I am just."

"I am sure she has no further claim upon us," said Mrs. Heron, with a sniff, "and I hope you will make it plain, John, that on no account can we take her back. We have been put to considerable trouble and expense, and I really think that her going without any fuss is quite providential."

At this moment there came a double knock at the door, and the servant announced that Mr. Wordley was in the drawing-room. Mr. and Mrs. Heron exchanged glances, and both of them turned rather pale; for John Heron had a very vivid recollection of Mr. Wordley's frank and candid manner of expressing himself. But he had to be faced, and the pair went down into the drawing-room with a long-suffering expression on their faces.

Mr. Wordley, however, appeared to be quite cheerful. He shook hands with both of them, and enquired after their health and that of their family quite amiably and pleasantly.

"Most delightful weather, isn't it?" he remarked. "Quite pleasant travelling. You have a remarkably--or--convenient house, Mrs. Heron: charming suburb: will no doubt be quite gay and fashionable when it is--er--more fully developed. You are looking well, Mr. Heron."

Mr. Heron, whatever he may have looked, was feeling anything but well at that moment; for he suspected that the lawyer was only masking his attack, and that he meant to spring upon him presently.

"I enjoy fairly good health, Mr. Wordley, thank you," he said, in his sanctimonious way; "but I have my share of trials and anxieties in this miserable world."

"Oh, don't call it miserable, on a morning like this!" said Mr.

Wordley, cheerfully. "My dear sir, there is nothing the matter with the world; it's--er--some of the people in it that try to make it miserable."

While he had been speaking, he had been glancing at the door and listening, as if he had been listening and expecting to hear and see someone else.

"The fact is," he said, "I have come up rather suddenly on rather important business: came up without a moment's delay. _Where is_ Miss Ida? I should like to see her at once, please, if I may!"

The faces of the pair grew sallow, and the corners of John Heron's mouth dropped lower even than usual.

"Ida?" he said, in a hollow voice, as if he were confused. "Where is she? Surely you know, Mr. Wordley?"

"I know? How should I know? I came up to see her: not a moment to spare. Isn't she here? Why do you both stare at me like this?"

"She is not here," said John Heron. "Ida left our house more than a fortnight ago."

Mr. Wordley looked disappointed, and grunted:

"Oh, gone to stay with some friends, I suppose. I'll trouble you to give me their address, Mr. Heron, please."

He rose, as he spoke, as if he meant starting on the moment, but he sank into the chair again as John Heron said in a sepulchral voice:

"I should most willingly do so, Mr. Wordley, but I regret to say I do not know where she is."

"You--don't--know--where--she is!" said Mr. Wordley, anger and amazement struggling for the upper hand. "What the devil I beg your pardon, Mrs. Heron! You must excuse an old man with a short temper and a touch of the gout--but I don't understand you! Why don't you know?"

Mrs. Heron began to sniff, and her worthy husband drew himself up and tried to look dignified, and failed utterly in the attempt.

"Such language--" he began.

"Confound my language, sir!" snapped the old lawyer, his face growing red. "Be good enough to answer my question!"

"Ida left our hospitable roof about a fortnight ago," said Mr. Heron. "She left like a thief in the night--that is to say, morning. I regret to say that she left no message, no word of farewell, behind her. I had occasion to rebuke her on the preceding night, and, following the dictates of an ungodly nature and a perverse pride, she chose to leave the shelter of this roof--"

Mr. Wordley sprang to his feet, his passion rendering him speechless for a moment.

"_You_ rebuke Miss Ida! Are you out of your mind? And pray, what had

she done?"

"She had been guilty of attempting to ensnare the affection of my son--" began John Heron.

At this moment the door opened and Joseph appeared. Mr. Wordley looked at him.

"Ensnaring the affections of _this!_" he snorted, with a contempt which caused Mr. Joseph's immediate retreat. "Oh, you _must_ be out of your mind!"

"Her conduct was reprehensible in other ways," stammered John Heron.

"Nonsense!" almost shouted Mr. Wordley. "I don't want to hear any more of such nonsense. Miss Ida's conduct reprehensible! Why, she couldn't conduct herself in any way than that of a high-bred, pure-minded, gentle-hearted girl, if she tried! You have been entertaining an angel unawares, Mr. Heron--there's a bit of Scripture for _you!_--you've had a pearl in your house, and it's been cast before--Bless my soul! I'm losing my temper! But, 'pon my word, there's some excuse for it. You've let that dear child leave your house, you've lost sight of her for over a fortnight, and--and you stand there and snuffle to me about her 'conduct!' Where is she? Oh, of course, you don't know; and you'd stand there like a stuck pig, if I were fool enough to remain here for a week and ask questions. But I want her--I want her at once! I've got important news for her news of the greatest importance--I beg your pardon, my dear madame, for the violence of my language--though I could say a great deal more to this husband of yours if I were alone with him. But it's no use wasting further time. I must find her--I must find her at once."

John Heron was as red as a turkey-cock and gasping like a cod out of water.

"This gross and unseemly attack is only excused by your age--"

"Confound my age!" exclaimed Mr. Wordley. "Let me tell you, sir, your age does not excuse your conduct, which has been that of a heartless and sanctimonious fool. When I gave that dear child into your care, I had misgivings, and they are fully justified. Would to God I had never lost sight of her! The dearest, the sweetest and best--Oh, let me get out, or I shall say something offensive."

As he made for the door, John Heron cleared his throat and stammered:

"I forgive you, sir. You will regret this exhibition of brutal violence, and I shall put up a prayer--"

"Don't you dare to put up any prayer for me!" cried Mr. Wordley. "I should be afraid something would happen to me. I need not ask why she left your house. It's quite evident enough. I've nothing more to say to you."

"One moment," said John Heron, with an attempt at dignity; "perhaps you will be good enough to inform me of the nature of the communication that you have for my cousin Ida."

Mr. Wordley looked as if he were going to choke.

"No, I will not, sir!" he at last responded. "I will tell you nothing--excepting that I hope and trust I may never see your sanctimonious face again. Good-morning! Good-morning, madame!"

He was outside Laburnum Villa with the velocity and force of a whirlwind, and was half-way on his road to the station before he could get his breath or regain his self-possession. Being a lawyer, he, of course, went straight to the police; but he was shrewd enough not to go to Scotland Yard, but to the police station near the terminus; for it seemed to him that it would be easier to trace Ida from that spot.

Fortunately for him, he found an inspector in charge who was both intelligent and zealous. He listened attentively to the detailed statement and description which the lawyer--calm enough now--furnished him, and after considering for a minute or two, during which Mr. Wordley waited in a legal silence, asked:

"Young lady any friends in London, sir?"

Mr. Wordley replied in the negative. "Think she has gone to a situation?"

"No," replied Mr. Wordley; "she left suddenly; and I do not know what situation she could find. She is a lady, and unaccustomed to earning her bread in any way."

"Then she has met with an accident," said the inspector, with an air of conviction.

"God bless my soul, my good man!" exclaimed Mr. Wordley. "What makes you think that?"

"Experience, sir," replied the inspector, calmly. "Have you any idea how many accidents there are in a day in London? I suppose not. You'd be surprised if I told you. What was the date she was missing?"

Mr. Wordley told him, and he turned to a large red book like a ledger.

"As I thought, sir," he said. "'Young lady knocked down by a light van in Goode Street, Minorities. Dark hair, light eyes. Height, five feet nine. Age, about twenty-one or two. Name on clothing, 'Ida Heron.'"

Mr. Wordley sprang to his feet.

"It is she!" he exclaimed. "Was she much hurt, is--is she alive--where is she? I must go to her at once."

"London Hospital," replied the inspector, succinctly, as he turned to a subordinate. "Call a cab!"

It was not a particularly slow hansom, and it did not take very long to get from the police station to the hospital; but to Mr. Wordley the horse seemed to crawl and the minutes to grow into days. He leapt out of the hansom, and actually ran into the hall.

"You've a patient--Ida Heron"--he panted to the hall porter.

The man turned to his book.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Discharged yesterday."

Mr. Wordley staggered against the glass partition of the porter's box and groaned.

"Can you tell me--?" he began. "Has she left any address? I--I am her solicitor. Excuse my being hurried: I want her particularly."

The porter looked at him sympathetically--everybody is sympathetic at a hospital, from the head physician and that puissant lady, the matron, down to the boy who cleans the brass plate.

"Won't, you sit down, sir," he said, "The young lady was discharged yesterday, and I can't tell you where she's gone, in fact, though I remember her being brought in--run-over case--I like to step upstairs and see the sister of the ward she was in, the Alexandra?"

While he was speaking, and Mr. Wordley was trying to recover command of himself, a slim black-clad figure came down the hall, and pausing before the large tin box provided for contributions, dropped something into it. Mr. Wordley watched her absently; she raised her head, and he sprang forward with "Miss Ida!" on his lips.

Ida uttered a cry and staggered a little; for she was not yet as strong as the girl who used to ride through Herondale, and Mr. Wordley caught her by both hands and supported her.

"Thank God! thank God!" was all he could exclaim for a minute. "My dear child! my dear Miss Ida! Sit down!"

He drew her to one of the long benches and sat down beside her. To his credit, be it stated, that the tears were in his eyes, and for a moment or two he was incapable of speech; indeed, it was Ida who, woman-like, first recovered her self-possession.

"Mr. Wordley! Is it really you? How did you know? how did you find me? I am so glad; oh, so glad!" She choked back the tears that sprang to her eyes and forced a laugh; for again, woman-like, she saw that he was more upset than even she was. He found his voice after awhile, but it was a very husky one.

"My dear girl, my dear Miss Ida," he said, "you are not more glad than I. I have been almost out of my mind for the last few hours. I came to London all in a hurry. Most important news--went to your cousin's--Oh, Lord! what a fool that man is! Heard you had run away--not at all surprised. Should have run away myself long before you did. Came up to London in search of you--just heard you'd gone from here."

"I ought to have gone yesterday," said Ida, "but they let me stay."

"God bless them!" he panted. "But how pale you look--and thin. You've been ill, very ill; and you've been unhappy, and I didn't know it. What a fool I was to let you go! It was all my fault! I ought to have known better than to have trusted you to that sanctimonious idiot. My dear, I've great news for you!"

"Have you?" said Ida, patting his hand soothingly--she had caught something of the gentle, soothing way of the sister and nurses. "Must

you tell me now? You are tired and upset." "I must tell you this very minute or I shall burst," said Mr. Wordley. "My dear child, prepare yourself for the most astounding, the most wonderful news. I don't want to startle you, but I don't feel as though I could keep it for another half hour. Do you think I could have a glass of water?"

The porter, still sympathetic, at a sign from Ida, produced the glass of water and discreetly retired.

"Now," said Mr. Wordley, with intense gravity, "prepare to be startled. Be calm, my dear child, as I am; you see I am quite calm!" He was perspiring at every pore, and was mopping his forehead with a huge silk handkerchief. "I have just made a great discovery. You are aware that Herondale, the whole estate, is heavily mortgaged, and that there was a foreclosure; that means that the whole of it would have passed away from you."

Ida sighed.

"Yes, I know," she said, in a low voice.

"Very well, then. I went over to the house the other day to--well, to look out any little thing which I thought you might like to buy at the sale--"

Ida pressed his hand and turned her head away.

"It was a sad business, sad, very sad! and I wandered about the place like a--like a lost spirit. I was almost as fond of it as you are, my dear. After I had been over the house I went into the grounds and found myself in the ruined chapel. Donald and Bess followed me, and Bess--what a sharp little thing she is, bless her!--she began to rout about, and presently she began to dig with her claws in a corner under the ruined window. I was so lost in thought that I stood and watched her in an absent kind of way: but presently I heard her bark and saw her tearing away like mad, as if she had found a rat or a rabbit. I went up to where she was clawing and saw--what do you think--"

Ida shook her head and smiled.

"I don't know; was it a rabbit?"

"No!" responded Mr. Wordley, with suppressed excitement. "It was the top of a tin box--"

"A tin box?" echoed Ida.

"Yes," he said, with an emphatic nod. "I called Jason to bring a spade; but I could scarcely wait, and I found myself clawing like--like one of the dogs, my dear. Jason came and we had that box up and I opened it. And what do you think I found?"

Ida shook her head gently; then she started slightly, as she remembered the night Stafford and she had watched her father coming, in his sleep, from the ruined chapel.

"Something of my father's?"

Mr. Wordley nodded impressively.

"Yes, it was something of your father's. It was a large box, my dear, and it contained--what do you think?"

"Papers?" ventured Ida.

"Securities, my dear Miss Ida, securities for a very large amount! The box was full of them; and a little farther off we found another tin case quite as full. They were securities in some of the best and soundest companies, and they are worth an enormous sum of money!"

Ida stared at him, as if she did not realise the significance of his words.

"An enormous sum of money," he repeated. "All the while--God forgive me!--I was under the impression that your father was letting things slide, and was doing nothing to save the estate and to provide for you, he was speculating and investing; and doing it with a skill and a shrewdness which could not have been surpassed by the most astute and business-like of men. His judgment was almost infallible; he seems scarcely ever to have made a mistake. It was one of those extraordinary cases in which everything a man touches turns to gold. There are mining shares there which I would not have bought at a farthing a piece; but your father bought them, and they've everyone of them, or nearly everyone of them, turned up trumps. Some of them which he bought for a few shillings--gold and diamond shares--are worth hundreds of pounds; hundreds? thousands! My dear," he took her hand and patted it as if he were trying to break the shock to her; "your poor father whom we all regarded as an insolvent book-worm, actually died by far and away the richest man in the county!"

Ida looked at him as if she did not even yet quite understand. She passed her thin hand over her brow and drew a long breath.

"Do you mean--do you mean that I am no longer poor, Mr. Wordley?" she asked.

Mr. Wordley laughed so suddenly and loudly that he quite startled the hall porter in his little glass box.

"My dear child," he said, slowly and impressively, "you are rich, not poor; im-mense-ly rich! I do not myself yet quite know how much you are worth; but you may take it from me that it's a very large sum indeed. Now, you are not going to faint, my dear!" For Ida's eyes had closed and her hands had clasped each other spasmodically.

"No, no," she said in a low voice, "But it is so sudden, so unexpected, that I cannot realise it. It seems to me as if I were lying in the cot upstairs and dreaming. No, I cannot realise that I can go back to Herondale: I suppose I can go back?" she asked, with a sudden piteousness that very nearly brought the tears to Mr. Wordley's eyes.

"Go back, my dear!" he exclaimed. "Of course you can go back! The place belongs to you. Why, I've already given notice that I am going to pay off the mortgages. You will get every inch of the land back; you will be the richest lady in the county--yes, in the whole county! The old glories of the dear old house can be revived; you can queen it there as the Herons of old used to queen it. And everybody will be proud and delighted to see you doing it! As for me, I am ashamed to say that I

have almost lost my head over the business, and have behaved like a--well, anything but like a staid and sober old solicitor."

He laughed, and blew his nose, and nodded with a shamefaced joy which affected Ida even more than his wonderful news had done.

"How can I thank you for all your goodness to me," she murmured, a little brokenly.

"Thank me! Don't you attempt to thank me, or I shall break down altogether; for I've been the stupidest and most wooden-headed idiot that ever disgraced a noble profession. I ought to have seen through your father's affectation of miserliness and indifference. Anybody but a silly old numskull would have done so. But, my dear, why are we staying here, why don't we go away at once? You'd like to go back to Herondale by the first train? You must hate the sight of this place, I should think."

"No, no," said Ida, gently. "Yes, I would like to go back to Herondale--ah, yes, as soon as possible. But I should like to see someone before I go--the sister, the nurse, who have been so good to me. You are sure"--she paused and went on shyly, "you are sure there is no mistake, that I have some money, am rich?"

"Rich as Croesus, my dear child," he responded, with a laugh.

She blushed still more deeply.

"Then, have you--have you any money with you, Mr. Wordley? I mean quite a large sum of money?" "Not a very large sum, my dear," he replied, rather puzzled. "About twenty or thirty pounds, perhaps."

Ida's face fell.

"Oh, that is not nearly enough," she murmured.

"Eh?" he asked. "But I've got my cheque-book with me. How much do you want? And, forgive me, my dear Miss Ida, but may I ask what you want it for?"

"Can I have a cheque for five hundred pounds?" Ida asked, timidly.

"Five thousand, fifty thousand, my dear!" he responded, promptly, and with no little pride and satisfaction.

"Five hundred will do--for the present," she said a little nervously. "Perhaps the porter will let you draw it out."

Still puzzled, Mr. Wordley went into the porter's box and took out his cheque-book.

"Make it payable to the hospital--and give it to me, please," said Ida, in a low voice.

The old man's face cleared, and he nodded.

"Of course, of course! God bless you, my dear! I might have known what was in that good, grateful heart of yours. See here, I've made it out for a thousand pounds. That's five hundred for you and five hundred for

me--and don't you say a word to stop me; for I'm only too grateful for the idea. It will cool me down; and upon my word, I feel so excited, so above and beyond myself that I want some safety-valve like this, or I should fall to dancing in the hall and so disgrace myself and the noble profession to which I belong."

With the folded cheque in her hand Ida took him up the many stone steps to the Alexandra ward. The gentle-eyed sister, who had parted from her so reluctantly, was naturally surprised to see her return so soon, and accompanied by a fatherly and prosperous old gentleman, who kept close to her as if he were afraid she might be spirited from him.

"I have come back to--to say good-bye again, sister," said Ida, her voice faltering a little, but her eyes beaming as they had not beamed for many a day; "and I want to give you something, something for the hospital--it is from my dear friend here, Mr. Wordley, who has just found me. And I want you not to open it until we have gone--say, for half an hour. And I am going to write to you as I promised; and you can write to me if you will be so kind; for I can give you the address now. It is on the back of the cheque."

She had written it in the porter's box.

"I am going--home. Something has happened. But I will write and tell you; now I can only say"--her voice broke and trembled--"good-bye, again, and thank you with all my heart." She drew the sister to her and kissed her; and Mr. Wordley shook the sister's hand, and blew his nose so loudly that the patients, who had been watching them eagerly, nodded to each other and exchanged significant glances, and there was a suppressed excitement in the ward which found adequate expression when, half an hour afterwards, the sister with flushed cheek and quavering voice made them acquainted with Ida's gift.

"And now," said Mr. Wordley, after he had shaken hands with several of the officials, including the porter, "and now, my dear Miss Ida, for Herondale and--Home! Hi, cab!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

The journey down to Herondale cannot be described: whenever Ida thought of it in the after years, she felt herself trembling and quivering with the memory of it. Until she had sat in the carriage, and the train had started and she realised that she was indeed going home--home!--she did not know what it had cost her to leave Herondale, how much she had suffered at Laburnum Villa, how deep the iron of dependence had entered her soul. She was all of a quiver with delight, with profound gratitude to the Providence which was restoring her to the old house, the wide moors, the brawling streams which she knew now were dearer to her than life itself.

Mr. Wordley understood, and was full of sympathy with her mood. He bought newspapers and magazines, and he let her alone and pretended to read; but every now and then she met his smiling glance, and knew by his nod of the head that he was rejoicing with her.

He had wired for a carriage and pair to meet them at Bryndermere, and Ida leant back and tried to be patient, then to look unconcerned and calm and composed; but she uttered a little cry and nearly broke down when the carriage stopped at the familiar gate, and Jessie, who was standing there, with her hair blown wild by the wind, forgot the inequalities of their positions, and catching her beloved young mistress to her bosom crooned and sobbed over her.

Jason stood just behind, balancing himself first on one foot, and then on the other, in his efforts to get a glimpse of Ida, and she stretched out her arm over Jesse's shoulder and shook the honest hand which had grown hard and horny in her service. Jessie almost carried her mistress into the hall, where a huge fire was burning and threw a red and cheerful glow over the fading gilding and grey-toned hangings.

"Oh, miss, how thin you be!" she said at last, as, with clasped hands, she surveyed Ida from top to toe anxiously and greedily. "Wherever have you been to look like that? But never mind, Miss Ida; you're back, and that's everything! And we'll very soon get some flesh on your bones and drive the sad look out of thee eyes." In moments of emotion and excitement Jessie forgot the schooling Ida had given her, and lapsed into semi-Westmoreland. "You've missed the moorland air, dearie, and the cream and the milk--I've 'eard it's all chalk and water in London--and I suppose there wasn't room to ride in them crowded streets; and the food, too, I'm told it ain't fit for ordinary humans, leave alone a dainty maid like my sweet mistress."

"Yes, you shall fatten me to your heart's desire, Jessie," said Ida. "I suppose I don't look of much account; I've been ill. But I shall soon get well. I felt, as we drove along the moor, with the wind blowing on my cheek, as if I had not breathed since the hour I left. And now tell me everything--all--at once! Rupert? There's no need to ask about the dogs." Donald and Bess had not yet ceased to tear at her in frantic efforts to express their delight. "Are you glad I've come back, Donald?" she asked in a low voice as she knelt and put her arms round his neck and nestled her face against his, and let him lick her with his great, soft tongue. "Ah, if you are only half as glad as I am, doggie, your heart must be half breaking with the joy of it. And if I'm lean, you are disgracefully fat, Bess. Don't tell me you've missed me, for I don't believe it."

It was some time before Jessie could drag her upstairs; and the sight of her old room, as cheerful as the hall, with the huge fire, almost unnerved her, and when she was alone she sank upon her knees beside the bed in a thanksgiving which was none the less deep and fervent for its muteness.

When she came down the dinner was ready and Mr. Wordley was standing in front of the fire awaiting her. She was glad that Jason had not had time to procure a new livery, was glad of the old shabbiness of the room, that its aspect was not yet changed, and that it greeted her with all its old familiarity, Mr. Wordley would not let her talk until she had made, at any rate, a pretense of eating; but when they had gone into the drawing-room, he drew a chair to the fire for her, and said;

"Now, my dear, I am afraid I shall have to talk business. I shall be too busy to come over to-morrow." He laughed. "You see I have left all my other clients' affairs, to come after my stray lamb: I expect I shall find them in a pretty muddle. Now, my dear, before I go I should

like you to tell me exactly what you would like to do. As I have explained to you, you are now the mistress of a very large fortune with which you can do absolutely what you like. Would you like to live here, or would you like to take a house in London, or go abroad?"

Ida looked up a little piteously.

"Oh, not go to London or abroad!" she said. "Can I not live here? If you knew how I feel--how the sight of the place, the thought that I am under the old roof again--"

She looked round the faded, stately room lovingly, wistfully, and Mr. Wordley nodded sympathetically.

"Of course you can, my dear," he said. "But equally o' course, you will now want to restore the old place. There is a great deal to be done, and I thought that perhaps you would like to go away while the work was being carried on."

Ida shook her head.

"No, I would like to stay, even if I have to live in the kitchen or one of the garrets. It will be a delight to me to watch the men at work; I should never grow tired of it."

"I quite understand, my dear," he said. "I honour you for that feeling. Well, then, I shall engage an architect of repute, the first in his profession"--he rubbed his hands with an air of enjoyment--"and he shall restore the old place, with a respect and reverence. I think I know the man to employ; and we will start at once, so that no time may be lost, I want to see you settled in your proper position here. The thought of it gives me a new lease of life! Of course, you will want a proper establishment; more servants both in the house and out of it; you will want carriages and horses; both the lodges must be rebuilt, and the old avenue opened out and put in order. Heron Hall was one of the finest places in the county and it shall be so again."

"And Jessie shall be the housekeeper and Jason the butler," said Ida, with a laugh of almost child-like enjoyment. "Oh, it all seems like a dream; and I feel that at any moment I may wake and find myself at Laburnum Villa. And, oh, Mr. Wordley, I shall want some more money at once. I want to send the Herons a present, a really nice present that will help them, I hope, to forget the trouble I caused them. Poor people! it was not their fault; they did not understand." Mr. Wordley snorted.

"There is one topic of conversation, my dear Miss Ida, I shall be compelled to bar," he said. "I never want to hear Mr. John Heron's name again. As to sending them a present, you can, of course, send them anything you like, to the half of your kingdom; though, if you ask me whether they deserve it--"

"I didn't ask you," said Ida, with a laugh, putting her hand on his arm. "If we all got our deserts, how sad it would be for everyone of us."

Mr. Wordley grunted.

"To-morrow I shall pay a sum of money into the bank for you, and you

will have to drive over and get a cheque-book; and you can amuse yourself by drawing cheques until I come again."

He lingered as long as he could, and kept the carriage waiting some time; but at last he went and Ida was left alone to face the strange change in her fortune. She sat before the fire dreaming for a few minutes, then she wandered over the old house from room to room; and every room had its memories and associations for her. In the library she could almost fancy that her father was sitting in the high-backed chair which was still drawn up in its place to the table; and she went and sat in it and touched with reverent, loving hand the books and papers over which he had been wont to bend. She stood before his portrait and gazed at it with tear-dimmed eyes, and only the consciousness of the love she had borne him enabled her to bear his absence. As she passed through the hall the newly risen moon was pouring in through the tall window, and, followed by Donald and Bess, who had not left her for a moment, she opened the great hall door and went on to the terrace, and walking to the end, stood and looked towards the ruined chapel in which her father had buried his treasure.

Up to this moment she had been buoyed up by excitement and the joy and pleasure of her return to the old house; but suddenly there fell a cloud-like depression upon her; she was conscious of an aching void, a lack of something which robbed her heart of all its joy. She had no need to ask herself what it was: she knew too well. Her old home had come back to her, she was the mistress of a large fortune, she stood, as it were, bathed in the sunshine of prosperity; but her heart fell cold and dead, and the sunshine, bright as it was, well-nigh dazzling, indeed, had no warmth in it. She was a great heiress now, would no doubt soon be surrounded by friends. She had been poor and well-nigh friendless that day Stafford had taken her in his arms and kissed her for the first time; but, ah, how happy she had been!

Was it possible, could Fate be so cruel as to decree, that she should never be happy again, never lose the aching pain which racked her heart at every thought of him! She put the fear from her with a feeling of shame and helplessness. She would forget the man who left her for another woman, would not let thought of him cast a shadow over her life and dominate it. No doubt by this time he had quite forgotten her, or, if he remembered her, recalled the past with a feeling of annoyance with which a man regards a passing flirtation, pleasant enough while it lasted, but of which he did well to be a little ashamed.

She would not look in the direction of the trees under which he had stood on the night of the day she had first seen him; and she went in with a forced cheerfulness to tell Jessie, listening with wide-open eyes, of some of the strange things which had happened to her. All the time she was talking, she was beset by a longing to ask Jessie about Brae Wood and the Ormes; but she crushed down the idea; and Jessie was too intent upon hearing the story of her mistress's sojourn in London to have any breath or inclination to tell any of the dale news. Of course Ida did not speak of the disagreement at Laburnum Villa, but she gave Jessie an account of the accident and her experiences of a hospital ward; at all which Jessie uttered "Ohs" and "Ahs" with bated breath and gaping mouth. It was late before Ida got to bed, and later still before she fell asleep; for, somehow, now that she was back at Herondale the memory of that happy past grew more vivid; in fact, the whole place was haunted by the spectre of her lost love: and of all spectres this is the most sad and heart-possessing.

She was out on Rupert as early as possible the next morning, and it was difficult to say which was the more pleased at the reunion, he or his mistress. And oh, what a delight it was to ride across the moor and along the valley and by the stream; to see the cattle grazing and to hear the sheep calling to one another in the old plaintive way! It was almost difficult to believe that she had ever left Herondale that Laburnum Villa was anything but a nightmare and the Herons a dismal unreality.

Now, for some time, she avoided that part of the road where the opening of the plantation gave a view of the Villa; but she was drawn towards it at last, and she leant forward on her horse and looked across the lake at the great, white place shining in the autumn sunlight. It seemed very still and quiet, and there was no sign of life about the place; the lake itself was deserted save by one of the steamers on which were only a few passengers well wrapped-up against the now keen air. The appearance of the white, long-stretching place struck her with a sense of desertion, and desolation, and with a sigh she turned and rode away.

That afternoon, as she was coming in from the stable Jessie came running towards her.

"Oh, Miss Ida, there's Lord and Lady Bannerdale and Lady Vayne and two of the young ladies in the drawing-room."

"Very well," said Ida, quietly; and removing her right-hand gauntlet, she went straight into the drawing-room.

In accordance with her father's wish and her own, perhaps mistaken, pride she had avoided all these people hitherto; but there was no need to avoid them any longer; she was their equal in birth, and her newly discovered wealth effectually removed any cause for pride. Lady Bannerdale, a motherly and good-natured woman, came forward to meet her, and took her by both hands.

"My dear, we have come over at once to tell you how glad we are!" she said. "We heard the good news from Mr. Wordley, and neither I nor my husband could wait another day before we came to congratulate you."

Lady Vayne, too, held Ida's hand and looked at her with affectionate sympathy.

"And we felt the same, my dear," she said; "so you must not think us intrusive."

Ida shook hands with them all and rang for the tea. She was very quiet and subdued, but the little cold look of surprise with which she had at one time met their advances was now absent, and they could perceive that she was glad to see them.

"Our joy in the good news is not altogether unselfish and disinterested, my dear Miss Ida," said Lord Bannerdale. "That Heron Hall should be shut up and deserted, while there is so charming a mistress to represent the old family, was little short of a general misfortune. You cannot tell how anxious and concerned we have been about you--but we will say no more about that. I trust a brighter star has risen above the old house, and that it is entering upon brighter

fortunes. At any rate, let that be as it may, we want you to believe how delighted we are to have you back again, and under such happy auspices." "And we want to say, too, dear," said Lady Bannerdale, while Lady Vayne nodded assentingly, "that we hope you have really come back to us, that you will be one of us and let us see a great deal of you. Of course, under the circumstances," she glanced at Ida's black dress, "we are debarred from expressing our pleasure in festivity; but we hope you will come to us quite quietly, and very often, and that you will let us treat you as one of our own dear girls."

Ida murmured a suitable response; but though she was by no means demonstrative they were satisfied; and as they left they expressed that satisfaction to each other.

"Oh, yes, she was glad to see us," Lady Bannerdale said; "and I like her all the better for not meeting us half-way and for refraining from any gushing. Poor girl! I am afraid she has been very ill, and has felt her trouble very keenly. She is much thinner, and when she came into the room there was an expression in her face which touched me and made my eyes dim."

"We must look after her," remarked Lady Vayne. "There is something weird in the idea of her living there all alone; though, of course, her maid, Jessie, will take care of her."

Lady Bannerdale smiled.

"Ida Heron is one of those girls who are quite capable of taking care of themselves," she said. "How wonderfully calm and self-possessed she was. Most girls would have been rather upset, or, at any rate, a little flurried, meeting us all so unexpectedly; but she came into the room with the perfect unself-consciousness which marks--"

"The high-bred lady," finished Lord Bannerdale. "I wonder whether we realise how old a family the Herons is; we are all mushrooms compared with that slim, little girl, who is now the mistress of Herondale and an enormous fortune."

"We shall have to find a husband for her," remarked Lady Vayne, who was the match-maker of the locality.

Lord Bannerdale smiled.

"The trouble would be to get Miss Ida to accept him when you have found him," he said, shrewdly. "I have an idea she would be difficult to please; there is a little curl to those pretty lips of hers which is tolerably significant."

"Poor girl! There is time enough yet to think of such a thing," said Lady Bannerdale, reprovingly; but while she sat it, mother-like, she thought that her son, Edwin, would be home from a long tour in the East in a week or two; that he was particularly good-looking, and in the opinion of more persons than his mother, a particularly amiable and good fellow.

The next day there were more visitors; they all seemed as genuinely glad at her return, and they all made as genuine overtures of friendship. It was evident that Ida need not be alone in the world any longer, unless she wished to be. On the morning of the third day, as

she was riding to Bryndermere, with some shopping as an excuse, she met Mr. Wordley; a gentleman was sitting beside him who, Ida guessed, was the architect. He proved to be no less a personage than the famous Mr. Hartley. They had pulled up for the introduction close by the opening on the lake; and while the architect was exchanging greetings with Ida, his keen eyes wandered now and again to the Villa; and as Ida turned to ride back with them, he said:

"That is rather a fine place over there, Miss Heron; rather bizarre and conspicuous, but striking and rather artistic. New, too: whose is it?"

"Stephen Orme's place," replied Mr. Wordley, in rather a low voice.

"Oh," said Mr. Hartley, with a nod which struck Ida as being peculiarly expressive and significant, though she did not know what it implied.

The three went all over the old Hall and after lunch the great architect explained, with the aid of a sheet of paper and a pencil, his idea of what should be done.

"There need not be, there should not be, the least addition," he said. "What you want to do, Miss Heron, is, as Mr. Wordley says, restore: restore with all reverence. It is a superb piece of architecture of its kind and it must be touched with a gentle hand. If you are prepared to leave it all to me, I trust I may be able to make the present building worthy of its past. It will be a delightful task for me; but I must tell you frankly that it will cost a very large sum of money; how much I shall be able to inform you when I have got out my plans and gone into the estimate; but, at any rate, I can say emphatically that the place is worth the expenditure. Am I to have *_carte blanche_*?"

"Yes," said Ida; "I will leave it entirely in your hands."

This at least she could do with the money which her father had so mysteriously made: restore it, the house he had loved so well well, to its old dignity and grandeur.

The great architect, very much impressed not only by the Hall but its beautiful young mistress, left before Mr. Wordley, who wanted to talk over business with Ida. But he found her rather absent-minded and preoccupied and presently, in a pause, she said, with forced calmness:

"Is Sir Stephen Orme still at the Villa at Brae Wood, Mr. Wordley?"

He had been making some memoranda in his pocket-book and he looked up with a start and stared at her.

"Is Sir Stephen--My dear child, don't you know--haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" she asked, her face beginning to grow paler, her lips set tightly.

"God bless my soul, I'm surprised!" he exclaimed. "I thought everybody had heard the news. Sir Stephen is not living at the Villa, for a very grave and all-sufficient reason: he is dead, my dear."

Ida leant back in her chair and raised a screen which she held in her hand so that it shielded her face from his gaze.

"I did not know," she said, in a very low voice. "I had not heard, I have not seen any papers, or, if I have, only the advertisement part. Dead!"

"Yes," said Mr. Wordley; "poor man, he died suddenly, quite suddenly, in the middle of a grand ball; died of the shock."

"Shock?" she echoed.

He looked at her as if he found it hard to realise her ignorance.

"Yes; the shock of the bad news. Dear me! it seems so strange that you, a neighbour, so to speak, should not have heard the story of which all London--one might almost say all England--was talking. Sir Stephen was a great financier, and had just brought out a great company to work an important concession in Africa. He was supposed to have made an enormous sum of money by it; indeed, must have done so; but at the very moment of his success there came a stroke of bad luck; and the news of it was brought to him on the night of the ball he was giving in his splendid town house. The sudden reverse meant absolute ruin, and he fell dead with the cablegram in his hand. Shocking, was it not?"

Ida's lips moved, but she could not speak. The whole scene seemed to rise before her; but, naturally enough, her thoughts were concentrated upon one figure in it, that of Stafford.

"Then--then Mr. Stafford Orme is now the baronet, Sir Stafford?" she said in a scarcely audible voice. "No; he is now Lord Highcliffe. His father was raised to the peerage on the day he died--one night almost say the hour he died. That makes it the more unfortunate."

"Unfortunate? I do not understand. You say he is a peer?"

"Yes; but a penniless peer; and I can't imagine a more unpleasant and miserable position than his. His father died absolutely ruined; indeed, insolvent; though I suppose by his son's act of noble self-sacrifice a great many of the debts were paid."

"Tell me--I do not know," said Ida, as steadily as she could.

"Sir Stephen settled a very large sum of money upon the young man; but he refused to take advantage of it, and made over the whole sum, every penny of it, to the creditors; and left himself, I am told, absolutely penniless. Not that it mattered very much; because he is engaged to a Miss Falconer, who father is, I believe, a millionaire."

The colour rose to Ida's face, the hand which held the screen shook.

"And they--they are going to be married soon?" asked she.

"I don't know, I suppose not," replied Mr. Wordley, as he bent over his memoranda again; "Lord Highcliffe has disappeared, left England. No one seems to quite know where he has gone. It was a terrible collapse, and a tragic end, the great Sir Stephen's; but men of his trade always have to run such risks. By the way, I suppose the Villa will have to be sold."

"Sold?" echoed Ida. "I would like to buy it."

She spoke on the impulse of the moment; but Mr. Wordley did not seem at all surprised, and only smiled as he responded:

"I know no reason why you should not, my dear Miss Ida. I am not sure that it would be a good investment; but if you've a fancy for it, I will enquire into the matter. Yes; certainly you can buy if you want to do so."

Long after he had gone Ida sat, leaning forward in her chair and gazing at the fire. Stafford was now Lord Highcliffe, a peer, but poor and a wanderer. She started: was it really he whom she had seen on the cattle steamer? Then they had been near each other, had looked into each other's eyes! Perhaps she would never seem him again--but, ah, yes! it was quite probable she would, for was he not engaged to the wealthy Miss Falconer, and would he not come back to marry her? The following evening she received a short note from Mr. Wordley: it informed her that the Villa was not for sale. It had been purchased by Mr. Falconer for his daughter.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Within a few days she received invitations from the Bannerdales and Vaynes and the other county families, who were evidently possessed by the kind determination that she should become one of them. The dinner at Bannerdale Grange was quite *_en famille_*; she was made a great deal of; and if she had given them the least encouragement they would actually have petted her; but though Ida had lost something of her old pride and *_hauteur_*, caused by her isolation, she was still somewhat reserved, and, grateful as she was for their overtures of affection, she could not respond as fully as she would have liked. It was the same with the Vaynes and Avorys; they were all more than kind to her, and she longed to receive their attention with open arms; but she could not: the fact was, her wounded heart was so tender that it shrank even from the gentlest touch.

"The girl is all right," remarked Lord Bannerdale. "She has been in great trouble and it has hurt her very badly; and though she seems rather cold and reserved, she is more sensitive than most women: you must give her time."

Ida had resolved that though she could not altogether forget the great sorrow of her life, she would not brood over it. She knew that for her complaint there was nothing worse than idleness; and she sought employment for her mind and body with an eagerness that sometimes became almost feverish. When she was not visiting or receiving visits from, what might be called her new, friends, she was busy about the farm and the estate, and took long rides on Rupert accompanied as of old by the dogs. Very soon, too, Mr. Hartley began at the restoration; and Ida was deeply interested in the progress of the work. Then, again, the hunting season commenced, and to the delight of Sir Robert Vayne, the master, she appeared at the first meet: and, is it necessary to say? was in at the death. She enjoyed that first run more than she had enjoyed anything since the fatal morning she had lost both sweetheart and father; and she was very nearly happy as she rode home with a

crushed hat and a habit splashed with mud.

A week or two afterwards, Lord Bannerdale gave a hunt breakfast, and made a point of her being present; and she yielded though she would have preferred to have joined the meet at the coverts. As she rode up, Lord Bannerdale came down the steps to meet her; and by his side was a tall, good-looking young fellow whom Ida rightly guessed, by his likeness to his father, to be Lord Bannerdale's son. He had returned from his travels on the preceding night, was in perfect health and spirits, much tanned by the sun and rain, and seemed to possess his full share of the amiability of his amiable family. He stood, bare-headed, at Rupert's head and took Ida's hand to help her to dismount, and not only walked with her to the house, but contrived to sit beside her at the breakfast-table. His people had been talking to him of Ida, he was quite prepared to be impressed, and that he was so was evident before the meal had concluded. His mother paid particular attention to Ida, and Lord Bannerdale regarded the young pair approvingly.

Lord Edwin rode as straight as Ida herself; it was a magnificent run--of course, "the best run of the season"--and Lord Edwin, securing the brush, fastened it to her saddle. Those who saw the act--they were not many, for the pace had been fast and hard--exchanged significant glances. Lord Edwin was over at the Hall next day and displayed a keen interest in the restoration, and bent for some time over the plans which he had humbly begged Ida to show him. He was a modest young fellow, with more intelligence and good sense than generally goes with his age, and Ida liked him. It was inevitable that they should meet almost every day; it was almost as inevitable that he should fall in love with her; for she was not only the most beautiful girl in the county, but there was an element of romance in her loneliness and her fortunes which naturally appealed to him.

He went to his father one day and confided in him; but, though Lord and Lady Bannerdale were more than pleased, they begged him not to be too sanguine.

"Sanguine!" he exclaimed, colouring. "I live in a state of mortal fear and dread; for though I love her more every time I see her, I never leave her without feeling that my case is hopeless. There is something about Ida--oh, of course I can't explain!--but I feel as if I could no more speak to her of love than I could--could jump over this house."

"And yet she is so gentle and friendly," said Lady Bannerdale to encourage him.

The young fellow, wise in his generation, shook his head.

"That's just it, mother," he said, gravely. "She treats me as if I were a brother, quite a young brother; and I know that if I were to speak to her, to let her know how much I love her, it would mean the end of everything. I should never be able to see her again--and I could not stand that; for I am only happy when I am with her--and then I am miserable with the thought of having to leave her."

"You must be patient, my dear fellow," said Lord Bannerdale. "Ida Heron is a girl in a million, and she is worth waiting for."

"Oh, I'll wait," said Lord Edwin; "but sometimes I feel that all the

waiting in the world won't win her," he added, with a sigh.

One day--it was in the Christmas week which Ida had been prevailed upon to spend with the Bannerdales--Lord Bannerdale came in at luncheon-time with some news.

"I hear the Villa is to be occupied at Christmas," he said. "Mr. Falconer and his daughter are coming down to-day."

"Is there to be a house-party?" said Lady Bannerdale. "But I suppose not. No, there could not be, under the circumstances. Poor girl! Sir Stephen's death--I never can remember that he was Lord Highcliffe! --must have been a great grief and shock to her. She and her father will naturally wish to be quiet; but I suppose we ought to call. You have never seen her, I think, Ida?"

"No," said Ida, in the impassive, reticent way in which she always spoke and looked when on guard.

"An extremely beautiful woman," said Lady Bannerdale; "but she always struck me as being a remarkably cold one; though, of course, it may have only been manner. The present Lord Highcliffe, Sir Stephen's son, has been away some time now. I suppose he will come back soon, and they will be married. They will make a very handsome couple. You would like him, Edwin. I took a great fancy to him on the few occasions I met him; and I felt deeply sorry for his misfortunes. But there will be no lack of money when he and Miss Falconer are married, for her father is immensely rich, I believe. It would be very nice for all of us if Lord Highcliffe settled at the Villa; and I have an idea that Mr. Falconer has bought it for them."

Ida's heart sank, and she seized the first opportunity of getting to her own room. What hope of forgetfulness could there be for her, what chance of happiness if Stafford came back to the Villa to live, if she should be in hourly dread of meeting him? The thought haunted her though all the quiet Christmas festivities at the Grange; and she was glad to get back to the Hall, and away from the eyes which watched her, though they watched her with a friendly and affectionate regard.

In her daily rides she avoided the opening on the lake side from which the Villa was visible; and she would sometimes make a long _detour_ rather than go near the spot. On one occasion, when returning from Bryndermere, instead of crossing by the ferry she rode round by the other side of the lake, keeping well away from the Villa, lest she should meet anyone belonging to it. She had reached the top of the hill below which wound the road leading to the Hall, and after pausing to look at the magnificent view, was riding across a field, one of the outlying fields of her estate, when she saw a lady riding through a gate at the lower end. The blood rushed to her face and her heart seemed to stand still for a moment, for she saw that it was Maude Falconer; then her face grew pale and a wave of bitterness, grew over her, for she recognised the horse on which Maude was riding: it was Stafford's Adonis. Her first impulse was to turn aside and leave the field; but her pride revolted, and she kept her course, looking straight before her and trying not to see the graceful figure below her.

At sight of her, the blood had flown to Maude's face also, and she tried to check her horse; but Adonis, at any time rather more than she

could well manage, was fresh and too eager to join the other horse, and he carried her up the field against her will. The two met almost face to face, the horses exchanging friendly neighs. For a moment, while one could count twenty, the two rivals sat and looked at each other. Half unconsciously, Ida noticed the pallor and the worn look of the beautiful face, the wistful peevishness of the delicately cut lip; then suddenly Maude's face flushed, her eyes grew hard and scornful, and with something like a sneer she said, in a metallic tone:

"I beg your pardon, but are you aware that you are trespassing?"

A saint would have turned on such provocation; and Ida, being no saint, felt that her face was as crimson as the other girl's, and grew as hot of heart as of face. She set her lips tightly and tried to remain silent: surely it would be better, in every way better, to ride on without a word. But it was more than she could do: and she drew herself up and her eyes flashed back the challenge, as she said in a low but distinct voice:

"Pardon me, but you are mistaken. The land on which I am riding belongs to me." Maude grew pale again, and her lips set closely until the line of red almost disappeared.

"Is this not, then, part of the Villa estate?" she asked.

"No; it is part of the Herondale estate," replied Ida, rather more gently: for was it not horrible that she should be engaged in altercation with Stafford's future wife?

"Then I presume I have the honour of speaking to Miss Heron," said Maude, with an indefinable air, combining contempt and defiance, which brought the colour to Ida's face again.

"My name is Ida Heron; yes," she said.

"Then, if you are making no mistake, it is I who am trespassing," said Maude, "and it is I who must apologise. Pray consider that I do so most fully, Miss Heron."

"No apology is necessary," said Ida, still more gently. "You are quite welcome to ride over this or any part of Herondale."

Maude gave a little scornful laugh.

"Thanks, it's very good of you!" she said, haughtily, and with that covert offensiveness of which, alas! a woman alone is capable. "I do not think I shall have any desire to avail myself of your kind permission; the public roads and the land belonging to my father's house will, I think, prove quite sufficient for me. I am the daughter of Mr. Falconer, of the Villa at Brae Wood."

Ida inclined her head slightly by way of acknowledgment and adieu, and without another word rode on towards the gate at the bottom of the field which opened on to the road. Adonis who had been delighted to meet his old friend, promptly followed; and, though Maude Falconer tried her hardest to check him and turn him, he, inwardly laughing at her efforts, trotted cheerfully beside Rupert, and continued their conversation. Maude was half mad with mortification, and, quite unable to leave Ida's hated side, she raised her whip and struck Adonis across

the face. The horse, who had never received such a blow before in his life, stopped dead short, falling back almost on to his haunches, then reared straight up and in a moment of temper tried to throw her off; indeed, she must have fallen but Ida, always cool at such moments, swept sideways, caught Adonis's bridle and brought him on all fours. Maude was instantly jerked forward on to the horse's neck in a humiliating fashion, but recovering her seat, sat trembling with passion.

It was impossible not to pity her, and Ida in her gentlest and quietest of voices, said: "I will wait here, will not go through the gate until your groom comes up. Your horse will be quite quiet then. If I might venture to say so, I think it would be wise not to strike him across the head; very few horses can stand it; and this one is high-bred and exceptionally spirited--"

She was stopped by Maude's scornful laugh.

"Really, I ought to feel very much obliged to you, Miss Heron!" she said; "and my sense of obligation is almost as great as my amazement at your frankness--and assurance! May I ask you to be good enough to release my horse's reins?"

Ida's hand fell from the reins, and her face grew crimson; but before she could have retorted, even if she had intended doing so, Maude struck the horse again; it turned and dashed across the field, kicking and plunging violently, with Maude swaying perilously in the saddle.

Ida waited until the groom--it was Pottinger--had gained his mistress's side and got hold of the horse; then, with no thought of bravado but simply with the desire to get away from the spot, she put Rupert at the gate and leapt into the road.

CHAPTER XL.

Ida rode home all quivering with the pain of her meeting with Maude Falconer. At first it seemed to her that she must leave Herondale--for a time, at any rate; that it would be impossible for her to run the risk of meeting the beautiful woman who had stolen Stafford from her; but, as she grew calmer, her pride came to her aid, and she saw that to run away would be cowardly. Herondale was her home, had been her home long before the Villa had sprung up, and to desert it because of the proximity of Maude Falconer would be almost as bad as if a soldier should desert his colors.

But for the next few days she did not leave her own grounds. She grew pale and listless, and Lady Bannerdale, when she came to look her up, noticed the change in her, but was too tactful to make any remark upon it.

"We have missed you so much, my dear," she said, affectionately. "Indeed, my husband has been quite fidgety and irritable--so unlike him!--and Edwin has been worse, if it were possible. Men are a great trouble, my dear Ida. Though perhaps I ought not to say that of mine, for I count myself lucky in both husband and son. Edwin has scarcely

given me a day's trouble since he was a child. I really think, if I were asked what are the best gifts bestowed by the fairy godmother, I should say 'a good digestion and a temper to match,' and I am quite proud of Edwin's strength and amiability. But even he has been somewhat of a trial for the last few days; so, my dear girl, do come over and help me manage them."

Ida smiled rather absently, and her ladyship glided smoothly from the subject.

"Since we last saw you we have called at the Villa," she said, "and we were fortunate enough to find Miss Falconer at home. She is alone there in that huge palace of a place, for her father has gone back to London; and, though I was never very much taken with her, I could not help pitying her."

"Why?" asked Ida, not absently now, but in her quiet, reserved manner.

"She looks so--well, actually so unhappy," replied Lady Bannerdale. "She was in mourning, and her face--she is really an extremely beautiful girl!--was like marble. And her reception of me was almost as cold. I am afraid that she has had more trouble than we are aware of, there was such a preoccupied and indifferent air about her. It occurred to me that she was fretting for her absent _fiance_, Mr. Stafford--oh, dear me! I shall never remember to call him Lord Highcliffe!--and I resolved to carefully refrain from mentioning him; but you know how stupid one is in such a case, how one always talks about lameness in the presence of a man with one leg; and in the midst of a pause in the conversation, which, by the way, was nearly all on my side, I blurted out with: 'Have you heard from Mr. Stafford Orme lately, Miss Falconer?' 'I suppose you mean Lord Highcliffe, Lady Bannerdale?' she said, turning her cold, blue eyes on my scarlet face. 'He is in Australia, and is well. I do not hear very often from him. He is leading a very busy life, and has little time for letter-writing, I imagine.' Of course I got myself away as soon as I could after that, and I'm afraid I left a very bad impression upon Miss Falconer."

Ida said nothing, but leant forward and stirred the fire, which may have caused the colour which glowed for a moment or two on her face.

"I am sure I don't know why the young man should have rushed off to the other end of the world: or why he doesn't rush back again and marry the lady of his heart, who has enough money for both of them, and would make an extremely handsome and stately countess. By the way, have you ever seen the present Lord Highcliffe, my dear?" "Yes, I have seen him," Ida replied in the tone which closes a subject of conversation. "Shall I give you some more tea? No? Would you like to see how the workmen are getting on? I think they are working very quickly. They will want this part of the house presently, and I have an idea of going away for a time; perhaps abroad," she added, though she had put the idea away from her until this moment, and it was only Lady Bannerdale's talk of Maude Falconer which started it again in her mind.

Lady Bannerdale, looked alarmed.

"Oh, don't do that, my dear!" she said. "If you are obliged to turn out of the house, why not come to us? It would be so kind and sweet of you."

Ida sighed a little wearily.

"Oh, I don't suppose they will insist upon ejecting me," she said. "I think I can persuade them to leave me two or three rooms."

Lady Bannerdale went home and dropped her bomb-shell in the presence of Lord Bannerdale and Edwin.

"Ida rather thinks of going abroad," she said in a casual way at the dinner table.

Lord Edwin was raising his wine glass to his lips, but arrested it half-way and set it down again; and his handsome face grew long and grave.

"Oh! We shall miss her," remarked Lord Bannerdale, lamely, and avoiding looking in his son's direction.

Not another word was said; but the next day Lord Edwin came into Lady Bannerdale's room with that affectation of ease and indifference which never yet deceived a mother.

"I'm going to call on Miss Heron, mother," he said. "Any message?"

Lady Bannerdale looked at him, her brow wrinkled with motherly anxiety. There was nothing in the world she desired more than his happiness; and she knew that the marriage with Ida would be in every way desirable: the girl was one in a thousand, the Bannerdale estates almost joined Herondale; both she and her husband were fond of Ida, who, they knew, would prove a worthy successor to the present mistress of the Grange; but just because it seemed so desirable and Lord Edwin's heart was so passionately set upon it, the mother was anxious. She saw that he was dressed with extreme care, and that his face was unusually grave.

"You will give Ida my love, Edwin, please, and tell her--" She turned away that he might not see her anxiety. "That is all; but it means a great deal, as you know, Edwin. I--I wish you every happiness, my dear boy!"

"Thank you, mother," he said, by no means in an unmanly way. "My happiness or unhappiness rests with her."

When he arrived at the Hall, Ida was just going out for a ride. She turned back with him to the drawing-room, thinking that he had brought a message from his mother, probably a definite invitation to stay at the Grange, and in her mind she had already decided to decline it. As he happened to stand with his back to the window the gravity of his face did not enlighten her; and with something like a start she received his first words.

"Miss Heron, my mother says that you have some thought of leaving Herondale, of going abroad. If that is so, I cannot let you go without--without my speaking to you; so I have come over this afternoon to tell you, as well as I can, what I have on my mind and my heart. I'm not very good at expressing myself, and I'm handicapped in the present instance by--by the depth of my feeling. Of course I'm trying to tell you that I love you. I thought you might have seen it," he said, with a touch of wonder at her start and flush of surprise. "But I see you have not noticed it. I love you very much indeed; and I feel that my only

chance of happiness lies in my winning you for my wife. I don't know there's any more to be said than that, if I were to talk for a month. I love you, and have loved you for a long time past." A few weeks, a few months are "a long time" to youth when it is in love! "The very first day I saw you--but I needn't tell you that, only I like you to know that it isn't a sudden fancy, and one that I shall get over in a hurry. I don't feel as though I shall ever get over it at all; I don't know that I want to. Please don't speak for a moment. There was something else I wanted to say. I'd got it all arranged as I came along, but the sight of you has scattered it."

Ida had been going to speak, to stop him; but at this appeal she remained silent, standing with her hands closing and unclosing on her whip, her eyes fixed on the ground, her brows drawn straight. The coldest woman cannot listen unmoved to a declaration of love, and Ida was anything but cold.

"I only wanted to tell you," he went on, "that my people are very anxious that you should say 'yes.' Both my father and mother are very fond of you--I think you know that and--" he stammered a little here for the first time--"and--well, there are the estates. You won't mind my saying that both you and I have to think of them; they belong to us and we belong to them, and--if we were married--But I don't lay much stress upon the estates being so close. I'd come and ask you to marry me if I were as poor as a church mouse or you hadn't a penny. It just comes to this: that I love you with all my heart and soul, that if you'll marry me I shall be the happiest man, and my people the proudest people, in England."

There was a warm flush on his handsome face, an eager look in his bright eyes, and he had pleaded his cause very well, in an outspoken, manly way, which never fails to appeal to a woman. Ida was moved; the crop nearly snapped in her hands, and her eyes grew moist. He saw it, and tried to take her hand, but she, though she did not move, shook her head very gently but very resolutely.

"No," she said, in a low voice, "I--I want to tell you, Lord Edwin, how proud I am at the honour you have paid me. Like yourself, I am not good at expressing my feelings--though, indeed, I think you have done yourself an injustice: you have spoken, told me very well--and I am very grateful. I wish I could say 'yes.'"

"Ah, say it!" he implored her, eagerly.

She shook her head again, and lifting her eyes and looking at him straightly but sadly, she said in a still lower voice:

"Lord Edwin, I do not love you."

"I never said, thought, you did," he responded, promptly. "Why, you've only known me such a short time, and I'm not such a conceited bounder to think that you've fallen in love with me already. I only want you to let me try and win your love; and--I think I shall do so," he said in a modest but manly way, which would at once have won Ida's heart--if it had not been won already. "If you will only give me some hope, just tell me that I've a chance, that you'll let me, try--"

Ida smiled a sad little smile.

"If I said as much as that--But I cannot. Lord Edwin, you--you have told me that you love me, and it would not be fair--ah, please don't try to persuade me! Don't you see how terrible it would be if I were to let you think that I might come to care for you, and I did not do so."

"For God's sake, don't say 'no,'" broke from him, and his face paled under the tan.

She turned away from him, her eyes full of tears which she dared not let him see.

"I--I must have time," she said, almost desperately. "Will you give me a day, two days?" she asked, quite humbly. "I want to do what you want, but--I want to think: there is something I should have to tell you."

He flushed to the roots of his hair.

"If it's anything that's happened in the past, anyone else--of course, loving you as I do, I have seen that there has been something on your mind, some trouble besides your father's death--but if it is past, I don't mind. I know I can teach you to forget it, whatever it is. Ida, trust yourself to me."

She drew away from him.

"Give me two days," she said, with a catch in her breath.

He caught at the hope, small though it was.

"I will give you two days, twenty if you like," he said. "Only, while you are thinking it over, remember I love you with all my heart and soul, that my people will love you as a daughter, that--Oh, I won't say any more: I can't trust myself! I'll go now."

When he had gone Ida got on Rupert and rode to the top of the hill. There she pulled up and thought with all her heart and mind. She could not doubt his love; she could not but feel that if she surrendered herself to him he would, indeed, in time teach her to forget. She knew that it was her duty to marry; his word about the estates had not been spoken in vain. Yes; if she became Lord Edwin's wife, she would in time forget. But, alas! she did not want to forget.

Her love for Stafford was still as strong as ever, and with its bitterness was mingled a sweetness which was sweeter than life itself. And yet how great a sin it was, how shameful a one, that she should love a man who was pledged to another woman, who was going to marry her!

She came in late for dinner, and could scarcely eat. Her reason said "yes," her heart said "no:" and she knew that she ought to listen to her reason and turn a deaf ear to the still voice in her heart. She paced up and down the drawing-room, pale and wan with the fight that was going on within her. Then suddenly she resolved that she would accept him. She would not keep him in suspense: it would not be fair--it would be a cruel requital of his love and generosity. She went to the writing-table, and hurriedly, as if she were afraid of hesitating, she drew a sheet of paper towards her and wrote:

"Dear Lord Edwin--" She had got thus far when Donald and Bess, who had

been lying beside the fire, sprang up and ran to the door barking loudly. She laid down the pen and opened the door mechanically; the moonlight was streaming through the window in the hall; the dogs bounded to the front door still barking vociferously. Still, mechanically, she let them out, and they rushed across the terrace and over the lawn to the group of trees beside the footpath. Thinking that they heard Jessie, whom she had sent to Bryndermere, Ida, half-unconsciously glad of the interruption, followed them slowly across the lawn.

Their barking ceased suddenly, and convinced that it was Jessie, she went on to add something to her message. Then, suddenly, she saw a tall figure standing in the shadow of the trees. It was a man, and Donald and Bess were jumping up at him with little whines of pleasure. Smitten by a sudden fear she stopped; but the man raised his head and saw her, and, with an exclamation, strode towards her. For an instant she thought that she was dreaming, that her imagination was playing her false, for it was Stafford's form and face. They stood and gazed at each other; her brain felt dizzy, her pale face grew paler; she knew that she was trembling, that she could scarcely stand; she began to sway to and fro slightly, and he caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER XLI.

She did not resist, but resigned herself to his embrace, as if he still had the right to take her in his arms, as if she still belonged to him. She had been under a great, an indescribable strain for several hours, and his sudden presence, the look in his eyes, the touch of his hands, deprived her of the power of thought, of resistance. To her and to him, at that moment, it was as if they had not been parted, as if the events of the last few months were only visionary.

With surrender in every fibre of her being she lay in his arms, her head upon his breast, her eyes closed, her heart throbbing wildly under the kisses which he pressed passionately upon her lips, her hair; the while he called upon her name, as if his lips hungered to pronounce it.

"Stafford!" she said, at last. "It is really you! When--" Her voice died away, as if she were speaking in a dream, and her eyes closed with a little shudder of perfect joy and rest.

"Yes, it's I!" he responded, in a voice almost as low as hers, a voice that trembled with the intensity of his passion, his joy in having her in his arms again. "Last night I came down by the first train--I waited at the station for it--I came straight from the docks." She drew a happy sigh.

"So soon? And you came straight here? When I saw you just now, I thought it was a vision: if the dogs had not been here--I remembered that dogs do not see ghosts. Oh, Stafford, it is so long, so very long since I have seen you, so sad and dreary a time! Tell me--ah, tell me everything! Where you have been. But I know! Stafford, did you know that I saw you the day you sailed?" she shuddered faintly. "I thought that was a vision, too, that it was my fancy: it would not have been the first time I had fancied I had seen you." He drew her to the bank,

and sinking on it held her in his arms, almost like a child.

"You saw me! You--there in London! And yet I can understand. Dearest, I did not hear of your trouble until a few weeks ago. But I must tell you--"

"Yes, tell me. I long to hear! Think, Stafford! I have not heard of you--I saw you at the concert in London one night--"

He started and held her more tightly.

--"I looked round and saw you; and when you turned and looked up towards me, it seemed as if you must have seen me. But tell me! Oh, I want to hear everything!"

The spell wrought by the joy of his presence still held her reason, her memory, in thrall; one thought, one fact, dominated all others: the fact that he was here, that she was in his arms, with her head on his breast as of old.

And the spell was on him as strongly; how could he remember the past and the barrier he had erected between them?

"I went to Australia, Ida," he said in a low voice, every note of which was pitched to love's harmony: it soothed while it rejoiced her. "I met a man in London, a farmer, who offered to take me out with him. You saw me start, you say? How strange, how wonderful! And I, yes, I saw you, but I could not believe my senses! How could it be my beautiful, dainty Ida, the mistress of Herondale, standing on the dirty, squalid quay! I went with him and worked with him on his cattle-run. Do you remember how you taught me to count the sheep, Ida? God, how often when I was riding through solitary wastes I have recalled those hours, every look of your dear eyes, every curve of those sweet lips--hold them up to me, dearest!--every tone of your voice, the low, musical voice the memory of which had power to set every nerve tingling with longing and despair. The work was hard, it seemed unceasing, but I was glad of it; for sometimes I was too weary to think; too weary even to dream of you. And it was sad business dreaming of you, Ida; for, you see, there was the waking!"

"Do I not know!" she murmured, with something like a sob, and her hand closed on his shoulder.

"My employer was a pleasant, genial man, my fellow-labourers were good fellows; I could have been happy, or, at least, contented with the life, hard as it was, if I could but have forgotten; if I could even for a day have lost the awful hunger and thirst for you; if I could have got you out of my mind, the memory of you out of my heart--but I could not!"

He paused, looking straight before him; and gazing up at him, she saw his face drawn and haggard, as if he still thought himself separated from her. Then, as if he remembered, he looked down at her and caught her to him with a sudden violence that almost hurt her.

"But I could not; you haunted me, dearest, all day and all night! Sometimes, when the men were singing round the camp fire, singing and laughing, the sense of my loss would come crushing down upon me, and I'd spring to my feet and wander out into the starlit silence of the

vast plains and spend the night thinking of all that had passed between us. At other times, a kind of madness would catch hold of me, and I'd join the wildest of the gangs, and laugh and sing and drink with the maddest of the lot."

She drew a long breath of comprehension and pity, and hid her eyes on his breast. He bent and kissed her, murmuring penitently:

"I'm not fit to kiss you, Ida. I did not mean to tell you, but--but, I can't keep anything from you, even though it will go against me. One night the drinking led to fighting and I stood up to a son of Anak, a giant of a fellow; and we fought until both of us were knocked out; but I remember him going down first, just before I fell, I went from bad to worse. The owner of the run--it was called Salisbury Plain--spoke a word of warning, and I tried to pull up, tried to take to the work again, and forget myself in it; but--ah, well, dearest, thank God you would not understand that you cannot know what a man is like when he is at odds with fate, and is bed-fellow with despair!"

"Do I not!" she murmured again, with the fullest understanding and compassion. "Do you think he is worse than a woman. On, Stafford, there have been times, black times, when I learned to know why some women fly to drink to drown their misery: and our misery is as keen, yes, keener than yours. For we are so helpless, so shackled; we have nothing else to do but think, think, think! Go on, dearest! I seem to see you there!"

"Thank God! you could not!" he said, huskily. "The black fit passed for a time, and I settled down to work again. One day there was an attack upon the farm by the blacks, as they are called. I was fortunately at home, and we managed to beat them off and save the stock. It was a valuable one and my employer, thinking too highly of my services, made me a present of half the value. It was a generous gift, a lavish one, and altogether uncalled for--"

"Oh, Stafford, do you think I don't know that you risked your life, as plainly as if I had been told, as if I had been there!" she said, her eyes glowing, her breath coming faster.

Stafford coloured and turned away from the subject.

"It was a large sum, and Mr. Joffler--that is the name of the owner of Salisbury Plain--advised me to invest it in a run of my own: there was enough to buy a large and important one. I went down to Melbourne to see the agents, and--is there no such thing as fate, or chance, Ida! Indeed there is!--as I was walking down one of the streets, I heard my name spoken. I turned and saw the stableman from the Woodman Inn, Mr. Groves's man--"

"Henry," murmured Ida, enviously: for had he not met her lover!

"Yes. He was surprised, but I think glad, to see me; and we went to a hotel and talked. For some time I couldn't bring myself to speak your name: you see, dearest, it had lived in my heart so long, and I had only whispered it to the stars, and in the solitary places, that I--I shrank from uttering it aloud," he explained with masculine simplicity.

Ida's eyes filled with tears and she nestled closer to him.

"At last I asked after the people, and nervously mentioned the Hall and--and 'Miss Ida.' Then the man told me."

His voice grew lower and he laid his hand on her head and stroked her hair soothingly, pityingly.

"He told me that your father was dead, had died suddenly, and worse--for it was worse to me dearest--that you had been left poor, and well-nigh penniless."

She sighed, but as one who sighs, looking back at a sorrow which has passed long ago and is swallowed up in present joy.

"I asked him where you were, and when he told me that you had left the Hall, and that it was said you--you were working for a livelihood, that you were in poverty, I--dearest, I felt as if I should go mad. Think of it! There was I, all those thousands of miles away, with all that money in my possession, and you, the queen of my heart, the girl I loved better than life itself, in poverty and perhaps wanting a friend!" He was silent a moment, and Ida felt him shudder as if he were again tasting the bitterness of that moment.

"When I had taken my passage," he went on, succinctly, "I sent Henry up to the run to fill my place, and with him a letter to explain my sudden departure; and the next day, Heaven being kind to me--I should have gone out of my mind if I had had to wait--we sailed. I stood at the bow, with my face turned towards England, and counted the days before I could get there and begin my search for you."

"And you came here, Stafford, first?" she said, to lead him on: for what an unspeakable bliss it was to listen to him!

"Yes; I knew that I should hear some tidings of you here. There would be a lawyer, a steward, who would know. I little thought, hoped, to see you yourself, Ida. I came from the station to-night to look at the old place, to walk where we had walked, to stand where we had stood. I stopped under the trees here and looked at the house, at the terrace where I had seen you, watched for you. I could see that men had been at work, and I thought that you had sold the place, that the new people were altering it, and I cursed them in my heart; for every stone of it is sacred to me. And then, as I stood looking, and asking myself where you were, the dogs came. Even then it did not occur to me that you were still here--at the Hall--and when I saw you--"

He stopped, and laughed shortly, as a man does when his emotion is almost too much for him.

"I'd made up my mind what to write to you; but, you see, I'd had no thought, no hope, of seeing you; and now--ah, well, it's hard to think of anything, with you in my arms! But see here, Ida, there isn't any need to say anything, is there? You'll come back with me to that new world--"

What was it, what word in the tender, loving speech that, like a breath of wind sweeping away a mountain mist, cleared the mist from her mind, woke her from her strange, dream-like condition, recalled the past, and, alas! and alas! the present!

With a low cry, a cry of anguish--one has heard it from the lips of a

sufferer waking from the anodyne of sleep to fresh pain--she tore herself from his arms, and with both hands to her head, stood regarding him, her face white, something like terror in her eyes.

"Ida!" he cried, rising and stretching out his hands to her.

She shrank back, putting out her hand as if to keep him off.

"Don't--don't come near me! Oh, how could I have forgotten!--how could I! I must have been mad!"

She wrung her hands and bit her lips as if she were tortured by the shame of it. His arms fell to his sides, and he stood and looked at her with his teeth set.

"Ida, listen to me! I--I, too--had forgotten. It--it was the delight of seeing you. But, dearest, what does the past matter? It is past, I have come back to you."

She turned to him with suppressed passion.

"Why did you leave me?" came painfully from her white lips.

His face grew red and his eyes fell before hers for a moment. At times his sacrifice of her to his father's need had seemed not only inexcusable, but shameful; the shame of it now weighed upon him.

"Ida, for God's sake listen to me!" for, as he had hesitated, she had turned from him with a gesture of repudiation. "Listen to me! There was nothing else for me to do; fate left me no alternative. My father--Ida, how can I tell you!--my father's good name, his reputation, were in my hands. He had done so much for me--everything! There has never been a father like him: my happiness stood between him and ruin--ah, not mine alone, but yours--and I sacrificed them! If you knew all you would forgive me the wrong I did, great as it was. I think now, if the time were to come over again, that--yes, I should have to do it!" he broke out. "I could not have stood by and seen him ruined and disgraced without stretching out my hand to save him."

"It was for your father's sake?" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Yes," he responded, grimly. "And it saved him--saved his good name, at any rate. The rest went--you have heard?"

She made a gesture of assent. He drew a long breath, and held out his hand to her.

"Can you not forgive me, Ida? If you knew what the sacrifice cost me, how much I have suffered. She here, dearest"--he drew still closer to her--"let the past go. It shall, I swear! There is a limit to a man's endurance, and I have passed it. I love you, Ida, I want you! Come back with me and let us live for each other, live for love. Dearest, I will teach you to forget the wrong I did you. It's very little I have to offer you, a share in the hard life of a farmer out there in the wilds; but if you were still the mistress of Herondale, instead of poor--"

Half unconsciously she broke in upon his prayer.

"I am still--what I was. I am not poor. My father was a rich man when

he died."

Stafford regarded her with surprise, then he moved his hand, as if he were waving away the suggestion of an obstacle.

"I am glad--for your sake, dearest; though for my own I would almost rather that you were as poor as I thought you; that I might work for you. Why do you stand and look at me so hopelessly. What else is there to divide us, dearest?"

Her lips opened, and almost inaudibly she breathed:

"Your honour."

He winced and set his teeth hard.

"My honour!"

"Yes. You have pledged your word, you have made your bargain--the price was paid, I suppose; you say so. Then in honour you belong to--_her_."

The colour flamed in his face and his eyes grew hot.

"You cast me off--you drive me back to her!" he said, scarcely knowing what he said.

"Yes!" she responded, faintly. "You belong to her--to her only. Not to me, ah, not to me! No, no, do not come near me, do not touch me! I had forgotten--I was mad!--but I have remembered, I am sane now."

Driven almost beyond himself by the sudden revulsion from joy and hope to doubt and despair, racked by the swift stemming of his passion, Stafford's unreasoning anger rose against her: it is always so with the man.

"My God! You send me away--to her! You--you do it coolly, easily enough! Perhaps you have some other reason--someone has stepped into my place--"

It was a cruel thing to say, even in his madness. For a moment she cowered under it, then she raised her white face and looked straight into his eyes.

"And if there has, can you blame me? You cast me aside--you sacrificed me to your father's honour. You had done with me," her voice vibrated with the bitterness which had been her portion for so many dreary months. "Was the world, my life, to cease from that time forth? For you there was--someone else, wealth, rank--for me was there to be nothing, no consolation, no part or lot in life! Yes, there _is_ one--one who is both good and noble, and--"

She broke down and covering her face with her hands turned away. Stafford stood as if turned to stone; as if he had lost the sense of sight and hearing. Silence reigned between them; the dogs who had been sitting watching them, rose and shivering, whined complainingly, as if they were asking what was amiss.

It was the woman--as always--who first relented and was moved to pity. She moved to the motionless figure and touched him on the arm.

"Forgive me! I--I did not mean to wound you; but--but you drove me too hard! But--but it is true. We cannot undo the past. It is _there_, as solid, as unmovable, as that mountain: _and it is between us_, a wall, a barrier of stone. Nothing can remove it. You--you will remember your honour, Stafford?" Her voice quavered for a moment but she steadied it. "You--you will not lose that, though all else be lost? You will go to her?"

He looked at her, his breath coming thick and painfully.

"My God! you--you are hard--" he broke out at last.

"I--am just! Oh, my dearest, my dearest!" She took his hand and laid it against her cheek, her lips. "Don't you see how much it costs me to send you away? But I must! I must! Go--oh, go now! I--I cannot bear much more!"

His hand--it shook--fell softly, tenderly on her head.

"God forgive me for the wrong I have wrought you, the tears I have caused you!" he said, hoarsely. "Yes, I daresay you're right, and--and I'll go! Let me see you go back to the house--One kiss, the last, the last! Oh, Ida, Ida, life of my life, soul of my soul!"

He caught her to him, and she lay in his arms for a moment, her lips clung to his in one long kiss, then she tore herself away from him and fled to the house.

Stafford went on to The Woodman, where Mr. Groves was surprised, and, it need scarcely be said, overjoyed to see him. To him, the young man was still "Mr. Stafford," and he eyed him with an amazed and respectful admiration; for though Stafford had never been a weakling, he had grown so hard and muscular and altogether "fit" that Mr. Groves could not refrain from expressing his approval.

"Ah, there is nothing like roughing it, Mr. Stafford, sir," he said. "I can tell in a minute when a man's 'hard' right through, and been doing square and honest work. It seems strange to us commoner people that you gentle folks should be so fond of going through all sorts of hardships and perils just for the fun of it; but, after all, it's not to be wondered at, for that's the kind of spirit that has helped Englishmen to make England what it is. But you're looking a little pale and worn to-night, sir. I've no doubt it's the want of dinner. If I'd known you'd been coming--but you know I'll do my best, sir."

He did his best, and Stafford tried to do justice to it; but it was almost impossible to eat. And he checked the almost overmastering desire to drink.

Ida had been right. He knew it, though the thought did not help to allay his bitterness. She had spoken the truth: he was still pledged to Maude. Mr. Falconer had paid the price demanded, and it was not his fault if it had failed to save Sir Stephen from ruin; the sacrifice Stafford had made had, at any rate, saved his father's good name from shame and reproach. Maude's father had performed his part of the bargain; Stafford had still to perform his. Ida was right; she had pointed out to him his duty, and if there was a spark of manliness left in him, he must do it.

He sat over the fire, close over it, as he had done in the backwoods many a night, smoking the old brier pipe that had cheered him in his hours of solitary watching, and thinking with a grim bitterness that it would have been better for him if he had been knocked on the head the night of the raid at Salisbury Plain. To be married to one woman, while he loved another with all his heart and soul: it was a cruel fate. But, cruel as it was, he had to bend to it. He would go straight to London and find Maude, redeem his promise, and save his honour.

Mr. Groves came into the room with a bottle of the port, and Stafford forced himself to show an interest in it and drink a glass or two.

"I suppose you'll be going up to the Villa to-morrow, sir?--I beg your pardon, I mean my lord; and I must apologise for not calling you so."

"Not 'my lord,'" said Stafford. "I have never used the title, Groves. Go up to the Villa? Why should I?" he asked, wearily. "It is closed, isn't it?"

Mr. Groves looked at him with surprise.

"No, sir. Didn't you know? Mr. Falconer bought it; and he and Miss Falconer have been staying there. She is there now."

Stafford turned away. Chance was making his hard road straight. After a sleepless night, worse even than some of the worst he had spent in Australia, and after a pretence at breakfast, he went slowly up to the Villa. Last night, as he had held Ida in his arms, something of the old brightness had come back to his face, the old light to his eyes; but he looked haggard and wan now, like a man who had barely recovered from a long and trying illness. He turned on the slope of the terrace and looked down at the lake, lying dark and sullen under a cloudy sky; and it seemed to him typical of his own life, of his own future, in which there seemed not a streak of light. A servant came to meet him. "Yes," he said, "Miss Falconer is in." She was in the morning-room, he thought. Stafford followed him; the man opened the door, and Stafford entered.

Maude was seated at a table writing. She did not turn her head, and he stood looking at her and seeing the record the weary months had left upon her face; and, even in his own misery, he felt some pity for her.

"Maude!" he said in a low voice.

She did not move for a moment, but looked straight before her wistfully, as if she could not trust her ears; then she turned and came towards him, with something like fear on her face. The fear broke up, as it were, and, stretching out her arms, she spoke his name--the accents of love fighting with those of doubt and a joy that dreaded its own greatness.

"Stafford! It is you!"

She pressed her hands to her heart for a moment, then she fell into his arm, half fainting.

CHAPTER XLII.

"Yes, my father bought the place," said Maude. "I asked him to do so, and he consented at once. I could not have let it pass to strangers. You see, I had been so happy here; it was here that you asked me to be your wife. And father has offered to settle it upon us," she blushed slightly, and her eyes became downcast. "He is no longer--opposed to our marriage; he knows that I would marry you if all the world cried 'No!'"

They had been sitting talking for nearly an hour. She had recovered from the shock of his sudden presence, and was seated beside him--so close that she could touch him with her hand--calm now, but with a glow in her usually pale cheek, a light in her eyes which had been absent for many a weary month past. He had given her, mostly in answer to her eager questions, a very abbreviated account of his life in Australia; telling her less even than he had told Ida; and it is needless to remark, saying nothing of the cause of his hasty return.

"Ah, well," she said, drawing a long breath, "it is all over now, Stafford. Ah, it is good to have you back safe and sound. You are well, are you not? You look pale and thin and--and tired. But I suppose it's the journey. Yes, it is all over; you need not wander any longer; you have come back to me, have you not, Stafford? If you knew how I have missed you, how I have longed for you! And now you will settle down and take your place in the world and be happy! Do you think I shall not make you happy, Stafford? Ah, do not be afraid;" her eyes sought his and her hand stole towards his arm.

He rose and leant against the mantel-shelf.

"I only know that I am quite unworthy of you, Maude," he said, gravely.

She looked up at him and laughed.

"Are you? Who cares! Not I! I only know that I love you so dearly that if you were the blackest villain to be found in fiction, it would make no difference to me."

He was filled with shame and self-reproach, and turned away his head that she might not see the shame in his eyes.

"How did you come?" she asked, presently. "If my father were only at home! You could stay with us, then."

"I am staying at The Woodman," he said.

She regarded him with some surprise.

"Last night! Late, do you mean? Did you meet, see anyone?"

There was a dawning suspicion in her eyes, and she regarded his averted face keenly; she noticed that he hesitated and seemed embarrassed.

"No one you know," he replied, feeling that it was impossible for him to speak Ida's name.

"How do you know?" she asked, with a curious smile. "Who was it?"

"I met Miss Heron of Herondale," he said, trying to speak casually, and wondering what she would say, hoping fervently that she would ask no more questions.

The blood rushed to her face, her eyes flashed and her lips tightened; but she did not speak, and moved away to the window, standing there looking out, but seeing nothing. He had gone to her the moment he had returned: what did it mean? But she dared not ask; for she knew instinctively how slight was the chain by which she held him. With an effort she restrained the rage, the fierce jealousy, which threatened to burst forth in violent reproaches and accusation; and after a minute or two she turned to him, outwardly calm and smiling.

"Have you made any plans, Stafford?" she asked. "My father was speaking of your return; he thought of writing to you. Dearest, there must be no reserve between us now--now that you have come back. See, I speak quite frankly. My father thinks--thinks that our marriage should take place at once. He has withdrawn his objection, and--and you will not thwart him, Stafford? It is hard for me to have to say this; but--but you will understand."

"I understand," he said in a low voice. "I am grateful to your father. Our marriage shall take place as soon as you please. It is for you to fix the date, Maude."

She nestled against him and touched his coat with her lips.

"I am ashamed of myself," she murmured; "but, ah, well! love casteth out shame."

A servant knocked at the door.

"The horse is round, miss," he announced.

"I was going for a ride," she said; "but I will send the horse away--unless you will ride with me. You will, Stafford?"

"Certainly," he said, glad of the interruption to this tete-a-tete which had been to him a positive torture.

"I will not be five minutes," she said, brightly. "You'd like to go over the house? They shall bring you something to drink in the smoking-room, or here, if you like: you are lord and master."

She went up to her room, and, when she had rung for her maid, paced up and down feverishly. He had gone to that girl before he had come to her! She was racked with hate and jealousy, which was all the harder to bear because she knew she must hide them within her bosom, that no word or look of hers must let him see that she knew of her rival. Some time, after they were married, she would tell him: but not till she was safe. She got into her habit quickly and went down to him. He was standing where she had left him, and as she entered the room she saw before he had time to turn to her with a smile, how haggard and harassed he looked.

"You have been quick," he said.

"Yes; I am learning one of my wifely duties: not to keep my husband waiting." They went out, and Pottinger, standing by the horses, touched his hat and grew red with joy at sight of his master.

"Well, Pottinger! Glad to see you!" said Stafford; and he was genuinely glad. "You're looking well, and the horse is too. Halloo! you're put the side-saddle on Adonis," he added, as he went up and patted the horse.

Pottinger touched his hat again.

"Yes, sir; Miss Falconer's been riding him, and I did not know that I ought to change the saddle. I can do so in a minute--"

"No, no," said Stafford; "never mind. I will ride the hunter, as you have the saddle on him. You like Adonis, Maude?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "Though I'm not quite sure he likes me," she added, with a laugh.

Stafford put her up, and noticed, with some surprise, that Adonis seemed restless and ill at ease, and that he shivered and shrank as he felt Maude on his back.

"What is the matter with him?" he said. "He seems fidgety. Does the saddle fit?"

"Yes, sir," said Pottinger, with a half-nervous glance at Maude, followed by the impassive expression of the trained servant who cannot speak out.

"He is troublesome sometimes," said Maude; "but I can manage him quite easily."

"Oh, yes," assented Stafford; "he is as quiet as a lamb; but he is highly bred and as highly strung."

As they were starting, Pottinger murmured:

"Don't curb him too tightly, miss."

Maude ignored the warning; and she and Stafford rode out. The rain had ceased, the clouds had passed away, and in the joy of his nearness, her spirits rose, a feeling of triumph swelled in her bosom.

"How little I thought yesterday, even this morning, that we should be riding side by side, Stafford," she said. "How little I thought I should have you back again, my own, my very own! Don't all these months you've been away seem like a dream to you? They do to me." She drew a long breath. "Let us ride across the dale."

"You will find it wet there, had you not better keep to the road?"

"No, no," she said; "Adonis is dying for a gallop; see how he is fretting."

Stafford looked at the horse curiously. He was champing his bit and throwing up his head in a nervous, agitated manner which Stafford had never seen him display before.

"I can't make the horse out," he said, more to himself than Maude.
"Perhaps he'll be all right after a gallop."

They crossed the road at a trot, which was an uneven one on Adonis's part, and got on the moor. Maude, still in high spirit, still buoyed up by her feeling of triumph, talked continuously; telling him some of the London news, planning out their future. They would have a house in London, Stafford should take his proper place in the world; they would step back to the high position which was his by right, as a peer of the realm. Stafford was scarcely listening. A question was haunting him, a question which he could not thrust from him: he was going to marry Maude Falconer, going to take the hard and stony road of duty which Ida, in her noble way, had pointed out to him. Ought he not to tell Maude about Ida and his broken engagement to her; would it not be better for both of them, for all of them, if he were to do so? He would have to tell her that he could not live at the Villa; she would want to know the reason; would it not be better to tell her?

He raised his head to begin; when suddenly he saw, going up the hill in front of them, a horse and horsewoman. She was walking up slowly, and, long before her figure stood out against the clear sky, he saw that it was Ida. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that his heart stood still. That she should have appeared before him in his sight, at such a moment, while he was riding beside his future wife--his future wife!--filled him with bitterness. His face must have paled, or Maude must have seen him start, for she looked at him and then turned her head and looked in the direction in which his eyes were fixed. She recognised Ida instantly; the colour rushed to her face; her hand tightened on her rein spasmodically; for a moment she felt inclined to turn aside, to ride away, escape from the girl she hated and loathed. And then she was moved by another impulse; the demon of jealousy whispered: "This is the moment of your triumph; why not enjoy it to the full; why not let her feel the bitterness of defeat? There is your rival! Let her see with her own eyes your triumph and your happiness." The temptation was too great for her, and she yielded to it.

"Who is that riding up the hill?" she said, controlling her voice admirably. "It is Miss Heron, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," he said, as impassively as he could.

Her lips curled scornfully at his assumption of indifference. "I have seen her and met her," she said, "but I have not been introduced to her. Let us overtake her, and you can introduce me. I should like to know her."

He looked straight before him, his face grave and set.

"Is it worth while?" he said in a low voice. "Some other time--"

"Why not now?" she asked. "We can catch her quite easily."

The moment had come for him to tell her.

"Not now," he said, huskily. "I have something to tell you, Maude; something you ought to know before--before you make Miss Heron's acquaintance."

She turned to him with a low laugh.

"Do you think I don't know?" she said, between her teeth. "I have know all along! I read the letter you wrote to her--I got it--stole it, if you like--from Pottinger. I have known all along--do you not think I have been very patient, very discreet? Even now I bear no malice. I can forget the past, forget and forgive. Why should I not, seeing that I am assured of your love and good faith? You will see how completely I forget, how little importance I attach to your fancy for the girl; a fancy which I am sure you have quite outgrown. Oh, I can trust you! We will join Miss Heron by all means."

His face was dark and heavy.

"Do not, Maude, until you've heard all," he began, but with a scornful laugh that yet had something doubting and desperate in it, she sent Adonis on. He sprang forward nervously and shivering under a stroke from her whip, and swiftly lessened the distance between him and Rupert, who heard his approach before Ida did, and who neighed a welcome. Ida turned and saw who was following her, saw Stafford just behind, and gathering her reins together she rode Rupert quickly to the top of the hill.

"Miss Heron!" cried Maude, in a voice of covert insolence, but almost open triumph. "Miss Heron, stop, please!"

Ida did stop for a moment, then, feeling that it was impossible for her to meet them, that day, at any rate, she let Rupert go again. By this time, Stafford had almost gained Maude's side. His face was dark with anger, his teeth clenched tightly. He knew that Maude intended to flaunt her possession of him before Ida. In a low but perfectly distinct voice, he said:

"Stop, Maude! Do not follow her." She looked over her shoulder at him, her face flushed, her eyes flashing.

"Why not?" she demanded, scornfully. "Is she afraid, or is it you who are afraid? Both, perhaps? We shall see!"

Before he could catch her rein she had struck Adonis twice with the sharp, cutting whip, and with a shake of his head and a snort of rage and resentment, he stood on his haunches for a moment, then leapt forward and began to race down the hill. Stafford saw that the horse had bolted, either from fear or anger; he knew that it would only increase Maude's peril if he galloped in pursuit behind her; he, therefore, checked his horse and made, in a slanting line, for a point towards which he judged Adonis would go. Maude was swaying in her saddle, in which she could only keep herself by clutching at the pommel; it seemed every moment as if she must fall, as if the horse itself must fall and throw her like a stone down the steep hill.

Ida, the moment she had got over the top of the hill, had ridden quickly, and, of course, quite fearlessly and safely, and had got Rupert so well in hand, as usual, that when she heard the clatter behind her, and, turning, saw the peril in which Maude had put herself, she was able to pull Rupert up. It was almost a repetition of what had occurred the other day; but this time Maude Falconer's peril was infinitely greater; for her horse was half mad and tearing down the steep hill-side, rendered doubly dangerous by the loose stones, and was

all too evidently indifferent whether he stood or fell. And yet another risk lay just below; for William had been digging in that spot for stones to mend the bank, and even if the maddened horse saw the hole, it was more than probable that he would not be able to pull up in time.

Such moments as these form the criterion of true courage. There was only one way in which Ida could save, or attempt to save, the white-faced woman who was drawing towards her at breakneck speed. What she would have to attempt to do would be to ride straight for the oncoming horse, swerve almost as she reached it, and keep side by side with it until she could succeed either in turning it away from that horrible hole, or stop it by throwing it. She did not hesitate for a moment.

It may be said in all truth that at that moment she forgot that the woman whose life she was going to save was Maude Falconer; she did not realise the fact--or, if she did, she was indifferent to it--that she was risking her own life to save the woman who had robbed her of Stafford. There was the life to be saved, and that was enough for Ida. She slipped her foot almost out of the stirrup, felt Rupert's mouth firmly but gently, leant forward and whispered a word to him, which it is very likely he understood--perhaps he saw all the game even before she did--and, with an encouraging touch of her hand, she let him go.

He sprang forward like an arrow from the bow. As they drew near the flying horse, Ida shifted her whip to her left hand, so that her right should be free, and, leaning as far in the saddle as she could with safety, she made a snatch at Adonis's rein at the moment she came alongside him. She would have caught the rein, she might have stopped the horse or turned it aside--God alone knows!--but as her fingers almost grasped it, Maude, steadied in her seat by the nearness of her would-be rescuer, raised her whip and struck Ida across the bosom and across the outstretched hand. The blow, in its finish, fell on Adonis's reeking neck. With a snort he tore away from the other horse and swept onwards, with Maude once again swaying in her saddle. Ida gazed at her in speechless terror for an instant, then, as if she could look no longer, she flung up her arm across her eyes.

A moment afterwards a cry, a shrill scream, that rang in her ears for many a day afterwards, rose above the clatter of Adonis's hoofs, and before the cry had died away horse and rider had fallen with awful force into and across the hole. Then came a dead silence, broken only by the sound of the horse's iron shoes as he kicked wildly and pawed in a vain attempt to rise. Ida rode up, and flinging herself to the ground, tried to approach the struggling animal. But, indeed, it was horror and not fear that struck her motionless for a moment; for horse and rider were mixed in awful confusion, and already Maude Falconer's graceful form was stained with blood, and battered by the madly kicking animal, now in its death-throes.

An instant after, before she could recover from her paralysis of terror--the whole affair was one of a moment and had passed as quickly as a flitting cloud--Stafford was by her side, and at work extricating woman from horse. It was not an easy task, for though Adonis was now dead, a part of Maude's body lay under his shoulder; but with utmost herculean strength Stafford succeeded in getting her clear, and lifted her out of the hole on to the grass. Kneeling beside him, Ida, calm now, but trembling, raised Maude's head on her knee and wiped the blood from the beautiful face. Its loveliness was not marred, there was no

bruise or cut upon it, the blood having flown from a wound just behind the temple.

Stafford ran to the brook for some water and tried to force a few drops through the clenched teeth, while Ida bathed the white brow. Suddenly a tremor ran through him, and he put his hand over Maude's heart. It was quite still; he bent his cheek to her lips; no breath met them. For a moment or two he could not speak, then he stayed Ida's ministering hand, and looking up at her, said:

"It is of no use. She is dead!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

The ball which Lady Clansford always gave about the middle of the season is generally a very brilliant affair; but this year it was more brilliant and, alas! more crowded than usual; for Lord Clansford was connected, as everybody knows, with the great Trans-African Company, and, as also everybody knows, that company had recovered from the blow dealt it by the rising of the natives, and was now flourishing beyond the most sanguine expectations of its owners; the Clansford coffers, not to mention those of many other persons, were overflowing, and Lord Clansford could afford a somewhat magnificent hospitality.

Howard, as he made his way up the crowded stairs, smiled cynically to himself as he caught sight of a little knot of financiers who stood just outside the great doors of the _salon_. They were all there--Griffenberg, Wirsch, the Beltons, Efford, and Fitzharford; and they were all smiling and in the best of humours, presenting by their appearance a striking contrast to that which they had worn when he had seen them on the night when the ruin of the company had been conveyed in that fatal cablegram. Having succeeded at last in forcing an entrance, and bowing over the hand of his noble hostess, which must have sadly ached, and returned her mechanical words of welcome with a smile as galvanic as her own, Howard sidled his way along the wall--a waltz was in progress--and collided against the "beautiful and bounteous" Bertie, who was mopping his brow and looking round despairingly for his partner.

"Halloo, Howard!" he exclaimed. "Pretty old scrimmage, isn't it? Should have thought your languid grace would have kept out of this sight. I've given a dance to a girl, but dash my best necktie if I can find her: might as well look for a needle in a bottle of hay--as if any fellow would be such a fool as to put a needle in such a place. I'm jolly mad at losing her, I can tell you, for she's the prettiest girl in the room, and I had to fight like a coal-heaver to get a dance from her. And now I can't find her: just my luck!"

"What is the name of the prettiest girl in the room?" asked Howard, languidly.

"Oh, it's the new beauty, of course," replied Bertie, with a superior little shrug at Howard's ignorance. "It's Miss. Heron of Herondale, the great heiress."

Howard pricked up his ears, but maintained his languid and

half-indifferent manner.

"Miss Heron of Herondale," he said in his slow voice. "Don't think I've met her."

"No? Dessay not. She doesn't go out much, and Lady Clansford thinks it's rather a feather in her cap getting her here to-night. When you see her you won't say I've over-praised her. She's more than pretty, and she'd be the bright and particular star of the season if she didn't keep in her shell so much."

"Herondale," said Howard, musingly. "That's the place near the Villa, isn't it? I don't remember anyone of her name as having been amongst the company there."

"No," said the omniscient Bertie. "She was living in retirement with her father then; but Stafford must have known her--made her acquaintance. Don't you remember that she was present when poor Miss Falconer met with her fatal accident?"

Howard remembered very well, but he said "Ah, yes!" as if the fact had just been recalled to him.

"Her father died and left her a hatful of money--that's ever so many months ago--and now she's come up to London; and I tell you, Howard, that it is with her as it was with the friend of our school-boy days: 'I came, "I was seen," I conquered!' Everybody is mad about her. She is staying with some country people called the Vaynes, people who would have passed, like a third _entree_, unnoticed; but they are deluged with invitations, and 'All on account of Eliza.'"

"Do not be vulgar, Bertie," said Howard, rebukingly.

"Well it was vulgar" admitted Bertie, "especially applied to such an exquisite creature as Miss Heron--Oh there she is with young Glarn! They say that he is more than ready to lay his ducal coronet at her feet--confound the young beggar!--but she doesn't give him the least encouragement to do so. Look! she doesn't appear to be listening to him, though he's talking for all he's worth. And it's the same with all of us: we're all dying with love for her, and for all she cares, we may die!"

Howard looked across the room and caught a glimpse of a tall, slim figure, a pale, ivory-tinted face with soft and silky black hair, dressed in the simplest fashion, and dark, violet eyes half hidden by their long lashes. It was a lovely face and something more--an impressive one: it was a face, once seen, not easily forgotten. Perhaps it was not its beauty, but a certain preoccupied expression, a sadness in the eyes and in the curve of the expressive lips, which made it so haunting a one. She was exquisitely dressed, with a suggestion of mourning in the absence of diamonds and a touch of pale violet in the black lace frock.

"She is very beautiful," said Howard; "and I can condole with you sincerely on the loss of your dance."

"Yes, it's nearly over now," said Bertie, with a sigh. "Talking of Stafford," he said, after a minute, "when did you hear from him last?"

"To-day," replied Howard. "I have his letter in my pocket."

"Still out in the backwoods?" asked Bertie. "Poor old chap! awful piece of luck for him! If his father had only gone on living and waited until that blessed company had come right side uppermost, he'd have been a millionaire. Look at Griffenberg and the rest of 'em!" he nodded towards the group of financiers; "they're simply rolling in money, rolling in it."

"Yes, he's still in the backwoods, as you call it," responded Howard; "and from what he says I should think he's having a pretty hard time of it; though, of course, he doesn't complain: there are some men still left who don't complain." There was a pause, during which he had been thinking deeply, then he said: "So Stafford knew Miss Heron, did he?"

Bertie looked mysterious and lowered his voice.

"Yes. Look here, old chap, I shouldn't say this to anyone but you; but you are Stafford's great and only chum, and I know I can speak safely; to tell you the truth--"

"Now you are going to tell me anything but the truth," murmured Howard, with a sigh of resignation.

"Oh, no, I'm not," retorted Bertie. "What there is of it is the truth and nothing but the truth. It isn't much. But I've a kind of idea that Stafford knew our new beauty better than we think. Do you remember how he used to leave our party and go off by himself? Not like Stafford, that, was it? And one of our fellows remarked to me that one day coming home from a ride he saw Stafford riding with a lady. He couldn't swear to him, but--well, Stafford's hard to mistake. Then, again, how was it he and Miss Heron were in at Maude Falconer's death; and why did he bolt off to Australia again directly after the funeral? And why is it that she keeps us all at arm's length, even that confounded Glarn?"

Howard's eyes grew sharp; but he smiled languidly, as he said:

"You ought to edit a riddle book, Bertie, my son. I think we should get across the room now. I should be greatly obliged if you would introduce me to Miss Heron."

"All right," said Bertie, "come along! But I warn you, you'll only meet with a cold reception; just a smile and a word and then she'll look away as if she'd forgotten your existence, and had not the least desire to remember it."

"Oh, I'm used to that," said Howard. "Lead on."

As they crossed the room, Howard's acute brain was hard at work. There was something in Stafford's conduct, a tone in his letters which Howard could never understand; but now, in the light of Bertie's mysterious communication, he thought he discerned a solution of the problem over which he had pondered for many an hour. Stafford had been unhappy during the whole of his engagement to poor Maude; he had exiled himself again immediately after her death, though, as Howard knew, he was well enough off now to return to England and to live, at any rate, in a quiet way. If there was anything in Bertie's suggestion--Howard pursed his lips with an air of determination. If there was anything, then he would find it out and act accordingly. Stafford's happiness was very

precious to Howard, and in the quiet, resolute, cynical way characteristic to him, he resolved that if that happiness lay in the hands of this beautiful girl with the sad eyes and lips, he, Howard, would do his best to persuade her to yield it up.

His reception was certainly not encouraging. Ida glanced at him, and returned his bow with a slight inclination of her head, and then looked away as if she had done all that could be demanded of her; and it was with a faint surprise, perceptible in her face, that she heard Howard say, in his slow, and rather drawling voice:

"There is a conservatory behind that glass door, Miss Heron; it is not very far from the madding crowd, but it must be cooler than here. Will you let me take you to it?"

She hesitated for a moment, but something in the steady regard of Howard's calm and sleepy eyes impressed her.

"Very well," she said; "but I think I'm engaged for this next dance, and I must not go far away. I have already broken two or three engagements."

"In that case you can come without hesitation," he said. "It is the first crime that costs a pang, having passed that the downward course is easy and painless."

He led her to a seat, and with the cool determination which Stafford always admired in him, began at once; for he did not wish to give her time to slip on her woman's armour; he intended to strike quickly, unexpectedly, so that she should not be able to conceal the effect of the blow.

"Almost as hot as in Australia," he said, languidly, but watching her out of the tail of his eye. "I suppose you were never there, Miss Heron? Nor have I been; but I've got a letter in my pocket from a very great friend of mine who is roughing it on a cattle-run, and he has so often described the country to me, that I almost feel as if I knew it. By the way, I think you know him. He is my dearest and closest friend-- Stafford Orme, as I always call him and think of him; of course I am speaking of Lord Highcliffe."

The problem was solved: he saw her face suddenly flush, and then as suddenly grow pale. So sharp had been the blow, its effect so overwhelming, that her fan fell from her hand. Howard, as he restored it to her, seized the opportunity of looking her full in the face, and assurance was made doubly sure.

This girl did hold his friend Stafford's happiness in her hand.

Ida was silent for a moment, because she knew she could not control her voice, could not keep it steady; then, with a quickened breath, she said:

"Yes, I knew Mr. Orme--Lord Highcliffe."

"Then I hope you liked him," he said, mercilessly; for there was no time for mercy; some idiot of a dancing-man would come and take her from him the next minute. "I express the hope, because I myself like and admire him very much indeed. He is a splendid fellow, and one of

those instances of a good man struggling with adversity. Are you fond of poetry, Miss Heron?"

Ida's bosom was heaving, she was fighting for calm. She knew now who it was with whom she was speaking; it was the friend, the cynical Mr. Howard, of whom Stafford had told her; she had not caught his name at the introduction. She regarded him with intense interest, and inclined her head by way of assent.

"I never think of my friend, Lord Highcliffe, without recalling those significant lines of William Watson's." He looked at her; and he said that his eyes were fine and impressive ones when he showed them plainly. "These are the lines:

"I do not ask to have my fill
Of wine, of love, or fame.
I do not for a little ill
Against the gods exclaim.

"One boon of fortune I implore,
With one petition kneel:
_At least caress me not before
Thou break me on thy wheel_!"

Her lip quivered and her long lashes concealed her eyes.

"They are fine lines," she said.

"They fit my friend Lord Highcliffe's case to a T. He was for a time the spoiled darling of fortune; she caressed him as she caresses few men--and now she is breaking him on her wheel; and the caresses, of course, make the breaking all the harder to bear. He writes most interesting letters--I don't know whether you care about farming and cattle-raising and that kind of thing; for my own part I am sublimely ignorant of such matters. I can lay my hand upon my heart and say I know a cow from a horse, but nothing shall induce me to go further. If you are interested, I would venture to offer to show you one of his letters; there is nothing in them of a private character."

Her heart beat still more quickly; he saw the eager light flash in her eyes; and his hand went to his breast coat-pocket; then he said, blandly:

"I will bring one next time we meet. Are you going--where are you going to-morrow, Miss Heron? I, too, shall be going there probably?"

She put her hand to her lips with a little nervous gesture: she was disappointed, she thought he was going to show her a letter, then and there.

"I am going to Lady Fitzharford's to-morrow afternoon to try over some music with her," she said, hesitatingly.

"Ah, yes; Lady Fitzharford is a good friend of mine," he said. "Shall you be there at, say, four?"

"Yes," said Ida in a low voice. "Did you say that Mr. Orme--Lord Highcliffe is well?"

"Oh, yes; he is all right now," replied Howard; "he has been ill--a fever of some kind or other, I believe--but he has recovered; he is a monster of strength, as you may have heard. But I am afraid he is very unhappy: something on what he calls his mind--he is not very intellectual, you know--"

Ida shot an indignant glance at him which made Howard chuckle inwardly.

--"But the best, the noblest of good fellows, I assure you, Miss Heron. I'd give anything to see him happy. Ah, here comes a gentleman with hurried gait and distracted countenance; he is looking for his partner; alas! it is you! We meet, then, at Lady Fitzharford's to-morrow. I will bring my friend's letter; but I do sincerely hope it won't bore you!"

He bowed his adieux and left her, and left the house; for the ball had no further interest for him. All the way home he pondered over the case. That she loved Stafford, he had not the very least doubt; her eyes, her sudden blushes and colour, her voice had betrayed her.

"He has loved her all the time; and I am a purblind ass not to have seen it!" he said to himself, with cynical self-contempt, as he climbed up to his rooms.

They were modest but comfortable rooms in Picadilly--and he struck a match before he opened the door; but it was not necessary for him to have got a light, for there was one in the room already, and by it he saw a long-limbed figure which had been sitting in his easy-chair, but which rose and exclaimed:

"Howard!"

Howard held his breath for a moment, then said, with exaggerated calm.

"I'm glad you found the cigars and the whiskey, Stafford. Have you been waiting long: sorry to keep you."

Howard laughed as he wrung his friend's hand.

"I thought I should surprise you, old man; but I flattered myself," said Stafford.

"Nothing surprises me; but I'll admit to being rather pleased at seeing you," drawled Howard, pushing him gently back in the chair. "Have you--er--walked from Australia, or flown?"

Stafford stared.

"Oh, I see! You mean I came so quickly on my letter? I started directly after I posted it, but lost the mail at Southampton. I--I got a restless fit, and was obliged to come."

"Got it now?" drawled Howard. "Or perhaps the journey has cooled you down. Have you eaten? I can get something--"

"Yes, yes," said Stafford, rather impatiently. "Got dinner at the hotel. I came on here at once: heard you'd gone to a dance, and thought I'd wait. I want you to do something for me, Howard--I'll tell you all my news some other time--not that there's much to tell: I'm well and nourishing, as you see. I want you to go down to Bryndermere. I dare

not go myself--not yet. I want you to get all the information you can about--about a lady: Miss Heron of Herondale--"

"How very strange!" said Howard innocently. "Do you know, I have just had the pleasure of meeting a Miss Heron of Herondale--"

Stafford sprang to his feet.

"Where?" he demanded hotly.

"At Lady Clansford's ball, which I have just left. May I ask why you are so interested in Miss Heron as to send me on such a mission?"

"I love her," said Stafford briefly. "I can not live without her--I've tried, and I've failed. I've loved her since--oh, I can't tell you! I want to know what she is doing. I want to know if she has forgotten me; if there is any hope for me!"

Howard looked at him compassionately, and whistled softly.

"My dear old man," he said, with an air of reluctance, "you fly rather high! The lady you speak of is the belle of the present season; she is the admired of all admirers; belted earls, to say nothing of noble dukes, are at her feet. She was the star of the ball which I have just left. If I may say so, I think you were very unwise to leave such a peerless pearl to be snapped up--"

Stafford turned away from him and stifled a groan.

"I might have know it," he said. "The belle of the season! Well, why not? There is no one more beautiful, no one more sweet. Who am I that she should remember me? What am I--"

"Rather a foolish young man, if you ask me," said Howard. "If I'd been in love with such a peerless creature, I shouldn't have left her to go tramping after cattle in Australia."

"What else could I do?" exclaimed Stafford, sternly. "Have you forgotten that I was not set free, that when--when death"--his voice dropped--"set me free, that it was no time to speak of love to another woman? I was obliged to go; but I've come back--too late, I suppose! Don't say any more; let us talk of something else: you are looking well. Howard."

"Yes, it's no use crying over spilt milk," said Howard, with a sigh. "Oh, I'm all right. Look here, I'll put you up to-night; we're got a spare room. Now, mix yourself another drink and light up another cigar--not bad, are they--and tell me all you've been doing."

* * * * *

At a quarter to four the following day Howard put in his appearance at Lady Fitzharford's house in Eaton Square.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she said: everybody was pleased to see Howard; "you are just the man I want. That sweet creature, Miss Heron, is coming here directly to try over some songs with me--I'm going to sing at that Bazaar, you know--and as you know something of music--is there anything you don't know, Mr. Howard?--you can give us your

opinion."

"With the greatest pleasure, my dear lady," responded Howard; "but on two conditions: one, that you don't take my opinion; the other, that you leave me alone with Miss Heron, directly she comes, for a quarter of an hour."

Lady Fitzharford stared at him.

"Are you going to propose to her?" she asked, with a smile.

"No," he replied; "I am tired of proposing."

"Well, I don't think she would accept you," said Lady Fitzharford, "she has had the most wonderful offers; she has refused Lord Edwin, the Bannerdales' son and heir, and, I believe, the Duke of Glarn--"

"I know, I know!" said Howard, more quickly than usual. "I can hear her on the stairs. Oh, vanish, my dear lady, an' you love me!"

Lady Fitzharford had scarcely left the room, laughing, and not a little puzzled, before the servant admitted Ida. She was pale, and the look of sadness in her eyes was even more palpable than on the preceding night. She blushed for an instant as she gave her hand to Howard.

"Lady Fitzharford has gone to get her music, Miss Heron," he said; "she bade me make her excuses; she will be here presently. It is so good of you to remember our appointment! When I came to think it over, I was quite ashamed, do you know, at the obtrusive way in which I pressed the subject of my friend, Lord Highcliffe's condition, upon you. But mind, though, I do think you would feel interested in his letter. He has a knack, unintellectual as he is"--Ida rose readily to the fly again and flashed a momentary glance of indignation at him from her violet eyes--"a child-like way of describing scenes and incidents in a kind of graphic style which--What an idiot I am!" he broke off to exclaim, he had been feeling in his pocket; "I have actually left the letter at home! Please forgive me. But perhaps you will regard my lapse of memory as affording you a happy escape."

Ida's lips trembled and her eyes became downcast. Disappointment was eloquently depicted on her face.

"No, I am sorry," she said. "I--I should have liked to have seen the letter."

"Would you really?" he purred, penitently, as she turned away to the window. "Then I will go and get it; my rooms are only a short distance."

"Oh, pray, don't trouble," she said, so faintly that Howard found it difficult not to smile.

"Not at all," he said, politely, and left the room.

As he went down the stairs he glanced at his watch, and muttered:

"Now, if the young idiot isn't up to time--"

At that moment there was a knock at the hall-door, the servant opened

it, and Stafford entered with a gloomy countenance and a reluctant gait.

"I've come," he said, rather morosely; "though I don't know why you should have insisted upon my doing so--or what good it will do me to hear about her," he added, in a low voice, as they followed the servant up the stairs.

As the man touched the handle of the door, Howard said:

"Go in, my dear fellow; I've left my pocket-handkerchief in my overcoat in the hall: back in a moment."

With a frown of annoyance, Stafford hesitated and looked after him; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he obeyed and entered the room.

They uttered no cry of surprise, of joy. They stood for a moment looking at each other with their hearts in their eyes. It was the moment that bridged over all the weary months of waiting, of longing, of doubts and fears, of hope that seemed too faint for hope and but a mockery of despair.

He had no need to ask her if she loved him, her face was eloquent of the truth; and her eyes reflected the love that glowed in his. He had got hold of her hand before she knew it, had drawn her to him, and, utterly regardless of the fact that he was in a strange house, that they might be interrupted any moment, he kissed her passionately with all the passion that had been stored up for so long.

"Ida," he said, as he bent over her and pressed her to him, "I have come back, I cannot live without you--ah, but you know that, you know that. Is it too late? It is not too late?"

"No; it is not too late," she whispered. "I--I did not know whether you would come. But I have been waiting; I should have waited all my life. But the time has been very long, Stafford!"

* * * * *

At the end of the quarter of an hour for which Howard had bargained, Lady Fitzharford opened the door of the inner room softly, so softly, that seeing Miss Heron in the arms of a stalwart young man, and apparently quite content to be there, her ladyship discreetly closed the door again, and going round by the inner room found Mr. Howard seated on the stairs. She looked at him with amazement, well-nigh bewilderment.

"Are you mad?" she exclaimed, in a whisper.

Howard smiled at her blandly.

"No," he said, with a backward jerk of his head, "but they are. I'm told it's a delicious kind of madness worth all your sanity. Do not let us disturb them. Come and sit down beside me until the time is up," he glanced at his watch; "they have still three minutes."

With a suppressed laugh she sat down beside him.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said, "to play me such a

trick. But, oh, how happy they look!"

"I am ashamed of myself, my dear, lady," he said; "but I should have been more ashamed of myself if I hadn't. Do they look happy? We will go in and see presently. It will be my great reward. But I should like to give them another five minutes, dear lady, for I assure you, on my word of honour, that I was once young myself."

THE END.

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