THE WARD.

BY

Mrs. Frances (Milton) Trollope

MRS. TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

"THE WIDOW BARNABY," "THE VICAR OF WREXHILL,"

"ONE FAULT," ETC.

LONDON:

G. ROUTLEDGE & CO. FARRINGDON STREET;

NEW YORK: 18, BEEKMAN STREET.

1857.

LM

THE WARD.

CHAPTER I.

It was on the 28th of November, 1835, at a quarter past six P.M., that Mr. Thorpe, of Thorpe-Combe, Herefordshire, being seated with a large wood fire, having the loppings of about three trees piled upon it, on one side of him, and a little round table bearing a single coffee-cup and two wax lights on the other, rang the bell beside his fire-place with very considerable violence. He waited for three quarters of a minute, with his eyes fixed upon the parlour door, before he rang again; but not perceiving during the whole of that time any indication whatever that his summons was likely to be attended to, he raised his hand a second time, and pulled the rope with even more energy than before. This last peal produced an instantaneous effect; for long ere its sound had ceased in the servants' hall his housekeeper stood before him.

"You will get punished for it some day, Mrs. Barnes, you may depend upon it you will," said the old gentleman. "I am as sure as that you stand there before me, that you will have to call a coroner's inquest to sit upon my body. It is always sure to happen where people, old and sick people like me, can get no one to come near them when they ring."

"I think, sir, that you must get some younger and activer body to answer your bell," replied Mrs. Barnes demurely, "for I know I don't move so brisk as I used to do. . . . But if you'd be pleased to have a valet, sir, like other gentlemen, it would be easy to find one as could run along the passages quicker than I can."

"You just say that to plague me, because you know I hate valets, Mrs. Barnes. . . . But I must bear it, I must bear it all, I know that; so no more about it, if you please, but listen to what I have got to say to you. You know I hate talking, so don't make me speak twice, but mind every word. I am going to invite a very large party here to pass the Christmas holidays. Do you hear what I say?"

The housekeeper looked in the old gentleman's face with great anxiety. "I am afraid, indeed, that you don't feel well!" she said; "let me send for Mr. Patterson to feel your pulse, sir, shall I?"

"You are a fool, Barnes, and I am another for keeping you as my prime minister so long after I became convinced that you were little

better than an idiot. But I cannot change just now, and therefore I beg, if you please, that you will listen with all the wits you have got to the orders I am going to give, and that, too, without fancying I am delirious."

"I beg your pardon, sir, indeed," replied the housekeeper with a courtesy; "but I certainly did fancy . . . . a large party, sir? Perhaps I did not quite understand you rightly. I dare say I made some mistake."

"Then take care, Mrs. Barnes, to understand me better now. Sit down, old friend; I am not delirious, Barnes, and yet I must have my house full of company this Christmas. Sit down when I bid you, and let us consult about it."

"But what shall we do for servants, sir? We have not got a soul but the gardener, and the bailiff, and the boy that cleans the knives and shoes, in the way of men-servants. What will the company do without servants, sir?"

"I know all that as well as you do, Barnes; but there is always plenty of time where there is plenty of money. I will have a dozen fellows all dressed up in green and yellow liveries before Christmas-day . . . . if I have a fancy for so many. Don't trouble yourself about that, good woman; I'll get servants."

"Why, I don't doubt you might, sir, if as you say you have a fancy for it. It is true enough that money can do anything . . . . if you choose to spend it."

"And this time, Mrs. Barnes, I do choose to spend it," replied her master. "I shall not think a thousand pounds at all too much for the party I wish to entertain."

The woman stared at him.

"Barnes!" said the old gentleman, placing his elbows on the arms of his ample chair, and looking earnestly in her face,—"Barnes! . . . . though it is very possible I may *not* die in my chair between ringing the bell and your opening the door to answer it, I do not think I shall live long. You know what the letter contained which I received last week; but you do not know, old friend, how heavily its contents weigh upon my heart."

"Well, sir, in that case a little company, perhaps, may do you good," replied the old woman; "and if so, I shall think no trouble too much in order to get all things suitable for them."

Mr. Thorpe smiled, and shook his head.

"That is not it, Barnes. . . . But there is no need to say any more about motives and reasons just now. It is possible that I may live some years yet, but I am doubtful about it, and I wish to see all my relations before I die."

"And very right you should, sir, I am sure; and if you will be pleased to give me your instructions I will do my very best to obey them," replied the good woman with sudden energy.

"Thank ye, Barnes, thank ye. The first thing will be to have all the rooms opened, aired, warmed, and set in order. Hire a dozen charwomen if you will, but let it be done by to-morrow night; and the next morning I'll get Sir Charles Temple here to give me his arm, and we will walk through them together, up stairs and down

stairs, and then say what is to be done next. How many women servants shall you want?"

"What is the number of the company to be?" inquired the old woman anxiously.

"I cannot say exactly, Barnes, because I don't know how many lads and lasses may have sprung up since I heard of them last,—something between a dozen and twenty, I should think."

"A dozen or twenty? . . . . Oh, goodness gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Barnes, clasping her hands. "A dozen or twenty! What in the earthly world shall I do with them?"

"Why, you foolish woman, cannot you remember the time when there was not a room in the house, up to the very garrets, that was not filled with guests?" replied her master. "Can't you remember that?"

"Well enough, sir, I can remember it; but think of the servants as was then! Oh, dear, sir! it was not the same place then."

"And think of the servants that are to be now, old woman, and teaze me no more. . . . Look about you, and hire what you want. I shall set Sir Charles to work for me about the men. I'll have . . . . that's all I have got to say, and I'm tired to death with talking. So go, will you, there's a good woman, and let me enjoy a little peace and quiet, if you can."

The housekeeper retreated, but lingered ere she closed the door. . . . "About Sir Charles, sir," said she, making a step backward into the room: "Didn't you say he was to be sent for?"

"Yes to be sure he is, foolish body!"

"And when, sir?"

"What does that signify, Barnes? How you do love to talk! . . . . I told you I should want him to-morrow morning as soon as I had finished my breakfast, and d'ye think I mean to fetch him myself? Do go away! My jaws ache with talking."

Mrs. Barnes now made a hasty courtesy and departed, having received one specific order that she was equally able and willing to obey; namely, to send a summons to Temple, on the morrow, requesting the presence of its master forthwith.

A clear, bright, sunny frost came happily on the following morning to brace the nerves of the household under the great and unwonted exertions to which the foregoing dialogue gave rise; and Mr. Thorpe, had he looked much about him as he passed from his sleeping apartment to his breakfast-room, might have marvelled to behold the vast results already produced by his powerful word. But he was not much given to such sort of investigations, and was quietly seated apart from the din he had caused, with one of his darling French Chronicles on a desk between his legs, and his still unfinished breakfast beside him, when the crunching of the hoar frost upon the gravel in front of the windows, by a step at once firm and light, caused him to look up, that he might behold, as he expected, the figure which he best loved to see, in the act of approaching his house door.

Nor was he disappointed. A young man, rather above the middle height, with a white shooting-jacket, considerably the worse for wear, rough brown gaiters that reached to the knee, clouted shoon, and a

fowling-piece on his arm, passed before the windows, nodding to the well-known arm-chair as he went by. In the next moment Sir Charles Temple was in the room.

"Your will, most absolute?" said the young man, standing erect before his venerable friend.

"My will?" repeated Mr. Thorpe, smiling; "yes, Charles, that is exactly the business in hand."

"I know it is," replied Sir Charles, "and you must pronounce it as quickly as you can, for I have two young farmers waiting for me on the top of the hill, with the dogs . . . . and you shall have larks and rabbit soup for a month if you will let me go."

"Oh dear! oh dear! Then why did you come at all? I want to have a long consultation with you, Charles, and not to sputter out half a dozen words while your curs stand yelping for you on the hill-side. Get along with you, do! I would rather not see you at all than in such a fuss."

"Will this evening do as well?" said the young man.

"No, indeed! . . . . Yes, yes, get you gone!" said Mr. Thorpe, looking out upon the sunny landscape.

Sir Charles Temple said nothing in reply, but rang the bell, and carefully placing his gun in a corner drew forward an arm-chair, and seated himself opposite to his old friend, in an attitude of very perfect repose.

It was a boy who now answered the bell; Mrs. Barnes being far too busy even to hear it.

"That's well, Jem. . . . You are the man I wanted," said the young baronet. "Run up to the top of Windmill Hill, will you, and tell Mr. Lloyd, and another young man that you will find there with some dogs, that they must go on without me . . . . for I am prevented from coming to them by business."

Jem made a leg, pulled his forelock, and disappeared.

"God bless you, Charles, for all your kindness to an old man!" said Mr. Thorpe, eyeing his companion affectionately; "but I am sorry you should lose this gaudy day. I'll answer for it that the wind cuts like a razor, but at your age sunshine makes up for all."

"Never mind the sunshine, neighbour Thorpe, if I can be of any use or comfort to you," said Sir Charles, taking up a splendid cat that lay upon the hearth-rug, and making a cradle for it with his arms. "Now let me hear what you have got to say to me."

"Now, is it not odd," replied the old man, pushing aside his reading-desk, "is it not odd, Sir Charles Temple, that an old fellow like me cannot make up his mind to do any single thing of the least importance, without consulting a young fellow like you? . . . . I must make my will, Charles, I must indeed. . . . . I don't think I shall live long. That is the job I want to talk about."

"You do not feel ill, do you, my old friend?" said the young man kindly. "I have seldom seen you look better than you do this morning. I won't let you take it into your head that you are ill."

"No, I do not feel ill. . . . . But that letter, Charles, that hateful letter will be the death of me."

"Make your will, Mr. Thorpe, at any rate," replied Sir Charles,

"It is a duty that no man should neglect, especially when, like you, he has a large unentailed property to dispose of. . . . . But as to that letter, my dear friend, you cannot surely persuade yourself that it conveyed to you any new information? Did you not . . . . ask yourself the question, did you not feel quite as certain that your son was dead before you received it as you do now?"

"No, Sir Charles, I did not,—certainly, I did not."

"If so, I am glad you have received it, for it must be better that you should know the truth beyond the power of doubting it. But I do not believe that any of those acquainted with the statements which had reached you before, entertained any doubt of the fact. I, for one, have never felt the shadow of a doubt."

"It may be so . . . . and the thing is easily accounted for. In no other was there any wish to find it false: my poor erring boy left no one but his father to care much whether he lived or died . . . . but even I can doubt no longer now. No one but a lawyer, Temple, could have got the fact, and the manner of his death, authenticated as it is here," continued Mr. Thorpe, drawing forth a letter from his pocket, and, for the second time, putting it into the hands of his young friend. "I am very glad that I made up my mind at last to send out an agent to the East Indies, properly qualified, to set the matter at rest. There can be no hope now, Charles . . . . no shadow of a chance, is there? not even for such a head as mine to work upon!"

"Most assuredly not, sir," replied Sir Charles, after attentively re-perusing the letter: "the date of his death, the malady which caused it, and the registry of his interment, are all recorded here with a legal precision that can leave no doubt; and I therefore fully agree with you that you did the best thing possible in employing your lawyer upon the subject. His professional sagacity has set the question at rest for ever."

"Yes . . . . I think so," said the old man. Then, after heaving one deep sigh as he replaced the letter in his pocket, he resumed the conversation in a more cheerful tone, saying, "Now, then, let us come back to the subject of my will. Is there any hope that you will at last listen to reason, Charles, and let me settle all I have upon you—is there any hope of this?"

"Not the slightest," replied the young man, laughing.

"You are an obstinate, wrongheaded boy," resumed Mr. Thorpe, "and very unkind to me, into the bargain. You know perfectly well that I love you better than any one left, and yet you refuse to let me serve you. If your estate were not so completely out at elbows, I would not ask you to let me repair it with mine; but as it is, you are guilty of great folly, to say the very least of it."

"Were not my estate so out at elbows, I should not have one hundredth part so great an objection to accepting what you offer. . . . . But, listen to me for one moment, my dear friend, while I just state the case as it stands between us, and then tell me if, in your heart and conscience, you think the bequest you propose would really serve me. My goodnatured father, and my thoughtless mother, contrived between them to cripple the Temple property so completely, as to

leave me with somewhat less than a thousand a year to keep up my beautiful old mansion-house, and enact the part of a long-descended young baronet. My dear mother, who, notwithstanding her extravagance, I love most devotedly, is, as you know, living upon her jointure of double that sum, at Florence; while I despite the sage counsel of all my uncles and cousins, persist in not letting my beloved house, and divide my time very happily between living like a hermit at Temple, and a dilettante at Florence, but without ever running in debt, observe, anywhere. Now, the worst that can be said of this by my rich neighbours is, that I am a queer fellow, and that my trumpery little income is quite enough for me . . . . while from the poor ones I know I shall get a kind word. And now, see how it would be with me, Thorpe, were I to consent to what you propose? One of my whims, as you well know, has been the liking you, and your old-world lore, better than either hunting or horse-racing, and, accordingly, about one-half the time I pass in England is spent at your house. But, though you let none of them come near you, there are, I believe, a whole host of nephews and nieces, who, you may depend upon it, have not lost sight of you, though you seem pretty completely to have forgotten them; and I will just beg you to reflect a little upon the dignified figure I should make, if at your death it should be discovered that our misanthropic, but very sentimental, intimacy has ended by my coaxing you to leave me your estate."

"Nonsense, Charles! . . . . what on earth can it signify what they say? . . . . I wish, with all my soul, I had never consulted you on the subject, but had settled all I have upon you without your knowledge. I was an idiot for having ever said a word to you about it."

"I give you my word of honour it would not have answered, Thorpe. . . . . I should have sold the whole property, dead stock and live stock included, my friend Pussy, perhaps, excepted, and divided the money with the most exemplary equality between all your relations, advertising for all who in either England or Wales could claim that honour. So what should I have got, dear neighbour, but disgrace and obloquy in the first instance, and labour and toil in the last?"

"Say no more about it, then. . . . . A wilful man, you know, must have his way. . . . . And this point, too, being settled, pass we to the question who is to have my three thousand a year, if you won't?"

"The worthiest among your kin, if you know which that is; if not, the nearest," replied the young counsellor.

"But there are many equally near, Charles, and I positively know little or nothing about any of them."

"Divide it, then."

"No, I won't divide it. Though the acres are neither so beautiful, nor so long-descended as those of Temple, they have belonged to us for the respectable term of two hundred years or so, and they shall not be cut up. I tell you what, Charles, terrible as the bore will be, I must see all these people and judge between them; I must, indeed; it is the only thing left me that can satisfy my conscience, now that you have so cruelly decided against me."

"It will be a bore, I have no doubt of it, but you are quite right

to endure it," said his friend. "And how is it to be managed? Will you creep out of your hole, my old friend, and make a progress amongst them, or will you invite them all to come and be looked at here?"

"Creep out! . . . . Do you think that all the nephews and nieces upon earth would make me do that? No, they must all come here, and you must help me do the honours, Charles, and help me to pass judgment, too; a fitting punishment for your obstinacy. I know you will be bored to death, but you must not forsake me."

"I won't, Thorpe; I will help you as well as I can: but you know my mother will expect me to get back to Florence in a month or six weeks."

"We shall get it all over before that time, I hope," said the old gentleman, sighing with anticipated weariness. "I began about it last night, before I had taken courage to try you once more . . . . that is to say, I ordered Barnes to have all the rooms cleaned. . . There are many of them that I have never entered since my wife died; and I am such an old fool that I want you to go with me into them for the first time."

"With all my heart. . . . I shall like exceedingly to see what this wide-spreading old pile may contain! for it is a positive fact, that I have never entered more than three rooms; this one, the epitome of all comfort; the library, and the dining-room."

"None other have had the windows open, I believe, since you took to me, Charles. I will have Barnes in at once, and we will set off on our progress without the delay of a moment."

The good dame was summoned, and this time was really many minutes before she entered, having various alterations to make in her toilette before it was possible she should appear before her master and the young baronet; at length, however, she came in with a cap and apron which had evidently taken no part in the scouring, and with as much composure of mien as it was possible to assume when arrested in labours so vehement.

"Now, Barnes, then," said her master, "let us set off. Sir Charles has given up a day's sport on purpose to see our old rooms. Lead the way, there's a good woman."

"Dear me! dear me!" exclaimed the poor housekeeper, greatly distressed; "didn't you tell me, sir, it should be for to-morrow? Don't you please to remember you did, sir?"

"Did I? . . . . Perhaps I did, Barnes; but what does that signify? Open the windows at once, and if we see dust and cobwebs now, we shall admire you the more if they all disappear hereafter."

"As to opening the windows, sir, I should be sorry if that had not been done many hours ago."

"That's a good woman. . . . Now, then, your arm, Sir Charles. When I am ready for any great work, I can't bear to be stopped."

The strangely matched pair of dear friends then set off upon an exploring expedition, which lasted for above two hours. The house was a large one, and in addition to the great object of deciding what it might be necessary to do, in order to make the long-neglected

rooms assume an aspect of comfort, Sir Charles found many things to stop him. There were a few very good pictures, which, thanks to Mrs. Barnes, were not at all the worse for their long seclusion; and there were Indian screens, and ivory pagodas, and ebony cabinets in abundance, not to mention a very respectable collection of china monsters, all exceedingly well deserving of admiration, as indicative of the elegant style of decoration, which, "sixty years since," drained the purses of all persons of taste as effectually as carved oak and heavy gilding do now. But while these venerable objects were exciting the admiration of the young baronet, the owner of them looked round with an air of melancholy that at length relieved itself in words.

"I remember all these queer things as well as if I had turned away from them but yesterday," said he. "They were, I know, considered to be rather in a by-gone taste twenty years ago, but now I suppose they look to you, Charles, as curiosities that might have made part of the decoration of the ark. Nobody cares for such sort of lumber now."

"They look venerable, but by no means obsolete," replied his friend; "and many a fine lady that I know of, would still hold these Eastern spoils in great respect. . . . . Were there curtains and carpets now in these two handsome rooms, and plenty of wax-lights to show off your magnificent mirrors, there would be little to find fault with, in your receiving rooms, Mr. Thorpe."

"Carpets and curtains?" . . . . repeated the old gentleman: "If I don't forget, there were very rich carpets and curtains here: but I suppose they are all worn out by this time, Mrs. Barnes?'

"Worn out, sir? . . . . What should have worn 'em out? Nobody has ever set eyes upon the carpets or curtains either, except one of the maids and me, twice every year, to see that there was no moths at work upon them. If you had but have waited, sir, till to-morrow morning, you would have seen that nothing has been neglected; by that time everything would have been in its right place," replied Mrs. Barnes with dignity.

"Egad! that's good hearing, Charles. . . . I would rather leave my old woman here a little money as a reward for her care, than spend it in carpets and curtains that might be used for a fortnight, perhaps, at farthest. . . . And the bed-rooms, Barnes, and the dressing-rooms, and all the rest of it? . . . . You must forget nothing, or I shall be in a terrible rage, you may depend upon it."

"I hope nothing *will* be forgotten, sir. It is a long time certainly since I have been called upon to prepare things for company; but I have not forgotten what, as I may say, I was brought up to, and by the twenty-fourth of next month . . . . 'twas Christmas-day you said, sir, wasn't it?" . . . .

"The twenty-third, say the twenty-third, Barnes. Never mind money . . . . only let me know what you want. . . . Have you got linen? . . . . china? . . . . all, and everything? I cannot undertake to think about it; I can only answer for the money."

"And that of course is the chief thing, sir," observed the sagacious housekeeper, leading the way up-stairs, and occasionally turning

round as she proceeded; "but I hope there will be less of that wanted than you expect. As for linen, dear me! there's enough of the finest and best to last the house for years, if it was as full of company as it could hold all the time; and for the tea and breakfast services, we are quite perfect; but I am afraid, with as many as you talk of, sir, we shall want dishes and plates too, for the dinners."

"Well, if you must, you must, Barnes. . . . But why won't the old plate do? . . . . I remember, Charles, your beautiful mother telling her husband one day, when they were dining here, that they must buy a service of plate, because it was so very economical, on account of its never breaking, and sure enough, there was a service of plate at Temple the day you were christened . . . . but the dear lady forgot that I paid nothing for mine. My embassy gave me that, and now, I suppose, I shall profit by the enduring qualities she so justly commended. . . . The plate can be cleaned up, Barnes, and save the buying china—can't it?"

"Is there to be a plate dinner every day, sir?" said the startled housekeeper. "I didn't understand that by what you said."

"And why not? . . . . It will save money, I tell you."

"Yes, sir, that's very true. . . . Only, we always reckon that a dinner served on plate should be a little more elegant than is usual for family parties that is to be repeated every day. A plain family dinner looks jist nothing upon plate."

"Never mind that, goody Barnes; I don't mean to starve my kindred. Every soul of them will come, expecting to be my heir, and as every soul of them, save one (and God teach me to choose well!) will be disappointed, the least I can do is to feed them well while they remain under inspection."

* * * * * *

The progress through all the best apartments of the old mansion having been satisfactorily completed, the two gentlemen returned to the usual sitting-room, when Sir Charles Temple, looking out upon the party-coloured lawn, half green, half white, which was still bright in sunshine, ventured to ask if his old friend had any further need of him for the present.

"Yes, to be sure I have," was Mr. Thorpe's reply, "I have always need of you;" however, he added, following the direction of the young man's eye, "I see you are longing to take a draught of the frost with a penny-weight of this sunshine to correct it. So go your ways, boy; only I wish you would come back and dine with me. I suppose you know that you are to get for me a carriage, horses, coachman, butler, footman, and groom? Besides writing the invitations, and everything else that does not come under the head of the Barnes department."

"Am I?" said Sir Charles, laughing. "Where am I to get the people from? Having so very little to do with servants myself, I am about the last man you should apply to. Where am I to find these fellows, Thorpe?"

"Where you please, my dear boy, and you may give a year's wages for a month's service if you will; but have them I must,

that is quite certain; but where to look for them, unless you help me, Heaven only knows. For pity's sake, Temple, don't leave me in the lurch!"

"I will do my best for you, depend upon it," replied the young man. "As to a coachman, by the way, I know I can suit you. My mother's old master of the horse, as she used to call Bridges, will be delighted to get such a job; and his son Dick will serve for a groom well enough. I will lend you my Frenchman, if you will, by way of a footman; and the landlord of the Temple Arms, our sometime butler, will resume his style and state in front of your sideboard without making any difficulty about it, if I ask it as a favour."

"Then ask it as a favour by all means, my dear friend. . . . Did ever man hit upon so able an adviser? . . . . I had no idea of your genius. But go on, Charles: where are my coach-horses stabled at present?"

"On the premises of your butler, I suspect. Joe Grimstone has a pair or two of first-rate posters, and they shall be put upon double allowance forthwith . . . . and now for the carriage. Where shall we find that, neighbour Thorpe? There positively must be a carriage, you know."

"Oh! excellent young man! How do I honour thee!" exclaimed Mr. Thorpe, lifting up his hands and eyes in admiration. "You have not studied Cinderella for nothing, Sir Charles Temple; and there is, I believe, still in the coach-house a sort of a pumpkin, which, once upon a time, was a handsome coach, and which it is very likely may turn into one again, if you set your genius to work upon it. I am quite sure there is nothing you can't do."

"We may see about that to-morrow, I suppose?" said the baronet, beseechingly.

"Yes . . . . I am almost tired now, as well as yourself, Charles. . . . So go, my dear boy, and come back by five o'clock to dinner. There are the letters to write, Sir Charles! . . . . we must not forget that . . . . they shall be circular, however, ... that will save trouble, and look impartial into the bargain."

"Very well . . . . I will be here," replied the kind-hearted baronet; and taking up his hat and his gun, he gave his old friend a nod, and departed.

CHAPTER II.

It was impossible that movements and consultations of so novel and remarkable a nature could be carried on in the parlour, without exciting something of the same kind in the kitchen and housekeeper's room. The cook, the dairymaid, and the boy, were laying their heads together, after their hard day's work in the first-named official residence; while Mrs. Barnes, and her niece, who acted as one of the provisional housemaids, were doing the same over a refreshing cup of tea in the second.

As few people knew so much of the matter as the worthy Mrs.

Barnes herself, her explanation of it, for the benefit of her niece, may be deserving attention.

"Now, do be patient, Nancy," said the old lady, "for one minute, till the tea is made and all's comfortable, and then I'll keep my promise and tell you every particular about it; and I can't say but you deserve it, girl, for you have worked like a slave to-day. There . . . now take up the toast, and fill up the pot, and sit down. . . . You wasn't much more than five or six years old, Nancy, when poor missis died, and I don't suppose you remember anything about her? You don't recollect what she was like, do you?"

"No, aunt, not a bit," replied the young woman.

"So much the better for you; for as you did not know her, you could not grieve for her . . . . but everybody else did, Nancy—I mean those that did know her—for she was the best and kindest lady that ever lived. As long as she was spared, everything went well. The only son, as you must have heard tell of scores of times, went on well enough as long as she lived—or, at least, nobody at home ever heard anything to the contrary; but very soon after she died, and while poor master was still almost broken-hearted, he was found out in more than one most good-for-nothing business . . . . the woman at the shop was the worst, for the hussy was married. Master was like one distracted when it came out, and blew up Mr. Cornilius sky high, there's no doubt of it; but though it wasn't a bit more than he deserved, nor so much neither, he wouldn't bear it, and took himself off, nobody knew where, for months. Then came letters to his poor father, who, from being one of the most visiting gentlemen in the whole country, had shut himself up and saw nobody. This letter, as the dear good gentleman told me himself, had little comfort in it. He was ashamed to come back, he said—and to be sure, for that matter, well he might be—so he asked for money to travel over the whole world, I believe, and money he had, and for years he went on roaming about, writing home once in six months or so, the poor old gentleman growing sadder and sadder every year, till at last no more letters came at all; and for six or seven years past, though it was pretty plain he was dead from his sending for no more money, master has gone on hoping and hoping that he should have him back again; till about a year ago he heard in some roundabout way or other, I don't well know what, that he was certainly dead somewhere t'other end of the world; and the poor old soul, he certainly did the best thing he could do, and that was, to send off letters to all the parishes—I suppose to the parsons and churchwardens and those sort of people—for certificates of his death and burial, if dead and buried he was. And, sure enough, it all came, signed and sealed, quite regular, giving an account of his death at most satisfactory full length. . . . So there was an end of all hopes and fancies upon his account, you see."

"Then that, I suppose, was just before I came here last cleaning bout," said the niece, "for I mind his being low and poorly for some days; and don't you mind he wanted to take to his bed, only you would not let him?"

"No, to be sure I wouldn't, dear old gentleman! for what good

could that do? 'Twas just like lying down to die on purpose. But after all, Nancy, though he keeps about, and has certainly no business whatever to keep his bed, I think he's right in the main, about not being as he used to be. If you mind now, he never walks out, let the sun shine as bright as ever it will; and though he keeps on poking over his old books as usual, he never now busies himself with writing down the curiousest things he finds in 'em as he used to do . . . . so that altogether he is an altered man, Nancy, in more ways than sending after his cousins; and we shall see a change, and sleep under another roof than this, before Christmas comes round again, or I am very much mistaken."

The conversation then sank into whispered hopes and expectations, in no degree inconsistent with the faithful and well-tried attachment of the worthy housekeeper, but in strict, natural, and inevitable conformity to the feelings of all housekeepers, past, present, and to come, when the probable termination of thirty years of meritorious service is under discussion.

The old woman was quite right in most of her observations and conjectures; and in none more so than in that which pronounced her master an altered man. For years he had cheered his existence by fostering a vague and unsubstantial hope; and having lost it, he was preparing to die as methodically as he had lived. Notwithstanding the change that had passed over him, however, the same indulgence of whim that had ever marked his character, still appeared in the manner in which he did this. Nothing could be much more dissimilar than the circumstances and station in life of the relatives it was his purpose to summon; but the letter addressed to each was precisely the same, varying only in the address.

Sir Charles Temple kept his word, and as the clock struck five returned with the promised rabbits and larks, and an appetite exceedingly capable of doing honour to whatever Mrs. Barnes and her assistants might place before him.

The dinner, though utterly out of all ordinary rule, appearing by one small dish at a time, was, as usual, excellent; and, for a while, woodcocks were discussed instead of wills, and excellent claret made the theme of unknown, unloved, and almost dreaded cousins, a gay one.

But both woodcocks and claret were at length dismissed, and the business of the meeting brought forward by Sir Charles Temple's saying, as he sipped a cup of Mrs. Barnes's excellent coffee,—

"Now then, Mr. Thorpe, let me hear something more at large—something illustrative and descriptive of the correspondents I am about to address."

"Your curiosity must feed on itself, Charles, till they arrive," was the reply, "for I know very little more about them than their names, and not even so much as that very perfectly; for if I have ever been told how the younger branches were baptismally distinguished, I have forgotten it. However, I am willing to tell you all I know. I think I have mentioned before that there is not a Thorpe amongst them—I never had a brother, and my four sisters have long been dead."

"Then the company will be made up of their children, I presume," said Sir Charles.

"Not altogether; for I have still three brothers-in-law, who must of course be invited, though I have certainly no intention of making either of these gentlemen my heir. The person who married my eldest sister is a Mr. Wilkyns, a Welshman, with a snug landed property in Glamorganshire, of about fifteen hundred a year, which he farms himself. He has, if I remember rightly, three daughters, and I have certainly no intention of leaving my estate to either of his co-heiresses. . . . However, they must come."

"Then of the young party you expect, three are already placed *hors de combat*. This will simplify the business a little. But are there no lad bairns among them?" inquired Sir Charles.

"Yes, my sister Margaret left two sons; she was the third, and married the last of all. I don't think the boys are grown up yet. Their father is a Mr. Spencer, who holds a good situation in the Treasury, and of course lives in London. . . . His wife died very soon after the last boy was born, and I have never seen him since. Mary, my second sister, married an officer, and went to India with him, and died there. She left a houseful of children, but most of them are dead, I believe; and Major Heathcote married again almost immediately, and has got a hundred more children, I fancy, for I hear they are very poor. Jane, my youngest sister, made a miserable match with a young curate called Martin, who, being the cadet of a cadet of a house—which, even in its elder branch, is neither very respectable nor very rich—literally began housekeeping with about two hundred a year. As Miss Jane married in open defiance of both her husband's family and her own, she had no settlement; and having spent a considerable part of her small fortune, she very prudently died last year. Her husband was gathered to his illustrious ancestors some time before, and all that remains of their silly marriage is one child . . . . whether boy or girl I really forget; but whichever it is, the child has been adopted, I hear, by Major Heathcote. . . . And now, Temple, you know all I can tell you about these people, all of whom, I am ready to confess, I have neglected more than I ought to have done. . . . But I have not been happy, Charles; and though God knows I wish that all the young people may have turned out better than my poor boy, I feel no inclination to see it."

"You are going to atone handsomely to one of them, at any rate," replied Sir Charles; "and perhaps you have done more good than harm in not letting them all live for years in a state of doubt and expectation, which would probably have been the case, had you brought them round you when you had first reason to fear that you had lost your son. And now for the letters, then. We must not prejudge this really important question, Thorpe; but I confess, provided there be a boy amongst them, that I feel some partial yearnings towards Major Heathcote's race. He must be a kind-hearted fellow, must he not, to have encumbered himself with another child, when, by your account, he had rather more than enough before?"

"Yes, that seems to speak well for him, certainly. I totally forget what sort of person he was, for, in fact, I never saw him but once,

and that was the day he married. . . . He was very handsome, and that is all I remember of him. . . . Here's my letter, Charles, and I will get you to copy it three times over."

Sir Charles took the paper, and smiled as he cast his eye upon it. "Very concise, friend Thorpe," said he, "and the copying it three-fold will not be a work of great labour."

"Concise! . . . Mercy on me, boy! . . . Do you think I want to write them an essay on my forlorn condition, and the result of it? Read it aloud, Charles, and I shall be able to judge if it be anywise abrupt."

Sir Charles obeyed, and read as follows:—

"Mr. Thorpe, of the Combe, Herefordshire, requests the company of * * * * *, to pass a fortnight of the Christmas holidays with him at his paternal mansion, it being his wish to become personally acquainted with all his father's descendants before he departs this life.

"Mr. Thorpe would prefer that * * * * * should arrive at the Combe in time to dress for a six o'clock dinner on the 23rd of next month."

"That's very well, I think, Charles; exactly what I meant to express, and no more," said the old gentleman. "Now, if you will just get up, and walk to that table, you will find pens, ink, paper, and sealing-wax, all ready."

The young baronet followed the directions given him, and placing a fair quire of post before him, began his task, which, as he had observed, not being one of great labour, was speedily accomplished. No sooner were the three letters sealed than Jem was ordered to gallop with them to the post; and this important deed done, Mr. Thorpe quietly returned to his ordinary tone of conversation, which consisted, for the most part, of rambling, but very graphic sketches of scenes through which he had passed, when filling the station of minister at the court of Madrid; and references, more interesting still to the fancy of his young companion, to an inconceivably extensive mass of antiquarian lore, collected during long years of solitary reading, and embracing an extent so various as to render any specific description of its object impossible; unless, indeed, the acquiring information which no other individual was likely to possess may be stated for it.

CHAPTER III.

As a brief introduction of the parties addressed by Mr. Thorpe's invitations, the three replies shall be given:—

"Dear Sir,

"Myself and my three daughters will have the pleasure of waiting upon you on the 23rd of next month, at the time mentioned.—I remain, dear sir, yours, "Charles Lloyd Wilkyns.

"Llanwellyn Lodge, 30th Nov. 18—."

"My dear Brother,

"Your invitation is very pleasing to us all, and, to say the truth, we should all like to accept it; but this, of course, cannot be, as we are twelve in family; that is to say, myself, my second wife, my son and daughter by my excellent first wife, your worthy sister Mary, nine young ones of different ages by my present good wife, and Sophia Martin, the orphan child of your poor sister Jane, whom we have taken to live with us; because, poor thing, there did not seem to be anybody else to take care of her. My wife and I agree in opinion that as it is your wish, as you say, to become acquainted with all your father's descendants, our nine young ones are out of the question, and therefore, must all be left at home. We, therefore, propose bringing my eldest girl Florence, who is your own niece; Algernon, her brother, who is likewise your own nephew, but very sickly, poor fellow; and Sophia Martin, who, as I said before, is the child of your sister Jane. Hoping that this arrangement will meet your wishes,—I remain, dear brother, affectionately yours,

"Algernon Heathcote.

"Bamboo Cottage, 30th Nov. 18—."

"My dear Sir,

"I am happy to say that my two sons, being about to return from Eton for the Holidays, will be able to accompany me to the Combe, by the 23rd of next month. I shall have much pleasure in presenting them to their maternal uncle, and beg to subscribe myself,—Dear sir, yours very faithfully, "Wm. Cavendish Gordon Spencer.

"Whitehall Place, 30th November 18—."

On the receipt of these letters, Mrs. Barnes was duly informed that she was to prepare for the reception of one dozen guests, all of whom were to be furnished with food, lodging, and attendance befitting the near relations of her master. This was quite enough. Mrs. Barnes, with *carte blanche* as to expense, carried on her preparations with equal zeal and ability; Sir Charles Temple did exactly what he said he would do, and the subordinates on all sides proved themselves worthy of trust and high pay; so that by the 23rd of December, everything in and about the Combe looked much as it would have done, had its master been possessed of Aladdin's lamp and ring, instead of only a resolute will and a long purse.

Amidst a good deal of affected indifference as to their proceedings, it was not difficult to perceive that Mr. Thorpe was well pleased by the effective activity of his coadjutors, and that he eyed the renewed splendour of his long-neglected mansion with considerable satisfaction; nevertheless, the friendly baronet often caught a sigh, doubtless given to the memory of the lost heir, even when the old man seemed most gaily to approve the renovated aspect of all around him.

The important day at length arrived, and with it the expected guests. The first carriage that rattled over the nicely-weeded but long silent drive, was the hack post-chaise which conveyed Major and Mrs. Heathcote, Sophia Martin squeezed in bodkin between them, and their son Algernon and their daughter Florence on two deal

boxes before them, which not only served as seats but contained also a very considerable portion of the travelling wardrobe of the family.

Sir Charles Temple's Frenchman, his mother's *ci-devant* coachman, together with the promised Dick, his son, and Jem, lately the boy of all-work, all stood in flaming liveries to receive them in the hall; while, with an air of dignity which imparted much of its own consequence to the household, the portly Mr. Grimstone, in the very best style of butler costume, was stationed with his hand on the lock of the drawing-room door, ready to vociferate whatever names should be given him.

These inferior, or at any rate uninterested functionaries, performed the duties consigned to them in a very able manner, and without having their nerves in the slightest degree affected by the appearance of those upon whom their services were first bestowed. But far different was the state of Mrs. Barnes. At this eventful moment she stood on the first landing-place of the great stairs, the very model in dress and general appearance of what a country gentleman's housekeeper ought to be, when, in addition to all the importance belonging to the station, she possesses that sort of indescribable dignity which ever attaches, where mistress there is none, to the person who ranks first among the women-kind of an establishment. Her niece Nancy was a stair or two above her, equipped to enact the part of ladies'-maid; while two more exceedingly spruce-looking damsels stood ready in the rear, to carry band-boxes, run for warm water, take possession of cords and travelling cloaks, and, in a word, to perform all the multifarious services which the experienced Mrs. Barnes knew were required when ladies arrived, as she was led to expect would probably be the case on the present occasion, without their abigails. So well arranged were all these matters, that had a few unattended duchesses been unexpectedly added to the company, the self-possessed Mrs. Barnes would have felt in nowise alarmed for the result . . . . but great was her dismay when from her place of vantage she looked down upon the party who first appeared to partake of the welcome that had been in all points so assiduously prepared. The first person who reached that part of the hall which was within sight of the scrutinizing eye of the housekeeper, was Mrs. Heathcote. Had Mrs. Barnes seen her twenty years before, however defective she might even then have found her *tournure* (for Mrs. Barnes was exceedingly aristocratic in her taste), she could not have refused to acknowledge that she was very pretty; but sixteen times within that period Providence had blessed her house with increase, and each successive process of maternity having left her with very considerable additional plumpness, her form had now arrived at a state of rotundity that forcibly suggested the idea of a sphere. Nor was her costume more in accordance with Mrs. Barnes' taste, than her person; for the cloak that kept her warm was of a coarse fabric . . . . the wires of her black and yellow satin bonnet had been buffeted amidst the many heads in the postchaise into a shape by no means favourable to her general air and appearance; while the waddling gait, probably inevitable upon the supervention of so remarkable a degree of *embonpoint*, rendered her altogether as

great a contrast as can be well imagined to the graceful ladies she had hoped to see making a part of this family meeting. The three young people followed, straggling and apart; but all that Mrs. Barnes could ascertain concerning them was, that one of the girls was considerably shorter than the other, though neither of them looked childish, and that the youth, who was the tallest of the three, was chiefly remarkable for the accumulation of worsted warmth-preservers that enveloped his slender person. Major Heathcote, after seeing that all the luggage was taken out, and paying the post-boy, rejoined his weighty rib as she stood before the drawing-room door, which she had desired might not be opened till he came up; and then bending his tall thin form sideways, so as to enable his lady to reach his arm with her fingers, he gave a military signal to the butler that he might advance, and in another moment they had passed from before the eyes of the housekeeper.

On entering the splendid drawing-room, the party found themselves in the presence of an old man and a young one, to both of whom they were equally strangers. Sir Charles Temple was standing before the fire, but Mr. Thorpe had already advanced towards the door in order to receive them. Had not that admirable *rifacimento* of a butler, Mr. Joseph Grimstone, while obeying Mrs. Heathcote's wishes for delay, still kept the drawing-room door ajar, it is probable that the philosophical-seeming old gentleman would not have been led to demonstrate quite so much eagerness; but, as it was, the Major and his lady had scarcely been announced, and passed the door, ere each had a hand very cordially taken by their venerable host. This circumstance made a strong impression on the husband and wife, who, being both of them blessed with kind hearts and loving tempers, immediately conceived such an impression of Mr. Thorpe's disposition as set them at their ease with him, which probably might not have been the case had their first *entrée* been otherwise arranged.

As soon as this first hand-shaking was ended, Mr. Thorpe proceeded to the examination of the three young persons who greeted his eyes, as the figures of his very tall and very round guests passed on. The first who approached him was a tall slight girl, whose features it was not very easy to distinguish, for a close bonnet showed more cap beneath it than face, and a thick green gauze veil, tied over all, left little by which to judge whether the damsel were well-looking or the reverse.

"And who are you, my dear?" said the old man, again stretching forth a welcoming hand.

"Florence Heathcote, sir," replied a timid but not unpleasing voice.

Major Heathcote here suddenly turned back in his progress towards the welcome fire, saying, "God bless my soul! I beg your pardon, sir, but my fingers are so frost-bitten, that I quite forgot the children, poor things! . . . That's Florence, your sister Mary's sixth child, but the eldest that I have left alive, and the only healthy one that my poor dear first wife ever bore. . . . . And this little lass," he continued, bringing forward a young lady apparently about the same age as his daughter, but considerably shorter, "this is Sophia Martin, your poor

sister Jane's little girl, and all that she left behind her, poor soul! . . . . And this is my son Algernon, Mary's seventh child . . . a very clever lad, I assure you, but not quite so stout, poor boy, as I could wish, though a deal better, a great deal better, than he has been."

The first of the three young people passed on towards the fire without obtaining more than a passing glance from her uncle; but not so the second. Sophia Martin was infinitely better dressed than her cousin; not, indeed, that a London lady of middling station would have discovered anything in the dress of either, sufficiently *comme il faut* to be worn before the eyes of strangers; but Sophia's appearance indicated great care and neatness. Her hair, notwithstanding the unfavourable weather, was in perfect order; and instead of stepping forward, like Florence, as soon as Mr. Thorpe released her hand, she paused, and looked up mildly but earnestly in his face, and seemed to linger near him, as if hoping for further notice.

The old man returned her gaze with equal earnestness, and not content with holding one hand, took the other also, saying, as he parted the natural curls upon her forehead, "This, then, is poor Jane's orphan girl, is it? . . . . She is not quite like what her mother was at her age, but she wonderfully resembles my poor boy. His hair curled just as hers does, and her smile is exactly like him. I never saw a girl so like a boy,—and yet, dear little soul! there is nothing masculine about her, either."

These words were followed by one of the sighs that had lately become habitual to him; but he shook his grey head, as if to get rid of the melancholy impression, and passed on, with a kind smile, to the young Algernon, who stood shivering within a step of the door.

"You look half frozen, my dear boy," said he, laying his hand on the lad's shoulder, and leading him on towards the fire; "and yet you are capitally well wrapped up, too."

"I took care of that, sir," said Mrs. Heathcote, assiduously releasing her step-son from a few of his worsted envelopements. "Algernon, though much better than he has been, is far from being quite fit to travel in such weather as this . . . . but the dear Major would bring him, sir," she continued, twinkling her bright little eyes at her husband; "so all I could do was to wrap him up well. To be sure, it would not have been fair to leave him at home. He is a good boy, sir, and a quick one too, I promise you. I packed you up well, Algernon, didn't I?"

"I should have been dead if you had not, mother," said the lanky lad, nestling close beside his plump and smiling step-dame.

Sir Charles Temple here gave the first indication of not being a statue, for he looked at Mrs. Heathcote with a benevolent smile, and said, "I hope you took care of yourself too, Mrs. Heathcote, for it is freezing tremendously hard."

Before the lady could reply, Mr. Thorpe proceeded to introduce his friend to the party. "I beg your pardon! I have lived so long by myself, that I forget how to do the honours properly. Mrs. Heathcote,—Major Heathcote,—permit me to introduce my excellent young

friend and neighbour, Sir Charles Temple. . . . . Young ladies, you must not think the worse of him when I tell you that he is the only man in the whole neighbourhood . . . . and it is a friendly neighbourhood too . . . . but he is the only one upon whom I have ventured freely to bestow all the rusty, crusty, creaking feelings with which an old man is sure to get charged when he lives alone. . . . And I wish you were a little stouter, Algernon, for, in addition to the patience which enables him to bear grey hairs and long stories, he is blessed with as unwearied a perseverance in hunting, shooting, scampering, and so on, as if the gift of sitting still were unknown to him."

This produced a courtesy and friendly simper from Mrs. Heathcote; a respectful military bow from the Major; from Algernon, a pretty hard stare from a pair of prodigiously large blue eyes; from Florence, the raising of rather remarkably well-fringed lids, which had been hitherto closed as she painfully thawed her hands; and from Sophia, a fixed look of nearly a minute long, unmistakably expressive of approbation—a look, indeed, speaking, but seemingly involuntary, for the minute after her eyes were bent upon the floor, and notwithstanding the cold which she evidently shared with the rest of the party, she drew from the circle surrounding the fire, and sought to conceal herself behind the ample person of her aunt.

The next moment another movement in the hall gave notice of a fresh arrival, and with as little delay as if the party had driven only from a neighbouring parish, Mr. Spencer and his two sons entered the room.

If any illustration were wanting of the superiority of a comfortable travelling carriage, over the rattling windiness of a hack post-chaise, it might have been furnished by the striking difference in condition between this party and the former one.

Mr. Spencer, who was a very gentlemanlike-looking person, of middle stature and of middle age, showed no indication whatever of having suffered from cold; his outer dress was indeed richly trimmed and lined with fur, and a lamp, that during the whole journey had burned within the carriage, had, with the nearly air-tight construction of the vehicle itself, effectually guarded him and his young companions from the frost. The two lads were as gentlemanlike and as warmly clad as their father, and the whole group had an air of fashion and of ease, which infinitely improved the spirits of Mrs. Barnes, as she watched their progress through the hall. Nor was it altogether lost upon her master either; Mr. Thorpe, though grown into a rustic humorist, had been a graceful and aristocratic personage in his younger days, and the address and appearance of Mr. Spencer produced on him the effect that a flourish of trumpets does upon an old charger. He braced his limbs, raised his somewhat stooping chest, and made a bow that would not have disgraced St. James's.

"It is a long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you, sir," said Mr. Spencer, with much suavity of manner, as he presented his hand; "but I am happy to perceive that you are still looking remarkably well. Give me leave to present your nephews to you. . . . This is Bentinck, my eldest son, and this, Montagu Manchester, my youngest

. . . . both of them very anxious to become better acquainted with their uncle."

"I am happy to see both them and you, sir," replied Mr. Thorpe. "You are come to me through very severe weather, as are also Major and Mrs. Heathcote, and these young people, who, by marriage, have the honour of calling you uncle . . . . but you do not seem to have suffered so severely by the cold as they have done!"

"My carriage is very well built, I believe. Major Heathcote, I am happy to renew my acquaintance with you," continued the official gentleman, presenting his hand. "One has got so completely into the habit of running to the Continent whenever one is not wanted in London, that it is to difficult to keep up any personal intercourse with friends in the country. . . . These young people are your children, I presume? . . . Pray make me acquainted with them. Bentinck, Montagu, here are three young cousins for you to make friends of."

"They are all cousins to your sons, Mr. Spencer, that is certain, though they are not all my children. This is Sophia Martin, the little girl that poor Jane, my wife's sister, and your wife's sister, left behind her."

Mr. Spencer bowed to Miss Martin, and received in return a low courtesy, and a glance to the face he bent towards her, indicative of the deepest respect and gentlest gratitude.

"Florence! Algernon!" said Major Heathcote, calling forward his children from the other side of the fire-place, "come and pay your compliments to your uncle Spencer."

Florence obeyed by advancing a step, and bending her slender neck; but her brother Algernon kept his place beside his step-mother, and contended himself by saluting his new relations by raising his remarkably large eyes, and in a slight degree bending his remarkably small head.

"And now, then, let me present to you my friend, Sir Charles Temple, and the whole circle will be known to each other," said Mr. Thorpe.

"Sir Charles Temple?" repeated Mr. Spencer, advancing towards him with animation, "I beg your pardon! . . . . It is just about three years since I met you at Florence. I hope Lady Temple is well. Is she still in that fairest of cities? The light is failing certainly, but I cannot conceive how I could be in the room with you for an instant, and not remember you."

As Sir Charles Temple, though he met the hand extended to him, very civilly, had not in fact the slightest recollection of ever having seen Mr. Spencer before in his life, he could only say in return, that his mother was quite well when he last heard from her, and that she still continued stationary at Florence.

This interesting recognition over, Mr. Thorpe turned to Mrs. Heathcote, and suggested the expediency of the ladies retiring to their rooms, in order to dress for dinner, adding, "Though the Wilkyns family are not arrived, that is no reason why the rest of the party should dress in a hurry."

The proposal was willingly accepted, bells were rung, candles ordered, and Mrs. Barnes desired to appear. To do that excellent

person justice, it is but fair to state that although a nearer view of the dress of the three ladies now consigned to her care did in no degree tend to increase the valuation she had in the first instance put upon them, her manners were quite as attentive and respectful as if a party of peeresses had come to take possession of her nicely-prepared rooms instead; and it was only when her ears informed her by the approach of another carriage over the gravel that the third division of the company was arrived, that she resigned her post in Mrs. Heathcote's dressing-room to her niece Nancy, the young ladies, each in their separate rooms, being attended by one of the provisional *soubrettes* of the mansion.

The next moment the sound of more trunks ascending was heard, and then the creaking of a pair of heavy boots and the tripping and the tittering of some young ladies. . . . And then all was hushed throughout the house, each room nevertheless being the separate scene of earnest occupation . . . . till the whole company were assembled together in the drawing-room just one minute before the great dinner-bell gave notice that the table was spread.

CHAPTER IV.

THE last persons who entered the drawing-room at this general muster were, as might have been expected, those who last left it, namely, Mr. Wilkyns and his three daughters. The squire of Llanwellyn Lodge himself did not, indeed, bestow much time upon his toilette, returning to the drawing-room much in the same condition that he left it, save that he had removed an enormous pair of overalls from his nether limbs, leaving his dress in what he considered as a fitting condition for any society in Europe. In appearance this gentleman was very nearly a giant, standing six feet four inches out of his shoes, and presenting a mass of bone, muscle, and sinew, in perfect proportion to his height. To assert that his soul accorded with his body might be considered as equal to saying that he had a lofty soul; therefore the expression must be avoided, as being liable to an erroneous interpretation: nevertheless, in one sense it was strictly true, for if the body of Squire Wilkyns was heavy, his soul was at least equally so; and the same *vis inertiæ* which rendered it difficult to put the one in motion, appeared to keep the other for ever stagnant also. But if his intellect was slow, so were his passions. Squire Wilkyns had but one propensity in the world which ever approached to vice, and this one very rarely carried him far enough to deserve the epithet . . . . he loved good strong heady port wine, and of ale could swallow with impunity as much as would intoxicate three ordinary men; but in this, as in all else, the effect within him was so slow, that ere exhilaration reached such a climax as to become apparent, the vinous influence had evaporated, and nothing but a little additional heaviness about the eyelids gave signal of the copious debauch. Of all things living, Squire Wilkyns certainly loved his daughters best; but there were no

incongruities in his nature, and his affections travelled at the same pace as his senses, his intellect, and his limbs. To have produced something approaching to the sensation felt by an ordinary parent at seeing the light drapery of a daughter approach a candle too nearly, Mr. Wilkyns must have seen all his three enveloped in flames; and ere the pang could reach him which the heightened pulse of a darling child is in general enough to give, it would have been necessary for him to witness the last feverish gaspings of struggling life. *Au reste*, if he had no strongly attached friends, he was without an enemy in the world; and if the ecstasies of high-wrought sensibility were unknown to him, so also were all the deep-felt miseries of human life.

Of his three daughters, one was rather pretty, one rather ugly, and the third neither the one nor the other. In all other respects they were so extremely like what the great majority of young ladies would be under similar circumstances, that it is not necessary to enter into any detailed description. They all knew very well that they were co-heiresses, and that when papa died they should have £500 a year each . . . . which in Wales is a good deal for a young lady. They also knew that papa never scolded about the bills for their wardrobes, if they did not exceed a hundred and fifty pounds *per annum* for the three; so they were nicely dressed, and altogether felt themselves entitled to be considered as

"Ladies of very great fashion in Wales."

The summons to dinner followed so quickly upon the entrance of the three sisters, that little or no introduction of them to the rest of the party took place. But they were not ignorant of the object of the meeting; and knowing that the grey-headed old gentleman was their uncle Thorpe, the handsome young man Sir Charles Temple . . . . "and all the rest their near relations," they very judiciously smiled, and assumed the appearance of being in great good humour and quite at their ease.

When the welcome sound of "Dinner is on the table," reached the ears of Mr. Thorpe, he immediately presented his arm to Mrs. Heathcote, but paused a moment before he passed out to say, "Sir Charles Temple, be pleased to give your arm to my eldest niece, Miss Wilkyns, ... and the uncles and cousins must come after as chance or choice may pair them," he added in a whisper to his plump companion; for, upon my word, excepting in the case of my sister Wilkyns' eldest girl, I know nothing about the young people's ages, and therefore could not venture to marshal them."

"They will all find their places fast enough if they are as hungry as I am, sir," said Mrs. Heathcote, waddling onward, in excellent spirits at the warm comforts that had greeted her arrival, and anticipating more solid consolation still from the ceremony they were now about to engage in. But on entering the dining-room she started. The sumptuous style in which the table was spread, the massive plate, the rich hangings, the fine mirrors, and abundant lights, absolutely dazzled her; and she very unceremoniously exclaimed, "Good gracious, how beautiful! . . . . and my goodness! what a dinner!"

This burst of genuine applause was not so gratifying to the feelings

of the venerable host as those who knew him not might have expected. Mr. Thorpe, in the state of mind which the defection of his son had caused, had found his best relief in withdrawing himself almost entirely from the world in which he had formerly taken an active and often a distinguished part; yet, while exerting his ingenuity to keep himself out of sight of those who could not sympathize with him, and affecting in his household establishment, and manner of life, an almost rustic simplicity, he had not in reality lost a jot of the refinement which had once distinguished him; and poor Mrs. Heathcote's unmeasured admiration of his dinner was as little to his taste now, as it would have been when he was accounted the most finished gentleman that England had ever sent as her representative to Madrid.

For a moment something like a harsh feeling of vexed mortification took possession of him, and he inwardly groaned as he contemplated prophetically all he should have to endure during the ensuing fortnight. But hardly had he got rid of the lusty arm which had rested upon his, and having placed her, according to his program, in the place next that intended for himself, moved with a hasty step to the other side of the table: then his conscience reproached him; he felt heartily ashamed of his own weakness, and making his way back again to her side more rapidly than he had quitted it, seated himself with philosophic toleration close to her, determined to atone for his contemptible movement of ill-placed vexation by making the good lady the object of his most especial politeness as long as she stayed.

This accidental getting into disgrace with himself was the most fortunate thing that could have happened to Mr. Thorpe, as it effectually set him upon his good behaviour, and enabled him to endure the heavy work of entertaining a large party of strangers, for not one of whom he entertained the slightest affection, considerably better than he would have done without it.

The order of arrangement also, as they came in, rather amused him; and this, too, helped him on in the performance of his task. The Welsh giant Mr. Wilkyns, before whom it seemed that all had given way, was the first that entered, perfectly unconscious that, though handing no lady himself, he was preceding all those who did. A sharp feeling of hunger led him to step out more briskly than usual; and whenever this was the case, all those among whom he passed invariably stood aside. Then followed Sir Charles Temple and Miss Wilkyns, the lady's countenance still somewhat expressive of the feeling which rendered the arm of the baronet a doubtful advantage, seeing that it was assigned to her by her ill-mannered uncle solely because she was his eldest niece . . . . Llanwellyn Lodge and all its acres evidently not entering into his consideration at all. Then came Mr. Spencer and Miss Eldruda Wilkyns; that gentleman being far too well acquainted with the laws of good society to balance between the second Miss Wilkyns, albeit she was not the pretty Miss Wilkyns, and any other young lady of the party. Mr. Bentinck Spencer and Mr. Montagu Spencer thought it proper in this land of strangers to take care of each other, and, without absolutely pushing before the ladies, contrived to slide into the dining-room close together, *pari passu*, with their papa. Then came the rather pretty Miss Wilkyns all alone

. . . . then Algernon and Florence, hand-in-hand . . . . and then the good-natured Major Heathcote, bringing up the rear with Sophia Martin under his arm.

This was certainly far unlike the gallant style in which guests had formerly been marshalled on entering that noble dining-room. Poor Thorpe hardly knew whether to smile or weep at the contrast, till he caught the laughing eye of Sir Charles; that settled the matter at once. The old gentleman smiled gaily on them all, and calling to each by name, as they entered, endeavoured to arrange them somewhat better than they seemed able to arrange themselves.

Whether it were on the scriptural principle, that she who was last should be first, or because he still fancied that he traced a resemblance between the young lady and his lost son, may be doubtful; but it was the meek-looking Sophia Martin whom he called to the second post of honour next himself.

"Dear goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, as the young lady, with downcast eyes, took the place assigned her, "why, Sophia, my dear, only think of you being the one to sit next uncle Thorpe! . . . . What will the Welsh young ladies say to it, eh, Sophy?"

"I trust, dear aunt, that it will not give them pain!" replied Sophia, in a voice that seemed almost tremulous from timidity, and at the same time half rising from her chair.

"Pain, my dear? . . . . Why should it?" . . . . said Mr. Thorpe, smiling kindly on her. . . . . "Nobody must take it into their heads to feel pain here, or I shall certainly quarrel with them. Sit down, my dear, sit down. You have got very pretty hair, Sophy."

While the soup and fish went round, Mr. Thorpe, and Sir Charles Temple also, took advantage of the brilliant light, which now, for the first time, fairly gave to their view the features of the whole party, and deliberately examined them. Notwithstanding the disparity of age, there was generally very excellent sympathy between these two gentlemen, nor did it fail them on the present occasion. Each formed the same, and, with one or two exceptions, a pretty just estimate of the party around them; the only points on which they differed being that Sir Charles thought Sophia Martin the plainest girl in the company, excepting his own Miss Wilkyns, and that Mr. Thorpe thought her decidedly the prettiest . . . . excepting, indeed, Florence Heathcote, who, now that her cap and bonnet were removed, would certainly have been thought pretty by most people. But she was quite at the other end of the table, and so much engaged in listening to her brother Algernon, that he could only see her profile. As the dinner went on and the wine went round, the voices of the guests began by gentle degrees to be heard; that is to say, Mr. Spencer observed to Miss Laura Wilkyns, that the frost appeared very like to continue; to which she replied, that she hoped he was mistaken, as it perfectly destroyed her. Algernon said to his sister, quite loud enough to be heard across the table, "I wonder if there be any library here?" . . . . Montagu, addressing Bentinck considerably above a whisper, proposed that they should call for champagne, and Major Heathcote and his lady conversed across the table fearlessly, and with all the affectionate kindliness of their natures congratulated each

other on looking so much more comfortable than when they first arrived.

"My dearest Major!" cried the lady, by no means *sotto voce*, but with a mouth so full as to be intelligible to none but the dear accustomed ear she addressed—"my dearest Major! don't let that dish pass! you never did, no never, taste anything so good."

"Thank ye, Poppsy dear. . . . I'll have a taste at it in a minute . . . and you mustn't forget the currie, I promise you. . . . I ought to know something about currie," turning to Miss Winifred Wilkyns, who sat beside him, "considering the time I was in India."

"Will you take wine with me, Mr. Wilkyns?" demanded Mr. Spencer with a courtly smile.

It took some time before the Welsh squire appeared to hear and fully understand this: but when he did, he replied rather solemnly, "I would prefer taking some ale, sir."

"You will think you are got among the Goths and Vandals," said Miss Wilkyns to her elegant uncle, "but papa is as proud of his ale as of his pedigree, and despises wine almost as much as the merchant who imports it."

"Really!" replied Mr. Spencer, holding his champagne glass to be replenished by the butler. "There is something most anciently Britannic in that. . . . I admire it excessively."

"What was that you said about my library, my young sir?" inquired Mr. Thorpe, good-humouredly addressing Algernon.

"I said nothing about your library, sir," replied the pale youth, blushing a little . . . . "for I do not know if you have got one."

"That is cautious, correct, and logical, Algernon," said his uncle, smiling,—"but before this time to-morrow you shall know more about it. . . . Will you drink a glass of wine with me, Algernon?"

"Oh! for God's sake, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, in genuine terror at the proposal. "He has drunk nothing but milk for the last twelvemonth, sir, and it's untold the good it has done him."

"His uncle shall not undo the good his careful stepmother has done," said Mr. Thorpe, looking kindly on his fat neighbour. "Grimstone! send for a jug of milk immediately, and let Mr. Algernon Heathcote have milk ready for him at every meal."

The old gentleman, as he said this, chanced to encounter the very prettiest pair of eyes he had ever seen in his life, lit up too by a smile that seemed intended for himself.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "I never looked at her before. Why, niece Martin," he continued, addressing himself to Sophia, "your cousin Heathcote is beautiful! She is, upon my word! perfectly beautiful!"

"She is indeed, sir!" replied Sophia, gently, "most beautiful!"

"An extremely pretty girl indeed," reiterated the old man, still looking at her. . . . "And what sort of lad is her brother, my dear?" he continued in a half-whisper, which was heard by none but Sophia herself.

"It is rather a difficult question, uncle. He is clever, but wildly eccentric. . . . but, be he what he may, he will not remain long to give either pain or pleasure to those around him. All the medical

men in our neighbourhood say that he is dying." This was said in a still lower whisper than his own, but with an accent so sad, so gentle, and at the same time so intelligent, that Mr. Thorpe felt comforted by the conviction, that there was at least one of his young relations that he should find conversable, intelligent, and full of feeling. But the subject they had touched on was not one that could be longer dwelt upon at present; so he gave Sophia's arm a friendly tap that seemed to promise future good understanding and confidence, saying, "I must have some more talk with you to-morrow, my dear, and you shall tell me a great deal about yourself."

Sophia, who, though not very handsome, had speaking eyes, looked up in his face as he said this, with so animated an expression of grateful affection, that the old man was deeply touched by it. "Poor little girl!" thought he. . . . . "Fatherless and motherless! A single word of kindness seems to touch her to the heart. . . . . Poor little girl!"

Meanwhile Sir Charles Temple was exerting himself to the utmost to perform the duties his old friend had so tyrannically put upon him. It is certain that, poor as he was, he would have given more than he often spent in self-indulgence to have purchased an escape from the festivities of the next fortnight, and this he had full-surely guessed before he entered upon them. But having pledged his word that he would dine at the Combe every day till the important meeting was broken up, he determined not to keep his promise to the word and break it to the sense, but resolutely and with good faith to do all within his power to please the invited guests.

Miss Wilkyns, having recovered the little touch of vexation which the allusion to her seniority had occasioned, determined to profit to the utmost by the advantage it had obtained for her. Though quite aware that her sister Winifred was the beauty of the family, and that she was not, she saw no reason why Miss Wilkyns of Llanwellyn Lodge, and co-heiress of the Llanwellyn estate, should not become Lady Temple if she liked it. And after having once or twice steadily examined the handsome profile of the baronet, she thought she should like it, and behaved herself accordingly . . . . so that Sir Charles had little time left him for general civility, hardly finding interval sufficient between the answers required by his conversable neighbour to drink wine with the gentlemen near him. Nevertheless he did contrive to find out that Florence Heathcote was beautiful, and even ventured, in reply to an animated inquiry from Miss Wilkyns as to who were the most celebrated beauties in Herefordshire, to say, "I know no lady in our county that can be compared to your fair cousin yonder. Her name is Heathcote, is it not?"

"Upon my word," replied Miss Wilkyns, with a short little laugh, "I hardly know. . . . . I presume she is my cousin because I meet her here . . . . *et voilà tout.*"

"Is she not beautiful?" persevered the baronet very impertinently.

"I dare say she is," replied the young lady, "if you say so . . . . for you know women are never permitted to be judges of each other . . . . But, to my taste, I confess that her total want of style and *tournure* would destroy all the beauty in the world. To be sure she is

dressed almost like a peasant girl, and that is against her. To my fancy, that other cousin, as I presume her to be, who sits beside my uncle Thorpe, is infinitely better-looking. Oh! dear yes," raising her eye-glass, "no comparison whatever!"

"What! that little olive-coloured girl, with her sharp black eyes? . . . . Surely you must be jesting?"

"Indeed, Sir Charles, I am not . . . . I think her very well-looking indeed. She dresses herself so remarkably well. Not, indeed, that the dress itself is greatly superior in quality to that of the other; but it is so differently made and put on, that it has quite a different air . . . . and then her hair curls naturally, which is a great beauty; and besides, I am quite certain she is very clever. I shall make acquaintance with her, I like her appearance so very much."

"And I will try to make acquaintance with the other," replied Sir Charles, laughing; "and then we will compare notes together in order to ascertain which of our predilections has turned out best."

The cold silence which for a minute or two punished this sally enabled Sir Charles to ask the two young Spencers what school they were at.

"Eton," answered both in a breath.

"Are you cricketers?" was the next question.

"In the first eleven," was the reply, again uttered by both so sharply in unison, that though two bodies he began to think they had but one soul and one voice.

"Can you row?" . . . . But here the union ceased, for one said no, and the other yes.

"What a noble institution Eton must be!" said Miss Wilkyns, joining in the conversation; "the lads are all so remarkably gentlemanlike."

"First-rate," said Bentinck, winking his eye at Montagu.

"I know nothing that makes so decided a difference as a good school and a vulgar one," resumed Miss Wilkyns; "don't you think so, Sir Charles?"

"I have little doubt that I should exactly agree with you did I know what you meant," he replied; "but you must explain to me what a vulgar school is."

"I hate explanations, Sir Charles Temple. Women have nothing to do with explaining; we should always leave that to our lords and masters, in my opinion. But without any explanation, of course vulgar schools are . . . . vulgar, that is, I suppose, cheap schools. I am sure you must know what I mean."

"Oh! yes, to be sure," cried Bentinck; "Winchester, Westminster, Harrow, Shrewsbury, Rugby, and all the rest of 'em."

"I do understand," replied Sir Charles, smiling. "It means every school in the world except your own. That is it, is it not?"

Before the boy could reply, and his heightened colour showed that he meant to do so saucily enough, his father bent gracefully forward to say,

"You are doing my lads great honour, Sir Charles Temple. . . . . May I have the honour of taking Champagne with you? . . . . When do you think of being in Florence again?"

And thus the hour of dinner wore away. The interval which succeeded served to make the parties better acquainted with each other; for the ladies, at a signal given by Mrs. Heathcote, but originating with her husband, collected themselves together in the drawing-room; while the gentlemen, closing their ranks around the blazing fire, seemed, for the most part, well inclined to yield themselves up to the soothing influences of warmth and wine, and something very tolerably like conversation was sustained between Sir Charles Temple, Mr. Spencer, Major Heathcote, and their host. Mr. Wilkyns drank and dozed, and dozed and drank, without disturbing anybody; and the three boys, after a silent examination of the two Etonians by Algernon, and of Algernon by the two Etonians, parted by tacit but mutual consent. The young Heathcote then stole out of the room, and after a tour of curious research round the old hall, and up the huge oak staircase, found his way very noiselessly to a sofa in the drawing-room; while the young Spencers placed themselves, where, by the circling of the seniors round the fire, the whole dessert was at their mercy, with the additional advantage of being able, from some decanter or other, if not from the circulating claret-jug, to get exactly as much wine as they liked to drink.

The ladies, meanwhile, had their own indulgences in the drawing-room, now brilliantly lighted up, not by oil, but by wax, in accordance with Mr. Thorpe's peculiar predilections and antipathies on that particular branch of drawing-room decoration. His opinion being, that the use of lamp-oil should be confined to Calmucks, Tartars, and kitchen-maids; while wax lights should be multiplied in exact proportion to the desire felt of making all things, animate and inanimate, appear to advantage. Three well-cushioned sofas, beside and in front of the fire, glorious in its bright union of coal and wood, invited irresistibly to a sociable division of their proffered comfort; and the six ladies nestled themselves accordingly, each into a corner, each with a pillow and a cushion for her own especial use, and each, thanks to the attentive refinement of Mrs. Barnes, with a footstool for her happy feet.

It would not have been very extraordinary if, under such circumstances, and induced thereto by the freezing adventures of the morning, the six fair creatures had all fallen asleep; and, truth to say, Mrs. Heathcote and her step-daughter Florence, together with the middling Miss Wilkyns, were very near sinking under the soft seduction. But coffee and curiosity saved them from such indecorum; the first being poured forth by the stately hand of Mr. Grimstone from an enormous machine of silver gilt, and embossed in so magnificent a style, as must have raised the lids of the most sleepy woman, if she had eyes beneath them capable of seeing; and the second being roused by the titillating questionings and answerings which began to pass between the two wide-awake Misses Wilkyns and the gentle Sophia Martin.

This latter young lady, after pausing with very striking timidity of manner till every one had placed themselves, before she ventured to take a seat herself, had finally dropped softly into the unoccupied corner of the couch on which the eldest of the co-heiresses had

thrown herself; but as she did this, she cast a speaking glance round the little circle, and then at Miss Wilkyns, which seemed to challenge the congratulations of the whole party upon her happiness in having this precious place left for her.

The heiress perceived this, and was not too sublime to be pleased by it.

"Which cousin are you, my dear?" she said, with a very gracious smile. "It will be quite proper, you know, now that we have all been brought together in this very extraordinary manner, that we should make some slight attempt to get acquainted. For my share in the good work, I think I shall undertake you; so please, dear, to tell me your name, &c. &c. &c."

"My name is Sophia Martin," replied the timid girl, venturing, by gentle degrees, to approach somewhat nearer to her elegant cousin.

"Sophia Martin? It is monstrous queer, to be sure; but, if you will believe me, I never heard your name before. Did you ever hear anything about Sophia Martin, Eldruda? or you Winifred?"

"No, indeed, never in my life," replied the second Miss Wilkyns, yawning.

"No, Elfreda, not I. It is not very likely I should, you know, if you never did," said the third heiress.

"But you must not look vexed and mortified at that, my dear child," resumed Miss Wilkyns, graciously. "It is no proof that we may not think you worth noticing now. How old are you, Sophia Martin?"

"Twenty!" replied Sophia, as if more than half-ashamed of being so foolishly young.

"Twenty! only twenty? Dear me! I should have thought you a great deal older than that."

"And how old may you be, my dear? that is, if you have no objection to tell," said Mrs. Heathcote, addressing the eldest of all the nieces, and looking at her with her good-humoured laughing eyes.

"Objection! And pray, ma'am, why should I have any objection?" replied Miss Wilkyns, evading the good lady's question by asking another.

"I dare say you have got no objection, my dear," returned Mrs. Heathcote; "only I have known lots and lots of girls, when I used to be moving about with the Major, who, if they happened to have turned twenty-five corner, as our officers always called it, would rather have been pinched black and blue than have said a single word about their age before anybody, man, woman, or child. Nothing in the world can be so silly, however; for there is not one girl in five thousand that can pass for being in her teens, above a year or two at the very most, after she is out of them. But young ladies never will believe that. I have observed it scores of times. It is only when a girl gets married, that her eyes seem to be opened about it; and then, especially if she has the luck to get into the military line, she grows sharp enough; because it is rather a favourite joke among the officers, you must know, when they are moving up and down from quarters to quarters, to set about guessing the age of the young

ladies at every new place; and 'tis quite astonishing how near they come, for the most part."

Before Mrs. Heathcote had finished this speech, Miss Wilkyns had got almost out of hearing, by walking off to a very handsome-looking grand pianoforte, the procuring and conveying of which to the Combe had been among Sir Charles Temple's most daring improvements upon the original plan of preparation sketched by Mr. Thorpe.

Sophia Martin, who followed her, assisted to open it, and arrange the lights, which, together with some rather antiquated volumes of music, were placed ready for use.

"Oh, if I could but hear you play and sing!" said she, gazing in Elfreda's face with a look of affectionate admiration.

"Are you fond of music, my dear?" demanded Miss Wilkyns.

"I never care about it, except from those I love," replied Sophia . . . . "Oh! those I admire, I should say. I know it is nonsense to talk of love before one has a right to do it," she added, hanging her head over the music.

"I like Sophia Martin," muttered the first to the second Miss Wilkyns, who had joined herself to the music-party. "She is so natural and unaffected."

"At any rate, she is the best of the set," answered Miss Eldruda. "What have you got here, Elfreda? Nothing new, I suspect. What a bore if we are expected to perform old music!"

"They may expect what they please," returned her sister, "but most assuredly I shall do no such thing. Somebody said that Temple was just come from Florence. If he is not a savage, he must have brought some new music with him."

"Oh dear! that would be so nice! . . . . Is he not lovely, Elfreda? Quite beautiful, I think, and so uncommonly elegant. Don't you think so, Elfreda?"

This was said in a whisper, and answered in the like manner by the elder sister, who made a little grimace, and replied, "I have not quite made up my mind yet, Druda; you know I am not very easy to please. The Wilkynses are accounted the handsomest family in Wales, please to remember, and that always makes people particular. Where will you see such a man as papa? Such a magnificent height! Temple is not so tall by four inches. But he does not look vulgar, certainly; and to my feelings that makes a great difference. I believe people that are really elegant themselves . . . . people of fortune and consequence I mean, care a great deal more about fashion and elegance than about mere beauty of features. And that's the reason why I like Sophia Martin, dressed so nice, and making the very best of herself, as she does, compared to that excessively dull-looking, ill-dressed, girl upon the sofa. . . . . That's just the sort of girl I hate."

During this time Sophia Martin, who was much too well-behaved to appear to hear anything which the sisters muttered, employed herself by turning over the musical pages of the choice but antiquated collection of thick and thin volumes which filled the cradle under the pianoforte; till at length, having found something in an unknown tongue, which she shrewdly divined to be Italian, she brought it to her new friend, and oldest cousin, saying, "Here then, dear, dearest,

cousin Elfreda! . . . . Oh! it is such a beautiful name, that you must let me call you by it. . . . . Here is a song that I think may perhaps suit you. Do just look at it!"

"My dear child! this was composed in the year one! Upon my honour and word, an old-fashioned song chokes me; it does indeed, Sophia. I am not joking the least in the world, I assure you. It *does* positively, and literally, choke me. It sticks in my throat, and I cannot bring it out, if I would give my life for it. We have had a singing-master, you must please to observe, who attended us for three years at our own place, Llanwellyn Lodge, coming all the way from Swansea one day in every week. And when people go to such an expense as that, the worst of it is that it makes them rather particular. However, my dear Sophia, you are such a nice little creature, that I am ready to do anything I can to please you. . . . . And, by the bye, I quite give you leave to call me Elfreda. Papa will tell you, if you will wake him up, and ask him, that it is a name of considerable importance in the family, for the Carrgwynnmorris part of the estate came into the family by an Elfreda, and that is the part I am to have, if it is settled, in the end, that the property is to be divided into three."

"I don't believe that there is a single one of Catamari's songs in the whole collection, Elfreda!" exclaimed Miss Eldruda Wilkyns, after having vigorously turned over the leaves of nearly the whole collection.

"But cannot you sing something from memory?" demanded the anxious and persevering Sophia.

"Oh! yes, I suppose we can, if we chose it . . . . only its rather a bore. I always like to have my music on my desk before me. It is something to look at, at any rate; and I do assure you, my little lady, though I suppose you know nothing about the matter, that it is often a relief to know what to do with one's eyes. The men, now-a-days, are such abominable puppies, that if by accident one happens to look at them in singing, they think you are quite ready to give yourself and your acres for the asking."

"You don't say so, cousin Elfreda?" replied Sophia, looking perfectly shocked, and dismayed. . . . . "And such a sweet, delicate-looking girl as you, of all people in the world! How you must hate them all!"

"Oh I do, my dear, I promise you—horrid creatures! If it wasn't for our being heiresess, it would be quite different, you know. But it is impossible, as you may fancy, to help suspecting mercenary motives sometimes, when men that you don't care a farthing for keep falling in love, as such quantities of them pretend to do, at first sight. And that's the idea that keeps me single, Sophia. . . . . And single I'll remain, you may depend upon it, till I find somebody worth having."

"Noble-minded Elfreda!" exclaimed Sophia Martin, with an energy which it seemed beyond her power to repress. "Oh!" she added with a look of inexpressible delight, how happy, how *very* happy I am that I came here! . . . . I wanted so much to escape it . . . . for it seemed so perfectly ridiculous for a little nobody like me, to be shown up at this great family meeting. But we never know what is best for us. . . . . Do we, Elfreda? . . . . Oh! heavens, how bold that

sounds! Can you—will you forgive me? Will you let me love you, Elfreda?"

"Yes I will, my dear; because I think, as I said before, that you are a nice little creature. There is nothing vulgar about you, not the least in the world, and that goes a great way with a Wilkyns, I can tell you."

It was now that Algernon Heathcote, having satisfied himself, or dissatisfied himself, with his examination of his two cousins Spencer, and having also peeped about, in his way from the dining-room, as much as he thought discreet, made his appearance in the midst of the ladies. His sister Florence was by this time very soundly asleep, her stepmother being aiding and abetting thereto, by having seized upon her little feet as soon as she perceived the "fringed curtain of her eye" to drop, and without question or ceremony laid them on the green satin sofa, covering them with her own silk scarf, "that the dear child," as she said, "might have a nice, warm, comfortable nap, after her terrible sharp journey."

"The kind-hearted lady started in some alarm as the door opened, conscious perhaps that satin sofas were not intended to support feet, not even such very pretty feet as those of Florence. But the sight of Algernon restored her composure, and pointing to his sister she held up her finger, and nodded her head to indicate that he was to approach gently, and not to wake her. The boy carefully obeyed her wish, and creeping to her on tiptoe, contrived to find room between the cosily drawn-up feet of Florence and her own plump rotundity, to accommodate his slender person.

"Are we going to have music, mamma?" he whispered.

"I suppose so, dear: I hope they won't be very loud, for I don't want to have this poor thing waked; I never saw anybody look so tired and thoroughly overcome in my life. If Florence could contrive to look ugly, for sure and certain she would have done it to-day. She did come as near to it as ever she could, didn't she, Algernon? I was quite vexed, for I saw as clear as light that nobody thought much about her."

"Did she look ugly, mother? I did not observe it. I wonder what they are going to sing. Have they sung anything yet?" said the boy.

"No. They have been all standing there, and talking about it, this ever so long. But they don't seem in any hurry to begin. If there were any young officers dining here, I should think they were waiting for them."

"Perhaps, mother, they are waiting to show off before uncle Thorpe. I should not be at all surprised if one or all of those very finely-dressed young ladies intended to be uncle Thorpe's heiress or heiresses. They all seem to look as if they thought they had more right to be here than anybody else, don't they, mother? . . . . Don't they? Come now, don't turn away your head that I may not see you laugh. I am sure you think exactly the same about them that I do."

"Algernon, if you grow so extremely impudent and well, you shall be sent off to Sandhurst without more ado. To see you now, you saucy fellow! you look no more tired than I do; and I watched what

a dinner you made . . . . that I did, you may depend upon it," said the step-mother.

"And you look as if you could eat me up for joy at it, you do!" said the boy, pressing close to her, and laying his beautiful head on her fat shoulder. "But, mother," he resumed, "there is nothing in the world just at present so good for me as fun. Will you please to let me laugh a little about those very, *very* fine young ladies? Will you, mother?"

"And how am I to help it, you audacious boy?" demanded the step-mother, knitting her brows. "Can I prevent you laughing, if you have a mind for it? Only you may depend upon it you shall go to college or to school, or somewhere or other, without any more nursing. You shall, indeed, Algernon:" and as she spoke she amused herself with parting the bright-brown wavy locks that covered the boy's forehead.

"Well then I will, as soon as ever we have done with uncle Thorpe. But just for this little bit of time that's left, mamma, you cannot be so cruel as to refuse to have a little fun with me. . . . . Can you, mother? . . . . You must laugh a little at these very fine young ladies with me; you must indeed, because I see already what's going on, and it will be capital, if you don't spoil it."

"Spoil what, you foolish boy? What are you talking about?"

"Why, of course we all know what we are come here for, don't we?"

"You are vastly clever, Master Algernon. And pray who told you. . . . . I should like to know?"

"Who told me that we were all to come here to be looked at by uncle Thorpe, that he might make up his mind as to who was to be his heir? Why, mother, I believe it was old Bridget who said it first. But you know well enough, and as well as I, that everybody knows it, and everybody says it. So don't try to look so very solemn, as if my repeating it was a crime as bad as killing the good old gentleman at once."

"As to looking solemn, Algernon, I have no intention to do it at all; but neither do I see any joke in the business. If things are as you say . . . . and old Bridget is very seldom wrong . . . . if you *are* all here to be judged of, you ought not to be turning your thoughts altogether to joking and jesting, especially against your own first cousins, because they are rather finer than anything you have been used to. It would be much more to the purpose, my dear, if you were to endeavour to show yourself off to advantage."

"I, mother? That's nonsense, you know; for everybody says I am going to die, except you, and Florence, and Bridget. I saw uncle Thorpe, good man, shaking his head, and looking very, very sad, kind gentleman, while he was listening at dinner to cousin Sophy, who was whispering about me, with a look about her eyes that anybody might have taken for tears, that knew no better. No, mother, the poor old gentleman has just been mourning the death of one heir, and he'd be a great fool to make preparations for mourning the death of another. It won't be me, mother."

"I don't see what right you have to say that, Algernon, when you know as well as I do, that since you have had your pony, and taken so to milk, you are no more like the same thing than chalk is to cheese . . . . and I don't take it very kind of you to talk so."

"Why? Do you think I am the more likely to die, mother, because Sophy Martin shakes her head, and looks as if she was going to cry? Not a bit of it . . . . and, to whisper a secret in your ear, I do not believe I am going to die at all, more than you do. But for all that, it is likely enough, and very proper too, that Mr. Thorpe should object to giving his estate to a person who is known to have been dangerously ill. So put me quite out of your head, mother. . . . ."

All this was said with his eyes steadfastly fixed on the group near the pianoforte, and his head still supported on the shoulder of his stepmother; but at this moment he changed his position, and covering his face with both hands, laughed quietly, as was always his wont, but very heartily.

"Foolish boy!" whispered Mrs. Heathcote. "Foolish boy!"

"I have done, mother," he replied, suddenly turning upon her a countenance of very grave decorum; "that is, upon condition that you will listen to me to-morrow, and let me have the fun of being showman, and pointing out to you and Florence all that is being acted in this beautiful puppet-show. I dare not let in papa for fear he should scold."

"And you ought to be afraid of me too, Algernon, you ought, indeed" . . . . began Mrs. Heathcote; but her discourse was cut short by the door being again opened, and Mr. Thorpe's entering the room.

For some time after the ladies had quitted the dining-room, the conversation, aided by the excellent claret, went on admirably; but though the vivacity of some of the party decidedly increased, rather than diminished, and though the heart of the hospitable host most cordially rejoiced thereat, he nevertheless became so insufferably weary of the official graces of Mr. Spencer, within five minutes of the time they were particularly directed towards himself, that, casting a deprecating look at Sir Charles Temple, the impatient old gentleman started from his chair, and muttering something about his health obliging him to join the tea-party early, and their finding his good friend Sir Charles Temple an excellent *Vice*, he fairly bolted, and made his *entrée* into the drawing-room at the time above described.

"I hope, fair ladies, that I shall not disturb you," he said, bowing to all, but particularly addressing Mrs. Heathcote; "but the fact is, my habits and my health oblige me to take my tea early, and I now come to throw myself upon your generosity, and implore you to give me some without loss of time."

Mrs. Heathcote, very considerably alarmed at having Florence's feet caught on the sofa, *almost* stood up, in order to give her the shelter of her person as a screen, than which she certainly could not desire a better; but there would have been something in this proceeding so foreign to the very nature of the good lady's spirit, that

instead of accomplishing the manœuvre, she rather pointed out than concealed the delinquency by her position and attitude, and then said, —"It was my doing, sir, and not hers, I do assure you; and now, to be sure, I am quite ashamed of what I have done, and can only beg you to forgive me!"

"What *have* you done, my dear Mrs. Heathcote?" said Mr. Thorpe, with a very encouraging smile, and fixing his eyes on Florence, who, thus suddenly awakened, blushed like a wild rose, and really looked as beautiful as the kind stepmother herself could have desired.

"Oh dear! Mr. Thorpe, you are very polite, and very kind too, not to be angry with me; but the position in which you found this poor dear child was altogether my doing. Young people, of course, ought not to lie about upon such beautiful furniture as this; but, poor dear thing! she did look so very tired, that I could not resist the temptation of making her lie down for a minute or two, and then she fell asleep, no more thinking of your green satin than if it had been the green grass-plot at home."

Had Mrs. Heathcote herself been one of the candidates for the heirship of the Thorpe property, the question of the inheritance would probably have been settled at that moment. Though a little *brusque* in manner, and occasionally sudden and hot in speech, the heart of the old gentleman was one of more than common gentleness; and no qualities touched him so much as those which demonstrated an overflowing of the milk of human kindness and the absence of all self-exalting airs and graces. As he stood gazing at the fat mass of affectionate good nature before him, his heart reproached him sternly and bitterly for having committed the paltry littleness of being angry with her for admiring his dinner-table and his dinner. Good Mrs. Heathcote herself would have been exceedingly vexed had she been aware how greatly her unstepdamelike affection for poor Florence eclipsed the object of it. Mr. Thorpe certainly gave one look of almost wondering admiration at the unexpected loveliness of the blushing young face before him, but he speedily turned again to her kind-hearted neighbour, and was in the act of squeezing himself in between them, when his eye caught another interesting object at a little distance, which awakened a fresh train of ideas, and caused a renewal of his self-reproaches, because, till thus seen, he had forgotten it.

Sophia Martin, who, at the moment of Mr. Thorpe's entrance, was standing in the centre of the three Misses Wilkyns, by that time all congregated at the pianoforte, no sooner saw the venerated figure of her uncle, than quietly gliding from the place where she stood, she brought her neat little person behind a large arm-chair, at no great distance from the Heathcote party, and there stood very nearly hid, till, just as the old gentleman was seating himself, he caught sight of her meek eyes fixed upon his own face with an expression of timid affection and respect that was very striking.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Thorpe, recovering his feet, "a pretty uncle I am, and a courteous host! It is your fault, Mrs. Heathcote, it is, indeed; but, absolutely, for a moment I forgot that I had any guests but yourself and your pretty Florence here

. . . . and there stand a whole bevy of beauties, all my own nieces into the bargain,—not to mention this dear little girl, who is hiding herself because she is ashamed of me, I believe, and looking, too, as if she could find in her heart to be kind to her ill-bred old uncle, if he would but let her."

Thus speaking, Mr. Thorpe pushed aside the arm-chair, and taking Sophia's two hands in his, impressed a paternal kiss upon her forehead.

This was the first kiss the old gentleman had bestowed on any of his fair relations, and it produced considerable effect. The three Misses Wilkyns looked at one another, and it is probable they thought that their turn would come next. Mrs. Heathcote looked at Florence, and inwardly ejaculated, "There is no accounting for taste." Sophia herself, the gentle, timid Sophia, trembled very perceptibly, and, for a moment, her eyes were fixed upon the ground; but in the next she looked up, and with a sudden movement that appeared perfectly irresistible, she grasped the hands which had held her own the moment before, and raising them to her lips, kissed them passionately. Then, terrified at what she had done, she drooped her head and murmured—

"Forgive me! forgive me! I am fatherless and motherless! and I cannot bear such kindness!" This burst of emotion was not distinctly audible to any ears but those of Mr. Thorpe, but he heard every word she said quite clearly, and was very much touched by the forlorn and desolate feeling they expressed.

"Poor little thing!" thought he. "It is sad, very sad, to feel oneself so alone in the world!" and he patted her dark and carefully-placed curls as tenderly as if they had hung over the prettiest face in the world.

At this moment Mrs. Heathcote felt some one pinching the back of her neck, and turning suddenly round, perceived Algernon, who, on the entrance of Mr. Thorpe, had twisted himself round the sofa, and deposited his lanky length of limb on a low chair in the rear of it.

"Mother! who do you think will inherit Thorpe-Combe?" he whispered close to her ear, and then retreated again pretty effectually out of sight of everybody.

CHAPTER V.

Of course, this first evening was a very important one; and therefore, long as the day's history has already been, a few more pages must be devoted to it.

Having recovered himself from the emotion occasioned by the above-mentioned touching little scene with Sophia, Mr. Thorpe stepped onward to the pianoforte, and congratulated himself upon seeing that three of his nieces appeared to be attracted by it.

"I wish I had three Welsh harps for you, my dear girls," he said;

"I love music, and I have a great predilection for what is national in every country."

"Old brute!" whispered Miss Eldruda to Miss Elfreda Wilkyns.

"Our native harps are seen more in the hands of our servants than of our ladies," said the eldest of the heiresses. "But if you love Welsh music, dear uncle," she added, correcting herself, as she remembered that she was the eldest daughter of the eldest sister of the Thorpe race, and that it would be a finer thing to be the heiress of thousands than of hundreds,—"if you love Welsh music, dear uncle, I can sing as many Welsh songs to you as you will. There is one in which every verse records the deeds of one of our ancestors, all in a direct line. The Wilkynses are a very fine old family."

"I think Sir Charles Temple will like to hear you sing that song, my dear," replied the terrified old man, wickedly and maliciously determined to make his faithful ally sustain the fire of all the *aps*, which his sensitive nerves shrank from; "so we won't have it till he comes. But perhaps my little Sophia, or Florence, or some of you, may be able to give us in the mean time something less historic. Which is the nightingale, *par excellence*, among you all?"

"Upon my word, I know nothing about the singing of our cousins," returned Miss Wilkyns, with a little smile. "My sisters and myself have made a study of music, and I believe we are all pretty tolerable proficients."

"That's well!" said Mr. Thorpe, yawning without much ceremony; and turning abruptly round, he encountered the person of Sophia within an inch of him. She had followed with a soft, stealthy pace, as if fearing to disturb anybody and everybody; but now, caught in the presumption of having followed him, she ventured to say, in a voice trembling from timidity. . . . .

"Did you not say that you wished for tea, sir? Nobody has rung the bell yet. May I do it?"

"Thank you, love, thank you. Do; there's a darling. I am very fond of tea, Sophy; and very fond of having it nicely made. Can you make tea, my dear?"

"Aunt Heathcote always makes the tea at home, uncle. But I think I could make it for you, if you would let me try. . . . . May I, uncle?"

"My dear child, I don't suppose that Mrs. Barnes, my mistress of the ceremonies, will think it right and proper that any of you should have the trouble of making tea. She will send it in ready-made, I have no doubt. But it's a horrid way of having tea, that. It is never good for anything . . . . cold and miserable . . . . half of it in the saucer, and always either too strong or too weak to drink. But I must take my chance with the rest, Sophy."

Sophia upon this glided away from him, and making her way with her usual soft noiseless movement in and out among the chairs and tables, got out of the room unseen by all save Algernon, who, rarely conversing much, amused himself by looking about him more than most people.

On reaching the hall, Miss Martin remained fixed for a moment at the bottom of the great staircase, uncertain as to the best method of

obtaining a sight of Mrs. Barnes, a confidential interview with whom was the object she had in view. A little reflection, however, sufficed to decide her movements; and taking a wax-light that she found ready lighted on a marble table at the foot of the stairs, she mounted to the room in which she had dressed.

Many ladies, and many gentlemen too, might have found some difficulty in that wide rambling mansion in discovering a room into which they had been ushered with considerable bustle and confusion, but Sophia Martin never forgot any path she had once trod, any stairs she had once mounted, or any door she had once passed through; so she walked directly, and without a shadow of turning, to the apartment in which she had dressed, and where she found two tapers burning on her table, and a bright fire blazing on her hearth. For one short moment she was tempted to seat herself in the low arm-chair which stood invitingly before it; for Sophia Martin liked comfort exceedingly, and had not always been able to enjoy so much of it as she desired. But she speedily recollected that she had not left the drawing-room for the purpose of enjoying the idle delight of an arm-chair; and smiling as some other thought occurred to her, she rose from its coaxing embrace, and having rung her bell, awaited the effect of it, with her dark eye fixed upon the fire, and with an expression as far as possible removed from that of thoughtless indolence. Thoughtless indolence, indeed, was by no means her besetting sin.

The bell was very quickly answered, but not by Mrs. Barnes. It was her niece Nancy who appeared at the door, requesting to know if anything was wanted.

"It was Mrs. Barnes, the housekeeper, whom I wished to see," said Sophia, in the gentlest and most gracious voice in the world.

"I will send my aunt here directly, miss," said Nancy, retreating.

"Your aunt, is she? Do step in for a moment, will you?" said Sophia, in, if possible, a sweeter voice than before.—"What I wanted to say. . . . . Do tell me what your name is, will you? I hope you will always come when I ring. . . . . But you must tell me your name."

"Nancy, miss," said the young woman, very respectfully.

"Shut the door, will you, Nancy, for one half-minute. What I wanted to say to your aunt, was about my dear good uncle's tea. . . . How you must all love him, Nancy! . . . . He seems to me the dearest, kindest creature I ever met with in all my life! Oh! Nancy! —you would not wonder at my saying so, if you knew what a very, very unhappy girl I have always been,—no father, no mother, Nancy! not even an aunt as you have! No wonder, then, that his kindness is something very new, and very dear to me!" . . . . and here Miss Martin drew forth her pocket-handkerchief and put it to her eyes.

"I dare say, miss, you will find him very kind," replied the girl, with a little increase of familiarity, and decrease of respect. "But what is it, if you please, that you have got to say to my aunt Barnes? . . . . I can take her the message if you like it."

"Oh! I dare say it will do just as well, speaking to you, Nancy. It was a message from him about his tea. He desires, that instead

of having it sent in to him, like the rest of the company, she will send in the tea-things for him by himself, exactly as if nobody was here. Do you understand, Nancy? And then I am to make it for him. And it is to be done in the same way every evening. Don't let there be any mistake, there's a dear good girl. He seemed to be so delighted with the scheme when he had thought of it; and I would not for the world have him disappointed through any bungling of mine. You understand, Nancy, don't you? Let a little tea-tray, and tea-pot, and one cup and saucer come in directly."

"Oh dear! yes, miss,—I understand, and I'll tell aunt directly, and she'll see about it, you may depend upon it. She knows all his odd ways better than anybody."

"Poor dear uncle! He has got a few odd ways then, has he, Nancy?" said Sophia, lingering a little as she passed through the door.

"Why, as for that, miss, I don't suppose there is many as haven't, gentle or simple. I don't mean to say that he is any way worse than his neighbours."

"Worse? . . . . Oh! Nancy, I am sure you have said nothing but what makes me love him better and better. Dear, dear uncle Thorpe! And to think of his being so kind to a poor orphan girl like me! . . . . And I never get liked by strangers; it is not my way. I wish, Nancy, you would promise always to come to me while I stay here, to do any little thing I may happen to want, for I feel now as if I had made acquaintance with you, and I shall like you so much better than any one else? . . . . Will you promise always to come?"

"Yes, miss, certainly," replied Nancy.

"By the bye, Nancy, did you ever see the sort of knitting the people do in our neighbourhood, as comforters for the wrist? You can't think how warm they keep the hands; and they are pretty too, I think, when the colours are good. Look, here is a pair I have just got new, and they suit your sort of bright complexion exactly. I will give them to you, if you would like to have them."

Nancy declared that she should like to have them very much, whereupon they were transferred to her with a most amiable smile; and then, begging her not to lose a single moment's time about sending in the tea, Miss Martin nodded a familiar farewell, and returned to the drawing-room.

She found all the gentlemen standing on or very near the hearth-rug, and sipping their coffee. Her quiet entrance appeared to be observed by no one; and having said a fond word or two to her dear cousin Elfreda, she contrived in the most easy and natural manner in the world to place herself beside a snug little table, at no great distance from the fire, having another chair of the most inviting description standing near it. Here she seated herself as if thinking of nothing at all, except, perhaps, keeping herself out of the way of everybody; for though too smoothly quiet in her movements to permit the charge of awkwardness to be brought against her, she could neither stand, move, nor sit down, without everybody's perceiving that she was almost shrinking into the earth with shyness.

Mr. Thorpe's kind-hearted notice would, doubtless, have been attracted by this sort of timid self-banishment, had he not been engaged by behaving with peculiar civility to the gentlemen of the party, towards whom he perhaps felt that he had been somewhat wanting in attention. He had, however, the satisfaction of finding them very easily propitiated. Mr. Wilkyns, indeed, seemed to keep his eyes open with considerable difficulty; but Major Heathcote and Mr. Spencer were full of chat, and though the old gentleman rather avoided looking Sir Charles Temple in the face, suspecting that he might get a reproachful glance if he did, he heard his pleasant voice in lively conversation with Mrs. Heathcote, and altogether was exceedingly well satisfied with the progress his guests appeared to be making towards entertaining one another.

Things were in this state when the door was thrown open, and a servant entered, bearing an enormous tray, filled with tea-cups redolent of fragrant steam.

"I have failed, then!" quietly sighed Sophia Martin. "That hateful Barnes is mistress here!"

Again the door opened, and again Miss Martin raised her eyes, and this time not in vain. A lesser servant and a lesser tray now made their appearance. Everything was exactly as the young lady wished to see it; a little tea-pot and a little kettle and lamp, a little cream-jug, and one little cup and saucer. It was perfect; and with her own unrivalled suavity of mien and of movement, she contrived to conjure the apparatus to her side, and saw it deposited upon the selected table, *almost* without any single person there being aware that she had anything to do with it.

Having achieved this, Miss Martin examined her little tray, and to her great consolation found that all her doubts as to whether she was to make green tea, or black tea, and all her difficulties as to where she was to get either, were solved and removed by the appearance of a miniature silver canister, containing a very exquisite specimen of the finest plant that China could boast. Having, with noiseless but rapid fingers, submitted this to the process of infusion, she left her place, and happily arrived at her uncle's side, before the huge circulating *cabaret* had reached him.

"Are you ready for your tea now, uncle?" said Sophia, in her most silver voice.

"Eh? what? Ready for tea, my dear? Oh yes? I am always ready for tea, if tea is ready for me. But, between you and me, Sophy dear, the stuff that is coming this way does not deserve the name."

"But if you will come this way, uncle, you will find that I have got some that you will like better—some that I have made on purpose for you."

"You? my dear child! Upon my word, that is very kind of you. God bless my soul! how very comfortable it looks; my dear kettle and all. Why, Sophy, you are a little witch. How upon earth did you contrive to find out precisely the very thing that was wanted? And, then, how upon earth did you contrive to get it?"

"As to the last, uncle Thorpe, I had only just to send a message

to your good Mrs. Barnes, who to be sure is the very kindest, cleverest person I ever met with, and then I was quite certain of having all that was wanted. So this answers both questions at once. All my share in the business consists in having discovered that you were wishing for a cup of tea made according to your usual mode; and of course, when I found that, I was determined, somehow or other, that you should have it. The merit belongs, I assure you, altogether to Mrs. Barnes."

The old gentleman sipped his tea with more than usual relish, looking the while with great complacency at the little quiet dispenser of it.

"You are a very extraordinary little girl, Sophy Martin," said he at length, "a very extraordinary little girl, indeed. To think now of your having found out what sort of a body my old Barnes is, and that as completely and exactly as if you had known her all your life. I'll bet fifty pounds, there is not another person here who has bestowed a thought upon her, good or bad; nay, very likely they have not even found out her existence. I wish to Heaven I had found out yours, my poor girl, long and long ago; and I should, if I had only done my duty when your poor mother died. Faults are often punished in this life, Sophy, depend upon that, and good deeds often rewarded too. . . . . Another cup, my dear child, and then I'll see if we can't get some whist. I used to be very fond of a rubber, but it is years since I last played. . . . . Here, pussy, pussy, pussy, come and have your cream, old friend."

At this summons, the voluminous pet of Sir Charles Temple, and the receiver of all the caresses bestowed by Mr. Thorpe for years, crept from under the old gentleman's chair; and, rubbing herself lovingly against his legs, answered the invitation with a plaintive "mew."

"What a cat! What a beautiful creature!" exclaimed Sophia, with an equal mixture of wonder and delight. "Why, uncle, she beats my own dear cat at home to nothing! I never did see so splendid a creature in my life!"

"You love cats then, Sophy?"

"I believe, uncle, it is almost the only whim I have got," replied Miss Martin; adding, with something like a sigh—"poor orphans like me, uncle, must not have pets, you know, but I *have* got a cat. She is the best mouser in the world, to be sure, and therefore, poor thing, she certainly pays for her keep."

Mr. Thorpe's heart sharply reproached him for his neglect of the kind-hearted orphan; and as he watched her carefully draining the last drop of cream into a saucer for his favorite, he endeavoured to still the self-reproach, by making a silent vow that, let what would happen about more important matters, poor Sophy Martin should have wherewithal to feed a pet cat, or a pet dog either, if she liked it, without having recourse to rats or mice for their support. The thought pleased him, and he gave her by far the fondest smile he had yet bestowed upon any of his nepotine kindred. "Now then!" he said, rising gaily from his chair, "let us see about a card-table."

As he turned to commence his canvass for players, he encountered

Algernon Heathcote, who, with a book in his hand, was reclining in a huge arm-chair placed against the wall at no great distance from Miss Martin's little tea-table.

"Ah! reading, my boy? Why, you have got one of Mrs. Barnes' household bibles, as she calls them. You will find one in every room in the house. That is one of her rules, dear good woman, and an excellent one it is. What have you been reading, my dear?"

"The story of Jacob and Esau, uncle," replied Algernon, demurely.

Mr. Thorpe scarcely heard the answer, for he was applying himself to the bell in order to make requisition for cards—but Miss Martin heard him perfectly.

"Who can play a rubber?" demanded the master of the house, as soon as the card-table and all its well-prepared appurtenances were set in order.

"The Major plays a capital rubber, sir," responded Mrs. Heathcote, eargerly, and delighted to find that her beloved was likely to obtain what he dearly loved.

"That's well," said Mr. Thorpe; "and you, Spencer?"

"With great pleasure, sir," replied the graceful official, drawing near, and arranging the diamond on his little finger, previous to extending his hand.

"And who will make our fourth? Mr. Wilkyns seems inclined for a nap. Sir Charles belongs, of right divine, to the young ladies. . . . What say you, Mrs. Heathcote?"

"I am afraid you would not like my play, sir," she replied, shaking her head. "The Major says I don't know trumps after the first three deals . . . . but rather than spoil the table. . . ."

"Oh! my dear aunt! I should so like to play!" said the gentle voice of Sophia Martin, who, somehow or other, found herself at this moment standing between her aunt Heathcote and her uncle Thorpe.

"Well, my dear, I see no objection, if your uncle Thorpe will accept of you. She plays a great deal better than I do, does she not, Major?" said Mrs. Heathcote.

"Oh dear! yes, Poppsy, that she certainly does—and the reason's clear. She likes it, and you don't, my dear. Shall we admit the young recruit, sir? . . . . Only we must take care not to ruin her. Perhaps she and I had better play against each other, and then we can settle it."

"No, no, no; we will cut for partners, if you please. But has everybody done tea? . . . . Take another cup of tea, Major. . . . I shall be back in a minute." And so saying, Mr. Thorpe took up one of the candles from the card-table, and with a brisk step left the room.

Sophia withdrew from the table, and placed herself near the fire, her downward eye furtively cast towards the door, which was opened the moment after by Mr. Grimstone, who, respectfully approaching her, whispered a request from her uncle that she would be pleased to step out for a moment.

The young lady obeyed, and found Mr. Thorpe in the hall, standing at the door of his usual sitting-room. He beckoned her to enter, and

then closing the door, put into her hands an old-fashioned but very elegantly-embroidered purse, with ten sovereigns on one side and twenty shillings on the other.

"Here, my dear child," said he, "here is a little card-money for you. When this is gone, Sophy, you shall have some more. It is very pretty of you, my dear, to wish to make up the table for us. There now . . . . run back again, and I will follow in a minute."

Sophia Martin gave him one look, made up of gratitude, humility, and astonishment, but lost no time in obeying him. She did not run, however; she very rarely did that; but her white frock was visible again amongst the chairs and tables almost before its absence had been perceived.

Mr. Thorpe returned the minute after, and, saying to the Misses Wilkyns as he passed them, "I hope, my dears, you mean to sing to us, as we play . . . . make Temple help you," made his way to the card-table, replaced the candle, spread wide a pack of cards to be drawn from, and all with an air of gaiety and good-humour well calculated to convey to every one who looked at him the agreeable fact that he was exceedingly well pleased with himself and everybody about him.

Major Heathcote and Mr. Spencer were still lingering near the purposed field of action; and at a look from her uncle, Sophia, who was once more whispering to Elfreda her longings to hear her sing, joined them, and the party sat down, the young lady falling to the lot of Mr. Spencer. Miss Martin really played tolerably well for so young a person, *very* tolerably well, and the courteous Mr. Spencer paid her many compliments.

"I believe," said Mr. Thorpe, looking at her kindly, "that this little lady can do everything well."

"It is only by giving a little attention, uncle," she replied. "I know very little about the game, as uncle Heathcote can tell you; but, of course, if three uncles condescend to play with me, the least I can do is to be attentive."

But, notwithstanding Sophia's humble opinion of her own play, the rubber was a very good rubber, and enjoyed accordingly.

Meanwhile that dear resource of young ladies, whether they can play or not play, whether they can sing or not sing,—that pretty occasion of display for faces and graces,—that concealer of yawns,—that relaxer of aching limbs,—in one word, the pianoforte, formed a centre about which the three Misses Wilkyns, Sir Charles Temple, Mr. Bentinck, and Mr. Montagu Spencer continued to walk and talk, for a considerable time; till at length, after a great deal of coaxing and pressing, refusing and coquetting, Miss Eldruda Wilkyns sat down to play, and the Misses Elfreda and Winifred stood up to sing. The air and its accompaniment were performed much in the style that might have been expected from young ladies who had been made "rather particular" by having a master once a week from Swansea. Sir Charles Temple, however, stood it out, and, without doubt, would have thanked the young ladies for their exertions in his favour, had he not, at the very moment they concluded, heard, or fancied he heard, Mrs. Heathcote speak to him from her very com-

fortable unchanged position on the sofa, where she still sat, with Florence at her side.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Heathcote!" he said, striding rapidly across the room, "what was it you said?"

"Nothing, sir. I did not speak at all."

"Indeed! I fancied that I heard you call me. Your young son has escaped, I perceive. I presume that he felt rather over-fatigued by the journey of this morning."

"I don't know about fatigued, sir. To be sure, Algernon, poor fellow, is not so strong yet as I hope he will be. But as to Florence, here, it seems a joke to talk of her being fatigued by travelling fifty miles or so in a post-chaise, when she can walk a dozen without being a bit the worse for it; and yet, the fact is, that she is more than half-asleep,—are you not, my dear?"

"Then, I suppose, Miss Heathcote is not fond of music?" said Sir Charles.

"Oh no!—That isn't it, neither," returned Mrs. Heathcote, looking at her and laughing, "for she loves it as well as the birds do, and that is saying a good deal, you know, sir, for they are at their singing from morning to night."

Here Florence, who was not very fond of hearing herself talked about, rose up, and stole away to the card-table.

"Does the young lady sing, then?" demanded Sir Charles, looking at her light graceful figure as she walked off.

"Oh dear, yes! . . . . I may be partial, perhaps; but, to my fancy, hers is the prettiest singing that ever I heard in my life," replied the step-mother.

"Then, how came you to be so cruel, my dear madam, as not to lay your commands on her to give us the advantage of her voice this evening?"

"Bless me, sir! I should never have thought of such a thing. Poor Florence!—she would have been up the chimney in a minute if I had. I did not mean to say that she was a fine-taught singer and instrumental player, like those young ladies: there was no chance for her, poor thing! for the major could never have paid for her teaching, if we had wished it ever so much. And I can't say I think it would have done her any particular good if we *could* have afforded it, for she could never be taught to sing sweeter, to our fancies, than she does now; and there's nobody to hear her at Clevelands besides ourselves."

"And why should you suppose, Mrs. Heathcote, that nobody's fancy would accord with your own? Why should not other friends have the pleasure of hearing her voice when it is within their reach?"

"Lord bless you, sir! how should she be expected to have courage to sing in company like this? I don't suppose she could get through a song in this fine place if you could give her the world," said Mrs. Heathcote, with so much animation that more than one head was turned towards the sofa.

"Mr. Algernon is a beautiful boy, Mrs. Heathcote. It is a pity he is so delicate," said Sir Charles, abruptly changing the conversation.

"To be sure it is,—a great pity, because it stops his education. But he will do very well yet, sir, I will venture to answer for it. He is not like the same boy that he was a year ago. He is ten times as strong,—ay, twenty times."

"And he may thank you for it, I fancy, Mrs. Heathcote. You seem to take most watchful care of him."

"God forbid I should not, sir! He is a boy that well pays for care. I never knew the like of him for heart and understanding both. I don't know what a person must be made of not to love him. It is impossible for anybody to help it," replied the step-dame.

"And is the young lady as happy in disposition?" demanded Sir Charles, lowering his voice.

"God bless her! yes. I don't think there is a pin to choose between them, as to that. They are very remarkable young people as to temper."

"Kind and careful training generally, I believe, improves the disposition of those who are so happy as to meet with it," said Sir Charles. "That young lady also, who is playing whist, is so happy as to be one of your family, Mrs. Heathcote, is she not?"

"Yes, sir, Sophy Martin lives with us," replied Mrs. Heathcote.

"And there can be no doubt, I am sure, that she repays your attention in the same delightful manner as her cousins?" said the baronet, rather interrogatively.

"Sophy Martin has not lived with us quite a year yet," replied Mrs. Heathcote.

It would have been far from polite, as Sir Charles Temple thought, to ask any more questions about Miss Martin, and therefore he desisted, spite of the conscientious wish which urged him to obtain all the information possible respecting the characters and dispositions of the young people, from among whom his old friend's heir was to be selected, and in which selection he had been so earnestly requested to assist.

It is indeed but fair to suppose that the uselessness of making any such attempt in the case of the co-heiresses was the cause of his rather evident disinclination to cultivate any particular intimacy with them; Mr. Thorpe having distinctly declared that, though invited to the family meeting, he considered them as excluded by their paternal inheritance from being among the candidates for his estate. Not so Mr. Bentinck and Mr. Montagu Spencer, however. And, determined to prepare himself for the cross-examination which he expected from Mr. Thorpe, he placed himself in a chair about midway between the card-table and the pianoforte, and ventured to break in upon the languid performances which were going on at the latter, by saying quite aloud,

"Well, young gentlemen! What do you mean to do with yourselves to-morrow?"

The two boys wheeled round towards him, as if moved by one and the same mechanism. "To-morrow, sir?" said the elder, in a sharp, shrill voice.

"Can't we skate, sir?" said the younger.

"Skate?" returned Sir Charles. "Oh yes, if you are skaters. There is plenty of good ice. Are you proficients?"

"First-rate!" said Bentinck.

"Capital!" said Montagu.

"Then you'll do very well, provided you have brought your skates. But first-rate skaters, I believe, never stir in winter without them."

The boys looked blank, and exchanged a glance and a shrug. "That's a devilish bore then, for I'm sure . . . . almost . . . . that we've got none. Do you think we have, Bentinck?"

"Can't say . . . . the servants may have put them up, for anything I know. I say, Montagu . . . . perhaps the governor thought we should find some here?"

"Do you think the old fellow has got any?" said one, lowering his voice,—"old Thorpe, I mean?"

"It will be a d—d bore if he hasn't," said the other.

* * * * * *

The whist-table now broke up. A tray made its appearance, and the sounds produced by the entrance of it seemed to awaken the Welsh squire; for just as it was placed upon the table he opened his eyes, for the first time since the tea left the room. This gentleman and the two young Spencers made the most of what they saw placed before them; but the rest of the party were not supper-eaters, and in another half-hour the drawing-room was left vacant, and the various bedrooms and dressing-rooms had received the guests.

CHAPTER VI.

Of all things which fate and fortune had yet given her to enjoy, separately and solely for her own particular use and benefit, Florence Heathcote best loved an early morning walk. In spring and autumn she was wont every morning of her life, when weather permitted, very literally to meet the sun upon the upland lawn; and though in the full summer tide his godship was generally up before her, she had many a time and oft stood all dew-bespangled on the green hill behind her father's house to watch his rising. But in the winter, these solitary, musing, holy, and most happy hours, were altogether lost for her at home. Not because the hardy little girl trembled at a snow-storm or shrunk before a frost; but because these morning joys must, in order to be perfect, be tasted before breakfast, and the active habits of the Heathcote family caused the morning kettle to be boiling so very early, that Florence must have walked forth in darkness, had she walked forth at all, if attempting to do so before the morning meal.

But just as Mr. Thorpe's company were separating for the night, the question was discussed as to what hour would be most agreeable for them to meet again for breakfast; and the majority of voices were decidedly for ten instead of nine o'clock. On hearing this, our

unrefined young rustic instantly decided, in the secret absolutism of her own autocratic heart, that neither drowsy uncles nor elegant cousins should imprison her in her chamber till that time,—at least if the sun shone, and she could find means of opening a door or a window, by which to pass out and look upon the new world around her.

With this scheme in her head, Florence gazed with considerable interest at the heavy house-door, as she passed with the ladies through the hall to the staircase. But there was a massive sternness in its structure which disagreeably checked her hopes of studying the geography of Thorpe-Combe on the morrow in all the delicious liberty of solitude. She felt in a moment that all such knowledge was

"At that entrance quite shut out,"

and her eyes wandered in vain for some promising side-passage that might give hope of finding a postern exit.

She had not entered her pretty apartment, however, many minutes, before one of the subsidiary waiting-maids, two or three of whom were found in attendance at the top of the stairs to marshal the guests the way they were to go, came to her with offers of disrobing services. Florence was not accustomed to much personal attendance; but having no little sister at hand to stand on tip-toe and unfasten her frock, she accepted the offer; and while the business was going on, asked the neat-handed damsel a few questions which she flattered herself might lead to the discovery of the sally-port she was so anxious to find. Nor was she disappointed. In reply to one of these questions the girl answered—

"Oh dear, yes, miss. The grounds lies all round the house entirely. There is no place in the whole country has got such gardens, excepting just Temple, which is quite a sight, almost, in the way of grounds. But ourn here is beautiful pleasant in the summer time, as you'll be able to guess to-morrow, miss, though the ground be so covered up with frost; 'cause there's to be a fire lighted for the ladies in the morning in the east parlour, and there's a beautiful large glass-door there, as opens in the very midst of the shrubs and evergreens."

"Whereabouts is the east parlour? Does it open from the hall?" demanded Florence.

"Yes, miss; the door 's right opposite the drawing-room."

"Thank you; that will do. I need not detain you any longer. Good night," said Florence; and then she was left alone to unpack her morning-dress, and to find her walking-boots; to admire the old-fashioned beauty of her comfortable room; to open her shutters and draw up her blinds, that no ray of awakening daylight might be lost; to say her prayers; and to lay herself down for a sweet, sound, youthful, healthful sleep, that fled lightly away at the first gleam of daylight.

Florence did not possess a watch; and although, when at home, she almost equalled a Cumberland shepherd-boy in the accuracy with which she made every object around her contribute to the

accuracy of the sun-dial, by which she regulated her out-of-door avocations, she now, as she took her first look from the window, found herself quite at a loss how to calculate the hour, from her ignorance of the position of the house; and so brightly was the light reflected by the crystals of the frozen snow which covered the earth, that she greatly feared she had slept too long. But the absence of all household sounds reassured her, and dressing herself with as much haste as her ice-bathed fingers would permit, she descended the stairs, and, thanks to the wide-spreading arched window which lighted them, found the east-parlour without difficulty.

By the aid of such light as the door admitted, and by cautiously making her way amidst the furniture, Florence wasted not much time before she discovered the promised glass door. To many young ladies the task of opening it would have been one of insurmountable difficulty; but Florence had seen such fastenings before, and, despite her frost-bitten fingers, succeeded in mastering them all, and found herself, at length, upon the gravel-walk of the pretty shrub-surrounded lawn which the maid had described.

But it was not a gravel-walk, or a lawn surrounded with shrubs, that Florence wanted. Her aspirations were for something more rude and less confined. Once, however, beyond the trammels of the walls of the mansion, she felt little doubt of her own powers of getting free from any restraint that out-of-door inclosures could offer; and accordingly she soon found herself at very perfect liberty on the wide-spreading esplanade in front of the house.

The view which greeted her from thence almost made her shout with gladness. The whole of the deep, long, gracefully-formed hollow, which gave the place its name, was visible from this spot; its deep sides, sweeping in a beautiful curve round the whole expanse, were thickly clothed with forest-trees of very noble growth, enriched, at intervals, by an undergrowth of clustering evergreens or of feathery larch. At the most distant point the Combe opened by a narrow gorge, but wide enough to admit a lovely landscape beyond, terminating in the blue hills of the Malvern ridge.

It was impossible at any time to look upon this view without feeling that it was one of singularly picturesque beauty, and, if the phrase may be allowed, of most happy arrangement. Not an object greeted the eye that did not add something to its pleasure; and far away as was the more distant outline, a feeling of home-comfort and sheltered cosiness was suggested by its form, which soothed the imagination by a thousand delightful dreams of tame Hamadryads and domestic Fauns. But at the moment Florence Heathcote first looked upon it, there was a species of enchantment spread over the scene, which was quite distinct from the ordinary charm of forest scenery: the whole sweeping woodland was one bright circle of sparkling crystals, so dazzlingly white, that the winking eye hardly dared to gaze upon it, yet so gorgeously beautiful, that if blindness had been the penalty, it must be looked at. It was not snow that clothed it thus in such pale intensity of lustre; the effect of this, though beautiful, is too smothering and heavy to give the airy grace which made Florence almost fancy that it was a fairy tale made palpable which she saw

before her. It was that rare perfection of hoar-frost, which now and then in our vapoury land turns every tiny twig into a separate jewel, making silver filigree look heavy and ivory carving coarse. The sun, too, was already high enough (for it was nearly nine o'clock) to illuminate one side of the fair show, while the other seemed to sleep in breathless stillness, under a delicate veil of shadow, as it were, lightly resting upon it.

Florence clasped her hands together, as this sight burst upon her, and exclaimed, "Oh!" with all the breath her rapture and the frost had left her. For a moment or two she stood perfectly entranced; and then her spirits, gaily awakening from wonder to delight, sent her, with a light step, along the crisp and tempting path which led under the trees round the north side of the Combe.

A sparkling draught of morning air was, to Florence, what sparkling draughts of more doubtful healthfulness may be to duller mortals; it gave her an exhilaration of spirits that made her long to laugh and sing. A woodland path commanding such splendid openings as that she now trod, and trod, too, for the first time, possesses an attraction for a country-nurtured fancy, like that of Florence, which only such fancies can comprehend. It sometimes sent her bounding onward at the rate of four miles an hour, and sometimes held her chained as fixedly as if she had no power to move at all. By degrees, too, her fingers and her feet grew warm, and then, most certainly, she was happier still; till at length, on reaching a point at which the fine old grey house and its sloping lawns made part of the landscape, she stood stock-still, and involuntarily exclaimed aloud, "Oh! how can they all lie with closed eyes up yonder, instead of opening them on such a scene as this?" And then, in the overflowing of her abounding enjoyment, and unmindful of the *unseasonable* application of imagery, she sang in a voice as clear as the air through which it vibrated,

"Hark! Hark; the lark at heaven's gate sings,
And Phœbus 'gins arise,
His steeds to water at those springs
On chaliced flowers that lies;
And winking mary-buds begin
To ope their golden eyes;
With everything that pretty bin,
My lady sweet, arise!
Arise! arise!"

And having finished her ditty, she bounded on again, much too forgetful of the progress of time, and of the length of way she had to retrace her steps before she could find herself soberly seated at breakfast with the rest of the Combe company. In the next moment, however, her attention was very forcibly recalled to the realities of life, by the sound of crackling branches above her head, attended by a quantity of silvery rime, which fell upon her like a shower-bath. She started forward to avoid any farther avalanche, and then turned to look upwards, in order to discover what had caused it. It was with great astonishment that she descried the figure of Sir Charles Temple scrambling down the bank at a pace that seemed to be more regulated by the angle of the declivity than by his will; and she

almost screamed when, having reached a point that was too precipitous to walk over, he made a sudden spring, and in an instant stood on the path beside her. . . . . In his hand was a gun, a couple of dogs were at his heels, a bag swelling with woodcocks hung from his belt; and his whole dress and appearance were so greatly unlike what she had seen on the preceding evening, that though she immediately recognised him, her countenance expressed extreme astonishment.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times, Miss Heathcote," he said, "not only for having, as I fear, startled you very unpleasantly, but for having sprinkled you so abominably with rime. I will not deny that some very sweet sounds turned me from my path, or that I did really and truly intend to get down to the spot from whence they came; but most assuredly I did not mean to make my descent thus rudely. I had no idea that the bank terminated in this place so abruptly."

As he spoke he laid aside his gun, and endeavoured with all gentleness to shake from the cloak of Florence the crisped powdering she had received. But having recovered her astonishment, she made light of the shower, blushed a little, laughed a little, begged him not to trouble himself about her cloak, and finally said that she thought it must be time to go home to breakfast.

"I am afraid it is," he replied; "and yet it is almost a pity to return till you have gone two or three hundred yards farther, where you may see the cataract!"

"A cataract!" exclaimed Florence. "Oh! let me see the cataract!"

"I think you had better not, Miss Heathcote, upon second thoughts, which you know are proverbially the best," returned Sir Charles, who had suddenly recollected that it would be giving a very unfair advantage against Florence, if he beguiled her into being too late for breakfast; an indecorum of which he knew Mr. Thorpe was likely very particularly to disapprove.

"Why?" said Florence, innocently.

"Because your uncle is rather particular on the article of punctuality, and he might be displeased, perhaps, if you were too late."

On hearing this, Florence smiled, shook her head, and said in a tone of rather doubtful resignation, "Well, then, I suppose I must turn back; but it is a great pity:" and suiting the action to the word, she turned about and began to walk briskly homeward.

"Do you not think it is very honest of me to have reminded you of this disagreeable necessity, Miss Heathcote?"

"Honest?" repeated Florence, looking up at him with an air of surprise.

"Yes, honest: for did I not advise what was good for you, and bad for me?"

"What was bad for you, sir?" demanded Florence, with half a smile, and looking very beautiful.

"It is bad for me to go home to breakfast, when I should so very greatly have preferred walking on with you to the waterfall," he replied, returning her smile.

"Then it is certainly a great pity we should not go, for I should have liked it very much too. I never saw a waterfall except in a picture, and I think it must be very beautiful," said Florence.

The temptation was strong to turn round again, but Sir Charles was really too *honest* to yield to it, so he steadily pursued his way homeward, notwithstanding the pretty temptation at his side.

"You must promise me, as a reward for my virtue," said he, "that you will not go to this waterfall till I can go with you. Will you promise this?"

"I should like to go with you very much," she replied, with the most perfect *naïveté;* "but if any plan for seeing it should happen to be proposed when you are not by, I am terribly afraid I should run off without you."

"Then to prevent such treachery," said he, laughing, "what say you to our making a party immediately after breakfast? Do you think you could bear the fatigue of walking so far twice in one day?"

"The fatigue of walking as far as the place where you jumped down?" said Florence. "Oh yes, I think I could bear that."

"Then it is an engagement, is it?"

"Yes, sir, if you please. I should like it better, almost, than anything else in the world. That is, if mamma does not happen to want me for anything."

"Do not call me *Sir*, Miss Heathcote, unless you put Charles after it—Sir, by itself, sounds so very formal." This was said with an earnestness that must have puzzled any one who did not understand *les dessous des cartes*. But Sir Charles Temple happened to know that his old friend, in the midst of all his affected rusticity, cherished a most vehement dislike to any solecism in conventional good breeding, and that a young lady's saying, "yes, sir," and "no, sir," would be likely grievously to offend his ear. Therefore, as he was beginning very decidedly to be of opinion that Florence Heathcote would make a most desirable heiress to Mr. Thorpe, he took her to task thus, with an energy that was quite involuntary.

Florence, however, though she understood nothing of all this, took it in very good part, said she was much obliged to him for telling her, and that she would try very much to remember it, because she did not like formality at all, as it always seemed to her as if people were angry.

"Then, when we are better acquainted, I hope you will let me call you Florence, instead of Miss Heathcote?" said the young baronet.

"You may call me Florence now, if you like it," she replied. "I am never called anything but Florence."

The acquaintance thus auspiciously began went on improving as they walked and talked, till, by the time they reached the house, which unfortunately was not till a quarter past ten, they had become fast friends: Florence considering Sir Charles Temple as the kindest and most good-natured person she had ever seen, and Sir Charles feeling most satisfactorily convinced that neither on the banks of Thames, Arno, Rhone, Rhine, Tiber, or any other stream by which

his wanderings had led him, had he ever chanced to meet so pretty a creature as Florence, with a soul so free from every stain of earth, and a spirit so gentle yet so joyous, so reasonable yet so gay.

On arriving at the hall-door, Sir Charles, looking from head to foot at the figure of his beautiful companion, perceived with dismay that the bottom of her dress was adorned with a border of icicles, which would make her entering the breakfast-room, without changing it, an act of great indiscretion. He remembered all the official elegance of Mr. Spencer, and all the precocious cleverness of his accomplished sons; he remembered the three Misses Wilkyns, and all their point-device laboriousness of toilet; and he saw, in imagination, their dozen of eyes all fixed upon the drooping curls and dabbled petticoat of his pretty friend, till he felt positively terrified at the idea of her appearing before them.

"You must run up-stairs, Miss Heathcote, you must, indeed!" he said in a hasty whisper, and laying his hand on her arm to stay the rapid step with which she was traversing the hall towards the dining-room. "Look at your dress! . . . . Look at the shining fringe upon it!"

Florence did so, and laughed. "Here I am, a perfect icicle," she said, "and yet not cold at all. I must take it off, however, or else this pretty trimming will melt, which would not be agreeable. But I shall not be long getting rid of it, and nobody will think about me if I do but get in before the breakfast is over." And giving him a parting smile, she ran up the stairs to her room.

Sir Charles entered his old friend's parlour as usual, *sans cérémonie*, gun in hand, and exhibiting his game-bag before he rang for the servant to take charge of it.

"Woodcocks, Temple?" said Mr. Thorpe, interrogatively.

"Yes, sir, five of them."

"Then I think we will forgive you for being late. There's a place for you, between my eldest niece and my youngest nephew. Make way for him, Montagu—or is it Bentinck?—I don't quite recollect which noble name belongs to which young gentleman. You must tell me to which dukedom the dark hair belongs, and to which the light, and then I dare say I shall remember. Have you been long out this morning, Temple? It seems to be a glorious day."

Nothing could be further from Sir Charles Temple's thoughts than to conceal his accidental meeting with Florence Heathcote, but, somehow or other, he had got into a wrong place for mentioning it. He felt no inclination to say to Miss Wilkyns,—"Your cousin Florence and I have been enjoying a *tête-à-tête* walk together." Nor was Mr. Montagu Spencer at all a more desirable recipient for the adventure. Neither did he, just then, deem it expedient to announce it for the information of the company in general, because he was quite aware that every eye was fixed upon him. "I will tell her dear good step-mother of it," thought he, "as soon as she has conquered the difficulties occasioned by that under-done, overflowing egg."

But he was spared the embarrassment of opening the subject, if he felt any such, by Mrs. Heathcote saying, while the golden-tinted

egg-drop still bedewed her lip,—"It does quite puzzle me where Florence can be gone to. Sophy Martin has found out her room, and says she is not there, nor her bonnet nor cloak neither. So she must be gone out, just as she does so often at home, to enjoy a little air before breakfast,—only she ought not to be so late, to be sure. But you must not think that is her way in general, sir," she added, addressing Mr. Thorpe, who was seated between her and Miss Martin. "She is never too late at home, but the most ready, punctual child in the world."

Mr. Thorpe was going to make some laughing reply, but Sir Charles felt, that if he missed this excellent opportunity, he should never recount his adventure at all,—and the leaving it to Florence would be exceedingly unfair; so, without any hesitation, but, on the contrary, with a good deal of eagerness in his manner, he said:—

"I can give you news of your lost daughter, Mrs. Heathcote. I had the pleasure of meeting the young lady as I returned from my chase after woodcocks, and we reached the house together."

"Eldruda, will you have some ham?" said Miss Wilkyns, bending her head over a dish before her, as if to conceal a laugh, which, nevertheless, was sufficiently perceptible.

"No, thank you! Elfreda," replied her sister, raising a napkin to her mouth to hide symptoms of sympathetic merriment, which were not, however, the less remarkable for the manœuvre.

"Bless her!" ejaculated Mrs. Heathcote. "I told you, Algernon, didn't I? that I was sure she was got out to look at the 'white world,' as she called it, yesterday. But did you come in together, sir? Why does she not come in to breakfast?"

Sir Charles felt no inclination to amuse the lively Misses Wilkyns with a description of Florence's frosted drapery, and therefore replied very demurely, that he believed the young lady was gone upstairs to take off her bonnet.

"If I had thought that any of you ladies were likely to get out so early, I would have had the garden-walks swept," said Mr. Thorpe. "I am afraid the fair Florence must have wetted those pretty little feet that I saw on the sofa last night, Mrs. Heathcote."

"No, sir, I hope not," said the baronet. "The frost is so exceedingly hard, as yet, that you would gain little advantage by sweeping. . . . . And besides," . . . . Sir Charles was on the point of adding that Miss Heathcote's ramble had not been confined to the garden-walks, but he happened to catch Miss Eldruda's little Welsh black eye so curiously fixed upon him, that he stopped short, and said nothing about it.

"Besides what, Temple?" said Mr. Thorpe.

"I was going to say, that it would be a pity for the ladies to confine their walks to the garden this lovely day. The woods are beautiful."

"You would not think it possible for ladies to walk in the woods at such a season as this, would you, Sir Charles Temple?" said his neighbour Miss Wilkyns, with a shudder.

"They will lose a very glorious spectacle if they do not," he replied, somewhat *brusquely*.

"I suppose you think that a party of country girls, as, I presume, you call us, may plunge to their waists in snow without danger. But I am afraid we have neither strength, energy, romance, nor inclination sufficient for such an enterprise. Are there any drives cut through the woods that you say are so beautiful?"

"No, Miss Wilkyns, I believe not. But as I always walk, and never drive, it is possible that I may be mistaken."

"I hope to heaven you are!" replied the young lady, "for it will certainly be very dull (lowering her voice to a whisper) not to go out at all; and as to tearing through bushes and wading through snow, I can answer for my sisters and myself that it is perfectly out of the question."

"There is no snow," returned Sir Charles, in an accent fully as chilling as his theme.

"Then, pray, do you think it right," said the piqued heiress, replying rather to his accent than his words,—"do you think it right, Sir Charles Temple, for young ladies, girls who may consider themselves as the daughters of a gentleman, and who have been brought up like gentlewomen, do you think it right for them to scramble over hedges and ditches, tearing their way through bushes, like so many savages looking for roots and berries?"

"It would be very unnecessary, at least, for any of this party, to set off upon such a quest," replied Sir Charles, helping himself from a dainty-looking pigeon-pie:—"may I have the pleasure of helping you, Miss Wilkyns?"

"I have breakfasted, sir, I thank you!" she replied, pushing back her coffee-cup, and drawing on her lemon-coloured gloves.

At this moment the door opened, and Florence entered. Every eye was turned upon her, but she was either perfectly unconscious or perfectly unheedful of it; for, with no deeper blush than her fresh walk had given her, she made her way to the top of the table, and bending down beside the master of the house, who turned round a smiling countenance to greet her, she said,—"I hope, Uncle Thorpe, you are not angry with me for being so late. I did not know at all what o'clock it was, and the woods are so very beautiful."

"The woods! . . . . Heavens!" murmured Miss Wilkyns.

"The woods! . . . . mercy!" ejaculated Miss Eldruda.

"The woods! . . . . incredible!" whispered Miss Winifred.

The two nobly-christened Etonians bent forward from the opposite sides of the table to stare at her,—and no great wonder; for with her half-straightened chestnut locks smoothly combed apart upon her forehead, her slight graceful figure, infinitely better shown by her plain, closely-fitted merino frock, than it would have been by the richest robe that ever fashion puckered, she looked so simply, thoroughly beautiful, that no eye, without a beam in it, could have looked at her without pleasure.

"Angry with you, my dear child!" said Mr. Thorpe, taking her hand, and gallantly kissing it,—"angry with you for admiring my rough old woods? . . . . But I will tell you what, Florence, I shall be angry with you, very angry, if you do not sit down here close to

me, and make a good breakfast. Here is one who I know will make room for you."

The one he meant to indicate was Sophia Martin; but before that affectionate girl, who had almost squeezed herself into her uncle's pocket, could move her chair, Mrs. Heathcote had made space enough, and Algernon was already behind his sister, with a chair ready for her. Florence repaid their services by giving Algernon a nod and a smile, and impressing a kiss on the cheek of her step-mother.

"To think of you, Florence!" said Mrs. Heathcote,—"who never breakfasted later than eight o'clock in your life,—to think of you not being ready by ten!"

"I was ready, mamma! . . . . I mean, I should have been ready, only I was so far away," replied Florence, attacking the roll Mr. Thorpe had placed before her.

"So far?" said the eldest Miss Wilkyns,—"where then have you been wandering, Miss Heathcote, if I may take the liberty of asking?"

"I hardly know how to tell you," replied the laughing girl,—"but it was a beautiful thick wood, with a narrow path that opened every now and then, as if on purpose for the view; and it was very near a waterfall!"

"A perfect Diana!" said Mr. Spencer, with something like a shrug and a sneer, and not quite approving the look of admiration with which their host was regarding her.

Sophia Martin breathed a heavy sigh. "Oh, Florence!" she said; and then employed herself with her tea-spoon and coffee-cup, for she was evidently confused, though her cousin Florence evidently was not.

"You don't mean that you have been to High Spring Fall, my dear, do you?" said Mr. Thorpe.

"Was it High Spring Fall, Sir Charles?" demanded Florence, innocently.

The young man coloured, for he knew, though she did not, the species of impertinence which was likely to follow this application to him, and would have saved her from it if possible; but it was not.

"You were at no great distance from High Spring Fall when I saw you, Miss Heathcote," he replied; and then added, as gaily and gallantly as he could, "What say you, ladies all? have you courage to follow Miss Heathcote's example? Shall we all start as soon as breakfast is over to visit this pretty cataract? . . . . The Fall is too mighty to be stopped by the frost; but I doubt not it will be beautifully decorated with icicles, and will offer as pretty a spectacle as you would wish to see."

The proposal did not receive an immediate answer. Each lady seemed to intend that another should speak first. Miss Wilkyns was calculating the chance of her receiving an offer of Sir Charles Temple's arm. Miss Eldruda was waiting to hear what Miss Elfreda said. Miss Winifred was meditating on the danger of spoiling her curls, like "that wild girl of the woods, Florence Heathcote, whose

sort of face could stand it so much better than hers could." Mrs. Heathcote was weighing what the danger to her new boots might be. And Miss Martin was anxiously waiting to hear them all say they would go, that she might stay at home, *tête-à-tête*, with her uncle Thorpe. So as none of them spoke, poor Florence rashly undertook to answer for the whole party at once, and said, "To be sure, they will all go! It is impossible for anybody to stay at home such a day as this! I do assure you that it is not the least cold, if you will but walk fast enough."

"Your hands do not look very warm, Miss Heathcote," said Miss Eldruda, drawing off her own glove, and employing her tolerable-looking hand, by arranging the moss on which the plovers' eggs were placed.

The fingers of Florence, though they would have been recognised, had they been ten times frost-bitten (by any eye that understood the question), as infinitely more beautiful than the thin, sallow, but well-preserved hands of Miss Eldruda, did certainly at this moment look of a blood-red hue; and Miss Martin, in an audible whisper, said, "Oh, Florence, put on your gloves!" But Florence only shook her head, and smiled; and, after the pause of a moment, said, "I do assure you my hands are not cold at all. It is only their colour that makes you think so: but nobody says anything about the waterfall."

"Gracious Heaven! you do not want to set out again, do you?" cried Miss Wilkyns, shuddering. "What a very extraordinary young lady you are!"

"It would really be a great pity if you should get chilblains on your hands, my dear," said Mr. Thorpe, rather gravely. "I would not recommend your going out again till you had restored circulation to your fingers. Young ladies must never have red hands."

"I dare say it will go off, uncle, presently," said Florence, carelessly.

"But do you not think, upon the whole, that it would be better for you to put off your next excursion to the cataract till shooting-time to-morrow?" said Miss Wilkyns, drawing up her eyes, and looking at her cousin through her eye-glass.

"Till to-morrow?" returned Florence, upon whom the "*shooting*" had produced no effect whatever. "To-morrow is Christmas-day, you know, and of course we shall all go to church; and the next day is the third from this; and it is very likely indeed that this white frost will go then, and we shall lose the icicles altogether. Oh! do let us go to-day."

"I dare say the two Mr. Spencers will have no objection to take a scramble with you through the woods," said Miss Eldruda, laughing; "but really you must excuse *us*."

"I think it is possible they may be *de trop*," said Mr. Spencer senior.

"Very likely," said Miss Wilkyns, quietly, but at the same time giving her graceful official uncle an intelligent look.

"Well, well, manage it as you like, and amuse yourselves as well

as you can, my dear children," said Mr. Thorpe. "There is a billiard-table in one of the rooms upstairs, boys; but it is very likely that you will find the cloth worm-eaten, the balls lost, and the cues and maces broken. However, you may go and see. It is just possible that Mrs. Barnes may have extended her patronage to them, and she is a prodigious conservative."

The young Spencers looked comforted, and started to their feet; neither did their father nor Major Heathcote hear of the billiard-table with indifference.

"Which way must we go, uncle Thorpe?" said Mr. Bentinck.

"Who will show us the way to the billiard-room, uncle?" said Mr. Montagu at the same moment.

"I will show you, boys, I will show you myself," returned the old gentleman; "but I shan't stir till my pretty niece here has finished her breakfast. . . . . Only she must promise not to let me see any chilblains. I don't like young ladies to have red hands."

"Look at this hand now, sir!" said Mrs. Heathcote, who had silently seized upon the left hand of Florence, while the contented girl managed to get at her breakfast by aid of the right. "Look here, sir. I have just warmed her poor little hand a little between mine, and you see there are no chilblains now."

The hand of Florence might, both in shape and colour, have served as a model for Vandyke. The three Misses Wilkyns, who happened at this moment each to have a hand ungloved, all drew on a delicate *gant de Paris*, and seemed quite ready to leave the table.

"If Major Heathcote should happen to die, I think I should be strangely tempted to marry his widow," whispered Sir Charles to Miss Wilkyns; and in return she gave him the kindest smile she had bestowed that day; for the fair Elfreda greatly enjoyed what she called "sly quizzing." But it is just possible that upon this occasion she did not quite enter into the spirit of Sir Charles Temple's jest.

Mr. Thorpe, meanwhile, took the delicate little hand thus offered to him into his own, saying very cordially as he examined it, "Why no, my dear madam, I cannot say I see any reason to find fault with the hand now; but have you done breakfast already, Florence?"

"Oh yes! But yet you see I am the last of all!"

CHAPTER VII.

On leaving the breakfast-room, which the whole party did together, Mr. Thorpe, when preparing to mount the stairs with the gentlemen in search of the billiard-table, desired Sir Charles Temple to escort the ladies to the east parlour, a gay-looking, cheerful little room, which had been prepared especially for their morning accommodation, and had been carefully supplied with lady-like books and engravings in abundance.

"What an extremely pleasant room!" exclaimed Miss Wilkyns to the young baronet, as they entered it. "The white ground of this

India paper and the bright-coloured birds and butterflies make it quite beautiful! don't they, Eldruda?"

"But look out of the window, Miss Wilkyns, and you will see what is more bright and beautiful still," cried Florence, who, perfectly unscathed by all the hits she had received concerning her preternatural love for waterfalls, could still think of nothing else. "What think you of the sun shining on all those sparkling boughs? and this is only a shut-up little garden! Think what it must be with all sorts of beautiful trees, great and small, all spreading themselves out, full dressed in this way, on purpose for you to look at them? I thought it was such a pity to come to a new place in the middle of winter, when, often, one can hardly get out at all! But instead of that, the sight from the walk in the wood is ten thousand times more beautiful than the brightest leaves and flowers of summer. It is a sight to make one dance and sing; and such a sight, Miss Wilkyns, ...

'Oh! how can you renounce, and hope to be forgiven?'"

The pretty, playful, coaxing manner in which this was said might have been more successful, if the important young lady to whom it was addressed had not been influenced by the foregone conclusion, that her cousin-german, Miss Florence Heathcote, was an individual whom it was necessary to keep at arm's length. In truth, she considered her as a person whose education had been so lamentably neglected, as to make her utterly unfit for all companionship with ladies filling a certain station in life; a station which made them, as she frequently observed, bound in honour to themselves, their ancestors, and their posterity, not to do anything that could compromise their character as gentlewomen. That walking with Florence to look at High Spring Fall must have been held by her as one of those past, present, and future acts of criminality, was made manifest by the steadfastness of her opposition to it.

"There are many things I believe, Miss Heathcote," she stiffly replied, "which young ladies are obliged to forego in order to preserve the refinement so essential to their possessing the esteem of the world; and scrambling through bogs and bushes, in search of the picturesque, is, in my opinion, one of them. I must beg you to excuse myself and my sisters from participating in anything of the kind."

Florence looked quite frightened; and for the first time became aware that she had done or said something wrong. The bright smile vanished from her face, and as she sat herself down close to her stepmother, slipping her arm within that of her protecting friend, Sir Charles Temple thought that she even looked pale from the rebuff she had received.

The east-parlour party consisted at this time only of Mrs. Heathcote and her offending daughter, the three Welsh heiresses, and himself; and had he joined the gentlemen, according to his first intention, he would have left, as he thought, a party singularly ill-constructed for the purposes of social enjoyment. He therefore changed his plan, and good-humouredly sat himself down at a table near the fire, and began examining the books that lay upon it, pointing out to Mrs.

Heathcote a volume of engravings which he assured her were very good, and asking first one Miss Wilkyns, and then another, and then the third, all sorts of light literary questions, in order to set them talking, and so give his poor bruised companion of the morning time to recover herself, and courage once more to raise her drooping head.

Miss Martin meanwhile had withdrawn herself, from motives of prudence. No sooner did she hear poor troublesome Florence begin again about sunshine and icicles, than all the dangers of a winter walk rose to her imagination. She must either go out in a pair of shabby thick shoes, like those worn by her inconsiderate cousin, or injure for ever and for ever the appearance of a new pair which set her short little foot off to the best advantage. She must either wear the black beaver bonnet, which made her look so very dark and old, or risk important injury to the new straw one, bought for the present great occasion. Then her neat and only silk gown might be splashed, her frill tumbled, her new shawl crushed, and her best kid gloves soiled. It was all ruin and destruction; and as she did not happen to care a single farthing about waterfalls, and very little just at present about the young baronet, she quietly slipped out of the room while Florence was in the midst of her harangue, and made her way to her own room, determined not to leave its shelter till the danger was past.

It was not, however, as yet quite in readiness to receive her; but the housemaid employed upon it was the Nancy with whom she had commenced a friendship on the preceding night, and she again entered into conversation with her.

"I beg your pardon, Nancy, for coming up so soon. Of course I know you can't be ready yet; but I am not going to stay a minute. Only do tell me, Nancy, something about this beautiful old house before I go down again. You must know, I hate walking out of doors in the winter. It makes such a mess of all one's things; and, besides, I can't bear giving the trouble of cleaning gown, shoes, and everything that one wears. So I came up here, because I think it very likely that all the others are going out; and instead of going with them, I should like of all things to see some of the upstairs rooms. Are there any family pictures here, Nancy?"

"Oh, yes miss; a number here and there about in the rooms. But there's no gallery like as there is at Temple," replied the girl.

"Are they in the bedrooms? I wonder if I could get a sight of them? . . . . I should so like it!"

"Why, the most of 'em is in master's own bedroom, miss; and you may go there safe enough, if you like it, for all the gentlemen are got to billiards, old and young, and master in the midst of them, as gay as the best. I couldn't help stopping to look at him as I passed by the open door; he ain't like the same gentleman as he was before the company was here, for I am often here backwards and forwards when mother can spare me, helping my aunt, Mrs. Barnes, about the furniture, though I haven't served here constant."

"Do you think you could spare time to go with me into my uncle's room for a minute or two, Nancy? I should so like to see the pictures."

"Yes, miss, I can show you the way, if you please; but it is just right away at the other end of the house."

"Come, then. I don't mind about the distance." And Miss Martin and the housemaid set off together very lovingly, beguiling the way with a good deal of domestic chat; for the young lady appeared to take interest in everything which in the slightest degree concerned the estimable relative to whom she so had so recently been introduced.

The distance, as Nancy said, was considerable, showing to advantage the size of the handsome old house; and though they did not loiter much, Miss Martin found occasion to remark that everything seemed very nice, and in the most substantial and complete repair.

"Oh dear, yes, miss," replied the girl, to an observation of this kind. "Master cares for nothing so much as keeping the house and grounds in good order. He sometimes says it is a wonder that he keeps on caring so much about it, seeing that no living soul hardly ever comes nigh the place, excepting Sir Charles Temple, and he never sees anything of it but just a room or two downstairs. But they do say,—that is, Mrs. Barnes, who knows him best,—that he never has quite entirely given up the notion that his son would turn up, and come again, and that is the reason why he has kept up the place so careful."

"But he seems to have given up the notion now, doesn't he?" demanded Miss Martin rather anxiously.

"Yes, miss. There's a letter come, proving, for sure and certain, that the poor gentleman is dead; and that's why master has invited such a sight of company to the Combe."

"I understand," said Sophia;—and she did understand perfectly now what she had only suspected before. All hope of his son's return being at length abandoned, it was a fact not to be doubted that Mr. Thorpe had collected all his collateral descendants around him in order to select from among them an heir.

The apartment of Mr. Thorpe was reached without interruption; Nancy opened the door, and the deeply-interested Sophia entered. It was a very large room, being over the drawing-room, and of equal dimensions. The bed seemed lost in it; and though there was abundance of wardrobes, and even book-shelves, to occupy the walls, there was nevertheless space sufficient left for more than a dozen of the family portraits of which Nancy had spoken.

Sophia stepped forward into the middle of the room, and looked round about her on all sides with an air of very accurate research, as if reading in the still life with which he was usually surrounded the private history of her uncle's mind. This general survey over, she turned her attention to the portraits.

"Has my uncle any particular favourites among these pictures?" said she.

"Not that I know of, miss," replied Nancy. "But my aunt could answer that better than me, because she is so constant with him. There is one there that, in course, he's fond enough of, poor old

gentleman! and that's his own son; but I never heard tell of any other that he was particular about."

"Is that it?" demanded Sophia eagerly, and turning in the direction which the girl's eyes had taken as she mentioned the young man's portrait.

"Yes, miss, that's the one, over the chimney-piece, and right in front of his eyes, poor old gentleman! as he lies in bed. I have heard Aunt Barnes say, that she is pretty sure master often lies a-bed of a morning, when he is quite well enough to get up, for no reason in the world but just to keep looking at that picture: for if all the other windows are shut, he is sure to have the one that lights up that, opened, and the curtains drawn back."

Miss Martin made no answer, but stood with her eyes steadfastly fixed upon the picture thus pointed out, shading the light from her eyes, so as to see it distinctly.

"He was quite young, you see, miss, when this was taken; and his collar turned back that way looks quite like a boy, don't it? But, I suppose, that was the fashion then as the young gentlemen wore them, 'cause his face is not quite that young, either."

The dress, in fact, was somewhat fanciful, having rather a Spanish air; the throat being entirely exposed, a cloak loosely depending from the shoulders, and the shirt-collar turned deeply over it.

"It has got pretty hair, miss, hasn't it?" resumed the conversable but still unanswered Nancy. "It is plain to see as you be a relation, there is something so very like you in the way it grows. I am sure you might be his own sister as far as the hair, and the eyes bean't that much unlike either."

"Do you think so?" said Sophia, almost in a whisper.

"Yes sure, miss, I do, and you'll see it in a minute if you 'll only just stop and let me bring over that little glass what master shaves by. You need not be afraid to speak, miss, nobody's likely to come this way."

"Do not tell anybody that I came here, Nancy," said Miss Martin, taking the glass from the girl's hand; "it would seem so curious."

"It's no more than what's natural, sure, miss," replied Nancy. "However, I won't say a word about it . . . . Don't you see the likeness now, miss?"

Sophia did see the likeness, and a well-pleased smile lighting up her countenance as she did so, made her companion exclaim,—"Oh goodness!—when you smile that way, it is the very same face exactly,—it is, indeed!"

Miss Martin answered not, but fell to such perusal of her own face in the little glass, and her cousin's face upon the wall, as made her companion laugh.

"You are determined to find out, miss, whether you be like or not, that's certain," said the girl; "and I don't doubt but what you must allow I spoke true:—don't you think so, miss?"

"I don't see much likeness, Nancy," replied the young lady, returning the mirror, and moving towards the door; "but nobody ever knows their own face. I won't hinder you any longer now. My room is done, is it not?"

"All but putting coals on and sweeping up the hearth," replied Nancy.

"Then, pray, don't trouble yourself about that," said the obliging Sophia. "I must go there to fetch my knitting-case, and I can do it just as well as you."

Having reached her room alone, Sophia entered it, closed the door, and locked it; then looking from the windows to see that no one from without could observe her, she unclasped the dress that was fastened close round her throat, took from her little stock of chemisettes one that, by a little alteration, she made to turn over her dress greatly in the manner of that in the portrait; and then setting to work with her brush and comb, she arranged the natural curls of her short stiff hair so exactly like that of her departed cousin, that she almost started at the resemblance.

"Extraordinary!" she exclaimed. "If I make nothing of this, I shall deserve to die a beggar!"

Having satisfied her careful and observant eye that she had hit upon the exact *tournure* of the hair, and as near an approach to identity in her collar as she dared venture upon, she resumed her former appearance, furnished herself with her knitting-case, and quietly returned to the east parlour, hoping that she should find it unoccupied, for she had much to think of, and would willingly have been alone.

In this hope she was disappointed; no farther allusion had been made either by the discomfited Florence, or any other of the party, to walking or waterfalls; and Sir Charles Temple, partly from a feeling of honourable adherence to the engagement by which he had bound himself to assist in entertaining his old friend's strange relations, and partly, perhaps, from some little curiosity to study the characters of the group around, had remained in the place where we left him; and as by this time all the ladies had furnished themselves with employment for their fingers, he had undertaken to read to them.

The entrance of Miss Martin stopped him in the middle of a scene in Van Artevelde; but being aware that one, at least, of his fair auditory was hanging with extreme interest on every word he read, he closed not the volume, but held himself suspended till the newcomer had settled herself among them. This would have been done quietly enough, had not each of the Misses Wilkyns felt so greatly pleased at the opportunity thus offered of once again hearing her own voice, that they one and all broke forth into a note of welcome on seeing her.

"I am so glad you are come! We are so delighted! Such a divine book! and such a reader!" exclaimed Elfreda.

"You have lost such a treat! But it is impossible to begin again, because we have got on such a quantity. So you are very lucky to come before we have quite finished," said Eldruda, concealing a yawn by holding up a large ball of worsted before her mouth.

"Sit down here, by me, Cousin Sophia," lisped the pretty Winifred, yawning without any concealment at all; "I am so glad you are come! You shall help me count my threads."

"Don't talk, my dears," said Mrs. Heathcote, partly from civility, and partly because she really found herself very comfortable.

Florence spoke not. She had not yet sufficiently recovered from the rebuff of her elegant cousin, to venture upon making any observation that might again attract her notice; but it is not very difficult for a reader to discover the impression his lecture makes on his hearers without the assistance of any words from them. Even where a whole party remains resolutely silent, their silence is modified by sundry little bits of by-play, quite as eloquent as words. One lady will go on with her work as diligently as if there were no reading going on; another will seem to find a sort of subsidiary amusement in a playfully-cautious manner of taking up and putting down her scissors; a third will unreel her cotton, with an earnest biting of her nether lip, as if the slightest concussion of the air would endanger the safety of the universe; a fourth will find it necessary to draw out her pocket-handkerchief at least once in every minute; and if the party consist of many, and the reader be a very lucky reader, one amongst them may sit, like Florence, with her work resting on her knee, while the abstracted eye gives something like an indication that the intellect is taking part in what is going on.

On the present occasion, however, the silence once broken could not be restored. The heiresses' reiterated assurances of their supreme felicity, of their gratitude to Sir Charles, and their admiration of his author, as effectually broke up the reading-party, as if they had all honestly proclaimed themselves tired to death. So Sir Charles, having given a rapid glance at Florence, and then waited a little while in vain, to ascertain whether the twittering of the Misses Wilkyns would cease, closed the volume, drew out his watch, and walked towards the window.

For one short thoughtless minute Florence was in danger of saying, "Do go on!"—but recollection came in time to save her, and she resumed her work with silent diligence.

"Upon my word it is a pity to lose the whole of this fine morning," said Sir Charles. "Are you quite decided, ladies, against walking?"

Miss Elfreda looked at her delicate lilac silk dress; Miss Eldruda at her pale olive, and Miss Winifred at her light green; and then they all looked at one another. It was impossible for the stoutest and most manly heart to be either so hard or so dull as not to comprehend what was passing in their thoughts; nor was there any opposing feeling strong enough in the mind of the young baronet to induce him to attempt substituting any other ideas in the place of those so visibly at work within them. Instead of this, he fortunately recollected the equipage which had been so ingeniously proposed for their use, and resumed with sudden animation—

"What say you, then, to an airing? Mr. Thorpe's carriage will accommodate any four of the party who prefer driving to walking. Shall we order it, Miss Wilkyns?" And his hand was already on the bell.

"I have not the slightest objection to a drive," replied the young lady. "At this season it is impossible to get exercise in any other way; for even if we had our horses and groom here, I doubt if we

should venture to ride. Has the carriage a dickey? I should not at all object to going outside, Sir Charles, wrapped in my furs."

Now Sir Charles knew no more what Mr. Thorpe's carriage was like, than he did of the *charpente* of Venus's car; neither had he the slightest inclination to profit by the hint which his vanity suggested was held out by the young lady's speech; for hopes of a walk to the waterfall were reviving within him, which he had the strange perversity to prefer to sitting beside the heiress in a dickey.

"If there were a hundred dickeys, my dear Miss Wilkyns, I would not counsel you to trust yourself in either of them," he replied, with great vivacity. "You have no idea how piercingly the cold would be felt, mounted aloft as you would be there. Not all the furs in the world could save the tip of your nose from being frost-bitten—*Imaginez!* . . . ."

Now it happened that the tip of Miss Elfreda's nose had, for the last two years, been acquiring something of a violet tinge, which, though she had never named it, even to her confidential sister Eldruda, was nevertheless very seldom entirely out of her thoughts. A maiden aunt, a sister of her father's, who was most unhappily plain, had a very red nose, and the eldest heiress trembled for the future.

"I don't think I shall go out at all," she replied, with a shudder. "One ought to be tremendously robust to leave the fireside in such weather as this."

Did not Sir Charles repent him of his vivacity and wanton allusion to a red-tipped nose? Assuredly he did. But repentance came too late, and the sunny waterfall faded away from his hopes into a vapour as vague and chilling as its own midnight mist. Had he not named the nose, there would have been an excellent chance of sending the three Misses Wilkyn and their elected favourite, Miss Martin, upon a two hours' expedition in the pumpkin coach, during which he might have escorted Florence and her irresistibly lovable stepmother to the cataract! Perhaps he deserved to be punished for his flippancy, but at any rate he felt that he was so.

The equipage, however, was ordered; and Mrs. Heathcote, the two younger heiresses, and Miss Martin, set off upon that most self-denying of all indulgences, a winter airing. Miss Wilkyns accompanied her sisters when they went to prepare for it, and did not return to the parlour, so that when the party drove away from the door, Florence and Sir Charles suddenly found themselves *tête-à-tête*.

Florence was seventeen, and young ladies of that age who have been brought up in the world of conventional etiquette would exclaim, "Nonsense! impossible!" were the perfectly childish state of her mind upon that most important of all subjects,—flirtation, described to them. Nevertheless, truth compels the historian of "The Ward" to state not only that she never had yet had any love affair whatever, but that her thoughts had positively never turned themselves in that direction, excepting when, during her early and late studies of her almost only very familiar literary treasure, Shakspeare, she had paused over some of his sweet love-tales: and then she had sighed very deeply, and said, particularly in the case of Juliet, "Oh dear! oh dear! I hope I never shall be so much in love as that!"

Such being the blank condition of her mind, she must not be too severely condemned if she did not, at the first moment of their departure, either tremble or turn red: on the contrary, she looked up at her companion without the slightest terror, or even alarm, and was on the very verge of saying,—"Now, then . . . . may we not go to the waterfall?" but something in the countenance of Sir Charles stopped her. He did not look ready to laugh as she did, but, on the contrary, had the air of being rather puzzled and embarrassed.

Florence, however, though very nearly a child, was not a stupid child, and it instantly struck her that her pleasant new acquaintance, though he was so very good-natured, and seemed so very clever, did not know what to do with her. She fancied that most likely he wanted to go and amuse himself in some masculine way or another, but that he thought it would be rude to leave her all alone; and she therefore said, with a pretty simplicity a thousand times more gracious and more graceful than the most well-behaved propriety of any *conscious* young lady could have been:—

"I think I must go and look for Algernon. He will fancy he has lost me."

"I should imagine that your brother must be in the billiard-room with the gentlemen, Miss Heathcote. Shall I go there and look for him? . . . . and, if I find him, send him to you here?" replied the baronet.

"Thank you, sir," returned Florence . . . . adding the minute after, "Charles," with a little haste, a little blush, and half a smile, as she remembered his lecture of the morning; and he smiled too, and thought that in his life he had never heard his own name pronounced so sweetly. But Sir Charles Temple was a whimsical young man; and instead of making him linger, this only made him leave the room more quickly, and Florence was left alone in the east parlour.

The sun no longer shone into the window, but it still made one side of the lawn sparkle, as if a shower of diamonds had fallen upon it. Florence longed to be out of doors, but dared not run upstairs for her bonnet and her wraps, lest her brother should come, and miss her. She stood, therefore, waiting for a minute or two, intending to be very patient, and then she thought there could be no harm in opening the window; and then she presently decided that Algernon would be sure to see her if she walked only in sight of the windows; and then that her dress was very warm, and that just for five minutes or so she could not possibly want either cloak or bonnet. This reasoning took not long, and in the next moment she was in the garden.

Now it chanced that one window of the billiard-room was immediately above that of the east parlour, and Mr. Thorpe, who had been for some time watching a very good game between Mr. Spencer and Major Heathcote, had walked at the conclusion of it to this window.

"God bless me! Major," he exclaimed, "there is your mad-cap young lady skipping about in the garden, with the frost dripping upon her, I should think, from every bough, and she without either bonnet

or shawl, or anything else to protect her! . . . . Are you not afraid of the cold for her, sir? Your family are rather delicate, my dear friend, and I really do not think it is safe."

This brought the whole party to the window.

"Oh no! . . . . dear child! . . . . there is no danger of her taking cold," said the Major, who, cue in hand, just gave a peep at his young daughter over the shoulder of Mr. Thorpe, and then returned again to the attractive table. "She is as hardy as a shepherd boy, and we think that is one reason why she is in such perfect health. She never had any sickliness about her, and my wife says, that the best thing in the world for children is, to let them be hardy, if they can bear it."

"Don't you think there may be some danger of her becoming rather masculine?" said Mr. Spencer, raising his eyebrows, and slightly shrugging his shoulders.

"I hope not," said Mr. Thorpe, rather tartly. "I could almost find in my heart to say that a woman had better be sickly than masculine; at any rate, I would rather see her hunch-backed. . . . . I have no hesitation whatever in saying that."

Sir Charles was one of the lookers-out from the window, and precisely at the moment when his old friend pronounced his preference for hunched backs, his eyes were fixed upon the figure of Florence, who was rearing herself on tip-toe to reach a brilliant bunch of crimson berries, which were glowing amidst the frosted branches of a holly. As she stood thus, with her arms raised, her head thrown back, and her delicate little waist displayed, fine by degrees, yet with no wasp-like division to mark the bold genius of the stay-maker, she appeared so perfect a model of youthful female grace, that he could not resist whispering in the ear of the old gentleman,—"Would you wish the addition of a hunch there?"

Mr. Thorpe turned round to him, and replied, laughingly, "Not just at this moment, Temple. It certainly would be rather a pity."

"Nothing very masculine there," re-whispered the baronet.

"Not very," returned Mr. Thorpe.

"May I go to her, papa?" said Algernon, eagerly.

"What, without your wraps?" replied his father, in an accent of great alarm. "Where's your mother, boy? Go to her, and ask her if you may go in your great-coat and comforter."

Algernon was out of the room in a moment.

"It is rather to be lamented, Major Heathcote," said Mr. Spencer, preparing to renew the game, "that your son and daughter cannot change sexes. Perhaps it might improve both."

"I don't know about that, Mr. Spencer," replied the good-humoured Major; "I cannot say I much wish any change in Florence. She is a good, and I think she is rather a pretty girl; and as for her healthiness, dear child, I would not take it from her even to give it to her brother."

"God forbid you should!" cried Mr. Thorpe, still watching the movements of his lovely niece. "God bless her, pretty creature! and keep her long as healthy and as happy as she is now! All I meant was, that I don't love any coarseness in ladies; and if it were

necessary, I would prefer, perhaps, sacrificing a little strength and activity rather than see them look unlike gentlewomen."

"Good heaven, yes!" ejaculated Mr. Spencer, fervently. "A boy-girl and a girl-boy are the most detestable monsters in creation. It would be difficult to say which is the worst."

Sir Charles Temple looked at the political official as he said this, with an eye that expressed something or other which Mr. Spencer did not appear to think worth attending to; for he turned abruptly away from the window, and renewed the game.

Algernon, meanwhile, finding that his mother was out, ventured to take the question into his own hands, and decided that nothing could possibly do him so much good as a walk with Florence. A very few minutes sufficed to equip them both, and forth they went, decidedly the happiest part of the company assembled at Thorpe-Combe. It was not till they reached the spot where Sir Charles Temple had joined her in the morning, that Florence was sensible of feeling any very decided regret that he was not with them; but then she made a halt, and said, "Algernon, you must try to get acquainted with the gentleman we found staying with Uncle Thorpe. I have not seen many, to be sure; but I do think he is the very nicest, kindest person I ever met with in my life."

"What is he called?" demanded Algernon.

"Sir Charles Temple. You must have heard his name yesterday, for Uncle Spencer said it over and over again, and so did Miss Wilkyns. I wonder, Algernon, if it would be very wicked to say that I like him a great deal better than all my cousins put together?"

"I hope not, Flora," replied the boy; "for in that case I should be the most offending soul alive. I hate them all, the whole set of them, with Miss Sophy Martin at their head; and as I see no good reason why one branch of so very odious a family should be likable, when all the rest, male and female, rich and poor, old and young, are so particularly the reverse, I feel greatly persuaded that you and I are quite as detestable as the rest, though hitherto we have never had wit enough to find it out."

"It cannot be helped, Algernon; if it is so, we must bear it as well as the rest. If we do not find it out, you know, about one another, it can't signify much; but about Sir Charles Temple, I wish you would mind what I say, and try to talk to him. I am sure you never talked to anybody like him; and then if you could but hear him read! It is something quite extraordinary. It is just what I should like you to do, Algernon, when you are a little stronger. There is something very beautiful, I think, in the power of giving new strength to every feeling and to every thought of an author. I never heard it done before, and I can't tell you how it made me feel. I think it is a great deal better than being able to sing."

"What nonsense, Florence. I had rather hear you sing than all the reading in the world; besides, I like to read for myself. I don't want anybody to make more out of the thoughts than I can find in them myself."

"Well, then, I suppose I have been talking nonsense; or perhaps it may be the natural difference between a man and a woman,—a boy

and a girl, I mean, Algernon. I think it is very likely that a girl may like to find somebody to help her on, and that a boy may like better to help himself; so we won't talk any more about his reading, because you don't understand me. But I do wish Sir Charles Temple was here now, for I don't see the least sign of a waterfall; and he said it was just close to where we were this morning, and we have got beyond that ever so much. But hark! What noise is that? Something out of the common way, I am quite sure! Come on, come on, Algernon;" and a few rapid steps more brought them to a projecting mass of mingled stones and trees, on turning round which they were in front of a tolerably heavy fall of water, that came dashing, at three distinct bounds, from a height of between thirty and forty feet, nearly to the spot where they stood, and then, dipping beneath a rude stone archway, glided more peaceably for the remainder of the descent into the deep, clear, brawling brook below. Every lover of nature would have deemed it an extremely picturesque object; but to Florence and Algernon, who had never seen anything of the kind before, it appeared stupendous, glorious, beautiful, and, hand in hand, they stood before it entranced in a species of ecstasy as delightful as it was new.

"How glad I am that I did not see it without you, Algernon!" was the first articulate sound uttered by either. "How beautiful! how grand! how wonderful! bounding, springing, dancing! . . . . Is it not like life and joy?"

"Florence, if I live I will see Niagara," said Algernon, almost solemnly. "Fancy this multiplied a thousandfold! . . . . If this is glorious, what must that be?"

"Foolish boy!" returned his sister, "to think of Niagara now! . . . . Is it not enough to look at that? How very, *very* much obliged I am to Sir Charles Temple for telling me of it! If it had not been for him, Algernon, I dare say we might have gone back to Clevelands without ever having heard of it; for you must perceive that the Misses Wilkyns, and Cousin Sophy too, speak of coming here as if it was something terrible, and requiring desperate courage, not to say boldness."

"Fools, idiots, dolts. . . . How I do hate and despise them all!—And those puppy boys, with their airs of manhood, and their silly talk! Upon my honour, Flora, if I heard one of the little ones at home . . . . Stephen, say . . . . who is just six years old, I believe . . . . if I heard him talk the twaddle that those boys do, I should look forward to seeing him locked up some day as an idiot. And *they*, poor animals! dare ridicule my mother; I heard them at it—calling her 'old fatty,' and 'a fine dumpling dame'—I know I shall quarrel with them, before we part—I am quite sure of it, Flora."

"God forbid! . . . . But how can you talk of anything so disagreeable now? . . . . Besides you must not stand, Algernon, for fear of the cold. Just come round to that other corner, that we may see it from both sides, and then we will walk back again as fast as we can, to prevent your being chilled. I hope mamma will not think we have been too far. . . . How I do wish she could see it, Algernon!"

On returning to the house, they found the carriage just driving off

to the offices, and on entering were greeted with the agreeable intelligence that luncheon was ready. A few moment sufficed to assemble the whole party again in the dining-parlour, where, on entering, they found the Welsh squire already established, and waiting, with as much appearance of eagerness as his countenance could possibly express, till Mr. Thorpe should seat himself, and the business of the hour begin.

What gentlemen would do in the country, if luncheon were there as uncertain a business as it generally is to them in town, it is impossible to say; but it is an undoubted fact, that when a country house has a large party in it, the necessity of eating at two o'clock seems so general and so urgent, that were the table not regularly and substantially spread at that hour, a very alarming approach to starvation must be the consequence. None of the company, perhaps, felt the necessity of immediately eating so poignantly as Mr. Wilkyns, but all were in a condition that appeared to render conversation exceedingly undesirable for the first few minutes after they sat down.

This first general craving satisfied, the various members of the party all raised their eyes, pretty nearly at the same moment, from their plates, looked in each other's faces, and began to talk. A turnpike-road at Christmas is rarely found to furnish great material for enthusiastic emotion, even in Herefordshire; so the four ladies who had been taking an airing, did not say much about it. Mrs. Heathcote, indeed, observed, that she dared to say the roads were a great deal better in summer, and that she was sure the country all round must be exceedingly pleasant. The two junior Misses Wilkyns helped each other reciprocally to jelly and custard, but said little or nothing about it; and Sophia, after waiting, with a look of modest trembling doubt, to see whether Uncle Thorpe would again place her in the chair next himself, as he had done at breakfast, dropped into it, when the invitation was given, with downcast eyes, which were only raised when the old gentleman asked her if she liked driving out, and then she said with an innocent sigh, "It was a very great treat to me, indeed, uncle. I do not think I ever had such a pleasure before."

"Dear little girl!" replied the old man, kindly. "Your young life has not been a very gay one, I fancy; but we must look forward, Sophy—we must look forward. Life has yet to begin for you, my dear child."

Neither was the conversation of the rest of the party particularly animated. Of course the Welsh squire did not speak; Major Heathcote confined his remarks to the state of the weather, and the effects of playing billiards upon people's hands and feet when the thermometer stood rather below Zero. Mr. Spencer senior yawned, and then addressed a few whispered inquiries to Sir Charles Temple, about the possibility of getting a newspaper. The Messieurs Spencer junior never spoke at all when they were eating anything which they considered as "devilish good," which was just now the case. Algernon sat very close, and muttered a few pertinent, which some present might have called impertinent, remarks, to his stepmother; and Florence sat very quietly by her papa, till Miss Wilkyns, raising her glass, and permitting it to make the tour of the table, rested it at length upon

her, and skilfully gave some little movement to the conversation, by saying, as she gazed on the fair face still glowing with exercise, "How have you disposed of yourself, Miss Heathcote. I did not find you when I returned to the parlour."

"I have been walking to the waterfall," replied Florence, with a blush and a smile.

"Did you go alone, my dear?" resumed the questioner, altering the angle at which she held her glass, so as to obtain a glance at the countenance of Sir Charles Temple.

"Oh no!" replied Florence, "not alone."

"Your walks in the woods do not appear to draw many companions. Was this ramble, too, a *tête-à-tête*, dear?"

"Yes," replied Florence.

"And it was a gentleman, I hope, Miss Heathcote?" said Mr. Spencer, with his expressive smile.

"Yes," repeated Florence, smiling also.

All the Misses Wilkyns looked up.

"Why, my dear girl, you do seem a damsel-errant, I must say," observed Mr. Thorpe, with something in his voice that sounded a little like reproof. "Do you know, I think it would be prettier for you to go airing with your mamma."

"Prettier!" said Algernon, fearlessly, and turning his large eyes towards his uncle. "I don't believe any carriage could take people to what is prettier than the wild place Florence has been looking at this morning. Just ask her to tell you about it, sir."

"No, no, my dear; I won't ask her anything about it now, and I'm glad she has seen it, because her head seemed running upon it so —and that's all very well. But, as a general rule, I don't think the woods are such good walking for young ladies as the garden. And, besides, young ladies never should walk *tête-à-tête* with gentlemen."

"Shouldn't they?" said Algernon, with considerable surprise.

The junior Spencers, being in a state of transition from oysters to pie, looked up, and tittered; whereupon Algernon, who had completely finished his more simple repast of bread, butter, and milk, rose up, and walking down to where the brothers sat, side by side, put a hand on the chair of each, and bending down his handsome head between them, said, "What are you laughing at?"

"Laughing?" said Bentinck.

"Laughing?" echoed Montagu.

"Yes. What were you laughing at, when Uncle Thorpe talked about my sister?"

"I don't remember laughing," returned Bentinck, looking at his father.

"I am sure I never thought of laughing," said Montagu, giving his brother a nudge, and adding, "Come along, Bentinck, let's go and see after some sliding."

"Have you been walking with your sister to the Waterfall, Algernon?" said Sir Charles Temple, who, with a good deal of interest, had been watching the whole scene, and now thought it time to step in to the rescue.

"Yes, sir, I have," replied the boy, turning from his cub cousins,

with a look of very sufficient contempt; "and I never saw anything that I thought so beautiful. I should like, if I could, to see all the waterfalls in the world."

"I wish I had been with you," returned Sir Charles. "It is a favourite lion of mine, and none of the party will let me show it off."

"Oh yes, we will! Sir Charles," said Miss Wilkyns, in the most obliging manner possible.—"You have nothing to do but to challenge us."

"But you must consult your uncle first, ladies," said Sir Charles, looking rather mischievously at his old friend. "Are you not fearful that he will call you damsels-errant?"

"No, no, no, I do not mean that at all, Temple," hastily replied the old gentleman. . . . . "And so it was your brother, my dear, was it, that you have been walking about with?" he added, turning to Florence.

"Yes, uncle," replied the unconscious girl, perfectly at her ease; adding, as she caught her mother's eye—"But he was well wrapped up, mamma.—I am quite sure he could not catch cold."

Mr. Thorpe felt that he had been rather blundering and rather cross, and addressing Algernon in a very conciliatory spirit, he said—"Did I not promise you, young man, an introduction to my old-fashioned library?"

"Yes, sir, you said you would show me your library," replied the boy, with sudden animation.

"Well then—let us adjourn thither; as many of us, at least, as care about old books in faded bindings."

Finding something to do being an object common to all, the invitation, such as it was, was apparently accepted by all, for the whole party put themselves in movement upon receiving it. But ere they reached the apartment mentioned, the two Etonians escaped, despite a glance from their father, which pretty decidedly indicated a wish to the contrary.

Probably the whole party, though some among them were not greatly versed in such matters, felt something like surprise at the stately style of the room they now entered. It was certainly out of proportion to the rest of the house, having been added by the present owner upon his return from Madrid, and being at that time a decided hobby. The venerable mansion requiring, in his opinion, no other addition, this room was not constructed to have any other above it, but was extremely lofty, and lighted by a graceful, well-proportioned dome, which prevented any part of it from being dark; though the whole of the walls (excepting the space above the chimney-piece, which was occupied by a splendid Velasquez) were covered by the most light-consuming of all things, books in dark bindings.

Exclamations of surprise and admiration were uttered by all; for the *coup-d'œil* of a fine library always seems to make an impression, however little the beholders may feel interested about its contents. Mr. Wilkyns, indeed, did not articulate—it very rarely happened that he did,—but he produced a kind of exclamatory grunt, which caused his eldest daughter to look at him, and to say, with much filial amiability, "Papa seems quite struck!"

The three heiresses walked about, and looked and smiled, and nodded to each other, and made ever so many little speeches, just as if they particularly well understood everything about books and bookcases. Mrs. Heathcote and the Major, who had entered arm in arm, strenuously declared it was the handsomest room they had ever seen; Mr. Spencer bowed gracefully to the owner, and said—"I make you my compliment, Mr. Thorpe. This is very well done, indeed. Capital; excellent good taste, throughout." And Sophia Martin crept to her uncle's side, and said, but as if frightened at her own timidity in speaking to him, "Oh uncle! I do not know how to believe my eyes! I can hardly fancy that all this beauty and grandeur is real! How very, very kind of you to let a poor ignorant girl like me, come to see it! . . . . If I never look upon anything like it again, I shan't mind it now. . . . . I have seen it once, and I shall never forget it. . . . . It is just like coming into a new world, this visit to Thorpe-Combe."

But perhaps the group best worth looking at, was that formed by Algernon and his sister; at least so thought Sir Charles Temple, though he could hardly be accounted a fair judge, as he certainly looked at no other. On entering the room the brother and sister were not together, Algernon being in the van, and Florence in the rear of the party. The boy, who, in fact, had never been in a handsome room dedicated to books before, stood as if spell-bound as soon as he had entered it; then stepping onward to the middle of the floor, he stopped again, gazed upward to the stately dome, and round and round upon the gallery that at "mid-height threaded" the walls; and then at the rich walls themselves, and at the tables, desks, and chairs, with which the room was studded; till at last, his eyes fixed themselves upon the picture, and there rested with an avidity of interest that seemed to render him perfectly unconscious that he was not alone. When Florence entered, her first glance around almost startled her, by the novel species of splendour it displayed, and her first thought was unbounded admiration; but the next was of her brother. With a quick but quiet step she approached him, and without addressing to him a single syllable, stood gazing at his face with a soft dimpling smile about her mouth, and a look of observant watchfulness in her eyes, which told, better than any words could have done, how very happy she knew that he must be, and how very determined she was not to interrupt him.

It was this which had invited Sir Charles Temple's attention, and ere he withdrew his eyes, he felt that he knew more of the character and history of them both, than many an hour of common intercourse might have taught him. He felt convinced, that however irregular and imperfect the sickly boy's education might have been, his mind was already greatly developed, and fully awake to that rarely-found but powerful passion for reading, which renders books the great joy of existence. And in Florence, he saw as beautiful a feminine reflection of her brother's mind, as it was possible to imagine. With enough of genius within herself to comprehend and sympathize in his sensations, Florence seemed conscious of their existence only in him; and on feeling her heart beat, and her spirit dilate, at the

sight of this marvellous accumulation of what they both loved so dearly, she seemed to forget that she could have anything more to do with it than watch the emotions which it caused in her brother.

"How intolerably affected that girl will be in a year or two," said the eldest Miss Wilkyns to her sister Eldruda. "For Heaven's sake just look at her! Take my word for it, she is trying to do picture, and she knows that Temple is looking at her just as well as I do. How can he be fool enough to be taken in by her pretended childishness! . . . . I never saw a more thorough-paced coquette in my life. She is perfectly detestable."

As Mr. Spencer was the only one of the party who had made a remark that seemed to indicate a power of judging the merits of a plan that had been almost entirely his own, Mr. Thorpe, having patted the curly head of the humble Sophy, and said "Dear child," turned to his elegant brother-in-law, and entered with him into a very learned discussion on Moorish, Grecian, and Gothic architecture; and if the Treasury gentleman knew but little of the matter, he had tact sufficient to conceal his ignorance, and to render Mr. Thorpe exceedingly well pleased at having one guest who knew what a handsome room was.

The long darkness of Christmas-eve had begun to envelope the party before the novelty of the library and its appurtenances was exhausted: lights were then ordered in the drawing-room, and the company streamed thitherward, not knowing particularly well what to do with themselves till it was time to dress for a six-o'clock dinner. On this occasion, however, the three heiresses showed themselves by far the wisest ladies there. They knew the value of a quiet restorative two hours before dinner, if nobody else did; and having stolen one by one upstairs, they assembled in the room of the eldest, rang for lights, and made up a blazing fire. Had they been sufficiently advanced in civilization to have ordered tea and bread-and-butter, which, let them lunch when they will or dine when they may, can never be resisted by London-bred young ladies, they would have been quite perfect in their manner of passing this interval, so often intolerable to "staying company" of less experience. This last best touch of refinement, however, they had still to learn; but they were not wanting in that valuable talent which gives to such hours of domestic separation from the world, a charm and a zest, productive of as much enjoyment, perhaps, as the most crowded saloon could afford: they were not wanting either in the power or inclination of making savory mincemeat of the party from whose presence they had thus judiciously retired.

Happily for Mr. Spencer the cross-post had just arrived with letters and newspapers; and he established himself, very greatly to his satisfaction, within a foot of the drawing-room fire, with a separate table and lights, and a chair which might have served as an emblem of the place he held under government, being rich and easy. The gigantic squire, by some accident or other, turned wrong in his intended passage from the library to the drawing-room, and found himself in the east parlour; but rather liking the stillness that

reigned there, he sat him down in an arm-chair by the fire, and fell into a sleep which lasted till the dinner-bell rang.

Major Heathcote, on beholding the candles, uttered a military expletive or two, indicative of his astonishment and remorse at having passed the whole morning without exercise; and having demanded the hour of dinner, seized his hat and stick, and walking forth into the palpable obscure, was no more seen till he resumed his place at the dinner-table.

Algernon, who, for some reason or other, which he would have found it difficult to explain, had conceived that Sir Charles Temple would be likely to prove a friend in need to him, whispered an inquiry in his ear as they left the library together, whether he thought he might take out any of the hooks to read?

"All of them in succession, my dear Algernon," was the reply, "if you will but take care to put them back again. I believe I know pretty well how they are all classed; and there is still light enough for us to find anything you want; so let us go back and see about it." And back they went, laying the foundation of much mutual liking, by the manner in which the serving and the served conferred and received obligation.

Poor Mr. Thorpe, meanwhile, perceiving the party thus scattered, and feeling himself considerably more fatigued than was agreeable by the unwonted exertions he had made in his character of host, quietly mounted by a little *escalier de service* to his own dressing-room, and remained there in stillness and meditation till the time arrived when he was sure of finding his guests assembled again in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Heathcote, Florence, and Sophia, thus left to dispose of themselves, very notably set to work round a table, at a civil distance from the Treasury place-man, and were soon occupied by baby-frocks and boyish pinafores in a style of usefulness as unlike as possible to the needlework of their elegant relatives.

While thus employed, with only an occasional whisper by way of conversation, Sir Charles Temple and his new friend Algernon joined them, each carrying a book.

"Sir Charles Temple says I may read the books, Florence," said the boy, his countenance glowing with delight. "I am glad I have seen the waterfall, for I do not greatly think I shall like to leave the house much now."

"Then if I am to lose my walking-companion, I think you must contrive to let me have some books too," returned Florence, very nearly as delighted as himself. "And what," she added, holding out her hand for the volume he carried, "what are you going to begin with?"

"It is Milton," he replied, "Milton's Paradise Lost. You know how I have been longing to get it!"

"You have got Milton? Happy boy! Will you ask my uncle to let me have it when you have done?" replied Florence.

"I have forestalled your wish, Miss Heathcote," said Sir Charles Temple. "When your brother told me that you both knew Milton only by extracts, and had just tasted enough of him to make you

wish for more, I ventured to bring you this volume of his minor poems to employ you, while he was bounding away through the great work. He will not read it tamely, or very deliberately at first; that I foresee. The operation of weighing each pregnant word, and endeavouring to follow the stupendous design from beginning to end, must come after. It should not come at first, for that would be to lose a separate pleasure. In the first flight we take with Milton, we should content ourselves by following him as he sails upwards through a flood of light, without pausing to examine whither he is going, or how his wings are made. The rest comes after."

"And do you think Algernon, or I either, shall have power so to follow him?" said Florence, eagerly.

"Yes, I do," replied Sir Charles,—and there was something in his manner of saying so that made Miss Martin, shy as she was, look up at him,—but it was only for an instant; in the next her attention was again riveted to her hemming. "Do you not think, Algernon, that you could establish yourself at Mr. Spencer's table yonder, and begin your flight, while I read Comus to the ladies? I will not read at all boisterously, so you shall not be disturbed."

The arrangement was made in a moment. Algernon seated himself so quietly within the benefit of Mr. Spencer's wax-lights, that his approach was hardly perceived by that gentleman, who was deep in a debate upon a bill in which he took a personal interest; and then Sir Charles edged in a chair between Florence and her mother, and in a low rich voice, more impressive, perhaps, in its subdued tone than it would have been had he raised it, he read the inspired and inspiring lines beginning—

> "Before the starry threshold of Jove's court
> My mansion is ——"

The very frame of Florence thrilled as she listened to him; but such sensations, so made up of the bright but vague ecstasy which an unschooled, but genuinely poetic fancy, feels when awakened for the first time to the beauty of such lines, so read, must not be dwelt upon: it is not a subject for description. She spoke not a single word, nor did she even, after the first minute or two, venture to look at the reader. But there is, as we all know, great eloquence in silence; and there is a stillness deeper than the mere absence of speech, which has expression in it—for those who are in the mood to mark it.

The hour and half which elapsed before the swinging bell gave notice that it was time for everybody to look in the glass, stole very deliciously away for one, two, three, at least, of the drawing-room party. It may almost be doubted if the heiresses themselves, with their blazing fire, their meditated finery, and unmitigated gossip, enjoyed themselves more than did Algernon, Florence, and Sir Charles. By them, indeed, the bell, though probably heard, was not understood, or rather not noted. But the reasonable Sophia instantly rose from her chair, folded up her work, and laying it smoothly in the huge maternal sewing-repository of her aunt, glided out of the room. Mr. Spencer started, looked at his watch, and rose too, and,

equally silent with Miss Martin, quitted the apartment. Mrs. Heathcote lingered a minute or two, for she wanted to work up her needleful of thread, to prevent its tangling; but this done, she too folded up the little white garment on which she had been employed, and saying, "Come, Florence," in the same accent that she would have done if Florence, too, had been thinking of her needleful of thread—the spell was broken, and the young girl started to her feet as obediently as the day before, but no longer the same very childish Florence that she had been.

Sir Charles Temple, too, felt he hardly knew how. He had made one in many very clever coteries at Florence; but, somehow or other, the classic Florence of the Arno had never inspired him with so much poetic feeling as the rustic Florence of Thorpe-Combe. The young man knew it too, and before he reached his dressing-room very frankly confessed to himself that he was falling in love with Miss Heathcote. But poor Temple was so accustomed to the necessity of checking wishes which his slender fortune made it impossible to gratify, that he only heaved one tolerably heavy sigh as he murmured,—"It can't be helped: I must bear it. I have no more power to marry than to fly with her in my arms to heaven."

Florence followed her stepmother very quietly up-stairs; but when she got there, totally forgot which way she was to turn, or why she was up-stairs at all; and having at length reached her room, would have forgotten also the dressing process which she had to go through, had not one of the abigails made her appearance, and roused her to something like a consciousness of where she was and what she was about.

As for Algernon, his enjoyment being of a more unmixed kind, he felt himself not puzzled at all. Being routed from the drawing-room, he carried his book up the two stories which led to his sleeping-apartment, a candle in his hand, and his eyes on the page as steadily as was consistent with his arriving at his own particular door in safety; having entered which, he sat down before the fire, and read on very steadily till Jem ran up to tell him that all the company were gone in to dinner. Then he went down again, and probably no one but the two young Etonians remarked that he had not changed a single article of his dress,—no, nor even brushed his hair, "the great lout!" since the morning.

* * * * * *

CHAPTER VIII.

The evening of this day, to all outward appearance, passed very nearly as the evening of the preceding one had done;—that is to say, the young ladies of the Wilkyns race played a little and sang a little, and talked to those very gentleman-like boys, the Spencers, rather more than the gentleman-like boys liked. The same *partie carrée* sat down to the card-table; Mrs. Heathcote and Flo-

rence again sat on the same sofa; Algernon again disposed of himself according to his own will and pleasure, which, on this occasion, was of course with his Milton in a corner; and Sir Charles Temple remained at liberty to go to the pianoforte, or to come away from it, just as he best liked: and it was herein that the chief difference between the two evenings lay,—for whereas he did very civilly stand up during great part of the musical performances of the first evening, he very rudely sat down by Mrs. Heathcote during the whole of this; and having made up his mind that the falling in love with Florence was one of the misfortunes to which he was doomed, and that if he took care that neither herself nor anybody else found it out, he should be the only sufferer by it, he let matters take their course with him, and gently led her on to converse, till she did so with almost as little restraint as if she had been talking with Algernon.

As to all the discoveries which he made during this important evening, concerning the archangelic nature, soul and body, of the unconscious girl whom he sat gazing at, it would be useless to record them, because they proved nothing beyond what has been stated before . . . . namely, that he was falling violently in love with Florence Heathcote.

The following morning was that of Christmas-day, and the servants had been up half the night, for the purpose of decorating the hall with boughs and berries. The effect of this pretty mimicry of summer was so striking, that the whole party, pausing as they descended from their various rooms, remained there till they were all assembled together, declaring that they had never seen summer in so beautiful a masquerading dress before.

Sophia Martin did not enter this winter garden till all, save the master of the mansion, had reached it; and having timidly greeted them in succession, she placed herself in an attitude which appeared perfectly natural, where the light fell, as she wished it should do, full upon her, and where she was sure of meeting the eye of Mr. Thorpe, when he too should descend, to join the meeting in Mrs. Barnes's mimic grove of mistletoe and holly.

Mr. Thorpe's first words on seeing them were,—"A merry Christmas to you all!" . . . . The next, as his eye caught sight of Sophia, were rather screamed than spoken, and were only these—"Great Heaven! How extraordinary!"

The manner in which they were uttered, however, startled everybody, except Mr. Wilkyns. Like the rest of the party, he had paused to look about him, as he passed from the stairs to the dining-room, and half raised his heavy eyes to see the gay wintry show. But waiting any longer than till the master of the house appeared, was quite out of the question; and moving on in quest of his breakfast, at a more rapid pace than he ever moved, except when in quest of his dinner, he was already at the door which opened upon his favourite room, when Mr. Thorpe's exclamation caused every one else to turn round, leaving him to take possession of it alone.

"You did not expect to see such a beautiful garden, did you, sir?" said Mrs. Heathcote.

"Do you marvel to see us all stand thus spell-bound?" demanded Mr. Spencer. "Were we a little farther Wales-ward, we might fancy the scene a resurrection of some Druids' grove, and that your ancestors, Miss Wilkyns, might be expected to appear before us to condemn this application of their sacred mistletoe to decorate our modern rites."

"What startles you, uncle?" said one niece.

"What is extraordinary?" said another.

"Then you do not have the hall dressed up so every Christmas?" observed a third.

"Bravo! Mrs. Barnes," cried Sir Charles.

"Oh, beautiful!" exclaimed Florence.

"Pretty, indeed, sir!" said the Major.

"My eye!" cried the Etonians in a duet.

But Algernon said nothing, he only laughed; and Sophia Martin said nothing, she only smiled; but smiled in such a sort that a tear started into the eyes of the old gentleman, and he shook his head sadly as he turned away; but he said nothing more; and after looking out of the window for a moment, he quietly, and almost as if by accident, offered his arm to Sophia, and motioning to the rest of the company that they should precede him, led her to the place next himself, which she had before occupied at the breakfast-table.

Whatever might have caused the emotion which he had testified, Mr. Thorpe soon shook it off, and gaily entered upon the task of marshalling the party for their expected attendance at the village church. Fortunately the edifice was not far distant; and as Florence declared that she would rather walk, and Sophia that she did not mind walking at all, it was voted that "one turn" of the Thorpe-Combe vehicle would do, instead of the two or three which Mr. Thorpe had civilly proposed, and even that its ample size would permit the venerable owner himself to be conveyed by it. The other gentlemen of course all walked, excepting, indeed, Mr. Spencer, who declared that he dared not venture, on account of some latent cold, of which he lived, he said, in constant dread, and he therefore was constrained to endure the mortification of remaining at home beside the fire, with nothing but the newly-imported cargo of novels, reviews, and magazines to console him.

An admirable restorative luncheon followed the return from church, which the intense cold did certainly make exceedingly welcome to the whole party; and after this the ladies, all and every of them, retired to the warm comforts of their respective chambers. Mr. Wilkyns placed himself in an arm-chair, on the centre of the hearth-rug, and Mr. Spencer read the newspapers, which Major Heathcote took up in succession, as fast as the gentleman of the Treasury laid them down. Algernon had stolen away to the library, long before the rest had finished their repast, and thither Sir Charles followed him as soon as the ladies disappeared; while the two young Spencers conveyed themselves out of sight, nobody knew where. One of the housemaids, indeed, remarked to Mr. Grimstone, that if it had not been a church-going day, she would have been willing to take her oath that she had heard folks playing at billiards as she went

along the passage . . . . But Mr. Grimstone assured her that she must have been mistaken.

The whole of his company being thus disposed of, Mr. Thorpe mounted by a back staircase to his own bedroom, and having sat down, sadly enough, in a chair which stood, now and ever, opposite to the portrait of his lost son, he gazed on it unremittingly for many minutes. Then, suddenly rising, he rang the bell, which as speedily brought Mrs. Barnes to his side as if she had no Christmas dinner to superintend.

"Step here, Barnes," said her master, placing himself in the best possible light for looking at the portrait. "Stand close to me, just there. Now, Barnes, look at that portrait, and tell me which of the young people who are visiting here it is most like. You told me, you know, that you had taken care to get a sight of them all. Which of them most resembles that picture, Barnes?"

Before Mrs. Barnes replied, she discreetly took a minute or two to consider. Had she answered at once, and with perfect sincerity, she would have said, "I cannot see any likeness to any of them." But she plainly perceived that this would not be satisfactory; and setting her memory to work upon the countenances of the two young Spencers and Algernon (for it never occurred to her that the dark-browed youth whose "counterfeit presentment" she was looking at, could be thought like a young lady), she replied, "Why, to my seeming, sir, it is far most like the dark-haired Master Spencer."

"Very well, Barnes, that will do," replied the vexed old man: "and now you may go to your minced-pies and plum-pudding again."

"My plum-pudding, sir?" returned the housekeeper, with a slight smile: "my plum-pudding has been on and boiling since four o'clock this morning."

Once more left alone, Mr. Thorpe resumed his arm-chair, and fell again to the contemplation of the picture.

"Foolish! foolish!" said he, in words addressed to his own spirit, but not given to the air,—"most foolish, to feel ready to quarrel with that gentle puddinger because she sees not, and feels not, like her master. Poor portionless orphan!" he continued, "pitied, but not cherished, in the only home her helpless head can find! Poor, gentle, humble, meek-spirited Sophia! . . . . True, she has not the delicate loveliness of the graceful Florence, nor the aristocratic bearing of the puppy Spencers; but, as if to atone for all deficiencies, and to compensate at once for all the harshness of her fate, Nature has given her a look that shall out-value all the grace and beauty of her race. . . . The last shall be first," . . . . he murmured, articulately; and then, rising from his wonted seat, with a smile on his lip and a tear in his eye, he returned to the dining-room, rang the bell, sent round the house to collect the church-goers for evening prayers, and in a few minutes was at the head of the walking party, with Miss Martin leaning on his arm.

When Sir Charles Temple entered the library in search of Algernon, he had found him, as he expected, in plenary enjoyment of the many good things around him; an excellent fire, an easy chair, a commo-

dious table . . . . and the "Paradise Lost," making no inconsiderable part of his Paradise found.

"Shall you wish me away if I enter, Algernon?" said the young baronet, pausing at the door, and looking at the happy student with a well-pleased eye.

"Not *you*, Sir Charles Temple," replied the boy, fixing his bright glance full upon him for a moment, and then looking triumphantly round with an air that seemed to say, "Am I not got into famous quarters?"

"You certainly seem to know extremely well how to get a snug retreat, Algernon; and it looks a little cruel, does it not, to break in upon you? But I, too, sometimes, like to creep away and hide myself; and I think you and I may read together here without being much in each other's way."

"*You* will never be in my way, you may depend upon it, Sir Charles Temple," replied Algernon: "for I am quite sure that I shall enjoy reading a great deal more if you are in the room with me; that is, if you will let me speak to you now and then when I have anything very particular to say."

"Agreed," returned Sir Charles, drawing a chair to the fire, and then selecting a companion from the shelves.

For a short space the *tête-à-tête* was a silent one, except that from time to time the breast of the boy actually seemed to heave, and he breathed hard, like a war-horse, when he hears the trumpet sound,—indications of what was going on within him, which were exceedingly intelligible to the baronet. At length the threatened "something very particular to say" appeared to have occurred to the young student, for he suddenly laid down his book, and without apology or preface, exclaimed,

"Can you tell me, sir, how it is that words seem to change their ordinary nature sometimes? I do not believe that the thoughts only,—and yet thoughts must be the soul of the poetry, and words more like the body in which it is clothed;—but if the thoughts *could* be sent into my mind without any words at all, I don't believe they would seem so glorious as they do here. This description of making gunpowder, for instance. I remember reading all about it in my father's encyclopædia, and that it was exceedingly curious, and the man a very clever fellow for finding it out. But listen to Milton's way of describing it, and it seems to be a work quite dignified enough for an angel, a fallen one at least . . . . to be employed upon:—

'Which of us, who beholds the bright surface
Of this ethereous mould whereon we stand,
This continent of spacious heaven, adorned
With plant, fruit, flower ambrosial, gems, and gold;
Whose eye so superficially surveys
These things, as not to mind from whence they grow
Deep under ground, materials dark and crude,
Of spiritous and fiery spume? * * *
* * * * * *
* * * * up they turned
Wide the celestial soil, and saw beneath
The originals of nature in their crude
Conception.'

And then their labour ended. How they seem to dazzle the eye of one's fancy as they come forth to battle!

> 'Now when fair morn orient in heaven appear'd
> Up rose the victor-angels, and to arms
> The matin trumpet sung; in arms they stood
> Of golden panoply, refulgent host.'

And then the firing off the cannon. Does not one seem to hear and feel the shock?

> 'From those deep-throated engines belch'd, whose roar
> Embowell'd with outrageous noise the air,
> And all her entrails tore.' * * *

Do you know, Sir Charles, I should be afraid that the high-sounding words were catching my ears, and making a fool of me, were it not that now and then a quiet phrase like this occurs—

> 'While we, suspense,
> Collected stood within our thoughts amused,'

And again, a little farther on, where he describes—

> ——— 'The Almighty Father, where he sits
> Shrined in his sanctuary of heaven secure,
> *Consulting on the sum of things.*'

And as these make me feel his power more strongly still, I don't think it *is* merely the blaze of words that so enchants me. But I wish you would explain to me what it is, in Milton, that makes me fancy, as I read on, that I have got into a quite new world, and that even the speech and language is not the same as I have been used to?"

"It is only because," replied Temple, laughing, "you happen to be perusing, for the first time, the most magnificent thoughts that ever entered into the mind of man, clothed in words the best suited to express them. . . . That is all, my dear boy."

"ALL!" exclaimed Algernon. "How little did I think, when I was sitting stiff with cold, in the chaise that brought us here, how little did I think, Sir Charles, that I was going to be so very happy! If I could have looked beforehand at the 'sum of things' I should have come here in much better humour."

"Then you did not greatly like the expedition, Algernon?" said Sir Charles, setting down his book, drawing his chair nearer to the fire, stirring it into a fresh blaze, and appearing altogether quite ready for a little further conversation with his companion.

"No, sir,—I could not bear the idea of it."

"And why not? Though you might not have anticipated Mr. Thorpe's noble library, nor prophesied an introduction to the 'Paradise Lost,' you must at least have known that you were about to enter upon 'fresh fields and pastures new,' and this alone, I should have thought, would have been sufficient to render the excursion agreeable to you."

"And had it been *this alone*, Sir Charles, I, and Florence too, should have set forth with joy and gladness, had we come in a wheel-barrow instead of a post-chaise, and had the frost been a dozen

degrees harder still.—But to come and be looked at, Sir Charles, for the chance of one of us being picked out by our unknown uncle, to carry away the precious prize that all were longing for, can you think we should like it? . . . . However, I do not care a farthing for all that now. . . . nor Florence either, I believe. The moment I found out that she and I should have nothing to do with it, I could look on and enjoy the fun as much as any one."

"How do you mean, Algernon, that you have nothing to do with it? What makes you say so?"

"Perhaps I ought not to say it at all, or at least not to anybody but my mother and Florence.—But you and I have somehow or other got to be friends, Sir Charles, though you are a great man and a baronet—and so you must excuse my talking to you so freely."

"Do not apologize to me for being my friend, Algernon, or I must treat you in the same style; but tell me candidly, as you have opened the subject, what are your reasons for saying that you and your sister have nothing to do with the business which you seem so well to know is going on here?"

"For a very good reason, Sir Charles," replied the boy, laughing,—"Do you not see that the important question is settled already; and that Florence and I, and five more of us, need trouble ourselves no more about it, but be as gay and as giddy as we like?"

"No, really, my dear Algernon, I see nothing of the kind—and I very seriously recommend you not to take any such ideas into your head. I ought to know my old friend, Mr. Thorpe, better than you do, and I protest to you that I see no reason whatever for believing that he has yet decided who his heir shall be."

Algernon laughed.

"Is our friendship ripe enough to permit my asking who you think is the favoured individual?" resumed Sir Charles.

"It would be fifty times better sport for you to find out yourself," returned the boy. "Do try, Sir Charles; I shall so very much enjoy it!"

"That will be amusing yourself most abominably at the expense of my patience, Algernon. Come, tell me at once, there's a good fellow."

"Shall you go to church, this evening, Sir Charles Temple?" said Algernon.

"I certainly intend to do so. Why do you ask?"

"For reasons germain, as Hamlet says, to the subject we are talking about."

"Do you mean that you will give me the information I ask for, if I remain at home with you?"

"Why not exactly.—I only wanted to give you an opportunity of judging for yourself. However, I do not wish to bribe you not to go to church. I think it is very wrong not to go, unless you happen to have a dear good stepmother like mine, who would be miserable if you did. . . . She thinks I should be out too late if I went this afternoon."

"But is there no hour, Algernon, but that of Divine service, in which you can communicate this very mysterious information?" said Sir Charles.

"I must have the coast clear for it," returned the boy; "but two minutes would do as well as two hours. As you would be able to move rather faster than most of them, could you not stay behind a little while, and promise to follow them?"

"Certainly. I will take care to do so."

Sir Charles managed the matter so well, that no attention was excited by his saying, "I will follow in a moment;" but the whole party moved off without him, and were speedily followed by very nearly all the household, such being the custom of Thorpe-Combe, whether the family were large or small.

"Now then, my young conjurer," said the baronet, returning to the library as soon as he had watched the last of the troop through the lodge-gates, "be pleased to let me know what light it is which you intend to vouchsafe me."

"They are all off? You are quite sure of that, Sir Charles?"

"Perfectly."

"Come along, then. You will wonder how I found my way first, but I could not rest till I had seen every corner of this beautiful old house."

So saying, Algernon Heathcote led the way across the great hall, along a passage that opened from it, and up a small staircase which led into one of the smaller corridors above.

"Stay one moment, Sir Charles; I think I am right; but I never was here but once. I think this is the door; but I should not like to march into one of my fine Welsh cousin's rooms, if I could help it."

While saying this, Algernon opened the door before which they stood, and looked in. "Yes, this is it; come on." Sir Charles Temple obeyed; and having followed his young conductor across a dressing-room, found himself in a spacious bed-chamber, and stopping where Algernon stopped, exactly in front of the portrait of his old friend's lamented son.

"Did you ever see any one of whom this picture reminds you, Sir Charles?" demanded the boy.

"Not that I remember," was the reply, "excepting the original."

"No! . . . . What not the hair and the shirt-collar? This picture, as you must well know, is the likeness of Uncle Thorpe's lost son. Did you never see any one else like it?"

"I see it! I see it!" hastily exclaimed Sir Charles. "It is as clear as light, Algernon. That little brown cousin of yours,—that Miss Sophia Martin, came down to breakfast this morning with her curly hair and her collar arranged exactly in imitation of this picture."

"I find thee apt," said the young Shakspearian, "and duller should'st thou be than I take thee for, Sir Baronet, if thou hadst not found it out," returned Algernon, rubbing his hands in great glee.

"But is this all the proof you have got to show, my good fellow, that the question of Mr. Thorpe's inheritance is settled?"

"It is all I can show you now, Sir Charles. Perhaps you may see more another time."

"But, Algernon, this proves nothing but that your curly-headed cousin has found her way to this room as well as yourself, and that she has done her very best to look as like her defunct cousin as possible. There is something comical enough in the discovery, I confess, and shows pretty plainly what the quiet little lady has in her thoughts; but it strikes me that this is more an indication of *her* mind upon the subject than that of her uncle."

"Well, sir, ... now, I think you had better go to church, because it is quite time; and I really have nothing more to show you. About all the rest, you have quite as much opportunity of judging as I have. Good-bye!"

"You are right about its being time to set off," replied Sir Charles. taking his hat as he passed through the hall; "but I cannot say that you have gone far towards proving your assertion: however, we shall see. Time is the great discoverer; he will solve this question as well as all others. Back to your blazing hearth, my dear boy! Do not stand in the cutting draught of this door. Dear Mrs. Heathcote would scold us both if she were here."

And so the new friends parted, the happy Algernon returning to his new-found treasure in the library, and Sir Charles Temple striding across a short cut to the church, which brought him to the door in time to enter it with the rest of the party

CHAPTER IX.

It may be feared that the thoughts of Sir Charles Temple were not as steadily fixed on the business of that cheering and holy hour as he himself would have wished them to be; but in truth he could not get the notion of Algernon out of his head. It was a notion that in no way pleased him. In most affectionate and simple-hearted sincerity he wished that his old friend should bestow his property in the manner that would be most creditable to his memory; and excepting perhaps the identical Miss Wilkyns who had so obligingly selected herself as the principal object of his attention, there was not one of the old gentleman's nepotine connections whom he would not have considered as a more desirable heir than Miss Martin. He thought her not only extremely plain, but, according to his ideas, singularly unladylike in her appearance. Her very neatness revolted him: it was the neatness of a young lady behind a counter. Her still, subdued, and most unyouthful manner of stepping and moving, gave him, as he subsequently expressed it, the same sensation as a cat was wont to produce on him, who is always found where she is least expected; . . . . and as to any latent, abstract qualities of mind, though, as he was ready enough to confess, he had nothing but instinct to guide him, he felt a conviction, which, as far as its certainty was concerned, was completely satisfactory, that whatever of that nature made a part of her was of a quality in no way calculated to atone for the absence of grace and beauty,

And was this the being his honourable, graceful-minded, gentlemanlike old friend was about to plant in the halls of his ancestors as the representative and continuer of his race? There was something in the idea which grated painfully on the feelings of the young adviser. Were this, to him, most unattractive person the best, or the only one, with whom Mr. Thorpe could claim kindred, Sir Charles Temple inwardly assured himself that he would, to the very utmost of his power, have palliated her detestabilities to her uncle, to himself, and, as far as possible, to all others: but with two such creatures as the young Heathcotes before his eyes, such a selection was intolerable; and he was determined to be ready with all the arguments that good taste and common sense could furnish, in order to set right the judgment that seemed in danger of going so very lamentably wrong.

As these thoughts irked and worked him, he covertly studied the countenances of the two girls who sat opposite to him. Florence, the very perfection of young ingenuousness and feminine grace; Sophia, the compact, terse, little abstract of what was precisely the reverse; and then he turned his eyes to Mr. Thorpe to see if he looked mad enough to render such blundering possible.

More than once, indeed, he persuaded himself that the idea was altogether unfounded, and muttered the word "Nonsense!" with very satisfactory energy; yet, from time to time, he could not help remarking that the old gentleman's attentions were all for her. His own hymn-book, opened at the right page, was regularly put into her hand when the rustic choir stood up to

"Praise the gods amiss."

It was to her stumpy little feet that he stooped down to arrange a hassock; and it was to her, and to her only, that he offered his arm when the service was over and the party set off on their return home.

The manner, too, in which the neat-looking little Miss Martin received these attentions, irritated the feelings of the sensitive baronet quite as much as the attentions themselves. The mixture of disclaiming humility and ardent gratitude,—the retiring shyness at one moment, and the creeping, cat-like caressingness at another, shook his serenity to its very centre; and when the whole circle were again assembled round the fire on their return, and he noted anew the combing of the stiff curls and the fall of the shirt-collar, so strikingly like the well-remembered portrait, he felt as if he could have thrown her out of the window with very particular satisfaction.

The Christmas-day passed as Christmas-days generally do, with more mirth in the kitchen than in the parlour, but a good deal of eating in both. When the company were assembled in the drawing-room after dinner, however, Mr. Thorpe seemed to consider it necessary that some effort more than ordinary should be made for their amusement, but apparently knew not how to manage it. First, he proposed a round game; but it was speedily evident that neither Major nor Mrs. Heathcote considered it particularly desirable for the young people. He then inquired if they had any predilection for Blind-man's-Buff? But upon this proposal the Welsh heiresses put a very decided negative, giving, at the same time, a glance at the

blonde trimming of their dresses, which ought to have made the ex-ambassador ashamed of himself.

"Well then, my dear children," said the discomfited purveyor of sports and pastimes, "if you are all too much grown-up for that sort of thing, you must give us all the merriest songs you can think of;—and then, perhaps, you may dance a reel, or something of that kind."

"Let us waltz!" said Mr. Bentinck Spencer.

"Will you waltz with me, cousin Florence?" said Mr. Montagu, suiting the action to the word by drawing near her, and putting on his gloves at the same moment.

It was evident, indeed, that this last proposal was likely to obtain considerable favour, for the official Mr. Spencer himself condescended to say to Miss Winifred Wilkyns,—"Shall I waltz with you, my dear?"

But, alas! this gay scheme did not answer, eventually, better than those proposed by Mr. Thorpe, for both Florence and Algernon declared that they had never seen waltzing in their lives, and did not know what it meant; and the three Misses Wilkyns, though they avowed a very passionate love for the exercise, declared that for that very reason there was not one of them could play a waltz. "We know better than that," observed the eldest sister: "the moment girls are known to play waltzes, they are never left in peace to dance them."

"And I don't suppose, my dears, that either of you two have given much time to music as yet?" said Mr. Thorpe, addressing himself to Miss Martin and Florence.

"I hardly ever saw a pianoforte before," replied Florence, laughing.

Sophia sighed deeply, shook her head, and then turned it away for a moment, as if ashamed to meet her uncle's eye; but at length answered,—"I do love music so very much, that I think, if I could ever have been taught, I *might* have played."

"No doubt about it, my dear girl, no doubt about it. And if you are so very fond of it, I don't see that it would be too late now," said Mr. Thorpe, his eyes almost involuntarily fixing themselves upon those dear stiff curls, which now again stood, hair by hair, as it seemed, in the self-same form and fashion as those he had best loved. "But without being able to play, you may give us a Christmas carol, Sophy. Don't you know any pretty songs, my dear?"

Now, the truth was, that if the life of Sophia Martin had depended upon her distinguishing the difference between the "Dead March" and "Let's hie to the Wedding," the chances would have been greatly against her ears being able to save her from the tomb. But yet, when she answered this demand by replying, "Oh no! uncle, not for all the world!" nobody unacquainted with the fact would ever have guessed it, or attributed her gentle silence to anything but timidity.

For some reason or other, however, Sir Charles Temple suspected the fact;—perhaps a very slight glance from Algernon's bright eye might have helped him to it. But, at any rate, he was disposed to make an experiment; and quietly placing himself in a chair behind

Florence, with whom he had established a comfortable, friendly sort of acquaintance, he said,—"I have a great favour to beg of you, Miss Florence: will you grant it?"

"Yes, that I will," she frankly replied, with a smile as cordial as her words.

"Thank you for the promise! All I ask is, that should your uncle Thorpe request you to sing, you will let him hear 'Hark! the Lark,' . . . . as I heard it in the woods the other day."

Having said this, Sir Charles waited for no further parley, wisely considering that as the young lady had already given him her promise, he might lose, but could not gain further advantage by listening to anything more she might wish to say.

The baronet then betook himself to his old friend, and whispered in his ear,—"Ask Miss Heathcote, sir . . . . I know she can sing, for I have heard her."

"Indeed! . . . . But I think you must be mistaken, Temple. She told me she had never seen a pianoforte. You probably overheard one of the Welsh ladies."

Sir Charles smiled slightly at the notion of his mistaking a Wilkyns's voice for that of Florence; but gravely assured Mr. Thorpe that such was not the case, as he would be quite aware if he would lay his commands upon his youngest niece to give them a song. Thus urged, the old gentleman approached her, and said, "Now, niece Florence, I dare say when I tell you to sing to me, you will reply that you cannot sing, any more than your cousin Sophy.—That is what you were going to say; is it not?"

"No, uncle," replied Florence, colouring.

"Indeed! Then what will you say?"

"That I don't suppose I sing well enough for you to like it very much; and, therefore, that I think it would be better for me not to try before so many people,—but that if you bid me do it, I will."

"And a very good answer it is, Florence. And now, my dear, I *will* bid you sing. Perhaps your cousin Wilkyns will be good enough to play for you?"

"Oh, certainly!" said the accomplished Elfreda, hastening to place her fingers on the instrument. "What shall it be, Miss Heathcote?"

"Whatever you please," replied Florence, innocently, and with very joyful alacrity; for though quite determined not to break the promise she had given to Sir Charles, she was exceedingly well pleased at the idea of escaping it.

"Whatever I please!" repeated Elfreda, with a slight sneer,—"Upon my word, that is undertaking a good deal. However, I will give you something very pretty." And having obligingly given this promise, she placed one of Signor Catamari's most prodigious bravuras upon the desk, and began to flourish her way through it with great apparent satisfaction. Florence, meanwhile remained in her place listening, and though the sounds she heard did not inspire her with any very thrilling sensations of delight, she too, was exceedingly well pleased, for just at that moment she greatly preferred hearing Miss Wilkyns perform to performing herself. As to the

offer of accompaniment to her singing, she no more understood it than the birds would have done, to whom her stepmother had not unaptly compared her.

Miss Wilkyns left her in peace during Mr. Catamari's long, long symphony,—though not, perhaps, without some little feeling of disgust at her not having eagerly placed herself beside the instrument the instant her own gracious promise had been uttered; but when she arrived at the air, and perceived that Florence still quietly retained her place, she waxed extremely wroth.

"Upon my word, Miss Heathcote," she said, tossing her rose-crowned tresses;—"upon my word, this is treating me very cavalierly. If, after your assurance that you could sing everything, you happened to discover that of what I played you knew nothing, it would have been but civil if you had told me so. It is not very often, I assure you, that I consent to accompany anybody but my sisters; and when I do, it is quite new to find myself treated in this way."

That Miss Wilkyns was very angry, and that this anger was excited by something she herself had done or left undone, was unmistakably visible to poor Florence; but in what the offence consisted, she knew no more than the babe to be born a dozen centuries hence. There was something laughable, but pretty too, in the simplicity with which, in reply to this startling attack, she said,—"Do you mean me, Miss Wilkyns! What is it you wanted me to do?"

"*Wanted* you to do? . . . . Upon my word, Miss Heathcote, I had neither wants nor wishes on the subject."

"No more had Florence, Miss Wilkyns," said Mrs. Heathcote, with so very good-humoured a smile, that nobody could be angry with her. "She neither wanted nor wished, I am very sure, that anybody should trouble themselves to play to her singing. God bless you, her voice has music enough in it, and plenty, without troubling you or anybody to help her. . . . . And it so happens that she never had anybody play to her in her life."

"Your young cousin did not quite understand you, my dear," said Mr. Thorpe, "so you must please to excuse her; she has not received a regular musical education, as you have; but I dare say, by what her kind mamma says about her, that we shall find her 'wood-notes wild' very agreeable. Come, my dear Florence, sing away, there's a good girl."

This was a sort of preluding which most young ladies would have preferred being spared, but Florence took it in excellent part, only saying, laughingly, before she began her song,—

"Please, uncle, you must not listen to all mamma says about me, or you will be sadly disappointed. But I am quite ready to sing as well as I can."

And without waiting for further orders, the clear, sweet voice of the untaught girl uttered the beautiful notes and the beautiful words Sir Charles Temple had asked for.

The three Misses Wilkyns looked furtively among themselves, from one to the other, and it seemed to be with great difficulty that they prevented themselves from laughing. Mr. Thorpe appeared to be both surprised and pleased, and said kindly, "I beg your pardon, fair

niece; but despite your caution, I shall henceforth most assuredly listen to all that it may please your mamma to say of you—for I find that she may be very safely trusted." Mr. Wilkyns, of course, said nothing; but Mr. Spencer remarked, that it really was a great pity Miss Heathcote should not take a few lessons; and Sophia Martin observed, that never, no never in her whole life, had she seen cousin Florence take so much pains about singing.

Sir Charles Temple, meanwhile, looked and listened considerably more than was advisable for the continuance of the even-minded tranquillity which it had been his wont to enjoy. To a mind less unsophisticated, and more *blasé*, than his own, it is likely enough that the extreme ignorance displayed by Florence of all things which accomplished people are taught to know, would have revolted him, from the decidedly Agnes-like air which it gave her. But to him this simplicity was delightful; and reading, as he did, in the deep tranquil blue of her beautiful eye, a spirit as bright in its thoughts as it was spotless in its purity, he saw, or fancied he saw, in her the only woman he could ever wish to make his wife. But how could he make a Lady Temple of the penniless Florence, without exposing her to privations which it would wring his heart to see? He must be a wretch only to dream of such a wish! It could not, must not be thought of! He would but go through the task to which he had pledged himself, and then resolutely determine to see her, and to think of her no more.

Sir Charles, good young man! was so perfectly and honestly in earnest as he took this resolution, that he gave himself, with a safe conscience and a gay spirit, to the enjoyment of whatever agreeabilities might intervene before it was necessary to act upon it; and accordingly, Florence had no sooner finished one song than he began asking her for another. In singing the first time among all her strange near relations, she had done what was disagreeable to her, in order to please dear Algernon's kind new friend, Sir Charles Temple; but after this first time she did not care about it at all. She was so accustomed to sit at her work, or walk in the fields, and warble away to father, mother, brothers, and sisters, for hours together, that she had not the slightest consciousness of showing herself off, or of doing anything at all out of the common way, by sitting close to her good stepmother, on the sofa, with Algernon on the other side of her, and Sir Charles Temple in front, singing away whatever songs they asked for, with the most happy freedom from all restraint, and with a feeling of enjoyment almost as great as she inspired in those who listened to her.

"Has she never had anybody to sing with her, Mrs. Heathcote?" asked Sir Charles.

"No, never in her life. She learns the tunes by her father's playing them to her on his flute."

"The Major is a musician, then?"

"Not very much. But when he was a young man quartered about, with little to do, he used to while away the time, now and then, by taking lessons from one of the band; but he would have given it up long ago, I take it, if it had not just been for the pleasure of teaching a new tune now and then to Florence. She has a pretty pipe, sir, hasn't she?"

"I think she has, Mrs. Heathcote," replied the baronet, very demurely. "And I was thinking, that as I sing too, sometimes, and know a great many of her songs, I could sing a second to her, if she would let me."

"Let you, Sir Charles? Oh, goodness! She would be delighted! Wouldn't you, Florence? Not that she knows anything about singing in parts, Sir Charles, but she is such a quick girl about tunes, and time, and all that, the Major says, that I don't think she would be likely to put you out in any way. What do you say, Florence? Should you not like to try?"

At this moment, poor Florence, for the first time in her life, felt unchildishly shy. Of herself, as having any claim upon anybody's admiration, she had never yet been taught to think at all; but she did think Sir Charles Temple was a very great man, notwithstanding all his good nature, and she blushed very brightly, as she replied, "Oh no, mamma! I don't think I could do that!" Poor Sir Charles! It was very much against him, that blush, and the pretty air of embarrassment which accompanied it. It is quite certain that Florence never looked so beautiful before, and it did seem unfortunate, under his peculiar circumstances, that he should be the first person exposed to the enchantment arising from this first symptom of transition from childishness to womanhood. For a minute or two he seemed quite to have forgotten his offered second, and indeed everything else, excepting just what he was looking at; but a distinctly audible little titter from a group at the other end of the room, formed by the three Misses Wilkyns, and the two young Messrs. Spencer, appeared to change the course of his feelings, for he got up and walked out of the room.

"I wonder, Florence, if Mr. Thorpe would think it rude of me, if I was to bring down my work-basket?" said Mrs. Heathcote, looking towards the card-table—"What d'ye think of it, my dear?"

"Think, mamma?" returned Florence, looking up in her face with the most unmeaning expression of countenance imaginable.

"Why, to be sure, my dear, you can't be much of a judge in such matters. And now I think of it, Florence, it won't do, of course, on Christmas-day, because it would not be looking like holiday time, as it ought to do. But now that dear, kind Sir Charles Temple is gone out of the room, we three do seem to be left to ourselves, don't we? and that makes one want something to do."

"Want something to do, mother?" said Algernon, in a whisper. "How can you want anything to do, when you can watch Sophy Martin's clever way of playing her game?"

"Nonsense, Algernon! I can't see her game here, nor you either."

"Can't I, mother?" returned the boy; "I think I can." And as he spoke, he fixed his eyes so earnestly upon her, that Mrs. Heathcote mechanically looked in the same direction; and she saw the young lady, who was now the partner of her uncle Thorpe, looking up in his face with a mixture of such tender devotion and venerating respect, that she exclaimed, "Poor girl! I suppose she is terribly frightened."

"Do you think so, mother?" said Algernon. "I don't. She knows how she is playing very well."

Mrs. Heathcote suddenly turned her eyes upon the boy, and remembering some of his former hints on the same subject, understood his meaning. "Well, dear," she said, with something a little like a sigh, "and if she does, I don't see who's to blame her. She has not got so many to love her as you and Florence have."

"But is that any reason, mother, that she should play so *very* well?" said Algernon.

"Yes, I think it is, poor thing!" replied Mrs. Heathcote, in a whisper. "I often wish that I . . . . and you, Algernon, and all of us, indeed, could get on faster in being fond of her; and it does not do us any great credit, I think, considering how very badly off she is, that there is not one of us that loves her."

"Why, I do think you are a hard stepmother upon us, now," replied Algernon, with a comic shake of the head. "I have heard of stepmothers who gave musty porridge to the poor innocents committed to their keeping, and whipped them if they made wry faces at it; but ask your own hard heart, Mrs. Heathcote, if you don't serve us worse? . . . . Just think of the dry, hard, sour stuff that you and father have bestowed upon us, and then you tell us to be fond of it! Fie, Mrs. Heathcote! Fie, fie, fie!"

"Go to bed, Algernon!" replied the stepmother, knitting her brows, and endeavouring not to laugh; "and, above all things, you bad boy, take care not to make your remarks when anybody besides myself and Florence can hear them."

"Born for your will, I live but to obey you," replied Algernon; "I don't mean about going to bed, however, but about keeping all my wisdom for you and Flora, and one more," he added, with a mysterious nod. "But do not be alarmed, mother, I would not interfere with the curly-headed darling for the world. Only, don't you think that it might be rather a good thing to give uncle Thorpe a hint that the '*poor, desolate orphan girl*' had better be adopted at once? It would be such a *comfort*, you know, mother, for them both, if she was to come and live here! Why should we not leave her at once in her own house that is to be? It would be such a good way of teaching us resignation for being cut out; would it not, mother?"

And thus passed the Christmas evening. Sir Charles Temple did not return till just before the party separated for the night; Mr. Wilkyns did not wake till the supper-tray came in; the whist-players played on; and the three Misses Wilkyns, and the two Messrs. Spencer, amused themselves as well as they could, each one of them thinking in their hearts that he or she ought to become the possessor of Thorpe-Combe and all its appertainments, as an atonement for being obliged to endure such exceeding dulness.

And Florence! Was Florence asleep as well as Mr. Wilkyns? No: but she did not feel as if she had anything to say, either to her mother or Algernon; and so she let them whisper on without interruption.

CHAPTER X.

"*Les choses s'arrangent,*" say the French; and so do people too, however heterogeneously brought together, if they are but left to settle into their own ways and their own places, without being too anxiously set to rights by their collectors.

And thus it happened at Thorpe-Combe. Before, long before, a week had fully passed, the different individuals of the party assembled there had one and all taken their positions relatively to the rest; and so they continued till they were separated, most of them never to meet together again with any very great degree of intimacy.

Generally speaking, the congregated cousins did not appear to have conceived any very strong degree of affection for each other. Miss Martin indeed ceased not to propitiate the love and affection of every living being she came near, excepting the Heathcote family, from whom it was not possible she could gain anything more than they had already given,—that being a child's share in all they had. Neither was it probable that she could lose much. The Heathcotes, as she very justly observed to herself, not being the sort of people to take any fussy fancies about being affronted.

Mr. Wilkyns never quarrelled with man, woman, dog, cat, stock, nor stool, provided they stood not in his path when he was moving towards his food, nor walked over him when drowsy digestion was patiently pursuing its ceaseless task; but neither was he apt to conceive attachment.

Mr. Spencer felt himself capable of doing a great deal for the sake of enriching his very promising and fashionable-looking sons; but he was dreadfully tired before the period allotted to their probation was over. His spirits, however, were greatly sustained by the secret conviction that it was morally impossible any man living in the style of old Thorpe, and so evidently by his manners a man of the world, could select from among the assembled party any but one of his two sons as his heir. The Misses Wilkyns, and all their ways, he felt to be most anciently Britannic. Sophia Martin was too ugly to be looked at more than could be helped; therefore he espied no latent danger in her; and as for the Heathcote boy and girl, the ex-ambassador would be more likely to leave his property to his old housekeeper than to either of them. Yet, notwithstanding this very satisfactory view of the party, he was sick to death of them all, and hailed the morning on which they all met, as he devoutly hoped, for the last time, with feelings of the most agreeable kind.

The *douce* Sophia said nothing to anybody about her particular opinions, her particular hopes, or her particular intentions; but, notwithstanding this discreet reserve, she was the only one who wept very much at parting, and she certainly cried a good deal when Mr. Thorpe caressingly put his hand, for the last time, upon her stiff hair, kissed her forehead, and begged of God to bless her. The good-natured Major and his excellent little wife, though exceedingly

delighted by their reception and entertainment, felt their hearts leap within them at the thoughts of home, and all the dear children, and the chickens, and the dogs, and the pigs, and all else that makes life precious to the homely heart.

The three heiresses, as they daily confessed to each other during their diurnal retirements before dinner, detested the whole set immensely, excepting uncle Spencer; but most particularly Sir Charles Temple, who was, beyond all contradiction, the most complete bore of a man they had ever met. Sophia Martin, they confessed, was the best of the bunch; but it was dreadfully wearing to the spirits always to see the same dress, and the hair, too, combed and curled, day after day, as if it was done in a mould; so they, too, hailed the breaking up of the party as a blessing.

Of the dozen guests who had been thus brought together, there were, however, three who watched the waning of every passing day with pain. The two young Heathcotes and Sir Charles Temple had gradually fallen into an easy sort of friendly intercourse, the charm of which was little guessed at by any of the lookers-on, though some among them were pretty sharp observers, too. Mr. Thorpe felt exceedingly obliged to his young friend for his great good-nature in taking so much notice of the sickly boy; and the circumstance of Florence being generally one of the party when they walked in the sun or gossiped round the fire, produced from him no observation whatever. Not that he quite overlooked her either, for he thought her exceedingly pretty, and pitied the pain she would feel upon losing the brother she seemed to love so dearly;—for that Algernon was doomed to follow the weakly race of his Madras-born brothers and sisters, he had not the slightest doubt, Sophia Martin having told him that more than one medical man had declared it was quite impossible he should live. Little did the old gentleman guess what was going on in the heart of Sir Charles Temple: little did he imagine that by giving his estate to his niece Florence, he might at once have obtained what he had so long wished for,—namely, the repairing the dilapidated estate of his friend. . . . . But most unfortunately it was the interest of no human being acquainted with this fact to enlighten him upon it, excepting that of the baronet himself, ... and he . . . . would much rather have knocked down his beloved old mansion, and sold the materials as rubbish, than have so selfishly used his influence. Florence herself knew no more of the matter than her good uncle; and as for Algernon, he had certainly never in his life thought so little about his sister Florence as he did now. The library, and all the delightful talk that grew out of it, possessed him wholly; and though he and his stepmother often got Sir Charles and Florence to sing together, when it was too dark to read, and too early, as they thought, to call for lights, it never entered the head of either to fancy that their dear, happy, merry, playful Florence had inspired the gentleman with a passion that must of necessity make either the bane or the bliss of his existence.

That these three felt a pang at parting that would have occasioned unmitigated astonishment, could it have been made known to the rest, is most certain; but they said little or nothing about it; and Major

Heathcote's closely-packed hack post-chaise drove off just as tranquilly, to all appearance (though with a little more clatter), as the more aristocratic equipages of Mr. Wilkyns and Mr. Spencer had done before it.

"Thank God! that business is over, Temple," said Mr. Thorpe, taking the arm of his friend, and leading him back into the house, after having watched this last departure. "I hope you think I have got through it well; but it has been terribly hard work sometimes. But I don't believe they found it out: do you think they did?"

"They could have found nothing, my dear sir," replied the young man, endeavouring to speak gaily, "but the most frank and graceful hospitality; and it seemed so naturally and so easily rendered, that, well as I know you, I never guessed that it cost you a painful effort. I am afraid, then, it must altogether have been a great bore to you."

"It has, Temple; not perhaps *quite* altogether, but very nearly so. I thank you heartily, however, for the noble help you gave me. That poor sickly boy seemed to touch your kind heart, my good friend. It is a sad spectacle. I would not let myself take notice of him, for it appeared to me that he was a beautiful and intelligent creature; and, after all I have suffered, I declare to Heaven that I would rather have died myself than taken a fancy to him."

"Upon my word, my dear sir," returned Sir Charles, eagerly, "I think you are totally mistaken about him. I am no physician, certainly, but I feel no doubt in the world that Algernon Heathcote is in a fair way to live and do well; and in point of disposition and intellect, I consider him as one of the most promising lads I ever met with. I wish I had known the cause of your taking so little notice of him; but, in truth, I thought that, for some reason or other, you did not like him,—and that I had no business to tell you whom you should and whom you should not talk to."

"No, poor fellow! God knows I took no dislike to him; quite the contrary, Temple. There is something exceedingly touching in his fondness for that kind-hearted stepmother. How he fired up when those trumpery puppies attempted to mystify her one day about the geography of Eton. . . . . But don't let's talk of him. I am sorry to say that I know but too well he has not long to live."

Sir Charles Temple was strongly tempted to ask upon what authority he knew this, or rather believed it; but Mr. Thorpe effectually put a stop to all further discussion by saying, "Now, Temple, I am going to do something quite as novel as inviting all my kith and kind to visit me,—I am going to desire that you will take yourself off. . . . . I must get Barnes to pack me up again in my own snuggery before I can have any comfort in you. Come and dine with me to-morrow, will you, my dear fellow? I don't suppose I am very sick; but neither do I feel particularly well, nor shall I till I am got into my old corner, with you opposite to me and pussy between us."

"Agreed," said the young man, preparing to go. "I will dine with you to-morrow without fail. But remember that if you go back to your old fancies about being ill, I shall decidedly take my evening coffee in all the dignity of my own silent halls."

This was said gaily; but the poor young man felt sadder as he

turned to take his solitary way to those same silent halls, than ever Jaques did, when he set about railing at all the first-born of Egypt.

He failed not, however, to keep his appointment, and found, as he expected to do, all traces of the recent metamorphosis entirely done away. Mr. Thorpe was seated in the identical arm-chair in which he was first introduced to the reader, with the same reading-desk between his knees, the blazing fire of wood upon the hearth, and the tabby cat contentedly re-established upon her rug.

Mr. Thorpe's last command to Mrs. Barnes, and, as he assured her, the last he ever intended to give respecting the transactions of of the last fortnight, was, that everything was to be restored to the *statu quo* in which it had been at the moment he announced to her his intention of receiving company.

"Write down upon a bit of paper," he said, in conclusion,—"write down upon a bit of paper, Barnes, the sum of money that you will require to pay all the bills, wages, and what not: but not a single word of remark about it in any way, nor ever let me hear the subject mentioned more."

These commands had been strictly obeyed; and when the two friends sat dawn again, *tête-à-tête*, to their little delicate dinner, it was Jem only, and Jem restored to his former unpagelike appearance, who was their sole attendant.

When he was dismissed, and the solitary bottle of claret left *en tiers* between them, Mr. Thorpe said, not quite solemnly, but by no means in a light or jesting tone, "You must remember, neighbour, that you have not yet quite completed your promised work of kindness. You stand engaged, you know, to help me decide on whom my property shall descend. Give me, I pray you, your judgment on this point."

If Sir Charles Temple had only seen in Florence Heathcote the charming creature which she really was, without having fallen in love with her a thousand fathom deep, he would have had no doubt whatever as to what advice to give. He would have said, "Leave your estate to Algernon, and in failure of issue from him, to his sister Florence." But now such counsel was impossible. He had refused frankly, and with his whole heart, the earnest entreaties of the old man to become his heir; and should he suffer the affection, that now filled his whole soul with the purest and tenderest feeling of which human nature is capable, to make him assume the appearance of having repented him of his disinterestedness, and led him to discover a way to escape the penalty of it? It was in vain that his heart told him that if Algernon inherited the estate, the contingent bequest of it to Florence would be as little likely to take effect as to be wished for; yet still, though all but hopeless of ever calling her his wife, he shrank with unconquerable averseness from the idea of naming her. After the meditation of a moment, he replied to Mr. Thorpe's point-blank question by saying, "If you have, as I cannot but think probable, already made up your mind on this subject, do not, my dear friend, waste your time by asking for my opinion. If this be the case, I would rather not give it."

"Nonsense, Temple! What earthly reason can there be for any

mystery between us on this subject? Give me your opinion of these young people. You will greatly vex me if you refuse it."

"So urged," replied the young man, "I shall certainly speak with perfect frankness. Did you see with my eyes, Thorpe, you would leave your estate to Algernon Heathcote."

"You do not mean it, my good friend? but your words are a dagger to me," replied the old man. "That boy is dying, Temple! Were it otherwise . . . . had I dared to doubt the fact, and ventured to pay him the same degree of attention that you did, I have little doubt that we should have agreed as well on this subject as we have ever done on most others; but pray do not name him again. I will not run the risk of being deprived by death a second time of the object of all my remaining hopes. I entreat you to name him no more."

"Then I presume the choice lies between Mr. Spencer's two sons?"

"And why so, Temple? A girl may take my name, and her family may retain it, as easily as a boy; and to speak with sincerity, I do not ever remember to have seen a pair of puppies from whom I should have found it more difficult to select a favourite. They are paltry miniatures of their paltry father. I would rather endow pussy with my estate, Sir Charles Temple, than bestow it upon either of them."

The young baronet changed colour. The question was becoming a very close one. He had not forgotten the hints of Algernon, respecting the manœuvrings of Miss Martin; but there was something so outrageously impossible in the idea that any one could prefer Sophia Martin to Florence Heathcote, that his understanding refused to receive it, and he perfectly trembled while waiting for the name he might hear next. But it was his own turn to speak, and not Mr. Thorpe's, and he soon perceived that his answer was waited for, whereupon, to save himself from an embarrassment that was intolerable, he said—

"You told me, if I mistake not, that you considered the three Welsh heiresses as already too well provided for, to make any increase of fortune particularly desirable. But it is possible, perhaps, that you may have changed this opinion now?"

"Do you really think so, Sir Charles Temple?" demanded Mr. Thorpe, with some austerity.

"Nay, my dear sir, how is it possible for me to judge?" replied the hard-pressed young man. Then, making a sudden bold plunge to extricate himself, he added, "Be not offended with me if I confess that the name you have forbidden me to mention is the only one among the whole party that I could ever utter to you with sincere approval—because . . . . I think a male heir would be preferable to a female one. This being the case, it is now your turn to name the person you think the most eligible."

The old man sighed heavily, but after a short silence replied, "It was hardly to be expected, Charles, that among a parcel of young people, all, as a matter of justice, perhaps, having equal claims . . . . your young eye and my old one should fix upon the same. Nay, I am quite willing to confess that there may possibly be more of weakness than wisdom in the selection my fancy has made. But cannot you

conceive, Temple, that if some one among these nephews and nieces happens to have features or an air that recalls to me my lost son, that one will be most likely to please me?"

There was no room for any farther embarrassment, and Sir Charles Temple quietly replied, "Very probably."

"Such is the case, Charles, and I see no shame in avowing it. The humble Sophia Martin, the poor portionless orphan, has a look that recalls my poor boy to me perpetually—and this is a charm that I have no power to resist—Sophia Martin will be my heir, Temple."

"May she prove a worthy successor to her excellent uncle!" said the young man in an accent as cordial as it was possible for him to assume. But all his efforts failed to make it fall on the ear of his old friend pleasantly. Mr. Thorpe, however, was much too reasonable a person to be offended, though he could have wished, perhaps, for better sympathy. But each took a glass of wine in silence, and the conversation was then renewed by Mr. Thorpe, on a subject as far distant as possible from the one they had left; and from that moment there seemed a compact entered into by tacit but mutual consent, that the little interlude of the last fortnight, and all the actors in it, should never form the theme of their future conversation. This resolution, though unacknowledged by either, was very faithfully kept to by both; the old chroniclers, and their musty commentators, again crept into the study, and the philosophy of history became, as heretofore, the favourite theme of discussion between them.

In this manner the short interval which remained of Sir Charles Temple's stay in the country, wore away, and he came to take his farewell dinner with his old friend. Neither of the gentlemen were in very high spirits on the occasion; Sir Charles felt that taking leave of Thorpe-Combe was like again taking leave of Florence, and despite the unceasing continuity of his good resolutions respecting the indifference which it was his duty to cultivate on the subject, he could not recall her image without painful and even violent emotion; and the fact that he had particularly got her into his head, and could not get her out again, was quite sufficient to account for his not being very good company.

His old friend would probably have been more aware of this, had he not himself felt ill and out of spirits. He attributed this, however, solely to the approaching departure of his favourite; and often reiterated was the inquiry, "How soon do you think you shall be back again, Temple?" But the evening closed at last; the friendly hands were clasped in a farewell grasp that both felt to be painful, and they parted.

At a very early hour on the following morning, and while the shutters of his old friend's windows were still closed, Sir Charles Temple passed before the front of the house, in order to take one more last farewell—alas! he had already taken many—of the spot where he had first heard Florence sing; and then, ashamed of his own weakness, he hurried home again, and in half an hour was galloping the one old pony that constituted all his English stud, to the high road on which he was to join the coach to London.

Mr. Thorpe's breakfast on that morning was a sad one, and it

would have been sadder still, had he not made up his mind to be very busy. As long as Sir Charles Temple remained in the country, a dislike, which he could not conquer, to resuming the subject of the settlement of his estate, had prevented his taking any steps towards making his will; an event upon which it would have been equally disagreeable for him either to have kept silence or to have spoken. But the impediment of his friend's presence removed, he determined to delay this important business no longer; and when Mrs. Barnes entered to remove his breakfast, he said,—"Barnes, do you think I could trust Jem to take a letter for me to Mr. Westley's?"

"Yes, sure, sir, no doubt of it," replied the intelligent housekeeper, as well aware of what was going to be done, as if her master had commenced the conversation by distinctly stating that it was his intention immediately to set about making his will.

"Then let him be ready in half an hour; and you may come in and fetch the letter, which I shall have written by that time."

"Very well, sir," was all the reply made: but half a glance at the housekeeper's face might have shown her master that she felt conscious in every nerve of there being a very solemn business afoot; but that nothing could be farther from her intention than to say any single word on the subject.

Exactly at the time named she returned, and there found, lying ready upon the table, a letter directed to Joseph Westley, Esq., Cropt Hill Cottage.

"Any answer, sir?" said Mrs. Barnes, demurely.

"No, Barnes; the gentleman will bring the answer himself."

"It will be a most abominable trick to serve me, if he asks the lawyer to dinner without telling me," said Mrs. Barnes to her niece Nancy, as soon as Jem and his important despatch had disappeared. "I'll dress but one of the partridges to-day, any how, you may depend upon that."

But the one partridge was enough. Mr. Westley did not make his appearance on that day. The next, however, brought him to the Combe; and a decisive and business-like pull at the bell brought Mrs. Barnes to the inside of the door, and Jem to the outside. The lawyer's horse was taken and led round to the stables, and the lawyer himself introduced into Mr. Thorpe's study.

There are various different degrees of domestic treachery and domestic impertinence. Some footmen (before the blessed invention of covers) would turn a note inside-out, as it is said, rather than not become acquainted with the contents; while others never did anything beyond peeping in at the ends. Some servants, as perfectly assured of what was going on as Mrs. Barnes, would have applied their ear to the keyhole; but Mrs. Barnes would have scorned such an action, and instead of using unlawful means to acquire more information, contented herself with most legitimately communicating as much as she had.

Niece Nancy had the benefit of this; and as they shook, and pulled, and shook again the curtains that were once again to be consigned to darkness and repose, Mrs. Barnes not only explained exactly what Mr. Westley and her master were at that moment

about, but also in what way, according to her judgment and belief, the great question of the Thorpe-Combe estate was likely to be decided.

"I have no more doubt than that I stand here, Nancy, how the property will go. That is, of course, what is not to be left in legacies. I think I can answer for it that there will be *some* legacies; but the fine estate, and the house, and all the beautiful things in it, will all go. . . . . Now where do you guess, Nancy?"

"If I had got to give it away to any of them as have been here, sure*ly* it should not be to either of them three scoffing, jeering, flirts as used to make such a sight of cinders before dinner every day in the blue damask. I hated the sight of 'em, tossing up their Welsh noses as if there was nothing good enough for 'em."

"You are quite right, Nancy. They won't be the better for a single stick on the place—trust me for that. But go on girl. Who do you think it will be?"

"Why, it won't be the little smut of a one, neither. She is as much overdone t'other way. I always thought she'd end by hugging me, she was so unaccountable civil and intimate. She isn't a bit like a lady, to my mind."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Barnes, "she is no beauty to be sure, but she wasn't the last in the list, I can tell you, with master. What d'ye say to her managing to have the little teaboard for him in every evening, that she might make his tea? She has cut her eye-teeth, Nancy, you may swear to that. But my master will never be such a fool as to turn over his houses and lands to such a one as that,—though I shouldn't wonder if she was to be paid a pretty good price, in the shape of a legacy, for every drop of tea she poured out."

"No, no,—it won't be she, that's no ways likely; but I'll tell you who I think ought to have it,—and that's the sweet, beautiful, pretty creature as was in the green chintz, She's the one for my money, with her voice like a blackbird and her eyes like two diamonds."

"She may be the one for your money, Nancy, if you have any to spare; but she won't be the one for my master's. It would not be right in the eyes of the county—a young thing like that; what should she do with it? No, no, my master is a good bit queer sometimes, with his hatred of footmen and the rest of it; but he's a gentleman every inch of him, and he'll take care that 'tis a gentleman that comes after him—and that gentleman will be one of the two young Mr. Spencers—the eldest, in course, I suppose. And who else could he choose out, Nancy, if you will but think about it, reasonable for a minute. They come to the place like gentlemen, and they are dressed by a valet, like gentlemen, and they look like gentlemen altogether,—and you see, when the time comes, if I ain't right."

"There is nobody so likely to know, at any rate, aunt, as you are, and I'm not going to contradict you; but I hope when the young gentleman gets a wife, that she will have sense enough to see how the things have been looked after and taken care of."

On this day, though not one single word had been said about dinner, Mrs. Barnes relaxed in her severity of purpose so much as to prepare two wild-ducks for the spit; but, nevertheless, they were not doomed to smoke together on the board, for just as the fire was preparing itself to receive them, the parlour bell rang, Jem was ordered to bring round Mr. Westley's horse, and the lawyer departed.

Another week passed away, and nothing more was heard either of Mr. Westley or the will; but, at the end of that time, three neighbours among the Thorpe-Combe tenants, all well-behaved respectable men, had each a note sent him (which, as they were not even sealed, Mrs. Barnes did look into), requesting them to call at Combe at twelve o'clock on the following Tuesday. They arrived punctually at the hour appointed, and found Mr. Thorpe and Mr. Westley seated at a table, with a skin of parchment extended before them. To this instrument, whatever it was, they were requested to put their names as witnesses of having seen Mr. Thorpe sign his, with seal annexed, and proclamation made that it was his own act and deed. This done, they were invited to refresh themselves by a tumbler of choice cogniac and boiling water (the weather being fearfully cold) and then dismissed.

Another week passed,—and another,—yet still Mrs. Barnes had nothing more substantial than conjecture by which to satisfy the curiosity of herself and all those of her friends and acquaintance in the parish who deemed themselves privileged to pay her a visit, and have a little neighbourly talk with her about the signing and sealing, which everybody knew had taken place at the Combe the day that lawyer Westley had rode by the second time. All she could do was, to look discreet, and declare that she knew her master well enough to be quite sure that all was right and as it ought to be. Nobody, she said, knew what was right to be done better than Mr. Thorpe, and as she did not feel she had a right to say any more, she begged they would all be so good as not to ask her.

But at the end of rather more than a fortnight from the time when this notorious signing and sealing took place, Mr. Thorpe rang his bell rather sharply, which was answered by Mrs. Barnes, at her most rapid pace; and, in fact, she entered the room with a feeling and a look of alarm, for it was long since he had rung so violently.

"I am glad to see you can move so briskly, Barnes," said her master, in a voice more gentle than ordinary, "for I do not feel altogether well."

"You don't think that the broiled chicken could have disagreed, do you, sir?" said Mrs. Barnes, in a tone of deep anxiety.

"I don't know . . . . How can one know, Barnes? I don't believe that if one had an apothecary living in the house all the year round, one should be at all more enlightened as to the recondite effects of broils and stews. But I think you may as well give me a little carbonate of soda, Barnes."

Carbonate of soda was never at any great distance from Mr. Thorpe, and the gentle corrector of indulgences was administered: after which the housekeeper seemed preparing to make her retreat, but her master stopped her by saying,—"Do put a morsel or two

more wood into the chimney, Barnes . . . . I wonder whether I am particularly chilly, or if it is really very, *very* cold."

"Cold, sir! God bless you! Don't be after fancying yourself ill, if it is only on the account of being cold, for the very oldest folks in the parish say that the like has not been known for above these thirty years. If it was not for the spring that runs out of the hill into the marble basin in the flower-garden, we should not have a drop of water to help ourselves; and even that we are obliged to wait for as it runs, for the moment after it touches the marble, it begins its freezing. It is terrible weather, sir, I do assure you."

"Let Beaumont have a couple of loads of wood sawed into short lengths, and given, by a good barrow-full at a time, to as many as choose to come for it. And double the weekly quantity of soup, Barnes, just while this very pinching weather lasts."

"God bless you, sir!" said the good woman, "you can't say a better word than that; for 'tis a great comfort to 'em, poor souls! a drop of good Combe soup such weather as this; and I'll set about it with a right good will, I promise you, sir." And then, having skilfully arranged the logs and swept the hearth, she departed.

Mrs. Barnes kept her word, and did set about ordering the wood, and preparing for a fresh batch of soup, with a right good will; but hardly had she sent off Jem in one direction and the kitchen-maid in another, than the parlour-bell again rang, though not quite so sharply as before; and having wiped her hands and removed an exterior apron, she once more went at her best speed to answer it.

"It is very good of you, Barnes, not to keep me waiting, because I really do not think I *am* quite well," said the old gentleman, shivering. "Don't you think, if you were to make me a cup of gruel and put a little brandy in it, I might feel it warm me? I think the soda was too cold for me, Barnes."

"You shall have a drop of gruel, sir. There isn't a finer thing in the world, or a more innocent," replied the housekeeper. "And you just put your feet up on this stool, will you, sir?"—close to the fire, like,—just so,—till I come back again with my drop of gruel. It is just the cruel cold weather that is too much for you, sir: but, thank God! there is remedies for that, and many of them, for those as have the means and just a little thought about 'em."

"I don't like master at all, Nancy," said the sagacious old woman, on returning to the kitchen, and setting hurriedly about her peparations for the gruel; "and what I like the least is his quietness. It isn't his usual way, and I don't like it at all."

"Wouldn't it be better to send for the doctor at once, aunt?" replied the girl; "so alone as he is! . . . . Sir Charles Temple gone to Italy,—and he making his will and all! It sets me all over in a shiver, I'll be whipped if it don't; and if you happen to make a little more gruel than you want, I wish you would give me a drop of it,—after you have mixed it ready, you know."

"Let you alone, Nancy, for knowing what's comfortable," replied the aunt. "Dear good old soul!" she continued, "I know I shall be unaccountable sorry for him, let it happen when it will. It is that abominable letter about his son,—'tis that's done it, if anything

does happen now,—and you may say I said it, girl. 'Tis his quietness I don't like; it makes me feel monstrous queer, and that's the truth. I wish to goodness he would just scold me a bit!"

"If I was you, I would send for the doctor, aunt," said Nancy, solemnly.

"He hates the whole tribe of 'em, Nancy, like poison; and I couldn't hold myself justified in sending, as long as there's a single bit of hope left that we can do without him," replied Mrs. Barnes, conscientiously.

The gruel, with its comforting accompaniments, was duly administered and duly taken, and Mr. Thorpe declared that he was certainly the better for it; but the next time the bell rang, it was to tell his prime minister that he could not help thinking he should be better in bed. . . . and to bed he went, and lay there, uneasily enough, poor gentleman! for several days. But Mrs. Barnes had never once the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper: nay, the doctor himself came and went, day after day, without eliciting a single sarcasm while he stayed, or a single reproach to any one who might have sent for him. Upon one occasion, however, after a comfortable sleep of an hour or two, upon waking up with the feeling of being better than for some days past, he seemed inclined to resume his ordinary humour; for, looking round, and seeing Mrs. Barnes in her now constant place by his bed-side, he said, quite in the tone of former days, "Now, are you not a fool, Barnes, to sit there day after day, as if you were determined to make yourself ill? Go, and lie down, silly woman! d'ye hear?—and when you have had as good a nap as I have, come to me again."

Delighted, most truly and sincerely delighted, at once more hearing the familiar tone, and firmly believing it to be the best possible evidence of her good master's speedy recovery, she replied with great glee, "Very well, sir, you shall be obeyed for certain; only please to remember, sir, if you seem to be as well as you are now, when I come back again, I must have you eat a bit of something,—I must, indeed, sir."

"We will see about that, Goody Barnes, when the time comes. Now get along with ye, and I'll try to go to sleep again."

It was about two hours after this that his watchful housekeeper returned to him: she had sat up during nearly the whole of four nights, and trusting to her belief that he could not speak *so*, were he not considerably better, she had very literally followed his injunctions and taken a nap.

When she returned to him, he was apparently dozing; but he opened his eyes as she drew near, and she instantly saw that a change of no favourable nature had taken place.

* * * * * *

To follow, throb by throb, the last pulsations of human life, is less difficult than painful.

Mr. Thorpe died within a month after he had made his will; and the worthy Mrs. Barnes, after the first natural burst of emotion was over, began to feel herself very painfully at a loss as to what she ought to do next. After a little reflection, however, she decided

upon sending to the gentleman who had made his will, requesting that he would be pleased to write word of the melancholy event to such persons as he thought it necessary and proper should hear of it immediately.

Mr. Westley appeared to have no difficulty in deciding to whom he ought to address himself; and the necessary communications were accordingly despatched with as little delay as possible.

CHAPTER XI.

"So soon!" exclaimed Sir Charles Temple with uncontrollable emotion, on opening an English letter delivered to him in his mother's presence at Florence. "Poor Thorpe! How little did I think when last we parted, that I should never see him again!"

"He was very old, Charles, was he not? I never remember him otherwise than old," observed Lady Temple.

"Poor Thorpe!" reiterated the young man, mournfully. "How very anxious he was that I should remain a few weeks longer at Temple . . . . I wish I had!"

"Would you have been happier, Charles, had you seen him die?" said his mother. "For my part, my dear son, I am exceedingly glad that you escaped so melancholy a scene. You could have done him no good, and would only have made yourself ill and miserable. . . . . No, no, dear Temple; most certainly, there is no reasonable cause for regret. On the contrary, it appears to me that you remained with him to the very last moment at which you could be useful. I know not what he would have done without you during the gathering of the nephews and nieces; but, to say the truth, I am most especially glad to have you here just now. We are going to have amateur concerts without number, and just guess how they could go on without you?"

"My dear mother, I must leave you," he replied, folding up the letter which he had now read to the end. "This letter is not, as I imagined, sent merely to announce to me the melancholy news, but to summon me to the opening of the will, which is to be deferred, it seems, till I arrive."

"It is surely taking a most impertinent liberty with you, Sir Charles," said the still lovely Lady Temple, very haughtily. "I speak not of the friend you have lost; I had myself a very great respect for him, and am quite aware how truly you were attached to the excellent old gentleman. But I can in no way conceive that any of his brothers or sisters, or nephews or nieces, or whoever it is he has left behind him, can have any possible right to make you gallop across Europe for the purpose of assisting the arrangement of their affairs. I hope and trust that you will decline this most troublesome and inconsiderate invitation!"

"Indeed, mother, it is impossible," replied the young man. "The invitation comes not from any member of poor Thorpe's family, but

from old Westley the lawyer, who, you may be quite sure, knows what he is about, and would not have written thus without good and sufficient reason for doing so."

"From Westley, is it?" said Lady Temple, while visions of possible legacies produced a considerable alteration in the tone of her voice. "Then I presume that it is really a matter of business, and that go you must. If so, it certainly cannot be helped, but it is exceedingly provoking." A very few hours after this discussion, Sir Charles Temple was on his way to England.

Such was the result of the first letter written by the Herefordshire lawyer in consequence of his late client's demise. Nor were those to which he subsequently applied himself, on the same subject, treated with at all less observance. Though it was no easy matter to put the gigantic Squire Wilkyns in motion, he made up his mind to obey this summons with a degree of promptitude that not only astonished his daughters, but raised very sanguine hopes that something important would follow.

"You may depend upon it, papa knows what he is about," said the decidedly clever Elfreda.

"Trust the old gentleman for that!" subjoined the sprightly Eldruda.

"It will be odd, to be sure, if one of us have got it," remarked the prettyish Miss Winifred. The heavy Welshman heard none of these remarks, but nevertheless was not absolutely without some dreamy conjectures of his own; yet, however agreeable in their nature these might have been, he by no means regretted the distant date at which the family meeting was fixed, the time allowed for Sir Charles Temple's return from Italy being not at all more than he should find necessary for fully making up his mind for the expedition.

Mr. Spencer started with very considerable emotion on perusing the letter addressed to him.

"Important news, probably," he mentally observed. "They would hardly take the liberty of sending to me, if I had nothing to do with it;" and he, too, determined to be at Thorpe-Combe very punctually at the time named.

Major Heathcote received the intelligence with a good deal of genuine feeling. "My dear children, here's sad news for us to-day!" he said. "Your kind and excellent uncle Thorpe is dead."

"You don't mean it, Heathcote?" said his wife, clasping her hands; "and he as well as any one of us little more than one short month ago! Isn't it awful? . . . . Is there any mention made about the will in the letter?"

"Only that I am desired to meet the family at the Combe the 15th of next month, to be present at the opening of it. . . . . Poor dear old gentleman! I am shocked indeed!" replied the kind-hearted major.

Both Florence and her brother Algernon dropped a youthful tear to the memory of the uncle who had given them the happiest days they had ever yet enjoyed; they were sorry he was gone, and they said so. But Sophia Martin, though also present when the important letter was read, uttered not a word; upon which Mrs. Heathcote

remarked, that considering she had been such a favourite with the poor old gentleman, she took the news of his death very quietly.

"Indeed, aunt, I am very sorry for him," replied Miss Martin meekly, but with an air of great resignation. "Only I think it would seem like affectation in me, if I was to make a fuss about it; for, of course, neither his living or dying could make any difference to me."

"God knows, my dear, whom it may make a difference to. I am sure there is none of us can tell. I only trouble myself by thinking how on earth we are to get mourning. It will be indecent not to put on black for him, poor old gentleman! let who will have his estate . . . . but I'm sure there is no money to spare."

* * * * * *

At length the day arrived which had been fixed by Mr. Westley for the opening of the will; himself, the three brothers-in-law of the testator, and Sir Charles Temple, being all assembled in the old gentleman's favourite sitting-room, in order to be made acquainted with its contents. It was not without difficulty that Sir Charles Temple controlled his emotions sufficiently to prevent his being too much distinguished from the rest of the party; and when the old favourite tabby gently rubbed herself against his legs, not all his efforts to maintain his composure could prevent his eyes from overflowing.

The four gentlemen, all in the deepest mourning, seated themselves round the fire, and the lawyer, putting on his spectacles, opened the important parchment, and began to read.

The preamble was not clothed in legal language, being a very short but touching statement of the bereaved condition in which the testator found himself by the loss of his only child, and of the lingering pertinacity of the hope which, even in the midst of his mourning, led him to contemplate the possibility that the son so long lamented might still exist.

Then followed, in good-set legal phrase, a bequest of all and everything of which he died possessed, whether real or personal (with the exception only of the trifling legacies hereafter to be mentioned), to Cornelius Thorpe, in case it should be proved that he was still alive, and able to avouch his identity before competent authorities. But in default of his appearance, the whole of the said property was bequeathed to his executors, Sir Charles Temple and Major William Henry Heathcote, IN TRUST, for the sole use and benefit of Sophia Martin and her heirs for ever, on the condition of her assuming the arms and the name of Thorpe.

Whatever may be the feelings of parties assembled upon such an occasion as this, it is not usual to hear much commentary or observation of any kind, and those most interested are not, in general, the most loquacious. Very few words were spoken on the present occasion; for the legacies, almost wholly confined to one or two old servants, and to be paid as annuities, with the sum of one thousand pounds to each of his executors, were not of sufficient amount or interest to elicit any remark; and neither Sir Charles, Mr. Wilkyns, Mr. Spencer, nor even the good-natured Major Heathcote himself, felt at all disposed to be talkative respecting the disposition of the

main part of the property. Indeed, Mrs. Barnes, on whom a life-annuity of one hundred pounds was settled, was the only person on the premises who thoroughly approved the will; and her measureless content at an independence, which exactly doubled her most sanguine hopes, left her with no power to regret anything which it had pleased her dear good master to will.

No sooner was the reading over, than Mr. Spencer declared himself obliged to set off as early as possible upon his return to town, steadily declining the polite invitation of the executors to partake of the dinner provided by Mrs. Barnes; the packed-up, comfortless, appearance of the house being almost as revolting to his feelings, as the recollection that all its carefully stored treasures, as well as the broad lands around, were the property of that singularly disagreeable person, Miss Sophia Martin. But Mr. Wilkyns and Mr. Westley both remained on the premises till the following morning; the first for the purpose of recovering himself after his unprofitable journey, and the last for that of giving the executors some necessary information respecting the details of the property of which they were to take possession.

The heiress for whom they were to act wanted exactly one year of her majority; and the executors were appointed jointly her guardians, in case she should be under age at the time of the testator's death. It became necessary, therefore, that they should consult together as to the manner in which their joint authority should be exercised for the benefit and protection of their ward during this interval; and, in order to do this, they agreed to remain together at the Combe during the following day.

"Shall we announce to our ward, by letter, the splendid bequest that has fallen to her?" demanded the ill-pleased Sir Charles Temple; "or will it be more agreeable to you to inform her of it yourself, on your return?"

"There will be no need to write, Sir Charles, if I go back to-morrow. It will be just as well that I should carry the news myself," replied the equally little-delighted co-executor. "But," added he with a little embarrassment, "if it were not for my scruples about inviting you to take up your quarters at such a very humble place as Bamboo Cottage, I should certainly ask you to go with me; for I can't help fancying, Sir Charles, that the young lady may show an inclination to have a will of her own, about where she will live and all that; and I am sure I shall not know what to say to her."

"I should have thought, Major Heathcote," replied Sir Charles, while his heart bounded at the idea of again seeing her whose very idea he had forsworn,—"I should have thought that the great kindness you have shown Miss Martin would have insured her entire obedience to any wish of yours."

"Well . . . . we shall see. I don't like to be over positive, you know; and young girls sometimes, they say, are not the easiest things to manage. However, if the going with me is disagreeable to you, of course I will not say a word more about it."

"Not the least in the world, I do assure you, Major Heathcote," replied the baronet eagerly. "On the contrary, it will give me great

pleasure to renew my acquaintance with your son, and Mrs. Heathcote, and . . . . all your family. I shall be ready to set off with you to-morrow, if you like it. Mr. Westley will take care that everything is done properly; the will proved, the tenants informed, and so forth. I shall be quite ready to start with you to-morrow morning."

"Thank you, Sir Charles; I am very much obliged by your kindness. To-morrow, then, it shall be. I own I shall be glad to get home, that there may be as little time left them for conjecture and expectation as possible. Not that my boy and girl, poor young things! ever took the least notion into their heads of anything of the kind: but I won't say as much for my foolish wife; and I'd rather put her out of suspense at once."

The departure of the two guardians was therefore settled for an early hour on the following morning. Mrs. Barnes having condescendingly agreed to postpone her own departure for Somersetshire, her native county, and the spot whither she intended to lead her favourite niece Nancy, that they might enjoy together the respect due to them from various branches of their family, the two gentlemen felt no anxiety as to the security of the valuable property contained in the house. The good housekeeper declared herself, indeed, perfectly willing to continue her superintendence of all that she had hitherto guarded with so much faithful care, till Miss Martin and her guardians could suit themselves with some person fit to be her successor, an engagement which the good lady felt to be equivalent to remaining mistress of Thorpe-Combe as long as she found her sovereignty there undisputed.

Books, pictures, and plate, with all the other costly etceteras of the splendid, though antiquated, *plenishing* of the Combe, were accordingly consigned to her care; instructions being left with Mr. Westley that complete catalogues should be immediately made out, and forwarded to Bamboo Cottage, Clevelands, Gloucestershire.

For Bamboo Cottage, Clevelands, Gloucestershire, the two executors then set out, agreeing that for the sake of uninterrupted conversation, and consultation on many points which it was necessary should be settled between them, they should travel post; an old travelling carriage, formerly belonging to Sir Charles's father, being dragged out of its retreat for the purpose.

During the journey, which lasted about six hours, Miss Martin Thorpe's immediate residence and establishment were fully discussed. They both agreed that it would be for the advantage of the property that she should reside at the mansion-house; an arrangement which, Sir Charles observed, might easily be made in the most agreeable and natural manner possible, by the family circle in which the young heiress had resided since the death of her mother, still remaining round her.

"Thorpe-Combe is large enough for you all," added the baronet; "and a residence in the family of her married guardian seems indispensable."

"We shall see, Sir Charles, how it will be all managed," said the major. . . . . "There is Clevelands' spire!" he added. "In five minutes more I shall be at home. Poor dear Poppsy! she will guess the truth at the very first glance."

CHAPTER XII.

Though, for some reason or other, perhaps because he thought his loving little wife would bear disappointment better if he were near her; though, for this reason or some other, Major Heathcote had determined to bring the news of the succession himself, he had written a line to say that poor Mr. Thorpe's particular friend Sir Charles Temple would return home with him, and that they hoped to get to Clevelands by tea-time. This letter reached Bamboo Cottage about two hours before its author; and the family, or at least as many of them as were not sent to bed, were assembled with some degree of form and ceremony in the large but rudely-fitted-up parlour that served as a drawing-room.

The first decisive movement visible on their entering, was the rush made by Mrs. Heathcote to her husband's arms; and in that close hug the secret was doubtless told; for though she tried to behave as well possible, and though her very heart was in the hand she held out to welcome Sir Charles, she glided so quietly back to her chair after the salutation was over, and remained there so very silently, that nobody well acquainted with her could doubt for a moment that she had heard what she did not like.

The next most conspicuous action was that of Algernon, who, at the sight of Sir Charles, actually forgot his anxiety to learn the news, and flying to snatch his hand, clasped it with all the energy of youthful friendship, and seemed as if he could not bear to quit it again.

At a short distance, timidly aloof, stood Florence, her soft eyes speaking a pleasure in the sight they saw, which she would have died rather than express in words; and though Sir Charles was eagerly, warmly, and with all sincerity, returning the greeting of his favourite Algernon, his eyes, too, were for a moment permitted to say what they liked; and they said much more, a great deal, than pretty Florence could fully understand; yet when she laid her head upon its pillow for the night, she recalled that look, with all its earnestness and all its softness, and went to sleep at last with the conviction that "Sir Charles Temple was certainly very glad to see her." At the further end of the room, apart from the well-set tea-table, the sofa, and "the grown-up ones," was a group of three young girls of the respective ages of eleven, twelve, and fourteen; and, on a low chair behind the sofa, and quite in the shade, sat Sophia.

Had an observing eye looked at her narrowly, it might have perceived that she was rather paler than common, but in all else quite unchanged. Her plain black frock sat as neatly, and her curling hair reared itself as stiffly as usual; and the quiet humility of her manner, as she stood up on the entrance of the two gentlemen, and silently sat down again, was in no way changed. Did she look in the eyes of either, or of both, to see if ought could be read there? . . . . If she did, it was so cautiously that none perceived it.

And now the important moment was come; the bustle of their

entrance was over; everybody was seated, and the perfect silence of the whole party showed that they were expecting to hear the result of Major Heathcote's journey. The poor man would rather have passed the night in the snow than speak it; but he felt it must be done, and turning towards Sophia, with as much composure and kindness of manner as he could assume, he said,—

"Sophia, my dear, I hope the news I bring will be productive of nothing but good to you; but it is a great change for so young a person. I have to tell you that you are your Uncle Thorpe's heiress. Except some trifling legacies, he has left the whole of his handsome property to you."

Unbroken silence followed this announcement, and nothing can well be imagined more embarrassing than the minute or two which followed. The poor Heathcotes were, in fact, too honest-hearted, from the gallant father down to his little daughter Mary, inclusive, to be able to say that they were very glad, or that they heartily wished her joy, or that they had no doubt she would make a good use of it, or any other of the various complimentary speeches which the occasion seemed to call for. She had been rescued by them from a state of very desolate poverty, had been pitied, cared for, and nurtured; but they did not, they could not, love her as they would have wished to do; and at this moment, had their lives depended upon it, neither Mrs. Heathcote, Florence, or the three younger girls, could find in their hearts the power to crowd round her with caresses and felicitations. As to Algernon, he had previously been so certain of the result of their visit at Thorpe-Combe, that not the slightest feeling of disappointment mixed itself with the triumph of proving to those who had been in his confidence, how right he had been; but this feeling did not lead him to put himself forward to wish her joy.

It was a great relief, in this state of things, when Sir Charles Temple rose up, and drawing a chair towards the shady spot occupied by the heiress, said, "When you are recovered from any feelings of surprise and agitation which this intelligence may have occasioned you, Miss Martin, I shall be much obliged if you will favour me with your attention. Besides the pleasure of paying my compliments to your Uncle Heathcote and his family, I have real business with you; and, to say truth, it is this which brings me here at the present moment."

"Business with me, sir?" returned the young lady in rather a low voice, but without any appearance of embarrassment.

"Yes, Miss Martin,—or rather Miss Martin Thorpe, as we must now call you, for it was the will of your late uncle that you should take his name—it is necessary that I should lose no time in telling you that I am appointed one of the executors to your uncle's will, and trustee and guardian to yourself. Your adopted father Major Heathcote is appointed to act with me in all these capacities; an arrangement which shows the thoughtful kindness of the testator, and which renders the necessity of my speedily returning to Italy of no importance, inasmuch as he is in every way the person best fitted to perform the duties which we nominally divide. Nevertheless, I shall wish, before I leave the kingdom, that you should make us both

acquainted with what your inclinations may be for the future, regarding residence and so forth, in order that I may leave everything of the kind so far settled, as to occasion neither you nor him the trouble of future references to me."

All this was spoken very rapidly, and as if it were rather necessity than inclination which led to its being said at all.

"I thank you, sir," said Miss Martin Thorpe, bowing her head; then, slowly rising up, she added, "but perhaps it may not be necessary for me to decide anything on the subjects you mention, to-night." And so saying, she glided out of the room with her usual noiseless step, without turning her eyes to the right or the left, or exchanging a word or a glance with anybody.

Sir Charles felt that the sort of rebuff she had given him, was not altogether undeserved. "Miss Martin Thorpe is right," he said, smiling; "and I am very wrong to have thrust myself and my duties upon her at so early a moment. I hardly know whether it was a sort of instinctive wish to break the awful silence which followed the announcement of her inheritance, or the more selfish feeling still, of desiring to get over the disagreeable business of proclaiming my own office, which led me to be so prematurely verbose. However, awkward as may have been my *début*, I cannot but rejoice that it is over. I do not much think that I am a favourite with the young lady, and therefore I shall leave the executive to you, my good friend. I really would not have to dictate ways and means to Miss Martin Thorpe, or to counsel her about the right or the wrong of any measure proposed, for more than I will say. I think she would freeze me into an icicle during the process."

This very frank manner of expressing his feelings, at this early stage of their official connection, almost startled Major Heathcote, who had not, during their residence together at Thorpe-Combe, fallen into so great a degree of familiarity with the young baronet as the frequent readings and ramblings had led to between Sir Charles and the other members of his family. He felt in nowise displeased by it, however, but rejoiced, on the contrary, at perceiving that whatever the humours of his ward might choose to be, he should have to act with a frank, unaffected, friendly person, who would give him no trouble by the display of any diplomatic stiffness or mystery.

The laughing tone of Sir Charles Temple's voice, as he said this, restored to Algernon all those feelings of pleasant confidence and familiar intercourse which had been interrupted and checked by the period which had elapsed since they parted, and still more, perhaps, by a greater degree of deliberate consideration of Sir Charles's rank and station, when compared to his own, than the exceeding happiness he had enjoyed at the Combe had ever permitted him to give way to there.

But now, again, all such ideas of restraint vanished; and placing himself in a chair close behind the young baronet, the happy boy began a whispering conversation with him, in which he reminded him, a little boastingly, of the superior sagacity which had led him so confidently to predict what had now taken place.

"I confess it, Algernon," returned Sir Charles, aloud. "You saw,

while at the Combe, what, I confess, to me was not yet in sight, and I honour you as a prophet therefore."

"How! Algernon," exclaimed his father; "had you any notion when we were at your uncle's of what has now happened to your cousin Sophia?"

"Yes, papa, I was perfectly sure of it."

"How came you never to mention it to me?"

"For excellent good reasons, papa. My knowledge was not derived from noon-day facts, open and visible to all eyes, but to my own secret little watchings of our gentle cousin, and little inferences drawn therefrom, which I knew full well you would call unfair, unjust, uncousinlike, unkind, and a dozen more *uns* besides, all tending to prove that I was a very unworthy, unamiable, and un-good-for-anything personage, and therefore I took excellent care never to say a word to you on the subject. But I did not treat mamma with equal respect, not fearing her half-and-half looks of anger and fun nearly so much as your out-and-out gravity of aspect when quizzing of any kind is going on. That is the reason, papa, why I never said anything to you on the subject."

"And did you fancy the same thing, my dear?" said the astonished major, addressing his wife; adding with great simplicity, "God bless my soul! It is very strange; but no such idea ever entered my head for a single moment."

"And I do not believe it ever would have entered the head of anybody excepting that strange Algernon's," she replied; "and, for my own part—though, to be sure, he did point out one or two little things that did seem rather particular, and that I can *now* see through plainly enough—I cannot say that I ever listened to him with any very serious idea that he was right. He often made me laugh, but I never paid any more attention to his jokes about Sophia, than to all his other droll nonsense about the Misses Wilkyns, and the Masters Spencer."

"And you, Florence? Had you any notion of what was going on?" demanded the good major, evidently a little piqued at the idea of having remained so completely in the dark, while others could see clearly.

"No, indeed, papa, I never paid the slightest attention to anything Algernon said about it. Indeed, I don't remember ever thinking so little about my cousin Sophy as I did while we were at Thorpe-Combe. I believe I was too happy to think of anything."

"Well! I am glad somebody was in the basket, as well as myself," said the major. "And you too, Sir Charles, as far as I can understand, seem to have known nothing more than this wonderful conjurer of ours pointed out to you?"

"Not a bit, major. What first put it into his head, Heaven only knows; I should as soon have suspected my dear old friend of fixing his affections on Mr. Wilkyns. But I confess that before Algernon had concluded his revelations, he fully succeeded in opening my dull eyes to the fact that Miss Martin herself had conceived the idea of awakening her uncle Thorpe's mind to a sense of her merits. Her perfect success must at least inspire us all with respect for her powers of pleasing, when she wishes to do so."

The conversation then rambled on, and now with the most perfect unreserve on all sides, towards the future. The tea-drinking over, Mrs. Heathcote had dismissed the three younger girls to bed, and on their leaving the room Sir Charles ventured frankly to ask the friends with whom circumstances had thrown him into such sudden intimacy, in what manner they thought it would be advisable to arrange Miss Martin Thorpe's residence during the year which remained of her minority. "That she should continue to reside with you, seems a matter of course: no other situation could by possibility be so desirable for her; but it strikes me that there may be a doubt as to the comparative advantages of her remaining with you here, or of your removing with your family to Thorpe-Combe. In the first case, there will be some accumulation of the proceeds of the estate made; but in the second, the young possessor of that very charming residence will at once come into the enjoyment of it. . . . . Which course do you think it would be wisest and kindest to pursue, major?"

"Perhaps I should say the latter," replied Major Heathcote, "were it not that the idea of my recommending what would give my family so splendid a home for a time, would be disagreeable to me."

"I can understand the feeling perfectly," replied Sir Charles; "but we must not suffer it, I think, to interfere with the advantage of our ward; must we? What does Mrs. Heathcote say to it?"

"That I would not, for the whole world, throw any difficulty in the way of my husband's doing his duty towards his ward. But I don't want to exchange my quiet comfortable home for the finest house that ever was built, and as we all seem agreed to speak our minds freely to one another, I see no reason why I should fear to confess that I should not expect to like the fine house the better, because poor Sophia Martin was the mistress of it."

"*Poor* Sophia Martin! Do, dear mamma, try to find a better adjective for the name of Miss Martin Thorpe," said Algernon. "I have taken a great deal of pains—have I not?—to make you call people and things by their proper names, and with their fitting accompaniments. But you are incorrigible! . . . . Poor Sophia Martin!"

"I called her poor, dear Algernon, because nobody seems to love her.—I really do pity her, poor thing!"

"*Seems* to love her," repeated Algernon. "Nay, mother, if that be what you wish for her, she shall have enough of it. I dare say I shall be able, if I take a little dutiful pains about it, to seem to love her dearly. Had you left out the 'seems,' dear mother, I might have been puzzled. But, unlike poor witless Hamlet, I know 'seems' perfectly well, having studied diligently under a fair professor, who shall be nameless."

"Come, come, Algernon, no more of this. If you run her down thus, shall we not have fair reason to say that you feel a little envy at the success of her seeming?" said the major.

"Say what you will, father," returned the boy, colouring, "provided you do not think so. . . . . Yet, perhaps, I am but a vain boaster, either. Oh, Sir Charles! that library,—that library! . . . . Would you believe me if I said that I should not like to have it all for my own?—as little Lucy says about the baby-house."

"No, I certainly should not," replied the baronet; "and even a twelvemonth's living within hourly reach of it would be no trifling advantage to you, Algernon."

"Ay, but Sir Charles, don't you think it just possible that poor Miss Martin Thorpe may like to keep her library shut up? You have no idea what a very careful young lady she is. Is she not, Florence?"

"Yes, she is very careful," replied Florence, blushing, as she perceived the eye of Sir Charles fixed upon her as she spoke; "but I dare say she would not shut up the library."

"To be sure, the children would have a beautiful run at the Combe," said the major, thoughtfully, "though it might only be the worse for them, dear little souls, afterwards; because, of course, when Sophy Martin marries, we must all turn out."

"But not before, papa? . . . . You think we shall all be sure to live with Miss Martin Thorpe till she marries?"

"Why, if we are to live with her at all, my dear boy, I do not see how it can be likely that we shall be turned out before she marries," replied Major Heathcote.

"Oh, very well: I dare say you know best, papa," replied Algernon, in a very gentle voice; "and as I don't think Cousin Sophy will be likely to marry in a hurry, I suppose you had better give up Bamboo Lodge altogether."

"Now then, Algernon, I think your second sight has failed you, altogether," said Sir Charles. "I will not pretend to say that I think your cousin Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe particularly attractive—for I do not. But I am not the least in the world of your opinion, that for this reason she is unlikely to marry. There will be adorers enough at the shrine of Thorpe-Combe, you may rely upon it, whether your cousin be admired or not."

"Alas! Sir Charles Temple!" returned Algernon, with a sigh, "I am hurt to the very centre of my heart to find how much more worser am I than your thoughts! And you do really believe that my innocence leads me to think no gentlemen can be found sufficiently mercenary to marry young ladies for their fortune, whether they happen to fall in love with them or not? Honour compels me to confess, Sir Charles, that you are mistaken in this. On the contrary, I do most devoutly believe that Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe has only to publish, far and near, the amount of her rent-roll, and the value of her books, pictures, plate, linen, and china, in order to secure to herself one or two offers of marriage every day of the year. Nevertheless, I still do opine," continued Algernon, changing his tone, and speaking with the demureness of a quaker, "nevertheless I do opine that Cousin Sophy is not likely to marry in a hurry."

"So much the better, Algernon," said Mrs. Heathcote. "Sophia is not a girl that could live happily with everybody, and it is the more necessary, therefore, that she should marry with caution. But, now you two guardians are together, I wish you would try to make up your minds as to the going to Thorpe-Combe, or staying here. I should like, if I could, to know before going to bed, because then, if I lie awake, I shall know how to begin plotting and planning about everything,"

"The wish is a very natural one, my dear Mrs. Heathcote," replied Sir Charles. "Any uncertainty upon a matter of so much domestic importance must necessarily make you anxious. But I am afraid such uncertainty must be endured for some hours longer, as it appears to me that we should be wrong to decide, without going into some sort of calculation, as to the difference it would make in the amount of the monies for which we shall have to account to our ward, upon her coming of age."

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Heathcote, endeavouring to look resigned.

"Tell me, dear mother," said Algernon, "do you wish very much to know how it will be settled?"

"Yes I do, Algernon," she replied; "I will not deny it."

"Then I will tell you," he gravely rejoined, "and he will not be a wise man who shall say I tell you wrong, mother. Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe will reside exactly where she herself likes best to do both during her minority and after it."

"Nonsense, Algernon!" said Sir Charles. "You must know, as well as we do, that as long as a ward is under age, she must live where her guardians appoint."

"There is a pithy proverb, Sir Charles Temple, that I think Cousin Sophy would do well to inscribe it over the door of her mansion, for it contains the law by which she rules her life:—

'WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY.'"

The two guardians smiled, but shook their heads, as much as to say, "That may be all very well, but it won't do with us;" and then the conversation rambled away on many points, relating directly or indirectly to the matter under discussion, till something was said which induced Sir Charles to ask Florence, whether she should prefer going to reside with her cousin at Combe, or remaining at Bamboo Cottage.

She paused for a moment, before she replied, as if repeating the question, "Whether I should like to live in a house belonging to my cousin Sophy?" . . . . Another pause followed, and then she added, speaking very quickly, "Oh, yes! I was so very, *very* happy at Thorpe-Combe, that I should like to go there again, in any way."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE appearance of the young heiress at the family breakfast-table the next morning was looked for with some interest by the whole party, for she was the last who took her place there. The "Good mornings, Sophy," and the "How do you do, my dears?" with which she was greeted, were received with the most immovable fixedness of countenance by her. Lavater himself could hardly have read emotion of any kind upon her features; but when Sir Charles Temple raised his eyes from a volume which Algernon had put into

his hands, and said, "Good morning, Miss Martin Thorpe," a slight, very slight, twitching about the mouth was perceptible. It was not a smile; certainly it was nothing like it; but, nevertheless, it was the result of a sensation of pleasure, too new and too delicious to be altogether smuggled under the sombre tranquillity in which she deemed it proper to veil her features. It was in vain, however, that Sir Charles, the major, Mrs. Heathcote, and Florence, all endeavoured to converse in an easy natural tone, as if nothing very particular had happened; an involuntary restraint and stiffness seemed to surround them all, which they found it impossible to shake off. Algernon, too, who, when in the talking vein, was the greatest chatterbox of the family, now remained profoundly silent; but his eye furtively, and from time to time, was permitted to ramble upon a visit of inquiry to all the faces round him, evidently bringing back the most amusement from the strictly-regulated looks of the silent heiress.

As soon as the breakfast was removed, Sir Charles Temple, who certainly was not inclined to give the young lady credit for having a heart so overflowing with powerful emotion as to prevent her transacting business, resumed the conversation which she had so abruptly cut short the preceding evening, by saying,—

"I shall be sorry to press you into the discussion of these affairs, Major Heathcote, sooner than may be agreeable to yourself and Miss Martin Thorpe; but I really am obliged to get through whatever is to be done before I leave England, as rapidly as may be: and this must be my excuse for pressing upon you both the necessity of settling, as soon as possible, the situation in which our ward is to be placed during her minority. Will it suit you, Miss Martin Thorpe, to enter upon the subject now?"

"I am ready to hear whatever you may wish to say, sir," replied Sophia; "only," she added, half raising her eyes to look round the circle, and permitting them to rest for half an instant on her cousin Algernon, "only, it appears to me, that the party is rather large for the transaction of private business."

Mrs. Heathcote instantly rose to leave the room, Florence, Algernon, and the eldest of Mrs. Heathcote's daughters (the only one of them present) following her example. But there was something so nearly approaching to quiet impertinence in the tone in which she had spoken, and the manner in which she retained her place while putting her aunt and cousins to the rout, as to rouse a feeling of opposition in her younger guardian, which induced him to say,—

"Surely, Mrs. Heathcote, it cannot be necessary for you to leave your usual sitting-room, in order to furnish us with a secret council-chamber for our consultations. Cannot you and I, major, attend Miss Sophia to some other room, without disturbing Mrs. and the Misses Heathcote?"

"We can go into my little study, if Sophia has no objection," replied the major, endeavouring to address the young lady in his usual tone, but nevertheless with a slight shade of deference in his manner, of which she was perfectly aware.

"Where you please, sir," she replied; "it is a matter of perfect indifference to me."

Algernon rubbed his hands, and almost clapped them with delight, at perceiving the approach of the heiress-like graces he was looking out for. Florence raised her eyes from the needle-work she had just taken up, and for a moment looked earnestly at her cousin. The heiress chanced to catch that sweet yet somewhat startled look, and it produced, unconsciously perhaps, a trifling toss of the head, which gave a dignified sort of air to her exit. "For what we are going to receive, Heaven make us patient!" said Algernon, as the door closed behind her.

A very small room, with a very small fire in it, received Miss Martin Thorpe and her guardians. The good major did the honours of it, as well as he might, by placing two out of its three chairs on each side of the chimney, and depositing his own person on the third, with a little table before him, in the front of it.

It was not from reverence to Sir Charles Temple's superior rank, that the elder guardian appeared desirous of yielding to him the honour of opening the conference, for Major Heathcote was really a gentleman, and not accustomed to give either more or less of deference to any than the established etiquettes of society demanded. He knew perfectly well that on this occasion, as much the older man, he ought to take the lead; but he had always felt a sort of shiness before his niece Sophy, of which he was unconscious with almost anybody else. Even when she was the destitute object of his charity, it was very nearly the same. There are some tempers which, though they rarely push their owners into a quarrel, manage to keep all kinder and gentler natures at arm's length. Such may be seen in every station of society, exercising a sort of power that is exceedingly mysterious. It is certainly a repulsive power, and therefore not greatly to be envied; yet still it *is* power, and when seen, as it very often may be, in a menial dependent exercising a most disagreeable, yet seemingly irresistible, influence upon those above him, it has something very puzzling in it. It is only the kind temper, however, that suffers from this species of repulsion. But there is many a gentle mistress—ay, and master too—who, with the power of chasing the discordant individual from about them, endure the unpronounced, but ever-felt, ill-humour for years, and go on, painfully puzzling to guess what it is that has offended Richard or Robert, Betty or Jane. Perhaps this sort of annoyance arises oftener from a dependent than an equal; for the species of temper which suffers from it would find it more easy to seek a prompt explanation from one above than from one below them. There had always been a sort of dumb sensitiveness about Sophia Martin which had kept her cheerful-spirited, kind-hearted protectors ever on the watch not to offend her; and, for the most part, their children followed their example, constantly yielding, where they could discover what her wishes were, and only wishing that Cousin Sophy would just say what she did like.

Algernon, indeed, though a fine-hearted creature too, could not, on this point, be correctly classed in the same category as the rest of his race. Nature had bestowed upon him an intuitive keenness of perception, which, had circumstances nurtured it, might have given him a good deal of Machiavellian acuteness; and, even as it was, he

contrived to dip deeper into the hidden workings of the human natures around him than most people. Where his father, mother, brothers, and sisters read in the impassible stillness of Sophia Martin the shrinking sadness of dependent poverty, he perceived a spirit galled indeed, but wanting occasion only to make it rampant. He discovered pride, obstinacy, selfishness, and cunning, where the rest saw only melancholy, indifference, a broken spirit, and a most sad though silent nature. The consequence of this was, that, though nobody loved, he alone hated her; and cordially did she pay him for it. For every other member of the family she felt rather a comfortable sort of contempt, but towards him her feelings were of a very different nature. Florence too, since the important expedition to Thorpe-Combe, had taken rather a different place in her estimation from that which she had previously occupied. From considering her as a silly chit, easily led by the nose, with no talent in the world but an unprofitable passion for reading, and a voice that broke the air into vibrations which seemed most unaccountably to tickle every ear but her own, she suddenly perceived that she was beautiful, and that everybody, in a greater or less degree, perceived it too. She certainly did not like her the better for this, and was quite aware that it would be more agreeable to be without her than with her. But until this disagreeable discovery was made, Florence was decidedly the individual whom she the least disliked in the family of her benefactors; for, in fact, it was very difficult to dislike Florence Heathcote; but, of course, when all sorts of eyes were seen to fix themselves upon her with admiration, there was more to object to in her than before.

To return, however, from this long digression, to the trio in Major Heathcote's study. It was Sir Charles Temple who now again opened the subject they had retired thither to discuss. . . . "I cannot doubt, Miss Martin Thorpe," he said, "that the novelty of the circumstance in which you find yourself, and the suddenness with which the change has come upon you, would render meditation and perfect tranquillity much more agreeable to you than being thus early obliged to turn your attention to business. . . . But I assure you it is a matter of necessity."

"I have no wish, sir," replied Sophia gravely, and with great distinctness of enunciation, "to indulge in any reveries which may interfere with the transaction of necessary business."

"Indeed! . . . . I am extremely glad to hear you say so," returned Sir Charles, feeling a very rapid approach in the same order of sentiments towards the young lady, which he well knew filled the heart of his friend Algernon. "This will enable me to enter, without any further ceremony, upon the only question whereon I conceive it will be necessary to trouble you for your opinion, before I leave England. Your excellent uncle Major Heathcote, and myself, wish to learn from you—in case we find, as I imagine we shall, the financial part of both schemes equally within reach of the income we can prudently afford to spend; we wish, Miss Martin Thorpe, to learn from you what mode of life you would prefer during the period of your minority."

"Before I can answer that question, Sir Charles Temple, it will be necessary for me to inquire what varieties of choice are in my power

as long as I remain under the legal protection of yourself and Major Heathcote?"

"A very pertinent question, Miss Martin Thorpe, and one that Major William Henry Heathcote and myself have fully made up our minds how to answer. We cannot, of course, permit you to reside anywhere, without the personal protection of the only guardian who is capable of taking the charge of you. It follows, therefore, that you must reside with him and his family, in his house, or that he and his family must reside with you in yours. I must know, before I leave England, which of these two plans is to be decided on, as the rate of allowance which I shall have to sanction will entirely depend upon this. Of course you can easily understand this, without our detaining you now to enter into particulars."

"Would it be necessary for the whole of Major Heathcote's family to reside with me, were I to decide upon immediately taking up my residence at Thorpe-Combe?" demanded the heiress.

Sir Charles Temple had very fine eyes, and he gave her a look (it was but for half an instant) which made her turn her face a little way from him, in order to contemplate the fire.

"Which members of the family, Miss Martin Thorpe, would you propose to dismiss from the parental protection before you take advantage of it for yourself?"

Perhaps Sir Charles Temple might fancy that it would be some time after this before the young lady would turn her eyes again from the fire to himself; and perhaps the kind-hearted Major Heathcote might think that poor Sophy would feel quite cut up by receiving so much sharper an answer than had ever been given her before, since she had entered the house. But if they did so think and so fancy, they were altogether mistaken. A full-fledged nest of hornets holds not itself more ready for attack and defence, when occasion calls for or permits it, than did Miss Martin Thorpe. She started at the words thus addressed to her, and the movement brought her head and her eyes again full in front of her young guardian. The hitherto penniless girl felt her new power in every swelling vein; and though her eyes were by no means such handsome eyes as those of Sir Charles Temple, they served indifferently well to express what she thought of him. They looked at each other very steadily for a minute or two in silence, Major Heathcote sitting rather uneasily in his chair the while; and then, having recourse to the poker, with which he very unnecessarily lessened the quantity of fuel which the grate contained. Sir Charles at length, not greatly admiring the aspect of the young lady's silence, was about to break it; but ere he could do so, she said, "I presume, Sir Charles Temple, it is not necessary that before you leave England I should accurately settle all the minor circumstances of my house and home? . . . . There are likely enough to be many points that it will be necessary for Major Heathcote's family and myself to arrange, in which we shall not at all require your assistance; and at the present moment I wish to banish all such from our discussion. What I shall require to know, before I give the answer you ask of me, is what the difference of expense is likely to be between my submitting to continue my residence here during my

minority, and my taking possession of my own mansion at Thorpe-Combe?"

A slight smile passed across the countenance of the young baronet. The vulgar proverb, "Set a beggar on horseback," &c., occurred to him forcibly. "Yet she rides well," thought he, as he contemplated the calm, cold, yet haughty expression of the little brown face before him. "Only I must take care that she does not manage her steed so as to trample us all in the dust. Poor Florence! . . . . Lovely, gay-hearted, innocent Florence! What a home will this odious girl's *mansion* make for her!" As this last thought crossed him, the whole expression of his countenance changed, he fixed his eyes upon the carpet, and instead of giving the sort of answer which a minute before he felt disposed to do, he turned to Major Heathcote, and said, "Will you have the kindness, my dear sir, to consult with Mrs. Heathcote upon this subject? It will be, I think, for you to make an estimate of the sum you should deem sufficient to repay you for continuing to receive Miss Martin Thorpe as a member of your family here, on one side of the question, and on the other, to state what sum it would be convenient for you to pay her towards her maintaining a suitable establishment at Thorpe-Combe, provided you consent to remove your family thither."

"Exactly so," said the heiress, rising. "Be so good, Major Heathcote, as to let me receive both these statements in writing, and I will not keep you long waiting for my answer." So saying, she rose, and walked out of the room with the same quietness of movement as heretofore, but with a step that had lost all its doubting timidity, and an eye that no longer spoke of shiness or of fear.

She did not trouble herself to shut the door she had passed through; but the major, recovering from the sort of paralysis which had seemed to hold him chained, while she remained, started up, and gently closing it, stood leaning with his back against it, as if to secure himself and his companion from her return.

"She has lost her senses, Sir Charles Temple," said he. "Upon my soul and honour, I think the poor little girl is gone mad."

"No, major; she is not mad; but I am afraid that we shall find it necessary to take considerable care that she does not make us so. I hope that you will forgive my sincerity, but I declare to you that I am unable to conceive the possibility of any young lady's appearing more detestable under such a change of circumstances than this Sophia Martin Thorpe. I am sadly fearful that your family will find a residence with her intolerably disagreeable, let her decide which way she will."

The good major sighed, and for him deeply, for he was by no means of a desponding temper; but the recollection of Sophia's look as she left the room, and of her words and manner while she remained in it, did cause him for a few moments some disagreeable forebodings. But he shook them off, as he had sometimes done in days of yore the thoughts of a coming siege or a threatened storming, by a rather vague but very firm belief, that whatever came upon him, would be exactly what it would be best and most right should come. "We must not take up sorrow at interest, Sir Charles. Things don't look

very promising, I confess; but they may turn out better, perhaps, than we think for. Luckily we have no very bad tempers among us, and my wife never quarrelled with anybody in her life, I believe, unless it was with my boy Algernon for not taking care enough of himself."

"If anybody living could turn discord into harmony, I believe most truly that she could do it," replied Sir Charles, with very earnest sincerity. "But depend upon it, she has no easy task before her. Poor Algernon too, so keenly observant as he is, so rapid to descry motives, and so nobly indignant where he finds them base, how will he ever endure the perverse impertinence of this girl?"

"My dear Sir Charles," replied Major Heathcote, "your position in society renders you too independent of circumstances to permit your submitting yourself patiently to them. But with us the case is different. My eldest boy is rather a singular sort of fellow, I confess, and his good stepmother has petted and spoiled him not a little; nevertheless he knows perfectly well that my circumstances are a good deal straitened, and that we must do, and not do, many things which might be more agreeably arranged were we rich. But Algernon has too much good sense, and loves us all a great deal too well, to suffer his dislike to his cousin to increase our difficulties. I wish, dear fellow, he were a little stouter, for he has excellent abilities; and were I not afraid, and my wife still more so, of his being sent from home, lest his returning health should suffer from want of care, I have little doubt that I could get him to Sandhurst, and give him a fair chance of following my own profession with credit. If we keep him with us much longer, he will be too old for it; he was sixteen his last birthday, and though I flatter myself he could pass a very creditable examination, for we are none of us idle, I should not choose him to go at an age when he ought to be quite past competition with the other boys. The idea of sending him at once certainly suggests itself now, with greater force, from my feeling persuaded that he would suffer more from the high and mighty airs which this poor girl seems inclined to assume, than any of us."

"Does Algernon himself seem desirous of adopting the army as a profession?" demanded Sir Charles.

"I cannot say he does. But in what other have I any hope of pushing him forward?" returned the major.

The young baronet did not answer this question, but remained silently and absently turning over the leaves of a volume he had taken from the chimney-piece.

"I do not very well know how to set about making the statements our young heiress asks for," resumed Major Heathcote, after permitting the silence to endure for several minutes. "On what data are we to proceed, Sir Charles? The income of the property is about three thousand a year, is it not?"

"Rather more than less, I believe."

"And what do you think would be a proper allowance for the owner of it during the last year of minority?"

"I think, Major Heathcote, that an answer to that question, in order to be reasonable, must be entirely guided by circumstances.

If it were left, for instance, to a girl who was residing in good and sufficient style with her own parents, who neither wished nor wanted payment for her maintenance with them, a couple of hundred a year would be sufficient; but if the young lady's future prospects in life might be supposed to depend upon a style of life that must, as in this case, be of necessity supported by her own property, I should not consider two thousand as at all beyond the mark."

"Two thousand pounds is a very handsome income, Sir Charles; and to a girl brought up as Sophy Martin has been, must, I should think, appear enormous. Of course, I should be willing to contribute the same sum that I expend here to assist the establishment, if it be settled that we all remove to Thorpe-Combe. That is about five hundred a year; and if you think two thousand would suffice to keep up the place in sufficient style for a minor, fifteen hundred a year would be all that we should find it necessary to allow her."

"If the young lady does not require a thoroughly well-appointed carriage, it might suffice," replied Sir Charles; "but as to the other question, respecting what she ought to pay, if she remains with you, I think no one can be so good a judge of it as your excellent wife. I therefore recommend that she should come hither to consult with you on the subject, while I get Algernon, and perhaps Miss Heathcote, too, to show me some of the lions of Clevelands."

This proposal being approved, and immediately acted upon, the three friends who had enjoyed so many wintry walks together at the Combe, now set off upon another, not much less inclement, but with a theme to discuss too interesting to leave them much leisure to think either of weather or scenery.

Sir Charles listened to all his young companions said on the subject of their cousin's inheritance with the deepest interest; he wished to read the hearts of both, and there could not be a better opportunity for doing so. The feelings of Algernon seemed to have no mixture of vexation in them. The fulfilment of his prophecy delighted him; and he had already seen enough of the operation of prosperity on the fine mind of Miss Martin Thorpe to insure him, as he expressed it, a never-ending joy in watching her. From the first hour, indeed, of the summons to present themselves at the dwelling of Mr. Thorpe, no shadow of expectation, either for himself or his sister, had ever suggested itself to him, though the probable reason for the summons had been openly canvassed among all the members of the family. He considered himself as perfectly out of the question, from being quite aware that though he was conscious of increasing strength, almost from day to day, there still existed a pretty generally received idea, among the friends and acquaintance of the family, that he was doomed to follow the brothers and sisters, who had, in fact, fallen early victims to the climate of India. Yet he felt, too, that if the old gentleman rejected him, it was not likely that he would choose his sister, either because, despite her beautiful perfection of healthfulness, she was of the same objectionable race as himself, or because there was something awkward in taking the girl and leaving the boy: so that no disappointment whatever mixed itself with the affair. But not so, Florence. With all the simplicity of truth she avowed, that Alger-

non was in her opinion so much more calculated to do honour to Mr. Thorpe's succession than any other pretender to it, that she was almost shocked, as well as disappointed, by the destruction of her hopes.

Earnestly did Sir Charles Temple listen to the unreserved expression of feelings, equally affectionate, generous, and simple, which flowed from the rosy lips, that as he gazed and listened seemed equally eloquent to the eye and to the ear.

"Florence!" he ejaculated, in an unheard whisper, to his heart; "if you are not my wife, I will go to the tomb of my fathers unwedded, no son of mine succeeding."

Nobody heard the vow,—for, as we have said, it was not audible, but it was registered where it could never be erased,—and this unmarked solemnity over, Sir Charles permitted himself to enjoy, with exquisite serenity of spirit, the air, the sky, the half-melted masses of snow that a long-lingering winter had left, making the path that the light-footed Florence trod beside him about as miserable as a path could be. Yet, still, all was unspeakably bright and beautiful in his eyes; and having, at length, succeeded, by rather a singular process, to set all the tormenting doubts suggested by prudence at rest, he gave himself freely up to the sweet happiness of believing that Florence Heathcote would eventually be his wife.

The reasoning that led to a decision which was in such exact contradiction to the conclusion at which he had arrived a few weeks before, when meditating on the same subject, did not arise from any observations elicited by his present opportunity of examination on the worldly prosperity of the young lady's father. No; the logical process went contrariwise, and was founded on the self-evident fact, that the extremest simplicity in their mode of living, and as little of luxury of all kinds (excepting in the one article of leisure for reading), distinguished the Heathcote family from all others, either at home or abroad, with whom he had ever become acquainted. From these premises, it followed that, of all persons, either at home or abroad, with whom he had ever become acquainted, Florence was the fittest to be his wife; for what would be poverty to others must appear wealth to her; and all fear of the miserable struggle between gentle station and ungentle want, which he had heretofore contemplated as inevitable upon his marrying during the lifetime of his mother, vanished like a vision of the night, engendered by high feeding and unhealthy occupation.

The most undoubted proof that the lady of his love possessed a splendid dower, would by no means so well have satisfied the long-descended young baronet of the prudence and propriety of his choice, as did Florence's thick shoes, coloured linen frock, little straw bonnet, and the home fabrics of all sorts which seemed to supply all the wants of her family. Had either Algernon or Florence known how exceedingly out of spirits Sir Charles Temple had been since they last saw him, they might have been greatly puzzled to account for the brightness of the glance that now shot from his eye, and the gaiety of the smile that curled his handsome lip. Not even the penetrating philosophy of Algernon would have sufficed to discover that it arose from

the almost peasant garb of Florence, and the unsophisticated rusticity of all things at Bamboo Cottage.

Whatever the causes, however, the walk was a most delightful walk to all the three; and having discussed and dismissed the subject of the inheritance, they talked of a thousand other things, that proved how very much they all thought alike, upon every point whereon intelligence may be brought to bear, without the interference of general society to assist it.

It was only because the appetite of Algernon announced to him the approach of the dinner-hour that they turned about to return home when they did, and even this did not bring them back in time to save them from hearing Mrs. Heathcote express the greatest astonishment as to where they could possibly have been so long.

CHAPTER XIV.

Sir Charles Temple learned by inquiry from his fellow-guardian that their ward had not appeared in any part of the dwelling frequented by the family, since her dignified exit from the study in the morning. But he learned also, that the good major and his wife had quite made up their minds upon the sum they should require from the heiress, in order to make her continued residence at Bamboo Cottage in all respects comfortable, and in fitting style.

"If she were to pay us two hundred a year, Sir Charles," said Mrs. Heathcote, looking conscious the while that she was naming an enormous sum,—"if she were to pay us that, she might have a maid of her own, the school-room fitted up as a separate sitting-room (for I could manage very well, now the two biggest boys are off, to keep school in the parlour) and everything else suitable. It is a great sum of money, I know, to be added to such an income as ours, but I would make it my study in all ways to make her comfortable."

"If my opinion may be considered admissible on the subject of house-keeping," replied Sir Charles, "I would advise you to name double that sum to Miss Martin Thorpe, which might, I think, enable you to keep such a carriage as would permit her extending her excursions and her visits, if she desired to do so."

This suggestion being agreed to, though not without a little shrug from Mrs. Heathcote, on the extravagant notions of the young baronet, it was farther settled between them, that these terms and statements should be submitted to the young lady before they left the dinner-table, as this would avoid the ceremony of inviting her to another private audience; and, accordingly, the other young people were instructed to withdraw as soon as the cloth was removed.

Miss Martin Thorpe obeyed the summons to dinner conveyed to her by Florence, without relaxing one atom from the reserve in which she had from the first enveloped her feelings on the great change in her destiny. Such a chilling want of everything like confidence on

her part was certainly sufficient to check all demonstration of sympathy in those around her; nevertheless Florence, who, after knocking, had waited for her at the door of her chamber, could not resist saying, as she took hold of her arm to accompany her downstairs, "Do you not feel very happy, dear Sophia?"

To which question she received for answer another: "How do you mean, Cousin Florence?"

"How?" returned Florence, laughing, "oh, in a thousand ways, I should think." This sufficed to bring them to the parlour door, and there the conversation ceased. Several attempts, however, were made by Mrs. Heathcote, the major, and Sir Charles, to produce something like conversation with her, but it was evident that she thought the most inflexible gravity necessary to the receiving with propriety the important change which had taken place in her circumstances.

Even though Sir Charles Temple was engaged in a laughing discussion with Florence, on her avowed delight in riding a donkey whenever she could get one, she remembered very dutifully the instructions she had received, and left the table, followed by Algernon and her two elder sisters, as soon as the table-cloth and the servant were withdrawn.

It was, as heretofore, Sir Charles Temple who opened the conversation, which he did by saying, with a good-humoured smile, "I am afraid, Miss Martin Thorpe, that you will set me down as the most troublesome guardian that young lady ever had, for I must again tease you about business."

As he continued to look in her solemn little face, even after he had concluded his speech, she felt constrained to answer, and said, "I shall never consider business as teasing, Sir Charles Temple."

"I am excessively glad to hear you say so," he replied, "and the more so, because I have so terrible a distaste to it myself, that if you were equally restive, and equally idle with myself about it, depend upon it we should never get on at all."

Sir Charles Temple looked exceedingly gay and exceedingly handsome as he said this, and Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe saw that he did; nevertheless, it was only with a very faint attempt at a smile that she answered, "I flatter myself, sir, that I shall never be found idle when business is to be done."

"Bravo!" cried the gay and happy young man, who had fancied, within the last hour or two, that it would not be quite impossible to teach Florence Heathcote what it was to love,—"Bravo! Miss Martin Thorpe. That assurance has removed all my embarrassment, and I can now enter upon that most detestable of all subjects, pounds, shillings, and pence, without a blush."

He then, with proper and respectful references to Major and Mrs. Heathcote, informed the young lady, that he had their permission to state to her what would be the difference in expense between her remaining to inhabit Clevelands with them, and their removing to inhabit Thorpe-Combe with her.

Sir Charles immediately perceived that there was imminent danger of further adjournment, and that Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe was on

the very verge of saying that she would give her answer after having considered the subject deliberately. He therefore went on to say, more rapidly than her manner of speech would permit her to interrupt him, "You see, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, that this statement places the subject before you in such a manner as will enable you to decide at a single glance. It is evident to me, that though as yet naturally unaccustomed to decide on subjects of importance, you have a vast deal of the sort of talent necessary to the promptitude which can alone enable people of fortune to make the different arrangements required by their position, without actually sacrificing the comfort of their existence to it. Let us, therefore, have the pleasure of hearing your opinion without any farther delay, as to the comparative advantages of removing to the Combe or of remaining here."

A moment elapsed before Sophia answered at all. It was not that she felt the slightest doubt as to the question to be decided; not for a single instant had she wavered in her choice; not for a single instant had it appeared possible to her that she could do so. But willingly would she have kept those whose movements and whose fate so wholly depended upon her fiat, some time longer in suspense. She was too acute, however, not to perceive that Sir Charles Temple had both the power and will to shorten this suspense. Had it been Major Heathcote who had requested to have her answer, the chances would have been fifty to one against his obtaining it, for perhaps many days to come; but giving a furtive glance at the handsome, spirited countenance of the young baronet, she decided upon pronouncing her will at once, and said,

"You must be pleased to excuse me, sir, if I say that it seems strange to me that you should put to me the question that you have done. What have you seen in me which should lead you to suppose me capable of preferring such a home as this, which does not belong to me, to such a home as Thorpe-Combe, which does?"

"Nay, fair lady," replied Sir Charles, laughing, "our doubt as to which home we, in our character of guardians, should assign to you, did not arise from any preconceived notions as to your taste and character, but solely because we felt that, at the age of twenty, your own wishes ought to regulate our judgment, and it was impossible, you know, that we, ... or, at any rate, that I, could pretend to guess whether you would prefer spending your money or saving it."

There was a tone of lightness and almost playfulness in this speech, and the manner in which it was uttered, that considerably discomposed the dignity of the heiress; and, again, it was well that it came from her younger instead of her elder guardian. As it was, however, she condescended even to give half a smile in return for Sir Charles Temple's laugh, as she replied, "It would, indeed, be rather hard upon me, were I not permitted to regulate my expenses and manner of life according to my own judgment. Though legally an infant, I am surely not a child."

"We are quite aware of that, my dear," said Major Heathcote, speaking for the first time since the subject was opened, "and it is

for that reason, Sophy, that we are anxious to hear you explain what your own wishes are."

"My wishes, sir, must not be my only guides," replied the young lady—"I am fully aware of that. But I am willing to adopt, for the present, the mode of life pointed out by Sir Charles Temple this morning. I am willing to take up my immediate residence at Thorpe-Combe, under the personal protection of my guardian Major Heathcote and his lady."

Sir Charles Temple, inexpressibly amused by this high and mighty style, carefully repeated her words to himself, that he might regale Algernon with them, when this solemn session should be over . . . . but being in rather too gay a mood to be cautious, he did this audibly, distinctly pronouncing "my guardian Major Heathcote and his lady!"

Happily, however, for the equanimity of Miss Martin Thorpe, the possibility that Sir Charles was laughing at her dignified manner of expressing herself never entered her head; but being occupied by thoughts widely different, she gave a very opposite interpretation to this repetition of what she had said, and with an air of mingled solemnity and decision resumed—

"I should be sorry you should misunderstand me, Sir Charles Temple. My naming Major and Mrs. Heathcote alone, without deeming it necessary to add a catalogue of the young people's names, was not intended by me to indicate any expectation that they should separate themselves entirely from their own family, in order to obtain the advantage of presiding for a time over mine. It might certainly be more convenient, were my cousin, Miss Florence Heathcote, the only one likely to remain at home during the period that such an arrangement is likely to continue, but it is not my intention to make a condition of it. I see no reason, however, why I should scruple to say that if the great pecuniary advantages which must naturally follow Major Heathcote's taking up his residence in my family should be found sufficient to place all his younger children at school, I should greatly prefer its being done."

There was an audacity of impertinence in the manner in which this was uttered, that for a moment seemed to paralyse the *savoir-faire* of the baronet, and he remained perfectly silent; but poor Mrs. Heathcote, in whom terror at the idea of losing her children superseded the newborn one which she was beginning to feel before the heiress, exclaimed with considerable energy . . . . "God bless my heart and soul, Sophy Martin! you don't expect that I will send all my dear children away, do you?"

"I have said nothing about my expectations, madam," she replied; "I spoke only of my wishes."

"Good gracious! How very strange that does seem, to be sure!" cried Mrs. Heathcote. "And you really would like, Sophy, to have all the dear children got rid of? Mercy on me! what a desert the house would seem! . . . . And how could they harm you, Sophy Martin, in such a great wide place as Thorpe-Combe? . . . . Whatever the major thinks right to do, that I always will and shall consent to, as in duty bound; but as far as I am concerned, I had rather live

upon water-gruel here, with my children, than on ortolans at Thorpe-Combe, without them."

Miss Martin Thorpe smiled a very particular sort of smile, which Algernon, on seeing one of the same kind afterwards, declared to be a full-grown specimen of the same species, of which they used now and then to see the buds, when Miss Martin Thorpe, of Thorpe-Combe, was plain Sophy Martin, the penniless pensioner of Bamboo Cottage; but she said nothing in reply to this burst of maternal feeling from Mrs. Heathcote, and it was the major who spoke next.

"I hope you do not think, Sophia," said he, "that because I am appointed your guardian, by your uncle's will, that it is my intention to maintain myself and family at your expense? I have not the least wish or intention of deriving any pecuniary advantage whatever from consenting to reside with you . . . . for certainly I shall not consider your being waited upon by a man instead of a maid, or your having six dishes perhaps, instead of four upon the table, any pecuniary advantage to me or mine. My expenses, exclusive of our clothes, amount to something less than five hundred pounds *per annum*, and it is my intention to contribute that sum to your housekeeping, if finally we agree to take up our abode at the Combe. . . . . So you perceive, my dear, that our sending the children to school is quite out of the question, even if your dear aunt liked it . . . . which, it is very plain to see, she would not."

Miss Martin Thorpe listened to this speech, the longest by far that the major had ever made her, with unbroken and profound attention; and when she perceived that it was finished, she turned to Sir Charles Temple, and said with a sort of dignified solemnity, that was really rather impressive . . . . "I trust, Sir Charles Temple, that I may be at once and for ever understood to be most peremptorily in earnest, when I say that nothing shall induce me to permit Major Heathcote to contribute any portion of his income to the support of my establishment at Thorpe-Combe. You of course are at liberty to judge whether I am wrong or right in this resolution. . . . . All I have a right to insist on is, that it shall be considered as immutable."

"Upon my word, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied her young guardian, the playfulness of his manner entirely gone, "I am too much a stranger to the duties so unexpectedly thrown upon me by the dear friend I have lost, to be able to decide whether the resolution you so peremptorily announce should be yielded to or not. Were your minority of many years, I should decidedly think it should not, as the having so large a family thrown upon you to maintain would, if the arrangement were continued for any length of time, be decidedly an inroad upon your property, which it would be obviously the duty of your guardians to prevent. But it appears to me that the case is different now; and that if your feelings on the point are so decided and so strong as you express them to be, we may be justified in yielding to your wishes . . . . especially as it cannot be doubted that these wishes arise, in part, at least, if not wholly, from your very proper recollection of what your uncle and aunt Heathcote were to you, before your uncle Thorpe made you independent of them and of all the world. I will therefore venture to give it as my opinion that we ought not to offer any oppo-

sition to your wishes, but settle your allowance at two thousand five hundred a year. In fact, Major Heathcote," he added, turning to his brother guardian, "there can be no reason in the world why we should desire to let the property accumulate during the short time that it will remain in our hands. . . . . Should ready money be wanted when Miss Martin Thorpe marries, enough will be found in the funds for any such contingency, for the late Mr. Thorpe has not spent above a quarter of his income for many years past."

"Were any other than myself concerned in this matter," replied Major Heathcote, "I have little doubt that I should look upon it in the same light that you do; but, as it is, I confess it is painful to me to contemplate the idea of my whole family living at free quarters upon my young ward."

"Then, sir," returned the heiress, very stiffly, "some other arrangement must be made for me; for most assuredly I will not submit to live in any manner by which my own house and my own establishment shall be supported from other funds than my own. But on the other hand," she added, "I will not deny that I should hear with pleasure of your having decided upon lessening the number of young persons that I shall have to accommodate. Your eldest son, in particular, would be placed with more propriety anywhere than in my house. He is but a few years younger than myself; and if I may be permitted to form an opinion upon anything concerning myself, while I am yet a minor, I would say that his being an inmate with me could not be considered as advantageous or desirable for me, by any one."

The trio who listened to her appeared struck dumb by this concluding sentence, for neither of them for a minute or two attempted any reply. Had there been a few grains less of gentleness in the temper of either Major Heathcote or his wife, the question of Miss Martin Thorpe's manner of life, as far as it related to them, would have been speedily settled, by their assuring her, in language as positive as her own, that they would see her and her fortune at the bottom of the sea before they would submit, themselves and their children, to become her guests, on any terms. But even in the moment of irritation produced by her last words, they neither of them forgot that though an heiress she was an orphan, and that there would be wickedness as well as weakness in permitting anything she could say to interfere with their duties towards her, both as a young girl to whom they had volunteered parental protection, and as a ward whose tutorage had been accepted without scruple or reservation. But though both the good major and his wife were prevented from replying with severity to her speech by feelings so essentially the same that no consultation between them could have rendered them more so, they were also equally incapable of answering her, for the moment at least, in any very conciliatory manner, and the eyes of both were simultaneously turned towards Sir Charles Temple, in the hope that he would undertake to reply to her. But in his case, as well as in theirs, the retort dictated by his feelings was speedily checked by his judgment. Though as little given to hatred as any man could well be, he felt, or fancied that he felt, something exceedingly like it, towards his youthful ward. At any rate, he certainly did dislike her

most cordially; nevertheless, he had wisdom enough not to act upon this feeling, but very quietly replied:—"However much I may be inclined to differ from you, Miss Martin Thorpe, as to the impropriety of your cousin Algernon's remaining a member of his father's family while you also reside with him, I should very reluctantly interfere to overrule any feeling in a young lady which could be attributed to delicacy. Most unquestionably, no superabundance of this precious quality can be so objectionable as a deficiency in it; therefore on that point I will willingly agree to be your advocate, if Mrs. Heathcote and your uncle will have the kindness to permit my talking to them on the subject. But as to the younger members of the family, as the eldest male amongst them, remaining at home, does not, I think, number above eight years, I must beg you to forgive me if I hint that no ill consequences are likely to arise from his continuing a little longer under his mother's protection."

As dulness of comprehension made no part of the heiress's mental peculiarities, she was at no loss to discover that her observant and very obliging guardian was laughing at her. For some occult reason or other, however, she felt no inclination to quarrel with him, and had sufficient command of herself to reply in almost the only manner that could prevent it; for she now called up more of a smile than he had ever seen in her face before, and said, very much as if she had really been exceedingly well pleased,

"Thank you, Sir Charles Temple. If you and Major Heathcote will contrive to manage concerning his son Algernon according to my wishes, Mrs. Heathcote and I will undertake to settle about little Frederic according to yours. It is possible, certainly, that my aunt and I may differ as to the eligibility of turning the next year to profit, as regards the education of her daughters; but however greatly I may wish for what I conceive advantages to them, I am not, I assure you, at all likely to trouble her with any obstrusive advice on the subject. The parents of the dear girls can alone be the proper judges of this question."

Now here were sentiments, and expressions also, with which it was impossible that any reasonable person could find fault. The major actually coloured from shame at having felt inclined to be so over-hasty to the poor girl, who certainly had a great deal of good sense, though she might not happen to be born with just such a gay sweet temper as her cousin Florence.

Mrs. Heathcote also was ready to acknowledge, that though Sophy's manner was not exactly pleasant, yet that it was exceedingly wrong to be angry with her, for what, most likely, she could not help. And that nobody could deny that she seemed inclined to be very liberal, and *could* mean nothing but kindness when she talked about the improvement of the dear girls.

As to Sir Charles Temple, he was on this occasion by far the slowest of the three in deciding how to interpret the feelings and motives of his ward. He could not make her out. He, too, could not deny, though he felt something at his heart which strongly disposed him to do so, that Sophia's refusal to let the Heathcotes contribute to the expense of her establishment must be considered as

liberal; neither was what she had said respecting the advantage which might accrue to the young girls of the family, by bestowing some part of the expense thus saved upon their education, at all undeserving of notice. And even on the subject of Algernon, it was possible she might be right; and that he, with his unsparing ridicule upon it, might have been as wrong as he certainly was uncivil. All this passed through his head, clearly and distinctly; not a word could be said against it. Nay, into the bargain, he was constrained to confess that she had borne his sauciness about little Frederic in a manner which in anybody else he should have called good-humoured. Yet, nevertheless, he still thought Sophia Martin Thorpe one of the most particularly disagreeable human beings he had ever met with.

All these wise and conciliatory reasonings, however, led to a perfectly amicable termination of the interview; and Miss Martin Thorpe once more retired to her own room to enjoy in solitude, silence, and secrecy, the deep, deep, deep, delight of having acquired all that her soul most loved.

But as her quiet step now again led her away from all that could interfere with her delicious meditations, she was conscious of carrying with her yet more of triumphant satisfaction than when she last sat down to enjoy them.

She had had to deal with two men vested with power over her, both of whom were of resolute, independent spirit, both decidedly and honestly differing from her in opinion, both resolute to do what they thought right, and yet, by a little sternness at one point, a little gentleness at another, and an unvarying determination throughout that she would have her own way, she had managed to obtain from them permission to spend nearly the whole of an income, about three times as large as a girl in her position would reasonably require .... to be left entire mistress of her own establishment .... with considerable reason to hope that she should succeed in getting rid of, at least, three of good Mrs. Heathcote's darlings, and something very comfortably approaching to a promise that Algernon, her own especial aversion, should, somehow or other, be taken out of her way.

Catherine of Russia did not love power better than Sophia Martin Thorpe; and so predominant was this passion over every other feeling of her nature, that no adequate idea of the perfection of her present happiness can be formed without its being remembered.

And yet, though at present almost stifled by the rampant, flourishing, and unchecked growth of this master-passion, there was another lying hid within her heart, which, though less native there, was of a nature and a quality not likely to wither easily, however much it might be overgrown and kept in the shade. While at Thorpe-Combe, Sophia had been too intently occupied upon the attainment of one mighty object to have a single thought at liberty for any other; but short as was the interval since she had obtained it, she had found time to conceive another wish, which, though weak and faint, compared to the former one, she did not intend to abandon. In a word, she not only discovered that Sir Charles Temple was the handsomest man she had ever seen, but had moreover very firmly brought her mind to the conviction, that there could be no man handsomer.

Moreover, he had a title which, though not perhaps the highest she could command, would suffice to make her "my lady;" and lastly, he was the master of Temple, a place which she had been told that summer travellers often came miles to see.

It is true that Miss Martin Thorpe did not believe Sir Charles Temple was in love with her; on the contrary, she was fully aware that he disliked her very much; but this did not in the least degree shake either her inclination or her determination to be Lady Temple, of Temple and Thorpe-Combe. She had faith unbounded in the power of wealth and in the power of will; and no beauteous girl, retiring to her room, blushing and tearful, from the first avowal of a favoured lover's hopes, ever looked forward to the union that would follow, with more confidence than the little ugly Sophia now did to that by which, in the fulness of time, she meant to bestow herself and her acres upon her unconscious and uncourteous guardian.

CHAPTER XV.

No important difficulties remained to impede the final arrangement of the plan of life which Miss Martin Thorpe had thus laid down for herself; and in the course of the evening which followed the above conversation, she gently contrived to intimate to Sir Charles Temple, that as soon as he should have done what he had given her reason to hope he would do, respecting settling some plan for her cousin Algernon, she should wish immediately to remove with the family to Thorpe-Combe.

"There can be no occasion whatever that it should be delayed, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied the young man. "I have already sounded my friend Algernon on the plan that I have imagined for him; to which, I am happy to say, he makes no objection; and before I meet you to-morrow at breakfast, I hope that I shall have been equally successful in obtaining the approbation of Major and Mrs. Heathcote to it."

Having thus pledged himself, Sir Charles Temple once more requested his host and hostess to retire with him to the scene of their former consultation, though by doing so he lost the pleasure which he had lately learned to prefer to all others that the world had to give . . . . namely, the looking in the face of Florence, as she listened to him when he talked or read or sang to her.

"I trust that our troubles and difficulties are pretty well over, dear friends," said he, placing a chair for Mrs. Heathcote, and seating himself close to her; "and I am willing to hope that I may have been somewhat over-severe in my judgment of our singular-mannered young ward. It may be that she is only one of the people whom the world call *odd*, and this, if nothing worse is joined with it, signifies very little perhaps, particularly with such tempers as yours. But there is one point that we have yet to settle, and on this I hope I

shall find you both as kind and as willing to indulge all who have a favour to beg, as I have ever found you."

"I am sure I wish with all my heart that you really had some favour to beg," replied Mrs. Heathcote, earnestly, "just that we might show we understand all the kind feeling you have shown us."

"Say you so, dear lady? .... Then I will put you to the test. I know the major can deny you nothing..... Will you ask him as a thing you particularly wish, that Algernon may accompany me to Florence?"

"Algernon travel with you into Italy? .... My dear Sir Charles! I do really believe the idea would drive him wild. Well as he is, I doubt if he would have strength to bear it."

"Then he is stronger than you imagine, Mrs. Heathcote," replied Sir Charles, laughing, "for I have been talking to him about it, and he bears it perfectly well. What say you, my dear major? Will you trust your charming boy with me for a few months? I will promise that the time shall not be altogether lost, but that his studies shall be carefully pursued in whatever walk you shall direct. I really think that such an excursion may be beneficial to him in every way; and for the present, at least, our *exigeante* ward will be satisfied."

Both the father and most maternal step-mother were overwhelmed with gratitude at this proposal. They declared, and with all sincerity, that they considered nothing so likely to confirm the improving health of Algernon, as such a scheme; and that the idea of the happiness it would afford him, and the improvement in every way which he was likely to reap from it, would leave them, for the present at least, without any species of anxiety on his account.

Before the little conclave broke up, both the major and his wife stated their willingness to expend a part of the income that would be spared by their residence at Thorpe-Combe, upon sending their three elder girls to school; a determination of which Sir Charles modestly but decidedly expressed his approbation; though at the same moment he could not restrain a smile, as he remembered Algernon's prediction that what Miss Martin Thorpe chose to do, that she would do.

So far, assuredly, everything seemed to proceed in very perfect accordance with that young lady's wishes; nor was she at all insensible to the fact that it was so; but whatever triumphant exhilaration of spirit this might cause her in secret, no eye could mark its workings on her quiet, firm-set features, or detect it in the inflections of her soberly-regulated voice.

Sir Charles Temple, notwithstanding the intention he had most sincerely stated on arriving, of hastening his departure as much as possible, made no difficulty about waiting a week or so, for the convenience of Algernon. It is true that at the time he mentioned this exceeding hurry, he had never remarked the colour of Florence deepen at his approach, nor heard her voice tremble when she named him. The time, however, though Mrs. Heathcote with difficulty found words sufficiently strong to express the gratitude she felt at the patience with which he bore the delay, seemed to him, and to young Florence too, to melt into the past more rapidly than that most silent and certain of all processes ever performed itself before.

But the dreaded moment came at last; Algernon was as ready as many hands could make him. The very last words that could be considered needful had been spoken between the young baronet and his now gentle ward; and Algernon looked as if the hope and joy which lighted up his magnificent eyes must act like steam restrained, and produce some vehement explosion, if not soon permitted to do the office for which it was "up," and bear him gaily over the sea and land that lay before him.

But yet there was one thing still left undone. Sir Charles Temple had not yet told Florence that it was absolutely necessary, in order to render his future existence endurable, that she should speak with her lips, and with well-authenticated information before her, concerning what she was about, the same thing that her innocent eyes had repeated for many days past, but evidently without her having the slightest idea of what they were talking about. In plain English, Sir Charles Temple had at last made up his mind not to leave Clevelands without having done his very best to make Florence confess that she loved him, and promise, notwithstanding his poverty, to become his wife.

In many respects this courtship was considerably out of the common way. For in the first place, instead of waiting and watching for a favouring moment, in which kind fortune might grant him an interview, Sir Charles, who perfectly well knew that any such hope must be desperate at Bamboo Cottage, managed the matter very unceremoniously at last, by saying to Algernon on the day preceding that on which it was settled that they should set off at eight o'clock, "Algernon! I wish you would not walk with your sister Florence to the mill this morning. I will undertake to give the message about the grinding quite as discreetly as you could do; and I have got something I want to say to her before we set off."

Florence stood ready cloaked and bonneted beside them when this was spoken, but though delighted, oh! delighted past telling, by hearing him say so, she was not fluttered, or in any way vehemently agitated by it. The idea that it was possible Sir Charles Temple should think of falling in love with her, and ask her to be his wife, had never for a single moment, under any form of disguise of dream or vision, entered her young head; and when she looked wistfully and hopefully at Algernon for his answer, it was only because she anticipated with great satisfaction, which she would have frankly avowed to everybody (excepting perhaps to Cousin Sophy), the hearing every word Sir Charles Temple was going to say the whole time of the walk, because it would all be said to herself, instead of being spoken with his head turned to Algernon, as often happened when they all walked together.

"That is too bad, Sir Charles!" was Algernon's reply, "for I wanted particularly to ask you about the snow, and if it was likely we should be stopped. However, never mind, that will do as we go along to-morrow; and I'll go and have a gossip with mamma, about a hundred and fifty things that I have not had time to talk about yet. So get you gone with your secret; only be sure not to forget what my mother said about the bill, that she MUST have it in,

you know, before the end of the week, because else positively he will never be paid at all, on account of their going away.

This took place at the distance of at least a quarter of a mile from the house; Sir Charles having more than once had occasion to observe, during the last week, that his now dutiful and well-behaved ward seldom failed to propose joining herself to the walking-party, whenever any of Algernon's personal preparations for the journey kept him at home. Never did this happen, however, under any other circumstances, for a more cordial aversion than the heiress felt for her cousin Algernon has rarely perhaps been experienced by any young lady for any young gentleman.

They were now, however, quite out of sight of the house, and too distant from it to fear the possibility of being overtaken by ony one, much less by so deliberate a stepper as Miss Martin Thorpe.

Not a word was spoken after this very unreserved arrangement was completed, till the sound of Algernon's retreating steps was no longer to be heard. Sir Charles's arm had been silently offered, and silently taken; but this was an honour which had often fallen upon Florence before, and therefore created no surprise. When it seemed quite certain that they were indeed alone, Sir Charles determined to begin speaking, and then, to his great surprise, he found that his heart beat so violently, as hardly to allow him breath for utterance. But though he could not very consistently have denied that of late his heart had been his master, he had no intention that its pulsations should master him now, and making a vigorous effort he articulated. . . . "My dear Miss Florence, will you give me leave to speak to you?"

"Leave! . . . ." repeated Florence gently, but without any sigh, "Oh yes! Sir Charles, I shall like to hear whatever you have got to say to me."

The baronet pressed her arm the very least in the world, and then began as follows—a mode of courting as much out of the common way, perhaps, as the style in which he had secured the *tête-à-tête* required for it:—

"Have you ever heard anybody mention, Florence, how very, very poor I am?"

"Poor? Sir Charles Temple . . . . what can you mean by calling yourself poor? How can you be poor? . . . . But you are only jesting," replied Florence, and she looked up at him, and smiled, exceedingly like an angel.

"I should be very sorry if I thought that *you* were in earnest, Miss Heathcote . . . . I should be very sorry if I conceived it possible that you believed me to be rich," replied Sir Charles gravely, nay almost sadly.

"Why?" said Florence.

"Because such an idea would altogether deceive you, Florence. Instead of rich, I am for my station most lamentably poor."

"Do you mind it?" said Florence.

"Mind it? . . . . Perhaps when thinking of myself only I do not mind it. . . . I have not, I believe, minded it so much as I ought to do. . . . But cannot you imagine how much more painful the thought of it must be, when the idea of another being joined with one is

mixed with it? . . . . another, Florence, ten thousand times dearer than oneself . . . . whose every wish it would be joy to gratify, and whom to see want anything would be agony."

That Sir Charles Temple, with the beautiful house that people said so much about, should be so poor as to talk of want, was certainly very surprising; but as he said it was so, no doubt for a moment remained upon the mind of Florence that such was the fact; and she did feel very sorry for it, for she knew very well indeed that it must make him uncomfortable. And besides this conviction, which was quite painful enough, another idea had occurred to her, which made her extremely unhappy. She thought that what he was saying to her alluded to Algernon, to the additional expense that must be occasioned by his accompanying him, and by the fear, perhaps, that he might not be able to indulge him so much as his generous kindness would wish. . . . . Oh! it was very painful! and the more so, of course, because she did not know what in the world to say to him. Not for a moment did she suppose that the kind Sir Charles repented of having invited her brother. . . . No, no, that was not it. Sir Charles loved Algernon, loved him dearly, and, as she truly believed, anticipated as much pleasure from taking the boy, as the boy did from being taken. . . . . But if, as she believed, the baronet, notwithstanding his title and fine house, was really poor, he might not be able to indulge any of those idle wishes which it was so easy to imagine might arise. "Dear, kind, Sir Charles! what could she say to make him feel more comfortable?" She knew she ought to say something, and after a little delay replied—

"I am sure you don't know, Sir Charles, what a rough, cheap way of doing things we have always been used to. . . . Don't fancy that Algernon will have any wants or wishes beyond the great delight of travelling through a new country, with a friend, new too, but so very, *very* kind, that it is difficult to believe he is not an old one. I am sure Algernon would a thousand times rather not go at all than think that he was a trouble to you. . . . Talk to him about it as soon as we go home, and he would presently make you understand what sort of ideas he has about extravagance."

"Florence!" said Sir Charles, taking the little hand which rested upon his left arm into his right hand. . . . "Florence! I was not thinking of Algernon."

Florence was very young—but little more than seventeen, and younger still in womanly knowledge than in age. . . . Yet the action, the words, the accent of the young man, seemed to awaken a new being within her, and she suddenly stopped, trembling from head to foot.

"Florence! my sweet Florence! . . . . Do not tremble thus because you find I love you!" . . . . and the position of his arms was again changed, and one stole round her waist as if to support her. . . . "I would not be thus abrupt in speaking to you, dearest Florence . . . . if . . . . if more time remained to me. I had taught myself to believe that I could leave you, Florence, and that it would be better I should do so, without confessing that, notwithstanding I was not in circumstances to marry, I had not been able to preserve

my heart from love. But I cannot do it. Every wish of my soul is centred in the hope that I may make you love me . . . . love me, Florence, well enough to make you careless of the difference between having such a house as Temple, filled with servants and with company, and living in it, almost as I do now, without a carriage, Florence . . . . in great retirement, and taxing all our ingenuity to find out how to live without getting into debt? Speak one word . . . . one little word to me, sweet Florence! Could you consent to live this hermit's life with me?"

"No! . . . . It is impossible!" said Florence, drawing a long breath.

"Merciful heaven! Have I then deceived myself?" ejaculated the deeply-wounded young man. "So sternly prompt! . . . . so hopelessly decisive!" and withdrawing the arm that encircled her, he stepped hastily forward, thoughtless and careless of what to do or to say next.

But Florence heard him not; she was hardly conscious that he had left her standing alone, on the spot where she had first heard the astounding words, "I love you!"

After striding on, melo-dramatically enough, for a step or two, the heart-stricken Sir Charles turned back to see how far she had already got on her way home, and beheld his Atalanta, spell-bound, as it seemed, and as little likely to run away as a statue.

His return was more rapid still than his departure, but his countenance expressed a vast deal more of despair than of hope.

"What is it, Miss Heathcote, that you declare impossible?" said he, stopping short before her at the distance of about four feet, and in a voice most preternaturally hoarse and disagreeable; "what is impossible?"

"That you . . . . that Sir Charles Temple should love me!" murmured Florence, her hands clasped, and her tearful eyes once more raised to meet his.

"Oh Florence! Florence! . . . . why have you tortured me?" he eagerly exclaimed; but, strange to say, in a voice that sounded most singularly musical. "Why make me think myself the most miserable wretch that crawls between heaven and earth, when one dear look of those angelic eyes could make me the happiest?" and so saying, and in such utter defiance of all decorum that his historian is almost afraid to relate it, he actually seized her in his arms, and without further ceremony impressed one, two, three, most passionate kisses on her lips.

Florence was terrified . . . . no, not quite terrified either, but in sober truth she was so vehemently agitated, that if the impetuous young man had not once again thrown a supporting arm around her, it is no exaggeration to say that she might have fallen.

"Forgive me! oh forgive me, Florence!" he exclaimed, with very genuine self-condemnation as he saw every trace of colour vanish from her cheeks and lips. . . . . "This is strange wooing, dearest! First I frighten you by drawing, perhaps, an exaggerated picture of my poverty, ... then rush from you like a madman, without giving myself time to look into your gentle eyes . . . . and then!

. . . . Have pity, Florence! I cannot finish the catalogue of my offences for very shame! Can you forgive me, Florence?"

During all this vehemence poor Florence stood as quiet as a lamb. . . . . The only evidence of her knowing what was passing, being, that silent but copious drops chased each other down her face; . . . . and his only rational hope of forgiveness arising from the fact, that she did not withdraw the hand he had taken, on returning to her.

After the interval of a minute or two, the really penitent Sir Charles had the satisfaction of seeing her colour return, and then he *very* gently drew her arm again within his, in proper walking order, and at a slow and not very fatiguing pace they proceeded onwards. At first the conversation between them was not very intelligible, but by degrees they were both sufficiently recovered, for the one to speak and the other to comprehend what was meant to be said and understood. It was not indeed very easy to make Florence believe that what Sir Charles Temple really meant was, that he wanted her to be his wife, and that at a time not farther off than a year at the very farthest, as he said; but when at last she did fully understand that it was so, a very considerable degree of happiness was mixed with her astonishment, and he had the inexpressible ecstacy of seeing her smile once or twice, as he went on to describe to her, rather more clearly than at first, the sort of life that he thought they might lead at Temple. The more he talked, the less she understood what he could possibly mean about being poor; but a sort of instinct prevented her telling him so. She felt, rather than thought, that it would be like telling him that she saw no objection to their marrying directly; so on this point she was most profoundly silent; yet nevertheless he did contrive to find out before they got home, that she did think it was possible she might be very happy at Temple, even without a carriage.

As to the way in which they got home, they could have given no very good account of it themselves. It seemed, upon thinking the matter over afterwards, that instead of turning to the left, which was the only way to get to the mill, they most certainly had followed a sweeping turn to the right, by which, in about three hours, they arrived, to their own unspeakable dismay and astonishment, exactly in front of the village church, and within a hundred yards of Major Heathcote's door.

"What shall we do about the miller's bill, Florence?" said Sir Charles, laughing. "Do you remember how very zealously we promised Algernon not to forget it?"

"Sir Charles!" replied Florence, looking away from him, and leaving only the *profil perdu* of her blushing cheek to be seen; "Sir Charles! I must tell mamma everything that has passed to-day."

"Do so, dear love," he replied, "and authorize me to do the same to your good father. But beyond these, my Florence, let not our secret go, for some months to come. I would rather that Algernon did not know it, for my own sake. . . . . I would rather Miss Martin Thorpe did not know it, for yours. When people are very much in earnest, dearest, they love not light jesting, even from such a friend as Algernon; and trust me, I should not like to think that while I

was hoarding in my heart of hearts the dear engagement upon which hangs my more than life, Miss Martin Thorpe should have the power of cross-examining you on the subject, and calling up blushes perhaps, which I should hold it as a robbery were any one but my most happy self to see."

Fluttering, trembling, with hardly power to walk, or even to breathe, but so infinitely happy that even as she stumbled up the stairs she felt "lapped in Elysium," Florence reached her own little room, and for about half an hour enjoyed, unquestioned and unseen, the contemplation of her almost incredible happiness. That she had loved Sir Charles Temple, long before it had ever entered her head as a thing possible that he could love her, she was now obliged to confess to her own conscious heart; and her fair cheeks, albeit unseen of all but heaven, did certainly blush "celestial rosy red," as her reluctant memory made the avowal. But despite this terrible mortification, she did not attempt to conceal from herself the fact that she was most superlatively happy; and when, at the conclusion of this beatified half-hour, she employed a pair of little trotting feet, which she heard passing her door, to carry an invitation to her good step-mother, the narrative she had to recount on her arrival gave her more pleasure than pain in the telling, though it was delivered with blushes and with tears.

Mrs. Heathcote's joy, and astonishment also, were in very fair proportion to her own; and so vehement indeed were her exclamations of delight, that Florence began to fear it would be very difficult to restrain them within the bounds prescribed by Sir Charles. "But you must remember, dearest mamma," she cried, "that nobody in the world is to know of it except papa. Not even Algernon, and least of all Cousin Sophy . . . . it is Sir Charles's most particular desire."

"And his particular desire shall be attended to, Florence, let it cost me what it will," she replied. "But I won't deny, for there's no use in it, that I should have liked to see how Sophy Martin would have looked when she heard you were going to be Lady Temple, and mistress of the very finest place in Herefordshire. . . . . But don't look so frightened, Florence; I have promised not to say a word about it, and I won't. But to be sure it is a most extraordinary piece of good fortune. Mercy on me, Florence! How delighted your poor dear father will be!—Bless him! . . . . I saw what he felt, though he did not say a single syllable about it; I saw what he felt, when he brought the news about Sophy. It is a comfort, dear, isn't it, to think that we didn't make that terrible costly journey to Thorpe-Combe for nothing. Algernon's journey to the finest country in the world, and your marriage to the handsomest and kindest man in it, is well worth the hire of the post-chaise. And, of course, I am glad, you know, about Sophy, into the bargain . . . . not but what yours will be the finer fortune of the two, I believe, when the old Lady Temple dies . . . . for I know she has got two thousand a year settled upon her for life out of the estate; and old ladies can't live for ever, you know."

"Dearest mother! . . . . I wish you would think more of Sir

Charles, and less of his fortune; and, besides, I believe you are quite mistaken about it, for he is rather unhappy, I am afraid, about being so exceedingly poor; but I shall not mind that in the least, if he won't. Don't you remember, mother, how often you have told me that I should make an excellent wife to a poor man, because I was easily contented? I longed to tell him that you said so, but I did not."

While this was going on upstairs, Major Heathcote was shut up with his aspirant son-in-law in the little study below; and not a whit less happy was he than his lady, though the young man dilated a good deal upon his poverty, and lamented deeply that under the present circumstances of the property, he could not propose to settle more than a thousand a year upon his lovely Florence. Major Heathcote wrung his hand when the mortifying statement was ended, and said, with characteristic frankness, "It may seem very little to you, Sir Charles, and I know you speak sincerely, when you say so; but to me, my dear friend, who have not a hundred pounds in the world to give my daughter, you must surely be aware that it seems much."

Major Heathcote cordially approved the present secrecy so urgently pleaded for by the young baronet; for though he said little or nothing about it, he was by no means unaware of several little peculiarities in the temper of the new heiress, which might be likely enough to make her a disagreeable companion to the young *fiancée*, if she were permitted to know anything about her engagement.

The party, therefore, met at the last dinner they were all likely to partake together for a long time, with a great variety of individual sources of meditation; but as they were all agreeable, the evening passed away quietly and smoothly to all external appearance, but with a vast deal more of real happiness than any mere looker-on could have divined.

The parting of the next morning was considerably less delightful; for then, perhaps, the sorrow felt was as much beyond what was apparent, as joy had been the evening before. But the hour of measured farewells, hidden tears, and unspoken grief, passed away, and left Bamboo Cottage in a state as different as it was well possible to imagine from that in which the recent return of its master, with his almost stranger guest, had found it.

CHAPTER XVI.

Miss Martin Thorpe had asked, and been answered, as to the length of time which would elapse before her guardian, Sir Charles Temple, and her cousin, Mr. Algernon Heathcote, would have crossed the channel which divides England from the continent of Europe. The interval was not long; for Sir Charles knew that he had already exceeded the time which his mother had calculated upon for his absence, and therefore lost as little more as possible in rejoining her.

During the three days allowed by her calculations as necessary to

elapse before the travellers reached Dover, Sophia permitted Major Heathcote to speculate upon the most advisable time, and the most advisable manner, for the household of Bamboo Cottage to be transferred to their future quarters at Thorpe-Combe. She also permitted the excellent Mrs. Heathcote to say a great deal about the advantages of taking their own two capital maids of all-work with them. She only looked languid and absent, too, when the mode of going being discussed, it was proposed that she should, as by far the most luxurious division of the march, be accommodated with a post-chaise, containing only Mrs. Heathcote and two of the young ladies, who were subsequently to be sent to school, besides herself; the rest of the party being to get on by the help of stages and waggons as well as they might.

But on the fourth morning—

"Then up and spoke that lady fair;"

and what she said surprised her hearers quite as much, perhaps, from the remarkable civility and gentleness with which she spoke as by the purport of the words themselves.

"Pray, dear Mrs. Heathcote, do not trouble yourself any farther," she said, "about my journey. . . . . It is excessively kind of you, but I have always had the greatest possible dislike to sitting idle, while others do that on which I ought to be employed myself. I have already taken steps respecting my removal to the Combe, which will spare you all farther trouble. I wrote yesterday to that decent woman, Mrs. Barnes, who is still, as I learned from Sir Charles Temple, in charge of the place. As she appears, by what I hear, to be amply provided for, it is possible she may not wish to continue in service; and, if so, I must provide myself with another housekeeper: but, for the present, I am prepared to make some sacrifice rather than not retain her. I shall consult her about the other members of my establishment, and thereby spare you all trouble and fatigue on the subject."

Mrs. Heathcote looked up. For half a minute, her gentle eye rested on the firm-set but tranquil features of the heiress, but it was a sealed volume to her; and she turned her looks upon her husband. He, good man, held his lips very nearly in the form necessary for producing a whistle, but nothing of the kind was made audible; and, instead of it, he very quietly said,

"And how do you mean to go, my dear?"

"I have ordered Barnes to send the carriage for me, which was used to convey Mrs. Heathcote and the Misses Wilkyns to church when we were at Thorpe-Combe," replied the young lady, with great civility.

"That is an enormous heavy carriage, my dear child, to be brought fifty miles and back again. You might as well travel by a baggage-waggon, Sophy," said the major.

"I have allowed them a day to bring it here, and one pair of post-horses will do it easily, as the distance is divided into three stages; and, for myself, I shall get on as well as I can with four. I am as

fully aware, as you can be, my dear sir, of the atrocious inconvenience of so lumbering a vehicle; but, as long as I continue a minor, I shall not attempt to do anything more than have this old equipage lined and painted, with my lozenge upon it. This will make it decent and respectable, and for the present I shall attempt nothing farther."

There was a silence for a minute or two.

"I suppose you will wish me and the two girls to go with you, at any rate, my dear, won't you?" said Mrs. Heathcote.

"No, dear madam, no," replied Miss Martin Thorpe, with equal civility and decision; "I shall not wish to trouble you to leave your own mansion till I have had the pleasure of preparing mine to receive you. I will not fail to write as soon as my house is in a proper state for me to have this satisfaction."

"But surely, Sophy, you don't mean to go travelling about the country by yourself—with nobody but your four horses and the post-boys? I don't think that will look respectable at all."

"You are quite right, Mrs. Heathcote, and I trust I shall always have the satisfaction of perceiving that you approve all I do," replied the young lady. "I have not entirely wasted my time since I became the possessor of Mr. Thorpe's property. It is a position which I am well aware renders discretion and forethought absolutely necessary. Without it, I should be running into more scrapes than you would find it easy to get me out of, with all the kindness that I know you feel for me: and I shall consider it as my first duty to prevent my guardians from having any unnecessary trouble about me or my affairs."

"We shan't think it any trouble, my dear," replied the major, kindly, "to see that everything goes right and proper; and I never doubted that your conduct would be everything that was regular and discreet. But, as your aunt says, dear Sophy, you must not think of posting from Clevelands to Thorpe-Combe quite by yourself."

"I have no thought of doing anything of the kind," replied Miss Martin Thorpe, with the air of being a little offended at the supposition.

"And whom, then, do you mean to take with you, Sophia?" demanded Mrs. Heathcote.

"My own maid, Mrs. Heathcote. I have hired a person so every way respectable, that I have the pleasure of feeling certain you must approve the selection. I dare say you remember Mrs. Roberts, the mantua-maker, at King's Cross?"

"Certainly, I do: it was she who made all our mourning."

"The same," replied the young lady. "I have walked over to her two or three times during the last week about another dress or two; and, upon my asking her if she could recommend me a good lady's-maid, she immediately answered that she had lived for several years in that capacity herself . . . . that she did not find the mantua-making business answer in this small neighbourhood, and that she would like, if I approved it, to take the place herself. She gave me a reference to Mrs. Mills, the clergyman's wife, to whom I went immediately. It appears that she has known her almost all her life, and

she gives her a most excellent character.. I therefore hired her immediately. . . . . I hope you approve this, Mrs. Heathcote?"

"I cannot say that there seems to be anything to disapprove in it, Sophy," replied Mrs. Heathcote. "I am only surprised how such a young person as you are should ever have the thought to set about such a business so cleverly; I can't think how it came into your head."

"The want of what I sought suggested the manner of seeking it," replied Sophia, with composure. "I presume this is the case with most people. It certainly is with me."

"And what day have you settled to go, Sophy?" inquired the major, winking his eyes and rubbing his forehead, as if feeling absolutely giddy from the variety of perfectly new information which he had received.

"The day after to-morrow," she replied.

Having nothing more to communicate at present, Miss Martin Thorpe arose as soon as she had answered this question, and left the room.

"What an extraordinary girl, to be sure!" exclaimed the major, after the door was closed. . . . . "I don't see that there is a single article to be found fault with in all she has done and said, and yet I should not quite like our Florence to do the same."

"God forbid! There is something downright unnatural in her way of going on, to my fancy," replied his wife. "I am not her guardian, thank God! . . . . or I promise you I should be dreadfully puzzled as to what I ought to say or do. If she were to be caught doing anything wild and thoughtless, like other girls of her age, one might set that to rights, easy enough . . . . but now, she positively frightens me, by seeming to know so unaccountably well how to do right."

"At any rate, my dear, we must not make a formal complaint against her on that score," returned the major, laughing. "If she were your child, or mine either, Poppsy, there might be some reason, perhaps, in our not liking to see her want and wish for our counsel so little as this independent young lady seems to do . . . . but as it is, I protest I see no cause to complain, though there may be a little to wonder."

"You shall not hear me complain, dear major," replied his sweet-tempered wife . . . . "nor do I think I shall wonder long at anything which Miss Martin Thorpe can either say or do. How glad I am that dear Florence has got her own thoughts, and her own hopes, to fill up her dear kind heart. . . . . This grand lady of ours would just put her out, and extinguish her for ever, if it were not for this."

Miss Martin Thorpe appeared most judiciously to have communicated to her guardian and his lady exactly as much as it concerned them to know, without troubling them with any details with which they had nothing to do. Thus, for example, they were made perfectly aware that the removing themselves and their belongings to Thorpe-Combe was a business with which she had nothing to do; that no servant of theirs was to be admitted there; and that they

were not to quit their present home, for the one to which she had covenanted to admit them, till such time as she should give them a signal that the hour was come for them to approach her. She did not deem it necessary to say a word about the man-servant whom she had also hired, with very good recommendations, at King's Cross, because she knew that her guardian would not deem it necessary to exercise his authority, in order to learn whether she were provided with such an attendant or not. Neither did she occupy either his time or her own in explaining the manner in which she had contrived to get two travelling-trunks well arranged and perfectly supplied with straps, and so forth. All she did trouble him to listen to, beyond what has been already stated, were the following words, spoken with great civility, but, at the same time, with an air of cool authority, which certainly suggested no idea of doubt as to the demand they contained being complied with.

"I had the pleasure of learning, either from yourself, sir, or from Sir Charles Temple, that my late uncle, Mr. Thorpe, left money in the bank of Messrs. Smith and Jones, at Hereford, to the amount of twelve hundred pounds. It is, of course, upon this sum that I must get you to draw for my immediate expenses: and I will thank you, sir, immediately to give me a cheque for the amount of the first quarter of the income allowed me, namely, for six hundred and twenty-five pounds."

"Sophy Martin is, certainly, a very extraordinary girl," was the thought that made him fix his eyes upon her, for a moment, after she had ceased speaking. . . . . "It is not over likely that she ever saw a cheque for a hundred pounds in her life; and, to hear her, one might think that she had been born mistress of thousands." His meditations, however, caused no delay in the execution of her command, and he sat down without answering her a word, and did what was required of him.

"I take it for granted, Major Heathcote," said the young lady, as she received the cheque, "that it is Mr. Westley, my late uncle's attorney, who has furnished you with that cheque-book; and I presume that, at the same time he procured it, he announced to the firm the power vested in you for drawing upon them?"

"I presume so, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied the major, showing himself, for the first time, in a slight degree provoked at the tone of magnificent independence which his ward had thought fit to assume. But his temper rendered it absolutely impossible that he should retain any such feeling long; the moment after he had called her Miss Martin Thorpe, he repented of it, and, in order to make friends again with himself, he added, "But that is too large a cheque, my dear, for you to get rid of, if you have anything to pay here. You talked of having bought a gown, did you not, Sophy? Will you like to have a little smaller money from me? you can pay me, you know, when we all get to Thorpe-Combe."

The kind-hearted major was quite right in supposing that the young lady would want a few pounds before she left Clevelands, but quite wrong in conceiving that she had any intention of being obliged to him for it. Nothing, indeed, could have been more unlikely; for,

had she *not* still possessed, untouched, the ten golden sovereigns which the late Mr. Thorpe had presented to her for card-money, *plus* fifty shillings more, which she had won either with him or from him, she would have paid any creditors she might have had at Clevelands or King's Cross their travelling expenses to Thorpe-Combe twice over, rather than compromise the dignity which it was her object to establish in the eyes of her guardian. She therefore replied to him, "I thank you, sir. I have no occasion to trouble you;" and, probably to prevent any further unnecessary discussion upon her affairs, she rose, cheque in hand, and left the room.

"Won't that be the last time I shall concern myself about her, beyond what I am bound to do?" muttered the major, as she disappeared. "And yet, God help me! that looks as if I was growing confoundedly ill-tempered; for what has the girl said or done that is really wrong? Nothing, positively nothing, from the very first minute of her heiress-ship to the present. And yet, it seems to me, that I should have liked her fifty times better, if she had been cutting the maddest capers that ever came into a young head, turned by good luck. But, beyond all doubt, I ought to be ashamed of myself . . . . a pretty sort of a disciplinarian I must be, to be sure,—and I an old soldier, with nine boys and girls to manage!"

Thus muttering and whistling by turns, the puzzled guardian made his way to the presence of the wife of his bosom, and determined to consult her on the paradox working within him.

"Oh! here you are, Poppsy, ... needle and shears as usual. That's all right, for I want to talk to you for five minutes; and I want you, my dear, to scold me into good-humour if you can. I am positively ashamed of myself, good wife, I am indeed; and I don't want you to give me absolution, but to bring me round again to common sense, if it is possible. I give you my honour, wife, that five minutes ago, I felt as if I could have flogged Sophy Martin for no earthly reason that I know of, but because she did not want to borrow five pounds, or so, of me. Am I not a pretty guardian?"

Without checking the movement of the "iron bar" she was manœuvering so profitably, Mrs. Heathcote shook her head, and then replied, "You had better not come to me, major, if you want to be preached into dutiful behaviour to that . . . . to Miss Martin Thorpe, as our dear comical-looking Sir Charles is so fond of calling her. I don't remember that ever I disliked anybody so much in all my life, as I do that girl. Ungrateful . . . ."

"For goodness' sake, don't use that word, wife!" interrupted the major, with very unusual severity of accent; "for it is exactly that which staggers me. We shall prove ourselves the vilest, meanest-hearted mortals, wife, that ever pretended to do a kind act, if we suffer this idea of gratitude to come into our heads. Did we ever expect, either of us, when we took in poor Jane's motherless and fatherless girl, that we were to be paid for it, either in deed or words? Did we, wife?"

"No, certainly, major. But that's no excuse for her treating us all as if she was a duchess accidentally fallen into the midst of us, and wishing to get away again, as fast as she can."

"I am not asking for your opinion about her, my dear," replied the major, with one of his usual twinkling smiles; "perhaps I might have been clever enough to guess it, without *troubling you*, as Miss Sophia says, about the matter. What I want of you is, that you should help me to make up my mind not to be as crabbed as an old invalid with a dozen balls in him, because this young lady happens to have a stiff style of speech, that does not quite hit my fancy. The truth is, Poppsy, that I can't bear to despise myself; and I am considerably more frightened now than I was at Brussels, when the drums stopped the fiddles just before we took our little trot to Waterloo, lest the notion that she was any way obliged to us should have got into my head, and that I should be looking out, day and night, for her *gratitude*. I'd rather be shot, Mrs. Heathcote, than turn out such a pitiful fellow before my own eyes."

"I have something of the same feeling, I suspect, major; and so it may be that you are not very far from right in fearing to give way to what I am sure I should hate as much as you could do," said Mrs. Heathcote gravely, and suspending the threading of her needle for at least half a minute, while she looked anxiously into her husband's face. "God forbid such thoughts should ever come into our heads, major! Heaven is my witness, that I would not have her gratitude, if she were as full of it as an egg is full of meat, and I don't and I won't believe that it is her want of it that makes me . . . . what shall I call it, major? . . . . so ready to quarrel with everything she does."

"Ah, well! It's plain enough to me, my dear, that, dislike it or not, it is just that thought which lies at the bottom of both our hearts, and I am heartily glad we have spoken together about it; for now, observe, Poppsy, that we both of us must make a resolution, *both* of us, but particularly me, as her guardian, never to be ready to quarrel with her, even in our own hearts, just for the *manner* in which she does anything. For that can only come from one of two things: either from folly, that makes us dislike just what we have not been used to; or else, from that confounded feeling about *ingratitude*, which I won't suffer either in you or myself. It is so damnably pitiful. Therefore, look here, my dear. Let us never find fault with her manner, let it be as stiff and grand as it will; always watching at the same time, like guardians ought, that she never does anything which in act and deed might be wrong or detrimental to herself . . . . and the devil of it is, Poppsy," he added, shaking his head with very evident self-condemnation,—"the devil of it is, my dear, that though I know in my own mind that she is not a bit likely to go wrong in anything, but quite the contrary, I don't like her at all the better for it."

Most heartily ashamed did the good major feel as he made this confession, and very nobly honest was it of him to make it at all. He could not, however, have hit upon a better confidante than his loving wife; for not only did she perfectly well and sympathetically understand him, but she felt also, that the sin to which he pleaded guilty was one that must very resolutely be battled with; and if, from the original depravity of their natures, it could not be positively eradicated,

root and branch, that it must at any rate be so far conquered and kept down, as to prevent its ever influencing their words and actions, in any way whatever.

"You are right . . . . you are right, dear wife," he replied, after patiently listening to her conscientious statement of what ought to be their conduct; "and so it shall be. Her money gives her a right to have her own way, if there is nothing wrong in that way; and we have no better right to thwart her, even in wish, than we have to insist upon her laughing like our young ones, instead of looking grave like herself. So now the matter's settled, Poppsy, and I feel easier in my mind, ten to one. And besides, you and I shall understand one another now, without having to exchange looks whenever she happens to seem rather queer. And that's a good thing, I can tell you, particularly where there happens to be young people." . . . . Nothing could more plainly show that the star of Miss Martin Thorpe was in the ascendant than the happy chance which had led the good major and his faithful wife to this frank interchange of sentiments; for it left them both exactly in the state most favourable to all her ideas of happiness, namely, with minds and tempers firmly bent to let her have her own way in everything, without permitting even a look to interfere with her.

CHAPTER XVII.

On the day appointed by the heiress for her departure from Bamboo Cottage, Mr. Thorpe's old-fashioned but very handsome coach, carefully cleaned, and with four fine horses, two spruce postilions, and a most respectable groom-like looking servant in deep mourning on the box, stopped at Major Heathcote's door, precisely at the moment it was expected by the young head, which had arranged not only its coming, but every circumstance, whether trifling or important, which could make the journey about to be performed commodious, agreeable, and dignified.

The staid-looking Mrs. Roberts, also in deep mourning, stepped out of the carriage as soon as the sable groom had let down the step; and with a sort of solemn pace, that seemed to speak of decorum, discretion, respectfulness, watchfulness, carefulness, all personified, made her way to the apartment of her mistress, followed by the man-servant, carrying trunk-covers and straps in his hands.

Miss Martin Thorpe, her uncle, aunt, and all her cousins, were engaged in eating their breakfasts when this happened; so that her servants, who had been made as well acquainted with what they had to do as if they had passed as many years in their new lady's service as in truth they had done hours, were neither challenged nor impeded by meeting any one.

Mrs. Roberts, when bringing home the two handsomest dresses ever made at King's Cross, had been initiated into all the mysteries of her young lady's packing arrangements; had herself, indeed,

lingered an hour to deposit the result of her own labours, with her own hands, in the trunk destined for their reception, and now assumed the insignia of her new office, by closing the various boxes, and putting the keys of them in her pocket. The experienced William then enveloped them carefully in their covers, fastened in all directions, exactly according to rule; and conveying them, with the assistance of Mrs. Heathcote's forbidden maids, to the carriage, strapped them in their various places with equal skill and promptitude.

It was then, and then only, that the parlour-door was opened, and Miss Martin Thorpe's carriage announced in the unknown voice of her new groom.

The whole family looked up with surprise, and Major Heathcote smiled, but speedily recovering his gravity, he quietly said, "I hope you have had time to finish your breakfast, Sophia?"

"I thank you, sir, ... I will take another cup of tea, if you please" . . . . replied the heiress with philosophical composure.

The "other cup of tea" was handed to her with the good-humoured haste which betokens a zealous wish to expedite that for which no extra time can be allowed; but Sophia sipped it leisurely, and with an air that seemed to say she should never do anything in a hurry.

The younger girls stared at her with almost comic astonishment. She had never, it is true, indulged them with any very frolicsome familiarity of intercourse; but then everybody knew that poor Cousin Sophy had neither father nor mother, and so that it was no wonder she was grave. But still, her twelve months' residence among them had removed every feeling of restraint, and sober Cousin Sophy was as much one of the family as if she had been merry Cousin Sophy. But now she seemed suddenly to stand out and apart from them, in a manner they could in no way understand. The eldest girl, indeed, had one day said to her mother, after some particular display of solemn dignity . . . . "Isn't Cousin Sophy grown proud, mamma, since she got rich?" . . . . But the two younger ones, after great puzzling, came to the conclusion that the new Miss Martin Thorpe was certainly very unhappy still about something or other, though it was not easy to guess what . . . . because it was not possible it could be about losing her uncle, though he was so kind to her, for she had known him such a very little time.

The little girls were quite mistaken, however. It was not unhappiness which caused the new Miss Martin Thorpe to rise from her chair with a deliberate quietness which seemed to defy the suspicion that any combination of events could overset her equanimity. Nor was it unhappiness that made her put forth two fingers of her stiff little hand to each of the family in succession, with the air of a machine which could make one movement but no other. No, Miss Martin Thorpe was not unhappy when she passed out through the ivyed porch of Bamboo Cottage, nor when she slightly touched the extended hand of the Major and stepped for the first time into her own carriage.

As in her final interview with her servant William, at the dwelling of her somewhile mantua-maker, Miss Martin Thorpe had ordered him to inform the postilions who were to drive her, that "as they

drove so should they be paid," and as relays of horses had been bespoken at the different stages, by post-paid letters, thoughtfully despatched by the young lady herself, the journey was rapidly performed, notwithstanding the weight of the carriage. A few minutes indeed were spent at Hereford by the thoughtful Sophia's driving to the bank, for the purpose of depositing her cheque, receiving fifty pounds upon it, writing her name in the presence of the head clerk, and receiving a cheque-book. This done, the still well-warned post-boys gallopped off, and brought the solitary but most happy possessor of Thorpe-Combe to the beautiful esplanade before the door precisely half an hour before the time at which her last letter to Mrs. Barnes had ordered dinner.

If Major Heathcote felt something like astonishment at the style in which his ward left his house, the feeling must have increased to unmitigated wonder had he witnessed the state with which she entered her own. Every part of the mansion was by her own order prepared for her, exactly as it had been at the general gathering of the family at Christmas. There were not, indeed, so many men-servants. There was no portly Mr. Grimstone, and no figure resembling that of Sir Charles Temple's smart Frenchman appearing at the hall-door opened to her. But there was Mrs. Barnes herself, the very perfection of a deeply-mourning housekeeper, standing in act to receive and welcome the new heir; and there was Jem, in a very tolerably well-fitted black skin, with buttons enough to justify the title of page in any land. As she mounted to the chamber prepared for her (which, by her order, was the same she had before occupied), two more females in deep mourning contrived to be visible, so that her new maid and her new man perceived no air of desolation in the spacious and noble-looking mansion that was to be their home.

Although, of course, no eye but her own and those of her servants could profit thereby, Sophia, though extremely well prepared to do honour to the dinner she expected to find ready for her at six o'clock, patiently endured witnessing the process of unpacking more than one trunk, in order to obtain all things needful for a well-appointed evening toilet. But Mrs. Roberts was active and exceedingly intelligent, and it was not more than five minutes past the appointed hour when little Miss Martin Thorpe rustled in her rich silk from her drawing-room into her dining-room.

Many young girls of twenty would have found the sitting down thus in solitary state extremely dull, not to say melancholy; but not so Miss Martin Thorpe. The only feeling she experienced, in the slightest degree approaching to annoyance, arose from the necessity of not permitting her eyes to wander freely over every part of the room and every article in it, from the fine Vandyke over the chimney-piece to the salt-spoons on the table. As long as William and the page remained in the room this was impossible; but at length she was left, with her oranges, East India ginger, and sherry, having secured herself from interruption by saying, "I shall want coffee and lights in the drawing-room in half an hour."

Having received these instructions the servants retired, and then it was that the very soul of Sophia looked forth at her eyes as she com-

templated the many indications of wealth which surrounded her. Obedient to the command, "Let me find everything in the same order as when I visited my late Uncle Thorpe at Christmas," the observant Mrs. Barnes had herself seen that the sideboard should have its colossal silver waiters and its golden cups. The rich damask furniture, though taken down within a week after the party broke up, again hung in heavy splendour before the windows; the massive chairs, fitted up *en suite*, were uncovered; the lustres blazed with wax lights; and the whole apartment, save that the table was now comparatively a small one, wore the same air of wealth and elegance as when it had caused her heart to leap at her first entrance into it.

A young female figure, in a richly-adorned picturesque sort of an old room, with rich draperies, massive plate, and a multitude of graceful, though antiquated, candelabres, has often been a favourite subject with artists, Flemish, English, and German. Some have made the fair one looking gay, and others sad, some have give her a book, and some a *billet-doux;* but no one ever yet bethought him of representing her in the act of taking an inventory of all the furniture with her eyes, that she might engrave it on her heart. It was thus, however, that the heiress of Thorpe-Combe beguiled her solitude; and if, as most philosophers have taught, contentment be really the most desirable object that the mind of man can obtain, the perfection of that enjoyed by Sophia might authorize her laying claim to the envy and admiration of the whole world.

Nor did less of the same measureless content hallow the first hours which she passed in her splendid drawing-room as its mistress. One by one was each article of price examined, and one by one did each seem to become, as it were, part of herself, and take its own distinct and separate niche in the widely-spreading temple of her affections.

The coffee was sipped with luxurious deliberation as her lingering eye slowly made the circuit of the room. It was an hour of very exquisite enjoyment, that; and Sophia, as she cordially acknowledged to herself that it was so, felt that she was not undeserving of the lot which had fallen upon her, for that she well knew how to value it.

And did the three solitary hours which followed lie heavily? No . . . . she had enough, and more than enough, wherewith to weave a web, which, like Penelope's, should never come to an end, though, not like hers, to be unravelled as soon as woven.

Yet notwithstanding this activity of fancy, the ordinary materials of romance were but little called upon to assist her meditations. Instead of giving way to any such idleness, she employed herself in thinking over all the business she had to do. And there was enough of it. She was aware that in order to satisfy the craving for power unchecked, which ruled above all others in her heart, she had insisted upon bearing a very costly burden; and her brow contracted as she remembered it. One by one all the members of the Heathcote family who would have to feed at her board, and be partially or wholly sheltered by her roof, during the next year, passed in very tormenting review before her. But with an unflinching spirit she consoled herself, and said, "Were it to do again, I would not change it. . . . What! Submit to continue still as one of Mrs. Heathcote's '*young*

folks?' Rather ten thousand-fold would I squander the entire income allowed me, in buying bread wherewith to feed them, so I were mistress of the ungraceful feast, than hoard it in my coffers, living the while their guest. Thank Heaven!" she murmured on, as she sat luxuriantly pillowed in a deep arm-chair, precisely on the spot where three short months before she had looked gratitude unspeakable at being permitted to stand,—"thank Heaven! I need not bear it long! Eleven months and eight days will set me free! But while the torment lasts, it behoves me to study deeply how it may be most lightly borne. I cannot, and I will not, pass the time without occasionally letting other eyes than those of the Heathcote race see what I am; and that, despite the poverty so many have loved to speculate upon, I am not quite unfit to sustain the weight of wealth that has fallen on me. . . . My guardian, too, my young and graceful guardian . . . . HE shall see it, and perhaps may wonder, and perhaps may wish. . . . I know not exactly how his guardianship may end. . . . The lackland baronet may perhaps be brought to fancy poor Sophy Martin as well worth thinking of as the fair penniless Florence. . . . We shall see. It may amuse me to let him watch me wear my state, as I know how to wear it, and yet, it may be, I shall prove too wise at last to let him share it. Time will show . . . . and this shall be left to time, without withdrawing an atom of my care from the important present. I must feed these people, and I must endure though I detest them. But neither shall the food nor the endurance cost more than I can help."

So passed the time away. Miss Martin Thorpe was no great reader; and, even, if she had been, her mind was in no state that night to profit by it.

* * * * * *

Very delightful to the heiress was the waking of the morning following. At the first moment that she opened her eyes on Mrs. Roberts' approaching to draw her curtains she started up, and half exclaimed, "Where am I?" But the next brought with it all the delightful truth. She remembered that she was Miss Martin Thorpe, an heiress who knew how to have her own way in all things, and the possessor of all she could see, and a great deal more besides.

Notwithstanding the quantity of business she had upon her hands, Sophia was in no hurry to get through her morning toilet. Mrs. Roberts was exceedingly obsequious; and not a comb or a pin, a ribbon or a frill, was handed to her, without such demonstrations of respect as made her feel herself extremely comfortable, so that altogether she was employed for more than an hour in getting ready to go downstairs, and breakfast by herself.

By herself! Could the whole world have furnished better company? As all was ordered to be as it had been during the Christmas festivities, the solitary coffee-cup was placed in the great dining-room. The disproportion was strikingly incongruous, but Sophia was in no humour to be pained by it. "It is really a noble room," said she, with a quiet smile; "I feel lost in it. . . . But how I love its magnificence now that it is my own!"

In days of yore, Sophia had never ventured to breakfast upon

Mrs. Barnes' exquisite coffee, because everybody praised it so very much, and because she thought there might not be enough of it, and that Mr. Thorpe might have watched her take it, and not liked her the better for it. But she now atoned to herself for this restraint, and hugged herself in an embrace of most fond selfishness, as she remembered that never, never more should she be called upon to sacrifice her own wishes to please another.

But this delightful thought led on to others of a more mixed character. Sophia was exceedingly fond of very nice coffee, and, to say truth, of all other nice things. Like her immortal namesake in Jean Jacques' "Emile," she might indeed have been very justly called "*friande*;" and with a degree of self-knowledge that did her great honour, she mentally exclaimed, as she poured forth the third cup of rich and steaming beverage, "How on earth am I to manage about having such coffee as this for my breakfast when the Heathcotes come? I must make purchase of a West-India Island, or else submit to breakfast upon tea, during the hateful period of their stay . . . . or else" , . . . and here she nodded her head, and smiled, as those only can smile who are inwardly pleased with themselves. "Yes, yes," she murmured, "it will not be so very difficult. I must speak to Barnes about it."

And this idea of speaking to Barnes about the thousand and one things which crowded her memory as necessary to be said to her, perhaps did, in some trifling degree, shorten her breakfast; for she did not remain at the table, notwithstanding the many delicacies which were upon it, for above an hour. At the end of this time she rose, rang the bell, and left the room.

On entering the drawing-room she rang another bell, and when her page answered it, commanded that Mrs. Barnes should come to her. That really very excellent person approached her new lady with the most respectful compliments of the morning, and hopes that she had rested well during the night.

"Pretty well, I thank you, Barnes," was the reply. "But I shall do better when I get into the room which I mean permanently to occupy as my own. I have now sent for you on purpose to go through all the apartments, in order to make my selection; and of course you will be able to tell me all particulars respecting their different advantages, as to wind, sun, and so forth."

"I know the rooms well, ma'am, no doubt of it; nobody alive, so well," replied the housekeeper, as she stood back to let the lady pass.

"Go before me, Barnes," said Miss Martin Thorpe. "It is you must lead the way, and remember I mean to see every room in the house.

"Then I am afraid, ma'am," said the housekeeper, stopping short, "that it will not be possible to do it just yet. The windows must be opened first, ma'am, or you would have to stand waiting in the dark and the cold while it was done."

"That would not suit me at all, certainly," replied Miss Martin Thorpe with a shiver. "Go immediately, and order that every room in the house be made fit for my inspection in an hour."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mrs. Barnes, preparing to leave the room with all despatch.

"But I cannot let that hour be wasted, Barnes. As soon as you have given the order, come back to me; I have much to say to you, as you may well suppose."

"Without doubt, ma'am, there is a deal to settle; and I'll speak your orders, and be back in no time."

During the absence of the housekeeper, which was lengthened by the necessity of giving a few particular instructions, naturally consequent upon her mistress's purpose of penetrating into *all* the rooms, Miss Martin Thorpe was engaged in a discussion with herself on the comparative advantages of making Mrs. Barnes stand, or permitting her to sit, during the long conversation which it was her purpose to hold with her. The dignity obtained by obliging her to stand was balanced by the probability of freer discussion, if she sat, and she finally decided on the sitting scheme; not from any foolish and wholly unnecessary consideration for the aching bones of the old woman, but from the well-digested persuasion that a certain portion of gossiping, judiciously employed, would be of the most important service to a family constituted as hers would be, and in some degree necessary, perhaps, in the intercourse between every *understanding* mistress of a family and the individual appointed as her prime minister.

In consequence of the line of conduct thus adopted, Mrs. Barnes was received on her return with a very gracious nod. "Sit down, Mrs. Barnes," said the heiress. "We must necessarily have many things to talk about before I can feel myself settled; and I would much rather have you sit than not."

"I thank you, ma'am," was the reply, and Mrs. Barnes sat down.

"Are you aware, Barnes, that I have invited my elder guardian, Major Heathcote, to come here, accompanied by all his family, to remain with me till I come of age?" said Sophia.

"I heard, ma'am, that the major's family was expected," replied the old woman.

"Of course, Mrs. Barnes, you must be aware that no young person of my age would prefer such an arrangement if it could be avoided. Having a large family to maintain is a great burden upon me, and the filling my house in such a manner, extremely inconvenient. But the Heathcotes, I am sorry to say, Barnes, are so extremely poor, that the taking them in during my minority will be doing them a most essential service. They mean, poor things, to spend a part of what they will save by my supporting them in this way upon the education of their three younger daughters, who, Heaven knows, want it bad enough. But besides these three girls, who unfortunately will have two holidays to spend here, there are three boys at school, whom of course it will be utterly impossible for me to receive at all. I dare say you know what school-boys are, Mrs. Barnes; and then, Heaven help me, there are two little ones more, who, I suppose, must remain in the house, as well as the eldest of all, the tall girl that you may remember seeing here at Christmas, who is really upon the whole not at all ill-behaved, and she is besides my own cousin, which, as long as she conducts herself properly, will always make a difference with me,

This is a tremendous large family, my good Barnes, and is enough, I am afraid, to make you tremble, as well as me. But I trust nobody will blame me for bringing this burden upon myself. I am sure my motives are good; a feeling of propriety, Mrs. Barnes, makes me wish to retain near me the protector appointed by my lamented uncle, as long as my age shall render it necessary; and a feeling of charity, which, if imprudent, must be pardonable, has led me to include the whole family in the invitation."

"It will make the house more cheerful and pleasant for you, I hope, ma'am," replied Mrs. Barnes, in a voice of encouragement.

"Noise never makes me cheerful, Mrs. Barnes," replied her mistress with a sigh; "but I must make the best of it. There is one fact, however, and a very important one, which I must not conceal from your knowledge. The income allowed me during my minority by my guardians would be extremely handsome were I about to spend it, as everybody would expect I should, upon myself. But it will be very little, Barnes, to maintain all this immense family, and at the same time keep up appearances in such a manner as not to disgrace myself, or bring contempt upon the memory of my dear and ever-to-be-lamented uncle. This, however, we must contrive to do; and I trust greatly to your cleverness and good management, Barnes, for being able to get through all my difficulties. May I hope, Barnes, that your respect for the memory of your late dear master will induce you to be a faithfal servant to me?"

"Why, to say the truth, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied the old woman, "my notion was to retire upon the bounty left to me by your dear uncle, ma'am. But I should be very loth, and hold myself in no ways excusable, to leave his heir and representative in a strait and distress for the want of a faithful servant to stand by her. You would not have found the money in the funds run up so, ma'am, if I had not helped him, early and late, to look after it. For though he was in no degree extravagant in his own expenses, quite the contrary, as we all know, still he was often unaccountable careless, or would have been if I'd have let him. So that I do feel, and I won't deny it, that my biding with you would help considerable to get you through this next year that is to be. But, for certain sure, my notion was to go and board in my brother's family, and trouble myself no more about anything."

"And a very good scheme too, Barnes, a little time hence; but if you are the wise woman I take you for, you will not be against adding a little more ready money to your store, which, added to the saving of your annuity, would mount up to something that would be worth while to leave behind you. And this will give you more consideration with your friends than even your handsome annuity. You should remember, too, that you are quite in the very flower of your usefulness, if not of your strength, and that it is almost a sin to sit down idle as yet."

"My poor master has chose a sensible young lady to be his heir, though she don't just happen to be the beauty of the bunch," thought Mrs. Barnes, as she listened to this speech; "and if he could hear and see us, there is no question but that he would wish me to serve

her." These thoughts did not suggest themselves in vain, and when the young lady ceased to speak, the old woman replied, "Well, ma'am, I will be no hinderance to your doing all the good that you wish, and will consent to make up a year of service with you, from the time you comed to be mistress here. But there is one word, ma'am, that I hope as you will give me leave to say, afore we goes on to other business . . . . and that is about my niece, ma'am. You was so kind and condescending, when you was here before, as to take a great deal of notice of her, and Nancy has a proper grateful heart as ever girl had; and she *was* in hopes, Miss Martin Thorpe, that she might have had the good luck to be chose as your own maid, ma'am, for which her handiness makes her remarkable fit. But we see, ma'am, that the good fortune of having the honour to wait upon you is given to Mrs. Roberts, and nothing to say against it, I'm sure, for she is altogether a most civil and respectable-looking lady's-maid. But as my niece has missed of that, ma'am, I have been thinking that if it was your pleasure to give her hopes of filling the place of housekeeper, after me, I might be useful both to you, ma'am, and to her, at one and the same time, by putting her exact into all the right ways of doing everything. But this, of course, Miss Martin Thorpe, it is for you to decide."

"I have no objection at all, Mrs. Barnes, to Nancy's looking forward to the place. I was very much pleased with her . . . . she was, indeed, very useful and obliging to me when I was here; and you may tell her, from me, that if she is capable of undertaking the charge at the time you leave it, I will promote her to the place of housekeeper at Thorpe-Combe. But as this will be great and quick preferment for her, I shall expect in return that she shall conduct herself so as to prove to me that she has my interest at heart. I am by no means a careless or indifferent observer of what passes round me, and particularly of servants, Mrs. Barnes; and long before your year is out, you may depend upon it I shall be able myself to form a very good judgment as to whether your niece is likely to turn out such a servant as I should wish to place in a situation of trust and confidence. You may just say this to her, if you please, and in the mean time I wish her to have the situation of upper-housemaid, and desire she may be ready to wait on any company I may have staying with me . . . . of course, I don't mean the Heathcotes; that set, as long as they stay, must be expected, as there are so many of them, to take care of themselves."

"Oh dear, ma'am! That is the worst of the business," said Mrs. Barnes, shaking her head.

"What do you mean, Barnes? What is the worst of the business?" demanded her young mistress, in some alarm.

"Why, the strange servants, ma'am. I presume the major and his lady will have a distinct set, like, of their own; and there is nothing in the wide world so difficult for a housekeeper to manage smoothly with as that."

"No, no, my poor dear Barnes!" replied Sophia, greatly pleased by this speech. "I would not, upon any account, have inflicted such an unceasing torment on the valued old servant, and friend, I may say, of my dear departed uncle. Nothing should have induced me to do it. No, Barnes, you shall have no strange servants, who would be

neither under your control, nor out of it, to plague and vex you from morning to night. I took good care of that when I gave the invitation. I will have no servants living here but my own."

"Indeed, ma'am, I am thankful to hear it," replied the admiring Mrs. Barnes, who, had she given her thoughts words, might have exclaimed,—

"How much more older art thou than thy looks!"

"If I have none but our own servants to manage, I am in no ways afraid but what I shall give you satisfaction. It is what I have done before in this house, and it is what I may hope to do again. But we shall have to look out, and about us, ma'am, to get what will be needed for so large a family. Of course . . . . and I don't mean to object to it, for, by all rule, I shall have nothing to do with her . . . . but of course Mrs. Heathcote will bring her own nurse?"

"Her children are not babies, Mrs. Barnes; there is no nurse in the case; and when I tell you that I shall have no servants but my own, I mean, as I always do, observe, literally and exactly what I say."

"So much the better, ma'am. Ladies and gentlemen who are really in earnest, are always the most easily understood, and the most strictly obeyed. And now, ma'am, will you be pleased to let me know the number of female servants as you have made up your mind to find necessary?"

"In settling this point, Mrs. Barnes," replied Sophia, "you must not forget what I have said to you relative to my present situation. My dear lamented uncle's property has been left to me, but I am not yet in possession of it. My income, when the property in the funds shall be made the most of, will not, I flatter myself, fall far short of four thousand a year; but of this I have as yet but a part. I will not, if I can possibly avoid it, run in debt. Neither will I submit to pass a whole year, during the gayest season of life, in constant mortification and solitude. It requires some skill, Barnes, as a person of your cleverness can easily see, to steer safe and well between these two things; particularly for a person burdened as I am by a family that in point of fact are in no way related to me, that is to say, except my cousin Florence. Now you must see that I should be guilty of very great folly, I might almost say wickedness, if I set off with the idea of making these poor people fancy themselves rich and great for one year, when I know that as soon as it is over they must go back again to their usual miserable mode of living. It would be treating them cruelly, Mrs. Barnes, nothing short of it; and I am quite determined to have no such sin upon my conscience. As for that sickly boy whom you may remember seeing here, my guardian, Sir Charles Temple, out of consideration for me, has taken him on charity, to try, I suppose, whether it will be possible to get any sort of occupation for him; and perhaps it is a blessing, for which we ought to be very thankful to Providence, that he is not likely to live to trouble his benefactor long. God knows I should be thankful to hear he was no more, poor unfortunate boy! It is quite impossible he should ever come to good, for he is decidedly the worst-disposed boy I ever heard of. As for his sister, poor thing, there is nothing to say against her; and it is to be

hoped that her parents, that is her father, will be able to put her in the way to get her living honestly, before he dies, for then his half-pay goes, and there will be nothing in the world left for them to live upon. It is a melancholy story, Barnes, is it not?"

"It is indeed, ma'am," replied the good woman, who had listened to her with great interest. "I am sure I had no notion they were so bad off as that."

"It is but too true, Mrs. Barnes; and such being the case, I hold it to be my duty to guard them all as much as possible from any suffering that might arise from imprudently changing their habits of life, during the time they are here. . . . . I will now, Barnes, go with you through the rooms. My first object will naturally be to select one that I shall find pleasant and comfortable for myself,—and then I will point out to you the apartments which I shall wish to have kept nicely in order for company, and then we will see about rooms for those poor Heathcotes. You lead the way, Barnes, and I will follow you."

The housekeeper complied, first inquiring whether her mistress wished to see what other staircases there were in the house, besides the principal one leading from the hall. Miss Martin Thorpe smiled, as she remembered that she had availed herself of one of these to make her way to and from Mr. Thorpe's chamber, when she wished no eye to see her, and was anxious to use her own, not only in studying the important picture, but also in noting accurately what cabinets, coffers, or other receptacles might be lodged there likely to be used for the safe preservation of any jewellery that might chance to be preserved in the family. But though these recollections passed charmingly enough through her mind, she replied to the inquiry very gravely by saying, "Yes, Barnes, I shall wish to become acquainted with every part of my house."

Mrs. Barnes, on this, led the way to the very staircase which her young mistress had before discovered for herself. "This, ma'am," she said, "is a very convenient approach to the two beautiful rooms that my master always used for himself; and in case you should happen to make choice of the same, I think you would like, perhaps, to have it carpeted, and kept altogether for yourself, or any servant that might just be coming to wait upon you, and nothing else."

Miss Martin Thorpe approved this idea extremely, and having a pretty distinct recollection of the spacious bedroom and pretty ante-room beside it, she walked forward with a rapid step; for a project had occurred to her, which she was determined immediately to put into execution. On entering the really noble room which the late master of the mansion had appropriated to himself, and which was of equal size with the drawing-room beneath it, its present mistress gave no indication of ever having seen it before, nor did she make any observation that could be construed into a declaration that she had not. She looked around, as if merely examining its size, and that of the room next it, and then said, "Are there any workmen at Hereford, Mrs. Barnes, who might be trusted to fresh paper this room?"

"Oh dear yes, ma'am. Excellent workmen of all sorts are to be found in Hereford."

"If I can, without much difficulty, get this room fitted up to my fancy, I think it possible I may convert it to my own use," said the heiress, walking through it into the adjoining room, which had served the late possessor for a dressing-room, but which was, in truth, much too large and handsome a room for such a purpose. Here Miss Martin Thorpe lingered much longer than in the bedroom, though she did not pass through that without indulging herself with a furtive glance, and permitting herself a furtive smile, as she passed before the important and well-remembered picture. At length, however, she had given all the attention which she at that time intended to bestow on either room, and followed the housekeeper through all the apartments which had been occupied during the foregoing Christmas. Stopping, at length, in the handsomest of them all, Mrs. Barnes said, "This is the room, ma'am, where Mrs. Heathcote and the major slept before. Shall it be prepared for them again?"

"The whole of the rooms on this floor," replied Miss Martin Thorpe, with more of dignity than she had yet put on to her confidential servant, "I intend to keep entirely for staying company. Let us go upstairs, if you please."

Mrs. Barnes moved on in silence, and Sophia mounted to the second floor, which, like that of all old-fashioned country-houses, was low, and in some parts having a sloping roof. She entered the first door she came to, and looked about the room upon which it opened with considerable interest.

"This is a very good room, Barnes; an excellent room, upon my word."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the housekeeper, "only it smokes so unaccountable bad, that we have never been able to make use of it, except indeed during the summer, years and years ago, when Mr. Cornelius Thorpe, my master's son, used to bring us home such a many of his out-standing friends and acquaintance sometimes, that we were glad to have such a room as this to put 'em in. But the furniture then was fresh, and pretty-looking enough, and that made a great difference."

"The impossibility of having a fire can be of no consequence, Barnes, to persons who never accustom themselves to sleep with fire in their rooms. . . . . I never knew the Heathcotes have a fire in their bedrooms since I have been with them, and this apartment appears to me exactly suited for them. It is large, and has every appearance, I am sure, of being exceedingly comfortable. You can find, somewhere or other, I dare say, a bit or two of carpet to put round the bed; and you may put in a second washing-stand, if you will."

This speech was listened to with an air that said a good deal; and if Miss Martin Thorpe had happened to think it worth her while to study the countenance of her housekeeper, she might have learnt that not even absolute power can safely set propriety at defiance. But she had no time to study her countenance, being engaged in looking from a window that commanded a part of the grounds which she had never seen before; the back part of the house, in which this apartment was situated, being flanked by a thick plantation, which in the winter season was by no means tempting as a walk, but which now,

with the full morning sun shining upon it, looked strikingly picturesque and pretty, and the more so, from having a small lodge-like dwelling, covered with ivy and sundry lighter creeping plants, in the midst of it.

"What house is that, Barnes?" demanded Sophia, looking at it with the pleased eyes of conscious ownership. "Who lives in it? It is one of the prettiest things I ever saw in my life. It can't be one of the lodges, for they are more than a quarter of a mile from the house, if I mistake not."

"Oh dear no, ma'am, that's no lodge," replied Mrs. Barnes. "It is but a small house, but it's a deal larger than any lodge."

"Does anybody live in it?"

"Yes, ma'am, an old man called Arthur Giles has lived in it for years."

"But what in the world was it built for, so close to the mansion-house? It must be a part of the property?"

"Oh! dear yes, ma'am, it is part of the property," said Mrs. Barnes with great decision, but without adding another word.

"Can you not explain to me, Mrs. Barnes, something about it?" said her mistress. "It seems very strange to me to see a beautiful little place like that, stuck close behind the great house, as if it were a baby-house to please the children with."

Mrs. Barnes said not a word in reply. Her loquacity seemed to have come altogether to an end.

"Who was it that built it, Mrs. Barnes?" demanded Sophia: "was it Mr. Thorpe?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Why did he build it? Do you know?"

"He built it, ma'am, for a poor relation of his wife, my late dear mistress. It was very beautifully fitted up then."

Had the faculties of Miss Martin Thorpe been at all at leisure, they would probably have enabled her to perceive a little causticity in this short reply, and the accent in which it was spoken; but they were not. Her attention was wholly occupied in accurately examining this newly-discovered piece of property, and her next words were . . . . "And pray who may Arthur Giles be? and what rent does he pay?"

"Arthur Giles, ma'am, was the favourite servant of my young master, before he went away, and he does not pay any rent at all."

"And why, Barnes, did my uncle put him in such a place as that to live, instead of keeping him in the dwelling-house with the other servants?"

"Arthur Giles, ma'am, was the most famous groom and rider in all these parts; and my master used to let him break the young horses that was bred on the place, from the Arab pair that he brought with him from Spain. He broke his right arm, ma'am, in doing some unaccountable rash thing to please Mr. Cornelius; and it was forced to be cut off, leaving him a useless cripple for the rest of his life. Mr. Cornelius almost lost his senses about it, because it was altogether his own doing, and spite of all his faults he was both kind-hearted and generous; and as my mistress's old aunt died just about

the same time, nothing would satisfy our young gentleman but putting Arthur Giles and his wife to live in that house . . . . and there they have bided ever since."

"And, for goodness' sake, what do they live upon? A strange wild scheme it seems to have been, I must say," said the young lady.

"His living, ma'am, was provided for, when the house was given him. The estate is charged with one hundred pounds a year clear for their use and benefit, as long as either of them shall remain alive," replied the housekeeper, concisely.

Miss Martin Thorpe coloured. "How old are these people?" said she.

"I cannot justly say their exact age, ma'am. They are very hale and hearty, both of them," replied Mrs. Barnes.

"Show me the other rooms," said her mistress, turning from the window.

Mrs. Barnes obeyed in silence, conducting the young lady from room to room over the whole floor. A wide range of buildings, surrounding the stableyard, contained sleeping-rooms sufficient for the men-servants of a large family; but those for the females (excepting Mrs. Barnes' own apartment, which was on the ground-floor) were all in this part of the house: and on arriving at the first of these, the housekeeper made a dead stop before the door, and said very demurely, —"This is the sleeping-room of the kitchen-maid: do you wish to see it, ma'am?"

There was a little shade of sauciness, or rather satire in the accent with which this was said, which probably would not have been indulged in if Mrs. Barnes had not possessed an income of equal amount, and equally well secured as that of Mr. Arthur Giles; but nevertheless it did not sufficiently approach the impertinent to call for any immediate notice, and Miss Martin Thorpe walked on, saying, "No, Mrs. Barnes, there is no occasion to take me into the servants' rooms. I presume that they are such rooms as ought to be appropriated to them, and that they are kept in decent order. Where does my own maid sleep?"

"At the top of a little staircase leading straight up from the side passage that was by what was my master's room. It was the room in which the lady's-maid slept in Mrs. Thorpe's time, and seems as if it was made so handy and convenient on purpose."

"No doubt of it. The arrangement is a very good one." These words seemed to have broken the silence which had succeeded the heiress's somewhat loquacious dissertations on the various rooms of her mansion, previous to her visit to the one she had assigned for the use of Major and Mrs. Heathcote. Her talkative vein appeared now to return upon her, and she said, "Let us return, Barnes, to those nice pleasant rooms on both sides the first passage we got into on coming upstairs; those, I mean, that are close by Mrs. Heathcote's room."

"Mrs. Heathcote's room, ma'am? The one she slept in at Christmas?"

Miss Martin Thorpe knitted her brows. "No, Mrs. Barnes; the one that I told you she was to sleep in now."

Mrs. Barnes said no more, but silently preceded her mistress to the locality she had indicated, and threw open successively the three doors nearest that of Mrs. Heathcote's predestined chamber, viz. the one to the right, the one to the left, and the one opposite. Sophia entered them all in rotation. "Delightful rooms, I am sure, all of them," she said. "It certainly is an excellent house. About the three girls that are going to school, I don't think it necessary to settle anything at present . . . . Perhaps . . . . but it is time enough to talk about that when the time comes. . . . . But here is a most pleasant room, with a straight ceiling, and two pretty windows with the most beautiful view, without comparison, in the whole house. I think, Mrs. Barnes, that I must give this charming room to my cousin Florence: but it is larger than any one person can want, and therefore I will have the bed from the next room brought in here and put into that corner for the two little boys. They always slept in the same bed together at Clevelands. It will be a great convenience to have their half-sister in the same room with them, for she has always been accustomed to make herself useful at home, and I know that she will like to go on doing the same here. And it is quite right and proper she should, poor thing! for there is nothing in the world so cruel as making young people, who must get their own bread in the end, fancy themselves too fine to work. See that the bed is moved, Barnes, and whatever washing-things put in, that you think necessary; but nothing very costly of course, because you know there is no answering for children. However, there will be a great deal to do, I dare say, in different ways, so you need not hurry about it; they will not be coming directly, for I certainly shall not have them in the house till the workmen are out of it.

Miss Martin Thorpe then left the room, and descended the stairs which brought her to the door of that apartment, the first visit to which had been so highly advantageous to her style of hair-dressing.

She again entered, and again examined it attentively. "I have quite made up my mind to occupy these two rooms myself, Barnes," she said; "but they must, of course, be newly fitted up. What is the distance to the nearest place where I can get post-horses?"

"About a mile and a half, ma'am, on the Hereford road," was the reply.

"Then let William immediately take the horse that I know Mr. Thorpe used to employ for errands, and order a pair of post-horses for me, to be here as soon as possible. I will drive over to Hereford before dinner."

"Shall I take your orders about dinner, now, ma'am, or return after I have sent off the groom?" inquired the housekeeper.

"By all means send for the horses first. I wish to set off with as little delay as may be."

When her messenger returned, she found the heiress reckoning the number of breadths in the Brussels carpet which covered the drawing-room; the apartment above it, being the same size, would require as many, and the calculation was one of some anxiety. But on the arrival of the housekeeper it was suspended.

"You are come about dinner, Barnes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you remember the carrot-soup we used to have at Christmas?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may let me have a little of that, every day, till further orders."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So far the dialogue proceeded without any difficulty, but Sophia found it necessary to reflect for a moment before she went on.

"Have you any game in the house, Barnes?" she said at length.

"No, ma'am," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"How is that? You have known of my intended arrival for this fortnight past. How came you not to think of getting in a provision of game?"

"I have no means of procuring it, at present, ma'am."

"Why so? We had game in the greatest abundance when we were here at Christmas—three times a day, I remember; I remarked it particularly. What is the reason you cannot get it now? The season is not over."

"No, ma'am, the season isn't over; but Sir Charles Temple has left the country, and all our game came from him."

"But, surely, with all the fine woods that we have about the place, there must be plenty of game, without going to Sir Charles Temple for it?"

"Oh, dear! yes, ma'am, the woods are full; but Sir Charles Temple is lord of the manor."

Miss Martin Thorpe coloured. "Dear me! is there no right of shooting here? that is very disagreeable. I suppose that Sir Charles Temple will not object to *my* people shooting for my own table."

"I can't say, I'm sure, ma'am," replied the housekeeper, with an air of greater indifference than became her station in the household. "But I don't believe that Sir Charles, when he is abroad, interferes at all. The gamekeeper manages the whole business."

"Then the gamekeeper must be sent to, Barnes: of course, he will be permitted to supply me?"

"No doubt about it ma'am," replied Barnes, readily; "he sells the game to all the families round about it. Temple is counted the finest manor and the best preserved in the whole county."

"Sells it?" replied Sophia, again knitting her brows.

"Yes, ma'am; the keeper disposes of a vast quantity; enough, as they say, to pay all the expenses of keepers, dogs, and all the rest of it."

"Then, if there is no game, you may get me what you will, provided it is nice. I eat very little, that is, I want very few dishes on the table; but I am very particular about having nothing but the nicest things, dressed in the nicest manner, and with little nice things, such as mushrooms, you know, Mrs. Barnes, and the like, for stews and sauces. In short, in a small way, I want to have my dinners as nearly as possible like what we had here last Christmas. I was perfectly satisfied then, and I have only to desire that you will go on in the same manner, remembering, of course, that however

excellent it may be in quality, the quantity for one person must comparatively be very little."

"That is quite true, ma'am," replied Mrs. Barnes, doing her very best to look solemn and respectful; "but of course, ma'am, you know that those sort of dinners, or only a small part of them, require to have the house thoroughly well supplied with all things needful for a good family; and I could not take the liberty of doing that till I had received orders."

"Then pray wait no longer; you have now my orders to get everything necessary for my having a perfectly nice dinner every day."

"When we were preparing for the party at Christmas, ma'am," said the housekeeper, rather maliciously, "my master sent the list that I made out to Fordham's. Is it your pleasure that the same thing should be done now?"

"Fordham? . . . . does he live at Hereford? Perhaps I could call there to-day."

"No, ma'am," replied the old woman, pursing up her mouth; "Mr. Fordham does not live at Hereford, but in Piccadilly."

"And pray what sort of things does he sell?"

"Potted meats, dried meats, hams, tongues, *patés*, *consommés*, sauces, glazes, fruits dried, preserved, and in jelly, truffles, caviare, laver, pickles . . . . oh, dear me, ma'am! these and a thousand other things besides, that it is quite impossible to think over all of a minute," replied the housekeeper, absolutely out of breath.

"Well, we must see about it," replied her mistress, a little alarmed. "But, at any rate, let me have some luncheon now, and a nice little dinner when I return from my drive, if it is nothing more than a roast chicken and bread sauce, a nice tart, with some cream, a very small dish of stewed cheese, with a little salad, and some trifle of dessert, preserved ginger making part of it. And it is as well to say at once, Barnes, that I shall never wish to dine, when I am alone, without having some preserved ginger. I eat it whenever I can, because it agrees so particularly well with me."

"I'll do the best I can, ma'am," returned Mrs. Barnes; "but the ginger you had yesterday was a little left from what was sent in at Christmas, and I doubt if there is as much more of it remaining in the jar."

The looks of the heiress were in a trifling degree overclouded at hearing this, and for a moment she was silent; but just as Mrs. Barnes turned to leave the room, she said, in rather a sharper and more decided tone than usual, "Then, in that case, Barnes, you had better make out your list for this Fordham at once. It would be exceedingly absurd, with my fortune, to deny myself what I know so particularly agrees with my health; but in making the list, you must remember that it is only when I dine entirely alone, or else with quite a show-off party (which I shall have very seldom at present), that I shall use those very costly things; so you will not write at first for a great deal."

"Very well, ma'am," said the admiring housekeeper, and closed the door behind her, leaving the young lady greatly in a humour to meditate upon the advantages of joining the manor of Temple to the acres of Thorpe-Combe.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM the drawing-room Mrs. Barnes retired to her own parlour, and before she set about any of the important business confided to her, she thought it not a sin to indulge in a little confidential conversation with her niece Nancy.

"I have done a deal of business and listened to a deal of talk since we parted at breakfast, girl," she began; "but whether I shall be able to hold by what I have promised, or whether you will be willing to thank me for the preferment I have got for you, I don't feel quite so sure as I did an hour or two agone."

"What preferment, aunt?" inquired the girl, eagerly. "She is not going to send away the lady's-maid, is she?"

"No, Nancy—no, that's not it. As the business now is between us, I stands engaged to continue housekeeper at Thorpe-Combe till such time as she comes to be of age; and you are to bide here the while as upper-housemaid, and to wait upon any staying ladies that mayn't happen to have their own maids; and when I go, you are to step into my shoes as housekeeper, I, of course, agreeing to put you in the way of knowing what's what in that capacity."

"My goodness, aunt! I don't ask for nothing better," replied the young woman, with every appearance of being greatly delighted. "That's no bad morning's work, at any rate; and I can't see, for the life of me, why you ain't contented with it."

"I dare say you can't; and I don't know how you should. And for anything I can tell, Nancy, you may take the place, and keep it till you better yourself with a husband. You haven't been spoilt like me, girl, by living with real gentlefolks, years enough to teach me what the difference is between serving a true gentleman, like my old master, and doing the will of a dirty little, selfish, set-up mushroom like this. God forgive me, Nancy! but I know I shall hate her like poison. . . . . There's enough to do, I can tell you; and I can't stay here, just at this minute, going through the whole history—and saying all she said, and looking all she looked. What on earth could my poor old master see in her to make him fancy her before them sweet, pretty, young creatures, the two Heathcotes. 'Tis unaccountable!" said Mrs. Barnes.

"It is not that unaccountable neither, aunt," replied Nancy, smiling. "The old gentleman was taken by her looking so like his son."

"She is not like his son, Nancy, no more than she's like you; excepting the way she took to of curling up her stiff hair and putting the collar round her neck; and all that, I take it, master taught her himself out of the picture, for it was plain to see it was that picture as was her looking-glass."

"Very likely," said Nancy, not choosing to inform her very punctilious relative that she had taken the liberty of leading the young lady into her uncle's bedroom. "But at any rate, she certainly did look like the picture."

"But she couldn't, for the life of her, look like him, though," said the old woman; "for with all his faults, and Heaven knows he had enough and to spare,—but with all his faults, he was kind-hearted and generous. Wilful, God knows! and more unable to bear reproof than a raw post-horse to bear the whip; but he hadn't her cunning, covetous look, anyhow. Mad as he made us, one and all, by plaguing our good master as he did, there wasn't one in the house that wouldn't have fled for him or bled for him. But, Lord love you! Nancy, when you come to know this old young woman a little better, you'll see whether she's like such a off-hand, harem-skarem as Mr. Cornelius. Catch her at getting into a scrape for the sake of a frolic! or fancy him packing up his relations in a garret, just because they warn't so rich and well-to-do as himself! I will tell you what, Nancy Barnes, if I was as young as you, and had got my way to make in the world as you have, I won't say but what I think I should take her place, and keep it all the easier, perhaps, for happening to have wit enough to find out what sort of stuff she was made of. But independent, and above the world, as I now am, I'd throw the keys in her face and be off, rather than demean myself by serving such a grudging, selfish curmudgeon of a girl, if it wasn't a fancy I've taken to them poor Heathcotes. I think that, spite of young madam and all her cleverness, I may make them more comfortable than they would be without me; and I should be able to do it fearlesslike, because, if she found me out, I just snap my fingers at her, and wish her good morning."

"Anyhow, aunt, I do hope you'll manage to stop till I'm sure of coming after you, for I *should* like to be housekeeper at the Combe before I was counting my full six-and-twenty. It would make all the people stare so."

"Well, Nancy, I have done my part towards it, and I'll stand it; garrets, little boys' washing, ginger sweetmeat, and all—if she don't come too sharp over me."

* * * * * *

Whatever else Miss Martin Thorpe might be, she was not an idle young woman; and considering that in all she did she had a very strong averseness to spending more money than was absolutely necessary (excepting indeed where her own personal indulgences were particularly concerned); considering this, it was quite astonishing to see how rapidly she made all the arrangements necessary for the manner of living she had sketched out for herself.

Without the loss of a single day, workmen were sent into the house to prepare the apartments she intended for her own especial use. Sophia had seen something of luxury among some few extravagant people in whose neighbourhood her parents had lived and died; and she liked it well enough to have a very tolerably clear notion how to set about making herself comfortable. The great room, in which Mr. Thorpe had slept, was soon converted into a gay-looking handsome sitting-room, upon the door of which she determined to set a solemn seal, never to be removed without her especial permission. The smaller room next to it was fitted up with every possible attention to comfort as her bedroom; and on this occasion no expense

was spared to obtain exactly the thing she wished, and obtain it quickly. The carpenters, painters, and upholsterers of Hereford, delighted to perceive the active spirit of improvement so promptly set to work upon the long-untouched mansion, were careful not to check it by any dilatoriness on their parts; and the work went on with such rapidity, that the two rooms were ready to be occupied in their metamorphosed state within six weeks after the metamorphosis began. But rapidly as Miss Martin Thorpe, and the ministers she employed, proceeded in what they were about, the time seemed rather mysteriously long to the Heathcote family; and after in vain awaiting for three weeks the promised summons from his ward, Major Heathcote thought it advisable to address her with an inquiry as to whether she had changed her plans respecting them. The return of the post brought him the following reply:—

"Dear Sir,—

"I am sorry that you should feel disappointed at not having heard from me. I have lost no time since my arrival at the Combe in doing what I felt necessary in repairs and alterations, so as to render the house capable of accommodating all who are to be lodged in it. The distance at which some of my most agreeable neighbours reside renders it necessary that I should have many spare bedrooms, and this consideration of course adds to the difficulty. A few weeks, however, will, I hope, be sufficient to finish what I shall think it necessary to do, and I will not fail to let you know when I am ready to receive you and your family. Meanwhile, I must beg to observe that it will be particularly convenient to me if you can immediately settle your three daughters at the school you spoke of. Their coming here just at present would unsettle all my arrangements very disagreeably, and therefore I cannot for a moment doubt that what you have so wisely determined to do you will do at once. I beg to be kindly remembered to all your circle, and I am, dear sir, sincerely yours,—

"Sophia Martin Thorpe."

The whole family, excepting those who were at a distance, and the two little boys in the nursery, heard this letter read aloud. They looked at each other a little, and then the major said . . . . "I am afraid, Poppsy, that she is laying out a great deal of money in preparing for us. Young people who have not been much used to the management of money, make sad blunders before they find out how far it will go. I had no notion she meant to do anything to the house. It seemed to me large enough for us all, and a dozen more."

"Not if the young lady looks forward to having such a vast deal of staying company," replied Mrs. Heathcote. . . . . "But what nonsense that is," she added. "Where is she to get company from? We never saw a single soul while we were there. . . . . And I must say that I do take it very ill-natured of her not letting the poor dear girls have a sight of the place before they go to school. They had so set their young hearts upon it."

"Oh, never mind that, mamma!" said the eldest of the three,

who had a large portion of the family good-humour. . . . . We shall see it at the holidays, you know . . . . and the going to school is pleasure and novelty enough for one bout. I declare I think it will be better to divide the two journeys into two different times of the year. And everything may be quite ready, you know, for our going to school just the same as for going to Thorpe-Combe."

"That's true, dear, and you are a dear good girl for saying it," said Mrs. Heathcote. . . . . "But do tell me, Florence, are you not a good deal surprised at your cousin's talking in this extravagant style, about altering her house and having such quantities of company?"

"I don't think that my cousin Sophy will ever be extravagant, mamma," replied Florence, with a merry smile. "And I never should have guessed it either, from anything I have ever seen of her . . . . but yet this letter looks as if she was intending to set off in fine style."

"And she has a very fine fortune, my dear, to support it," said Major Heathcote. "I am chiefly vexed that she should think it necessary to put herself to any extra expense about preparing for us. I am sure we were exceedingly well lodged at Christmas, and could not wish for anything better, if we had to continue for years. It is a great pity that she should think of spending money in preparing rooms for us. . . . . But as for the dear girls' going to school a week or two sooner, it would be childish to make any objection. The Misses Western will be ready for them at a day's notice, and it will save a good deal of travelling backwards and forwards."

In short, "The Heathcotes" again proved upon this occasion, that they were by no means difficult people to manage, a fact which it is highly probable Miss Martin Thorpe had ascertained before she consented to pass her minority under their protection.

The young heiress, meanwhile, was taking measures to make it known in the neighbourhood of Thorpe-Combe that she was by no means averse to society. Mr. Westley, the lawyer, with whom she had, of necessity, repeated interviews, was enabled to state this from the very best authority; and Mr. Bentall, the apothecary, who was called in to prescribe for a trifling attack of indigestion, left her presence equally capable of circulating this important fact. To both these gentlemen, as well as to the clergyman of the parish, and his obliging wife, who of course had waited upon her immediately, Sophia talked much of the kindness of both her guardians in permitting her immediately to occupy her own house, in consideration of the shortness of her minority. She mentioned also the obligingness of Major and Mrs. Heathcote in having consented to become her guests, with their whole family, till she should be of age. It somehow or other happened, accidentally of course, that not one of these personages were left in ignorance as to the nature of the engagement she had entered into with her guardian, namely, that she had positively refused to permit their remaining with her otherwise than as honoured guests beneath her hospitable roof.

It can hardly be doubted that such accounts as these professionally communicative persons were thus enabled to spread, produced the

desired effect. . . . . In fact, before Miss Martin Thorpe had displayed her crape and bombasin in "church and market" for a month, most of the families in her immediate neighbourhood had called upon her. She was not perhaps calculated to make a very vehement impression at first sight, but the general impression was decidedly in her favour, as a neighbour who wished to be sociable.

Mr. Westley, the lawyer, thought she would live to make an excellent woman of business. Mr. Bentall, the apothecary, said she was just the sort of person to become a blessing to the neighbourhood, perfectly affable, and certainly inclined a little to dyspepsia. Mr. Ogleby, the clergyman, declared himself exceedingly well pleased with his new parishioner; and the ladies of all three spoke in terms of high admiration of her style of mourning, so perfectly lady-like, rich, and not fantastical in any way, and as deep as if it had been for her father; a sort of respectfulness that showed an excellent turn of mind in one so young. Their daughters hoped she would give parties, for she was so civil and quiet-looking that they should never be afraid of her giving herself airs, though she *was* such a great fortune. Nor was there less of unanimity in the judgment passed by their sons; all of them being of opinion that she would be a capital good catch for some one, and that, with four thousand a year, people wouldn't be particular about her complexion.

Sophia herself was in as good humour with her new acquaintance as they were with her. She had no propensity whatever to quizzing; and when people displeased her, her feelings were of a kind rather to place her in the class which it has pleased "the great moralist" to say "he liked," than among those who suffer their antipathies to evaporate in a jest. What she sought was the gratification of a vulgar sort of pride, which was essentially a part of herself, but which hitherto had been crushed and chained down by circumstances, too overpowering to leave the passion place to show itself, yet not of a nature to smother it outright. . . . . And now, like a plant that during the long winter has shown no sign of life, but puts forth vigorous shoots at the first warm breath of the fostering spring, it sprouted and flourished, and reared its head on high, with a vigorous strength that seemed almost to laugh at heaven itself. Under the influence of such a feeling as this, it will be easily understood by those who love to study shades of character, that the highly-born, and all who in any way were decidedly her superiors in station, were less valuable to her than such as she knew were gazing upon her greatness with admiration, and almost with wonder. Persons tinctured with the species of pride which beset Miss Martin Thorpe, are often exceedingly condescending; and if they spoke sincerely, would, one and all (provided the thought were skilfully brought down to earthly littleness), be ready to exclaim—

"Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven."

Of all the neighbours who had yet visited her, she decidedly gave the preference to an old lady, her son and daughter, who all lived together in an old-fashioned house, upon the income of a small free-

hold estate, which had the dignity of being long-descended, but the disadvantage of being hardly sufficient to maintain them. The old lady, being near eighty, was pretty well *hors de combat;* but the son and daughter, the former, aged forty, and the latter, thirty-six, made themselves agreeable, in a variety of ways, to the young heiress. Their approaches at first, however, were made with the slow and solemn step that indicates profound respect. Never before had Sophia been addressed as a being superior to all who surrounded her —never, till Miss Brandenberry mentioned the circumstance to her, had she been aware of the peculiar charm of her voice and manner, or of the extraordinary influence she produced on all who approached her, by the tranquil dignity of every movement and of every word.

Miss Brandenberry and her brother were the first visitors she received in her own private sitting-room; and it was there, too, that, for the first time, she learned to understand the charm which all her individual peculiarities communicated to everything which in any degree proceeded from herself.

"Could you not have said, Richard, if you had been brought into this room blindfold, and knew not in what house or in what county it was situated, could you not have said, Richard, that it must have been conceived and arranged by Miss Martin Thorpe herself?"

"I could have sworn it!" replied Mr. Brandenberry, with a slight sigh.

"It is so like her! . . . . That mouse-coloured paper, with the delicate pink flowers upon it, and the chintz so elegantly to match! . . . . It all reminds one of her in a way I cannot describe."

"You need not describe it, Margaret; the feeling describes itself," rejoined Mr. Brandenberry. And this time he appeared to be very strongly affected by the remark; for he left his chair, though it had the advantage of being exactly opposite to Miss Martin Thorpe, and walked to the window, blowing his nose when he got there, in the way people do blow their noses when they have some very strong emotion to get rid of.

"Do you sit much in this sweet room?" said Mr. Brandenberry, gently returning to his place, but moving his chair so as to sit beside the young lady, instead of in front of her. "Are many of your solitary hours passed in this Elysium of your own creation?"

The effect of this question was considerably increased by Mr. Brandenberry's fixing his large, languishing, heavy grey eyes so earnestly on Miss Martin Thorpe's small black ones, that, as she never had had anything of the same sort happen to her before, she felt "quite odd," as she would have herself expressed it, and actually turned away, and looked down, as she replied, "Oh, dear, yes! . . . . I quite live here."

With an eager movement, Mr. Brandenberry now started up, and flew to the windows. "Margaret!" he exclaimed, "must not those be the very windows we see from the leads of the Terrace summer-house? I am almost certain of it. How very singular!"

"Why is it singular, Mr. Brandenberry?" said Sophia, with a smile.

"Why? . . . . Good Heaven! . . . . I beg your pardon, Miss Martin Thorpe, you must forgive me. . . . . But it is so impossible. . . . . That is, I mean, it is so difficult——"

"Well then, do be quiet, Richard," said his sister, appearing rather anxiously to interrupt him; "what is difficult is generally dangerous. I don't know what is come to you. . . . . I believe, Miss Martin Thorpe," continued Miss Brandenberry, playfully, "that my brother is going to turn poet. He is decidedly growing absent and fanciful."

"Are the symptoms quite new to him?" returned Sophia, in the same tone.

"Perfectly. I never saw anything of the kind in him till within the last few weeks. . . . . But when I can get hold of a page, you may depend upon it I will bring it to you. As it will be a first beginning, however, we must be merciful in our criticisms."

"Are you a merciful critic, Miss Martin Thorpe? . . . . or a hard and cruel one?" said Mr. Brandenberry, again ordering his eyes upon duty.

"I suppose that would depend upon the sort of poetry," said Sophia, again looking away from him.

"Your grounds appear to be excessively beautiful, Miss Martin Thorpe," said the cautious sister, interposing very judiciously. "My brother and I were too young to know much about the late Mr. Thorpe's family, during the time that they were in the habit of visiting in the neighbourhood. My poor father, indeed, was the most intimate friend, I believe, that Mr. Thorpe had, when he first came to reside here for good, after returning from his embassy to Madrid. My poor father was such a genealogist! You know people always care particularly for what they are remarkable for themselves; and there was nothing that my poor dear father loved so much as talking about old long-descended families and their pedigrees. And your late uncle had so many delightful Spanish stories, about the old pedigrees of that country! But Richard was quite a little boy then, and I believe *I* was hardly born, so that we can hardly remember the happy time of this delightful intimacy. . . . And therefore, dear Miss Martin Thorpe, I am going to ask you the greatest of all possible favours. My brother and I are passionately fond of rambling in woods and shrubberies, and your late uncle lived, at last, in so retired a manner that we never ventured to intrude by coming into the grounds, and what I want you to grant, is the permission for my brother and me to walk sometimes in your woods. There is a little gate, you know, that opens upon a cross road, that runs behind Broad Grange, and if you would have the excessive kindness and condescension to let us have a key made for that gate, I declare you would make me the happiest creature alive."

"I do not know what gate you speak of," said the cautious Sophia, hesitatingly.

"Is it possible!" cried Mr. Brandenberry, waiving the business-like part of the transaction, and coming to the sentimental. "Is it possible, Miss Martin Thorpe, that you have never rambled through your own beautiful woods as far as the gate that opens upon Mill Lane?"

"No, indeed, I have never yet walked in the woods at all: I have been so very busy since I came to the place. But I will certainly walk to see the gate you mention. I mean to know everything about the premises, by degrees."

"Oh, Margaret! fancy,—just fancy the delight of showing Miss Martin Thorpe the cataract for the first time! . . . . Will you, oh will you let me—let us, I mean, be your guides when you walk to that gate?"

Sophia had a very decided preference for poking about her property by herself, when examining it for the first time; and what she liked best to do, that, as her cousin Algernon had observed, it was most likely she would do. Nevertheless, she did not feel at all disposed to be churlish to her neighbours at Broad Grange, and therefore replied,

"When the spring is a little farther advanced, I should like such a walk very much; but I cannot bear mud."

"Oh, heavens! no . . . . mud! God forbid I should be the means of bringing those fairy feet in contact with such a horror! . . . . But, Margaret! . . . . you love pictures—cannot you imagine the effect of such a light, sylph-like form as that, glancing through the umbrageous solitudes of Thorpe-Combe woods?"

"Can I not?" returned his sister, shaking her head . . . . "It is very droll, Richard! But it is exactly what I was thinking of myself."

"No? . . . . But where is the wonder?"

Mr. Brandenberry then turned the conversation upon the subject of the county balls. He perceived that the "key" had not taken, exactly . . . . and the mention of mud had rather damped his courage in the woodland line. It is probable that in alluding to a ball-room, his thoughts were wandering towards quadrilles, hand-squeezings, and *tête-à-tête* struggles to get into tea-rooms. But these were not the images which it suggested to Sophia. She had not before heard any mention made of these Hereford balls, and it immediately struck her, that she should like nothing better than showing herself off there, as the heiress of Thorpe-Combe. She therefore replied in a more animated tone of voice than was quite usual to her, that as soon as her guardian and Mrs. Heathcote were there to chaperon her, she should certainly go.

This subject, naturally enough, led the conversation to the neighbourhood; and the different families who patronized these festivities were described at some length by the animated brother and sister. The general tone of their observations, or, as it were, the setting of the various gems of satiric wit which sparkled through their discourse, was that of the most candid liberality. "Certainly, it is an excellent neighbourhood on the whole,"—"amiable, good people,"—"so much friendly feeling,"—"and, really, a considerable sprinkling of talent." But the monotony of praise so general was soon relieved by a few remarks of a more personal and individual character; and, at the end of an immoderately long visit, it was not the fault of Mr. and Miss Brandenberry if the heiress was not left with the conviction, that the neighbourhood was quite good enough to make it answer to visit them and give them parties; but that, although there was a good

deal of wealth among them, there was hardly a family in the county, except, indeed, the Brandenberrys themselves, whose ancestry could strictly bear examination.

It would be attributing an almost unnatural degree of shrewdness to a girl of twenty, brought up, too, for the most part in great retirement, if it were asserted that all this information was taken at its exact worth by Sophia. But though, strictly speaking, this could hardly be the case, it was more nearly so than would be likely to happen half a dozen times out of a hundred. Nor was the admiration for herself, so frankly expressed by the brother and sister, the part least clearly understood. Rarely was her estate, or her house, or her plate, or her funded property, long absent from the mind of Sophia Martin Thorpe; and though she certainly saw nothing impossible, or even very surprising, in a gentleman's falling in love with her; and though she knew particularly well that she had a small hand, a very little foot, and hair that curled naturally, she still thought that it was most likely Mr. Brandenberry was hoping to catch the heiress. But she had no objection to this in any way: she did not think at all the worse of him for considering the acquisition of property as the first object in life,—and complacently remembered that she was not obliged to accept him, or anybody else, merely because they offered to her; no, not even if they really did fall in love with her, while thinking chiefly of her fortune . . . . It was their business to take care of themselves, and her business to take care of herself; and she was determined never to quarrel with anybody merely because they said they had fallen in love with her. "That would be quarrelling with one's bread and butter," thought she, as she sat down to her *nice* dinner, after the above-mentioned visit, "and there is nothing so silly as that;" and as this droll little illustration passed through her head, she smiled at her own wit, and set about helping herself to her carrot-soup with a very pleasant expression of countenance.

CHAPTER XIX.

Miss Martin Thorpe had said no more than the truth when she told Mr. and Miss Brandenberry that she had been very busy. The fitting up of her two rooms, with all the contrivances to make them both splendid and cheap, had really left her little leisure for anything else. Yet it was impossible to go on without hiring a butler, and there was another housemaid to be inquired about. The places of dairymaid and kitchenmaid were preferments which, she assured Mrs. Barnes, might be bestowed in most unobjectionable plurality upon one and the same individual; for Miss Martin Thorpe had a peculiar dislike to having a house crammed full of servants; and as to a laundrymaid, she had, for the present, dismissed the difficult inquiry from her thoughts; it being much better, where there was a mixed family, to put the washing out, and then each party could pay for their own.

All these troublesome but necessary affairs had from day to day prevented her sending a message she had determined on, to her lawyer, Mr. Westley, requesting that he would come and dine with her for the purpose of talking over a matter of business concerning the estate. But, at length, she felt sufficiently at liberty to put her intention in execution; the invitation was sent and accepted, and Mrs. Barnes ordered to prepare a *genteel* dinner for two, but to omit the preserved ginger at the dessert.

The gentleman arrived very punctually at the hour appointed; the dinner followed immediately, and employed both lady and gentleman agreeably enough till the servants had quitted the room; when, feeling that it was time their idle conversation should cease, Miss Martin Thorpe spoke as follows:

"I have requested to see you, Mr. Westley, for the purpose of asking you a few questions respecting the cottage-residence situated in my shrubberies, and, in fact, within a few hundred yards of my house. It is a very pretty place, but if I can get no rent for it, it appears to me that the best thing I can do would be to pull it down, and sell the materials."

"I don't know but it might, Miss Martin Thorpe, replied the man of business. "But I suppose you know that we have no right to come upon it, as long as old Arthur Giles lives?"

"No right to come upon a part of my own property, and within a stone's throw of my own dwelling-house?" said Sophia, her brows taking the ominous bend which they always assumed when displeased.

"By 'come upon it,' I don't mean standing, or stepping, or walking over it," replied Mr. Westley. "But we can't come upon it, to let it to any other than Arthur Giles; and still less, as a matter of course, could we pull it down."

"Very extraordinary, and very unwarrantable, I think. No one should make provisions and arrangements calculated to be so exceedingly inconvenient to those who come after them," said Miss Martin Thorpe, with a good deal of genuine feeling. "Such a house as that is perfectly absurd for an old groom to live in. Are you quite sure, sir, that it is actually settled upon this old man for his life?"

"The deed has been regularly registered, Miss Martin Thorpe, and I have all the documents very safely stowed in my office, together with the settlement of the annuity of one hundred pounds, which, as well as the house, goes to his old wife after him, if she should happen to survive. I am sorry that you seem to have taken a dislike to its standing, because I am afraid that nothing can be done in the matter."

"I have taken no dislike to its standing, if I could get a fair rent for it, Mr. Westley. I am sure, with the burdens I have upon me—the whole of my guardian's family to be supported at my expense during my minority . . . . and everything for housekeeping so difficult to get that one is obliged to send to London for it—I am sure with all this, I shall find the income allowed me hardly enough for my wants, and twenty pounds a year—a fair rent for such a house as that—would be a great convenience."

"Why, as to that, I think, Miss Martin Thorpe, that you will find

yourself able to get on without embarrassment. It is counted a cheap county, and if you like to keep it up, you have everything exceedingly convenient about the place for providing a large family. I should hope my old acquaintance, Mrs. Barnes, would, for the most part, be able to manage without sending to London."

"You are mistaken, I assure you, sir. There are many articles which *I* cannot do without, for which I am absolutely obliged to send at a great expense to London. But there is no use in entering upon the discussion of this question. I am afraid, too, there is no use in detaining you any longer. If you like to take a cup of coffee before you set off on your return, you will find some in the drawing-room." And so saying, the young lady rose and left the room.

It appeared that Mr. Westley did *not* wish to take any coffee, for she saw no more of him that evening; and, left to her own meditations, she conceived a project by which she thought it possible to obtain the dislodgment of old Arthur Giles, without going to law with him about it. Accordingly, on the following morning, she made the old man a visit. It was the second he and his good woman had received from her; the first having been one of rather sharp questionings, and ending with no very affectionate feelings on either side. But now the young lady of the land entered the pretty dwelling with much more civility of manner, and bade the old couple "good day," in a voice almost as gentle as that in which she used to address her late dear and ever-to-be-lamented uncle.

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Giles, about the roof of your house," she said. "They tell me that it is getting sadly out of repair; and, by what I hear, the whole building is likely enough to come down about your ears. It strikes me that it would be a deal better, and more comfortable for you and good Mrs. Giles, to get rid of it at once. I will agree to give you five pounds a year towards getting a snug little place in the village, and then you will have no farther trouble about it; but otherwise, you know, I shall be obliged to require of you, that it shall be put in a state of substantial repair; for you are only life tenants, and at your deaths the tenement must be restored to the estate, which it certainly cannot be, if it tumbles down."

"I don't think as there is any need as yet for you to make yourself uneasy, miss, about the safety of the building," replied Arthur Giles, composedly, "and I can't say as I feels any particular inclination to change. When one gets used to a place, miss, it don't seem comfortable to quit; though, for the matter of the five pounds, I am all one your debtor as much as if I was agreed to take it."

Miss Martin Thorpe stood knocking some bits of gravel from her neat boot with the point of her parasol, an implement not yet wanted to shelter her from the sun, but which she always carried about in her hand, when she walked, for the sake of preserving her third-best bonnet from any shower that might happen to fall while she was employed in her favourite task of "looking about her."

Easy as Miss Martin Thorpe usually found it to reply to any words uttered by one decidedly her inferior (excepting, heretofore, her cousin Algernon), she was now exceedingly at a loss what to say to Arthur

Giles. In fact, she felt a very particular degree of dislike and ill-will to both the old man and his wife, which it was more easy, perhaps, to explain to herself than to find any reasonable excuse for expressing to them.

She might, indeed, have said, "Why do you both fix your cold old eyes upon me?" for she felt that they were both looking at her pretty earnestly, and she felt, too, that they were both, in their contumacious old hearts, analysing her motives for saying that their pretty house was going to tumble down. So, after the pause of a minute or two, she turned herself about, and walked away briskly; not very desirous, perhaps, of overhearing the words that might be next spoken by those she had left. But the old couple were very civilly cautious, and it was only when her short sharp step on the gravel could no longer be heard, that the old man indulged in a hearty laugh, and the old woman echoed him.

"She won't set fire to the place, will she, husband, for the sake of getting quit of us?" said the merry old woman.

"Why no, Molly, I don't think she'll do that, because, when she comes to calculate a bit, she'll find that she'd be out of pocket if she did."

* * * * * *

About a week after this unprofitable visit, Miss Martin Thorpe read in the county paper an advertisement announcing an Easter ball at Hereford, and containing some of the first names in the county as stewards. This at length produced the letter which she had hitherto so often invented reasons for postponing; and her guardian and his family were informed, in as civil words as she could bring herself to use, that her house was now free from workmen, and that she was ready to receive them. This lagging letter received an immediate answer, announcing that Major and Mrs. Heathcote, Florence, and the two little boys, would be with her on the day week that they had received her summons. For, luckily, Bamboo Cottage was let, furnished, and the tenant ready to enter.

On receiving this definitive document, she sent for Mrs. Barnes, and informed her on what day this long-announced arrival would take place.

"Shall you choose, ma'am, to walk into the rooms, and inspect them yourself?" demanded Mrs. Barnes, with an air of profound respect.

"Oh dear no, Mrs. Barnes," was the prompt reply. "I feel confident that I can trust to you to see that everything is as it should be" . . . . and the heiress almost smiled at the idea of any human being's thinking it necessary that she should leave her elegant sitting-room, and trot about the garrets, to see that there was a sufficient quantity of soap and towels for those dearly-beloved Heathcotes.

But Mrs. Barnes, though graver than any judge while she remained in the presence of her mistress, did more than half smile when she reached her own dominions, and found niece Nancy there alone, for she laughed outright. "See if I bean't up to her, Nancy, after all," said the greatly-delighted housekeeper. "She's a deal too grand a lady, and God be praised for it! to look after the rooms that these poor dear Heathcote folks are to be packed into: and if I don't play her a trick, may I never touch a penny of my annuity. But you shall

neither meddle nor make in it, Mrs. head housemaid, and then the blame can fall nowhere but in the right place, if it should chance to happen that I am found out. So mind, if you please, that you have got the east parlour to look after this morning, and you had best go, perhaps, and ask madam some question about it, to show how you are employed. That parlour is to be their constant living-room, she says; so 'tis ten to one but she'll have some invention to make it uncomfortable. Sunshine, however, costs nothing, so I don't suppose she'll order the blinds to be fastened up immovable, and she can't easy spoil the room without that."

"And what is the scheme you are upon, aunt, if I may be so bold?" said the upper housemaid.

"Never you mind, girl . . . . However, as I told you her orders, when she gave 'em, 'tis as well you should know how I intends to obey 'em. You remember the smoky room that I told you was for the major and his lady?" Nancy nodded. "Well, then . . . . I'll be hanged if they shall sleep there," resumed the resolute annuitant.

"Why, aunt, you don't mean to bring them downstairs, do you, and then fancy that missis won't find it out?"

"No, Miss Nancy. I won't bring 'em downstairs, that is, not the major and his lady, because I don't want to make a blow up, and because I can make 'em very comfortable without. But this is what I'll do. I'll have the bed out of the green room, as the Welsh squire slept in, put upstairs in the south room, that the young Spencers had, and there the chimney draws as well as in our pretty lady's own sitting-room. . . . . I'll move the two little beds that's there into the big room that she was for turning her guardian into, and there the little boys shall sleep, and Betty shall have the room next 'em; and it is she shall wash 'em and dress 'em. My master's own niece, pretty cretur—Miss Florence, I mean—shan't be kept to no such slavery, if I can find a way to help it. Well, I haven't done yet with my improvements. The small room that her kind cousin fixed upon for her, I means to make a dressing-room of for the major, and there's a chimney as draws well there, too, and though it's not over cold just now, the major and his lady shall both have fires blazing for 'em, you see if they don't."

"And where is Miss Florence to sleep, aunt?" demanded Nancy, looking considerably alarmed.

"In the same room she had in my master's time, and no other," replied Mrs. Barnes.

"Oh, my goodness! If she was to find you out, how long do you think you'd have to stop here, aunt?"

"As long as I want to stop, niece Nancy. Don't you be after troubling yourself about me. If she likes to keep you on, and you likes to stay, that will prove the difference between us, girl, quite sufficient to make you a favourite; but if so be as your heart turns sick at her ways as bad as mine do, why then I'll take care of ye one way or another, never you fear."

The courage to put all this in operation was not wanting on the part of the old housekeeper, and very sufficient opportunity was afforded for it by her young mistress; for she had determined to walk

through the woods, with her page for her guide, to the dwelling of her friends the Brandenberry's, as much needful information still remained to be acquired respecting the ball. The visiting between them had hitherto been but rare on the part of Sophia, as she had never yet got to them without the expense of post-horses; but, on this occasion, she was determined to discover whether she could not enjoy an intercourse so useful and agreeable without this heavy tax. The affair of the key still remained unsettled, but the approach of the Heathcotes seemed to open her heart, and her doors also, to her new friends, and she *almost* made up her mind to promise them this great favour in the course of this visit, provided she still found them as agreeable as before.

Soberly meditating on this, and on other points of equal importance to her own dear self, she walked, for the first time, through her lovely woods, as unconscious of all pleasure from their beauty as if she had been stone-blind. At length, however, she came upon an object that awakened all her attention, and at once recalled her from meditations on keys and balls, and neighbouring bachelors and distant baronets, to the scene before her. This object was a magnificent oak-tree, around which space had been cleared in all directions to give fair play to its giant arms, "as it stood in its pride alone," and had so stood, like the sylvan hero of the glorious song,

"For a hundred years or more."

Sophia remained stationary for a minute or two, with her eyes fixed upon it.

"Even she can't pass master's old darling, without a look," thought Jem; "and no wonder, to be sure, for he's a king of a tree."

Miss Martin Thorpe, also, was mentally uttering a soliloquy at the same moment. "As soon as I am of age that tree shall come down," thought she; "it must be worth many pounds." And from this moment, the present walk, and all future ones that led her through her woods, became exceedingly interesting; for she took to spying out all the large trees, of which, to her extreme satisfaction, she found great abundance, and, in her heart, condemned them every one to the axe.

She found her friend, Miss Brandenberry, seated with her venerable mother in a large old-fashioned parlour, the stone mullions of its one bay-window casting almost as much shade as its narrow panes did light. The old lady was knitting a stocking, and the younger darning one; but this last was, with equal skill and rapidity, lodged beneath the cushion of her chair the instant the rough-clad hind who acted as porter opened the door and announced "Miss Martin Thorpe."

"Tell my brother! . . . . Let my brother know!" . . . . were words which burst forth before Miss Brandenberry could sufficiently recover herself from her joyous surprise to offer any other salutation; but, when this was spoken, she threw her long figure forward, and, with one prodigious step, reached the approaching heiress, and all but took her in her arms.

"What joy! . . . . what happiness!" she exclaimed, remembering,

with something nearly approaching anguish, as she spoke, the extremely far from new or clean cap which she had on her head, and the faded and otherwise unpresentable condition of her old silk gown. But, notwithstanding this inward torment, she Spartan-like concealed every symptom of suffering, and reiterated the expression of her delight in every phrase that unbounded admiration and devoted affection could inspire. Then, going close to the ear of her mother, she screamed, with all the power of her lungs, "Miss Martin Thorpe, ma'am! Miss Martin Thorpe, of Thorpe-Combe!"

The poor old lady "took to shaking," as the Western Americans express it when an ague seizes them, but it was entirely from joy. Notwithstanding her age, she had still all her wits, if not all her senses, about her, and was as wide awake as either of her offspring could be to the obvious fact, that it was equally possible her son should marry the heiress as for any one else to do it. With some difficulty she contrived to rise and advance a step or two to meet the thrice-welcome guest, for which effort she was rewarded by Sophia's saying, "How d'ye do, ma'am," and then retreating to the most distant point the room permitted. But for this the old lady cared not a farthing; wholly intent upon one object, she kept retreating, as, by the help of laying her hand from step to step upon the table, she hobbled back to her place, "Your brother, Margaret! where is your brother, my dear? Why don't you send for your brother, child?"

Sophia was neither deaf nor blind to any of these indications of joy and gladness at the sight of her, nor, in the least degree, at a loss to comprehend their meaning: but she still continued to reason, as she had done at first, that it could do her no possible harm, that it might amuse her, and that if anybody who hoped to get her for the sake of her fortune were to end by falling in love with her, they must make up their minds to bear it. In short, she repeated to her heart, that she should take care of *herself*, and they must take care of *themselves*.

It was, therefore, with as much cordiality as it was in her nature to show, that she received Miss Brandenberry's enthusiastic welcome; but as to the poor old lady, she could not be useful to her in any way, and if she ever forgot anything, she would have forgotten that she was in the room.

"And have you really walked, dear, dear Miss Martin Thorpe! . . . . What condescension! what excessive kindness! . . . . And you look so elegant, too, that nobody in the world would believe you had walked an inch. Richard says, and I am sure it is as true as truth itself, that this county has never seen such perfection of elegance as now inhabits Thorpe-Combe. . . . Poor dear Richard! My dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, do you know, I cannot help being rather uneasy about my brother. I don't know whether you have observed it, but he certainly is excessively altered within the last month or six weeks. He is no more like what he used to be, than nothing. He looks, *I* think, wonderfully thin and pale for him, and *so* absent, poor fellow, that I sometimes think his long-descended old mansion-house might be burnt to cinders above his head, without his ever finding it out."

"I hope you are mistaken, Miss Brandenberry, about your brother's

being ill, for I am come here to-day on purpose to consult with you both about the Easter ball at Hereford," said Sophia.

"You don't say so, Miss Martin Thorpe?" exclaimed Miss Brandenberry, almost gasping with ecstasy. "Richard will be wild with joy! He is such a dancer! I have been told that, even in Paris, he would be thought more of, in that way, than almost any Englishman ever was before. But, to be sure, he is the very strangest young man! . . . . for, would you believe it, Miss Martin Thorpe, notwithstanding his passion for dancing and his quite-out-of-the-common-way perfection in it, I have heard him declare, hundreds and hundreds of times, that if he could not get a partner he cared about, he would rather not dance at all; and there are so few people that he can persuade himself to be tolerably civil to, that the chances are always ten to one against his ever meeting with a partner he likes. Oh! Richard, poor dear fellow! . . . . is quite out of the common way, I promise you. I believe people of very old family *are*, in general, more particular about whom they talk and dance with, and all that sort of thing, than others; at least, I know it is the case with Richard."

"But you do not think he is too ill to go to this ball, do you, Miss Brandenberry?"

"Oh! good gracious, no! . . . . The very name of it, especially if he hears you speak of it, will drive him half wild with delight. Richard has so much animation! especially when anything touches his feelings. . . . . But, for God's sake! dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, never let him find out that I have ever named him to you. He is the very best son and brother that ever was born upon the earth; but, nevertheless, I am perfectly sure, that if he found out I had ever indulged my feelings, by naming him in your presence, he never would permit me to speak to him again. He would not, I give you my word and honour; so, for goodness' sake, never betray me."

"No, certainly, I will not betray you," replied the grave Sophia, rather solemnly. "But I want you to tell me what is the proper way of applying for tickets? Whether I ought to apply to the stewards, or only send to the inn? I should prefer sending to the stewards, if it is the custom for any one to do it, because, of course, it would be much more agreeable not to go, for the first time, into a room like that quite unexpectedly."

"Of course! Oh dear me! . . . . Of course! But if you will take my advice, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, you will put the whole business into Richard's hands. He is the person of all others to manage it exactly in the proper way. I have no doubt that he would take his horse at once, and ride round the whole neighbourhood,—Richard knows everybody in the county, almost; and he would take care to make it generally known that Miss Martin Thorpe, of Thorpe-Combe, was going to make her first public appearance at the county Easter ball, provided tickets were immediately sent her. That would be the only right and proper manner of doing it; and then you will find that everybody of the slightest fashion in the neighbourhood will take good care to be there to meet you."

"I think that *will* be the proper way," replied Sophia, compla-

cently; "and I shall be much obliged to your brother if he will undertake it for me."

"Obliged? . . . . Oh! if he could hear you! . . . . I should like to know what there is that he *could* do for you, that he would endure to hear called an obligation! . . . . Poor dear Richard! I cannot help thinking of his ecstasy when he hears that he shall meet you at this ball! . . . . It is odd enough, but perhaps it was at the *very* moment you were deciding upon it that the enthusiastic creature was saying—only yesterday, by the bye—that he had never seen but one perfectly-beautiful foot in his life. I have no business to repeat his words . . . . but I leave you to guess whose he meant."

While this was passing in the bay-windowed parlour, Mr. Brandenberry was making the most of the advantage which accident had given him over his sister. His dirty fishing-jacket was changed for his best frock-coat, a coloured cotton neckcloth for a black satin one; shining boots were substituted for rusty shoes; and his hair arranged with that nice care which forty years not unfrequently renders necessary. All this certainly took time; nevertheless, just at the moment at which his sister gave Miss Martin Thorpe leave to guess whose foot was thought perfectly beautiful, he made his appearance in the parlour.

Hardly was he permitted to add a word to the profound bow which he performed over the kindly-extended hand of Sophia, before his sister, in the chirruping accents of excessive glee, exclaimed, "My dearest Richard! You know not what there is in store for you! . . . . Do you remember a certain conversation about a certain foot?"

Whether dearest Richard remembered any such conversation or not, he remembered the talents of his excellent sister; and turning away his grey eyes from the face on which they had been fixed, exclaimed with great feeling, "Be quiet, Margaret!"

"Quiet? . . . . Richard! Richard! . . . . When will *you* be quiet again, when I tell you that Miss Martin Thorpe intends going to the Easter ball?"

"Is this true? Do not let this wicked girl put such visions into my head if they are to prove only baseless fabrics, dearest Miss Martin Thorpe! Of all the things that *could* happen, this is the one I have been the most ardently wishing for! Tell me, is it true?"

"I have thought of it, certainly," replied Sophia, sedately, but not without some consciousness that her foot *did* look very small, as it rested upon the footstool which Miss Brandenberry had assiduously placed before her. "I have been thinking of it ever since I saw the advertisement in the county paper, and I have walked over this morning to ask you and your sister to give me some information about it."

"Walked over! . . . . Gracious Heaven! Is it possible? . . . . To consult us? Oh! Miss Martin Thorpe!" and Mr. Brandenberry clasped his hands together, and seemed at a loss to decide on which theme to bestow his rapture first. But Sophia, who never forgot the business she had in hand, recalled him to his senses by repeating, word for word, all she had said to his sister respecting the necessity of making her intentions in favour of the county, generally known to

the inhabitants thereof. No two testimonies could agree together better than those of the brother and sister on this point. The gentleman, as eagerly as the lady had done, declared the felicity he should feel in being permitted to gallop over the county to proclaim the glorious tidings; but in his case this was rendered greatly more effective by the judicious addition of various symptoms of agitation which would have been out of place in hers. Sophia, as usual, saw and understood it all; and she liked it very well. She expected, and perhaps intended, to be an object of pursuit to a great many gentlemen; and here was one of them quite ready to prove that she was not mistaken.

She thanked him, therefore, as distinctly as she had thanked his sister; and when in return he said, "May I dare to hope for the honour and still greater happiness of your hand, Miss Martin Thorpe, ..." and here stopped short, and, looking rather wild and absent, emitted a sigh; but almost immediately recovering himself, added, ... "for the first quadrille?" When he said this, she replied, "I shall be very happy, Mr. Brandenberry," in quite as obliging a tone as she had ever spoken to him.

After this she rose to take her leave. "You are not unattended, Miss Martin Thorpe?" he said, while his obedient eyes spoke all the anxiety he intended to testify for her reply. "No, Mr. Brandenberry; I have my page with me," uttered with a good deal of dignity, cost him another sigh; but here again he recovered himself quickly, and leaving the room to seek his hat, while she received the elaborate adieus of his sister, he stood ready at the Gothic porch of the old mansion to convey her respectfully to its garden-gate. But by the time this barrier was reached, he had got into so eloquent a description of the effect which he knew her approaching appearance would make throughout the county, that he thoughtlessly passed through it without taking his leave; nor did he cease to talk till they reached the little wire gate which formed the only separation between Miss Martin Thorpe's woods and Miss Martin Thorpe's lawn.

"Good heaven! . . . . Is it possible I have got thus far? I had no idea of passing beyond my own gates. This is absolute bewitchment," he added, laughing, "for I am engaged to accompany my sister Margaret to a dinner-party at the house of one of our most distinguished neighbours; and how to get back in time to dress, if I go round by the road, I know not. May I not exclaim almost in the words of Macbeth?

> "Who can be wise, enchanted, temperate, and happy,
> Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man.
> The expedition of my violent . . . .
> Outran the pauser reason."

These words were uttered with animated but laughing vehemence; and, the word "love," at the end of the third line, so slurred over as to be rather felt than heard. So there was no reason why Miss Martin Thorpe should be displeased, neither was she, as it seemed; for without any indication whatever of being at all flattered by it, in any way, she put out her hand in token of friendly farewell, saying, "Good morning, Mr. Brandenberry. I hope you will get back in time."

"But the door! the fatal door!" he exclaimed, as he still held her hand. "Alas! I cannot win my way through the keyhole; neither can I leap it. May I ask you to have the excessive kindness to lend me your key?"

Now Miss Martin Thorpe had not, as may be perceived above, any objection whatever to Mr. Brandenberry's falling in love with her, nor did she feel herself in any way called upon to take any measures to prevent it; but she did not like giving him the key of her shrubbery. It was not that she anticipated, or feared, any indiscreet use of it on his part; she was quite able to take care of herself, and not at all afraid of Mr. Brandenberry. But a key was a part of her property; the giving it for his use would be sharing with another what was now entirely her own, and she did not approve this. But, nevertheless, she liked Mr. Brandenberry very well, and decidedly thought him agreeable; so she said, "My page shall return with you to the door, Mr. Brandenberry, and let you through."

"A thousand thanks!" said the judicious gentleman, bowing gaily, and turning to retrace his steps, with the page, having the precious key upon his finger, striding after him.

But ere they had achieved three paces, Sophia, who was most exceedingly hungry, remembered that her stately butler had made it an express condition of his taking service at Thorpe-Combe, that Jem should assist in laying the cloth, and the idea that she should have to wait while the boy accompanied Mr. Brandenberry, and returned, was more than she could bear; therefore, turning briskly round, and raising her shrill small voice so as to be distinctly heard, she said:—

"I believe, Mr. Brandenberry, that it will be better for you to take the key yourself, this time. You will be so kind as to send it back again this evening, will you?"

The gentleman, who had darted back the instant he heard the voice, received the ungracious favour with a happy smile; and once more pronouncing "Farewell!" set off at a brisk trot through the admired premises, muttering some wayward fancies about not caring a split straw how ugly or how odious their possessor might be, provided she would bestow herself upon him, for better, for worse, and perfectly prepared so far to reverse the order of the ceremony which he desired to go through with her, as to promise on his part to honour and obey, provided that in return she would covenant with all her earthly goods to him endow.

CHAPTER XX.

At length the day arrived which the heiress had fixed for the arrival of her guardian and his family at Thorpe-Combe. The major, his lady, Florence, and the two little boys, came closely packed in a post-chaise, the greater part of their luggage being left to follow by a waggon which would bring it as far as Hereford. Fortunately the day was as fine a one as ever April gave; and therefore, with all the windows open, the party were much less incommoded than they had been, when, with

the two long legs of Algernon, instead of the four short ones of the little boys, they made the same journey the preceding Christmas.

The two little ones, the elder eight, the younger five years old, were in ecstasies, as they drove through the pretty paddock, and reached the bright-looking esplanade before the door; but even the youngest of their three companions had enough on her mind to make her silent, if not sad—the major thought of old Thorpe, and his young heiress, with no very gay feelings; and Mrs. Heathcote, though one of the last women in the world to "take up sorrow at interest," as her husband called it, could not quite prevent herself from thinking still more at that moment, perhaps, than she had ever done before, that Sophia Martin was not exactly the girl, of all others, that she should best like to have for the mistress of the house she was to live in, instead of her own, for the next twelvemonth.

Neither of the three spoke from the time they passed through the Lodge-gates, till their rattling vehicle had drawn up to the steps of the handsome entrance; then, as Major Heathcote gave his hand to his daughter, after depositing his two sons on the gravel, he said, "You look pale, Florence."

"Do I?" she answered, with an inaudible sigh, but a visible smile. "I suppose the drive has tired me; but it was very pleasant, too."

In another moment they were within the hall, and the stately butler ushered them, according to the orders he had received, into the east parlour. It was vacant, the heiress not having deemed it necessary to descend from her private drawing-room to receive them.

Perhaps, at the moment, this was a relief both to Florence and her stepmother—for both remembered the pleasant room as the scene of Sir Charles Temple's first acquaintance with them; and every object in it recalled to Florence the charm, the delight, the indefinable pleasure, his conversation, his reading, his kindness, had occasioned her, so that their first emotions on re-entering the eventful house were decidedly agreeable.

But with the major it was far otherwise. When he came in, after paying the post-boy, and seeing the luggage removed, leading a pretty boy in each hand, he certainly expected to find his ward ready to welcome them; and a look more expressive of displeasure than was often seen upon his countenance, succeeded to the good-humoured smile with which he had entered.

"Where is your mistress, Jem?" said he to the page, whom he instantly recognised as the lad who had waited upon Algernon during the Christmas visit, notwithstanding his buttons.

"She is in her own drawing-room, sir," replied the lad very civilly, and looking very much as if he felt ashamed to say so.

"Her *own* drawing-room, my lad?" repeated Major Heathcote. . . . "Of course I know perfectly well that the drawing-room is her own . . . and I will go to her there, if you please. It is nonsense showing us into one room when your mistress is in another." And so saying he approached the door of the apartment which he had known as "the drawing-room" during his former visit.

"My mistress is not there, sir," said the boy; "she is in her drawing-room upstairs."

"Then show me to the drawing-room upstairs," said the major. Had not Jem on one or two other occasions, and twice in the case of visits from Mr. and Miss Brandenberry, shown people into this new drawing-room, he would not now have so readily ventured to obey the command of Major Heathcote; but having received no orders to the contrary, he did precisely the thing which his young mistress would most particularly have desired he should not do . . . . . that is to say, he showed her guardian the way to the room into which it was her firm resolve that neither himself nor any of his family should ever enter.

* * * * * *

Nothing, in fact, could have been more irksomely disagreeable to the feelings of the heiress than being put under the authority of Major Heathcote at all. The circumstances under which he had found her, when his generous heart had offered her an asylum in his own family, were such as it wounded her spirit to the very quick to remember . . . . . Most assuredly she would have preferred being the ward of any man living, during the short yet hated period of her minority (that is, provided always that her dear property would have been as secure as she certainly believed it would be now), than of Major Heathcote; and the idea of making herself a ward in Chancery, which process she had happened to hear of in the case of a friend of her father's, had more than once occurred to her. But a sort of instinctive shrewdness made her fear that the doing this might be attended with trouble, expense, and possibly with *blame from the world*, on account of that very kindness which it was so painful to her to remember. Now this terror of blame from the world took the same place in her estimation which the whole code of moral laws holds in that of most other people. It was to her both law and gospel; and rather than abide its penalty she would certainly have submitted to a few months' residence under the same roof with his Satanic majesty. After some secret struggles, therefore, she took her part, as the French phrase goes, and determined to adhere to it, let her hate it as much as she might. Having come to this decision, she next set her wits to work to discover the mode and manner of going on, by which she should suffer the least during the time the infliction was to last. And here again she found herself obliged to make a sort of battle-field of her mind, on which different feelings might struggle and fight till such time as one should be proved the strongest. In other words, she set about considering whether it would be more painful to sacrifice her newly-acquired importance, by remaining a member of Major Heathcote's family . . . . while her beloved money accumulated during the suffering process; or . . . . to sacrifice many and many a precious pound, in order to obtain at once the keen delight of being mistress of herself, of her house, of her servants, of her ox, of her ass, and of everything that was hers. The last temptation carried it . . . . Sordid avarice bowed before paltry pride, and she *generously* made the proposal, which Sir Charles Temple persuaded Major Heathcote to accept. This settled, she felt that she was about to give an enormous price for a favourite indulgence, and the only way to make it answer was to extract as much enjoyment from it as possible. It was

for this reason that the new sitting-room had been arranged, and that the Heathcote party had been shoved up into the garrets and out of sight. In a word, though she knew she must pay for that as well as for her preserved ginger, she determined to make up her mind to the expense rather than lose the gratification, and flattered herself that she possessed enough of firmness and enough of skill to do everything she liked to do without putting it in the power of the world to abuse lier, and without ever having to reproach herself with having spent her money for nothing.

* * * * * *

When Major Heathcote, therefore, entered her sitting-room, the reception he met was perfectly civil; though, had his receiver's will been autocratic law, it is probable that he would very speedily have been tumbled, head and heels, out of the window.

"How do you do, Major Heathcote?" she said, advancing to meet, and even to shake hands with him. "I should have come down to you in a moment, only I was just looking over the last week's accounts. I will go with you now, if you please, to see Mrs. Heathcote, and my cousin Florence, and the children. I hope they have shown you all into the east parlour; it is a very pretty room, and I mean that it shall be considered as entirely belonging to your family while you stay with me. I have taken the bed out of this room, on purpose that I might have a quiet place for myself, to get through my business, without my interrupting anybody or anybody's interrupting me."

Sophia moved rather briskly towards the door as she said this, and having reached it, passed out, but held the handle of the lock in her hand till her guardian should have passed out too. He did not make her wait long; yet he could not, for the life of him, help lingering, for a minute or two, to look round the brilliant apartment, which was not only quite new to him, but in a style of modern arrangement so perfectly unlike the rich and antiquated stiffness of the rest of the house, that he felt a degree of astonishment that he had no power to conceal. He had too much tact, however, to say a word about it; but following Sophia in silence to the east parlour, had the satisfaction of seeing her touch his wife's hand with two of her fingers, and his daughter's cheek with the tip of her nose, while to the two boys, who ventured to come forward and look up in her face, she condescended to say, "How do you do, Frederic?" and "How do you do, Stephen?"

Florence had the greatest possible inclination to laugh. Without meditation upon it, either with reprobation or resentment, she perceived that Cousin Sophy was much too grand to be very intimate with her; and there was something so solemn and consequential, yet, despite of this, so familiar to her eyes, in the features, gait, and voice of the little heiress, that she felt there was comedy in it, and felt too that she was really thankful Algernon was not there to burlesque the comedy into a farce, too ludicrous to be sustained with the decorum and gravity necessary for the occasion. How far the dear consciousness which lay warmly nestled in her heart, that though Cousin Sophy did not choose to treat her as an equal, there was somebody

else who did,—how far this remembrance contributed to convert into sport what was in itself exceedingly disagreeable, there are no means of knowing; but it is certain that good Mrs. Heathcote (notwithstanding the perennial flow of good-humour, which was as inseparable from her as the laughing eyes in her head), did not feel quite as much at her ease as did her stepdaughter. The receiving a visitor at her own house, even for half an hour, and without their having any particular claim upon her, was never performed by her without a cordial wish on her part that they should be made to feel themselves welcome. But now, though she was so puzzled and mystified by the whole style and manner of the thing, that she felt afraid of blundering by any interpretation she might put upon it, she felt pretty sure that they were not welcome at all. She looked at her two little boys each standing abashed with his little cap between his hands, and felt ready to cry. Her own home, though not very elegant, had ever been a cheerful one, and this cold entrance into one, so every way different, chilled her to the heart. Fortunately for all parties her husband saw how it was with her; and half a dozen wise and excellent feelings, of which pride perhaps was one, urged him to get his dear little wife through this cold-bath-like sort of reception, without permitting the shivering-fit consequent upon it to be visible. He therefore spoke with more than usual hilarity of tone, as he said, "Well, Poppsy dear, this is a beautiful room, isn't it? . . . . and you will like to have a run upon that pretty lawn, boys, won't you? . . . . But I suppose you dine at six o'clock, Sophy, and if so, we must not stand amusing ourselves with your pretty garden, but go and dress directly."

"A word in season, how good is it," says a great authority. This word of Major Heathcote's was in most excellent season; for not only did it cheer his wife, but it acted upon the mind of his ward in the most favourable manner imaginable. Though incapable perhaps of comprehending very clearly anything about warm-heartedness, or cordial kindness of temper, Miss Martin Thorpe was not wholly insensible to the fact that she was receiving her relations rather scurvily. But, on the whole, she thought it was decidedly better to do so, than to compromise any portion of her own individual interest or comfort by doing otherwise. Had Mrs. Heathcote, therefore, begun to cry, and had the major appeared sulky, displeased, or even particularly grave, she would have hardened herself in her resolution of not caring what they thought of her, rather than let them break in upon the plots and plans she had formed to keep them at arm's length, and herself safe from every annoyance whatever. But upon perceiving that the major took it all in good part, notwithstanding he had already discovered the secret of her elegant retreat, she immediately determined to let things go smoothly, if they could, and even to be exactly as civil and polite as she possibly could venture to be, consistently with the duty which she owed to herself of keeping them all from being troublesome.

Under the influence of these ameliorated feelings, therefore, she bestowed one of her cold smiles upon her guardian, and applying her own dignified hand to the bell, said, "Yes, indeed, ... I think you

must go and dress. I will have Barnes herself in, to show you to your rooms." And Barnes herself did come in, after a very short interval, being quite determined to perform the office now assigned her, whether commanded to do so or not.

"Barnes," said the heiress, "you must take Major and Mrs. Heathcote to their rooms, and my cousin Florence to hers. . . . . I have put you quite near to your mamma, Florence, that you may be at hand if she happens to want you. Your luggage, of course, is taken up already. I suppose the little boys have dined?"

"No, we haven't," said Frederic, rather dolefully.

"No? . . . . Then one of the maids must give them something." And at that instant it occurred to Miss Martin Thorpe that in her orders respecting the accommodation of her guardian's family she had altogether overlooked the necessity of naming some place where the little boys might be permitted to perform the abomination of eating. Notwithstanding all her excellent talents for managing, she felt at a loss, and was considerably relieved, when, on whispering in the ear of Mrs. Barnes the anxious question, "Where had the children better eat?" that intelligent person replied in the same tone, "I think, ma'am, they had better have all their meals in my parlour, and then I can see that there is no harm done."

Miss Martin Thorpe then bowed politely, as she permitted the whole party, preceded by Mrs. Barnes, to pass her; nor did she follow them up the stairs till full time had been allowed for the decisive turn to be taken that led from the long sky-lit corridor on which all the principal bedrooms opened, to the side passage from which the staircase leading to the second floor ascended.

Good Mrs. Barnes felt heartily ashamed of the path in which she had to lead them. Yet she had no objection, either, that the character of her very heartily-disliked mistress should be made known to those whom it concerned. She was too well-taught a servant to volunteer any observations upon Miss Martin Thorpe to her own relations, but would have been by no means displeased by hearing such. The efforts she had made, and successfully too, for the comfort and accommodation of the Heathcote family, had not been done with any wish or intention of deluding them respecting the disposition of their niggard hostess, but purely from a desire that they should be made comfortable in spite of her.

When the party reached the side archway which led from the principal corridor, Major Heathcote stopped, although their pilot housekeeper had already passed through it.

"Are you going to take the little boys to their room, Mrs. Barnes?" said he. "Which way is our room? . . . . It is the same that we had before, I suppose?"

"Why, no, sir, it is not," replied the housekeeper, gravely. "Miss Martin Thorpe has ordered rooms to be prepared for you upstairs."

True to his determination of making the best of everything, the major did not even look at his wife, but strode onwards without uttering a word of observation.

Thanks to Mrs. Barnes, the being obliged to mount a second flight

of stairs was the worst part of the business, for most thoughtfully had everything been arranged to make them feel comfortable when they got there; and the vicinity of the large airy room allotted to her boys, perfectly reconciled Mrs. Heathcote to the elevated situation of her own. The major's snug dressing-room, too, was most commodiously within reach both of his children and his wife, so that before they had walked above three times into each of the three rooms, they began to think that it was a great deal better they should be there than sleeping below, if darling Frederic and Stephen were to be above.

"And now, Miss Heathcote, I will take you into your own room, if you please, and then I will send up the housemaid to wash the young gentlemen's hands, if they like to have it done, before she takes them down to my parlour to dinner . . . . and if you will be pleased to ring your bell, ma'am, the upper-housemaid will be ready to attend you."

All this seemed just as it ought to be; and Florence, after delaying one moment to unlock her mother's most needed boxes, and give her a kiss, followed Mrs. Barnes downstairs again, and was exceedingly well pleased to find herself installed in the same pretty room which had been appropriated to her at her last visit.

Florence, of course, had a great deal to do, as all ladies who travel without a maid must have, on reaching a house where they are to unpack and dress for dinner within half an hour. Nevertheless, she could not resist wasting a few minutes while she stood with her eyes fixed on the garden beneath her windows, in meditating on the great, great changes which had taken place since she had last looked out of that same window. The little neat, quiet, insignificant figure of Sophia Martin, as she remembered it, then rose in most startling contrast beside the image left on her mind by the same being as she had just seen her, rustling in rich silk, and stately in the consciousness of wealth and station. . . . . Then Algernon, to whom every newly-discovered gap in a hedge that gave to view a pretty landscape, had been a treasure beyond price . . . . to fancy him wandering over the Alps, and in the society of one whose attainments were able to supply the happy boy with all the precious lore he wanted. And then herself! Was it, indeed, possible that she was the affianced wife of such a being as Sir Charles Temple? A smile, bright and beautiful, came upon her sweet face as she replied to the question by saying aloud, "Yes, yes, it is all true! . . . . But it is all most passing strange." And then Florence turned to her looking-glass, and a few minutes sufficed to send her downstairs, looking, in her simple black frock, exactly as her lover would have wished to see her.

On reaching the hall Florence walked, as heretofore, to the drawing-room door, but on attempting to open it she discovered that it was locked. She stood doubtful which way to turn, when the butler came out of the dining-room, and silently opened the door of the east parlour for her to enter. Her father and step-mother were already there before her, and exactly two minutes before the butler entered to say that dinner was on the table, Miss Martin Thorpe joined them.

"You don't use the old drawing-room, then, Sophy?" said Major Heathcote, as he gave his arm to take her to the dining-room.

"No, Major Heathcote," she replied; "the furniture is extremely rich, you know, and the silk is almost as good as new; therefore I consider that it would be very extravagant to use it constantly.

"And was it to save the old drawing-room that you made the fine new one upstairs?" said he. "I am afraid that sort of saving very seldom answers."

"No, sir," she replied, with a good deal of stiffness; "I had more important reasons still for arranging the room you speak of upstairs. It is absolutely necessary for me, in order to form the habits of business that I wish to obtain, that I should have a sitting-room into which no one but myself has any privilege to enter. Without this, I should never feel for a moment that I was certain of being alone."

"And was it necessary, Sophy, to make this place of business so very smart and elegant?" said he.

The heiress coloured highly, and her first words were, "May I send you some fish, sir?" . . . . But she presently replied to him by saying, "My late respected and ever-to-be-lamented uncle Thorpe selected two rooms upstairs for his own use, while he was owner of this property. I have seen no objection in selecting for myself the same two rooms; and the only difference is, that I have taken the liberty of reversing the use made of them. I sleep in the smaller, and sit in the larger room. My uncle Thorpe did the reverse . . . . I cannot think that there is anything in this requiring reproof."

"Reproof, my dear? God bless my soul! I hope I said nothing that could be construed into reproof? I do assure you, Sophy, it was not my intention. Shall I have the pleasure of taking wine with you?"

The young lady held her glass to the butler during the time necessary to pour into it the amount of one tea-spoonful, and in the goblet thus flowing drank his health. The conversation which followed was not very continuous nor very gay. Mrs. Heathcote was chiefly occupied in comparing all she saw before her to all she had formerly seen at the same table. It would have been very unreasonable to find fault with the dinner, for there was quite enough for four people—nevertheless, it was evidently a dinner very cautiously ordered on principles of economy. The season was that of Lent, and it was probably for that reason that salt-fish made the first *entrée*. Soup there was none. A roast leg of mutton graced the bottom of the table; cabbage and potatoes made the side-dishes.

Miss Martin Thorpe appeared to her relatives to have totally lost her appetite, for she positively ate nothing but a morsel of the apple-tart which constituted the second course. Dessert there was none; nevertheless Mrs. Heathcote, bold in maternal love, and knowing, or at least believing, that her two little boys would miss too severely the daily indulgence of making their appearance after dinner, ventured to say, "May Frederic and Stephen come in as usual, Sophy?"

"If it will give you pleasure, Mrs. Heathcote, I certainly shall not refuse my consent. I will only beg you to remember, that when I have company I should wish this custom to be omitted."

So passed the first family dinner at Thorpe-Combe, after Miss Martin Thorpe had taken possession of it.

CHAPTER XXI.

THERE were many other causes besides sweet temper, which assisted the Heathcotes in the endurance of Miss Martin Thorpe and her mansion. In the first place, the country was beautiful, and it was new; for the season at which their last visit had been made showed them but little of it, and that little under an aspect as unlike what they found it now, as youth is to age and winter to spring. The major walked about, good man, from morning to night; and being a "disciple of the gentle Isaac," found much delectable occupation on the banks of the pretty stream which divided the property of Temple from that of the Combe. And then, there was an interest deep and tender, which neither papas, mammas, nor young ladies, will find it difficult to understand, which made the neighbouring territory, the noble old house, which belonged to it, its gardens, its woods, its very shade and sunshine, matters of pleasure and importance. Letters from Sir Charles Temple and Algernon had reached Clevelands a week or two before the Heathcote party left it, and besides furnishing most delightful matter for meditation, family discussion, and delicious hope, the packet contained a short, but excellent matter-of-fact document, addressed to the two old servants who were left in charge of Sir Charles Temple's old house. This document directed them to furnish Major Heathcote with whatever game he chose to order; to let the house, gardens, and grounds be open to the whole of his family, at all times and seasons; and, moreover (a clause which went very directly to the centre of Mrs. Heathcote's heart), that a sort of Belvidere banqueting-room, situated at the most beautiful part in the whole domain, should be swept and garnished for the express use and benefit of Messrs. Frederic and Stephen Heathcote, it being within easy reach of their sturdy little legs, if said little legs were permitted to trot for about a quarter of a mile along a path in the heiress's shrubbery.

Any gentleman and lady, their daughter and their two little boys, residing in so very excellent a house as that of Thorpe-Combe, must have exactly such a person as Miss Martin Thorpe for their hostess before they will be able fully to comprehend all the pleasure which the Heathcote family derived from this old banqueting-room, the lovely walks around it, and the free admission to an excellent library, that did *not* belong to the mansion that they called their home. By degrees, indeed, this beautiful room became almost their only morning dwelling-place; and Miss Martin Thorpe, ensconced in the dignified retreat of her mouse-and-rose-coloured boudoir, little guessed

how infinitely superior an apartment her harshly-treated guests had found. Nearly all Mrs. Heathcote's work-boxes and work-baskets, one by one, found themselves permanent and most commodious receptacles in the banqueting-room. To the banqueting-room the major conveyed the whole of his delicate apparatus for the manufacture of flies. To the banqueting-room every treasure over which the little boys held

—— "solely sovereign sway and masterdom,"

was carried with feelings of delight that multiplied their value a thousand-fold. And, lastly, it was in the banqueting-room that Florence's little writing-desk was established, at which she was beginning to pass some of her happiest hours, by complying with the earnest request contained in Sir Charles Temple's first letter, which implored her, by all the pretty adjurations in use among persons in their predicament, "to keep a regular registry of all she read and all she did . . . . of the walks she took, particularly when she deigned to turn her beloved footsteps towards Temple, ... and of the moments (short, of course, and far between) during which she permitted her precious thoughts to wander towards the man who adored her."

There are many young ladies, pretty thoroughly enamoured too, to whom this request would have brought nothing but embarrassment: but the "bringing up" of such must have been more artificial than that of Florence. What is called shyness is probably in all cases produced by the thoughts being too intently occupied by self. It is not self-love, exactly, but self-anxiety, which produces it. Now Florence had no such anxiety. She had never been *produced* with a view to making an effect; and no thought or feeling connected with this had ever entered her head. She loved Sir Charles Temple, ... oh, so much! . . . . And what could be so delightful as to write down for him all she thought and almost all she felt? Surely nothing! . . . . at least, as long as he was away from her.

But it is forestalling to dwell thus on all the enjoyment which Sir Charles Temple's prescient attention to their comfort procured for the whole family. The events which occurred while all this was ripening into habit must not be overlooked. The Hereford ball, the approach of which had been the ultimate signal which produced the summons to her guardian and his family, occupied the thoughts of Miss Martin Thorpe very considerably. It did not indeed prevent her giving daily attention to the quantity of bread, butter, meat, and milk, consumed by her guests, nor did she in the least degree relax her efforts to render the burden as little oppressive to her purse as possible. But, despite all this persevering attention to her domestic concerns, she was in no degree negligent in her preparations for that important epoch in her life's history,—her first presentation before the eyes of the aristocracy of the county in which her property was situated.

In all that concerned this important appearance, the counsels of Mr. and Miss Brandenberry were of the greatest convenience and utility. Mr. Brandenberry assured her that there would be no neces-

sity for her putting four post-horses to her coach, for that the Harrises, and the Pontefracts, and the Nevilles, and the Templetons, never came with more than a pair, though their places were all rather more distant from the scene of festivity than her own. He told her, too, that he thought her coachman and footman would suffice, without encumbering her rather heavy equipage with any other attendants: and, lastly, he relieved her from all anxiety about tickets, by putting into her hands a packet with a half a dozen enclosed in an envelope conveying the respectful compliments of the stewards to Miss Martin Thorpe.

But important as were all these services, they were, comparatively speaking, of nothing worth when set beside those which accident put it in the power of his sister to bestow. In one of the delightfully-long morning visits which preceded this ball, the necessity for which became so urgent that the cautious Sophia found herself actually driven by that strongest, to her, of all impulses, her own convenience, to *lend* the key of the shrubbery gate "for a little while," to her new friends; in one of these visits Miss Brandenberry happened to say, "It is very fortunate, is it not, Richard . . . . that Miss Martin Thorpe looks so particularly well in black? because, in general, deep mourning does not make a good ball-dress. But then one comfort is, that there is nothing which sets off diamonds so much. Of course, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, you mean to wear your diamonds?"

Miss Martin Thorpe coloured a little. "When I am of age," said she, "I shall consider it as a duty that I owe to myself to take care that nothing is wanting, either in my dress or equipage, which it is fitting to my station that I should have . . . . and some sort of jewelry will of course be necessary. But until I shall be in the unrestrained possession of my whole fortune, I do not mean to purchase diamonds, or anything else of the kind."

"*Purchase!* my dear Miss Martin Thorpe? Good Heaven, no!" exclaimed Miss Brandenberry, in reply. "Who that had the happiness of possessing such diamonds as you have, would ever think of buying more?"

Miss Martin Thorpe stared, and now coloured a good deal; but for some minutes remained profoundly silent, which was perfectly natural, considering the variety of thoughts that rushed upon her, and which it was absolutely necessary she should in some degree digest before she ventured to speak again.

Was it possible that diamonds really and truly made part of the treasure bequeathed to her by her ever-to-be-lamented uncle, although she had never yet seen or heard of them? Was it possible that the dear, precious gems could have been surreptitiously removed by any one? . . . . The lawyer? . . . . Major Heathcote? . . . . Sir Charles Temple? . . . . God knows! . . . . and poor Miss Martin Thorpe felt the painful truth at the very bottom of her heart . . . . God knows that it is impossible even to guess who may and who may not be trusted!

As to opening these harassing doubts to her attached friends, Mr. and Miss Brandenberry, it was wholly out of the question. Should

she confess to them that she, with all the extraordinary ability for which they had repeatedly owned, with the most unaffected candour, that they gave her credit, should she confess to them that she actually did not know whether she inherited any diamonds or not? It was not to be thought of! . . . . She was still silently struggling with these most embarrassing meditations, when it suddenly occurred to her that Mr. Westley, when he delivered to her keeping, by the direction of her two guardians, the various keys which had been placed in his hands by the careful Mrs. Barnes, had said, "These, madam, I presume, are the keys of all such repositories as contain valuables. Whatever they are,—of which I know nothing,—your guardians have authorised me to deliver them into your hands."

On receiving these keys, Sophia well remembered having shut herself up alone in what had been her uncle's bedroom, and applied them to the locks of several inlaid old cabinets, which they readily unlocked; but finding nothing but a parcel of letters which appeared to her mere lumber, she closed those she had opened, and without troubling herself, at that very busy moment, to examine the others, she ordered them to be all carefully removed together into a lumber room, while the alterations upon which her thoughts were so anxiously engaged went on.

If there were indeed any diamonds, she felt confident they must be in one of these unexplored cabinets, now restored, as very precious ornaments, to her elegant boudoir; and there they stood exactly opposite to her, while she waited with burning impatience for the departure of her friends. But it seemed to her as if they had taken root in the seats they occupied. It was in vain that, after waving the discussion upon diamonds, by saying that old-fashioned settings were only fit for old-fashioned people, it was in vain that she looked graver, and graver, and graver. It was in vain that she made short answers, or no answers at all, to all the lively and affectionate speeches they made. The crosser she looked the more passionately did they seem to admire her, and the more impossible did it appear that they could tear themselves away; till at length she suddenly rose, and with most unwonted vivacity declared that she longed so excessively for a walk that she was determined to accompany them for a short way on their road home, through the shrubberies.

Great, of course, was the delight expressed by the brother and sister at hearing this flattering, this delightful proposal; and away they went, Mr. and Miss Brandenberry exhausting the English language to find words sufficiently strong to express their happiness, and the hapless Sophia forcing herself to endure all the sickness of hope delayed, till she thought she had marched them off far enough to prevent any danger of their proposing to return. When she had reached this point, she stopped short and said, "Now, good-bye." Upon which Miss Brandenberry said, "O heavens, my dearest, dearest Miss Martin Thorpe! it is absolutely impossible that you should think of venturing back alone. Richard, of course——"

"No. I am VERY much obliged to you; but I really am not in the least afraid, to-day. Good morning, good morning! I shall be very glad to see you again to-morrow if you happen to be in the

humour for a walk. Good-bye!" and Miss Martin Thorpe separated herself from them by three backward steps.

"If the earth were this moment to open before me, and yawn in a bottomless gulph at my feet," exclaimed Mr. Brandenberry, "I would spring across it, though sure of sinking to everlasting night, rather than see you prepare to wander through these solitudes alone!"

"Oh dear me!" said poor Miss Martin Thorpe, touched a little, certainly, by his vehement eloquence, yet still sick for an uninterrupted examination of her cabinets,—"O dear me! Mr. Brandenberry! no danger whatever can happen to me in my own woods!"

"Gracious Heaven! . . . . You know not what you say! Dearest . . . . Forgive me, kindest Miss Martin Thorpe! Let me, I implore you, judge for you in this. You know not . . . . Oh! you cannot know. There ARE dangers. Oh! heavens! . . . . For such as you, there are dangers that innocence like yours can never dream of! . . . . I cannot let you go home alone. Margaret! you are within reach of our own gates, on quitting the shrubbery," and so saying, he darted after the retreating heiress, too much occupied in the construction of energetic, and as some might think even passionate phrases, to perceive how very nearly his charming companion appeared to approach the condition of the deaf and dumb.

But although too much preoccupied to be any longer capable of either speaking or hearing, Miss Martin Thorpe was not a young lady to be put aside from having her own way by the ardour of any admirer upon earth. Had it been her will and pleasure to get rid of Mr. and Miss Brandenberry by a shorter process than walking them off the premises in the manner she had done, she would have done it; and now that she began to suspect that Mr. Brandenberry intended to contrive a *tête-à-tête* in her boudoir, she was as resolutely determined that he should not enter there, as if she had greatly disliked, instead of very nearly liking, his insinuating advances. But love-making was one thing, and diamond-seeking another; and no one living could feel the difference more strongly than Miss Martin Thorpe.

"Now I must wish you good morning in good earnest," said Sophia, planting herself with her back towards a side-door that opened upon the lawn which divided the house from the shrubberies.

"It must be so?" . . . . said he, looking plaintively in her firmly-set little brown face.

"Good morning, Mr. Brandenberry," she returned; "I shall be glad to see you again to-morrow."

"May angels hover near and have you in their keeping! he exclaimed. "But oh! . . . . For heaven's sake, let me unlatch that door! Are fingers such as those made for such iron work?" . . . . And he seized the short little hand which had taken hold of the latch, and removed it. But not so did he move her resolution; no! not though he pressed the little hand, considerably harder than ever he pressed it before. Without affecting at all more disinclination to have her hand detained than at that moment she really felt, she jerked it out of his fingers in a way that left no doubt upon his mind as to its being advisable that he should let it alone for the present; so making a virtue of necessity, he let her pass, muttering just audibly,

"sweet tyrant!" and then pronouncing aloud "farewell! farewell!" he bounded from her across the lawn with the agility of a youth of eighteen.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was with no slow step that the heiress mounted the stairs to her sacred boudoir, and with no slow hand that she prepared to explore the contents of the yet unexamined cabinets. They were opened successively, and apparently in vain, for drawer after drawer presented nothing to her but multitudes of letters; among which were a few valueleless trifles, which looked like memoranda of treasured affection, but in no way resembling the dearer objects which she sought. But the heart of the fair Sophia was not doomed on this occasion to beat for nothing; neither was the word of Margaret Brandenberry to be accounted vain, false, and of no account. In one of the indescribable ins and outs of the largest of these Eastern miniature temples of mystery, the eager fingers of Miss Martin Thorpe detected the fact that there was a species of springy yielding in one part of the tortoise-shell labyrinth, which could only be explained by supposing that it *might* be removed if she could but have wit to find *how*.

People talk of the eagerness with which drowning men catch at straws; but any one who had watched the features and the fingers of the heiress, as she patted, pushed, pulled, and shook the envious pass, which, as she believed, hid from her all she most longed to see, would have acknowledged that life was not the only treasure capable of making a human soul quiver in its "fleshy nook." But description must cease when the moment arrived at which her trembling labours at length proved successful; for who can paint the joy of such a spirit as that which animated the gloating eyes of Sophia Martin Thorpe, as, for the first time of her life, she strained them open to behold diamonds . . . . that were her own?

She knew perfectly well that she had locked the door of the room, and that no human eye could share with her own the glory of that sight, unless that door was broken open, or the chimney or the windows invaded . . . . Yet she could not be contented, till she had crept with stealthy step to see that all indeed was safe, and that her deep ecstasy might be indulged without danger that any envious eye should watch it.

Yes! . . . . They were diamonds! diamonds rich and rare, that seemed to look up sparkling into her eyes, and cry, "Behold us!" Had Sophia been of a caressing temper, she certainly would have kissed them; but as she was not, she drew them slowly and sedately from their cotton bed, and weighed them in her calculating grasp.

Most people, if they set to thinking about it, can say what moment, through the years that they have passed, was the happiest they have known. Some will declare that it was when they first learned to know how sweet was that love which meets return. But not so, Sophia. If she answered truly to such a challenge, she must avow,

to the latest hour of her existence, that it was the gratification of a tender passion which could meet no return, that caused her the most delicious sensations she had ever known. She did not expect her diamonds to love her; it was enough for her if they returned bright flashes to her eager gaze . . . . and this they did. Again and again she changed their position as the light fell on them, and again and again they sent off new showers of rainbow light to bless her eyes. Never before had she been so nearly overpowered by emotion. She experienced a sort of ecstasy that almost made her giddy, and she was actually obliged to sit down in order to recover herself.

But Sophia had great strength of mind; and this first overpowering rush of feeling past, she did not again lose her self-command. After pressing for a minute or two her hands upon her heart, as if to still its too rapid pulsations, she arose with recovered calmness, replaced the new-found treasure in the honoured shrine wherein she had found it, slowly, carefully, and surely relocked the cabinet, and drawing a long luxurious breath that spoke, in eloquent silence, of happiness assured and tremors sunk to rest, she unlocked her door, looked at the recovered calmness of her steady features in the glass, and rang the bell for her maid, that she might change her dress for dinner.

When, a few moments before the dinner was announced, she as usual joined her guests in the east parlour, no feeling of weakness caused her to betray that her mind was in any degree in a different state from that it had been when they met at breakfast. If anything, there might perhaps have been a shade of deeper gravity than usual upon her small features, but, on the whole, there was nothing to excite attention. As was usual with her now, her appetite seemed altogether to have left her, but she made no complaint of indisposition, and when Major Heathcote observed upon her not having so good an appetite as formerly, she quietly replied, "I have taken a little luncheon this morning, and I think that very often does spoil the appetite."

It was the custom of Miss Martin Thorpe to take the nice cup of coffee that she loved so well, in the calm retirement of her own boudoir, and to remain there, afterwards, during pretty nearly the whole evening. But on this day she managed differently. She went upstairs indeed, as usual, upon leaving the dining-room, but remained only long enough to swallow her coffee, and then returned to the family party assembled in the east parlour. . . . . No coffee ever made its appearance there. . . . . Miss Martin Thorpe remembered that it had not been the daily custom to have it at Bamboo Cottage, and, therefore, very considerately took this favourite beverage, to which she had now accustomed herself, alone, that her doing so might not in any troublesome manner interfere with their habits.

The Heathcote family looked a little startled at her sudden re-appearance among them, and Florence broke off in the very middle of a fairy tale which she was repeating for about the hundredth time, with Frederick standing at her knees and Stephen perched upon them. On the appearance of her cousin she judiciously led them both out of the room, and finished the dearly-beloved story in the presence of the good Mrs. Barnes, and seated in her parlour.

Nothing could be more favourable to the object for which Miss

Martin Thorpe had quitted her favourite boudoir than this retreat of Florence, for it was her purpose now to mention to her guardian and his lady her intention of making her first appearance in a Herefordshire ball-room the following week; to request their attendance on the occasion; and to state her opinion of the absurdity of permitting a girl so young as Florence to accompany them.

"A ball!" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, in a tone that seemed to testify that the balls, formerly so much enjoyed, had not quite faded from her recollection. "Dear me! I am sure I never thought of such a thing. And how far is it off, my dear? . . . . Will it be a long drive?"

"Not very long, ma'am. County families, at a much greater distance, attend the Hereford balls constantly."

"Well . . . . I am sure I have no objection, and indeed I think it is quite right and proper that you should enjoy yourself. Don't you think so, major?"

"Oh yes, certainly. There can be no possible objection to Sophia's going to the county balls if she likes it. I only wish that we some of us knew a few of the gentlemen. I am afraid it will be rather awkward at first, about getting partners. For in her situation, so young as she is, and just come into such a fine property, she must not dance with anybody that may chance to ask her. Indeed I should not quite like that my Florence should do that."

"As to partners, Major Heathcote," said the young lady, "I do not think that there will be any difficulty in my obtaining such as will be proper for me. I shall not wish, on this occasion, at least, to dance with any but gentlemen connected with the old established families of the county. But as to my cousin Florence . . . . do you not think that she is much too young to go?"

"Why, I don't think it would do her any harm. What do you say, Poppsy?"

"Harm? . . . . what harm should it do her? . . . . I am sure, Sir . . . ." Here Mrs. Heathcote fortunately stopped short—another word would have plunged her into very considerable difficulties, for there was nothing that the young Florence seemed to dread so much as that Miss Martin Thorpe should discover her engagement with Sir Charles Temple. *Why* she dreaded this so much, she might herself, perhaps, have found it difficult to explain . . . . perhaps it was that, conscious of being more sensitive on that point to "the touch of joy or woe," than on any other, she did not feel disposed to risk the "trembling" which might be likely to ensue, did she permit that tender point to come in contact with the not very gentle handling which her cousin was apt to bestow on most things.

Major Heathcote laughed aside at the false step which his lady's tongue had so nearly made, and at the sudden halt by which she had saved herself; but feeling that she required a little help to recover herself completely, he very cleverly said, "*sir?* . . . . do not call me *sir*, Poppsy, it sounds so like being angry with me. Besides, my dear, I don't mean to say that I have the least objection to Florence's having this pleasure if she wishes for it—none in the world."

His wife gave him a very grateful sort of smile, and said no more.

"And do you really think it proper that so very young a person as my cousin Florence should go to this ball?" said Miss Martin Thorpe, with a degree of gravity which made her look almost solemn.

"Yes, indeed, I do think it particularly proper," replied Mrs. Heathcote, stoutly; "and I certainly shall not go without taking her."

Sophia very rarely did anything without thinking what its consequence might be; and now it appeared evident to her that the consequence of any further opposition, on her part, to letting Florence be one of her party to the ball would be disagreeable, for which reason she let the subject drop.

A ball in the country is a great event for all ladies; it was so to Mrs. Heathcote, and her half-frightened young step-daughter; but we must leave them by themselves to their consultations in the banqueting-room, and in Flora's room with the friendly housekeeper, while we follow Sophia, the real heroine of our tale, through some of the intricate preliminary measures preceding the important evening.

On the morning following that on which the diamonds were discovered, Mr. and Miss Brandenberry made their quiet way to the boudoir at rather an earlier hour than usual. Sophia, however, was already expecting them, and rather anxiously; for in the first place, she was quite aware that they must have perceived something vague and unsatisfactory in her manner of receiving what had been said respecting the jewels; and, in the second place, she was also aware that she had treated the rapidly-increasing tenderness of Mr. Brandenberry with much more harshness than was in her opinion at all necessary. Marrying Mr. Brandenberry, who had neither money nor land, worth speaking of, to add to her own . . . . who had no title . . . . and no magnificent old mansion, like Temple, to reward her generosity, in case she ever *did* decide upon trusting her happiness in the power of the tightest settlement that ever bound a woman's own fortune to a woman's own self . . . . marrying Mr. Brandenberry was one thing . . . . but permitting him to devote himself to her for a year or two of doubtful hope, was another.

Of the first, which she would have considered as an act of unmitigated insanity, she, of course, never thought for an instant; but of the last, she did think a good deal. In a quiet way, it certainly rather amused her to hear him say, and to see him do, so many lover-like things, such as she had read of in some of her romantic mamma's books. She really did not dislike it at all: she had never had any love made to her before; and she saw no objection whatever to a person who was sure of having a great many offers of marriage, permitting the first gentleman who had happened really to fall in love with her, to let her see a little of the manner in which such genuine passion showed itself. It could not make the matter at all worse for poor Mr. Brandenberry, and would certainly be rather advantageous than otherwise for her.

Under impressions such as these, she gave a very kind reception both to the brother and sister; and though she was rather a novice in the art of looking tender, she did her best to look, at any rate, exceedingly gentle. Mr. Brandenberry was not a man to overlook a

crescendo movement of this nature; nor was his sister either at all likely to overlook it, and gratefully did both the one and the other bless, admire, and praise every word she uttered, every smile she smiled, and every look she looked. The harmony that reigned amongst them was ineffable.

Having mutually enjoyed this state of things for some time, without anything of very essential importance having been said by any one, Miss Martin Thorpe referred to the conversation of the day before, by saying, with rather less equality of cold composure than usually marked her manner of speaking, "Do you recollect, Miss Brandenberry, what I said yesterday about the old-fashioned setting of diamonds?"

"Do I? . . . . Oh yes! . . . . do you ever say anything in the presence of Richard and myself, that we either of us ever forget?"

"Well, then, if you remember it so well, I am afraid you will think me very changeable and capricious, when I tell you I have altered my mind. I have been looking over my diamonds, and I really think that, considering how difficult it is to make a black dress look smart, the best thing I can do will be to wear some of them."

"How delighted I am to hear you say so!" replied her enthusiastic friend. "Richard and I have been talking all the morning about the effect of diamonds when placed in hair that curls naturally. Richard says that every diamond so placed, becomes worth two . . . . and he says, too . . . . But, oh! goodness gracious! how angry he looks! only just look at him, Miss Martin Thorpe—that's all! . . . . Never fear, Richard . . . . I love you a great deal too well to betray any secret of yours, though I am but a thoughtless girl, and do rattle away sometimes rather faster than I ought to do, perhaps. But we must leave off talking in this way, or he will certainly run out of the room. Tell me, then, dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, in what manner were you thinking to wear your beautiful diamonds?—mamma says she well remembers them, every one, and that they are perfectly superb."

"I hardly know in what manner it will be best to use them," replied Sophia; "but if Mr. Brandenberry will excuse our going away from him, I would ask you to be so kind as to go with me into the next room, where I have locked them all up in a drawer, and when you see them, I dare say you will be able to give me some advice."

"Come, then, dearest Miss Martin Thorpe! I perfectly long to see them—and I know Richard will have enough to think of, if he is left in this room—for Richard and I often say to one another, if we happen to be shown in here when you are somewhere else, that the very looking at the things is almost like the happiness of talking to you.—It is all so beautiful and elegant, and so exactly like yourself."

Miss Martin Thorpe then led the way to her sleeping-apartment, followed by her delighted friend; the drawer was opened, and certainly displayed some very good diamonds set in a variety of forms for the hair, shoulders, breast, and so forth, together with necklace, bracelets, and earrings, none of them in the newest taste, but all more or less elegant, and in perfectly good order.

"Oh goodness! what beautiful jewels!" exclaimed Miss Branden-

berry, her projecting eyes looking as if they were ready to start from her head, and complete the collection. "Think how you will look with all these about you!—all, all, all! I would not have you leave out a single one of them. You have no idea, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, what an immense effect this will produce upon a first appearance. Our county is rather particular about jewels. I have always heard my mother say that nobody was considered quite tip-top who had not got diamonds. So of course you will not spoil the first impression by leaving any of them at home?"

"If I wear any of them," said Sophia, with an air of indifference, "I may as well wear all. There will be no more trouble in it." And as she spoke she began handling the different articles, as if to examine their clasps and pins.

"Let me dress you in them!" cried Miss Brandenberry, fervently, "Oh, do! do! . . . . I know so well how they ought to look! Though I am not a great many years older than you, I have been at a great many more county balls, you know! Will you sit down and let me dress you?"——

"You may do what you like, my dear Miss Brandenberry. If it will amuse you, I will sit down while you put them on, as you think they ought to be worn. Only I am afraid your brother will think that I am very rude to leave him for so long."

"Never mind my brother, dear Miss Martin Thorpe," said the delighted Margaret, drawing off her gloves, and seizing a comb from the toilet-table. "He is not likely to think anything that you do very wrong, poor fellow. . . . . There, just sit so, for half a moment. Oh! these beautiful short, stiff, natural curls are made on purpose for diamonds; how they do set it off, to be sure! . . . . But we must have a band of black velvet, or something of that sort, to keep them steady. Have you got anything of the kind?"

"I dare say I have," replied the heiress: "but my maid will know better than I; shall I ring for her?"

"No, no, no, not for the world! . . . . That would spoil all my pleasure, for of course she would fancy that nobody must touch them but herself . . . . Just let me look here, may I?" and without waiting for an answer, the graceful handmaiden pulled out drawer after drawer of the careful heiress's neatly-arranged stores, till at length she discovered a thick waist-belt of black ribbon, and bound it round and round Miss Martin Thorpe's little bullet-head. Upon this foundation, which she declared to be most satisfactorily firm and substantial, Miss Brandenberry deposited exactly as many of the various-sized, and various-shaped ornaments as she could manage to fasten on, and completed the labour of love, by placing, as well as the nature of a morning dress would permit, the necklace and bracelets where they ought to be. But at this stage of the business a terrible embarrassment presented itself. Miss Martin Thorpe had never had her ears bored, and there lay the long glittering appendages, as ingeniously expansive as if they had been fabricated by that boldest of all trinket-fanciers, a North American Indian—there they lay, the last-left tenants of the satin case, with no possibility of their being appended to the thick tips of the vexed Sophia's ears.

A moment or two was lost in the expression of useless regrets by Miss Brandenberry, when suddenly her countenance cleared up, and she joyously exclaimed, "I know what we will do! I will just get a needle, and a bit of black sewing-silk, and tack them upon the band, so as to make them hang down as close to the ears as possible. Nobody in the world will ever be able to find it out."—The implements required being near at hand, no time was lost in putting this last and most skilful touch to the immovable heiress's head-dress; and then, Miss Brandenberry clapped her hands, and almost shouted in approbation of her own taste and skill, and of the exquisitely becoming effect they had produced.

"You must let Richard see you! . . . . Poor fellow! You must, indeed! It would be too, too cruel to refuse him! If you could but only guess how you look! . . . . I never did, no, never in my life, see anything to be compared to the becomingness of that head-dress, just as it is now! Come to the glass, and look at yourself, my dear, dear, Miss Martin Thorpe, and then you can judge for yourself."

Miss Martin Thorpe cautiously rose, as if fearful that, at every step she made, a jewel might be lost; and, placing herself before the looking-glass, most certainly agreed with her delighted friend, and even confessed that she *did* think diamonds made a beautiful head-dress. The earrings, too, appeared to her most exquisitely elegant and well-placed; for the thoughtful Margaret, with a little fond, caressing touch, held the head of her friend in such straight and immovable equilibrium before the glass, that the sewing-silk loops by which they were suspended were quite invisible.

"Now then, let us just step in, for one moment, to poor, dear Richard!" said the fond sister, opening the door of communication. Sophia said a word or two about its being rather foolish to do that, but she made no positive resistance, so, in the next moment, Mr. Brandenberry was basking in the blaze of luminaries which he admired with quite as much devotion as the demure-looking owner of them herself.

"*Now*, Richard! Tell me honestly and sincerely what you think of that?" said Miss Brandenberry, crossing her arms before her and drawing herself up, as if preparing to watch the effect she knew must follow.

"Think!" repeated Mr. Brandenberry, after the interval of two or three minutes, and with a sigh that seemed to relieve an almost suffocating oppression on his breast. "Think! . . . . what do I think of it?. . . . Margaret, Margaret!. . . . There was no need of this!"

"Poor fellow!" cried his sister, evidently much touched. "I guessed how it would strike him . . . . Come, come, Richard! . . . . Don't turn away your eyes in that manner," she added, as if endeavouring to give a playful turn to the subject. "What in the world will Miss Martin Thorpe think of you? . . . . She must suppose, of course, that she is too ugly to be looked at."

"Margaret! . . . . You are unfeeling," said Mr. Brandenberry, in a low, mournful voice, and passing his hand across his forehead, as if, poor gentleman, he would have willingly wiped away the impression he had all-too-strongly received; then, taking a long striding step or two across the room, he remained for a moment at the open

window, and the balmy breath of spring which entered there having done much towards restoring his composure, he returned to the spot where the two ladies still stood, and said, with an abashed and most truly penitent air, "Miss Martin Thorpe, ... I know not how to apologise to you as I ought . . . . Forget and forgive my weakness. Poor Margaret is very thoughtless! It is dangerous playing with edged tools . . . . But no more of this . . . . Your head-dress is, indeed, beautifully arranged, and the county of Hereford will, by seeing you in this costume, know at once how . . . . how very lovely a creature is added to their society."

Feeling, probably, that he had reached a climax from which it would not be advantageous to descend abruptly, Mr. Brandenberry made signal to his faithful Margaret that it was time to go, and they departed accordingly, the brother and sister comparing notes on the progress they believed themselves to be making towards the brilliant object of their common hope; and the heiress, as she now, with lingering enjoyment, perused each separate jewel in the glass, paying herself many pleasant compliments in her heart, upon the superiority of wisdom, which thus enabled her to enjoy the passionate admiration of a lover, without running the very slightest risk of being beguiled by it into bestowing her wealth upon him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VERY gentle, modest hint from Miss Brandenberry about the capability of an old coach to hold six persons *not* having taking effect, Major and Mrs. Heathcote, Florence, and lastly, the jewelled heiress herself, made their *entrée* into the Hereford ball-room without any native guard whatever. As it was the decided though secret purpose of Miss Martin Thorpe to produce as much sensation by her entrance, as possible, she had ordered her horses rather at a late hour, and the room, as she had intended it should be, was full when they arrived. It was exceedingly fortunate for the success of Sophia's projected *coup de théâtre* that she followed the advice of her Brandenberry friends, and adorned herself with those speaking appendages of wealth which had been so happily brought to light; for, without this very legible label, it is extremely probable that the late Mr. Thorpe's penniless niece, Florence, might have carried away all eyes from his rich niece, Sophia. Nothing, certainly, could be more unpretending than Florence's plain white frock and black ribbons, nothing more simple than the smoothly-laid braids of her glossy brown hair. But nature will sometimes puzzle the most accomplished gentleman-usher, and Florence is not the first undowered girl, whose slight, tall figure, swan-like neck, and graceful step, may have thrown into the shade a stunted, brown, dull-looking little body, with three or four thousand a year. But what shade is obscure enough to conceal the glitter of diamonds? Certainly none that an English ball-room can throw; and, accordingly, no eye blundered, though some few juvenile ones

might wander, as the party walked up the room, and Miss Martin Thorpe, the heiress of Thorpe-Combe, stood as unmistakably conspicuous before all the assembly as she could have herself desired.

Many, more accustomed to find themselves the centre of a circle of eyes, might, however, have borne it worse than our young heiress. The quiet, *posé*, demure look of her small features was in no degree altered, though, perhaps her gait was a little more stiff than usual from the consciousness of the precious weight she carried on her head.

Several of the neighbouring families, who had already called upon her, crowded round to pay their compliments. To some of these Major Heathcote and his wife had been already introduced, and those who had not, requested the favour without loss of time, the guardian of nearly four thousand a year being by no means a person to be neglected. But, as it happened, the pretty Florence had never been beheld by any eye in that assembly before, and it certainly speaks well for the independent spirit of the young county gentlemen, that no less than three of them desired to be presented, and asked her to dance, though the rumour was speedily circulated that she was one of twenty children, and that her father, the major, had nothing but his half-pay to live upon.

A cruel accident, a very cruel accident, had prevented Mr. and Miss Brandenberry from being in the ball-room when the chosen of both their hearts entered it. A jibbing post-horse had absolutely refused to mount a certain hill which rose between Broad Grange and the town of Hereford; and for a few dreadful moments it appeared very uncertain whether, after all their efforts, the brother and sister would not have been obliged to give up this important meeting with the heiress at her first ball, and walk back, pumps, satin shoes, and all, leaving her to the unimpeded agreeableness of all the single men far and near. After an excruciating interval, however, a neighbouring farmer lent a cart-horse, by whose aid the anxious pair were at length safely deposited at the wished-for door.

The sort of eagerness with which they sought the figure of her whom alone of all the world they wished to see, may be more easily imagined than described. It was with a perfect thrill of delight that Miss Brandenberry at length discerned an object at once both black and brilliant, at the farthest extremity of the room. "There, Richard, there!" she whispered with an almost convulsive grasp of the fraternal arm on which she rested. "For heaven's sake, come on!" And on they went; but ere they had made their way to the spot where she had been visible, Miss Martin Thorpe had already walked off under the escort of some far happier man, and taken her place in a quadrille.

"Go up at once, and remind her that she is engaged to you, Richard!" said the firm-minded and resolute Margaret.

"I can't! . . . . It is impossible!" replied her tortured brother. "Don't you see that she is dancing with Lord Thelwell?"

"Merciful Heaven! Was there ever anything one ten-thousandth part so provoking?" cried poor Miss Brandenberry. "That is precisely the very thing that I was most anxious to prevent. If she once takes it into her head to fancy that she is as fashionable as she is rich, I

would not give one penny for your chance, let her believe you to be ever so much dying for her. I know how she will behave, I am quite sure that she will hardly speak to us . . . . But go, at any rate go, Richard! and stand looking at her just where she can see you. It is folly to give up in such a cowardly way at once."

The exemplary brother obeyed without uttering a word; and was better rewarded for his obedience than he had dared hope to be. It happened that Sophia's *vis-à-vis* was no other than her cousin Florence, and before the young nobleman who had taken out the heiress had performed two figures with her, the watchful Mr. Brandenberry perceived to a certainty that he inquired of Miss Martin Thorpe who the lady was who had spoken to her as they made their *traversée*. He perceived, too, and his heart beat joyously as he made the remark, that from that moment the noble steward was infinitely more occupied in looking at the pretty lady than in talking to the rich one; and when at last, the dance being over, he noted the look of frowning displeasure with which Miss Martin Thorpe complied with Lord Thelwell's request, and presented him to her cousin, the most sanguine hope arose that he should derive important benefit from the whole adventure. He had taken effectual care, according to his sister's instructions, that Sophia should see him hovering near her—and he was conscious that the passionate misery his eyes had expressed must appear in very favourable contrast with the indifferent air and careless nonchalance with which the young nobleman now led her back to her place, and seated her by the side of Mrs. Heathcote.

Mr. Brandenberry wasted no farther time in watching Lord Thelwell; quite satisfied that he had not only asked Florence to dance, but also that he had desired an introduction to her father; and feeling a satisfactory assurance that this evident and offensive preference of her beautiful cousin to herself would put her in the most favourable state of mind possible for receiving a stronger display of his own devotion than he had ever yet ventured upon, he drew near her with the aspect of a man so borne down with sorrow and disappointment as hardly to have sufficient energy left to sustain the hated load of existence.

He remained for at least a minute exactly in front of her before she perceived he was there, so intently was she occupied, apparently in drawing up her short little white gloves, but really in watching from the corner of her eye the tone and style in which her late noble partner, who had not pronounced three words while he was dancing with her, was now exhibiting his conversational powers to her cousin.

But the strength of man could endure this situation no longer, and Miss Martin Thorpe's oblique contemplations were interrupted by a profound sigh so close to her that she looked up with a start.

"You are come then, at last, Mr. Brandenberry? I supposed, by not seeing you in the room, that you had given up your intention of being at the ball?" said she.

For an instant Mr. Brandenberry's only answer was given by steadily fixing the large languishing grey eyes which have been already

mentioned, upon the sharp small black ones of the heiress. But as soon as the young lady, notwithstanding her steadiness of character, could bear it no longer, and turned away her head, a signal which Mr. Brandenberry always watched for as a cook does for the rising up of the milk in her skillet, to convince him that the fire of his passion had in this way been applied long enough, he replied, "How comes it, can you tell me? . . . . Dearest and best Miss Martin Thorpe!—Can you tell me how it is that you, with an eye that seems gifted with the power of looking into the very heart and soul of man, can so mistake as to believe that one who has for weeks lived upon the dear hopes to which the anticipation of this ball gave birth, could give up his intention of coming to it? . . . . Would to Heaven I had the power to do so!" he added, hastily, and in a voice so low that had he not at the same time dropped into the vacant chair that was beside her, and permitted his lips very nearly to touch her ear, she could not have heard him. As it was, however, she did hear him, and she knew perfectly well what he meant. Mr. Brandenberry perceived this, by a slight, a very slight, approach, to a smile at one corner of her mouth; but as her general demeanour continued as calm and composed as usual, he ventured to go on, and before the orchestra gave them to understand that it was time they should take their places, if it were their intention to dance in the next quadrille, he had made as vehement love as a gentleman in a ball-room could make, short of saying, "Will you marry me?"

They joined the set that was nearest to them, and Miss Martin Thorpe certainly found this dance a good deal more agreeable than the last. But notwithstanding the necessity of attending to the figure, and notwithstanding that she listened to every one of Mr. Brandenberry's speeches, and now and then said two or three words in reply, the reflective Sophia found time to make up her mind very decidedly on one point—namely, that the choosing a partner for life, and a partner for a dance, ought not to be regulated by the same principles . . . . an original and very profound thought, which is here recorded rather for the sake of the young than the old reader.

Florence, meanwhile, was very quietly going through her quadrille with Lord Thelwell, enjoying that sort of peaceful indifference which engaged young ladies only can taste, and which renders even a first ball a matter of nearly as little importance as a first puppet-show. Florence, indeed, had not even the gentle stimulant of perceiving that she was greatly admired by a score or two of persons whom she never saw before, and did not feel particularly anxious ever to see her again—for not being used to the sort of thing, the tolerably well-bred symptoms of it escaped her attention entirely.

The fair Miss Brandenberry, notwithstanding she had the advantage of knowing nearly every gentleman in the room, was not so fortunate as the young *débutantes*, for she got no partner at all. The circumstance, however, was not new to her, so, like the eels of natural-historical celebrity, she did not much mind it, but amused herself, as she had often done before, by distinguishing dresses that were her old acquaintance from dresses that were not, and by

watching whether young Mr. This danced with young Miss The other, as often this ball as the last. She had, moreover, in addition to these accustomed sources of amusement, two others, which greatly helped to pass away the time. The first was the noting with an anxious but well-contented eye the rather unusual portion of conversation which her brother was mixing up with his dance with the heiress. "Ah, ah!" thought she, in her usual lively spirit of remark, "Richard is not only dancing a set with her, but a set at her."

The other source of extra entertainment which this amiable descendant of a long line of county ancestors found for herself, while wandering round and round what she was wont to call "her native ball-room," was derived from the examination of an object which all individuals of the race of Brandenberry, from the beginning of time, have delighted to honour with their particular attention, whenever any such have been encountered at their county balls,—namely, a stranger.

Leaning on the arm of the Earl of Broughton, the still youthful-looking father of Lord Thelwell, was a gentleman but little resembling in appearance any of the persons who were usually seen there His complexion was extremely dark, and, what but rarely accompanies this, his head was nearly bald; but though the spare fringe of crisped black hair which yet remained on the back part of it was sprinkled with grey, he did not altogether appear to be an old man. He wore a thin moustache, which, contrasted with the shaven-and-shorn air of the rest of his head and face, gave him very much the look of a Chinese; and a quick, jerking sort of gesticulation which seemed to accompany every word he uttered, suggested to Miss Brandenberry the idea that he must be a foreigner. But let him be what he would, no doubt could be entertained as to his being *somebody;* for Lord Broughton seemed to devote his whole attention to him, evidently following wherever he led, and assiduously bending his tall person to the level of his jerking companion, as if anxious not to lose a word he said.

It was in vain that Miss Brandenberry asked every soul she met, who that strange-looking person was, that Lord Broughton had got with him; no one appeared better informed, though many were as curious as herself.

Finding all inquiry vain, she gave it up, and began to hover about the quadrille in which Miss Martin Thorpe and her brother were dancing, in order to be in readiness to catch a few rays from that distinguished young lady's diamonds, and a few words from her lips, as soon as the dance ended.

In this her success was as great as she could reasonably expect, for Miss Martin Thorpe presented two fingers to her, and said, "How do you do, Miss Brandenberry?" with very nearly her usual degree of cordiality, though Mrs. Templeton and two of the Misses Brickerley, both county families of four horse-power gentility, came up to pay their compliments almost at the same time. She had, moreover, the great satisfaction of seeing these ladies, as well as two or three others, who in like manner approached the heiress, retire again, after

a very few words spoken and answered; for, to say truth, there was something in the still, solemn aspect of little Miss Martin Thorpe which did not greatly tend to exhilirate the spirits of those who approached her, and when people come to a ball, they do not wish to be frozen if they can help it.

Perceiving this, Miss Brandenberry resolved at once to attach herself, without shiness or hesitation of any kind, to the Thorpe-Combe party. By hazarding this step she would, beyond all question, be giving an immense advantage to Richard, and she might, moreover, find it extremely pleasant to sit and chat with that good-natured-looking Mrs. Heathcote, to whom she had never happened to be introduced before, because, when she had asked Miss Martin Thorpe's permission one morning to wait upon her and her daughter, it had been found upon inquiry that the ladies were not at home. But this was an excellent opportunity for making the acquaintance; and as soon as she perceived that Miss Martin Thorpe was left to herself, and at liberty to reseat herself by the side of her chaperon, she preferred her request for an introduction, which was immediately complied with.

Mr. Brandenberry had, by this time, undeniably advanced a degree or two farther in Miss Martin Thorpe's estimation than when he had first entered the ball-room; and the reason of this was, that though he had once been seen to look full in the face of Florence Heathcote, he had never turned his eyes towards her again, or given in any way the slightest indication of wishing for an introduction, or of having anything to say to her whatever. This showed a degree of gentlemanlike, rational good sense, which she had never remarked in Sir Charles Temple, who had disgusted her extremely by running the risk of spoiling the poor unfortunate child, though knowing that she had only her own industry to depend upon, and that, merely for the sake of amusing himself with the silly prattle of a girl who had nothing on earth to recommend her but her trumpery beauty.

In contrast with such conduct as this, Mr. Brandenberry's behaviour certainly appeared to great advantage; and when, after their quadrille was ended, he once more stationed himself before her, with his eyes riveted (as the phrase goes) upon her face, she actually made a movement which very plainly indicated a request that he would be pleased to sit down by her. His sister Margaret, at the other extremity of the bench, was hardly less fortunate, having succeeded in edging herself in between Mrs. Heathcote and Florence, who had both smiled with the most perfect good-humour when she made a remark about crowding them.

It was just at this moment that Miss Brandenberry's attention was again caught by the figure of the stranger she had before remarked. He was still leaning on the arm of Lord Broughton, and appeared, together with the young Lord Thelwell, who was on his other side, to be approaching the spot where they sat.

"You don't happen to have heard who that very odd-looking person is, I suppose, Miss Heathcote? He must be somebody of consequence, because Lord Broughton, who very seldom comes to the balls at all, seems to pay no attention to any one else. Isn't it very

odd? . . . . Upon my word and honour, I believe they are coming up to us! Don't they look exactly as if they were coming up to us?"

On this point the opinion of Florence perfectly corresponded with her own; and that neither of them had been mistaken was immediately proved by the three gentlemen becoming stationary before the heiress, while Lord Thelwell said, "Will you give me leave, Miss Martin Thorpe, to present my father, Lord Broughton, to you?"

Sophia's steady composure was for a moment a little overset by this unexpected address; however she did not forget for more than a second or two that she was the heiress of Thorpe-Combe, possessed of a fine house, and a very magnificent service of plate, and having on, at that very moment, four times as many diamonds as Lady Broughton herself. These thoughts effectually restored her composure, and she replied that she should be "very happy," in a manner as dry, stiff, and consequential as usual.

After a few ordinary words had been said about her settling in the neighbourhood, the beauty of the surrounding country, and so forth, Lord Broughton requested an introduction to her guardian, Major Heathcote, his lady, and daughter. This ceremony having been duly performed, and the Major and Mr. Brandenberry having stood up, and joined themselves to the group of gentlemen, the desire of an introduction spread to the dark-complexioned stranger also, and Miss Brandenberry was at length relieved from her painful ignorance respecting his name by hearing Lord Broughton very distinctly present him to the Thorpe-Combe party as "Mr. Jenkins."

The name did not please the discriminating ears of this spinster of ancient descent; and either for that reason, or because she was not included in the introduction, she whispered in the ear of Florence, "It would have been more to the purpose, I think, if his lordship had introduced Lady Broughton to you, instead of this queer-looking yellow man."

This idea of introducing his countess to the heiress and her party, did not however appear to strike his lordship, for no allusion whatever was made to Lady Broughton and her daughters; though the earl, his son, and their remarkable-looking friend, continued to converse with the party considerably longer than the mere circumstance of the young Lord Thelwell's being steward of the ball could be supposed to render necessary. The conversation of the three gentlemen was divided however, and so far from general, that it speedily turned into three *tête-à-têtes*, the earl giving himself, for the moment, solely to the major, his son to Florence, and Mr. Jenkins to Miss Martin Thorpe.

The orchestra again calling upon the dancers, Mr. Jenkins, very greatly to the astonishment of Miss Brandenberry, led out the heiress. "It was not," as she observed to Mrs. Heathcote, "that the gentleman looked too old to dance, but that there was something about him so exceedingly unlike all other people, that it seemed quite unnatural that he should attempt to do what anybody else did."

"He *is* a very odd-looking man, certainly," replied Mrs. Heathcote,

"Odd? . . . . why, my dear ma'am, did you ever see such a curiosity? I flatter myself that I am not particularly apt to spy into my neighbours' concerns, but I certainly would give *something* to know where Lord Broughton got him from. It is quite totally and absolutely impossible that he can be an Englishman of good family. I don't speak only of his name, though that of course says a good deal, but of his queer, dry, yellow-looking skin. And yet the Broughtons are the proudest people, out and out, in the whole county. I am sure of one thing, Mrs. Heathcote, at any rate, and that is, that if the earl does *not* know him to be a thorough gentleman, he has done a most abominable thing to introduce him as a partner to your charming niece. I hope you won't suspect me of flattery, my dear Mrs. Heathcote, but I do assure you that I think Miss Martin Thorpe is one of the most enchanting young ladies I ever met with, in the whole course of my life. And as to my poor dear brother Richard, he can talk of nothing but our delightful new neighbour. The late Mr. Thorpe, poor dear gentleman, was certainly a bit of an oddity, at least since that sad business about losing his son; but now, I am sure, the whole neighbourhood ought to feel themselves under the greatest obligation to him, for having left his property to a person likely to be such a prodigious acquisition to us."

Lord Broughton and his son had by this time walked off, leaving the major at liberty to offer his wife and daughter the amusement of a promenade to the card-room, whereupon Miss Brandenberry slid herself along the bench to the side of her brother, who, though generally taking out more of his ticket-money in dancing than any other gentleman of the county, was now quite determined not to dance again, unless he could again be made happy by the hand of the object of his adoration. His sister perfectly understood his feelings. "I am so glad you are not going to dance with anybody else, Richard!" she said: "It would spoil all."

"No man who has courage to play such a game as I am engaged in, could dream of anything else—if he had the wit at least to carry it through. No great danger, is there, Margaret, to be feared from her present partner? The young Viscount, thank Heaven! did not take with her at all. What a hideous quiz that Jenkins is, to be sure! . . . . I am really very much obliged to Lord Broughton for introducing him."

"No doubt of it, Richard, no doubt of it. It is just the luckiest thing for you that could have happened. You must ask her again, as soon as ever this dance is over. She won't have had one agreeable partner, through the whole evening, but yourself. Is not that a blessing?"

As Mr. Jenkins released Sophia's arm, Mr. Brandenberry presented his to receive it, requesting permission to attend her to the tea-room in search of refreshment. Nothing could be better timed than this request, and never had the young lady looked more graciously disposed towards him than when she accepted it. He had the great good fortune to procure a chair for her at the corner of a table, where she could get as much tea as she chose, and eat as much bread and butter as she liked, quite comfortably, he standing close behind her all

the while, assiduously supplying the sugar and the cream, and making her thoroughly sensible of the great difference between people who were attentive and people who were not. In short, their arm-and-arm retreat from the tea-room was still more amicable than their approach to it, and on passing a short little sofa, placed in a recess, and just calculated to hold two persons, he had both the courage and the wit to propose her resting herself there a little before she ventured to dance again.

Sophia made no objection to the proposal, and Mr. Brandenberry, placing himself proudly beside her, had the satisfaction of thinking that everybody in the room must perceive the sort of terms they were on. Never indeed had the object of his passion appeared so inclined to be conversable. She had, in truth, been galled in a very tender point, and, contrary to her usual habit, she sought relief in words.

"Upon my word, Mr. Brandenberry," she said, "I am afraid I have done very wrong in bringing out that poor girl, Florence Heathcote, in this way. There is nothing which I think so wrong as deceiving people about money matters; and I fear there is no doubt but that Lord Thelwell, seeing her come with me, *is* deceived, and fancies that she must in some degree be provided for like a gentlewoman. It is a very melancholy subject to me, Mr. Brandenberry, I do assure you; but I think I owe it to my own sense of what is right to remove at once all such false impressions. That poor girl, whom you see talking there, with so much easy indifference, to that foolish young nobleman, has, I dare say, less money belonging to her than my own kitchenmaid. You may easily guess how exceedingly painful it must be to me to mention it, even to so friendly a person as you, Mr. Brandenberry; but I do it, in order to give you an opportunity of making the fact properly known, that no one in my neighbourhood may have cause to reproach *me* with practising any deceptions about my relations."

"How every word you utter, my dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, raises your charming character in my eyes!" replied Mr. Brandenberry, with irrepressible admiration. "There is so much beautiful candour in every word you say, such a noble spirit of rectitude in your wish that this unfortunate young person's actual situation should be made known, that I shall positively feel a species of glory in seconding your high-minded desire, by removing all mystery on the subject. But, alas! my charming friend! your young and pure mind has yet to learn the strong, though contemptible . . . . not to say vicious, ... influence, which mere beauty produces in society. To a man indeed, situated as . . . . as I am, for instance, whose whole heart and soul are occupied on one object, ... to me, in short, that young person yonder, in the white frock and black ribbons, appears as totally devoid of all personal attraction as she is of wealth. Yet, during the time you were dancing with that Mr. Jenkins, and while I was making my melancholy way, in and out, through the crowd, in order to catch a sight of you, and fancying all the time that everybody must have the same object in pushing forward as myself, I discovered to my unspeakable astonishment that it was not you, loveliest Sophia, but that maypole of a girl, poor unfortunate Miss Heathcote, that

they were all elbowing each other to get a sight of! I felt perfectly disgusted at their folly . . . . especially when I heard at least a dozen of the first men in the room declare, that her beauty was an acquisition to the county which would make every ball the fashion at which she was likely to appear."

Not a word of this was lost upon the heiress. She was, then, fortune, diamonds, and all, eclipsed by her penniless cousin! . . . . It was wormwood!

Whether the information thus subtilely conveyed produced as strong an impression in favour of the reporter as he reckoned upon, may be doubted; but the general effect of what he had said was infinitely greater than he had anticipated; and Miss Martin Thorpe returned from the ball with her heart awakened to stronger passion than she had ever felt before.

CHAPTER XXIV.

On the morning following the ball, at an hour so early as to show more desire of finding the family at home than of evincing any particular deference for etiquette, Lord Broughton and his friend Mr. Jenkins arrived at Thorpe-Combe, and inquired for Major Heathcote and for Miss Martin Thorpe.

The major, however, with his wife, his daughter, and the two little boys, were already established in Sir Charles Temple's old banqueting-room; but Miss Martin Thorpe was in her boudoir, with her friend Miss Brandenberry, discussing the demerits of most of the persons they had seen the night before. The name of the noble and early visitor caused both ladies to start; the younger one slightly, the elder with considerable violence. The mistress of the house, however, immediately recovered herself, and said, "Desire the gentlemen to walk upstairs;" and before Miss Brandenberry could express one-tenth of the pleasure she felt at being so luckily there, just when her dearest Miss Martin Thorpe must be sure to want her, they entered the room.

Lord Broughton's manners, and perhaps in some degree his conversation too, where those of a class. He was easy, gentlemanlike, and neither particularly animated nor particularly dull, but requiring stimulants, considerably stronger than either of the ladies then present could offer, to make him give out any symptoms of individual character. But the case was different with his friend Mr. Jenkins; in him, everything was individual, and, apparently, nothing in common with the rest of the world. In person, dress, voice, and manner, he was as essentially singular a person, perhaps, as ever existed, and took so little pains to conceal or soften his peculiarities, that it is probable nothing less authoritative than the name and station of the Earl of Broughton could have induced the wealthy Miss Martin Thorpe to remain in the same room with him.

His appearance at the ball of the preceding evening, though sufficiently eccentric, had not been more severely censured by the majority,

of the company, than by their declaring it to be strange and foreign-looking. But this morning it was infinitely more so, and exceedingly shabby into the bargain. Instead of a hat, he carried in his hand a cap of scarlet cloth, embroidered with gold, the glittering splendour of which contrasted strangely with the rest of his attire. His trousers of yellowish white (texture unknown) were of almost Asiatic fulness of dimension; and a smoke-tinctured waistcoat, imperfectly buttoned, gave to view an extremely dirty flannel ditto, which, fastening close round his neck, was but partially concealed by a fine and clean linen shirt that intervened between them. A wonderfully ill-fitted coat, which had every appearance of having been purchased of a Jew clothes-merchant, completed his attire, except, indeed, that a strangely mysterious apparatus, known to the initiated to betoken inveterate smoking, hung from his button-hole.

Before he had been two minutes in the room, he placed the close-fitting cap upon his bald head, and then, while Lord Broughton conversed with the ladies on the usual subjects which furnish country-visiting talk, he indulged himself in what appeared to be an extremely prying spirit of observation. Rising from his chair, he very unceremoniously walked round the room, evincing much less admiration for the taste with which it was decorated than the happy few hitherto permitted to see it had manifested. In fact, his dark brow was more than once contracted by a frown of evident disapprobation, as his eye boldly glanced from object to object. Nothing, indeed, in the whole apartment, excepting the four old cabinets to which the late *renaissance* in the science of furnishing assigned conspicuous stations, appeared to meet his approbation. To these, however, he approached again and again, laid his hand caressingly on their massive ornaments, felt with pleasure, as it seemed, the perfect smoothness of their ebon and ivory mosaic, and finally, stationed himself before the smallest and most curiously wrought of the four, and putting his hands behind him, stood there, lost apparently in a profound reverie.

Miss Martin Thorpe, though greatly approving the admiration of anybody and everybody for anything and everything belonging to herself, thought the mode which Mr. Jenkins had adopted for showing it towards her cabinet exceedingly odd, if not absolutely impertinent; while Miss Brandenberry, notwithstanding her respect for the earl, and her delight in listening to all that he was pleased to say, could not keep her eyes from following his extraordinary friend, and soon most satisfactorily convinced herself that he was, beyond all contradiction, mad.

Lord Broughton continued for some time to talk on with so easy and unembarassed an air, as in a great degree to cover the awkwardness arising from the singular demeanour of his companion; but perceiving that the ladies paid less and less attention to his words, and more and more to the grimaces of Mr. Jenkins, he rose to take his leave, begging Miss Martin Thorpe to present his compliments to her guardian, with his hope of seeing him at the Castle. And then, for the first time, his lordship muttered something about Lady Broughton's hoping to make her acquaintance as soon as the family returned from London, whither they were about immediately to remove. Having

made this speech, and a parting bow to each of the ladies, Lord Broughton touched his absent friend upon the sleeve and said, "Now, Jenkins, I think we must be going."

The person thus addressed now turned his face upon the trio, who for the last five minutes had only seen the back of his loose, long-waisted coat, and displayed, greatly to their astonishment, a countenance almost ghastly in its sallow paleness, and with eyes that evidently bore the traces of tears. The earl knit his brows, shook his head, and gave his friend a very unequivocal glance of disapprobation and reproof.

Mr. Jenkins looked into his lordship's face, in return, with the air of a man who is inwardly arguing some point which he means, when he has made up his mind upon it, to communicate, and after a short interval so passed he turned away from his lordship to the heiress, and said. . . "I am almost afraid, young lady, that you will think me a very strange person . . . . But in point of fact there is really nothing strange in the matter, and one word from me will enable you to understand it in a moment . . . . Will you give me leave to sit down again with you, while I explain myself?"

This was said in so much more quiet a manner than was usual to Mr. Jenkins, who generally shot out his words, like a charge for the destruction of small birds, that Miss Martin Thorpe, after giving a glance at Lord Broughton, and perceiving that he also was preparing to reseat himself, followed the example, saying as she did so, and with not much more than her usual ungracious stiffness, "Pray, sir, sit down."

"The fact is, Miss Martin," began Mr. Jenkins, "Miss Martin Thorpe, I mean. . . . the fact is, that a great many years ago I was very well acquainted with this country. Lord Broughton, for instance, is one of my very oldest friends . . . . we were at school together, and . . . . just at the time that I used to see most of him—just at that same time I used to be a great deal here too; for your late uncle was then exceedingly intimate at the Castle also . . . . though I hear that all fell away afterwards. But . . . . then, while this lasted, I knew your uncle's wife, the last Mrs. Thorpe, exceedingly well too . . . . very intimately . . . . She was very kind to me, very kind, indeed, and altogether the house was . . . . in short, Miss Martin . . . . Miss Martin Thorpe, I mean . . . . I should consider myself as under a very great obligation if you would give your servants orders to let me walk about all over the place."

After saying this, with much of his usual rapidity of utterance, he turned to the earl, and added in a sort of pleading, apologistic accent, "I would give my right hand, Broughton, to go into every room in the house this moment . . . . I would, upon my soul!" . . . . Then looking submissively in the face of Sophia, he seemed to await her answer with much anxiety.

To most persons his request would have appeared a very simple one; the bell would have been instantly rung, the housekeeper summoned, and orders given that the gentleman's affectionate reminiscences should be gratified as speedily as possible. But Miss Martin Thorpe felt exceedingly embarrassed by it. She did not like the request at all. In her estimation there was something very odd

indeed, not to say impertinent, in it; and few things could at that moment have been less agreeable to her feelings than to grant it. She hesitated, looked at Miss Brandenberry, hemmed, drew out her pocket-handkerchief, and hemmed again, and was beginning in a husky sort of whisper some speech which opened with, "Really, sir," . . . . when Lord Broughton, apparently thinking that the scene was becoming disagreeable, rose up again, hastily exclaiming, "Come, come, Jenkins; this is really too foolish. There can be no occasion to trouble Miss Martin Thorpe with any such nonsense. Look at the windows from the outside, my good friend, and let that satisfy your sentimental longings."

"Lord Broughton, you are right," replied Mr. Jenkins, suddenly springing towards the door. "There *can* be no occasion to trouble Miss Martin Thorpe with any such nonsense, and I *will* look at the windows from the outside."

So saying he darted out of the room, his noble friend, after another civil parting bow, following; and in the next moment the sound of their horses' feet was heard retreating, as it seemed, at full speed.

"Gracious Heaven! my dearest friend!" exclaimed Miss Brandenberry, "what a man! . . . . And, how beyond all words, I admire you for having so beautifully checked his impertinence! . . . . I am perfectly convinced, my sweet young friend—I am, indeed, *perfectly* convinced, that he is mad; and if his lordship, the Earl of Broughton, had not been in the room as a sort of guard to us both, I should most certainly have taken the liberty of ringing the bell. Upon my word, I don't suppose that there are three young ladies in Europe of your tender age, who would have evinced the same admirable presence of mind. It was quite beautiful to see! . . . . It was, indeed! . . . . What a state my poor dear brother Richard will be in when he hears of it! . . . . Mercy on me! To think of a real madman like that galloping over your beautiful house—and you, your dear precious self, remaining in it all the time! . . . . I should not wonder the least bit in the world if Richard, when I go home and tell him of it, were to arm himself with a brace of loaded pistols, and walk up and down before the door of the house all night. And, upon my word, I should not know how to say him nay."

"I hope there will be no occasion for that," sedately replied Sophia. "You know I have men-servants in abundance, Miss Brandenberry."

"Yes, so you have, to be sure. Only it was so very shocking. . . . What was it he said? . . . . that he would rather have his right hand cut off than not run into every room in your house? . . . . It is awful to think of it! . . . . Dear, dear, Miss Martin Thorpe! Do tell me how you find yourself? I am so afraid that you must have been shaken! Hadn't you better take something? If it was only a glass of sherry wine, just to quiet your poor dear nerves? Do let me ring, will you? I am sure a little wine would be quite a comfort."

In reply to all this affectionate vehemence Sophia very quietly replied, "I do not like to take wine before my luncheon, Miss Brandenberry, I don't believe it is at all wholesome, for nothing takes off

one's appetite so much" . . . . And perceiving, on looking at her watch a few minutes afterwards, that the important hour for this said luncheon was near at hand, she had recourse to her usual method of dismissing her friend, which she never failed to put in practice whenever it happened that an early after-breakfast visit was prolonged so as to approach this very sacred hour of the day. For our heroine was vastly more inclined by nature to exclaim at such a moment, like the "Little Grey Man," in the legend,

"Don't disturb me at meals!"

than to invite her admiring friend to share the choice little banquet with her. She therefore, as usual upon all such occasions, said . . . . "I think it is getting late, my dear Miss Brandenberry, and you know I always make a point of going through a good deal of business with my housekeeper just at this time, every day."

The wonted signal had the wonted effect . . . . Miss Brandenberry pressed the heiress's half-extended hand with enthusiastic affection in both her own, and then departed, leaving Miss Martin Thorpe to a species of solitude which it gave her no pain to endure.

A good deal of mystery did, in truth, envelope the daily luncheons of Sophia, but it may be explained in few words. Sophia loved money, and she loved nice eating too. Now, whenever these two affections are co-existent in one and the same person, and that person the mistress of a family, it necessarily follows that some difficulties and struggles between them must ensue. In Sophia's case these difficulties were greatly increased by her having her guardian, his wife, and his three children to feed, and that, for the majority at least, at the same table where she was to feed herself. It is not saying too much to aver, that her rest was disturbed by the dilemma in which she thus found herself. More than once she lay upon a sleepless pillow, while the horns of it made themselves into palpable pictures, as if on purpose to torment her. On the one side stood firmly, swelling upon its broad base, a glorious money-bag, at whose narrow mouth a few diminutive coins rose in a pyramid, ready for use . . . . But beside it stood a coarse unseemly joint of salted meat, with rude accompaniments, such as the *gourmet* loves not. On the other side, a like ample bag lay prostrate, and from its yawning orifice welled forth a stream of glittering gold, while evident collapse reduced its roundness . . . . But in all directions near it might be seen the very daintiest dishes that appetite ere dreamed of. The struggle in the mind of the heiress between these two states of existence was for some days very cruelly harassing; but the pithy proverb . . . . "*Aimez, et vous serez inventif*," was proved true in this as in a million other instances, and our Sophia bethought herself of taking her luncheon *alone*, in the quiet room, where, as everybody knows, she "transacted all her business." These lonely luncheons, once decided on, became a source of unspeakable comfort to her, in various ways. The savoury meat that her soul loved was served to her in the greatest possible perfection, no chilling evaporations taking place while others were pressed to share it. The daily meditation as to what these meals should

be, supplied the want of all those more thriftless thoughts, which are wont to fill the heads of idler maidens; and the secret consciousness that the general style of her housekeeping, considered *en grand*, was highly economical, prevented all remorse from the costliness of the *very little* morsels which exhaled their rich but tiny steams within the small, well-heated, silver reservoirs, which had been selected from the closet of ambassadorial plate for her especial use. This digression, which has proved somewhat longer than was intended, will enable the reader to comprehend why it was that the bewitching hour of day with Sophia was two o'clock, and why, from that time till three, the sacred solitude of her boudoir was never invaded, save by the entrance of her favourite Mrs. Roberts, whose office it was to take in and bring out the various articles necessary to the performance of these secret gastronomical mysteries.

It was about one when Lord Broughton and his eccentric friend made their exit; and it took rather more than three quarters of an hour afterwards before the affectionate nature of Miss Brandenberry had so far relieved itself in words as to permit her receiving the civil *congé* of her hungry friend, and tearing herself away. The operations which followed were performed with a steady regularity, which, if it did not, in its fragrant detail, resemble clock-work, was at least in most perfect accordance with it, and might furnish a lesson to many an elegant household, by proving that when the will of its ruler is steadfast, no irregularity will occur.

In a word, Miss Martin Thorpe sat down to an exquisite repast, served in silver, exactly as the great clock over the stables struck two.

CHAPTER XXV.

L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose.

It would be hardly possible to imagine human arrangements made in a manner more likely to insure their object than those adopted by Sophia for the tranquil enjoyment of both her private breakfast and her private luncheon. The back stairs, whose *embouchure* was at two steps from her chamber-door, insuring the coming and the going of the needful apparatus unseen by any but official eyes . . . . the clear understanding so carefully established between herself and her guests, that her boudoir was sacred to herself alone . . . . the positive orders, so impossible to be misunderstood, and so unlikely to be disobeyed, which forbade the admission of any visitor calling within the prescribed intervals;—all this seemed to promise a security which justified the completest confidence on the part of the individual so protected; but—

L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose!

It was on the morning we have been describing, exactly at the moment when appetite, excited by all that had been most carefully prepared to provoke it, led the hand of Sophia to clutch her knife and

fork with more than usual eagerness, in order to make the delicacies just uncovered to her eyes more intimately her own than they were already, that the door of her sitting-room was abruptly and even vehemently opened, and the "crimson-tipped" figure of Mr. Jenkins stood before her.

Certainly there exists no ordinary form of words capable of doing justice to the feeling of indignation which at that moment swelled her heart and shot from her eyes; and it is but an idle effort, that of straining and torturing language in order to make it express more than by its nature it has strength to do. It is wiser to leave the task to that power which is restrained by no grammar, and limited by no vocabulary. Suffice it then to say, that nothing could exceed the anger of Miss Martin Thorpe.

The circumstances which led to this unexampled scene were as follow:—On reaching the steps before which Lord Broughton's groom held the horses, Mr. Jenkins, who was still an extremely active little man, seized the bridle of the one which had brought him to Thorpe-Combe, and springing into the saddle, galloped off without even turning his head to see if his lordship followed him. In this way he reached the lodge gates alone, but pausing there, that this obstacle might be opened for him, he was overtaken by his noble friend.

"Are you not a foolish fellow, Mr. Timothy Jenkins?" said the earl, laughing immoderately. "As I hope to live, I believe you are running away because you dare not look me in the face. Come, Timothy, confess! . . . . Own, like a man, that for once in your life you are heartily ashamed of yourself."

"And so lie past the hope of pardon?" returned his wild-looking companion. "If I do, may I never see the glorious sun at home again! No! . . . . Earl of Broughton! . . . . The time has been, when I have thought you keen, sharp-witted, quick at device, and bold in act as thought. . . . . But now! . . . . Poor Arthur! . . . . You have lost ground lamentably! Not only by the heels of my jenet, Sir Earl, have I run away from you, but swifter far by the rapid flight of my superior wit . . . . And not wit only, Arthur, but my will. Know you not, old friend, that wilful will, rough-riding, hard-mouthed wilful will, has carried me on its back for forty years and more . . . . And think you, now, that I mean to stand bobbing, cap in hand, before a little ugly pug-nosed girl, asking her leave to do what do I will, whether she gives permission or not?"

"Of course you will, you needless boaster; and therein lies the jest," replied Lord Broughton, still laughing. "Why, beloved Timothy, should you deem it necessary to poke that celestial-looking *chef* of yours into a wasp's nest, when you may get at whatever portion of the fabric you may have a fancy for, without any danger of being stung?"

"I like to be stung, Lord Broughton," replied Mr. Jenkins. "It makes me laugh better than tickling. Besides, to tell you the truth, and without in the slightest degree intending to affront you, I doubt if your earlship's philosophy mounts to the same pitch as mine. I am a great philosopher, Thelwell . . . . Broughton . . . . what the devil's your noble name? . . . . a greater philosopher than you fancy

me to be . . . . And so you shall confess, before I have done with you. But this is wasting time . . . . and I have business to do. Adieu! my lord! . . . . I will not keep your dinner waiting, if I can help it."—And with these words the eccentric Mr. Jenkins scampered off, in the attitude and at the pace of an Arab, pursuing a foe at full speed.

The three miles which separated Broughton Castle from Thorpe-Combe, were passed over twice by Mr. Timothy Jenkins in considerably less time than ordinary mortals required for performing the same distance once; and having secured his panting steed somewhere and somehow, out of sight of the house, he made his way, Heaven knows how, but unseen and unheard by any one, up to the door of the unsuspecting young lady, whose first reception of him was so violent a start, that her raised fork actually dropped from her hand. The look she gave him would have been terrific to any man less blindly indifferent to all things save his own crotchets, than was Mr. Timothy Jenkins. It may almost be doubted whether he saw it; but at any rate he took no more notice of it than he would have done had a cat opened wide her green eyes before him.

"My dear!" . . . . he began.

"Sir!!!" ejaculated in a tone indicative of more wrathful indignation than the monosyllable was ever made to express before, seemed to check him for a moment only. "Don't look in such a passion, my dear," he resumed, "it is not pretty . . . . And you have no reason to be angry with me, as I will prove to you in one minute. You must know, my dear girl, that I am very rich . . . . monstrously rich! I am, upon my word and honour, though I do not carry colours to prove it just at the present moment, I confess. But, however, I suspect you are too sensible a girl to doubt your own eyes. I saw last night that you were rather partial to trinkets and jewels, and that sort of thing, because I perceived by the first glance of my eye that you had got one and all of the old things on and about you . . . . and if they were rubbed up a little, some of them might look decent enough, perhaps, in a quiet way. But they are no more to be compared with . . . . However that's nothing to the purpose, just now; but *this* is" . . . . And here Mr. Timothy Jenkins drew forth from his deep coat-pocket a small casket of the finest ivory, inlaid with tiny flowers of transparent tortoiseshell. He touched a spring, and the lid flew open. "Now then, look here, my dear," he said, raising from its rose-coloured satin bed an enormous string of the most magnificent oriental pearls. "This is what I call a pretty toy, and it is worth just about . . . . let me see, just about at least one quarter of all the diamonds you had got stuck about your poor dear little head, last night . . . . What do you think of it? It is very pretty, and not nearly so heavy for you to carry."

"I think, sir," said Sophia, her voice, her eyes, her mouth, her chin, all undergoing the most sudden and surprising metamorphosis, "I think, sir, that if those are real pearls, they are the most beautiful that ever were seen in the world."

"Pretty nearly, pretty nearly. But pray, Miss . . . . Martin Thorpe . . . . do you happen to have any doubts about their being

genuine? Do you suspect that they are made of wax and glass, my dear?" said Mr. Jenkins, laying them across the hands of Sophia, which seemed instinctively to advance in order to receive them.

"Wax and glass? . . . . Oh no, sir! . . . . I never saw anything so beautiful in all my life. And what a clasp! How that stone blazes in the middle of the diamonds!"

"Yes, it does . . . . It is a pretty sapphire for the size. I am glad you like it. And now, Sophy Martin . . . . Thorpe, I will make a bargain with you: I will give you that string of pearls, clasp, casket, and all, if you will only be kind and good to me, and let me go about the old house that I have not seen for so many years, without being cross and angry as you were this morning. What say you? Will you agree to it?"

The dull little eyes of Sophia actually shot forth a sort of dim lurid ray as they were raised to those of her strange but most munificent visitor.

"Agree, sir! . . . . I am sure I do not know what to say to express my gratitude. Every room in the house, of course, and everything in them, may be seen by you at any time and at all times. Mrs. Barnes, my housekeeper, is a very civil obliging person, and she shall have orders to attend you whenever you please."

"Mrs. Barnes . . . . Mrs. Barnes, your housekeeper? Yes, my dear . . . . that will do exactly. I should like nothing better. Here they are then. They are pretty tolerable pearls, I promise you. And they are your own, Miss Sophy. I give them to you out and out. Now then, lock them up in one of your dear old cabinets. They are rather too valuable to lie about."

Flattered, bewildered, but delighted, perhaps, more than she had ever been at any single moment of her whole life, Sophia hastened to obey him. He followed her to the cabinet she selected, and when she had opened it, held her back, with one hand, but gently enough not to frighten her, while with the other he himself opened the door of a centre receptacle, which was well calculated to hold the casket conveniently. But ere she deposited the treasure, he said to her, "Have you observed the spring, Sophy? . . . . Do you know how to open it?"

"How kind of you to think of it," she exclaimed. "Indeed I do not, and I shall be greatly obliged if you will show me."

"Look here, then . . . . you see it is very easy." And the happy heiress practised the manœuvre before his eyes, that she might be quite perfect in it.

"Yes, that is the way. You will hardly miss it now. But I am more sharp than most people about springs . . . . I can always open them, and, more than that, I can generally pretty well guess where they are. Stay now; just let me put my finger there, will you?"

Sophia stood aside: Mr. Jenkins touched a panel which seemed to be merely ornamental, and flying back, it discovered a recess in which lay a morocco case which looked as if it contained a very small miniature. Mr. Jenkins snatched at it with a movement so sudden as to make her start. But a gentleman possessing the power of giving away such a string of pearls as she had just received, was

not likely to inspire fear, and immediately recovering herself, she composedly watched him open the little case, which did indeed contain the "miniature presentment" of a little boy of six or seven years old. He changed colour as he looked at it, becoming again as pale as she had seen him look once before that day. But how different were her feelings as she watched him now! . . . . Instead of the sour frown which then clothed her features, and hung heavily upon her brow, as much of kindness as it was possible for her countenance to express shone in her looks, and her voice and manner once again assumed the obsequious gentleness that her poor old uncle Thorpe had thought so interesting.

"Perhaps you know that little boy?" she said—"perhaps when you used to be here so much from Lord Broughton's Castle, you may have seen him?"

"No!" replied Mr. Jenkins, with a slight sigh. "I don't think I ever *did* know that boy."

"I dare say it is the picture of my cousin Cornelius," said Sophia demurely.

"What makes you think so, my dear?" demanded her companion.

"Oh! . . . . I don't know. Merely because it is here, I believe; for of course, I never saw it before, as I never found out the spring," said Sophia.

"Then I don't suppose you care very much about it, my dear . . . . and if you do not, I wish you would give it to me." Sophia looked askance at it, as it lay in Mr. Jenkins' hand, and saw that it was set in a circle of small diamonds. She felt a twinge at her heart which caused a moment's delay in her answer . . . . The eye of her new acquaintance was upon her, and had the delay continued, he looked very capable of taking offence, and flying off. But luckily the diamonds were *very* small, and, in good time, she remembered that the pearls were very large; so, with the best grace she could assume, she replied . . . . "Oh certainly! . . . . I am sure you are most exceedingly welcome. I only wish the diamonds were larger. They *do* seem very bright, but I am afraid they must appear quite small to you."

"It is the little picture I want, and not the setting," said Mr. Jenkins, quietly, and at the same time examining the back of the picture to see how it was put together. "If you like it," he added, "I can very easily take the ivory out, and leave the little diamonds with you?"

"Just as you please," replied Sophia, and she stood fixed beside him without moving a joint, anxiously awaiting the result.

Mr. Jenkins began to set to work upon the setting, with his thumbs; but though he applied them handily enough, the good work defied him, and he turned to Sophia's well-spread table to look for some instrument that might assist him. It was then that for the first time he perceived the elaborate nature of the preparations for the repast he had interrupted, and suddenly changing his purpose he said. "Do you keep the little picture, my dear, till another time . . . . only don't give it away to anybody else, and I'll come again with some tool or other that will help us to do this little job about the diamonds better than one of your handsome silver-hilted knives. I am glad to see that you

are so fond of pretty things, Miss Sophia, for I have got abundance of them . . . . And now, as you cannot conveniently give me the picture to-day, I will ask you to give me something else. . . . . Will you give me something to eat? I am as hungry as a hound."

Sophia, who felt a thrill run through her frame at the mention of this abundance of pretty things, replied in the most bland of tones, "Oh, sir! I shall be so glad if you can find anything you may happen to like; but I am afraid that you will find it all so cold! . . . . Pray sit down. I will come to you in a moment."

He obeyed, and seated himself at the table, which he rapidly examined in every particular with the eye of a connoisseur. Sophia meanwhile did her best to join him with as little delay as possible, but she first restored the miniature to its recess, closed the precious cabinet, locked it carefully, and put the key, which was on a bunch with many more, into her pocket. This done, she placed herself opposite to her guest at the well-spread little table; and considering that she had as yet eaten little or nothing herself, she did the honours of it with wonderful cordiality. It is true that the cabinet, with its well-remembered though unseen acquisition, was at no great distance, and exquisite as was the repast before her, she would not, even had it been quite hot, have hazarded the favour of her new acquaintance for any gratification it could have afforded her . . . . So greatly, at that moment, did the affections of the heart supersede all merely animal requirements in the consideration of Sophia!

Mr. Jenkins appeared to know extremely well what was good; and either from hunger, politeness, or some other cause, paid no attention to the coldness of the delicate viands of which he had, indeed, himself been the cause.

"Nothing can be better made than these *petits patés*, my dear. Is it the Mrs. Barnes you were talking of who had the honour of making them?" said he.

"I rather think so, sir," replied Sophia; "she is a very good cook, and as I do not as yet know so much of the servant who is under her, I have desired that she should herself prepare everything that is sent up to me."

"Very thoughtful . . . . very wise," said Mr. Jenkins; "and I take it for granted she is a great favourite, Miss Sophia?"

"Why no, sir, I do not think she is a very pleasant servant. I like that people should show that they have one's interest at heart, and I do not think that is as much the case with her as it ought to be. However, it is a great object to get a good cook. May I give you a little of this pulled turkey, sir? It is dressed with mushrooms, and is generally very good. I only wish it was not so cold . . . . and the asparagus too! I fear it is quite spoiled."

"Not so cold, not so very cold, neither, my dear. These pretty silver dishes must have been famously hot when they came up, for they are quite warm now. What have you got under *that* cover, Miss Sophia?"

"Stewed eels, sir, and that she does remarkably well too . . . . but I would not advise you to venture upon it now. If you will do me he favour to call just at the same time some other morning, you shall

find everything more comfortable. These apricot creams, I know, are very nice, and so I dare say is the jelly. Which will you take, sir?"

"Jelly, my dear; I will take some jelly. It looks exactly as it ought to do . . . . and you must know that I am rather particular about jelly. When one is rich, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, I don't see any reason why one should eat bad things. Do you?"

"No, indeed, sir," replied Sophia, with considerable energy, "I think it would be very foolish, and only show one's ignorance."

"Very true . . . . very sensibly said, indeed. But do tell me, my dear, how comes it that you seem to be left all alone so? They told me at the Castle that one of your uncles . . . . by marriage, I mean . . . . one of your uncles, who is your guardian, was living with you, together with his family. Where in the world are they all?"

"Why, sir, the truth is, that I should never be able to do anything . . . . and I like to manage all my own affairs; but I should never be able to do it all if I did not keep one room to myself, particularly during the morning . . . . and so I have had this one fitted up on purpose for me, and they none of them ever come into it."

"I am afraid, then, you don't find them very agreeable?" said Mr. Jenkins, interrogatively.

"Why you know, sir, it cannot possibly be agreeable to have troublesome little boys running about the house."

"And your cousin Florence? . . . . I think they told me at the ball that she was called Florence . . . . What sort of a girl is she?"

"She is no fit companion for me, in any way," replied Sophia, colouring, as the feelings of the previous night returned upon her.

"Oh! dear, dear . . . . that's a pity! But they are not making any great noise in the house now, at any rate; or else I suppose we should hear them, shouldn't we?"

"Certainly, sir, and very disagreeable it is, sometimes. But luckily they are very seldom at home in a morning. My other guardian, Sir Charles Temple, has a place quite close to mine, and I understand he he has given the Heathcotes leave to let the children play in an old summer-house in his grounds. If he did it to keep the house quiet, it was very thoughtful of him."

"The summer-house at Temple? . . . . Do you mean the old banqueting-room? . . . . Good Heaven! How well I remember it!" exclaimed Mr. Jenkins.

"Yes, it is called the banqueting-room," replied Sophia; "I have never been to look at it, but I am told that it is reckoned very pretty."

"Well! . . . . Now, my dear, then, I will wish you a good morning . . . . and I shall come to see you again, you may depend upon it. But before I go, you must just be so kind as to let me light my pipe, will you?"

With very eager zeal the fingers of the amiable heiress employed themselves in communicating light to the *bougie*, by whose aid the rose-scented vapour soon mounted in a delicate cloud from the enamelled appendage to Mr. Jenkins' button-hole: for, in the first place, she was only too happy to do anything to please him; in the second, she longed for him to go, that she might be left *tête-à-tête* with

her pearls; and, in the third, she remembered that lighting a *bougie* cost nothing, or next to nothing. So the operation was performed with equal adroitness and despatch, and the visitor departed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was a very lovely April morning upon which all these adventures occurred; and as the sun was still high in the heavens when Mr. Timothy Jenkins found his horse again, and rode off, we must follow his movements a little longer. It was a pity that the gentleman, who, though eccentric, appeared to be a generous good-natured sort of a person . . . . it was a pity that he had so inveterate a habit of smoking, for it prevented his enjoying, as he might otherwise have done, the leisurely pace at which he permitted himself and his horse to thread the narrow woodland path which led to the old banqueting-room . . . . though, under the dominion of the gardener, this path looked as wild as if it traversed a forest in Western America, instead of leading most commodiously across the ravine which divided the two estates, by means of a rude-looking ivy-mantled bridge. But the ground beside the path was literally matted over with primroses and violets; and had Mr. Jenkins permitted his nose to have fair play, it might have told him that the richest aroma which an eastern sun ever drew from the blossoms of Araby the blest, could not exceed in spirit-soothing sweetness the scents of an English spring. But though this was lost for him, the gay carol of the birds was not; no, nor the insect hum, that the first warm breath of fitful April is as sure to bring into our cold sunshine as is the rank fervour of July to animate its reptile thousands on the Nile. Mr. Jenkins enjoyed it all, yet it was an enjoyment that made him again turn pale, and he had to dash away a tear or two before he could see, as clearly as it deserved to be seen, the pretty net-work, made up of sunshine and shade, beneath his feet—or the bright tender green of the young larch-buds, that sprinkled the woods through which he passed.

Though he took good care that the pace of his horse should be as slow as the pace of a horse could be, the distance between Thorpe-Combe and the banqueting-room was soon stepped over; and having reached the grassy space that surrounded the building, he sprang to the ground again, tied his high-bred but docile little Arabian to a tree, and having given one long earnest gaze around, entered the room.

The very domestic party assembled there were so divided as to give the whole space, large as it was, the air of being inhabited, and exceedingly comfortable. The old couple left by Sir Charles Temple in charge of the premises, had probably received private orders which had recently made this beautiful but long forsaken room assume the well-furnished air which it now presented. Near the fire-place, which now glowed with a small but bright wood fire, a large carpet, old, but still in substantial repair, had been brought from the fine old library,

and carefully laid down; it reached to the two upper windows of the beautiful range which opened opposite the door of entrance upon the precipitous descent to the ravine that bounded the property. The music and the sparkling of a small natural cascade, caused by a sharp turn and sudden dip of the brawling little stream at the bottom, had probably led to the choice of this secluded spot for the erection of the *salon de plaisance*, now again, after the interval of many years, converted to purposes of enjoyment. And there the cataract danced and sang still, as featly as when it first tempted the extravagant father of the present poor baronet to lay out many hundreds to obtain a luxurious view of it. And a luxurious view it still was, though the window-frames were weather-stained, and the delicate green of the stuccoed walls had turned to a dingy patch-work.

On a comfortable sofa near the fire sat Mrs. Heathcote, assiduously employed in teaching the youngest of her little boys to read. At the farther extremity of the room, and far beyond the more furnished division marked out by the carpet, stood a large table, well nigh covered from one end to the other with the multifarious articles necessary to the pursuit of the science of angling. Major Heathcote and his son Frederic, who had both of them already been spending several very happy hours by the water-side, were occupied at this table in preparing for a second expedition; and Florence, seated at a little writing-desk placed at one of the beautiful windows, was pretty thoroughly unconscious of all around her, while scribbling a history of the last night's adventures to Sir Charles.

But despite of this, Florence, in common with the rest of the party, was startled by the very unexpected appearance of Mr. Jenkins; they all fixed their eyes upon him, but it was only Major Heathcote who recognised, under the cap of scarlet and gold, the bald-headed gentleman introduced to him by Lord Broughton at the ball. Mr. Jenkins approached him with a smiling countenance and an extended hand.

"How exceedingly comfortable you all seem to be here!" said he, looking round upon the whole party. "But I hope you won't think me impertinent for breaking in upon you all. I have just been explaining, Major Heathcote, to the young lady to whom you are so kind as to act as guardian, why it is that I am so anxious to make acquaintance with you all. These are all old haunts to me, Mrs. Heathcote; I used to be a great deal at Broughton Castle formerly, and at that time the Thorpe-Combe family were very intimate there—so that I used to be a great deal at Thorpe-Combe too. It is many, many years since I have seen either; and therefore you can understand . . . . I am sure that you can . . . . the sort of feeling which makes me desirous of becoming acquainted with you all."

Though this was said with Mr. Timothy Jenkins's usual short, sharp, rapidity of manner, there was a tone of natural feeling in it, which at once propitiated the friendly hearts of his hearers.

"No man can understand that better, sir, than one who has been a soldier," replied the major. "I don't wish ever to forget what I felt on coming back to my father's vicarage, after passing five years in the garrison at Gibraltar. It was like coming home to a thousand dear

old friends at once. Every tree, every bush, every table, and every chair, felt dear to me."

"To be sure they did, sir," replied Mr. Jenkins. "But if you came back to your father's vicarage, Major Heathcote, you found your father still alive . . . . or his vicarage would no longer have been your resting-place. . . . This makes a good deal of difference. Are these your sons, Mrs. Heathcote? Of course they are, and I have asked a silly question. They have features that both father and mother themselves. . . . I must not venture to come and shake hands with you, my dear," he continued, approaching Florence, but stopping short within a few feet of her little table. "You seem so very busily engaged, that you will be angry, I suppose, if I interrupt you?"

"No, indeed!" said Florence blushing, and hastily putting her letter into her desk. "I think I have written enough for to-day." And she stepped forward, and offered him her hand with a frankness of manner which grew out of his own. The favour was very cordially received; and then the uninvited guest began walking about the room, looking first out of one window and then out of another, talking all the time, in a succession of very unconnected sentences, but with a great air of good-humour, and friendly interest for them all. At length he approached in his wanderings a sort of sideboard which stood against the wall at the bottom of the room, on which was a basket and napkin, together with the remains of a loaf of bread, some cheese-parings, and a couple of tumblers, one having contained beer and the other water.

"Who has been eating here?" demanded the unceremonious Mr. Jenkins.

"We have all been eating," replied Major Heathcote.

"Rather a homely repast, apparently," returned the other bluntly. "Was this forwarded to you from the larder of the heiress?"

Mrs. Heathcote laughed, Florence coloured, and the major looked a little as if he thought their visitor *tant soit peu* impertinent; nevertheless, he answered, with but little less than his usual good humour, "Yes, sir, it came from Thorpe-Combe."

This question and answer seemed to bring the conversation, if such it might be called, to a conclusion, for Mr. Jenkins hurried away with as little ceremony as he had entered; merely giving a nod to each of the party, without saying anything beyond a general good-bye, which appeared to be intended for them all.

"What an exceedingly queer man that is," said Florence; "and yet there is something that interests me about him, though I cannot tell why. Perhaps it is because he looks sallow and out of health."

"I do not think he is out of health, Florence," replied her father. "He looks, I think, more sunburnt than sickly; but certainly he is the most remarkable free-and-easy chap that I ever saw. Come, Fred, catch up the basket, there's a man. We had no luck this morning, but I think we had not quite shade enough. We must do better now, or we shall get no compliments from Mrs. Barnes."

* * * * * *

For nearly a week after this time Mr. Jenkins did not again make

his appearance at Thorpe-Combe, and Sophia began very seriously to believe that the opinion uttered by Miss Brandenberry, in the extremity of her dismay after his first abrupt exit from her boudoir, was literally correct, and that the unaccountable bestower of the unequalled string of pearls was really and *bonâ fide* mad. How else indeed could his conduct be accounted for? That his motive for this munificent and uncalled-for generosity was not, as he had declared it to be, a wish of propitiating her free consent to his going over her house, was clearly proved by his not taking advantage of the permission when given; and, in short, nothing but his being insane *could* account for it. Such really appeared to be the only rationa interpretation of his conduct, and on this her mind fixed itself too firmly to be easily shaken. Such being the state of the case, it became a matter of immense importance to her, that she should decide with judgment upon the line of conduct she was to pursue. Were his wildly-liberal present to her made known, and the fact of his being insane to become evident also, she felt that it would be impossible to retain it. It was not improbable, she thought, that this rich treasure, so recklessly carried about in his pocket, might constitute the whole of his fortune. She fancied that he might in some capricious moment before returning to England have thus converted his property into a portable shape, that he might be himself the bearer of it; and if this were so, she felt that she could not be thankful enough for the chance that had so providentially thrown her in his way! If he were indeed mad, there could be no sin of any kind in keeping his rich gift, because he must, of course, be provided for in some asylum where he could in no way benefit by its being restorted to him.

Could she therefore be quite sure that the transaction between them would remain unknown to all beside themselves, her course was clear. She had only to keep the secret herself, and to keep also the treasure which fortune had put into her hands; but if, on the other hand, he were, before the aberration of his intellect became generally known, to mention his visit to her, and the gift he had made in the course of it, the only thing for her to do, was to endeavour by every means in her power to ward off all suspicion of insanity, so that it might for ever remain doubtful whether he were not legally in a state of mind to render him capable of disposing of his property at the time she received his present.

Having completely made up her mind as to the modes of conduct which in either case it was her duty to pursue, the outward bearing of Sophia indicated nothing that in any way interfered with her usual monotony and stiff composure of spirits; but, in truth, she was not without her anxieties, and looked out for every sound which might bring her tidings of Mr. Timothy Jenkins, with a much more lively degree of interest than she usually felt in the welfare of any human being, save herself.

On the morning of the sixth day after his first visit, Mr. Jenkins again made his appearance at Thorpe-Combe; but on this occasion he chose so strange a time for his visit, that no reasons less imperative than those which regulated Sophia's conduct towards him, could have

induced her to admit him. She was in the act of presiding at the economical family dinner at six o'clock, when the bell at the hall-door rang violently.

"This is an odd time for visitors," observed Major Heathcote.

"Let nobody in," said the heiress, knitting her brows into great severity of aspect; but suddenly recollecting herself, she added—"unless it is——If any one wishes to see me, desire that the name may be sent in."

It was the butler to whom this was addressed, and accordingly he himself answered the door-bell; but not even the dignity of his very superior demeanour could induce the guest who appeared at it to submit himself to the etiquette he suggested. Before the hall-door was again closed, Mr. Jenkins was in the dining-room, wearing a smiling look of assured welcome, which, if it did not indicate madness, betokened a degree of familiarity hardly less embarrassing to Sophia.

She immediately rose from her place, saying, "Let me show you into the drawing-room, sir;" but before she had well finished the sentence, Mr. Jenkins seized upon a chair, and drawing it to the dinner-table beside Florence, said, "Don't stand upon any ceremony with me, my dear. You know I told you that I had been very intimate here, and you can't please me better than by just letting me fall into my old ways again. I am come on purpose to dine with you, Miss Martin Thorpe. You keep too good a house to make a notice necessary, or else I should have given you one, for I am a little like yourself, my dear,—I like what is nice."

Sophia was indescribably distressed. Her dinner was very nearly as far removed from deserving the epithet of "nice," in the sense in which she well knew Mr. Jenkins used it, as possible. It consisted of a tureen of pea-soup at the top, and a round of boiled beef at the bottom of the table,—cabbage, carrots, &c., furnishing the side dishes.

"That is a good substantial joint, my dear," said the sallow traveller, eying the goodly "round," "but I don't think it will suit you and me. It is a favourite with the major, I suppose, and if so, that is very attentive and kind of you; but I think I can guess the sort of course which will follow; and all hot, hot, you know; so you shall give me leave to wait, if you please."

"The ladye called her little foot-page
And whispered in his ear"—

that he should order Mrs. Barnes to prepare, and send in with the greatest possible expedition, whatever she had ready in the house that was "nice," and having said this, she called him back again to add, "Whatever she was going to get for my own supper to-night."

Jem was a quick boy, and well deserved the promotion which had fallen upon him. He repeated the whispered message to Mrs. Barnes without a single blunder; but so great was the astonishment of the housekeeper at its purport, that notwithstanding the haste demanded, she made the grinning nuncio go through it every word again before she moved an inch.

"Her own supper! The Lord be good to me! What mortal man

can that be as she'd say that for?" demanded the good woman, looking perfectly dismayed.

"It is the queer chap as comed last week from the Castle with his lordship," replied Jem.

Oh! that's it, is it? She wants to curry favour there, does she? Nasty proud minx! But she may give away her dear supper, and her breakfast and her luncheon into the bargain, before she'll bring that set here again as they used to be. However, madam shall try what her delicate supper will do, if it is only for the pleasure of knowing how moping and miserable she will go to bed without it;" and in pursuance of this excellent resolution a very dainty second course made its appearance in less time than any one but a Mrs. Barnes could have achieved it; yet not so quickly, nevertheless, as not to make it very obviously visible to the meanest capacity that this addition to the entertainment was *improvisé*. The greatly-vexed Sophia did all she could to make this awful interval appear as short as possible by ordering the butler to bring round champagne, and by most earnestly pressing Major, Mrs., and Miss Heathcote to eat more boiled beef. But all would not do. The first course and the second course were pretty nearly as distinct as if the one had been called dinner and the other supper; and though the major made a point of saying everything he could think of, and Florence answered freely and pleasantly to all the numerous questions Mr. Jenkins was pleased to ask her, time halted with them all most obviously.

Mrs. Heathcote was the person who appeared to suffer least by this; for the very lively and awakening feeling of astonishment which had seized upon her gave occupation enough to her thoughts to have employed them twice as long. What could be the cause of this astounding variation in the character and manners of Miss Martin Thorpe? She, whose avarice showed itself more visibly every day she lived . . . . she, whose temper stood not the slightest contrariety without exhibiting the most unequivocal marks of impatience . . . . that she, that Sophia, should submit to this unauthorized and very impertinent intrusion from a perfect stranger, not only without displeasure, but with every appearance of thinking herself honoured and favoured thereby, was a mystery so perfectly past finding out, and at the same time so exceedingly exciting to curiosity, that, as Mrs. Heathcote sat and watched both the guest and his metamorphosed entertainer, the vacant table and the idle plates stood before her unnoted.

As to Mr. Jenkins, all that could be made of him was, that his dauntless, reckless, indifference to all common forms rendered him absolutely unconscious of the strangeness of his own conduct. But, at the same time, there was such an air of careless good-humour in all he said, that it was certainly difficult for a good-natured person not to feel in some degree pleased with him. But no person at all acquainted with Miss Martin Thorpe could for an instant suppose that this sort of manner could have any charm for her. It was, on the contrary, clear as light that it was and must be precisely the kind of thing she most detested; yet there she sat, convulsing her features into a ceaseless smile, and instead of looking daggers at

every impertinent word he uttered, torturing every feature to express approbation and delight.

Nor was the conduct of Mr. Jenkins at all such as to render this labour of politeness easy. Though apparently in the most perfect good-humour, he showed without any attempt at reserve, that he was quite aware of the awkwardness of the operations which were going on, to welcome him.

"I did not mean, my dear, to put you into this terrible fuss," he said . . . . "I can't say, to be sure, that I like to eat salt beef. That would not be true, for I account it, next to salt pork, the most uneatable thing that Europeans put upon their tables. In general . . . . that is, among the higher and middling classes . . . . they are very decent feeders. But I would not have come in so unexpectedly, if I had thought your general manner of living was so unlike your nice luncheons. By the bye, I don't mean *your* luncheon, Major Heathcote, I can't say that looked very tempting, but yours, my dear, that you and I sat down to, so snugly together, about a week ago."

"Will you not take another glass of champagne, Mr. Jenkins?" said Sophia, whose brown cheeks were gradually becoming crimson.

"No, I thank you. . . . . Yes, I will, though; it will make the time seem shorter. . . . . Did you not think I was lost, my dear? I'll bet an elephant to a camel, that you thought I was run away . . . . and that you would never see any more of my pretty things. Eh? was it so?"

This speech, however alarming, from its allusion to what she intended none but herself should know, had enough in it to revive all the sinking energies of Sophia, and she answered in her very gentlest tones. . . . . "You had said that you would return, my dear sir, and I felt sure you would not break your word, and most happy I am to see you again."

"You would have liked it better, though, if I had come at lunch-time, instead of dinner? . . . . I must remember that, another time."

"Come when you will, sir, you will always be welcome," said Miss Martin Thorpe.

The major and Mrs. Heathcote, though the very last people in the word to exchange uncivil family glances, could not resist this. They looked at each other; and that look, though neither prolonged nor of any very marked expression, said a good deal. If Mr. Jenkins observed it, he was less frank than usual on the subject, for he made no commentary. His next speech was addressed to Florence.

"My dear, you are very like your mother, and she was very pretty, I remember that. She was ever so many years younger than . . . . than her brother. It is very interesting, I assure you, coming back in this way to an old place that one remembers so well. Look here, my dear . . . . let me see your pretty hand. There, I brought this on purpose for you. My fingers are not very big, you see, so what was rather tight for my little finger is not a great deal too big for your third. . . . . There . . . . How do you like it?"

While saying this, Mr. Timothy Jenkins, who appeared to the excited mind of Sophia to carry about with him an inexhaustible mine

of precious stones, put upon the finger of Florence a diamond ring of very considerable value, which, though hardly suited to so young and small a hand, appeared to sparkle in the eyes of the heiress more resplendently than any stone she had ever looked upon. For one short moment she turned her dark, dismal-looking eyes from the hand of Florence to her face; and the glance, though rapid, positively made Miss Heathcote start. All the deep, deep mortification Florence had caused her at the ball; all her vague, latent suspicions, that the admired Sir Charles Temple thought her beautiful; all the corrosive, vainly-battled consciousness which lay at the bottom of her own heart, that she was so; and that not all the wealth that all the world could give had power to make the richly-endowed heiress as fair to look upon as her penniless cousin,—all this, strengthened, it may be, by the ill-humour which the vexatious circumstances of the present moment produced, seemed recorded in that look . . . . for it was one of unmixed hatred.

But though Florence started at the unexpected sternness of that strange glance, she was at an immeasurable distance from understanding it. She perceived that her cousin was very angry with her, and fancied that she saw some great impropriety in her having permitted Mr. Jenkins to take hold of her hand and place the ring upon it. In truth she did not greatly approve this, herself; and colouring to the temples, she drew off the glittering jewel, and laying it beside the plate of her new acquaintance, said, with a pretty shake of the head, which conveyed a whole volume upon the impropriety of her accepting it. . . . . "You are very, very kind, Mr. Jenkins, and I am very much obliged to you; but indeed I cannot take the ring, so do not be angry if I return it to you."

Mr. Jenkins looked at her with a sort of meditative eye that seemed scanning her character. He took up the ring, however, and replaced it on his own finger, but did not appear to have taken her refusal of it amiss, for he smiled as he replied . . . . "Very well, my dear, then I must keep it myself."

When at length the second course did arrive, Sophia had the satisfaction of remarking that Mr. Timothy Jenkins did ample justice to it; and something in her own heart, or rather in her own palate, perhaps, made her feel the importance of having the power thus to gratify a man who gave away jewels, rich and rare, as freely as a crippled godmother in a fairy tale. She would willingly, however, have spared some of his laudatory remarks on the dishes set before him, bearing as they did upon their comparative merits, relatively to what she had given him at luncheon,—for of her luncheons she never spoke; and though not particularly observant as to what the Heathcote family might think of her, on any point, she greatly preferred their knowing nothing at all about them. But there was nothing in the manner of either father, mother, or daughter, as Mr. Jenkins made these *mal-à-propos* observations, which betrayed their having excited much attention; perhaps the information they conveyed was not quite so new to her guests as she imagined, for Mrs. Barnes was a bit of a gossip, and would chatter a little to Mrs. Heathcote, now and then, when that very loving mother indulged herself by accom-

panying her little boys into the housekeeper's room, which to them was by far the most agreeable part of the mansion.

Another whisper produced the lighting-up of the drawing-room, and then followed a very severe struggle in the mind of Sophia as to whether she could, would, might, and should carry off with her the precious giver of jewels when she removed from the dinner-table, or whether she must, in conformity to established usage, leave him to listen to whatever it came into honest Major Heathcote's head to say. She had taken to peeling her almonds, as a means of lengthening the interval of meditation, and shortening that of danger which might possibly follow . . . . and having reached the very last upon which she thought it possible thus to employ herself, she abruptly rose, without paying the least attention to the fact that Mrs. Heathcote was in the act of dipping her fingers in her water-glass and said —"Everybody seems ready for the drawing-room, so I think we may all go there together." This speech, long delayed, and not delivered at last without hesitation, was rendered of none effect by the following reply from Mr. Jenkins :—

"Together, my dear? what! . . . . gentlemen and ladies all together? . . . . That is quite out of the way, Miss Sophy. I am afraid your good aunt has not brought you as forward as she might have done, upon the chapter of customs and manners. However, you need not look grave about it, my dear. There is no harm done; and with your good leave, Major Heathcote and I will make ourselves comfortable for a little while here, with nobody to listen to us but a bottle of claret."

Escape from this sentence there was none. The miserable heiress . . . . for at that moment, despite all she had got and all she hoped to get, Sophia *was* exceedingly miserable . . . . the miserable heiress bent her head, and said, with extraordinary gentleness, considering what she suffered, "Pray do, sir." This effort made, and the parlour door closed behind her, she had, at least, the comfort of knowing that no farther restraint was necessary for the present; and brushing, with her accustomed disregard of ceremony, past Mrs. Heathcote and Florence, she took refuge in her own boudoir, where her sulky cup of coffee was as usual brought her, and where she remained, for a long hour, execrating the yoke of her minority, which obliged her to endure the presence of the hated Heathcotes, and very gravely pondering again the possibility of picking a positive quarrel with them, and making herself a ward of Chancery.

At the expiration of this time her page came, according to order, to inform her that the strange gentleman and the major had left the dinner-table, and she then descended, trembling lest she should find some alteration in the manners of her valued guest, which might be the result of his *tête-à-tête* with her guardian.

But her terrors on this subject were altogether vain and unfounded. She was right enough, perhaps, in thinking that Major Heathcote was not fond of her, but totally wrong in supposing him likely to make her or her conduct the subject of conversation with a stranger.

In fact, during the hour they remained together her name was not once mentioned between them. Mr. Jenkins, notwithstanding the

eccentricities of his manner, was essentially gentlemanlike, and having, during many years of various adventure, acquired much out-of-the-way information and anecdote, the conversation was exceedingly well sustained, without either party having recourse to commentaries or questions concerning the few persons with whom they were mutually acquainted. During the last few minutes, indeed, which preceded their leaving the room, Mr. Jenkins led the conversation to Italy, and mentioned having heard that Major Heathcote's eldest son was there with Sir Charles Temple. This was replied to, with all frankness, as well as a question or two which followed respecting the age of Algernon, and his enjoyment of the novel scenes to which his journey must have introduced him.

Had it not been, in short, for the puzzled feeling of surprise and wonder which the unaccountable manner of his introduction to the intimacy of Miss Martin Thorpe occasioned him, Major Heathcote would have enjoyed the unwonted variety which his visit afforded; but upon this point not a syllable had been spoken, either in the way of explanation or remark, and happy would Sophia have been could she have known how totally and entirely her name had been omitted during their conversation.

As to Mrs. Heathcote and Florence, the case was different. On finding themselves alone in the drawing-room, it had occurred to them both at the same moment, that the best atonement which could be made to Frederic and Stephen for having been banished altogether from the dining-room, would be to have them in there till Miss Martin Thorpe made her appearance.

"May I ring the bell, mamma?" said Florence.

"Yes, dear,—I think we may venture. If she pops in upon us before the gentlemen, you must run off with them," said Mrs. Heathcote.

The bell was answered by Jem, who received orders to desire Mrs. Barnes to send the two boys into the drawing-room; the result of which was, that Mrs. Barnes immediately entered there herself, leading a child in each hand.

And then, most certainly, something like gossip ensued, and from a quarter where poor Miss Martin Thorpe the least expected it. For so thoroughly was she convinced that she had bribed the housekeeper to silence, by means of high wages, confidential importance, and the promise of great preferment to her niece, that she believed herself safe with her, upon the surest of all principles, self-interest.

It may often happen, perhaps, that similar calculations prove equally erroneous; but never were any more completely so than these respecting Mrs. Barnes. She hated Miss Martin Thorpe with all her heart and soul. It was not exactly with the same species of hatred as that which flourished under the same roof towards poor Florence, and indeed towards all her race, in the gloomy heart of her dry, hard, calculating, avaricious young mistress; for Heaven knows, that there was no mixture of envy in it,—Mrs. Barnes would more readily have agreed to transmigrate herself into a toad, than into Miss Martin Thorpe; but she hated her with the most complete contempt and scorn that it is well possible for one human being to feel for another.

She hated her for the vile little cajoleries by which she had gained the estate; she hated her for the monstrous and most premature avarice by which she sought to augment it; she hated her more still for the giving way of that avarice before her own detestable desire for self-gratification; and she hated her most of all for daring to suppose that she had the power of purchasing the good-will of one who for nearly forty years had been the honoured, trusted servant of her generous uncle, by any paltry advantage which her own interest induced her to bestow or to promise.

The feelings produced by the conduct of Sophia to the Heathcote family added, more or less, to every separate count in the indictment against her; and there was no point in her ungrateful hostess's character upon which Mrs. Heathcote remained ignorant, concerning which it was in the power of Mrs. Barnes to enlighten her.

"Don't vex about your dear boys, ma'am," were the good-natured housekeeper's first words as she entered the drawing-room. "They haven't been a bit the worse for her nasty ways this time. There was sweetmeats about, and I took care they should have their share, bless 'em!"

"You are very kind, Mrs. Barnes, very kind to us all; and we all feel it, I assure you," said Mrs. Heathcote, with half a tear in her laughing blue eye; "but I do assure you that I had much rather the children had nothing given them beyond what she allows us all. They have never been much used to sweatmeats, and even if they had, it is but for a short time, you know, and cannot make any great difference."

"No, ma'am, nor it can't make no great difference in Miss Martin Thorpe's housekeeping either. And it is no use to talk, Mrs. Heathcote, as I believe, ma'am, I have told you before. It is no use for me to pretend to do what do I cannot. I could no more go on cramming that greedy, hard-hearted little body with all the nice things I can think of, and never contrive to have a bit fit for you and yours, when I can find an opportunity, than I could fly. But you may set your conscience to rest, ma'am, about all I do for the dear children, or you either, or the major, or dear Miss Florence, bless her! If it was ten times more, it would be all gain and profit for Miss Martin Thorpe. I have told you so before, Mrs. Heathcote, and I tell you so again. Miss Martin Thorpe could not keep me in my place, if she was to try to hold me with wild horses, after you was gone,—no, nor Nancy either. The girl has seen enough of her, and loves her nigh about as well as I do. And you may take my word for it, Mrs. Heathcote, that the next housekeeper Miss Martin Thorpe gets will no more keep up her own greedy table, without bringing up the bills to almost double mine, than she'll fly. Servants, of course, don't understand two ways of going on, in the same house; and where ladies choose to have such a table for their own private boudoir as our miss keeps, you may depend upon it that there will be a letting out in other things. Not that I want to boast of my honesty in no way; for I dare say that I'm not in reality a bit more honest than the rest as have been brought up as decently as myself. But I do believe, Mrs. Heathcote, that my pride it is that keeps me so strict in all I

do for her. It goes against me to think as I shall have to take her wages; and as to trying to get any of her dirty money by tricking her, I should scorn it."

"I am quite sure that nobody would manage her house so carefully as you do, Mrs. Barnes, notwithstanding you take such good care of us," replied Mrs. Heathcote. "But do tell me, if you can, something about the strange gentleman that dined here to-day. Who is Mr. Jenkins?"

"Upon my word, ma'am, that is a question I cannot answer," returned the housekeeper, very gravely. "So close as Miss Martin Thorpe is in all her ways, never even inviting her favourites the Brandenberrys, except, as you know, ma'am, once or twice to tea, and that as long ago as before you come; so very close as she is, it is the wonder of wonders to me how her heart comes to be so open to this gentleman. I haven't got a sight of him yet, but the men-servants, and Mrs. Roberts too, who saw him when she answered the boudoir-bell, they do say he is the queerest-looking chap that ever comed out of a nobleman's house. And for that reason, I concludes she can't be in love with him, though for that matter I don't believe she'll ever prove much of a loving nature to any man living. But something there must be between 'em, she keeping him shut up in her dressing-room all that time. And then again making such an unaccountable fuss with him again to-day, and he coming unexpected too, which I should have thought would have been enough to drive her mad at any time. It is altogether a most remarkable mystery."

"I think so, too," replied Mrs. Heathcote, "and if the gentleman had a little more the manner of a lover, I should certainly be tempted to think, notwithstanding what you say against it, that she had a fancy for him. He may be a rich man, Mrs. Barnes, for anything we know to the contrary . . . . and if you had seen how the ring sparkled that he wanted to give Florence at dinner to-day, you would not think it at all unlikely. I did not see it very near, but I think it was a diamond, was it not, Florence?"

"I believe so, mamma," replied the young lady, suspending for a moment the game of cat's-cradle which she was playing with Frederic, "but, to confess the truth, I do not understand much about diamonds."

"Nay, ma'am, if the gentleman is rich," said Mr. Barnes, "that makes all the difference in the world. But the men did not seem to describe him that way. If I thought he was rich, and inclined to marry Miss Martin Thorpe, I should not feel the least bit of doubt in the world but what she would accept of him . . . . he coming from the Castle, too, along with my Lord . . . . for if my guess is right, a lord counts for something with our young lady as well as a purse."

"Well! we shall see, Mrs. Barnes, how it all turns out," replied Mrs. Heathcote; "and now I think we had better not keep you any longer. I will send the little boys out to you again as soon as Sophia comes downstairs to receive this gentleman."

The housekeeper then took her departure, and for about half an hour the children were as happy as their mother and sister could contrive to make them in a fine drawing-room, where every article was a

"TOUCH ME NOT," and where the fear of "Cousin Sophy" was incessantly before their eyes.

At the end of that time Major Heathcote and Mr. Jenkins joined them; and then, not even the constitutional tranquillity of Mrs. Heathcote could prevent her hurrying the children away, with a degree of bustling haste which spoke plainly enough her anxiety that they should not be seen there. Florence, who fully shared the feeling, snatched a little hand in each of hers, and was leading them with all speed from the room, when Mr. Jenkins stopped her by saying, "Why do you run away with the little fellows at such a rate, my dear? . . . . . Do you fancy that I don't like little boys? . . . . You are quiet mistaken there. . . . They may stay a little while longer, may they not, madam?"

Mrs. Heathcote, to whom this was addressed, replied with some little embarrassment, "You are very kind, sir. But I believe it is quite their bedtime . . . . and their cousin—that is, I mean, Miss Martin Thorpe, is not particularly fond of children."

"Oh! ha! . . . . That's the state of the case, is it? . . . . Then pray let them go at once. I would not vex Miss Martin Thorpe. . . . Oh! dear me, no! not for all the world! Good night, my dears, good night! Run away as fast as ever you can trot, there's darlings . . . . and take care never to stay, and never to go, never to move, and never to speak, in any way that Miss Sophia Martin Thorpe does not approve."

There was something in the tone and manner of this speech that sounded so much like quizzing, that the Heathcotes knew not well what to make of it, till it occurred to them all, at the same moment, upon seeing the queer grimace, accompanied with snapping his fingers, with which Mr. Jenkins turned away, and walked towards the fire, that he condemned them all, as being too servilely obedient to their rich relation. Florence blushed as she executed her intention of leaving the room; Mrs. Heathcote looked vexed, and almost ready to cry; and the major, after meditating upon it all for about two minutes, came to the conclusion that it did not signify a farthing . . . . that his troublesome ward would be off his hands in a few months, when he would take them all back to Bamboo Cottage and independence.

At this moment Miss Martin Thorpe entered the room; but though she knew that he whom she considered as the diamond king, if not the king of diamonds, was there, she could not entirely chase from her brow the frown which had settled on it, upon meeting the two little boys at the very door.

"Charming little fellows, those, Miss Sophy," said her new friend, coming up very close to her, and peering in her face. "I dare say you spoil them. Come, confess, don't you spoil those two beautiful little boys by your over-indulgence? I am quite sure you dote upon them."

Both Major Heathcote and his innocent wife felt as much confounded at this *mal-à-propos* speech as if they had been conscious of having recounted to Mr. Jenkins the whole history of the total banishment from her presence, in which Miss Martin Thorpe generally

contrived to keep the poor little rogues whom she was now so jocosely accused of spoiling by over-indulgence.

They both looked at her to see how she took it; and, as it happened, she looked at them. A whole volume could not have explained her feelings more plainly. She was perfectly sure they had been complaining of her, and looked her love accordingly.

But this emotion, powerful as it was, could not for above a moment subdue her resolute purpose of cultivating the friendship of Mr. Jenkins, and she said civil things to him with unceasing perseverance, till he suddenly jumped up, and exclaimed, "Good night to you all! It is time to be off;" and had very nearly escaped from the room before Miss Martin Thorpe could stop him. She succeeded, however, in slipping in between him and the door, while she said, "But how are you going, my dear sir? Have you a carriage, or horses here?"

"I never ride in a carriage, if I can help it, Miss Sophy, and I never ride upon more horses than one at a time. But there is one that I always know where to find when I want him—so good night, my dear. Don't you be uneasy about me . . . . there is no occasion."

Once more the active little man endeavoured to make his way to the door; and once more Miss Martin Thorpe stopped him. "When shall I have the great pleasure of seing you again?" said she.

"When I come to renew my acquaintance with all the old rooms," he replied.

"I hope that will be very soon!" said the lady.

"I dare say it will, my dear!" returned the gentleman.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Among other little personal pettings, Miss Martin Thorpe was rather fond of indulging in sleep; never rising before that last sweet morning nap, which so many persons appear to consider as the most delicious portion of their repose, probably because stolen from the day. . . . and rarely failing to go to bed, as soon as her eyelids gave her warning that it would be agreeable to do so.

The night which followed the dinner-visit of Mr. Jenkins, was however spent differently. On reaching her luxurious chamber, Sophia, though weary enough, felt no inclination, or rather no power to sleep. Having put on her dressing-gown, therefore, she dismissed her maid, and locking her door, sat herself down to very earnest meditation.

There was food enough for it in the events of that day. The familiar visit, which argued a decided liking for her; the diamond-ring which spoke so plainly of treasures yet to give; the act of offering it to another, which threatened the frightful danger that the rich stream of this stranger's unexampled bounty might flow from herself to others; and lastly, the terrific fear that Florence, the detested Florence, and her hateful race, should step between her and her

golden friend, sapping his affection for her, and seizing upon his favour in her stead.

"It shall not be!" . . . . She exclaimed to herself in the silence of night. "I have succeeded once in working my way to the object I had in view, and rather would I die than they should baffle me now!"

Restless, feverish, uncertain as to what she could and what she should do, in order to prevent the mischief she feared, she walked to and fro in her handsome, ample boudoir, without having a thought to spare on its elegance or its comfort. A gnawing, miserable feeling of anxiety had taken possession of her; Florence Heathcote, with the bright lovely blush which beamed upon her charming face when she refused the ring, rose palpably before her, and no hideous opium-raised monster, that ever racked disordered nerves, wore an aspect more abhorrent. Sophia placed her hands before her eyes, as if that could keep the detested object from her. . . . but it was all in vain; she saw, she felt it still.

"They shall leave me! they shall leave me!" she exclaimed. "I will not nurture and nourish thus the thing that stings me! . . . . And the '*charming little fellows*,' so artfully brought forward for his notice . . . . how do I know but that before a week is over I may see them, too, sparkling and bedecked with gems? Gems which were all, —all, originally intended for me? If I patiently sit still and see it, see myself robbed, defrauded, cheated, tricked,—if I sit still and bear it, may worse than death repay me for my folly, and my sin!"

One hour past midnight sounded from the clock in the stable-yard. She listened, and all within the house was still . . . . and then she opened the precious cabinet, and once again devoured with her eyes the string of pearls, which had so completely turned her head and taken possession of her heart. No heroine, immortalized in black and white, ever yielded at that witching hour, to a more complete abandonment of all her thoughts, and all her feelings to one dear object, than did Sophia as she twined and twisted the precious beads about her hands. That the man who could part with them, as Mr. Jenkins had done, was insane, she felt more nearly convinced at that still moment of meditative examination than she had ever been before; but the madness was of a kind so richly to reward the watchers and the keepers who attended on it, that she felt as if without scruple she could have bound herself to the charge for life. Not as a wife, however; let her not be mistaken. The passion which engrossed her was not a blind passion. There are other loves which may aptly enough be painted blind, but avarice has a thousand eyes, and rarely mistakes one object for another. Could Sophia indeed have been assured, upon sound legal authority, that she should obtain by a statute of lunacy the uncontrolled management of Mr. Timothy Jenkins' affairs, within six months after she married him, the generous maniac had only need to prove that he was, as he had assured her, "very rich," in order to make her vow that she would love, honour, and obey him to the last hour of her life. But no such assurance being within her reach, no thoughts of marriage mixed with her speculations; an open field, with no hateful Heathcotes to watch, mar, or

rival her operations upon the fancy of the wayward man, was all she asked of Fate; but convinced that Fate rarely works for any, without perceiving in them a spirit of industry to assist her, she finally resolved to set about the removal of her guardian's family without delay. She distinctly remembered having, years before, heard of a young lady's changing her guardian; what had been done once, might of course be done again. She doubted not that the Brandenberrys would be able to tell her what the legal process was, and for such a quarrel as might naturally lead to it, she trusted to her own skill to bring it about . . . . Thus settled in her purpose for the future, she first laid her pearls to rest, and then herself, and nothing more happened to disturb either for the remainder of the night.

The following morning was one on which a visit from the Brandenberry brother and sister was all but certain, inasmuch as she had not seen them for two whole days; and few things could be less probable than that a third should be permitted to pass away without their coming to bring their usual offering of admiration, devotion, and love. Sophia therefore stirred not from her boudoir, even to walk into her kitchen-garden (the part of her grounds in which she most delighted) in order to see how many cabbages had been cut from their stalks since the day before.

Her watchfulness was not in vain, for it was at rather an earlier hour than usual that the footsteps of Miss Brandenberry and her lovelorn brother were heard gently to creak along the passage, on the outside of her door.

The love of Mr. Brandenberry had during his two last interviews with the mistress of his soul progressed so rapidly, as rather to alarm Sophia, lest she should receive from him proposals so explicit, as to force from her an answer equally direct; a consummation which she greatly desired to avoid. She had just enough of woman's weakness in her heart to feel rather pleasantly fluttered and flurried by the passionate glances of Mr. Brandenberry's large grey eyes; and as it was a principle with her never to deprive herself of anything pleasant, if she could possibly avoid it, she was extremely desirous to keep matters from this concluding crisis, as long as possible. She had therefore administered to him at their last meeting rather a strong dose of sedative and cooling stiffness of manner; and she was therefore aware that in order to give the poor man courage and energy sufficient to make him useful, the interview must commence with a little gentle friendship. She held ready, therefore, as the pair approached her, a hand for each, and even permitted herself to look full up into the face of her adorer, which always encouraged him to look back again with all the tender passion he could muster, into hers. This prefatory pantomime having been performed with equal ability on both sides, and Miss Brandenberry having a place indicated to her on the same sofa whereon the gracious heiress herself sat, the conversation began, as usual, by a few earnest phrases from the faithful Margaret, expressive of what she and Richard had felt all through yesterday and the day before, because they had not dared to intrude upon the sweetest neighbour that ever happy people had, for fear of being *too* troublesome.

"I am always glad to see you and your brother, Miss Brandenberry," replied Sophia, "and I am sure to-day I am quite delighted that you are come, for I really want some friend to consult with about a very disagreeable circumstance which has occurred to me."

"Gracious Heaven! what has happened? Dear, too dear Miss Martin Thorpe! Relieve me from this agony of suspense. Has any one dared" . . . . but here his emotion or his prudence stopped him, or Mr. Brandenberry would certainly have added, to make love to you, besides myself?"

"Nothing has happened to me, Mr. Brandenberry," replied Sophia, mildly, "which need alarm you, but much that has been very painful to me. It grieves me deeply to tell you, my kind friends, that I fear it will be impossible for me to continue to endure the residence of my guardian's family under my roof. Their conduct renders my existence perfectly miserable."

"Black-hearted, ungrateful wretches!" exclaimed Miss Brandenberry, suddenly throwing her long arms round the rather startled heiress . . . . "Forgive me! . . . . Oh forgive me, dearest Miss Martin Thorpe!" she added, almost sobbing, "but the idea of any one using you ill, is more than I can bear."

"Margaret!" . . . . cried her brother rising solemnly from his chair, and speaking as if his agitation made articulation exceedingly difficult, "Margaret! . . . . Think what others suffer at hearing this, who dare not give their tortured feelings vent. . . . Sister! restrain yourself . . . . Oh! do not let me see that another may venture to draw near, and demonstrate sympathy which I would die to show in the same way! . . . . Margaret, Margaret, forbear!"

This was uttered in accents of such very vehement emotion, that it was impossible Miss Martin Thorpe could be greatly surprised when Mr. Brandenberry dropped on one knee upon her footstool, and, evidently (of course) not knowing what he did, seized her hand, and kissed it.

"Pray get up, Mr. Brandenberry," said the heiress, blushing a little, but still looking very placid, "I hope there is nothing that need frighten my friends so very much. When Providence has blessed people with good sense, Mr. Brandenberry, it is their duty, you know, to exert it, in order to get out of difficulties, into which, of one kind or another, everybody is liable to fall."

To this gentle reproof Mr. Brandenberry replied by that favourite phrase of all gentlemen in his interesting situation, "Forgive me!"—and having said this, with even more than usual pathos, he again seated himself, but considerably nearer than before, to the fair and injured creature who thus touchingly confided her sorrows to him; and with clasped hands, and eyes that languished almost to closing, prepared himself to listen with enforced composure, to what she should say next.

"It would be needlessly painful, and indeed altogether improper, for me to enter at length into the description of all I have endured since the Heathcote family arrived here. I hope you both know me too well to think that I should complain lightly; but I do assure you that it is a great deal worse than I can bear. This being the case, I

shall be much obliged to you, Mr. Brandenberry, if you can give me any information respecting the legal manner of changing one guardian for another?"

"Have you already fixed upon that other?" demanded Mr. Brandenberry, in a timid trembling whisper.

"No, Mr. Brandenberry, I have not," replied Miss Martin Thorpe, permitting her eyes again to look at him very mildly. "But that choice may be more easy to make, perhaps, than the vacancy for it."

"Not so, not so, I assure you," replied the gentleman, with a tone of recovered spirit and animation. "Nothing is more simple, more easy, or of more constant recurrence. You have only to declare that such is your will, and no gentleman, deserving the name, will resist it for a moment; but if he should, you must have recourse to the Chancellor."

"That is exactly what I wanted to know, and I thank you very much for giving me the information," said Sophia, with the appearance of being relieved from considerable anxiety. "I shall now know how to proceed."

"I have no words to express the joy I feel at the idea of being useful to you!" returned Mr. Brandenberry; "and think me not presuming on the precious friendship which has granted me this inestimable privilege, if I ask to whom you will confide the dear, the sacred office of watching over you, during the remaining months of your minority?"

This question, notwithstanding its pretty wording, was a direct one, and Miss Martin Thorpe had a sort of instinctive dislike to answering such. She hesitated for a moment, and was just going to utter one of her little innocent white lies, by saying that she had not yet decided, when she remembered that having got the information she wanted, she need not fan Mr. Brandenberry's tender passion any more just at present. She saw plainly enough that he hoped to be appointed guardian himself; and considering this as very decidedly a piece of presumption, she made up her mind to tell him the truth, quite aware that if the disappointment chilled him too violently, and sent him to a greater distance than she desired, it would be easy enough to whistle him back, and make him again as tender as she might happen to wish. She therefore replied quietly, and with that precision of feature which, in her, often gave to a young face the sedateness of age, "I shall appoint Mr. Westley."

Mr. Brandenberry had sufficient command of himself not to betray the discomfiture which this answer occasioned him. Of all men living, perhaps, Mr. Westley was the last he would have wished to see in the situation of Miss Martin Thorpe's guardian; for none knew better, and very few so well, in what sort of condition the long-descended acres of the Brandenberry family would be found when the old lady died . . . . and none, therefore, would be likely to value so justly at its worth the disinterestedness of his passion for the heiress. He said not a word, however, in reply, that could betray his feelings, but, on the contrary, after a sigh and a look that were meant to express "Would I were he!" . . . . he appeared to recover his better judgment, and said,

"No one, my dear Miss Martin Thorpe, who knows anything of Mr. Westley, but must allow that it would be impossible for you to select a more proper person in every way . . . . and the choice is exactly such a one as those who know *you* best might have anticipated from the noble, high-minded correctness of your views on all subjects. That selfish wishes for an appointment, which must of necessity draw the person selected for it near to you, should arise, you cannot wonder; but that man would be unworthy to call himself your friend who could not learn to forget self when satisfied that your safety and interest were in good hands."

This speech was an able one, and Miss Martin Thorpe really and truly admired him for it. So they parted in the most friendly manner possible. There was hand-shaking, and there was hand-squeezing, and eyes and sighs were set to work, and performed their duty well; yet Miss Martin Thorpe found in none of it any subject of offence, nor was she, either to the brother or the sister, at all more stiff and starched than it became a young lady of her feelings and pretensions to be.

Sophia went down to dinner on that day, fully determined to take offence at something or other, and if possible to get up a scene which might lead by degrees to the declaration she meditated; namely, that it was impossible she could any longer submit to have her home rendered miserable by the presence of people who treated her so ill. But everything was against her. Florence had that morning received a long letter from Sir Charles Temple, so full of tender love and thoughtful consideration for her, and for every one who belonged to her, that it must have been a power infinitely greater than any possessed by Miss Martin Thorpe which could have disturbed her serenity or succeeded in persuading her that the dimples must be banished from her cheek, or the light of gladness from her eye. A scrap from Algernon, addressed to his father and mother, had produced very nearly as exhilarating an effect upon them; for it spoke of perfect health, unbounded gratitude to Sir Charles, and affection to them, and was so brightly redolent of happiness and hope, that it was no easy task to put the receivers of it out of humour.

Miss Martin Thorpe, however, did her best, and she had some talent for the business she undertook.

Major Heathcote, with the very happiest and gayest of smiles, asked her to take wine.

The brow of the heiress contracted, and with a mouth, that by its expression might have been supposed to have just come in contact with bitter apples, she replied,—

"I really wish, sir, you would be so good as to leave off asking me to drink wine. The weekly bills for my present enormous family run so high as to make me feel the necessity of denying myself every indulgence."

Major Heathcote had the greatest difficulty in the world not to laugh . . . . but as to being angry, it never entered his head. "Very well, my dear," he said in reply. "You are quite right not to spend more than you can afford, and you will know better how much

that is, when you have managed your money a little longer . . . . I will take a glass of water now, Sophy, and no great hardship either. That is the way we often used to drink healths at Bamboo Cottage, if you remember."

"O yes, sir, I remember perfectly well. And I cannot help occasionally thinking that if other people remembered Bamboo Cottage as well as I do, it would be better."

As this was said to, or rather of, nobody in particular, nobody in particular answered it, and the next sound heard was the voice of Mrs. Heathcote, asking for some bread.

"I should be much obliged to you, Mrs. Heathcote," said Miss Martin Thorpe, in a sour querulous tone, "if you would please not to teach my page that very awkward way of holding the bread-basket. I wish, if I can, while my housekeeping expenses run so high, to avoid taking another footman, but it will be impossible to go on as we do now."

"Why, I am really almost afraid that it will, my dear," said Major Heathcote, who could endure a vast deal more impertinence from a young lady in his own person than in that of his wife. . . . . "But, however, we had better think a little more about it, Sophy, before we make up our minds to decide; and if it is to be talked about, the fewer witnesses, beside those concerned, the better."

"I will not endure to be dictated to in my own house as to when I am to speak and when I am to be silent," said the determined Sophia, rising abruptly from her chair. . . . . "God knows I have done my best to keep out of the way, in the hope that we might live in peace . . . . but this is too much!" . . . . and with these words she passed through the door, and slammed it after her, with a violence that produced, as she intended, a very striking effect.

Mrs. Heathcote and Florence were startled; too much so, indeed, to recover themselves so as to converse immediately in their usual tone; but the major appeared to attach so little importance to the young lady's exit, that his composure did much towards restoring theirs, and they proceeded with their dinner very much as if nothing particular had happened, excepting that they all talked rather more than usual. When the cloth was removed, and Frederic and Stephen admitted, the sudden glee which seized upon them after they had made up their minds to be sure that cousin Sophy was not present, was too much for the gravity of Florence, and she laughed aloud. In short, this evening was by far the most agreeable they had known under that roof, during the dynasty of Miss Martin Thorpe; and could she have been aware of their state of mind, it might perhaps have occasioned her as strong a pang of mental suffering as any she had yet endured.

But this was spared her. She retired to her boudoir, perfectly satisfied that she had taken a very masterly step towards the attainment of the object she had in view, and gave orders to Mrs. Roberts, in a gentler voice than usual, that she was to bring up her coffee as soon as possible, and that she wished to have it very particularly hot. While in this satisfied and tranquil state of mind and body,

she was gently surprised at seeing Mr. Brandenberry enter her boudoir, where never man had entered after sunset, since it had been sacred to her, and approach her with strong symptoms of agitation, but stammering something, not quite inaudible, about begging that she would permit him to have a few moments' conversation with her.

Miss Martin Thorpe felt a little agitated. She had never been made love to, in her life . . . . that is to say, nobody had ever openly pleaded guilty to the "soft impeachment," before her, or distinctly requested her to place herself in the same gentle category for his sake. . . . . And now she felt convinced that the awful moment was come. Her emotion, however, was not of the kind which was likely to lead to any vacillation of purpose; Sophia had no more idea of bestowing her wealth upon Mr. Brandenberry, than upon the mouldering bones of his most remote progenitor. It has been said by some heart-depreciating moralists, that we love nothing so dearly as we love ourselves. . . . . But Miss Martin Thorpe was a living proof that the satiric remark is erroneous. She evidently loved her property, or at any rate valued it, more than she did herself; for whereas she would not have been altogether unwilling to have bestowed herself on the adoring gentleman before her, an instinct, in her case infinitely stronger than self-love, commonly so called, led her to shrink, like the sensitive mimosa, from approaches which might endanger the whole and soleness of the Thorpe Combe investiture in herself.

She speedily recovered her self-possession, however, and desired Mr. Brandenberry to sit down, with a sort of stiff civility, too nearly akin to her usual manner to produce any violent effect upon the nerves of her visitor.

"I have waited upon you this evening," he said, "notwithstanding the unseasonable hour, my dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, for the purpose of making an observation which may, I think, in the present state of your affairs, be of importance to you. This I trust will be an excuse for my intrusion." The composure of Miss Martin Thorpe was completely restored by this opening. She perceived that, for the present, she was spared the necessity of dismissing from her presence the only man who had ever put it into her head to believe that she was admired . . . . and she was glad of it. "Make no apology, Mr. Brandenberry," she replied, "for the time of your visit. I am quite certain that the object of it is kindness to me."

This was so benignly spoken (for Miss Martin Thorpe), that the most cheering anticipations for the future took possession of her lover's heart; and he proceeded to the business he came to discuss, with the delightful consciousness that, if what he was about to say should wear the appearance of something like interference in her affairs, there was little or or no fear but that it would be forgiven.

"It has struck me," he resumed, in a more assured voice, "that the great object of getting rid of the odious people whose presence so cruelly interferes with the daily happiness of the most amiable being that ever trod the earth; it has struck me, I say, my charming friend,

that this may be obtained without the troublesome, and it may be expensive process of changing one legal guardian for another. Were I you, I would immediately write to Sir Charles Temple, telling him that circumstances of a domestic nature have occurred, which render it quite impossible that you should continue to permit or endure the further residence of the Heathcote family under your roof, and that you must request him immediately to assist you in taking measures for their removal. It is impossible, my dearest Miss Martin Thorpe, but that this request should be immediately complied with; and then, should the admirable delicacy of your charming mind lead you to feel that during the remaining months of your minority it would be necessary, or at any rate advisable, that you should retain a female friend near you, somewhat more advanced in years than yourself, I have it in commission from my sister to say that she would hold herself ready to devote heart and soul to your service, in any way which you might find it convenient to desire."

Miss Martin Thorpe, whose first feeling on listening to a new proposition was always that of awakened caution, heard Mr. Brandenberry with fixed attention, but an immovable countenance; and despite his forty summers, of sharp looking round and about him, he was totally at a loss to guess the impression he had made. He had, however, the discretion to remain perfectly silent, thinking it advantageous to find out, if possible, what was passing in her closely shut-up little mind, before he ventured to say anything more.

The silence between them endured for some minutes, but it was Miss Martin Thorpe who broke it at last.

"You are very kind and obliging, Mr. Brandenberry, I am sure, and so is your sister, too . . . . very much so, indeed. But I must decline for the present giving any answer to her proposition about herself. As to what you say respecting the possibility of my getting rid of Major Heathcote and his family, without legally changing my guardian, I think it deserves very great attention. If it can be done, and I see no reason why it should not, I should very greatly prefer it. I have no reason to suspect that Major Heathcote would take any advantage of the power which the law gives him over my income, in order to inconvenience me. Indeed, I don't think, from what I have hitherto seen of him, that it is at all probable . . . . and therefore, I see no risk or danger of any kind in adopting the course you advise . . . . and I certainly think I shall follow it."

It is always agreeable to have one's advice taken. Mr. Brandenberry found it particularly so. He knew perfectly well that it would be impossible for the self-willed young heiress to live entirely alone, as Sir Charles Temple would doubtless tell her; and, could he succeed in establishing his sister as her inmate, the success of his very tenderest and most passionate hopes might be looked upon as certain.

"I will not then detain you for an instant longer, my dear young lady," he said . . . . "Blessed with so commanding and early-developed an intellect as yours, you have no need that any one should intrude counsel on you as to the manner in which whatever you deem it right to do should be executed. All that is necessary in the

manner of your communication to Sir Charles Temple is, that it should be decisive and firm. Good night, my charming friend! . . . . Never, surely never, was a man placed in a situation of such thrilling interest as mine at this moment, while watching the noble independence of spirit and high-minded promptitude of character, exhibited by one so young and so . . . . lovely!" The last word was added after he had kissed her hand, and while in the very act, as it were, of flying from her, so that its agreeable effect was judiciously left upon her feelings, with no counteracting influence from the discretion which would have been called for had he remained in her presence.

Miss Martin Thorpe felt no displeasure at his parting words—none at all . . . . but nevertheless she was very glad he was gone. She had enough to think of, and enough to do; and her liking for Mr. Brandenberry's soft speeches was by no means strong enough to compete with her inclination to set to work upon both. She deliberately went over again in her mind all the causes of dislike and of fear that the Heathcotes, or rather that poor Florence, had given her; she thought of the treasures that *might be*, and probably were, still hanging suspended, as it were, between her and her unconscious rival; and at length the meditation ended by her sitting down and writing the following letter to Sir Charles Temple:—

"Dear Sir,—It is not without extreme reluctance that I decide upon the painful step I am now taking; but I think it is my duty so to regulate my affairs as not to make the generous bequest of my ever-to-be-lamented uncle a misery instead of a blessing to me. The great unhappiness which arises from the residence of Major and Mrs. Heathcote and their children under my roof is greater than I can bear; and my purpose in thus addressing you is that you may be at once made acquainted with my resolution of leaving my house myself if they refuse to quit it. I prefer confining myself to the general fact, that my existence is made unhappy by their presence, to entering into any particulars as to the conduct, on their parts, which has produced this. All I wish is to place myself in such a situation as shall enable me to live in peace, and to utter no word of accusation which may in any degree tend to prejudice or injure any individual in your opinion. In justice to Major and Mrs. Heathcote, however, I feel it my duty to declare that I have no complaint of any kind to make against them. There is nothing in *their* tempers to render a residence with them intolerable. On the contrary, indeed, I have a great regard for them both, and remember with the most affectionate gratitude their former kindness to me. I deeply regret that other circumstances, which I truly believe they have no power to regulate or control, must render it impossible for me to prove, as I would wish to do, my kind feelings towards them. Their little boys, too, are good-humoured, orderly children, and give little or no trouble to any one.

"I must request you, dear sir, under these very painful circumstances, to let me receive by return of post such a communication from you as may assist me in the recovery of such a degree of domestic tranquillity as I have a right to enjoy in my own house. I

have a female friend, whom I have been so fortunate as to attach to me in this neighbourhood (a descendant of one of the oldest families in the county), who will be willing to take up her residence with me, should it be your opinion that the presence of such a person will be necessary. She is not married, but her age is fully sufficient to render her proper as a protector in the eyes of all who may think me too young to protect myself.—I remain, dear sir, sincerely yours,

"SOPHIA MARTIN THORPE."

Having completed this epistle, she rang the bell for her supper, and, greatly comforted by the consciousness of having acted wisely, sat down to enjoy her solitary but savoury morsel, in as happy a state of spirits as it was possible for her to enjoy while her dangerous cousin Florence inhabited the same house with her.

Before she closed her eyes in sleep, she determined, after considerable vacillation on the point, not to announce to the Heathcote family her spirited resolution of getting rid of them, till she received Sir Charles Temple's answer to her letter.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SUCH a scene as that which has been described as having taken place at Miss Martin Thorpe's dinner-table, could not pass without producing some effect even upon the gentle spirits of the Heathcotes. As for Florence, indeed, there was a feeling in her heart which seemed at every moment of her existence to shed a gentle sunshine round her, almost sufficient to prevent her being conscious of any shadow which crossed her path. She was startled, and somewhat shocked at Sophia's violent outbreak of inhospitable rudeness; but she absolutely forgot it again, as soon as she found herself alone in her room, and at liberty to let her thoughts fly, unchecked and unchallenged, the way they loved to go. True as the carrier-pigeon, who having been once taught the path he is to travel, never forsakes it, the fancy of Florence, at these happy moments, bore her, without losing a moment by delay, to her fair namesake city, and there regaled her with so vivid a view of the man who loved her, and whom she fondly loved, that scarcely could the magic mirror of Earl Surrey have served her better. Nor was the figure of Algernon forgotten in the picture. . . . . It was so delightful to know that her brother was with him! . . . . It was so delightful to believe that they were both thinking of her!—that a very few moments so employed were fully sufficient to send her cousin Sophia and all her strange ways as effectually out of her head as if she had never existed.

By Major and Mrs. Heathcote, however, the subject was not quite so easily dismissed; but they really believed that the poor girl's head was so turned by the sudden and violent change in her circumstances, as hardly to leave her in a condition to know what she was about.

"She will grow wiser, Poppsy, by-and-by," said the major, "and

then I dare say she will be sorry, when she remembers all her rough ways with us; but if you can bear it, my dear, I am sure I ought to do so, and I really think it will be best on all accounts, if we possibly can, to go on till she is twenty-one. Then, of course, we may leave her without any observations being made. But now, if we started off again, it would make a terrible rumpus, both here and at Clevelands; and Sir Charles Temple might be vexed about it. In short, altogether, I think we had better take no notice, but just keep out of her way as much as we can. Not but what, if she plagues you, my dear, I shall be quite ready to take French leave, if you wish it, at a moment's warning."

"Me! my dear!—God bless your dear heart, major! I don't mind her ways the least bit in the world. Upon my word, she made me a great deal more unhappy when she was poor, instead of rich, and when not all I could do could ever make her look gay. That *did* vex me, because I thought, poor thing, that she was fretting on account of being an orphan, and dependent, and all that. But now that I know she has got everything her heart can wish, I am not going to quarrel with her, nor with Providence either, for her not having a good temper into the bargain. Besides, major, we have got too much to be pleased at just now, to trouble ourselves greatly about poor Sophy Martin's being cross with us. I know that good soul, Barnes, takes care that the boys shall want for nothing. I know that you are as contented as the day is long, with your flies and your fishing-rod; and that dear darling Florence will be just as happy as she deserves, with that nice, kind-hearted Sir Charles, and his beautiful place; and if with all this, and Algernon and the rest of them sending us such beautiful letters, I could be wicked enough to sit down with my finger in my eye, and cry because poor Sophy looked sulky, I don't think I should deserve to be ever happy more."

This conversation was so completely satisfactory to both parties, that they scarcely ever reverted to the subject again; and the very few people whom the formal visitings of their sour little hostess brought within reach of them, never found reason to suspect, from the manners of any of the Heathcote family, that they were living rather as permitted pensioners than as honoured relations in the mansion of the heiress.

Miss Martin Thorpe's intention, however, of being a most distinguished grandee in the estimation of her neighbours was not very successful. Poor Mr. Thorpe's resolute seclusion of himself from them all, after the loss of his son, had naturally estranged most of the county families from any great feeling of interest in or intimacy with his race; and those whom curiosity, or a sociable temper, had brought to visit his successor, had all, save and except Mrs., Mr., and Miss Brandenberry, arrived at the conclusion that she was the very dullest little body that any elderly gentleman, with an estate to leave, ever picked out as the favourite on whom to bestow it.

* * * * * *

Without too directly avowing that she had implicitly followed his advice, Sophia gave Mr. Brandenberry to understand that she had written to Sir Charles Temple, and did not intend to take any active

measures for releasing herself from what she termed her "present most embarrassing situation" till she had received his answer.

Notwithstanding the caution with which this information was communicated, Mr. Brandenberry was not slow in perceiving that she had in fact acted entirely by his counsel; and most happy was the augury he drew from it. At first, however, his immediate hopes were restricted to the having his sister invited as the chosen and protecting friend of the heiress. But as he and his confidential Margaret walked, hour after hour together, upon the flag-stone terrace behind the house, sheltered by a privet hedge on the north, and opening to the old apple-orchard on the south by two flights of crazy, moss-covered steps, they warmed themselves into the belief that there was no occasion whatever for waiting so long for "the important moment which was to decide everything." "If I had been with her ever so long," reasoned the sanguine Margaret, "she could not give you more encouragement to speak than she has done now. What *can* go beyond her doing exactly everything you tell her to do?—If I was you, Richard, I would not live another twenty-four hours without knowing whether I was to be master of Thorpe-Combe or not."

Richard pondered her words in his heart, and walked, and walked, and walked, before he answered her. At length he said, "I wish, Margaret, I could make it appear that the only possible way for her to get quit of these good-tempered people that she hates so bitterly, was by marrying."

"And so it is, Richard," exclaimed his sister, in the joyful tone of one who has just enjoyed the participation of a great discovery. "Nothing can be more plain and clear than that this is positively and literally the fact. She might, certainly, by working her way through long consultations with her other guardian, and by consenting to have me, or some other lady, who could be prevailed upon to give up the whole comfort of her existence, at last make such arrangements as would enable her to drum the Heathcotes out of her house; but if she wants to be released *immediately*, there is, most unquestionably, but one way to achieve it, and that is by marrying. The thing is as clear as light. How I wonder that it did not strike us before! And how very sorry I am that you did not tell her so, instead of only just using the influence it is so clear you have, in making her write to Sir Charles Temple! Oh! why did not this come into your head before?"

"There is no time lost, Margaret. It is better not to push matters too fast; by getting on step by step with her, I shall make it exceedingly easy at last."

"Nonsense, Richard! I do believe, in my heart, that you are weak enough to let your dislike of her interfere with your manner of proceeding. You ought to know as well as I do—and you *do* know as well as I do—that in a business of this kind the faster people run the better. It is very well, in some cases, for a girl to be let see her way before her. Where, for instance, a man knows that if the woman he is trying to get can be made to like him, it will be a capital good thing for him in point of interest, the more time he gives her before he asks the question, the safer he may feel about the answer. For I cannot but think, that first or last, almost every girl would most likely

make up her mind to do what is wisest in such a case. But just put the case the other way, Richard, and see what common sense will say to it. Do you think that the more time *you* give to such a girl as this to look about her and make inquiries, the more likely she will be to say *Yes*, instead of No? I don't think that you can look gravely in my face and say so."

"That is true, very true, Margaret," replied Mr. Brandenberry, suddenly stopping short in his walk. "The thing shall be decided at once. I will propose to her to-morrow."

"Well said, Richard!—That is the sort of way a man of spirit should always act. I heartily wish, brother, that the girl was not such a nasty, niggardly, hateful, little wretch; but nobody can have exactly everything they want; and God knows the first object with you ought to be money."

Mr. Brandenberry pressed the hand of his admirable sister, as she made this speech, so pregnant with affection and moral feeling, and replied, "As to the girl herself, my dear Margaret, do not let any thoughts about her vex you, or trouble your pleasure, in case I succeed. I certainly do dislike her a great deal more than any woman I ever saw in my life. But what does that signify, Margaret? If she should plague me more than merely by her ugly disagreeableness, which, of course, I must bear, I shall take excellent good care to cure her. Miss Martin Thorpe standing on her own estate, and Mr. Richard Brandenberry making a low bow, and asking for leave to come and stand by her, is one thing. But Mr. Richard Brandenberry, possessed, in right of his wife, of the said estate, and the lady trotting behind him over the acres no longer her own, is another. Women never get thoroughly aware of this difference till after the torch of Hymen has thrown a light upon it, Margaret; and I only dwell upon it to you now, to prevent your being more uneasy about me than there is any occasion for. I shall manage to be very tolerably at my ease, I dare say."

Mutually delighted with each other, the brother and sister returned to the house. Mr. Brandenberry mounted his horse, and during a two hours' saunter through the most retired lanes in the neighbourhood, conned over the words and the deeds with which the great business of the morrow was to be executed; Miss Brandenberry employing herself, pleasantly enough, the while, in meditating upon the manner in which she and her brother should receive the county families at Thorpe-Combe, when they came to pay the wedding visits.

At the very same time that Mr. Brandenberry and his sister were holding this consultation on the terrace at Broad Grange, Miss Martin Thorpe, without any other counsellor than her own heart, determined upon making another visit to old Arthur Giles, to see if, by some means or other, she could not contrive to get him to quit his dwelling. Considering what very quiet neighbours the old man and his wife were, it might seem strange to many that their occupation of this pretty residence should torment her so grievously—but it did torment her. As long as they remained there, Thorpe-Combe was not so much her own as it would be if they were away, and she was quite conscious that she should know no rest till they were gone.

"Here comes our sweet lady!" said the saucy Mrs. Giles to an

acquaintance who happened to be sitting very sociably between her and her husband as Sophia approached. "Here comes Miss Martin Thorpe to pay us another visit."

"The devil she does!" exclaimed their visitor. "She must not see me here, Arthur, even if you bolt the door upon her to prevent it; she must not, upon my soul!"

"Hush!" returned the old groom, making a signal for silence. "Step in here, step in here, quick, behind this door here, and hold it a trifle open if you have a mind to hear how pleasant she talks."

The stranger obeyed the signal. Mrs. Giles opened the house-door to the young lady's knock, and then ushered her into the pretty sitting-room which it so pinched Sophia's heart to see the old couple occupy.

Old Arthur rose up, and placed a chair for her with its back tolerably close to the door through which their visitor had passed, and Miss Martin Thorpe seated herself. "I am come to you again," she said, "in order to talk a little common sense to you about this house. Nothing can be so absurd as your persisting to stay in it, when I am willing to get you another, fifty times better and fitter for your residence, elsewhere."

"Asking your pardon, ma'am," said Mrs. Giles, "I don't think there is any house fifty times better than this in the whole county . . . . but howsomever, we are in course bound to thank you for your obligingness, though we greatly prefer biding where we be, to moving."

"It is a pity, good woman, that you have not a little fitter notion of your own rank and station, than to prefer such an absurd residence as this, to such a one as I would find for you . . . . but the fault belongs more to the ridiculous folly of the worthless young man who placed you here than to yourselves, and I am willing to befriend you in a proper reasonable way, if you will let me, without thinking at all the worse of you for his folly."

"As to the young gentleman as put us here," . . . . began Arthur; but whatever he was about to say was cut short by his wife, who wishing, as it seemed, to take upon herself the honour of entertaining the heiress, said, "Never you mind about that young gentleman, Arthur Giles. He is dead and gone, and his name can't signify to nobody. Anything and everything that this young lady will be pleased to say to us, I shall be proud to listen to, and it will be more civil in you, if you don't interrupt the conversation in any way." Then drawing her chair quite as closely opposite to that of the heiress as was at all necessary, she sat bolt upright, crossed her arms before her, and appeared prepared to listen with the most fixed attention to whatever the lady of the land might choose to utter. Yet, notwithstanding the profound respect thus manifested, there was something in the manner of it which did not altogether please Miss Martin Thorpe. She knit her brows, drew in her lips, and settled her spirit more firmly than ever, to the task of getting the obnoxious old couple off her grounds.

"I have been looking over the late Mr. Thorpe's will, my good woman," said the young lady firmly, "and it is proper that I should inform you that you are very likely to get yourself and your husband into trouble by acting under false impressions concerning it. Of

course you can know nothing of law—I don't expect you should, nor do I feel in any degree offended by anything you have said through ignorance; but it is proper that I should inform you that the will of your late master, Mr. Thorpe, gives the whole property to me, charged indeed with your annuity, but without depriving me of any of my rights over the estate."

"That is just what I was told, ma'am," replied the provoking Mrs. Giles, with a cheerful smile; "there isn't anybody in the parish, I believe, as don't know all the particulars of Squire Thorpe's will . . . . and there's a many as could have told without that knowledge that Mr. Thorpe wasn't a gentleman likely to leave a young lady his estate, and then make it not worth the having, by taking away her rights from her. There is no doubt or question, Miss Martin Thorpe, but what the squire left to you all the rights in the estate that he had got to leave . . . . provided, as they tell me, that his poor dear dead son didn't turn up again . . . . which was nonsense, to be sure; but somehow or other he could never get it out of his thoughts . . . . And you have at this present time all the rights that he had got to leave, but he couldn't leave this pleasant bit here to nobody whatsomever, as long as we two shall continue alive, for the reason that he hadn't got it to leave. For he had made it over to us, to pleasure that young gentleman as you was pleased to mention, and that so fast and sure, that he could not have left it away from us if he had desired it ever so much."

"Very well, Mrs. Giles," replied Sophia, sharply, "you seem to understand the law exceedingly well, on your side, and now I will show you that I understand it quite as well, on mine. The deed by which this house has been so absurdly bestowed upon you, conveys the house, and nothing but the house; and depend upon it, Mistress Giles, that I shall take excellent care that what belongs to me shall not be available to you. The gate which opens from the shrubberies in front of this garden, upon the road, shall be immediately closed, and orders given that no person whatever shall be permitted to pass from your door through any part of my premises; so that, if you persevere in remaining here, it must be without any communication whatever with your fellow-creatures; and if you are starved for want of food, I really cannot help it: the fault will be yours, not mine."

"That will be very shocking indeed, ma'am," replied the old woman, screwing up her features in a very comical style, which was probably intended to express dismay; but Miss Martin Thorpe saw, or fancied she saw, a strong inclination to smile, notwithstanding; and even old Arthur, who seemed well enough inclined to let his dame take the lead in this difficult business, certainly turned his head aside to conceal a laugh. Sophia looked from one to the other, and clearly perceived that the countenances of both expressed rather merriment than alarm.

"You think," said she, rising, and speaking in a tone of great anger, "you think that I shall not put this threat into execution. Perhaps you fancy that I shall not have courage and firmness enough to carry my purpose through? You deceive yourself, old woman, and so you will find to your cost."

"Indeed, and indeed, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied Mrs. Giles, rising also, and standing aside, that the angry heiress might have room to pass, "I do truly believe that you have courage and firmness, as you call it, for anything as you was particularly minded to do. Only I couldn't help laughing a little at hearing you talk about playing us such a trick as that. It would be so unaccountable funny,—wouldn't it, Arthur?" and here the contumacious old couple laughed aloud, and it even seemed to the irritated ear of Sophia that they did not laugh alone, but that some unseen mocker in the air joined in the audacious chorus. In a paroxysm of rage she rushed from the room, and left the house, determined to seek workmen before she re-entered her own, who should set to work, within the hour, to put her despised threat in execution.

The village carpenter lived at no great distance from her gates, and to him she immediately gave very distinct orders for the execution of the work she meditated. The man stared at her. "Run up palings ten feet high in front of old Arthur Giles's!" said he, his respect for the young heiress apparently giving way before his astonishment.

"Yes, Mr. Gosford, in front of the dwelling of Arthur Giles and his wife," returned Sophia, deliberately. "The work is rendered necessary for the protection of my own rights . . . . But if you have any objection to doing it, you have only to say so. I will get workmen from Hereford."

Worthy George Gosford the carpenter had seven children, and the best custom he could boast was from "the Combe;" so his answer was speedily given, that "in course he had no objection to do anything, and everything she ordered, as in duty bound." So much in earnest was the heiress in this business, and so desirous that it should be set about forthwith, that before she left his workshop, she desired to see the timber he intended to use, and actually employed some time in ascertaining that the cluster of deal planks which the carpenter pointed out to her for the purpose, were high enough to prevent all exits and entrances. Having fully satisfied herself on this point, she set off on her return home, assuring the man—for the first time in her life that she had ever been guilty of such extravagance—that, if the job were well and quickly done, she would make him a present of five shillings over and above his bill.

A few minutes after leaving the workshop she perceived a horseman approaching her at full gallop, and became aware the minute afterwards that it was no other than Mr. Jenkins. In an instant her features were drilled into the expression of very meek serenity, and a smile of the most winning description was prepared to greet him. But whether the pace at which he rode prevented his seeing her with sufficient distinctness to recognise her person, or that he was too deeply occupied by his own thoughts to note any one, he galloped on without appearing conscious that she was near him; and presently turning from the road by a little bridle-path at no great distance from the point where she stood, was speedily out of sight.

"What a pace he rides!" thought Sophia. "It is very provoking! for I should very much have liked to ask him in, to luncheon with me."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THOUGH constantly reminded that the key of the Thorpe-Combe woods was not permanently lent them, by Sophia's never omitting to ask them for it, from time to time, the Brandenberry brother and sister were still often accommodated by the use of it; and fortunately having it in their possession on the important day when the great question was to be asked and answered, they set off together by that pleasant path which has been so often mentioned; the faithful Margaret promising to linger beneath its shade till her brotner should have performed the deed, and returned to tell her the result.

It would be difficult to say which was the most agitated at the moment they parted; or whether the brother advancing to the adventure, or the sister retreating to await the issue of it, would have given the greater portion of a little finger that the next hour were well over. But however equal in degree might be the interesting agitation of their situations, it is the gentleman we must follow, leaving the palpitating Margaret to walk and to sit, to advance rapidly towards the house and retreat slowly from it, with as much philosophical composure as she could command. The entrance of the Brandenberrys, whether brother or sister, or both, had long ceased to be a matter of ceremony at Thorpe-Combe, and the agitated lover made his way through a garden-door, and up to the boudoir of his mistress, without having his nervous tremors increased by the curious eyes of any domestic. On softly entering the elegant apartment in which sat his lady-love, his courage was for an instant somewhat shaken by perceiving that she looked, in plain homely English, most abominably cross. But her countenance cleared up perceptibly upon discovering who it was that thus dared to invade her solitude; for she was in a humour to want and wish for a little flattery. More than one circumstance had vexed her within the last twenty-four hours. Arthur Giles and his wife had unquestionably laughed at, and set her threatened vengeance at naught; Mr. Jenkins had rode past her, either from carelessness or rudeness, without speaking; the whole family of the Heathcotes appeared to be in the most perfect good-humour and harmony of spirits, notwithstanding that she neglected no possible opportunity of being uncivil to them; and Mrs. Barnes had forgotten—actually forgotten, and confessed that she had done so—to order any sweetbreads for her private table from the butcher. But notwithstanding all these accumulated vexations, she gave the usual two fingers to Mr. Brandenberry when he obsequiously held out his hand to receive them.

"My dearest Miss Martin Thorpe!" he said, with more than usual tenderness of voice and manner, "how are you?"

"I am very well, I thank you," replied Miss Martin Thorpe, readjusting the cushion behind her back, and drawing the footstool a little nearer to her—to both which comforting operations Mr. Brandenberry lent an aidful hand.

"It strikes me that you do not look quite well!" said he, with a sigh that he seemed wishing to stifle in its birth. "Lovely,—perhaps lovelier than ever,—but—I cannot be deceived.—I am sure that you are looking pale, Miss Martin Thorpe!"

"And no great wonder, if I am," she replied, her brows knitting themselves into that settled look of licensed crossness, which, since her accession to wealth, and all the privileges of independence, had been becoming every day more habitual to her. "I am sure I suffer enough to make anybody look pale."

"Gracious Heaven! And is there no way to prevent this? With hearts near you who would joyfully shed their vital blood to protect you from every sorrow and from every pain, is there no way to prevent your angel nature from being thus harassed and tormented?" ejaculated the lover, with clasped hands and uplifted eyes.

"I am sure, if there is any way, I have not wit to find it out," returned Miss Martin Thorpe; "for I try everything I can, and I think things only get worse. These Heathcote people are the torment of my life, and it may be weeks, ay, and months too, before I can get rid of them, if I am to wait for the authority of Sir Charles."

If the whole conclave of the gods had sat in council together in order to find for him a propitious opening, they could not have contrived a better. "Wait for nothing, adored Sophia!" he cried, suddenly throwing himself at her feet: "wait for nothing to emancipate you from this detested thraldom, but the protecting love of the man who idolizes you! Sophia! turn not those heavenly eyes away; I am in outer darkness when you look not on me! Oh! lovely and beloved! let me protect you! My life, passed in one long unceasing act of worship to your heavenly charms, shall guard you, for ever and for ever, from all and everything that can annoy you! Sophia! lovely Sophia! be mine! Be my wife, my bride—the adored possessor of my soul and body!"

These eloquent words were accompanied by the most passionate caresses, which, as she endured them with something like the philosophy of a post, or else from a species of experimental curiosity which prevented her from offering any interruption, continued for a very considerable time. At length, however, she seemed to have had enough of it, for by a sudden movement she pushed herself and her sofa (which was furnished with excellent castors) so vigorously backwards, that her lover fell forward on his face, and very literally lay at her feet.

Mr. Brandenberry felt at that moment as if he could gladly have wrung her head off; but this was an emotion which he did not permit to be visible. Rallying with rather a better grace than might have been expected from a gentleman who had never visited Paris—for he rose with a movement as nearly resembling a bound as the circumstances of his position permitted,—he assumed a countenance almost sublimely audacious, and again approaching the fair one, said, "Sophia! too lovely Sophia! I await my doom!"

But if the gentleman was bold, the lady was resolute; for without betraying any weakness of any kind, she replied,—

"Mr. Brandenberry! I am exceedingly obliged to you for your

good opinion of me, but at present I have no intention of changing my condition."

Now Mr. Brandenberry perfectly well knew that this answer had nothing in it which necessarily doomed him to despair; and he accordingly drew a chair, and set about finishing the work in hand, with a sort of resolute perseverance which did honour to his courage. But he had yet to study the character of the charming Sophia a little more, before he thoroughly understood it. The answer above recorded might certainly, from the generality of young ladies, have given room for hope that a little perseverance would conquer the reluctance so gently expressed. But with Miss Martin Thorpe it was otherwise. Had she been less sure of herself, she would probably have felt it necessary to protest more; but, as it was, she saw not any occasion to resort to wordy vehemence in order to prevent her valued neighbour from entering upon her property; and she therefore replied again, quite as gently as before, "I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Brandenberry, but it is not my intention to marry at present. I am very well as I am."

Once again, more encouraged than disheartened by so mild a rejection, the determined lover renewed his suit; and it may be fairly doubted if any word in the English language, expressive of admiration and love, was forgotten by him in the course of his next speech. But it was like pouring milk upon a granite rock; the operation was productive of no great effect of any kind; assuredly the granite was not melted, but it looked perhaps rather the smoother, and more glossy, for the libation.

"Pray, Mr. Brandenberry, don't say any more about it," said Sophia. "I have a great regard for both you and your sister, and I should be very sorry, I assure you, if anything were to prevent our going on in the same pleasant manner as before. . . . . Pray don't talk any more upon the subject, because it is of no use. . . . . I don't wish to be married at present to anybody."

Here again was an answer in which no particle of despair was to be found; but Mr. Brandenberry was excessively tired, and he therefore, yielding to his longing desire to get away, rose up, slapped his forehead with his open hand (he perceived not that he was in a predicament to make his fist necessary), and said, "Most adored Miss Martin Thorpe! I obey you! . . . . Life has now little left for me, to make it worth preserving . . . . but I swear in the face of Heaven that this rash hand shall never release me from the load, so long as you permit me to cheer my aching senses by beholding you."

Sophia had, on the whole, been exceedingly well entertained by the interview; but she, too, was beginning to grow a little tired, and it was therefore with a contented smile that she replied, "Good-b'ye, Mr. Brandenberry. I am sure I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you very often. Pray remember me very kindly to your sister, and tell her that I have got the worsteds from Hereford, and am going to begin the pattern she gave me directly."

Mr. Brandenberry on this seized her hand, and impressed upon it a most impassioned kiss; then giving her a parting look of mixed tenderness and woe, he left the room, walked down the stairs, and

met his sister Margaret loitering behind a holly-bush at not more than a hundred yards' distance from the house.

"How, Richard, hast thou sped?"

would have been her first words, had the gods made her poetical; but as they had not, she only pronounced the monosyllable, "Well?"

"Well!" echoed her brother, drawing a deep sigh, from sheer fatigue; "the devil take her! . . . . I shall have the same thing to do again and again before I get her acres; and when I do get them, the first thing I should like to do, would be to bury her under them."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Margaret, "she has not refused you, then?"

"O yes, she has, my dear, half a dozen times over . . . . but not in such a way as to make me hang or drown myself. I have very little doubt that she has already made up her mind to marry me; and even if she has not, I have certainly no great reason to despair of bringing her to it before long. But the worst of it is, that it is plain she likes the preliminary part of the business a devilish deal better than I do. Margaret! . . . . I shall be worn to a thread-paper if I go on making love to her at the rate I did to-day for a month."

"A month? . . . . Oh! Richard, Richard! How is it possible you can talk so lightly on such a subject? What is one month, or two months, or ten months, or twenty months either, compared to having the Thorpe-Combe estate, without a debt or a mortgage upon it, of any kind whatever?" returned Miss Brandenberry with great indignation. "You are the last man in the world, Richard, that I should ever have expected to hear talk such conceited nonsense. It is quite unworthy of you. But I suppose you are only jesting."

"No, upon my soul I am not. If I could get through the business at once, and have the reward in my pocket, you might not perhaps even hear me complain about it . . . . but it is plain to me that she likes being made love to; and as I hate making love to her worse than poison, you can't be very much surprised, Margaret, if I do grumble a little. However, don't let us quarrel about it. You must go on, my dear, just the same as before, coaxing and flattering her up, till you have made her fancy that it is quite impossible to live without you."

"And so I will, Richard," replied the excellent Miss Brandenberry, with the warmest sisterly affection; "and what is more, you shall never hear *me* complain of the job, as long as there is the very slightest chance that it will come to anything. And yet, upon my word and honour, Richard, my part of the business is no sinecure. Oh dear! how disagreeable she is, to be sure!"

"You need not tell me that, my dear," replied the brother, laughing; and the refused lover and his truly sympathizing sister walked home together, by no means in a despairing state of mind.

* * * * * *

It was still several days after this before Sophia again saw Mr. Jenkins; and she began to feel very seriously uneasy lest his diseased fancy might have seized upon some new whim, and that she should

see no more of him, or of the riches and the gems of which he had boasted. She would undoubtedly have been more uneasy still, had she known that during this time he spent many hours of every day in the banqueting-room at Temple, surrounded by the detested Heathcotes, and making himself so agreeable by his good-humour, his anecdotes, and his fun, that, notwithstanding all his odd ways and his odd looks, they were becoming very fond of his visits. A mutual regard was indeed so evidently springing up among them as might well have made her tremble for her own influence, had she witnessed it. But though Major Heathcote, his wife, and his daughter, had all agreed not to suffer Sophia's ill-humour to drive them away, or to break up an arrangement, the destruction of which might involve Sir Charles Temple in considerable trouble, they did not feel themselves called upon to converse more with their sullen and sulky little hostess than she herself appeared to wish; and, consequently, these goings and comings of the eccentric Mr. Jenkins were never communicated to her by any of them.

When at length, however, this, to her, most interesting personage once more made his appearance in her boudoir, she was completely satisfied when, in answer to her flattering inquiries respecting his health and his absence, he replied that he had not been well enough to trouble her with his presence. He seemed, nevertheless, to have quite forgotten his favourite fancy of going over every room in the house; for when she told him that Mrs. Barnes, her housekeeper, or she herself, if he preferred it, would be quite ready to attend him, he replied, "Not now—not now, thank you. I don't feel quite in the humour for it." He refused, too, to partake of her luncheon, and seemed altogether a good deal changed in manner; being restless and fidgety, beginning many sentences without finishing any, and more than once appearing to forget her altogether, and to be occupied solely with the examination of the different articles of furniture in the apartment. But all this she attributed to the unsettled state of his intellect, a fact of which she entertained very little doubt; and she consoled herself for the change in his manner, by thinking that she perceived an increased degree of familiarity in his address, which in his state of mind argued well, she thought, in favour of the hopes she still entertained of farther presents from him.

On the following day he returned again, and then his manner was, if possible, more strange and restless than before. But after wasting a good deal of time in walking round and round, and backwards and forwards, much in the manner of a greatly bored lion in a cage, he at last sat down close to her, and said, "Pray, my dear, how soon do you expect that your guardian, Sir Charles Temple, will be likely to return to England?"

Delighted at hearing him thus open upon a subject which so nearly concerned her, and persuaded that nothing would be more likely to establish firmly for herself the interest which her residence and possessions had already given her in the eyes of this whimsical old friend of her predecessor, she answered him eagerly, and in the kindest voice imaginable, "Oh! my dear sir, that is a subject upon which my poor mind is very busy at present. Your kindness to me has been so great,

that if you had not kept away from me, I am quite sure that I should have opened my heart, and told you all my troubles."

"Then open your heart now, my dear!" replied Mr. Jenkins, with sudden animation. "I should like to hear all you have got to say, exceedingly."

"Should you, sir?" returned Sophia, quite sentimentally. "How very kind of you!"

"Go on, Sophy—go on; what was it you were going to say?" demanded the impatient confidant.

"Why the truth is, my dear sir, that I have lately written to my guardian, Sir Charles; and it is impossible for me to say what will be the consequence of my letter; I should not be greatly surprised if it brought him back immediately."

"Indeed!—upon my word I am very glad to hear it, my dear. Then he will bring home with him your cousin Algernon, won't he? and of course the boy will be here? . . . . I want to see that boy."

Not all the habitual weighing of words to which Sophia had for years drilled herself, whenever she thought her interest concerned, could prevent a burst of genuine feeling upon hearing this detested name, coupled with her house as the probable home of him who bore it.

"Algernon Heathcote come here!" she exclaimed, while her unguarded eyes suffered a spark from within to shoot through them. "Never, sir!—Oh, Mr. Jenkins!" she continued, recovering her self-possession, "I wish to heaven that your kind heart knew all that I have suffered from that shocking boy, and then you would not wonder at my expressing myself with so much vehemence."

"What have you suffered, Sophy?" returned Mr. Jenkins, gravely. "I would wish you to tell me all about it. What has Algernon Heathcote ever done to injure you?"

Desiring nothing better than such an opportunity of making a partisan of her jewelled friend, she replied, "What have I suffered? Oh, Mr. Jenkins! you know not what a life of suffering mine has been! Left an orphan at nineteen years of age, I but too well remembered all the happiness of having a mother, not to feel in the most agonizing manner the want of one!"

"Of course, of course. That must be true enough, certainly. Go on, Sophy," said Mr. Jenkins.

"You understand this, dear Mr. Jenkins," she resumed; "therefore I need not enter at length into the history of all I suffered on my removal from my poor mother's house to that of Major Heathcote. It was most dreadful."

"But how did you come to go there, more than to any other of your mother's connections?" demanded Mr. Jenkins, again interrupting her.

Sophia coloured a little, but the weak emotion passed, and she replied without any appearance of embarrassment: "I believe it was in consequence of some arrangement made between my poor mother and Major Heathcote, just before she died."

"Some pecuniary arrangement, I presume?" said Mr. Jenkins.

"Yes, I suppose so," returned Sophia, again colouring a little.

"Very well—go on. What was it made you so very miserable when you got there?"

"The dreadful treatment that I met with from my cousins," replied Sophia, unhesitatingly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Jenkins. "There is something very shocking in that. Perhaps it was the younger children, who were in no way your blood relations, whose behaviour made you so uncomfortable?"

"No, sir, indeed it was not," said Sophia, quickly remembering that as they had no connection whatever with Thorpe-Combe, to which all Mr. Jenkins' affectionate reminiscences seemed to attach themselves, they could not be within reach of becoming her rivals. "I have no reason whatever to complain of the younger children; neither the boys nor the girls troubled me in any way, poor things; and God forbid I should accuse them falsely! But my cousin Florence has ever been my greatest enemy; and as for Algernon, if ever there was a diabolic temper upon earth, it is his."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Sophy," said Mr. Jenkins, with a sigh that really seemed to speak great concern.

"Indeed, my dear sir," she resumed, "I should be very unwilling to pain your kind and generous heart by describing all I have endured from him."

"Never mind me and my feelings, Sophy," said her sympathizing friend. "I wish to hear all the particulars; and you may depend upon it, that listening to you will do me no harm. What sort of wickedness was it that Algernon Heathcote used to practise against you?"

"It was a system of ceaseless tormenting," she replied, "which none perhaps but the wretched victim can fully understand. Had his unmerited hatred shown itself in mere bodily injuries,—had he beaten me, pinched me, nay almost murdered me, I should call his conduct a thousand times less cruel than I think it now. Neither was his ill-will shown in open abuse or revilings. No! You might have lived for weeks in the same house with us, and never perhaps become aware of what he made me suffer!" Sophia here drew forth her handkerchief, and pressed it upon her eyes.

"I could wish, my dear Miss Sophy," said Mr. Jenkins, looking rather puzzled than compassionate; "I could wish that your description of all this were more clear and tangible, as I may call it. I think it very likely that, if my old acquaintance Sir Charles Temple returns home, I may become known to this young man. He too, as well as yourself and Miss Florence, stands in near relationship to my valued old friends; and without thinking it necessary to enter exactly into my future plans, I see no reason why I should not fairly state, that my intention in coming to this country was chiefly to have the pleasure of making acquaintance with those they have left behind them, and, if I find them worthy of it, to give from my ample means some substantial proof of the affectionate remembrance in which I retain the kindness of those who are gone. It is therefore really important that I should become acquainted with the character and disposition of your cousins. I cannot hunt up so easily all the other nephews and nieces of my old friends; but these two young Heathcotes seem particularly to have

fallen in my way, and I shall therefore feel very much obliged by your telling me everything you know about them."

This speech was rather a long one, and though in some parts uttered with Mr. Jenkins' characteristic rapidity, there were pauses in it which gave time for several perfectly new notions to present themselves to the fertile mind of Miss Martin Thorpe. She began very greatly to doubt the justice of her former surmises respecting the sanity of Mr. Jenkins' intellect. If he had come into the neighbourhood of Thorpe-Combe expressly for the purpose of making acquaintance with the relations of the late Mr. Thorpe, and conferring upon them substantial proofs of his regard, the act which she had considered to be that of a madman was in reality only a proof of the spirited and able manner in which he was capable of carrying into execution the resolutions which he formed. But new as was this view of the case, it increased rather than lessened the necessity of keeping his partial attention fixed upon herself. Advantages which before had appeared vague, though probable, now took the form of certainties; and according to the moral code by which she regulated all her actions, she immediately decided that it was a duty which she owed to herself to prevent any other from sharing the affection which his generous present had so clearly proved he already felt for her.

"What you have now said, my dear Mr. Jenkins," she replied, "renders that a duty which was only a consolation before. Your great kindness to me, which, believe me, I can never forget, raised a very natural wish in my bosom to make you indeed my friend by opening to you my whole heart, and confessing to you the sorrows and sufferings which from others I endeavoured to conceal. Algernon and Florence Heathcote, my dear Mr. Jenkins, are, I grieve to say it, very unworthy young people; false, deceitful, hard-hearted, and ungenerous, incapable of feeling attachment themselves, incapable of being grateful for it in others: thus much is torn from me by my devoted attachment to you. You have frankly asked me for a true account of them, and I have given it as far as was necessary to satisfy my strict regard to truth. Beyond this, my dear sir, I will entreat you not to press me. It is inexpressibly painful to find myself in a situation in which it becomes a duty to speak severely of my own relations. You, dear Mr. Jenkins, with all your kind and generous feelings, cannot but sympathize in this, and I will therefore venture to entreat that you will ask me no farther questions, and you will, too, I trust, give me credit for the honesty and ardent love of truth which has torn from me what I have already said."

Mr. Jenkins rose from the chair he occupied immediately opposite to the sofa of the heiress, and placing it between himself and her, leaned over its back as he supported it on its front legs, and looking very fixedly in her face, said, "Sophy, I will never trouble you with any more questions, if you will only answer me this one: Is Florence Heathcote an ill-tempered girl?"

There was something in the expression of the dark and sallow countenance thus brought on a level with her own, which convinced Sophia that her singular visitor attached much importance to her answer. All her hopes from him, perhaps, turned upon the words for

which he seemed so anxiously waiting, and she was determined to speak them with effect. Wherefore, clasping her hands fervently together, and steadily returning his gaze, she replied, "Indeed, indeed, she is!"

"Now, then, good morning," said Mr. Jenkins, raising himself briskly, and appearing to be perfectly satisfied. "I am going to London for a week or two upon particular business, but at the end of that time I shall return to Broughton Castle, whether the family are there or not, and then you may depend upon seing me again."

"To London upon particular business! Something about his money, beyond all doubt," thought Sophia; and rising to present her hand in order most affectionately to bid him farewell, she said, quite touchingly, "God bless you, dear Mr. Jenkins! God bless you, and bring you back again safely!"

"You are very kind," was his reply; but stopping short as he was turning to leave her, he added, "By the bye, Miss Martin Thorpe, I will ask you a favour before I go. Those palings that you are running up, so as to inclose the entrance to the shrubbery-cottage, as it used to be called, will destroy one or two trees which my kind friend Mrs. Thorpe planted with her own hands, for I was at her side, and helped her. Will you indulge me by stopping the work till I come back? And then, if the foolish old man is still obstinate,—for I know all about it,—if he still is obstinate, I dare say that between us we shall find some other way to manage him. Will you grant me this delay?"

"Grant you! my dearest sir!" returned the heiress, with great enthusiasm. "What is there you could ask, that I should feel it possible to refuse?" And delighted and exhilarated beyond her usual composure of spirits by the manner in which he seemed to mix himself up with her concerns by that charming monosyllable WE, she pushed aside an intervening chair or two, and almost ran to the door by which he was going to make his exit, once more to take his hand, and once more to utter an affectionate farewell. But ere she reached it, he had already passed through it, closed it behind him, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXX.

DURING a few weeks which followed this interview, everything went on at Thorpe-Combe with great apparent tranquillity; but, nevertheless, the mind of its mistress was not without its anxieties. Could she have anticipated so conclusive an interview with Mr. Jenkins, or could she have foreseen the absence which now so fortunately put him out of the reach of Florence, and all her hated wiles and smiles, she certainly would have at least *delayed* her letter to Sir Charles Temple. But as it was past recall, she wisely bestowed more thought on its possible results than on her regret for its departure. She resolved, let his reply be what it would, to keep on the best possible terms with him, and even to endure the Heathcotes during the

whole of her minority, rather than have any dispute. These conciliatory resolutions did not arise so much from any partiality to him, or from any pertinacity in the purpose which had formerly suggested itself of joining the properties of Temple and Thorpe-Combe, and giving herself the desirable appellation of "my lady," but solely from the fear that the generous Mr. Jenkins might take it into his head to think her wilful. Nothing, therefore, could be more steadfast than the resolution she came to, of being as amiable as possible. The paling-work was suspended; the dinners, and evening tea-drinkings, when taken together, passed without any further efforts to make the intractable Heathcotes quarrel; and, in a word, everything went on as smoothly as the pent-up water above a mill-dam before it reaches the point at which it is to be dashed into froth and fragments.

Meanwhile her intercourse with the Brandenberry brother and sister had received little or no interruption in consequence of the offer and its rejection. Miss Martin Thorpe would in truth have felt greatly at a loss how to dispose of her day, had she lost the eternal enterings of the unwearied Margaret, with all the gossip which her long acquaintance with the neighbourhood enabled her to get at, and all the patterns which the heiress's resolution to work for herself the most superb set of chairs ever seen, rendered so invaluable. Each of the ladies pretended to believe that the other knew nothing of the enamoured Richard's melancholy state of mind, so that the adventure of the offer was never discussed between them. Miss Brandenberry continued, as heretofore, to allude occasionally to the perishing condition of her too sensitive brother, and Miss Martin Thorpe to listen to her, without giving any indication of displeasure. In fact, Sophia would not have at all disliked any degree of love-making which the brother and sister thought advisable, conscious, that let it be as pleasant as it would, there was not the slightest danger of her being such a fool as to make any marriage in consequence of it which would add neither to her consequence nor her fortune.

So Mr. Brandenberry went on sighing and ogling without let or hinderance of any kind; Sophia and Margaret too (for the heiress expected a good deal of cross-stitch in return for her friendship) went on working monsters in lamb's-wool; the major caught trout; Mrs. Heathcote made frocks; Florence read, wrote, and roamed deliciously through the groves of Temple; and the two happy little boys almost forgot at times that "cross Cousin Sophy" lived in the same house with them.

* * * * * *

It was late in a lovely evening about the middle of June, and the whole of the Heathcote portion of the Combe family were assembled to enjoy the last sweet hour of twilight upon the noble esplanade before the house, when they were startled by the very unusual sound of carriage-wheels approaching through the thick shrubberies that led from the lodges on the London road.

"Who in the world can this be?" said the major, making a step or two towards the point from which the road was most visible. But before his question could be either idly repeated or idly answered, a hack post-chaise, with one pair of horses, two insides, and conside-

rable luggage, appeared in sight. As there was neither mark nor likelihood about it, to say whom it might contain, the major gazed in as perfect ignorance as he had listened to it; but the eye of Florence had caught another eye, whose glance had caused her blood to ebb and flow so irregularly, as to oblige her to reseat herself upon a bench from which she had risen; and Mrs. Heathcote at the same moment fixing her eyes upon the rear of the vehicle, exclaimed "Good heaven! That is Algernon's box!"

The door of the post-chaise was opened in less time than it takes to tell of it, and Sir Charles Temple sprang out, followed by his young friend. Great was the clamour of surprise (for of Sophia's letter the Heathcotes of course knew nothing), but greater still, perhaps, was the throb of joy which this unexpected sight occasioned. Algernon, taller by two inches, and stouter by half a dozen, than when he stood before them last, embraced father, mother, sister, and brothers, in succession; and such was the confusion of the moment, that Sir Charles Temple actually embraced most of them, too; by which extraordinary freedom Florence was so far roused from the feeling of faintness which had come upon her that she was able to rise up, and, by help of the offender's arm, to reach the dear east parlour, which she happened to know was the spot where he had first conceived the project of taking care of her for life.

When Sir Charles Temple had sufficiently recovered his senses to hear and understand the major's reiterated question of, "What has brought you home so suddenly?" he felt some difficulty in replying to it. From its being asked, it was plain that their amiable ward had not communicated the purport of the letter she had written, and which had produced this prompt measure, from the fear it naturally suggested that Florence found not such a home in her cousin's house as the young baronet approved. But to explain all this in a moment was impossible; the question, therefore, was only answered by another, —"Where is Miss Martin Thorpe?"

Had Sir Charles never before conceived the idea, from the querulous letter he had received, that his ward's house had not been a happy home to her relatives, the sort of start which this question produced would have suggested it.

"I suppose she is in her own sitting-room," said Mrs. Heathcote.

"Her *own* sitting-room," repeated Algernon. "Do you not all sit together?" The two ladies shook their heads and smiled. "What a comfort!" cried the handsome Algernon, his saucy eyes exchanging an expressive glance with his stepmother.

"But we must let her know you are here, Sir Charles," said the major, "or she will really have reason to be displeased with us." And a message was immediately sent up to the lady of the mansion, announcing the arrival of the travellers.

"Algernon! I should scarcely have known you," said his father, looking at him with such an expression of pride and happiness in his eyes, that the laughing blue ones of the baronet sparkled with satisfaction.

"You think, then, that I have taken care of him, Major?" said he.

"Care, my dear fellow? I don't know what you have done to him. Poppsy, do you feel quite certain that this tall stout fellow is really

the boy that you have been cuddling up, like a sick lamb, for the last three years?"

"Why, if it were not for his eyes and his teeth, and his hair and his smile, Major, I really do not think I should know him. I wonder if Miss Martin Thorpe will be brought to believe there is any hope of life in him now?"

"Why, as good Uncle Thorpe is dead and burried, and the estate settled upon herself and her little heirs for ever, I think she may," said Algernon. "But it would really be very hard upon me," he added, "if I were not to live to a good old age; for most certainly I have had just double the usual proportion of fatherly and motherly care. Those who have seen, may say whether I have not had two mothers; and if this gentleman here did not look so ridiculously young, I could declare that I might often have mistaken him for a second father."

"Say brother, Algernon," said Frederic, looking from one of the handsome young faces to the other. "He looks just as if he might be your brother."

"Does he, Frederic?" said Sir Charles, laughing, and throwing a bright eye-beam upon Florence, which caused her to turn her head aside, her mother-in-law to colour, her father to smile, and Algernon to stare.

Just at this moment, when, to say truth, they none of them wished for any interruption at all, the door opened, and Miss Martin Thorpe appeared.

A little flurry and agitation were visible on her countenance, and her dark skin had rather more of the carnation in it than usual; but when, having shaken hands with Sir Charles Temple, she turned her eyes upon Algernon, she actually turned pale. Though she had talked of the certainty of his speedy death to Mr. Thorpe with rather more confidence than she actually felt in the near approach of that desirable event, she really and truly had ever thought him a very fragile and delicate sort of a boy, who was, at any rate, quite as likely to die as to live, spite of all the ridiculous fuss that Mrs. Heathcote made about him; and when she looked at him now, with every symptom of health and strength in face and limb, her intense displeasure at the sight made her feel positively qualmish, and she would have been very glad if it had occurred to any one to open the one window of the pretty east parlour, and give her a little air.

This was not done, however, and after a few minutes, she contrived to recover herself without it; but she felt altogether exceedingly ill at ease, and by no means knowing what it would be best for her to say or do, in order to make this too prompt attention to her complaints on the part of Sir Charles pass off with as little *éclat* as possible. After a few sufficiently awkward little speeches about his journey, and so forth, she rallied her courage sufficiently to say, "Shall we leave my cousin Algernon to talk of his adventures to his family, Sir Charles, while I have the pleasure of speaking a few words to you before tea is served in the drawing-room?"

However much Sir Charles Temple might have preferred remaining

where he was, it was of course impossible that he could say so, and he therefore civilly replied that he should be happy to follow whithersoever she would lead.

He was, however, a little startled when he found that this leading was to take him upstairs; and on reaching the gay-looking and really handsome room to which she introduced him, he looked as much astonished as if she had transported him to Pekin.

"Where in the world did this room come from?" said he. "You must have the wand of an enchanter, Miss Martin Thorpe, to have created this magnificent apartment from among the sleeping-rooms of my old friend's mansion."

"I am glad you approve it, Sir Charles Temple," she replied, modestly. "It was absolutely necessary for me, as I am sure you must be aware, that when I determined upon residing here in the manner I now do, I should have some room that I could call my own."

Sir Charles had said nothing about his approval of the room, which, in fact, struck him as being vastly finer than there was any occasion for; but on this point he made no observation; and as to her having a room that she could call her own, he felt by no means disposed to dispute it. But not wishing that this *tête-à-tête* with his ward should keep him longer from the party below than was absolutely necessary, he said, "I fear, Miss Martin Thorpe, that the unfortunate disagreements which you mention in the letter I have had the great pain to receive from you are the cause of your thus finding it necessary to separate yourself from your guardian and his family. If you cannot remain happily together, I feel perfectly assured that neither Major Heathcote nor the ladies of his family would wish the arrangement to continue; and it is because I feel, that under the circumstances your remaining together must be equally disagreeable to you all, that I have thus hastened my return."

"I had no idea that my letter would have brought you home so suddenly, Sir Charles," replied Sophia, in some confusion, "or I should certainly have written it more cautiously. I am extremely sorry to have occasioned you any inconvenience, and had hoped that everything might have been arranged by letters."

"Such violent changes as you propose, Miss Martin Thorpe, are not easily arranged, so as to have the appearance of propriety, even when all the parties are present to assist in it; and still less could this be hoped for when they are not," said he.

"I am sure, Sir Charles Temple, if you disapprove the separation I spoke of, it will be my wish to give it up," replied Sophia, very cleverly taking all the merit of the most gentle obedience, while joyfully catching at the least appearance of opposition, which might save her from exposing herself to blame from Mr. Jenkins.

"I would by no means wish either party to continue with the other, unless both found themselves happy in the union," replied Sir Charles, gravely.

"I think we begin to understand each other better now," said Sophia, in the gentlest possible accents, "and I have no doubt but that

we shall go on very well for the future. Therefore, Sir Charles, I shall be greatly obliged by your not in any way alluding to the letter I unfortunately sent you, in presence of the Heathcotes. They as yet know nothing of it."

"I have every wish to oblige you, Miss Martin Thorpe," replied the baronet, perfectly persuaded that if the poor fretful-tempered girl had taken offence unreasonably, she was now heartily sorry for it, "but your cousin Algernon has seen your letter."

The scowl produced on the young lady's brow by these words went far towards correcting her inexperienced guardian's erroneous estimate of her present state of mind, and he secretly determined that Florence should not remain her inmate, if there was any chance of her sharing such looks as that. But for the present he agreed to sink the subject entirely, unless Major Heathcote, from the information which he had probably already received through Algernon, should name it to him.

"And in that case," said Sophia, meekly, "I will beg leave to speak to him on the subject myself."

"Now then we may return to the party below," said Sir Charles, rising.

"Certainly," replied the heiress, with a gentle smile; and they descended the stairs together.

Nothing could exceed the amiable sweetness of manner with which Miss Martin Thorpe conducted herself towards the whole party. To converse at all with Algernon was indeed beyond her power, but she contrived to avoid this very skilfully; and to the rest her kindness was quite sufficient to have made them weary of conjecture as to the cause of it, had they not all been far too happy and too occupied to think about it.

Had it not been for the pre-occupation occasioned by many anxious thoughts of Mr. Jenkins, and of his declared intentions to "*give substantial proof of his affectionate remembrance of those who were gone*," Sophia might have observed enough in the course of that evening to have convinced her, perhaps, that some of her projects were not very likely to answer; and that the Temple and Thorpe-Combe estates were likely to remain divided for ever, if their union depended upon that of Sir Charles Temple with herself. But much too profoundly occupied by graver matters to find time for any such secondary speculations, the whole attention which she could give to anything at the present moment was bestowed in displaying civility to Mrs. Heathcote; and so dreadfully irksome was this, that she was thankful in no common degree when at length the often-consulted timepiece on the chimney-piece told her that she might bid them good-night, and send them all to bed, without any outrageous impropriety.

Sir Charles Temple, however, was most cordially invited by her to stay the night; but he preferred the chance of doing the honours of his now precious banqueting-room to the party he expected there, even to remaining an inmate for a few hours longer with his charming ward.

The great anxiety of Sophia on the following morning was to

prevent any interview between Sir Charles Temple and Mr. Jenkins from taking place, before she had herself seen the latter. The first news which her accomplished waiting-woman, Mrs. Roberts, had communicated on entering her room to wake her, was, that Mr. Jenkins was come back to Broughton Castle; and Sophia well remembered that nearly the last words he had said to her contained a promise of paying her a visit as soon as he returned. It was therefore very important that she should secure an early interview, in order to explain to him, before he saw any of the family, that she had had a conversation with her younger guardian, which had decided her even to receive Algernon, and to treat him with a degree of kindness more consonant to her own gentle nature than to his deserts, rather than lose the protection of Major and Mrs. Heathcote during her minority. She thought that this statement, with her manner of communicating it, might produce a strong effect in her favour on the mind of her already partial friend, and would have given one of her recently acquired pearls rather than not enjoy an opportunity of making it before Algernon was introduced to him.

Fortune favoured her wishes beyond what she had dared to hope; for when the family breakfast was over, at which she had herself on this occasion condescended to assist, instead of seeing Sir Charles Temple walk in, as she had fully expected, the whole of the Heathcote family prepared to walk out.

As she had never, since they first entered the house, proposed to join them in any single out-of-door excursion, it was in no way necessary, notwithstanding her change of politics, to do so now; and she therefore permitted them to follow their own plans, civilly hoping that they might not over-fatigue themselves from the heat of the weather.

She thought herself exceedingly fortunate when she saw them all set off, but ten times more so when, within half an hour afterwards, Mr. Jenkins entered her boudoir.

"Oh! my dear, dear sir! how truly delighted I am to see you!" she exclaimed, actually springing forward to meet him. "How are you? Do you feel fatigued by your journey? Have you been returned long? How very, very kind it is in you, to come and see me! How uncommonly well you look!" To all which the sallow personage she addressed only replied,

"Thank you;" and then sat down, without appearing in any particular hurry to say anything more.

"I have news to tell you, my dear sir," resumed Sophia, "which I think will give pleasure to your kind heart, because it is likely, I hope, to be advantageous to me. My guardian, Sir Charles Temple, is returned home, and my cousin Algernon with him; and I trust, dearest Mr. Jenkins, that we shall go on——"

"Sir Charles Temple returned! and Algernon with him!" cried Mr. Jenkins, with sudden animation; and starting from his chair without appearing particularly interested about the goings on she was preparing to dilate upon. "Where are they?"

"Sir Charles is at his own house, I believe," replied Sophia, "and my cousin Algernon is gone out to take a walk with his father and

the rest of the family; so that, I am sorry to say, I cannot send for him that he may be introduced to you this moment. But if you will give me the great honour and pleasure of your company at dinner to-day, you shall see both your old acquaintance, Sir Charles Temple, and my cousin."

"No no, that won't do,—that won't do at all. I don't want to see Sir Charles Temple just now. And yet I am very glad he is come too, —very glad." Then rising from his chair, Mr. Jenkins began his usual restless sort of promenade round and round the room, with his hands behind him, his eyes on the ground, and apparently meditating deeply on some subject, which, as it seemed, he intended to keep to himself.

Sophia felt a good deal at a loss what to say next. She was exceedingly afraid of not seeming sufficiently delighted to see him, if she said nothing, and perhaps still more afraid of vexing and disturbing him, if she said too much, while he continued in this silent fit; but her embarrassment was speedily ended, by his stopping short before her in one of his turns, and then, drawing a chair so close as to make his knees touch hers, addressing her as follows:—

"Sophy Martin—Miss Sophy Martin Thorpe—I have taken a whim into my head, in which you must humour me. Will you? Will you do whatever I ask of you, whether you like it yourself or not?"

"Most assuredly I will!" replied Sophia with delighted eagerness; "and be only too happy that there is anything in the world by which I can prove my wish to please you."

"That is very kindly answered," said Mr. Jenkins, "and I am much obliged to you for it. And now I will explain myself. You remember, I dare say, all that I told you about my old friendship for Mr. and Mrs. Thorpe, who used to live here in my youth, when I was so much at Broughton Castle?"

"Remember it! Oh, my dear sir! Do you think it would be possible for anybody to forget what is so very interesting?"

"No, I did not think you had forgotten it. And perhaps, Sophy Martin, you remember, too, that I told you my chief purpose in coming here was to make acquaintance with those they left behind them. Now you, my dear, are only one of these, and Miss Florence is another, and Algernon will be a third; all that's very well, and just what I wanted. But I find by inquiries I have been making, that there are ever so many more cousins, who all came to see the dear old man before he died, and I have taken it into my head that I should like them all to come and see me before I go away again. Will you write by this day's post, Sophy, and tell these Wilkyns and Spencer people—all those who were here to visit him, that a middle-aged bachelor-friend of the family is desirous of making acquaintance with them. You must let me see your letters, when you have written them, and if they are not just what I like, my dear, I will write myself. Will you sit down and do this directly? now, while I am sitting with you?"

Sophia was startled, and hardly knew what to make of this most unexpected request, or the very peremptory manner of it. She had

not indeed the slightest intention to refuse. On the contrary, it appeared to her that this general gathering of the family looked more like a decided intention of dividing the large fortune he had spoken of among them, or of bestowing it, as his old friend had so wisely done before, upon a selected favourite, than all which had gone before it. This was very hope-inspiring and agreeable. Nevertheless she could not but feel, that in a race where there are many competitors, there must be some risk of being outrun; and most assuredly, could she have had her wish, she would have stood alone before the eyes of the munificent Mr. Jenkins, as the sole relative his friend had left.

These thoughts, however, did not prevent her immediately answering, with every appearance of the most delighted alacrity, that she should obey him with the greatest possible pleasure. And in fact, as she busied herself in bringing forward all the elegant writing-apparatus which made part of the furniture of her boudoir, she was not unconscious of the pleasure she should feel at displaying her independence, wealth, and consequence, before the eyes of those who had seen her under circumstances so very different. She remembered that the elegant Mr. Spencer and his accomplished sons had never appeared to be very fully aware when she was in the room and when she was not; and she remembered also that the three paltry heiresses of five hundred a year each had required almost as much abject observance to propitiate their favour as she could now wish for herself. The idea of shining so very brightly before eyes so sure to be envious, was a pleasure calculated to be fully appreciated by such a mind as hers, and she raised her golden ruby-tipped pen with a lightness of spirit which communicated itself to her voice, as she said, "Now then, dear sir, what shall I say to them?"

Without any ceremony Mr. Jenkins dictated the letter which he wished her to send, and which ran thus:—

"Dear Uncle Wilkyns,—A gentleman called Jenkins, a man of large fortune, and a bachelor, who says that he was formerly very kindly treated by my uncle and aunt Thorpe, has come to this country from one many thousand miles distant, for the sole purpose, as he says, of seeing the relations of his dear old friends, and of proving to them all, more or less, how tender a recollection he entertains of those he has lost. He has therefore requested me to invite you and your three daughters to pay me a visit here on the 25th instant, for a week or ten days, that he may have the pleasure of being introduced to you and to them. At present he is staying with the Earl of Broughton, at Broughton Castle; but he desires me to say that if you will do me the favour of accepting this invitation, he will join the family party at Thorpe-Combe, for the pleasure of giving you the meeting. I believe you know that my uncle and aunt Heathcote and my cousin Florence are here; my cousin Algernon returned from Italy last night with Sir Charles Temple, and I am immediately going to invite the Spencers; so that the whole family will be assembled.

"In the hope that my request will be granted, I remain, dear uncle Wilkyns, your dutiful niece, "Sophia Martin Thorpe."

The epistle to Mr. Spencer was very nearly a duplicate, and both were sealed and committed to the coat-pocket of Mr. Jenkins, who took his leave as soon as this business was completed, promising carefully to post the letters, and leaving instructions with Sophia to communicate to him the answers as soon as they should arrive.

Left once more to her own reflections, Sophia felt absolutely astonished at what she had done, and at the prodigious expense and trouble she had consented to bring upon herself without any certainty, or even promise, of deriving from it any advantage whatever. As these thoughts passed through her mind, she experienced something like a pang of self-reproach at the facility with which she had been persuaded to commit an act of such imprudence, which her sober reason told her would be but ill-paid for by the gratification of her vanity. But by degrees more pleasant thoughts succeeded; she felt quite aware that neither the Spencer boys nor the Wilkyns girls were likely to be such dangerous rivals as the hateful Heathcotes, who were already there; she knew, that let Mr. Jenkins be as rich as he would, there was not the least probability that he would make any of them as rich as herself; she recollected, with the most consolatory certainty of not losing it, what she had already gained from the singular stranger by her amiable manners to him—the worth of many thousands; and, finally, it struck her that in case he should use her so abominably ill as to like any of her cousins better than he liked her, she could, should, and would desire him, as a matter of common justice, to defray the expenses of the party he had obliged her to invite.

This last consideration did a vast deal towards soothing her spirits, and enabled her to recur with almost unmixed satisfaction to the display of her newly-acquired dignity which she anticipated. Of her invitations, however, she determined to say nothing till they were accepted; but, struggling hard to preserve the appearance of good-humour which she had assumed, permitted the intervening days to pass away with no other impediment to the happiness of those assembled than a little stiffness and formality when she was present, but which was as innoxious to the perfect enjoyment which surrounded them when she was absent, as the rain of yesterday to the sunshine of to-day.

One effect, which human wisdom perhaps might have classed as unfortunate, was rapidly taking place during these few halcyon days. The fears of Sir Charles Temple that his little income would be insufficient to support a wife without his submitting to the sacrifice of disposing, in some way or other, of his beautiful place, vanished entirely as he watched the exquisite enjoyment of his lovely Florence amidst its groves and lawns, with no greater state than the rude furnishing of the rustic banqueting-room afforded, and listened to her genuine laugh as he inquired, almost in trembling, if she thought it possible she could be happy and contented without a carriage, a butler, and a brace of tall footmen, such as he confessed had helped to furnish the huge hall very advantageously during the residence of his lady mother.

But when he found that neither his beloved herself, nor father,

mother, nor brother (for Algernon was now let into the secret) objected to the humble household which alone he had it in his power to offer, he boldly proposed that they should be married immediately; and no farther delay was insisted upon by any of them, beyond what was necessary for Sir Charles to announce the matter to Lady Temple at Florence, and to implore her, by all the love she felt for him, not to oppose his making himself happy in his own way.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE letters of invitation sent by Miss Martin Thorpe to her uncle in the Treasury, and her uncle at Llanwellyn Lodge, were both of them productive of much speculation. In the first case, this was confined to the individual breast of the elegant official to whom it was addressed; but the second was referred almost entirely to the wit and will of the gigantic Welshman's three daughters.

"A mighty queer sort of adventure this!" muttered Mr. Spencer, over his morning coffee. "A gentleman called Jenkins wanting to prove tender recollections to everybody belonging to old Thorpe. I'll see the whole race and generation hanged, drawn, and quartered—excepting my own fine boys—before I ever again permit a carriage-wheel of mine to make half a turn round its axle towards them. A pretty audacious creature that Martin girl must be, after having let us see her cajole the old dotard to cheat us, before our very eyes, to dare sit down and pen such an epistle as this to me!" Then crushing it with an angry grasp, he threw it into the basket which stood ready to receive all such offerings, and pleased himself with the reflection that her receiving no answer at all would be the greatest mortification he could bestow upon her, while at the same time it cost him neither a globule of official ink nor a second of official time.

At Llanwellyn Lodge the effect of the invitation was different. The Squire, as it was addressed to him, went through the ceremony of breaking the seal, and seemed, from the direction of his heavy eyelids, to be occupied for about half a minute in perusing its contents, after which he pushed it an inch or so towards his eldest daughter, drowsily pronouncing the words usual on all such occasions, "Just look at that, Elfreda."

The young lady stretched forth her accustomed arm the whole distance between herself and her somniferous parent, and, skilfully reaching the letter, speedily made herself mistress of the contents.

There was something in the expression of her features as she read it, which seemed to her two sisters to be caused neither by a request concerning leave to cut down a tree to mend fences, nor by a notice of a county meeting, nor by a petition for a subscription for an infirmary; so they both exclaimed at the same moment,—

"What is that, Elfreda?"

"It is the strangest letter I ever read in my life," she replied. "It

is an invitation from Sophia Martin to go to Thorpe-Combe, to meet some travelling gentleman who used to know the old Thorpes, and now wants to make acquaintance with all their relations."

"Do let me see it!" said Eldruda.

"Let me look at it when you have done," said Winifred.

After both the younger sisters had satisfied their curiosity, and one had exclaimed "How oddly she writes!" and the other, "How I should like to go!" they brought their three heads together in consultation, and with well-founded confidence in their colossal papa's absorption of intellect, discussed the question of to go or not to go, and decided upon it before they gave him any further trouble about the matter.

"It does seem almost too ridiculous to set off again for Thorpe-Combe in search of what we can get," said Elfreda, "doesn't it? particularly for us, who really have rather more right to be independent than most people."

"But it is so very dull always staying at home," observed the pretty Winifred, "that without caring a straw about this bachelor gentleman's possible intentions, I do think it would be very foolish to refuse the invitation."

"I am decidedly of Winifred's opinion on that point," said Eldruda, in a tone of decision that it was evident could not be easily shaken. "In the first place I should above all things like the fun of seeing that stupid, ugly Sophia Martin stuck up by way of a great lady, receiving company. There would be some amusement too, perhaps, in seeing the bachelor gentleman himself. Who knows! And you see, Elfreda, that Sir Charles Temple is to be there."

"As to Sir Charles Temple, Druda, I made up my mind, long before I left Thorpe-Combe last winter, that if he were the only man left in the world, I would not have him. However, if you both of you wish to go, I shall not make any objection. Go and tell Jones, Eldruda, that she must not mind about looking up the household linen for the great wash to-day, for we shall want her to alter some dresses; and I will make papa understand about it, if I can."

The task which Miss Wilkyns thus allotted to herself was not an easy one, but, on the other hand, she did not deem it necessary that it should be performed to the letter. All that was absolutely essential, she did; and the Squire, at the end of half an hour, was left with a a dreamy sort of conviction on his mind that his daughters wished him to eat some more of those very good breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners, which, from making a change, had been so very beneficial to his health, as Elfreda said. And, on the whole, the vision was not at all disagreeable to him. Beyond the Jupiter sort of nod which the charming Elfreda pretty well knew how to obtain, when she wished it, nothing was ever expected from Squire Wilkyns in the way of preparation for any expedition, either distant or near, except, indeed, the signing his name to the cheque which Elfreda drew for him, and read to him. This done, all things went on without any trouble on his part till the hour of setting out; and then he found a newer set of clothes than those deemed good enough for daily wear set ready for him, which having assumed, he was roused into raising himself into his carriage

and then slept as it rolled quietly onwards till he had reached the point to which he was destined to go.

On deciding to accept the invitation, a letter was of course despatched by the executive portion of the Wilkyns administration to announce the same to Miss Martin Thorpe; and then it was that she called Mrs. Barnes to council, and informed her of the important crisis for which it was her business to prepare. The silence of Mr. Spencer was interpreted with very acute correctness by the heiress; and her orders, therefore, were given for the careful preparation of the same rooms for the Wilkyns family which they had occupied at Christmas, and the best in the house for Mr. Jenkins.

The first part of this command had nothing very surprising in it, except, indeed, that it demonstrated a greater degree of hospitality than the housekeeper had given her new mistress credit for; but the second clause puzzled her exceedingly. Neither being, nor wishing to be, on confidential terms with her heartily-detested lady, from whom she most faithfully intended to separate herself as soon as her stipulated year of service was over, Mrs. Barnes never penetrated to the boudoir where Mr. Jenkins was received, when not expressly summoned, and as that somewhat whimsical gentleman had changed his mind as to desiring to go over the old house with her, she had never yet caught a sight of him. But the description which had reached the servants' hall, of his appearance, dress, and manner, rendered this command for the best room in the house a matter of very considerable surprise. The expression of this feeling was, however, of course reserved for her niece Nancy, or any other of the household not excluded by their station from a place in that "Lower Chamber," which, like other administrative assemblies, was in the habit of freely discussing all the affairs of the establishment.

"I tell you he is the queerest chap to look at," said the butler, "that ever I handed wine to; and if it wasn't for his coming with Lord Broughton, and his staying such a time as he did at the Castle, I should say that he was ten times more like an actor man upon the stage than a gentleman."

"And I should say," said the sagacious William, "that if you happen to know what a horse is, and had seen the little Arabian as I found tied up one morning among the shrubs—in the very queerest place, to be sure, that ever any visiting gentleman hit upon to leave his horse in—if you had chanced to see this little beast, ladies and gentlemen, and happen, as I say, to know what a horse is, you'd have been sure in no time that the owner of him must be a man as didn't mind his money, or else a fancy horse-dealer."

"A horse-dealer!" exclaimed Mrs. Roberts, with extreme indignation; "I really wonder, young man, how you can use such language concerning a gentleman who visits the lady you serve."

"I didn't mean to say anything uncivil, nor I didn't say he was a horse-dealer," returned William, a little alarmed; "and I hope, Mrs. Roberts, as you won't be after making mischief of what I said."

"I'll bet a shilling with anybody," said Nancy, who had learned to care vastly little for her promised place, "that our missis has fallen in love with the gentleman, and is going to be married to him; and

that's the reason why she has invited ever so many of her nearest relations to come and stay here with him; and I'll defy any one of you to explain the whole thing any other way."

"I believe she loves her own self, and her own money, a deal too dearly to marry anybody," said Mrs. Barnes. "For what is marrying to a woman, but just giving up her money, if she has got any? No, Nancy, she won't be in no hurry to do that. But let it be how it will, the whole set are to be feasted, and the plate had out too; so you will have rubbing enough to do, you men folks, I can tell you, for the 25th is the day they come, and bustle enough there will be to get ready."

But the bustle was effective, and everything was ready on the appointed day. A foreign servant, who spoke no word of English, preceded the arrival of Mr. Jenkins; and being shown to his master's room, appeared, to those who answered his summons when ringing for means to light the fire (which he gave unmistakable signals must be done, notwithstanding that the midsummer sun had shone during the whole morning upon the apartment), to be preparing a very elaborate toilet for him. In fact, when Mr. Jenkins at length made his appearance in the drawing-room, where all the company were assembled before he entered, his appearance was very unlike what his young hostess had ever seen him assume before.

He now looked as much like an English gentleman as the tailor and barber could make him; for the thin curling moustache was removed from his upper lip, his clothes fitted him very nearly as well as other people's, and he wore no skull-cap upon his head.

Sophia was by no means displeased at the metamorphosis, as she still stood in some awe of the highly-educated Welsh heiresses, and had not been altogether without alarm lest they should consider her introducing a person of so remarkable a *tournure* as Mr. Jenkins had hitherto displayed, as rather derogatory to the dignity she was so anxious to exhibit to their admiration.

As it was, however, everything went off extremely well. As soon as he made his appearance, Sophia deliberately walked up to him, and placing her hand in his, led him round in the most solemn manner imaginable, and presented him successively to each member of the Wilkyns family, and then to Sir Charles Temple.

The Welsh squire mechanically got up, but of course only made an inarticulate sort of civil grunt in reply to the introduction, and then sat down again, hoping that this was the last of the party, and that dinner would come next.

Miss Wilkyns received him with the last imported inclination of the body, Winifred with her most beautifying smile, and Eldruda, with her most discriminating stare.

To each and every of them Mr. Jenkins made a comical little bow, giving at the same time a sharp glance of his keen black eye, in the manner of one who is desirous of seeing rather farther than the surface, if he can.

When he reached Sir Charles Temple, his manner appeared slightly embarrassed. He drew out his pocket-hankerchief, and flourished it about the lower part of his face, as if awkwardly at a loss how to address him. But if he really experienced a sensation of shyness in

addressing the handsome young baronet, it must have been relieved by perceiving that he was too intently occupied in listening to something which Florence Heathcote was saying, to take any very particular notice of him. He muttered, however, something that seemed intended to be civil about being glad to see a gentleman who had been such a favourite with his old friend Mr. Thorpe; to which Sir Charles, without looking at him very earnestly, replied, "I hope I see you well, sir," and immediately resumed his conversation with his blushing neighbour.

This ceremony gone through, Mr. Jenkins approached Mrs. Heathcote with a smile which seemed to say that he was well contented it was over, and that he was now ready to have a little conversation with her. But when he had reached within a step of the place where she sat, he suddenly stopped short, exclaiming, though almost in a whisper, "That is not all; there is another whom I have yet to see. Where is Algernon Heathcote?"

If this question was addressed to Miss Martin Thorpe, who had by this time resumed her own place in the middle of her own principal sofa, it apparently was not heard by her, for she immediately turned her head the other way. But Mrs. Heathcote, who had reached to a considerable degree of intimacy with the eccentric traveller, during his frequent visits to the banqueting-house previous to his journey to London, immediately replied—

"Let *me* introduce our boy Algernon to you, Mr. Jenkins." And without waiting for his answer, the zealous step-mother bustled across the room to where Algernon stood enjoying the richly wooded landscape from the window, and taking him by the hand led him, puzzled but unresisting, to the singular personage who had desired to make his acquaintance.

"This is Algernon Heathcote," said the kind soul, too proud of the boy, and too eager to show him off, to pause for any reflections as to how he might like to be thus exhibited. Now, had any one else been the exhibitor, he would not have liked it at all; but loving her too well to quarrel with anything she could do, he smiled with such bright good-humour at the anxious-looking countenance that thus suddenly placed itself before him, that Mr. Jenkins seemed to lose the ordinary proportion of discretion (never particularly great) by which in general he endeavoured to regulate his words and actions, and placing a hand on either shoulder of the startled youth, he exclaimed, "Gracious Heaven! And this, then, is Algernon Heathcote!"

Algernon coloured, and certainly looked as handsome as the fondest and proudest mother could have wished.

"Yes, Mr. Jenkins, this is Algernon; and when you get a little better acquainted with him, you will find out that his looks are not the best of him."

Having said this, Mrs. Heathcote returned to her place, leaving the new acquaintances standing together at the window.

"You must not believe anything my mother says about me, Mr. Jenkins," said the boy, laughing. "She is a very good woman in all other respects, but she very often tells stories about me."

"Then now I have made acquaintance with you, I must take care

to judge for myself," said Mr. Jenkins; and dropping into a chair he made the lad a sign to sit down beside him, and before the ten minutes which preceded the announcement of dinner had worn themselves away, he had contrived to set the youth off upon a very animated recapitulation of his Italian travels.

When at length the welcome signal came for removing to the dining-room, the mistress of the house made a quick, anxious movement towards Mr. Jenkins, and, offering to take his arm, said, "Will you be so kind, sir, as to take me in to dinner?"

"No, my dear," replied Mr. Jenkins, without much ceremony either in his words or manner, "that would be quite contrary to etiquette. You must take Sir Charles Temple's arm for to-day, Miss Sophy; and Mr. Wilkyns must lead in Mrs. Heathcote; the major may give his arm to that Miss Wilkyns next to you, because she looks the eldest; and the two younger-looking ones must amuse Florence as well as they can, though they, too, appear to have greatly the advantage of her in years. But as for me, you must let me take care of myself. I have found a young fellow here who suits me exactly, because he loves travelling, and he and I intend to sit together."

It was a sore struggle, both in strength and skill, for the heiress to listen to this without wincing; and perhaps at that moment she would have willingly abandoned all future hopes from the munificence of Mr. Jenkins, could she by so doing have, of a surety, consigned every individual of the party around her to the Red Sea. But as no such pleasant alternative was offered to her choice, all that was left her was to smile and walk on.

The rest of the company stared at each other, more or less, according to their different degrees of intimacy and astonishment; but they all obeyed the sallow traveller's marshalling, and took their companions and their places exactly as he had commanded.

Few meetings could be less lively than was this second cousinly reunion at Thorpe-Combe. Major Heathcote made an attempt to converse a little with the eldest Welsh heiress, but was speedily monosyllabled down; that young lady finding it altogether impossible to recover her temper, after the brutal vulgarity displayed in the speech of Mr. Jenkins. Sir Charles occupied himself wholly and solely in carving anything and everything within his reach; for Florence sat next to her father at the bottom of the table, and, being on the same side as himself, was hopelessly out of reach even of a look. The *amusement* afforded by the two younger Misses Wilkyns to their pretty cousin, consisted entirely of whisperings between themselves, which she might perhaps have overheard in part, had she been disposed to listen; but that she certainly was not—consoling herself for the dulness of the dinner by recalling the gaiety of the luncheon enjoyed that morning in the banqueting-room, on strawberries, which Sir Charles and Algernon had assisted her to gather in the beautiful garden at Temple. Good-natured Mrs. Heathcote ate her dinner peaceably enough; and though nobody said anything to her, and she said nothing to anybody, she felt not the slightest inclination to complain, albeit she would decidedly have been more thoroughly comfortable had Sir Charles Temple and Florence been seated next each

other, looking a little more gay and happy than they did now. Mr. Wilkyns was even better satisfied than his neighbour, for he watched nobody's looks, and ate and drank without being interrupted by having any single word addressed to him. He had seldom or never been at so pleasant a dinner-party. Sophia did, perhaps, the best thing which under the circumstances she could do; she sat perfectly silent, and any one who had occupied himself by studying her demeanour, might have come to no worse conclusion respecting her, than that she was too shy to speak.

Mr. Jenkins and Algernon meanwhile talked pretty nearly enough for the whole party, or at any rate they talked without ceasing; but it was done in a *tête-à-tête* aside sort of tone, so that no one but themselves was the better for it.

The evening was to most of the party quite as dull as the dinner, except indeed that the relief afforded to the lovers, by the power of approaching each other, and conversing with no other restraint than lowered voices at a distant window, gave food for speculation to the three Misses Wilkyns; and at length produced a glance or two of such evident sympathy between Elfreda and her umwhile ardent admirer, Miss Martin Thorpe, as to lead at last to a very friendly and intimate sort of conversation between them,—the dreadfully bold manners of poor Florence being of course the principal theme. The certainty, too, that whatever beauty some people might fancy they saw in her now, would not last long, was discovered with the most cordial unanimity of feeling and opinion; and so thoroughly agreeable and amusing did Miss Wilkyns make herself, that if anything could have consoled Sophia for the sundry gnawing anxieties which beset her, it must have been the discovery of so much admirable good sense in her cousin Elfreda.

As to Mr. Jenkins and Algernon, the ladies saw no more of them that night. Miss Martin Thorpe, having in vain watched the door for some minutes, after the entrance of Major Heathcote gave notice that the dinner-table party was broken up, found an opportunity of asking her page Jem where they were.

"I don't know for Master Algernon," answered the boy, "but I believe the strange gentleman is gone to bed, for he told me to bring him a side-candle."

It was probably the consolation conveyed in this answer which enabled Sophia to enjoy as much as she did the above-mentioned conversation with her sensible cousin, Miss Wilkyns.

After the ladies had withdrawn, Major Heathcote had placed himself at the top of the table, between Sir Charles Temple and the Welsh Squire; but Mr. Jenkins and Algernon had retained their former places, and continued to converse very much as if they had been alone.

"I declare to you, Algernon," said the sallow traveller, "that you almost tempt me to say that I, too, must see Italy before I die. Hitherto I have been ever looking for my Eden in the East; but your account of Florence is very tempting. But, now, I want you to tell me, Algernon, how you like coming home? Does not Thorpe-Combe appear mighty dull to you after all you have been describing?"

"Thorpe-Combe dull, sir?" replied the boy, shaking his head. "No! let what will come to it, I shall never be able to think Thorpe-Combe dull. I won't say that I like it as well now as I did in the time that your old friend was alive, Mr. Jenkins, for he was a delightful old man, and seemed so very anxious to make us all comfortable, that it is impossible not to be sorry he is gone. But there is a room in this house, Mr. Jenkins, that I suspect you have never been in yet, that will pretty well prevent the place from being dull. I'll bet a shilling you have never been in the library; unless, indeed, you used to go there years ago, in Mr. Thorpe's time, when you used to come over here from Broughton Castle, as you say. Did you ever see that room, Mr. Jenkins?"

"I should like to see it with you, Algernon," replied the sallow traveller.

"Then let us go into it to-morrow, after breakfast. Shall we?" said Algernon, eagerly.

"I had rather go there to-night," returned Mr. Jenkins.

"But I am afraid there are no lights there," replied the boy, shaking his head. "By what Florence tells me, Cousin Sophy does not care at all about the room, and never goes near it. Uncle Thorpe used to have it lighted up every night, and then, if possible, it was more delightful by night than by day. But unless there were a good many lamps or candles, you could not judge of it at all, for it is a very large room,—and such books!"

"We might see it by a better light another time," replied Mr. Jenkins; "but I have a fancy for going there with you to-night. Will you agree to it?"

"To be sure I will," cried Algernon, gaily; "and I know every corner of it so well that I can show you where the most particular things are, if we had only a farthing rushlight."

"And how did you become so well acquainted with it, Algernon?" demanded his new acquaintance. "You were only here for a fortnight, they tell me. Was it Mr. Thorpe who taught you your way about it?"

"No, sir," replied Algernon, "it was Sir Charles Temple. Mr. Thorpe said that the room made him melancholy. It was some thought about his lost son that made him so, Sir Charles said, and so I took care never to say much about it before him. But he found out, dear kind old man, that we loved to be there, and that was the reason that he had it lighted. And we did enjoy it, to be sure. Sir Charles, and Florence, and I, when we got together there, would always have liked to have stayed till it was time to go to bed, if we could."

At this moment the three gentlemen at the top of the table rose together, and Major Heathcote said, as he passed down the room, "As you do not take wine, Mr. Jenkins, you will perhaps like to join the ladies?"

"Do not wait for me, major," was the reply; "Algernon and I will come presently;" and after remaining till the trio had entered the drawing-room, Mr. Jenkins made the request for a side-candle, which had been reported to Sophia.

Algernon was right in saying that the library could not be well seen without more light than they carried with them, as they now entered it. The one candle only seemed to make its darkness visible, and he exclaimed, "Oh! dear Mr. Jenkins! Do not go on now, for you will not be able to judge of it at all. It is a shame to see it for the first time in this manner." But the observation did not arrest the steps of Mr. Jenkins, who continued to pace up the long room in silence, and having reached a certain arm-chair at the top of it, seated himself in it, and resting his arms on a little reading-table at its side, buried his head upon them, and remained silent for several minutes.

Aware that this reverie must be taking him back to the days that were gone, Algernon stood noiselessly beside him, and yielded himself very sympathetically to something of the same kind; for he, too, recalled time past, though recent, yet certainly as completely unlike the present—as far as concerned that library and its owner—as any which the wider range of his companion's memory could recall.

But whatever the cause, there was stronger emotion on the countenance of the elder than on that of the younger meditator, when their eyes next met. It was, indeed, evident that Mr. Jenkins had been shedding tears, and Algernon showed all the sympathy which under such circumstances could be shown, for he turned away, and occupied himself in taking a volume from the shelves.

"That's over," said Mr. Jenkins, abruptly rising, and speaking in his usual sharp, short style of enunciation; "and now tell me, Algernon, how you should like to have such a library as this for your own?"

"How I should like it, Mr. Jenkins?" repeated the youth. "Upon my word, that is a sort of question which I have never asked myself, and to say the truth, I don't think it is a very useful one."

"Nay, boy, I know not that," returned his companion, laughing. "What should you say, now, to some kind friend who should exert his interest and influence to bring about a marriage between you and your cousin Sophia? What should you say to it, Algernon?"

"I should say, sir," replied Algernon very quietly, "that I think a kind friend, either to her or to me, might employ himself better."

"And why so, Algernon? It would be a means of giving you a share, at least, in the inheritance of your uncle; and if you think you could be happy in the union, I am quite serious in saying that I shall be willing to use all my influence to bring it about."

"Surely you can only be jesting, Mr. Jenkins," replied Algernon laughing. "Miss Martin Thorpe is old enough to be married to-morrow, and you can scarcely, I think, say the same of me."

"Is that your only objection, Algernon?" said Mr. Jenkins, looking at him earnestly, and certainly with no expression of mirth on his features. "I very much wish you to tell me whether you think she is amiable?"

"Upon my word and honour, Mr. Jenkins, I will not let you marry me to anybody," returned the youth gaily. "I don't know how you may manage these things in the East, but men, or boys rather, never do marry at sixteen in England."

"And that is the only answer you will give me, Algernon?" resumed the persevering match-maker. "I feel certain I could make her

promise to wait for you, for I have great influence with her. If she will do this, will you, on your side, promise in three or four years' time to become her husband, if I undertake to see a liberal settlement made on you?"

"If I did not still believe you to be jesting, Mr. Jenkins," replied Algernon gravely, "I should think you were very wrong to talk to me in this manner; for to me it appears quite wicked to propose that any one should marry from such motives. But I am quite sure you are not serious. And now let us talk about the books, shall we?"

"At any rate, Algernon, there is one point on which I am quite serious. I particularly wish you to tell me, freely and candidly, your opinion as to the temper and character of Miss Martin Thorpe," said Mr. Jenkins in his most sedate and deliberate manner, and waving his hand in token of his objection to any immediate change of subject.

Algernon coloured, and for a moment remained silent; but upon Mr. Jenkins repeating the words, "Tell me candidly," he replied,—

"Then very candidly I will tell you that I do not think myself competent to judge of anybody's character, in such a manner as to justify my pronouncing so deliberate an opinion upon it as you now ask for; nor do I," he added, with a gay smile, "know half enough of your character, to understand why you question me so closely."

"That is true, boy, very true. So I will not quarrel with you, though you are very saucy; neither will I, for the present at least, ask you any more questions."

The conversation then turned on a variety of subjects, upon all of which the curious Mr. Jenkins seemed to take particular interest in discovering the opinions, or rather the notions, of young Algernon. Many costly volumes were looked at, and lightly discussed, and many lively remarks made and answered on both sides, till at length Mr. Jenkins bade his companion good night, saying, "I always take my coffee and my pipe in the solitude of my own room, Algernon, but you, I presume, will join the party in the drawing-room. The youth only answered by an evasive "Good night, sir;" but on finding himself alone in the hall, he made prize of another candle, and quietly stole back to the library, greatly preferring the quiet company he had left there, to any advantage he was likely to gain from that in the drawing-room, even though the lady so obligingly selected for his bride was among them.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Before Sir Charles Temple had finished on the following morning the not lingering breakfast which preceded his daily walk to the banqueting-room, he received the following note:—

"Mr. Jenkins presents his compliments to Sir Charles Temple, and will be much obliged by his permission to call upon him at Temple any hour this morning. Mr. Jenkins would wish to see Sir Charles Temple alone, and the earlier the hour named the more agreeable it would be to him."

It must be remembered that at this time, Sir Charles Temple knew nothing whatever of this strange-looking Mr. Jenkins, except that he professed to have been formerly on intimate terms with the late Mr. Thorpe. Notwithstanding the improved style of toilet in which he had appeared at dinner on the preceding day (the only time at which Sir Charles had seen him) there was still something so un-English in his appearance, that the young baronet doubted not but that his intimacy with Mr. Thorpe must have been formed while that gentleman was residing as ambassador at Madrid. With this impression, he was considerably puzzled on receiving the above note to divine what motive he could possibly have for desiring a *tête-à-tête* interview with him, till it suddenly occurred to him that he might possibly intend to offer his hand in marriage to the heiress of Thorpe-Combe.

"Why not address himself to Major Heathcote? Stupid fellow. The major is her personal guardian, and not I," murmured the baronet, as he thought of the eyes of Florence, turned towards the door of the banqueting-room to look for him, in vain; and his first idea as he sat down to his writing-table, was to refer his threatened visitor to that gentleman. But a second glance at the note he was about to answer, showed that this would not do, inasmuch as it contained not the slightest hint of the writer's having anything to say concerning his ward. Constrained, therefore, most sorely against his will, to endure this most unwelcome interruption, he named eleven o'clock for it, determined to see his friends in the garden-room first, and explain to them the cause of his breaking in, for a hateful half-hour at least, upon their new-established mode of spending the morning together.

Florence was venturing to steal a bouquet from the flower-beds before the windows, all of which had of late received the most assiduous attention from the old gardener, when Sir Charles approached, holding Mr. Jenkins' letter in his hand. He thrust it into his pocket, that he might assist Florence in her selection; but even this employment, which perhaps he loved better than any other, could not restore the harmony of his spirits, for in a more vexed tone of voice than she had ever heard from him before, he said, "Florence! There is a hateful man coming to call upon me this morning,—and I must go to the house to receive him." The intelligence was probably not particularly agreeable to the young lady; for there was a scheme a-foot for the morning, invented by Algernon, and about to be communicated to Sir Charles, which was to send them far afield along the margin of the stream, to a spot of peculiar beauty discovered by the major and little Frederic in one of their fishing expeditions. And there the strawberries were to be taken, and there Sir Charles was to read a play to them (out of hearing of the major's fish), and in short, the scheme thus broken in upon was intended to be one of great felicity. But Florence behaved a great deal better than Sir Charles; for she made the best of it, and only stopped rather abruptly short in her flower-picking, saying, "Then let us go in to mamma at once, Sir Charles, and tell her so; for I know she is busy in making preparations. But be sure to tell Frederic that you will go to-morrow, for his delight at the idea of being our leader, as he calls it, is extreme."

All the little party in the banqueting-room looked blank and dis-

appointed when these tidings were announced; but Algernon, after the meditation of a moment, burst into a fit of laughter. "Sir Charles!" he exclaimed, "I am quite sure I know what he is come for."

"You guess, Algernon, do you?" replied the baronet, "and so do I too. It is very absurd, I think; the disparity of age makes it ridiculous, if everything else were perfectly desirable, which I think is exceedingly doubtful. Besides it would be much more proper that he should speak to your father than to me."

Algernon stared at him. "How is it possible," he said, "that if you have found out what this very agreeable but very distracted gentleman has got into his head, how is it possible, Sir Charles, that you can speak of it so gravely?"

"I am too cross at this moment, to make a jest of anything," replied his friend. "Besides, I dare say it is not at all more absurd than a multitude of other propositions for the fair hand of the heiress, which, like all other young ladies so situated, she is pretty sure to receive as long as herself and her acres remain to be disposed of."

"But will you be so good, Sir Charles," said the boy, still laughing, and rubbing his hands with the air of being infinitely amused, "will you be so good as to tell me what answer you intend to make to his proposal?"

"I suppose that must depend upon circumstances, Algernon," replied Sir Charles, bearing with less philosophy than usual the interruption, which caused him to suspend some important observations which he was addressing to Florence. "I shall probably refer him to the lady for his answer."

"No, no, no, for Heaven's sake don't do that!" returned Algernon, bursting anew into immoderate laughter. "I do beg and entreat, Sir Charles, that you will refer him to my mother, and to nobody else. I particularly wish that the affair should be left wholly to her decision, to the which I promise and vow that I will pay the most abject and absolute obedience."

"What *are* you talking about, Algernon?" said the baronet. "What have you to do with Miss Martin Thorpe's marrying or not marrying Mr. Jenkins?"

"Mr. Jenkins!" shouted Algernon. "My dear fellow, it is ME Mr. Jenkins wants her to marry, and not himself." And then, more soberly he entered into his reasons for so thinking, which were confessed to be perfectly satisfactory, and which occasioned pretty nearly as much mirth to Florence as to himself. But Mrs. Heathcote fully justified the boy's appeal to her protecting influence; for she exclaimed with such unfeigned horror, "Algernon marry Sophy Martin!" that all Sir Charles's vexation gave way, and he laughed as heartily as any of them. But though he laughed, he declared himself ten times more angry than before, as it certainly now appeared evident that he was called away, at the expense of the very happiest hours of his existence, to listen to a proposition too preposterously absurd to be treated seriously.

It was therefore with much less amenity of manner than was usual with him, that Sir Charles Temple rose from his chair to receive the

visitor, who exactly at eleven o'clock made his appearance in his library.

Mr. Jenkins on this occasion wore neither skull-cap nor puckered pantaloons; neither had he his richly inlaid smoking-apparatus suspended from his button-hole; but his appearance was altogether as much like that of other people as it was probably in his power to make it. He entered, however, with his hat on his head, and when the servant who had introduced him closed the door of the room, leaving him *tête-à-tête* with the baronet, he walked up towards him, and silently stationed himself within two paces of the spot where he stood, without removing it. Sir Charles stared at him, and it was sufficiently evident, perhaps, that this singular mode of presentation caused more surprise than satisfaction.

"You do not know me then, Sir Charles Temple?" said Mr. Jenkins, at length taking off his hat. "I had fancied that the baldness of my head was the greatest security against my being known. But even with my hat on, you do not know me."

"Know you!" exclaimed Sir Charles, his eyes distended as he gazed upon him, very much in the manner that they might have been, had he seen a ghost. "Know you?—It is impossible!"

"Impossible that you should know me?" returned the other with a smile, "or only impossible that I should be him whom you see I am?"

"Cornelius Thorpe! May I believe my eyes?" said Sir Charles, stretching out both his hands towards him.

"When backed by my own testimony, I think you may, Temple," returned the wanderer, receiving them.

"Then why, for God's sake tell me why, did you leave your poor father to pine and die in the belief that you were no more?" said the baronet, with strong emotion.

"Sir Charles Temple," returned the resuscitated Mr. Thorpe; "it will certainly be in your power to repeat that hateful, blasting question to me, both by voice and eye, incessantly, unceasingly, without intermission, mitigation, or mercy, as long as I consider it necessary to remain within your reach. But let me tell you, before you proceed any farther with this sort of discipline, that you *can* do no more to torture me in this way than I do myself. And I will, this once, make you the same answer I received myself from the tormented spirit within. I left my father because he had chafed my spirit more than I chose to bear. I remained away from him because I would not return to confess that he was right and I wrong; and I fabricated and sent him home the report of my death, because I would rather, had it been needful, have turned that lie into a truth, than have submitted to appear again in his presence, and in that of your honourable self, sir, and the neighbourhood in general, like a flogged cur crouching to ask for pardon. For the which unchristian-like, inhuman, and unfilial pertinacity of resentment, I deserve precisely the degree of punishment I carry about with me. I defy you to make it greater, sir. But, as I am returned to England for a few months only, upon what I consider to be business of importance, I could wish that as little demonstration should be made of what I know you feel towards

me, as may be; inasmuch as it might interfere materially with what I am about to do, as far, at least, as concerns the manner of it, and can be productive of good to no one."

"You will hear no reproaches from me, Mr. Thorpe," replied Sir Charles, with a sigh of irrepressible regret. "That your return is not the matter of ecstasy that it would have been had it happened earlier, I will not pretend to deny; but the beloved son of my dear old friend is too profoundly an object of interest to me, for there to be any danger that I should wilfully torment him. If, on the contrary, there is anything I can do to pleasure or to serve you, rely upon it you may command me freely."

"I thank you, Sir Charles Temple," replied the sallow-faced wanderer, who really looked as if he bore about him the branded mark of his self-inflicted banishment; "and I thank you too, more sincerely perhaps than you will easily believe, for the manner in which you have for years supplied my place near my poor father. Old Arthur Giles has told me much of this; and the feelings created by it make your present gentleness of rebuke doubly precious to me. It would have given me another very bitter pang had I found you disposed to treat me harshly."

"No one who loved your father as I did, Mr. Thorpe, could act in a manner so much at variance with what his own feelings would have dictated. Tell me, sir, can I be of any use to you? Perhaps you may wish me to undertake the making this most unexpected event known to my ward? It will be rather a severe trial to her young philosophy; but of course it should be done immediately."

"Of course," replied Mr. Thorpe. "But this is one subject, among many, upon which I shall most especially wish to receive your opinion and advice. I have led a life of strange and stirring adventure, Sir Charles, since I left you setting off to take your place in the sixth form at Harrow; and if I had met the fate which my reckless daring projects deserved, I should probably have returned long ago, as penniless, if not as repentant, as the prodigal son in the parable. But Fate willed it otherwise, and I am at this moment known at Madras, by the name of Jenkins, as one of the richest merchants ever established there. I am not married, nor at all likely to be so, and therefore the reclaiming my property here, the right to which I understand my dear father carefully preserved to me, would be matter of little moment, did I not wish, at last, to do what was right, if I could find out the way how. My intimacy with the present Earl of Broughton while at Eton, and the close bond cemented between us afterwards, by our fellowship in many a wild scrape which preceded my departure, were all too long before your time for you to remember much about it. But I knew that, with all his wildness, I might trust securely to his discretion if I confided my secret to him; and accordingly I made myself known to him, and him only, upon my first arrival. My purpose was to become acquainted, under the shelter of my incognito, with all my cousins, to confirm the disposition which my father had made of his estate, if I had reason to believe that,—the trial of possession made,—his choice was such as he would have himself approved; and, if I found any of the others in a situa-

tion at all to require my assistance, I intended to gratify myself, and honour his memory by bestowing it. All this might have been done very easily, and without the embarrassment of any discovery at all, had not several circumstances come to my knowledge which incline me to believe that I shall not be acting the conscientious part I really wish to perform, without reclaiming my property here, and altering the disposition of it."

Sir Charles Temple listened to all this with earnest but completely mute attention, and when Mr. Thorpe ceased to speak, and appeared to await a reply, he still continued silent, till the awkwardness of remaining so became too great, and then he said, "Pray, sir, go on."

"I would now rather listen to you, my good friend," replied Mr. Thorpe. "I shall be greatly obliged by your freely giving me your opinion respecting all these young people."

"Impossible, sir!" said Sir Charles, with an air of resolute decision. "A moment's reflection will, I am sure, lead you to perceive that whatever my opinions may be on this subject, I should be perfectly inexcusable if I brought them forward; and the more disposed I believe you to be to listen to them, the more averse I ought to become to making them known. I should feel this to be the case even had your father *not* commissioned me by his will to watch over the interests of Miss Martin Thorpe, but, as it is, the disclosures you require of me would be most unjustifiable."

Mr. Thorpe took a minute or two to consider of this answer, and then, slightly smiling, replied, "You are quite right, Sir Charles; I I will not again harass you by asking for your opinion, nor will I seek to embarrass you by dwelling on the obvious fact, that your declining to give it is the strongest testimony that you could possibly offer. But the same right feeling which prevents you interfering to influence my opinion, will prevent your rendering my acting upon the principles which I hold to be right, more difficult than is necessary. Without entering with you at present, the least in the world, into the question of right and wrong, I must inform you, Sir Charles, that by virtue of the will which renders you, conditionally, trustee and guardian to Sophia Martin, now erroneously called Sophia Martin Thorpe, I exonerate you from this conditional trust and guardianship, by declaring myself the identical Cornelius Thorpe, in default of whose appearance alone your appointment stands good. Are you satisfied of that identity, Sir Charles Temple? Or shall you deem it necessary, before you resign your trust, to receive the testimony of others to the fact?"

"No, Mr. Thorpe," replied the baronet, endeavouring not to return the smile which still rested on the features of the restored heir,—"no; the duties vested in me by my friend's will cannot render it either honest or honourable to deny a fact of which I am perfectly convinced. I feel quite aware that I am no longer Miss Martin's guardian; but, till she shall have learned this fact from you, I would rather hold no farther conversation with you on the subject."

"I will leave you instantly, my dear sir," replied Mr. Thorpe, still looking rather too obviously amused at the struggle so visible in his companion's manner and countenance, between the proper regrets of

the guardian and the exceeding satisfaction of the man. "I will not detain you for a moment, excepting just to say, that I had hoped you would have had the kindness, in your official character, to announce to this young lady the change in her circumstances, occasioned by my return. Am I to understand that you decline this?"

"Most assuredly, Mr. Thorpe. It is by no means a part of my duty, and I certainly shall not undertake it, by way of a pleasure. Perhaps if you shrink from it yourself, the best person to employ will be Mr. Westley, the lawyer who made the will, and who is in every way a very respectable and proper person."

"I may have recourse to him, perhaps, if I can hit upon no method of performing the business which shall please me better. But you must make me one promise, Sir Charles, before I take my leave, and I trust you will not think it unreasonable; as you have declined breaking the news of my return, to your ward, I make a particular point of your not communicating the fact to any one else. Will you promise this?"

"I shall consider myself obliged to do so, if you require it, Mr. Thorpe; but I confess that I should be well pleased if my co-guardian and his family could be exempted from the restriction," replied the baronet.

"It is especially on their account that I make it, Temple," returned his companion, again smiling, and with a certain expressive sort of nod which brought a considerable augmentation of colour to the cheeks of the conscious Sir Charles. He replied, however, with a very good grace, that Mr. Thorpe was quite at liberty to make his own laws upon the subject, and that they should be scrupulously obeyed.

The two gentlemen then parted; Mr. Thorpe considerably relieved from having so far disembarrassed himself from his incognito; and Sir Charles, flushed and anxious, with his thoughts continually reverting to his much-loved Algernon, and the possible result to him of this strange discovery, and his conscience vainly tormenting him with reproaches for the very pleasant sensations of which he was conscious, and which he condemned as being false to the interests of his ward. But whatever the amount of blame involved in this hilarity of spirits, the young man had no power of escaping from it; for the more he thought on the subject, the more his pleasant anticipations took form and strength, till by the time he reached the impatiently-expectant party in the banqueting-room, his whole aspect was redolent of agitation and joy.

But here his treason stopped. To look, at that moment, composed and indifferent was beyond his power; but nothing, not even the eyes and voice of Florence united, accusing him of having something upon his mind which he would not tell her, could induce him to utter a syllable in explanation of the emotion which he had not the skill to hide. Yet he was sore bestead, too, with questionings; and Algernon, in particular, took the liberty of tormenting him with very little moderation; till, at length, in answer to his saying, "I am sure you have heard news to-day that has pleased you, Sir Charles! Why are you such a niggard of it?" the young baronet replied with the

gravest look he could muster,—"How do you know, Algernon, but that I may have recovered some little hopeless arrear of rent, which to a poor over-housed fellow like me might be particularly convenient?"

"Did Mr. Jenkins bring you notice of it?" returned the curious boy, looking more puzzled than ever; but Sir Charles suffered the question to drop unanswered, and, excepting that now and then what seemed a very unmeaning smile crossed his features, he gave no farther indication that anything particular had happened to him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

When the whole party met again at dinner, Sir Charles Tempie had not only recovered his composure; but, either from innate contentment of mind, or an amiable determination that, happen what might, the time present should be made as generally agreeable as possible, he exerted himself more than he had ever done before to *faire l'aimable* to the three Misses Wilkyns, to make everything go as smoothly as might be between Sophia and the Heathcotes, and finally to make the unfortunate heiress herself feel as much at her ease as it was in her stiff nature to do.

Though not a word or sign of intelligence of any kind had been exchanged between Sir Charles and Mr. Thorpe since their parting in the morning, it seemed as if they were acting in concert; for Mr. Jenkins (as he still was to all save one) assumed a tone of general sociability to the party, accompanied by the most marked attention to Sophia, which greatly contributed to make the present evening go off more lightly than the last. The musical powers of the Welsh heiresses were, as heretofore, brought forward for the benefit of the company; Florence was prevented by a considerate whisper from Sir Charles from singing at all; Algernon confined his experiments upon the risible muscles of his step-mother within tolerably decent bounds; Major Heathcote had a candle to himself by which to enjoy the newspaper; and Mr. Wilkyns reposed in the deepest and widest of all the arm-chairs without being interrupted by anybody.

For the first half-hour after the servants retired with the tea-trays, the tranquillity of Sir Charles was a little shaken by the expectation that Mr. Thorpe would, perhaps, if he intended himself to be the organ of the discovery which was to be made, choose this time for it. But he soon became convinced that such was not his plan; and that for the present he was more occupied in profiting by his incognito, for the purpose of becoming better acquainted with his relations than with any projects concerning the manner of throwing it off.

Nor was this system, the fairness of which the only person who understood it could not but approve, confined to that evening only. For a whole week Mr. Thorpe exerted himself most assiduously to become acquainted with his cousins Wilkyns, and his cousins Heath-

cote, and showed considerable tact in the prosecution of his object. With Algernon he passed many chatty hours in the library, during which the unconscious boy was subjected to an ordeal that was to decide whether his situation in life was to be that of a man of handsome independent fortune with unlimited power to indulge the taste and liberal ambition so strong within him, or that of a poor soldier of fortune, without one grain of liking for the profession which, beyond all others, perhaps, requires to be pursued *con amore* in order to render it tolerable. And lucky was it for him that he *was* unconscious of all this; for had it been otherwise, his young spirits would hardly have had firmness enough to permit his doing himself the justice he now did.

With the Misses Wilkyns, Mr. Jenkins flirted almost enough to alarm Sophia for her own pre-eminence in his favour, for so only, as he speedily discovered, had he any chance of becoming sufficiently intimate and familiar with the Welsh ladies, to ascertain in any satisfactory degree of what stuff they were made. It was with a watchful eye, too, that he marked each lovely trait of opening character in Florence; and so well did she bear the scrutiny, that, it may be, the repentant wanderer might have been tempted to try his chance of being permitted to bask for the rest of his days in the warmth of her smiles instead of under that of an eastern sun, had he not perceived as plainly as he did all other things that were going on about him, that she had been already wooed and won.

To one who had as deep and lively an interest in the game thus going on as Sir Charles Temple, and who understood it as perfectly, this week was one of very great excitement, though not perhaps of very great anxiety. Whatever his opinion might be of the merits of Mr. Cornelius Thorpe in other respects, he gave him due credit for the quiet acuteness with which he carried on the analysing process, upon which he perceived he was engaged, and felt very satisfactorily convinced that his judgment would be as correct as the means he took to form it were judicious. Not a syllable farther was exchanged between them on the event that was approaching; but each plainly, though tacitly, approved the proceedings of the other, and their mutual good understanding did much towards making these probationary days pass easily, yet *to the purpose*.

It should seem that the wealthy nabob had a notion that trinketry, in general, possessed somewhat of a touchstone quality, which made it exceedingly useful in such a business as that upon which he was now engaged; for he presented sparkling proofs of his power to be generous to every female of the party, and certainly reaped therefrom no trifling gleanings of character.

In short, he proceeded with a very rapid pace towards such a general intimacy with the whole party as to enable him to converse unreservedly with them all; taking care, the while, to make Sophia continue to feel her own pre-eminence with him sufficiently to prevent her becoming seriously jealous of any one.

Almost the only result produced either to the Spencer or the Wilkyns families from the meeting at Thorpe-Combe during the preceding Christmas was the friendly sort of intercourse which from that time

had been kept up between them. All the Welsh heiresses, and particularly the eldest, felt great admiration and respect for the fashionable style and tone of Mr. Spencer. They liked to talk of him, and call him "uncle;" to repeat his anecdotes of all the lords and ladies of his acquaintance; and to make it known to all who chose to listen, that the only one of their maternal connections for whom they felt any real affection was their Uncle Spencer, of Spring Gardens, who was one of the most really elegant and highly connected people they knew. Mr. Spencer, on his side, in a considerable degree returned the partiality. He thought the Wilkyns girls, as he called them, acute and discerning; gave them credit for understanding extremely well the first interests and most important springs of action in life, and had, moreover, a vague notion that if the two ugliest remained old maids, the third might make a very profitable wife for one of his sons—a trifling disparity in age being no object whatever to people who take a proper view of the institution of marriage.

The result of these amicable feelings on both sides was an occasional correspondence by letters between Mr. Spencer and the eldest Miss Wilkyns, which had been greatly fostered by their mutual desire of expressing their feelings on the subject of old Mr. Thorpe's "abominable will," and by the occasional interchange of woodcocks from Wales and caricatures from London.

The circumstance of Miss Martin Thorpe's invitation to the Combe, with the strange reason assigned for it, furnished Mr. Spencer with an opportunity for despatching a letter to his fair correspondent, in answer to one, rather too long ago received from her. He was, moreover, rather curious to know whether the Wilkyns family had received the same, and in what manner they had acted concerning it. This letter from Mr. Spencer was forwarded to Thorpe-Combe, and delivered to the charming Elfreda as she sat beside Mr. Jenkins at the breakfast-table.

"Did you know anything of Mr. Spencer, of the Treasury, during your former intimacy at Thorpe-Combe, Mr. Jenkins?" said she to her neighbour, as she put the slightly-read epistle into her pocket; "he married one of my aunts; but I am sure I forget what her Christian name was."

"I cannot say I remember much about him," returned Mr. Jenkins; "but it was hardly civil of him to return no answer whatever to the letter which your cousin Sophy wrote to him at my request—at the same time she wrote to you. My motive for wishing to become acquainted with him was surely not such as was calculated to offend any man. I should have thought it equally unjust and uncourteous towards his boys,—who bear exactly the same relation to my old friend as you do, my dear Miss Wilkyns, and the rest of the young people here,—I should have considered it as extremely unjust, had I left them out."

"I never heard anything so extraordinary in my life," replied the fair Elfreda, with vehement indignation. "I am sure your kindness and generosity to us all demands a very different return."

"I wish no return for anything I can do for you," replied Mr. Jenkins, "but civility from those who do not know me, and as much

kindness as they can spare from those who do; but if, as I presume, your letter be from him, Miss Wilkyns, I wish that in your reply to it, you would explain to him what my reasons were for seeking the honour of his personal acquaintance."

"Trust me for that," dearest Mr. Jenkins!" replied the young lady with great enthusiasm; "his behaviour deserves the severest reprobation, and if I write to him at all, which he hardly deserves, he shall receive a tolerably strong hint of my opinion on the subject, at the same time."

In truth Miss Wilkyns, notwithstanding her affectionate partiality to her uncle Spencer, was not sorry to have an opportunity of proving to him that she had in this instance proved infinitely the better politician of the two; and accordingly, among an agreeable variety of Thorpe-Combe chit-chat, she found room for the following passage in her answer:—

"I must confess, however, that I think you were wrong, my dear uncle, in returning no answer to my cousin Martin Thorpe's invitation. If she alone were concerned, indeed, the natural indignation which, as I have often said, I know you must feel at the abominable manner in which she contrived to cut out your charming boys from a property which, for a thousand reasons, ought rather to have belonged to one of them than to anybody else; if *she* alone had been concerned, I could hardly have blamed you for acting as you have done. But really Mr. Jenkins is a person that I could have wished you to know. Not but what he is the greatest quiz and the greatest bore that I ever met with in the whole course of my life; but it is quite certain that he must be immensely rich, and it really seems to me that he does not know what to do with his money. Not content with making the most elegant presents in precious stones to myself, my sisters, Florence Heathcote, and Sophia Martin Thorpe, fancy him giving a magnificent pair of diamond earrings to that poor fat Mrs. Heathcote, who had no more connection with the late Mr. Thorpe, you know, for whose sake he professes to do all these generous deeds, than the man in the moon. However, on the whole, I cannot help thinking I was right in persuading papa to come. Our brooches and bracelets are really beautiful, and I am very far from feeling certain, that the queer little man may not give us more substantial proof still, of his strong attachment to the race of Thorpe. You never saw anything more perfectly handsome and gentlemanlike than the gold repeater he has given Algernon; and I could not help wishing, when I saw it, that it were destined for the waistcoat-pocket of one of my Eton cousins; the neck-chain, too, which suspends it, is by far the richest I ever saw. My cousin Algernon, by the bye, has perfectly recovered his health, and is certainly extremely handsome, but a million of leagues as yet from approaching in elegance and fashionable tone of manners to your two charming boys. As to my cousin Florence, I am sorry to say that she is greatly altered for the worse, having become within the last six months the most complete flirt I ever had the misfortune of meeting; and it strikes me as rather singular that Sir Charles Temple, who must have seen something of good company abroad, should choose to

expose himself in the manner he does, by encouraging this abominable propensity. As to Major Heathcote, I do think he deserves to see something very disagreeable indeed happen to her, for neither Sir Charles, nor the bold girl either, put the least restraint upon themselves when he is present, but go on flirting and laughing, and reading sentimental books together, in a way that I really think would shock you,—that is, in a girl that is in some degree a connection of your own: for, alas! I know that you men of fashion are not half so fastidious as you ought to be about the manners of ladies in general."

As this was written in the dear departed days of unlimited official franking, Miss Wilkyns indulged in a good deal more of the same kind of desultory gossip, which she was encouraged to do by her uncle Spencer's reiterated assurances that he found her letters excessively entertaining; but enough has been already transcribed to answer the purpose for which the extract has been given.

* * * * * *

Even if Sir Charles Temple had not approved, so entirely as he did, the patient course of investigation by which Mr. Thorpe was endeavouring to become acquainted with the merits and dispositions of his various cousins, it is probable that he would not have been very active in opposing it; for certainly nothing could be much more delightful than the manner in which this interval of probation was passed by his Florence and himself. Never was love-making more pastorally simple, more patriarchally pure. The most genial of English summers gave them an atmosphere that made it a luxury to breathe. Mrs. Heathcote's established habit of conveying all her multifarious needlework to the banqueting-room made the daily migration of the family to that much-loved spot a matter of certainty; and can it be doubted that the master of the beautiful domain, poor as he was, contrived to make it as nearly a paradise for them all, as any fancy not utterly *blasée* could desire?

Nor did this enjoyment appear obnoxious to any disagreeable observations from the rest of the party assembled at Thorpe-Combe. The abominable flirting reprobated by Miss Wilkyns had nothing to do with the long hours which she passed side by side with Sir Charles on the river's bank, her father fishing away at a hundred yards from her, without hearing a word that they said; and her step-mother, either safely deposited in the midst of her work-baskets in the banqueting-room, or else attending no more to their billings and cooings than she would have done to the like ebullitions of eloquence from a pair of wood-pigeons. Of all this, neither Miss Wilkyns nor anybody else, excepting the particularly well-contented parties concerned in it, knew anything. Algernon either lived in the library, up to his ears in poetry and romance, or, mounted by the mysterious agency of his new friend, Mr. Jenkins, traversed the lovely lanes with him in all directions. Miss Martin Thorpe, sometimes apart "in her secret bower," and sometimes in the pleasant society of the Misses Wilkyns, still kept watch and ward over her interest, and soothed herself into being almost perfectly satisfied that on the whole she had no reason to fear for it. The pretty presents which the munificent family friend

bestowed on her cousins, though certainly not witnessed without something of a pang, went farther towards convincing her of his power to give, than to create any doubts that, first in place, she was also first in favour. As to the Welsh giant, he had every reason to be quite as well pleased as the rest of the party; for the *ci-devant* study of the late Mr. Thorpe had been very courteously assigned to him as a smoking-room, and there he sat, in an atmosphere composed of beer and tobacco, as peaceably as a huge tom-cat basking in the sun.

Thus everybody was exceedingly well satisfied and exceedingly happy. Sir Charles Temple dined with them regularly every day, and nobody even thought of asking him how he had passed the morning; Mr. and Miss Brandenberry had the honour of being invited twice; but upon both these occasions Mr. Jenkins sent down a request to have dinner and Algernon Heathcote sent up to him, as he was too much indisposed to appear; the fact being, that he feared lest Mr. Brandenberry, with whom he had formerly some intimacy, might recognise his features or his voice at the dinner-table, though he had escaped this in the crowd of the Easter ball-room.

At length, however, all this charming serenity reached the point at which it was to be swallowed up in "discordance." The stipulated week or ten days had been stretched to nearly double that space, in consequence of a private hint from the hero of the party, to the mistress of the mansion, that such was his desire; but the time was come when Miss Wilkyns was permitted to give her papa's orders for post-horses, and Mrs. Barnes told that she need prepare no more potted meats for breakfast, nor any longer bespeak all the sirloins and sweetbreads in the country.

In short the hour arrived in which Mr. Cornelius Thorpe determined upon making his existence and return known to his unsuspecting relations. The moment chosen was that in which the whole party were assembled in the drawing-room after dinner, for the purpose of taking coffee, and before any member of it was withdrawn for that of enjoying the lovely evening hour, among the lawns and shrubberies.

The first object which struck the eyes of Sophia as she followed her lady guests into the drawing-room, was the identical portrait by which she had dressed herself, some six or seven months before, with such remarkable success, placed upon a chair beside one of the windows. Some people might suppose, perhaps, that this portrait, to which she owed so much, would have been a favourite with her; but somehow or other it was not so; and when the room, now her boudoir, but formerly the bedchamber of her predecessor, was undergoing the metamorphosis which produced its present splendour, this portrait had not only been turned out of it, but its banishment accompanied by an order that it should be put into the lumber-garret, "because it was an ugly thing, and the frame so very old-fashioned."

Mrs. Barnes, however, who, as it seemed, had no ambition to signalize her last year of service by any great servility of obedience, had not deemed it necessary to obey this command to the letter, and therefore, instead of consigning the said portrait to the lumber-room, she had placed it exactly in the same position in the apartment of

Major and Mrs. Heathcote, which it had formerly occupied in the room below it.

When conversing one day with Mrs. Heathcote and Algernon, Mr. Jenkins, in his character of family friend, inquired if they had ever happened to see a picture which he remembered well, as having been a great favourite with the late Mrs. Thorpe. "It was the portrait," said he, "of her unfortunate and ill-conducted son. I should like to see it again, if indeed it has not been destroyed."

"What sort of portrait was it, Mr. Jenkins?" demanded Algernon; and the portrait was described to him, in reply.

"*Do* you remember that picture!" returned the boy, laughing and rubbing his hands in infinite glee—"Do you remember that portrait? Oh! you know not the fun that portrait has caused me! It is hanging in mamma's room now."

"Fun? How can it have caused you fun?" returned the sallow traveller, while something almost approaching to a flush crossed his cheek.

"I don't think I ought to tell you," replied Algernon, suddenly recollecting the liberal stranger's cross-examination respecting the character of Sophia, and his own determination not to give any testimony against her.

"Good gracious, why not, Algernon?" said Mrs. Heathcote, observing a vexed and disappointed expression on the countenance of Mr. Jenkins, who had become a great favourite with her, not only on account of the earrings, but because she so clearly perceived his great admiration of her darling step-son. "I am sure it is a very good story, and if you won't tell it, I will."

"You had better let it alone, mother," replied Algernon, scampering off. "But at any rate I won't stay to listen."

Mrs. Heathcote then related, with a good deal of humour, the history, as communicated to her by Algernon, of Sophia's having somehow or other got a sight of this picture, and having dressed herself so as to resemble it. "I had never seen it, when my saucy boy pointed out to me the change in Miss Martin Thorpe's manner of dressing herself," she said; "but now that I see the picture over my chimney-piece every day, I often think of it, and most certainly Algernon was right; for though I don't think that she is really very much like it, she did certainly contrive to make herself look so, by her dress. Of course you understand what she was at, Mr. Jenkins. And to be sure it answered perfectly," she added, with a sigh.

Mr. Jenkins probably did understand what she was about, but at that time made no remark upon it. He did not, however, forget the story; and being determined to make this portrait a part of the machinery of his discovery scene, he slipped out of the drawing-room after Sophia had entered it, when the company were assembling for dinner, and seizing upon the intelligent William, explained to him where he wished the portrait, then hanging over the chimney-piece in Mrs. Heathcote's bedroom, to be placed before the ladies entered the drawing-room after dinner. The command was accompanied by a sovereign, and was answered by a "Yes, sir," pronounced in a tone that left no doubt of obedience.

Sophia started on seeing the well-remembered canvass, her brows contracted themselves into an alarming frown, and hastening to the bell she rang it violently.

It was answered by William.

"Who was it brought that thing here?" she demanded, in no very gentle voice, and pointing to the portrait.

"It was I, ma'am," replied the man. "Mr. Jenkins ordered me to do it."

"Mr. Jenkins?" repeated Sophia in a softened tone. "Let it remain then."

"How very odd!" exclaimed Miss Wilkyns. "He is very kind, to be sure, and all that; but certainly he is the very oddest person that ever lived. "Don't you think so, dearest Sophia?"

"I think Mr. Jenkins so very agreeable, and like him so very much," replied the mistress of the mansion, "that if there is anything particularly odd about him, I don't perceive it. I am sure I hardly know anybody in the whole world that I like so well as I do him. And as to this picture, Elfreda, I think I can guess all about it. You know his great attachment to the Thorpe family, and I believe I told you that when he first came to see me he seemed quite affected at the sight of the old house, and begged that I would let Barnes take him over all the rooms—which of course I consented to with the greatest pleasure. But I thought he had changed his mind, for he has never said anything about it lately; but I suppose that now he has changed it again, and probably *has* got Barnes to take him over some of the old rooms, and in that way has found out this old picture. I am sure that if it gives him any pleasure, he is very welcome to it, and I shall be quite glad he has found it."

All this did very well for the Misses Wilkyns, and they had no doubt that the case was exactly as their dear cousin Sophia stated; but Mrs. Heathcote perfectly well remembered the "good story" she had told to the *family friend* concerning this picture, and she could not help fancying that the sudden production of it might have some connection with the anecdote. She was perfectly aware that "dear good Mr. Jenkins" *was* an odd man, and she fully expected that he would make some commentary upon this new mode of passing an estate by the title of a shirt-collar and a hair-brush. But she cared little and said less upon the subject; feeling perfectly indifferent as to whether Miss Martin Thorpe quarrelled with her outright or not; being brought to this sturdy state of mind by the young lady's having told her that very morning, with every appearance of the most obliging attention, that she thought it might be better for the boys and girls who were at school to pass the approaching holidays at one of the watering-places on the Welsh coast, where the rest of the family could meet them, for that sea-bathing would do them all so much good.

* * * * * *

Mr. Jenkins himself was the last of the gentlemen who entered the drawing-room; and he found those who preceded him already grouped round the portrait, which, by its conspicuous situation, had immediately attracted their attention.

Sir Charles Temple, who instantly recognised the picture, looked

furtively at the supposititious Mr. Jenkins, and silently turning away, seated himself near Florence, quite certain that the hour was at last come for the discovery so long anticipated, and which must of course, he thought, give rise to a scene by no means of an agreeable nature. Algernon, too, who, like his mother, connected the appearance of the portrait with the fact of Mr. Jenkins having been told the history of Sophia's mimicry of it, rather drew off from the scene of action, and placed himself as near as he conveniently could to his step-mother, anticipating the probability that she might be referred to respecting it. But the business afoot was rather of a more serious nature, and he was presently drawn from the place he had chosen for one whence he could better hear and see what passed.

"You have seen the original of that portrait, Major Heathcote," said Thorpe, placing himself close beside it, and so as to receive the broad daylight on his uncovered head. "That was taken when the original was eighteen. Have you any notion how the same face might look after an interval of twenty years?"

"It is the portrait of young Thorpe," replied the major, rather startled by the tone in which he was addressed; "I remember him perfectly, sir, and had he lived twenty years after I last saw him, I think I should have remembered him still, had it been my lot to meet him."

"Do you think me like him, Major Heathcote?" said Thorpe, fixing his eyes upon him, and speaking in a tone as solemn as that of old Hamlet's ghost.

"Gracious Heaven, sir, no!" replied the major hastily; "what on earth is it you mean?"

"Simply to ask the question, Heathcote, which my words imply. Can you trace any resemblance between the nephew by marriage from whom you parted when you were quartered at Cork some seventeen years ago, and the worn and weary man who stands before you?"

Whether the gentleman were an impostor or not, might remain to be proved; but there was no longer any doubt that the personage before them claimed to be no other than the long-lost Cornelius Thorpe, and the master of the house wherein he stood.

The effect which this startling announcement produced upon the company was various. Major Heathcote remained exactly in the position wherein he first received the idea that little yellow Mr. Jenkins meant to announce himself as the owner of Thorpe-Combe. He really was much too strongly agitated to speak, even if he had known what to say; but anybody who had studied his countenance might have perceived that the longer he gazed the more satisfied he became that the ghost spoke truth.

Sir Charles Temple looked on, gently took the hand of Florence in his, held it fast, but said not a word.

Algernon deliberately began a critical comparison between the eyes, nose, and mouth, on the canvass, and those on which every eye in the room was now fixed. His sister almost, it may be feared, returned the pressure of Sir Charles's hand, but if she did, it was by a movement that trembled so violently as perhaps to make the doing so

involuntary. The three Misses Wilkyns drew together in a cluster, and having gazed their fill on good Mr. Jenkins in his new character, turned all their six eyes, as if by common consent, upon Sophia, nor removed them again for a very considerable time. Mrs. Heathcote only exclaimed, "Mercy on us!" and then turned her back, with a great deal more of kind-hearted civility than the action generally demonstrates upon the unfortunate heiress, without having glanced, even for an instant, at her face. Mr. Wilkyns very nearly rose from his chair, and as he sank into it again, audibly exclaimed, "What's that?"

And Sophia? What did the wretched Sophia do or say at this very terrible moment? First she turned very, very pale, and had she been a weakly girl, would decidedly have fainted; but instead of this, she presently became extremely red, and starting from her chair exclaimed in a key as much like thunder as any female voice can achieve—"Infamous impostor! Are you men? Are you my guardians? And will you not turn him out?"

Sir Charles Temple looked at her with an expression of great compassion, but did not speak; the major too only shook his head, remaining still silent for another minute or two; and when he did speak, his words, though not addressed to her, were more killing to the miserable girl who had appealed to him, than the harshest answer he could have framed. "Of your identity, Cornelius, it is impossible to doubt. No one can seriously suggest the idea of attempting such a fraud. But for God's sake, nephew, why have you not been with us before?"

On hearing these decisive words, Sophia rose from her chair, and looking neither to the left hand nor the right, walked rapidly but steadily out of the room.

Something may be said hereafter of what passed there after she quitted it, but Sophia Martin is our heroine, and to forsake her in the hour of distress would be a very base sort of historical treason.

However much the unfortunate girl might have been agitated by the scene which has been described, she in no degree lost her presence of mind; it was with perfect steadiness of hand and head that she opened the door and passed through it, closing it after her with no violence but appearing in all ways precisely in the same state of mind that she had done an hour before. Upon first feeling the sting which this terrible event conveyed, one cry of anguish seemed to burst from her in the passionate words addressed to her guardians; but this past, no farther sign of weakness was discernible.

On reaching her room she calmly and deliberately locked herself in, then opened drawer after drawer of her cabinets and wardrobes, extracting from each whatever was at once valuable, and portable. The *string of pearls* was not forgotten, nor yet the recent present of trinkets which, in common with the other ladies of the party, she had received from him, whom she might have been tempted to call

"A little *too much* kin, and less than kind."

But when she came to the old-fashioned repository of the family diamonds, the discovery of which had lately caused her heart to throb with rapture, she hesitated. She disliked, even in that sad moment

of sunken hope, the idea of being seized upon as a common thief, and forced to render up what she had stolen. Yet it seemed that she still more disliked the anguish of parting from the jewels which she had called her own; for after twice closing the lid of their case, and twice replacing it in the cabinet, she suddenly, and with a sort of desperate courage, snatched it out again, muttering between her closed teeth, "Let them seize me, and carry me to prison, if they dare. The ghostly vagabond calls himself a man, and cannot for very shame make me restore them. A woman might."

Strengthened by this philosophical reflection, Sophia removed the treasures from their massive case, and enveloping the whole collection in a pocket-handkerchief, deposited it, not without some difficulty, in the pocket of her dress. She then took out the well-remembered miniature, which its false-hearted original had left in her possession only because he could not remove its diamond setting. Did she deplore the avarice which she had suffered to peep forth on that occasion, chaining her tongue, when she would willingly, had she possessed sufficient self-command, propitiated the favour of him, who now seemed to her fevered fancy something monstrous, absorbing and exhaling wealth at will? Perhaps she did. But at any rate, the sight of that miniature seemed to turn her sick, in spite of the magic circle of brightness which surrounded it, and which under other circumstances would have had power to charm, had the childish features it decorated been those of a youthful gorgon. But now, the thing altogether, as it lay upon her hand, made her shudder; and after the struggle of a moment, she threw it back again into its concealed recess, and hastily closing the doors of the cabinet, turned from it with loathing. The rest of her preparations took not long. A small parcel of necessaries made up in the form in which she had sometimes carried her embroidery through the wood, to consult the accomplished Margaret, while her brother hovered near in self-devotion, constituted the rest of her baggage; and with this in her hand, every sixpence she could collect in her purse, her most serviceable bonnet on her head, and a shawl on her shoulder, Sophia Martin (Thorpe no more) sallied forth to seek new adventures.

Happily there was a way leading into the gardens which did not pass by the drawing-room door, or the *ci-devant* heiress might have faltered. As it was, she reached the sheltered path which led to Broad-Grange unseen and unheard by any. The light was now failing, and Sophia was glad of it. Richly as she was laden, she feared no lawless stragglers there; and though she had perfectly made up her mind as to what she intended to do, she was not sorry to have her solitude insured by something approaching to the darkness and silence of night, while she meditated on the manner of it.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

On reaching the dwelling of old Mrs. Brandenberry, Miss Martin had to raise a venerable, long-handled, iron knocker in order to procure admission; for the wide oaken door, which during the days of summer stood invariably open, so as to render both knocker and porter unnecessary, was now closed for the night, and great was the effect produced by so rarely occurring a summons to it.

The man-of-all-work, and the maid-of-all-work, now the only occupants of the kitchen—

"A world too wide for the shrunk" *household*,—

both started as if they had been shot; and the one raising his head from darning his hose, and the other from mending her petticoat, exclaimed at the same moment—

"Mercy upon us! What's that?"

"Go to the door, John, can't ye?" said the female, recovering herself. "What's the good of sitting staring that way? You don't think it's a ghost, do ye?"

John rose, and took the candle. "Thank you for nothing, good man," said the woman, stretching out her hand to contest the possession of the light; "just as if it was that dark as you couldn't feel to open the door, and I to be stopped in my work, that fashion."

"The woman's mad," returned John, pulling stoutly to obtain the disputed flambeau. "Do you think I am going to let in people at this time of night without seeing who they are?" But not even this, reasonable as it was, sufficed to settle the question, and a second knock as loud as the hand of Sophia could make it, caused Mr. Brandenberry himself to rise from the old settee on which he was lying, with his sister on one side labouring upon one of the heiress's chairs, and suggesting to him new plans for the final subjugation of her restive heart; and his mother on the other, catching enough of what was going on to induce her to mumble from time to time an emphatic, "Ay! Do, Dick, do!"

"Who can be coming here at this time of night, I wonder? and those fools in the kitchen asleep, I suppose," said this "Squire of low degree," but long descent. "It can't be an invitation, for they always go to the kitchen-door. Will you spare me the candle, Margaret (there was but one), while I go and see?"

Without waiting for an answer, Mr. Brandenberry took the candle, and sallying forth, crossed the low-browed stone hall, drew back two ponderous bolts, turned the huge old key, and then opened the door, and beheld the object of his proclaimed adoration standing before it, considerably paler than usual, and looking rather flurried and discomposed in spite of all her efforts to avoid it.

Had he seen an imp of darkness, or the witch of Endor herself, he could hardly have appeared more frightened. But other emotions speedily chased this natural result of his extreme surprise, and

assuming with all celerity the aspect of a man blessed almost beyond his own power of belief, he caught her hand (she had already laid her bundle on a slab), drew it tenderly under his arm, considerably more than half-pressed it to his heart, and led her into the parlour amidst a string of tender exclamations, beginning and ending with "Dearest Miss Martin Thorpe! Too lovely and beloved Sophia! Dearest and best! You are agitated! What, then, has happened? Dearest Miss Martin Thorpe!" etc. etc. etc.

Of course her fond friend Margaret attacked her exactly in the same manner, while the half-blind, half-deaf old lady, as soon as she clearly understood who it was, ceased not to chime in with, "Dear me! dear me! only think! Richard, my dear, get out a glass of wine. Dear me! dear me!"

Sophia wisely seated herself on the easy-chair that was assiduously offered her by her adorer, and then permitted the storm of welcome to sink into such a comparative calm, as might enable them to hear what she wished to say. As soon, indeed, as their first overpowering emotions had in some degree subsided, both the brother and sister were eager enough to listen, and then it was that Sophia plaintively began the tale she had to tell.

"Alas! my dear kind friends!" she said, "I trust that in hearing what I am going to say, you will do me the justice to believe that I have no wish to exaggerate the sufferings I have undergone. But indeed, indeed, I am very wretched!" Here she paused, and here of course flowed in a tide of tender sympathy from right and left, for the fair speaker had the brother on one side and the sister on the other.

"Oh! tell me, tell me all," cried Mr. Brandenberry, almost losing every species of self-control, and kissing again and again the hand of the supposed heiress, who to all appearance was herself too much agitated to observe what he was about.

"But indeed you must be calmer, dear Mr. Brandenberry," resumed Sophia, "or you will never understand what I have to tell; and at this moment I am so greatly in need of your advice, that it is most important you should listen to me with composure."

Thus gently corrected, the lover *did* resume his tranquillity; and excepting by a few expletives, too rapidly uttered to occasion much delay, the narrative of Sophia proceeded to its close without interruption.

"You remember," she said, "the resolution I was driven to take by the infamous conduct of the Heathcotes towards me? You remember the letter which I wrote to Sir Charles Temple, announcing my intention of separating myself from them? That letter, as you are aware, has brought home Sir Charles, but instead of finding any relief from his interference, I now find myself in danger of being sacrificed to one of the most infamous plots that ever man conceived. At first everything seemed to be going smoothly, after his return, and I was weak enough to entertain a hope that I might be able to endure, to the end of my minority, the presence of these odious people—in short, I was ready to submit to almost anything, rather than encounter the disgraceful *éclat* of a public quarrel with my

guardians. But now their persecution has taken a shape which I cannot bear; nor will I longer remain to be made to listen, almost by force, to proposals I so heartily detest. It seems to be perfectly settled, between the two, that I am immediately to marry Sir Charles Temple; and when this plan was first disclosed to me, and that I rejected his proposals, Major Heathcote had the audacity to tell me, that if I refused to put myself under the honourable protection of a husband, he should immediately reduce my allowance to one hundred pounds for three months, in order, as he insolently told me, to prevent my being able to keep house for the pleasure of receiving visits from my bachelor neighbours to whom I furnished keys to pass through my shrubberies. This, dear Miss Brandenberry, was more than I could bear. I flew to my own chamber, and collecting my jewels (which I would not trust with them), hastened hither alone, and almost in darkness, to ask for your advice."

In mentioning her "bachelor neighbours," Sophia naturally betrayed some little confusion, and turning away her face from the brother, suffered her head to drop for a moment on the shoulder of the sister. The ready Margaret seized this moment to give her brother so expressive a look as must have infallibly marshalled him the way he had to go, had he himself felt any doubt about it; but he felt none; and the very instant Sophia had pronounced the word "advice," he dropped on his two knees before her, and once again poured out with extraordinary fervour and vehemence an acknowledgment of the passion which consumed, as he said, his very vitals.

Sophia seemed entirely overpowered by her feelings. "Margaret! What can I say to him?" she exclaimed, with a touching mixture of confusion and delicacy. "I have not thought of marriage—it has been my fixed determination *not* to think of it till—till—I had tried the experiment of living alone. But now! Oh! Mr. Brandenberry, can you not read my heart? Can you not divine how dear to me your well-known attachment must become when put in competition with the so-evidently mercenary views of Sir Charles Temple?"

"Be mine, then, at once and for ever!" exclaimed Mr. Brandenberry, with the most flattering vehemence. "Let me snatch you from the calculating wretches who would sacrifice your angelic sweetness to their infernal avarice! Yes, adored Sophia! I do believe that you must feel the contrast between love such as mine and that professed by the presumptuous man who, secure in his power as your guardian, has dared to make the most open love before your face to your contemptible cousin Florence. Show, then, most lovely and beloved! show, then, that your noble nature cannot be enslaved by tyranny like theirs! Be mine, be mine at once!"

"Alas!" cried Sophia, plaintively, and yielding her hand with exceedingly little resistance to the grasp of her lover—"Alas! Mr. Brandenberry! what is it you ask? They will pursue me, seize me, and drag me back again! They know their power too well to quit their hold upon me. I feel certain that before mid-day to-morrow, I shall be forcibly carried back to my own house, thenceforth my hated prison."

Here the poor young lady seemed to weep violently, for she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes and sobbed quite audibly.

"Know they where you are?" demanded Mr. Brandenberry, hastily.

"Oh, no," replied Sophia; "I have neither spoken to, nor seen, any human being in the family since I left the drawing-room to avoid the hateful importunity of Sir Charles. I have no doubt that they will think I have retired for the night, and will agree to postpone their farther persecutions till to-morrow."

"Then, at least, this night is ours," exclaimed the lover, starting upon his feet, "and, dearest, we must profit by it! Of course you know that, being a minor, no alternative is open to you but elopement?"

"Alas! I fear so," replied Sophia, once more hiding her blushes upon the shoulder of the sympathizing Margaret.

"Bewitching delicacy!" exclaimed the lover, throwing his arms around her. "Nothing, not even the fervour of my ardent love, should induce me to press for this decisive step, were there any possibility of avoiding it. But the case is plain, sweetest Sophia! You must be mine at once, or never!"

"If I am to blame in yielding to you," she replied, "the guilt, Heaven knows, is theirs, not mine! I would have wished for farther time—for longer knowledge of you; but as it is——"

"As it is, my lovely girl, we must set off for the kind friendly border,—for Gretna Green, Sophia, the moment a postchaise can be procured. But, gracious Heaven!" he added, suddenly striking his forehead with great vehemence, "I have not ready money by me sufficient to perform the journey! By the most cruel ill-luck we have not yet drawn upon our London banker for the last half-year's rents, which are always deposited with him. What can be done in this tremendous difficulty? Probably, dearest love! you have not sufficient with you to supply this exigence?"

"I know not," said Sophia, with an air of charming innocence, "if I have enough. Here is my purse." But ere she drew it out she stopped herself, and added, "No, no, on second thoughts, I am sure the little money I have in my pocket could not go far towards it. But if we can contrive to pass through Hereford just as the bank there is open, I could draw for above five hundred pounds which still remain of my last quarter. This will suffice us; and it is this we must procure."

"Charming creature!" ejaculated the adoring Brandenberry, his heart leaping as he listened to the easy tone in which his promised bride talked of drawing out this pretty little sum, surpassing by one-fifth part his own and his mother's annual income. "Charming creature! What admirable presence of mind she displays, Margaret. Even under circumstances thus trying, she is still the same,—still everything that angels must envy and mankind adore. No difficulty whatever now remains, my Sophia. Your spotless purity shall be preserved from every breath of slander by my leaving my house this night. I will share with you the little light repast we take for supper, then mount my horse, and gallop to Hereford; from whence to-morrow morning I will bring a chaise-and-four, my lovely fugitive, that shall carry us to the bank by ten o'clock. I trust it is not likely that any of your persecutors will discover us in time to throw any impedi-

ment in our way. So near the possession of celestial bliss, the loss, or even the delay of it, would, I am certain, make me blow my brains out."

Sophia smiled very gently at his passionate impetuosity, and comforted him by the assurance that she felt quite sure they should escape beyond all danger of pursuit if they exactly followed the plan he had laid down.

The "little light repast" then followed; and perhaps, excepting the first blow which conveyed to her the frightful news that Cornelius Thorpe still existed, the sight of it caused her a greater pang than any other circumstance of that eventful evening. But she remembered her diamonds, and she remembered her pearls, and she remembered, too, that as neither her adoring Richard nor her devoted Margaret knew that the pearls existed, nor exactly how many diamonds were in her pocket, she might, if she managed well, contrive to spend a good portion of their value on herself. This thought enabled her to endure the littleness and the lightness of the repast with greater equanimity than anything else could have done.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Seeing that our heroine is thus snugly disposed of, we may now return with a safe conscience to those whom she left in her quondam drawing-room.

"Poor soul!" cried Mrs. Heathcote, looking pitifully after her as she disappeared. "Poor soul! I can't help feeling for her. Though to be sure she did not bear her prosperity well."

"My good Mrs. Heathcote!" said Mr. Thorpe, coming towards her, and seating himself nearly in the centre of the whole party, "your kind-hearted sympathy would never have been called for by the scene you have just witnessed, if my cousin Sophy Martin *had* borne her prosperity well—if she had borne it even decently. The wealth I have left behind me in the East would have rendered it quite unnecessary for me to have interfered with my poor father's secondary bequest, had I not found reason to believe that he would himself have reversed it, with equal promptitude and indignation, had he lived long enough to know the truth concerning the object of it. My Lord Broughton can bear witness, that when I accompanied his family to the ball at Hereford, my only object was to make acquaintance with the young heiress, for the purpose of confirming to her the property which she then held only by conditions which were forfeited. We had agreed, too, that if the young Lord Thelwell found the young lady to his taste, he should have all my influence to assist his own in obtaining her hand. I learnt, however, that this part of my project was not likely to succeed, even before we left the ball-room; but this was a mere secondary idea, and giving it up without expressing any feeling of disappointment, I fixed all my thoughts on the hope of entering the house I had so rashly left, with the power of

confirming the wishes of my lamented father, and of proving to my young cousin that I was come as a friend, not as an enemy. It is needless—perhaps it would be ungenerous—were I to recapitulate *all* the reasons I have had for changing my purpose; and it is the less necessary to do so, because I can hardly doubt but that many of those now present must be aware *why* it is that, professing to desire, before all things, to do what I believe my father would have wished to do had he lived longer, I should decide upon using the power given me, by the first disposition of his property, in reversing the second. But fully convinced as I am, that of all the relatives he has left, this unlucky girl is the last, had he really known her, that he would have fixed upon to supply his place in the mansion where he was born, I hold it to be a matter of right, and of most imperative justice, to act as I have done, and as I intend to do. Had a multitude of other circumstances *not* existed, either of which would have justified me in doing as I have done, the one fact that she sought to work upon the feelings of my too-forgiving father, by aping the dress and air of this portrait, would be sufficient, not only to have led to the decision against her, but to have rendered it righteous in the eyes of all. Dear old man!" continued the too late repentant son, "shall I let his place be taken and held by one who dared palter with his precious love, and swindle him out of his property by a sly mimicking of the erring child of his affection? No, by Heaven. I would rather abandon for ever the climate and the soil to which I have attached myself, and shiver out the remnant of my frail existence under this northern sun—myself holding the place he held—than leave another in it so utterly unworthy of bearing his name, and so utterly incapable of following his example."

"Perfectly right," said the eldest Miss Wilkyns.

"I am not the least surprised," said the second.

"I am sure it serves her quite right," observed the third.

* * * * * *

This scene seemed completely to have exhausted the strength of Mr. Thorpe; and making an apology to the whole party for leaving them, he prepared to retire, telling Mrs. Heathcote that he should be much obliged if she would have the kindness to consider the house as her own as long as she remained in it, and do the honours of it to the guests he had assembled.

The erring but now well-intentioned man then retired to his coffee and the smoke of rose-leaves, leaving his company to comment, as might best please them, upon the extraordinary events of the evening.

It is hardly possible to conceive a set of people more completely in the way than were the Welsh Squire and his three co-heiresses upon this occasion. The Heathcotes, and their friend Sir Charles, were naturally longing to discuss what had happened and was likely to happen; but there had ever been a sort of civil disunion established between them and their Llanwellyn-Lodge cousins, arising from the abundant presence of all sorts of pretension on the one side, and the total absence of it on the other, which rendered anything like unreserved communion between them impossible. The evening therefore was passed, as long, at least, as they remained together, in the most

unmeaning observations which it was possible for a set of people, all deeply interested in the subject-matter, to utter.

Fortunately, however, for the rest of the party, as well as for themselves, the three sisters found it utterly impossible to remain beyond nine o'clock without relieving themselves of the observations they wished to make to each other, concerning the events of the evening.

"I hope I may be excused," said Elfreda, addressing the apology to no one in particular, "but I have so dreadful a headache that I really feel quite unable to sit up."

"I don't feel well, either," said Eldruda, pressing her hand upon her chest.

"Don't you think it will be better for us all to go to bed?" subjoined pretty Miss Winifred in a very languid voice.

No opposition of any kind being offered, the bell was rung, candles brought, and the trio bowed and curtsied out of the room, their mighty father having retired to the study, there to meet his tobacco and his beer, without having given any decisive indication of his having heard, or not heard, anything which had passed.

Thus, at length, peaceably left to themselves, the two guardians, Mrs. Heathcote, Florence, and Algernon, drew their sofas and chairs together, and began to exchange commentaries on the marvellous discovery which had taken place; and then it was that Florence ventured to say—"Do you not think, mamma, that Cousin Sophy might take it kind if I went up to her? I am afraid she is very unhappy."

"Indeed I think so, Florence," said Mrs. Heathcote, "and I would go with you; only that I think, perhaps, she might suffer less by seeing you alone at first. One thing, however, I feel sure of, though I suppose we have no right to tell her so till we have been commissioned to do it; but I feel perfectly certain in my own mind, that Mr. Thorpe will not leave her unprovided for, though he may not think it right to make her his heiress."

"I agree with you perfectly, Mrs. Heathcote," said Sir Charles, "and if our Florence finds the poor girl suffering from the idea that she is to be reduced to absolute want, having so little reason, poor thing, to reckon upon the affection of any one, I think that she might venture to hint, like an angel of peace as she is, that any such fear must be utterly groundless."

"Shall Florence mention the three Misses Wilkyns as among the subscribers to the fund that is to prevent it?" demanded Algernon.

"There is no occasion to mention any fund, Florence, beyond what supported her before this most unfortunate adventure befell her," said Major Heathcote. "Tell her, if she says anything about fears for the future, that my house and home will still be open to her, as formerly, and that there is not one of us, from the oldest to the youngest, who would not rejoice in making her forget that any sorrow has fallen upon her."

"Do not think me a brute, papa, for making a joke about it," said Algernon, endeavouring to look penitent, "for I have leave and license to tell Florence that she may be the bearer of better tidings than any promise of kindness from us could afford. Mr. Thorpe told

me in a whisper before he quitted the room, that if either of you saw the disappointed young lady to-night, you might tell her that though he thought it his duty to redeem his own estate, he should take care to bestow such a fortune on her as the favourite niece of his father might have a right to hope for. I suspect he thought that Florence would visit her, for it was towards her he looked, as he said this."

Sir Charles Temple thought he had never seen his betrothed look more decidedly like an angel than she did as she stood listening to these credentials for her mission; and most truly it was with a lightened heart, and no lingering step, that Florence now for the first time sought her cousin Sophia in her boudoir.

On reaching the door, she knocked gently, but received no reply. She waited patiently for a minute or two, and then knocked again more loudly; but as there was still no answer, she ventured to go in. There was nothing to give notice of the young lady's elopement in the sitting-room, except its being empty; but on proceeding across it to the sleeping-apartment, the door of which was wide open, she perceived various indications of what had occurred. Many of the drawers had been drawn out, and remained so; the receptacle of bonnets and shawls was also open; more than one of the latter had been pulled out, rejected, and left on the floor; and, lastly, a Leghorn walking-bonnet, known by sight to Florence, had left its unoccupied stand, to show where it had been. It was impossible to doubt for a moment that Sophia had left the house, and Florence hastened back to the drawing-room with the intelligence.

Mrs. Barnes and her own maid were immediately summoned, but both declared themselves alike ignorant of her departure. On examining her mistress's room, however, Mrs. Roberts gave it as her decided opinion, that she had gone out, as the satin shoes she had put on, when dressing for dinner, were left, and those most likely to be chosen for walking, gone.

"But where on earth can she be?" exclaimed Mrs. Heathcote, looking seriously frightened. "Where had we better send to look for her, Mrs. Barnes?"

"Upon my word, ma'am, I can't say," replied the housekeeper with very evident astonishment; "I never knew Miss Martin Thorpe stir out of the house, at this time of night, since she came to it. May I be so bold as to ask if there was any reason for her taking herself off in this strange manner?"

The Heathcote family and Sir Charles Temple exchanged glances of consultation as to the answer which should be given to this very natural question; but they all felt the presence of the lady's-maid a restraint, and the old servant of the mansion was therefore answered with more reserve than would have been maintained towards her had she been alone, by Major Heathcote saying,—"Upon my word, Mrs. Barnes, it is by no means very easy to understand what has happened; but it is certainly very necessary, or at any rate very proper, that we should learn if possible where the young lady is gone. Can either of you give any guess, as to this?"

"No, indeed, sir," was the decided answer of Mrs. Barnes; but Mrs. Roberts, after vainly looking round the circle in search of light

upon this very mysterious manœuvre, condescended to say, "If my mistress really *is* gone anywhere, it must be to Squire Brandenberry's; for that is the only place where she is anyways intimate."

"That is all very well then," said Sir Charles, "if she is there, she is of course safe."

"But ought I not to go to her, ma'am?" demanded Mrs. Roberts; "I can't but think she will be greatly in want of my attendance."

"It will, I think, be better to wait for her orders," said Major Heathcote, in a tone of authority that settled the question; whereupon the two female *chefs* left the room to exhaust their own brains and those of the entire household, by interminable conjectures respecting this most incomprehensible occurrence.

The servants' hall accordingly became the scene of a most animated discussion; Mrs. Barnes openly proclaiming her belief that the young lady had certainly done something or other, which she ought not to have done, and Mrs. Roberts maintaining with equal pertinacity that it was quite impossible she could have done any such thing; and that it was very hard indeed, if such a lady as Miss Martin Thorpe, with such a fortune at her command, and only a few months to pass before she was quit of all her plagues and troubles, and quite entirely her own mistress, could not go out and visit anybody she pleased, without being drawn over the coals for it.

Mrs. Barnes was in the very act of beginning such a reply to this as might have endangered the harmony of the party, when the foreign servant of the returned wanderer entered the room, and put into her hands a slip of paper, on which was written in a hand very carefully disguised—

"Please to come to me, Mrs. Barnes.
(Signed) "TIMOTHY JENKINS."

"Soh!" she exclaimed, "I suppose I have got to go and doctor this yellow-faced gentleman, as you call him, William; and that will be queer enough, seeing that I have never yet set my eyes upon him. At least, if he is not ill, I can't guess what it is as he wants with me."

But notwithstanding any *queerness* she might find in the summons, Mrs. Barnes was not a person to delay obedience to any guest thus applying to her, and she immediately mounted to the room occupied by the stranger.

On entering it, she found him seated beside the fire, with his pipe in his hand, and the embroidered scull-cap on his head. He looked at her very earnestly for a moment, without speaking, and then said in a kind and gentle tone,—"Come in, Mrs. Barnes, and shut the door."

The good woman remained for a few seconds motionless; but the room was very ill-lighted, there being only one small wax taper and the fire, to scare away the darkness amidst which the still unacknowledged master of the mansion chose to sit; and wishing, as it seemed, to see more clearly the person who addressed her, the housekeeper suddenly advanced, seized one of the candles which stood on the

dressing-table, and lighting it with all speed at the flame of the taper, held it high, so as to illuminate to advantage the face she wished to examine. For a moment Mr. Thorpe turned his head away from her, but thinking better of it, faced about again, removed the scull-cap from his head, and smiled as he fixed his eyes upon her.

"The Lord in Heaven be merciful to me!" cried the poor woman, trembling from head to foot. "Is it a spirit?—or is it only my fancy that is making a fool of me?"

"You have not then quite forgotten me, Barnes?" said Mr. Thorpe, standing up before her; "and yet you seem more than half-afraid to acknowledge that you know me?"

"Afraid! No, not afraid of anything but being mistaken. But oh! sir! if you are not indeed Mr. Cornelius, for the love of Heaven tell me so at once!"

"And if I am Mr. Cornelius, Barnes, what then?"

"Why, then the Lord be blessed and praised for having sent you back to drive that griping devil from us, that you have scared away!"

And then followed a loud lament upon his not having appeared in time to close his father's eyes; painful enough for the penitent son to hear, but more meekly listened to from the old woman who had often chid his youth, than when Sir Charles Temple had uttered it. But the look of deep misery which appeared settling on his brow, as she proceeded, checked his old friend more effectually than any chiding could have done; and abruptly breaking off in the midst of her profitless wailing, she turned to the expression of the most cordial and heartfelt congratulations—more cordial and more heartfelt, unquestionably, from the nature of the sentiment which the good woman entertained for the individual who would be dispossessed of her ill-used wealth by his arrival.

A thorough good understanding being thus established between them, the old servant was made to sit down with her new master; and if anything had been wanting to the just estimate which Mr. Thorpe had already formed of his relatives, the two hours of unreserved conversation which ensued would have supplied it.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Before the greatly altered party at Thorpe-Combe met on the following morning at breakfast, the news of Miss Martin's elopement with Mr. Brandenberry, in a post-chaise and four, was known to every individual in the house, and probably to most of the individuals out of it, for the circuit of a mile or two.

The tone of observation produced by it among Mr. Thorpe's guests was of course various, though, with the exception of Algernon, they all looked exceedingly grave. But he, spite of his genuine endeavours to conceal a degree of mirth, which really seemed almost indecorous, considering the near relationship of the lady to nearly all present, could not hear the subject discussed without again and again

giving way to bursts of laughter. The Misses Wilkyns looked excessively shocked at this levity; Major Heathcote chid the boy, Mrs. Heathcote really looked vexed, Florence shook her head, and Sir Charles Temple endeavoured to frown, though more than once he seemed to feel the mirthful impropriety infectious. But Mr. Thorpe appeared altogether puzzled by it, and after watching the boy for some time with considerable symptoms of impatience, he said,—

"Algernon!—That you are glad Sophia Martin should be gone away is very natural, for I know she did not like you, and I suppose you know it also. But why you should find her running away with a man whose proposals have not been made in the usual way to her friends and guardians, so excellent a joke, I cannot imagine. I think it is a disgrace to us all, and I do not like your enjoying it so violently."

"I am rather ashamed of it myself, sir, I must confess," replied Algernon; "but after all, it is not my cousin Sophy, you know, at whom I am laughing—that would be worse still, I suppose; it is only at Mr. Brandenberry."

"Let those laugh that win, Algernon. It is Mr. Brandenberry who has cause to laugh, I think."

"How, sir? Cause to laugh when he has married Sophia Martin under the belief that he was leading Sophia Martin Thorpe, of Thorpe-Combe, to the altar?"

"You abominable boy!" returned Mr. Thorpe, laughing, "you do not pretend to believe that she has married him without telling him what has happened?"

"Why do not you believe it, sir?" demanded Algernon gravely.

"Good heavens! boy, no," returned Mr. Thorpe, looking really angry with him.

"Let us talk no more about it, dear Mr. Thorpe," said Algernon, colouring; "of course you will not mind any nonsense of mine."

"Most certainly I shall not," replied his cousin, changing the conversation. But somehow or other Mr. Thorpe could not get the idea out of his head, that his favourite Algernon had judged the unfortunate Sophia with unjustifiable harshness, and it vexed him. Nothing, perhaps, could have so greatly tended to soften his own feelings towards her as this. He interpreted her elopement by supposing that Mr. Brandenberry, having won her affections, had agreed with her to conceal his pretensions till she should be of age, and beyond the reach of any control from her guardians; but that, having regained her liberty at the expense of her estate, her lover had persuaded her immediately to profit by it, probably not doubting that she would still possess sufficient fortune to make her an excellent match for him; and moreover, to render it very likely, that his pretensions to her hand would be still strongly opposed by the family. All this was likely enough, and though not perfectly correct on the part of the gentleman, had nothing preposterously dishonourable in it. But the idea suggested by Algernon, that Sophia had tricked a gentleman into marrying her, by inducing him to elope before the alteration in her circumstances could be known to him, had something in it that he could not very easily forgive the boy for imagining. Notwithstanding this first gentleman-like burst of indignation, however, he could not contrive to get the

disagreeable notion out of his head. Sophia, as he had seen and heard her at old Giles's cottage—Sophia devouring her savoury morsels in secret—Sophia, with the ample fortune of which she then believed herself possessed, slandering the gentle unportioned Florence and her destitute brother, in order to prevent their sharing his liberality with herself—Sophia, under all these circumstances, rose before him again and again, till he began to feel that it might be just possible Algernon was right.

From the moment he had determined upon reclaiming his estate, Mr. Thorpe's purpose was to give ten thousand pounds to Sophia Martin, little as he liked or loved her; but he now resolved, before he made known his intentions on this or any other point, to ascertain to a certainty whether the suspicions of Algernon were just. For this purpose he determined to be at Broad Grange to receive the fugitives on their return; and having requested the whole party assembled at the Combe to remain his guests for another week, he arranged his plans without a single confidant, save his Arab groom, so as to give him a fair chance of encountering the newly-married couple before the bridegroom should have learned the news of his return, if indeed the bride had intended to keep it from him.

It was not difficult to calculate, with tolerable accuracy, the probable period at which the fugitive pair were likely to reach Broad Grange; and the carriage-road to it, after passing the Combe Lodge, being three miles, whereas that through his shrubberies was less than one, his faithful Asiatic had abundance of time to give him warning when to mount the fleet little animal he usually rode, so as to send him scampering through the shrubbery-path, without any risk of being too late to receive Mr. and Mrs. Richard Brandenberry in their own porch.

No plan could more perfectly succeed; and Mr. Thorpe, the actual possessor of Thorpe-Combe, stood ready in broad daylight to greet them there, as they descended from the chaise.

It is but justice, however, to the eccentric but not ungenerous Cornelius, to declare that he would not thus have presented himself, had he not very justly come to the conclusion that his presence there could not fail of doing his little-liked, but perhaps wrongly suspected cousin, more good than harm. For, if guiltless of what Algernon suspected, it could not but be consolatory to her to be received with forgiveness, and the promise of ten thousand pounds, by the relative from whom she probably anticipated very scanty kindness; while, on the other hand, if she had indeed beguiled a lover of her wealth to marry her without it, the discovery of her being the better plotter of the two could never be made under circumstances more likely to insure her forgiveness from her irritated bridegroom, than when she was saluted with a friendly welcome by the only person in existence who could pay him for forgiving her.

Mr. Brandenberry, the moment the chaise stopped, opened the door himself, and sprang to the ground with so much graceful gaiety, as might well make his lady forget, if anything could, that no attentive serving-men were there to do this office for him. Sophia took his offered hand, and descended. Perhaps at that moment there existed

a pretty even balance in her mind, between the dread of the approaching discovery and the triumph of having outwitted the mercenary bridegroom, whose adoration she had ever felt to be in so great a degree addressed to her acres. But nevertheless she endured a pretty sharp pang of terror as she saw the detested form of her cousin Thorpe step forward from the porch. But even then, neither her courage nor her cunning forsook her. "Here," she said, "is the man whose interference I feared might prevent our marriage, my dear Richard!" hanging lovingly upon her bridegroom's arm. "But, thank Heaven! it is now too late!"

"Does not Mr. Brandenberry then know of my return, Sophia?" said Mr. Thorpe, approaching her.

"No, sir, he does not," she replied with unshrinking courage; "and you may now inform him of it, if you will."

Somewhat astonished at the familiar manner in which his bride was thus addressed by a person totally a stranger to him, and still more so, at the lady's manner of replying to him, Mr. Brandenberry rather sharply turned towards Mr. Thorpe, and said, "May I inquire, sir, who it is that I have the honour of seeing?"

"Assuredly, Mr. Brandenberry, you have every right to make the inquiry, and I have every inclination to answer it,—if, indeed, on looking at me with attention, you cannot answer it yourself,"—was the reply, and as he made it, Mr. Thorpe looked him full in the face and smiled; which he had invariably found to be the most certain manner of making himself recognised.

It must be remembered that when presenting himself at the Hereford ball, Mr. Thorpe had wished and endeavoured as much as possible to disguise his person, and that now his purpose was to make himself known; so that, when the bridegroom set about the examination to which he was thus challenged, no recollection of Mr. Jenkins occurred to puzzle him; nevertheless he looked earnestly in the face of his mysterious visitor for a minute or two, before any idea of the terrible truth suggested itself. But at last it came upon him like a thunderbolt, with a shock unmitigated by any mixture of doubt, and at the same instant, the treacherous manœuvre of Sophia stood revealed before him!

The blow was terrible; but Mr. Brandenberry did not altogether lose his recollection. He remembered, both that the gentleman who stood before him was the near relation of his bride, and moreover that he could not betray all he felt on the occasion, without betraying also the mercenary nature of the addresses which had won her. One look he certainly did give her, but it was askance, and then rallying with the recollection that Thorpe was an honourable name, and would be sullied in the eyes of all men were the lady who had borne it, as its chief, to come portionless to the arms of her spouse, he boldly determined to make the best of a very bad matter, and to lose nothing by a too honest avowal of his feelings.

Within two minutes, therefore, after he became convinced that Cornelius Thorpe was Cornelius Thorpe, and his adored heiress no heiress at all, he manfully answered to the challenge of his new relation:—"If it is possible that I may believe my eyes, when they see

what is so very extraordinary, I should say that the long-lost son of our excellent neighbour Mr. Thorpe was returned to life."

"And not to life only, Mr. Brandenberry, but to the inheritance of his ancestors," replied Thorpe. "This is neither a place nor a time to talk of what I may be able to do for my cousins, without injury to myself. But I shall find both; and for the present I wish you both all joy;—and now farewell."

Mr. Thorpe waited for no answer. Certain that he had said what was more likely to preserve his abominable little relative from actual ill-usage than anything else he could have spoken, he felt no inclination to prolong the interview, but rapidly gliding off, and seizing the bridle of his gentle horse from the branch of a tree, just beyond sight of the gates, he sprang upon his back, and galloped home again,—perfectly satisfied that the diamond-cut-diamond style of union which had brought the pair together, would, from the caution it demanded on both sides, be likely to secure to both quite as much conjugal happiness as they deserved.

The thought which most completely engrossed Mr. Thorpe on re-entering the house was the injustice he had done to Algernon, and tossing his reins to the groom who was waiting for him on the steps, he ran full speed into the library to seek him. And he found him there; but not alone. Suddenly rising from the chairs in which they had been seated, and coming forward evidently to greet his arrival, were three persons wholly unknown to him. The unexpected group consisted of a middle-aged gentleman in the centre, and a slender youth on each side of him. Algernon, who stood near, looked at them, and thought of the Laocoon; but the absence of the serpent was not the only dissimilarity; for whereas the faces in the antique group betokened agony, those of the modern one spoke nothing but delight.

Mr. Thorpe looked at Algernon for an explanation, or at any rate for an introduction to the trio, and the appeal was answered by his saying, "This is Uncle Spencer, Mr. Thorpe, and the young gentlemen are his sons."

"Permit us, my dearest Cornelius," said Mr. Spencer, gracefully advancing with an extended hand, "to be among the first to welcome your long-wished-for return to your native land!"

Mr. Thorpe bowed, and rather slightly touched the extended hand of his visitor.

"Were you aware of my return, sir, when you arrived?" said he.

"A letter from Sophy Martin summoned us," replied the equivocating official, whose appearance at this critical moment was occasioned solely by the letter from Miss Wilkyns which has been already quoted.

"But to that letter you vouchsafed no answer, Mr. Spencer," replied the restored heir.

"My dearest sir, it was impossible. In fact"—and here the invaluable assistant in the affairs of the royal treasury stopped short.

"It matters not, sir," returned Mr. Thorpe; "I am vastly well pleased to see you now. My wish is, as speedily as possible, to bring to a conclusion the affairs which have obliged me to return to this country, and I shall feel better satisfied from having made acquaint-

ance with you and your sons, before I leave it again." Then turning to Algernon, he laid his hand upon his shoulder, and whispered as he led him to the other end of the room, "I beg your pardon, my dear boy. For the future, say what you will, I shall believe you implicitly; so henceforth my faith is at your mercy."

Algernon looked at him with surprise, having no knowledge whatever of the excursion from which he was just returned, and having moreover totally forgotten the little faith with which his interpretation of Sophia's elopement had been received.

"I have paid the bridal visit, Algernon," resumed Mr. Thorpe. "Do you understand me now?"

"And how did the bridegroom look on seeing you?" cried Algernon in reply.

"I suspect that he is a wise and prudent man, in general, notwithstanding the blunder he has just made; and having great respect for all such, I fully intend to give him as much consolation, under his misfortune, as I conveniently can, without injustice to others."

Algernon nodded, and with a smile so radiant with good humour as very clearly showed he heard this pitying sentence with satisfaction. The two friends then walked down the room again, arm in arm, and joining the Spencer group, Mr. Thorpe proposed adjourning to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Heathcote, who, as he expressed it, had kindly undertaken to do the honours of his house for him, would be happy to receive them.

How heartily did Mr. Spencer mutter damnation upon the folly which had brought him and his thus tardily into the presence of so gracious a cousin.

* * * * * *

To draw out minutely the finale which followed these events, would be but tediously to repeat what the imagination of the intelligent reader has already suggested to him.

Of course, Lady Temple objected to the frightfully imprudent marriage proposed by her son; and *of course,* upon being informed that Florence had been endowed with fifty thousand pounds by her munificent cousin, she thought better of it, and even confessed that it was a match which was calculated beyond all things to give her pleasure, on account of her very affectionate recollection of the whole Thorpe family.

Of course, Algernon had the house and all its belongings, together with the estate of Thorpe-Combe, settled on him and his heirs for ever; and *of course* the happy boy contrived to prevail on his father and well-beloved stepmother to make it their home for many a happy year, without insisting as a condition that any of his young brothers and sisters should be banished from it.

Of course, Mr. Thorpe kept his word, and did rather more than he ought to have done for Sophia and her kidnapped husband; giving them wherewithal to live at the antiquated Grange with better dinners and suppers than the dark-browed bride had the slightest right to hope for. But Mr. Thorpe did not deem it necessary or righteous to leave in her possession the jewels she had so unceremoniously conveyed away; observing to her, as he reclaimed them, that

they would be fitter for the future wife of her cousin Algernon than for her, because Thorpe-Combe was a larger estate than Broad Grange; adding, that he hoped the Brandenberry family would consider the string of pearls he had given her as proper an heirloom for the Grange as he thought the old Thorpe diamonds for the Combe. And *of course* the young Mrs. Brandenberry did not agree with him in this opinion at all; but as soon as her three hundred a year was secured to her, past accidents, declared that on this particular account she desired never to have any further intercourse with the Heathcote family whatever; at the same time making it clearly understood that Sir Charles and Lady Temple were included in the threatened estrangement.

Of course, the Wilkyns and the Spencer races went back very nearly as they came, except that they carried with them very civil assurances of Mr. Thorpe's regrets that he had not any more Thorpe-Combes to give away.

Of course, the wanderer himself derived as much pleasure as undying regret for the past would permit, in witnessing the happiness he had made. And when, fifteen years later in life, he once again returned to see how his works of atonement had prospered, and found Temple flourishing in the easy affluence of its owner, and its woods redolent with the gay carols of the happy race which he had assisted to plant there; when he saw Algernon blessed with a wife deserving him, and the prosperous younger branches of the Heathcote race,—some by his own Asiatic influence, and the rest by the help of their wealthy friends and their own sound Heathcote principles, all thriving, prosperous, and respected, with the grey-haired major and his joyous wife in the midst of them,—he returned again to end his days in the distant land of his choice, with a conscience soothed into believing that he might hope to be forgiven.

THE END.

PRINTED BY COX (BROS.) AND WYMAN, GREAT QUEEN-STREET.