EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE.

N.B.
2 Febry 1911

EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE.

A Novel.

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER,

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "A BLAMELESS WOMAN," "ARMY SOCIETY,"
"THE TRUTH-TELLERS," "GRIP," "A SEASIDE FLIRT," ETC.

IN ONE VOLUME.

LONDON:
F. V. WHITE & CO.,
14, BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C.
1897.

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO, LIMITED, 182, 183 AND 184, HIGH HOLBORN, W.C.
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

CONTENTS.

EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE.

EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE

CHAPTER I.

THE KING OF SUMMERHAYES.

"Coin by coin, unscrupulous Time
Tells out the sum he owes.
Eternity, that usurer of life,
Still lending little, takes our all at last,
And gives back nothing got."

—OWEN MEREDITH.

THE blinds at Summerhayes were closely drawn. The King of Summerhayes was dead. Another king reigned for the nonce in his stead—that king whom we call Death.

Sir Geoffrey Hayes had for many years been known far and wide as the King of Summerhayes, that quaint Blankshire village lying under the shadow of the blue wolds, almost hidden in the tender pink and white, or the leafy green of its apple and cherry orchards. It was no such great property that over which he had ruled, but he had

loved it from his earliest boyhood with a devotion which had magnified it in his eyes into a kingdom. And now he had gone, gone in the very flower and prime of his days, to that other country where kingdoms are different to the kingdoms of this world; he had gone to join his wife, from the shock of whose death he had never quite recovered, and his body was going to lie beside hers in the quiet little churchyard under the shadow of the old grey, ivy-clad church.

The king was dead! For the moment his majesty, King Death, reigned supreme. After the morrow another king would be in power at Summerhayes—the son who would succeed him—Walter Hayes, fourteenth baronet, aged fifteen years.

There had only been two children of the Hayes race, Walter, the heir, and Basil, the younger; both fine, handsome, clear-faced, blue-eyed lads, real Hayes in type, real Hayes in disposition, with nothing about them of the dark winsomeness of their dead mother.

There was no very close friendship between the brothers, for there was five years difference in their

ages. Basil Hayes was but ten years old at the time of his father's death, and between a boy of ten and a boy of fifteen there is, as all the world knows, a great gulf fixed. They were fond of one another in a brotherly kind of way, but they were in no sense chums. They had different friends, different pursuits, different aims. Both were Hayes born and bred, in itself enough to constitute a bond, yet it was the only bond between them. Just now, with the shadow of death upon the house, the feeling between the two was stronger than it had ever been before. The elder was very tender and gentle with the younger; the younger was becomingly respectful and grateful for the notice of his brother.

"You know, old chap," said Sir Walter to his young brother, when they had paid their farewell visit to the darkened chamber where the dead King of Summerhayes lay, "we have got to stick together pretty closely, you and I. I know more than you, because I am older, and I have seen more, and he talked to me more; it was only natural. And if I tell you things that mayn't always be pleasant, they will be for your good, Basil, not because I want to be

disagreeable, not because I want to be hectoring or elder-brotherish or anything of that kind, but because we've got to live as he would like us to live. If there's anything you see in me that you don't like, you can tell me as I will tell you, because we have got to look to each other now for everything."

"But what about Uncle Roger? What about Aunt Adelaide?" asked Basil, looking up at his taller brother, and thrusting his hand into his.

"Uncle Roger?—yes; well, of course, you see, he is left our guardian, he will be like a sort of superior schoolmaster to us, don't you know. He said to us last night that he was going to take our father's place. I didn't say anything to him then, because he meant well and it would have seemed ungracious; but nobody can ever take Father's place to us. We can only take it towards each other, and give it to each other; we shall have to do what Uncle Roger tells us because he has been left our guardian, you see, but that's all. We shall have to live where they wish, and that probably won't be here."

"Not here?"

"Most probably not; but while we must just put

up with anything we don't like, we can always remember that Uncle Roger is no Hayes; he is not one of us, a Hayes born."

"But Aunt Adelaide is?"

"Yes, yes; but the women don't count, you know; it is only the men who count."

The younger of the two instinctively crept a shade nearer to his protective elder.

"Walter," he said at last, "I will try to do everything as if he was still here; it will be very hard, because I don't like doing things I am told; but I will try."

"And I will try too, Basil, old fellow; and we shall know all the time that they are looking down upon us, and that they are glad and happy that we are not disgracing the old name. And we shall be happy—not as happy as when he was with us; but still we shall be happy."

It was the only serious talk that the brothers ever had. It is not natural for young boys to be discussing the serious problems of life and making vows for their future conduct. On an occasion like the last earthly farewell to a father, such a conver-

sation was forgivable enough. Both meant it at the moment earnestly, utterly, absolutely, and there is no doubt that it helped over in a wonderful way the first soreness of the new *régime.*

They had scarcely done speaking when the uncle Roger of whom they had talked together came into the room. A tall, fine, handsome, well-set-up man, soldierly and aristocratic in appearance, bland in manner, with a certain studied grave dignity of manner, with an equally studied impressiveness of speech.

This was Roger Drummond, who had been, by the dead man's will, appointed guardian and trustee of the two boys, and who held the office of Recorder of the city of Northtowers. The Recorder of Northtowers was a man to whom fortune had been exceptionally kind. He was a man who throughout his whole life had gained a certain amount of success almost entirely because of his outside attributes—the class expressed in his voice, the haughty yet hearty ease of his manner, his great height, and a certain trick he had of looking down upon the world at large; all these things had carried him along upon

the tide, giving the more ordinary folk the impression that he was a man both of distinction and importance.

Yet, as a matter of fact, he had fallen woefully short so far as his brains went. When you came to sift him to the bottom, you found that his most distinguishing characteristics were mere mannerisms and an assumption of distinctiveness. He had set out in life to reach the woolsack, or to become the Lord Chief. He had attained to neither distinction. Finding that briefs did not flow into his hands, he had tried journalism, and had set out with a flourish of trumpets to be the premier man of the day in that particular line. But, alas! journalism is a trade which requires something more than a fine manner, and everything that Roger Drummond touched in journalism failed. He started a new journal. Other people found the money, and Roger Drummond was entrusted with the finding of the brains. This journal was to revolutionize the whole world of illustrated periodicals. It became known to the trade as "The Sieve," and it only succeeded when Roger Drummond, having quarrelled with his direc-

tors, resigned the reins of government into other hands. Then he turned his attention to politics, and he made himself useful to his party; and so much mischief did Roger Drummond do in this capacity that he was given the Recordership of Northtowers, more with a view to keeping him safely out of the road than because his legal attainments warranted his promotion to such an office.

Shortly after his appointment, Roger Drummond came in for a large fortune from a wholly unexpected source. From that moment he retired from public life, excepting that he retained his office of Recorder of Northtowers. Then he married Miss Hayes of Summerhayes, and settled down to the position which he had occupied for many years, and in which we first make his acquaintance at Summerhayes itself.

The Roger Drummonds had never had chick nor child. It was no trouble to them. Mrs. Drummond was a little woman on whom the cares of life sat lightly. She possessed the most absolute dominance over her personable husband, and with that kingdom

she was more than content. When, however, the death of Sir George Hayes, her only brother and nearest relative, threw upon her and her husband the care of his two children, she did not repine against the arrangement.

"I don't care about children, you know," she said to an old friend who called upon her the day after Sir George Hayes' death. "I never wanted children of my own; but these great boys will be easy to do for. They are big and strong—real Hayes, both of them—and amply provided for—amply. Walter, of course, takes Summerhayes, and there will be about three hundred a year for Basil. It is not a very large provision, but Summerhayes is not a very large property, and three hundred a year is a very great help to a boy beginning life. Walter will go back to Eton, of course, at the end of the term; as for Basil, I shall keep him with me until it is time for him to go to a preparatory school for Eton—that should be in about two years' time. No, my dear, I don't know anything about the bringing up of boys, but the old woman who has been with them ever since they were born knows; she understands them both

thoroughly. Oh, yes, I shall take her along with me; she will be most useful at the Oriol House. I should never know what to do with cut fingers, and black eyes, and all the other things that boys are subject to. The old woman will sew, and be a sort of sheet anchor in the house. For the rest they are dear boys, oh, dear boys, real Hayes both of them, and the Recorder and I will be happy in the care of them."

"What are you going to do with Summerhayes?" asked the friend. "Do you and the Recorder intend to live there?"

Mrs. Drummond looked startled.

"No, no; oh, dear, no! No, no. I believe in having my own house absolutely; I should not like to live there at all, fond as I am of Summerhayes. Oh, I think until Walter comes of age we shall try to let it; it would be better in every way than having the place shut up. I do dislike shut-up houses so much. Oh, it is all quite simple; they will spend their holidays with us, make their home with us; there is plenty of room for them in our house at Northtowers; it is very large—much larger than one

would think. There is no necessity to keep up Summerhayes; we shall certainly put it in the market at once."

"Will the boys like that?" the lady inquired.

"I don't see why they should dislike it. Boys are not like girls, who cling to a house as a cat does. They will probably be quite contented with the change to Northtowers; I never knew the child who did not like change yet. Anyway, whatever we do will be done for the best, and they must put up with whatever the Recorder and I think is the best for them."

So the fiat went forth that Summerhayes was to be let, and for a time pass into the hands of strangers.

If the truth be told, when Walter Hayes first realized his guardian's intentions with regard to his ancestral home his first impulse was a thrill of indignation. That, however, passed, for he was a sensible boy, and saw the wisdom of his aunt's remarks.

"You know, Walter," she said to him the day following that of his father's funeral, "it has been

suggested that your uncle and I should come here and make our home at Summerhayes, so that it may not be let. But, my dear boy, that is asking a little too much of us. Summerhayes is a much larger house than our own, and we should have to give up our house at Northtowers. If you were little boys instead of big ones, we might have done this; but you must remember that you are turned fifteen, and that in six years' time from now Summerhayes will be absolutely your own; you will be able to do precisely what you will with it, and it is not very likely that if we were to give up our own home, and were to come and live at Summerhayes, you would not require it yourself when you came to be the master of it. And to ask us to give up our own home for so short a period as six years is more than would be just. It would be a thousand pities to leave so handsome a house unoccupied during that time, because when a house is shut up and left to servants, as it would of necessity be, it is never kept in such good condition. So, although you may not like it, my dear boy, your uncle and I feel that it is distinctly for the best that

Summerhayes should be let, and let as soon as possible."

And Walter Hayes, being, as I said just now, a very sensible boy for his age, saw the reasonableness of his aunt's remarks, and fully acquiesced in her desires.

So Summerhayes was let, and the young owner and his brother transferred their home to the rambling dwelling in the Close at Northtowers, which was known as the Oriol House.

CHAPTER II.

THE RECORDER'S SECRETARY.

"A great deal of talent is lost to the world for the want of a little courage."

—SYDNEY SMITH.

EVERYBODY in Northtowers said that it was a wonderful thing that the two Hayes boys should have settled down so completely to look upon the Recorder's house as their home; and people said, too, that it was an even more remarkable circumstance that Mrs. Drummond, who had never had a child of her own, and had been from the time of her marriage the petted idol of her husband, should have taken up her motherly duties with such extraordinary and marked success. It might have been because they were nice boys in themselves; indeed, everybody in Northtowers liked the two young Hayes. Possibly if there had only been one instead of two, and that one had been Basil instead of Walter, the liking would not have been so marked as it was. Basil, at ten years old, with his modest patrimony of three hundred a year, might have passed in a crowd without any par-

ticular recognition; but Walter, with his title, his place at Eton, his future as the King of Summerhayes, was altogether another person, and, for his sake, both the boys were universally accepted by the Northtowers people as immense favourites.

Of the two Mrs. Drummond herself preferred Basil. Walter was always polite, reasonable, quiet, and, to a certain degree, worldly. There were depths in Walter which Mrs. Drummond was never able to gauge. He never disputed her edicts, never failed in his absolute courtesy to her, never got into scrapes, never forgot that he was Sir Walter Hayes of Summerhayes; but at the same time, when Walter was ready to leave Eton and go to Sandhurst, Mrs. Drummond was fain to ackowledge to herself that she knew no more of him and his inmost nature than if he had spent the three past years under his father's wing instead of under her own. With Basil everything was different. Mrs. Drummond knew to a nicety how much of his last sovereign had gone in "tuck"; she knew all about his school fights, and even encouraged them and glorified them; she knew in what directions Basil's predilections lay;

she knew him as thoroughly as if he were her own son, instead of only being her nephew. To all intents and purposes she was Basil's mother; but she was never anything more to her elder nephew than his guardian's wife.

After leaving Eton, Walter Hayes went to Sandhurst, and in due time came into possession of his property, and practically Northtowers knew him no more. He usually, it is true, spent a week of his long leave with the Recorder and his wife, but he had long since ceased to look upon Northtowers as his natural home. Consequently the intercourse between the brothers grew less and less with every year that went by. So, by the time that Basil arrived at man's estate, they were little more than strangers to each other. When I speak of arriving at man's estate, I mean, naturally, when the time came for him to leave school and make his choice of a profession. His natural instincts led him to follow his brother's footsteps and enter the army, but this was a course which met with the disapproval of both Mr. and Mrs. Drummond.

"I don't see why I shouldn't go into the Service

as well as Walter, Aunt Adelaide," Basil exclaimed, vexedly, when his aunt first expressed her objections to this plan.

"Because, my dear boy, you can hardly afford to do so," she said, very kindly, and yet decidedly. "You forget that Walter is the head of the family, and is well enough off to please himself in most things. With you it is a question of ways and means. When you come of age you will have three hundred a year—well, just a little more, because your expenses have not been quite so much as that; but beyond a few hundreds of loose money, that is what you will come into—three hundred a year. Of course Walter, being the eldest son, has the place, and therefore he can please himself."

"But a fellow could live very well with three hundred a year besides his pay."

"A fellow might live," said Mrs. Drummond, sensibly, "but it would be a case of genteel starvation; you could not live as other men do who have much more; you would start handicapped; you would be very, very uncomfortable and unhappy, and my urgent advice to you, Basil, is to give up

the army and turn your thoughts entirely in another direction."

"In what direction, Aunt Adelaide?" he asked.

"Well, my dear boy, in the direction in which money-making lies. What little money I have will one day be yours, but it is kinder and better to tell you now that my income is not much. I was only given five thousand pounds, which has always been considered the proper sum for the Summerhayes girls to take out of the estate. I was an only girl, it is true, and my aunts, although there were five of them, had not had a smaller amount; but the estate was mortgaged for it, and your father was years paying off his aunts' shares, so that when my turn came it was not possible for me to have more because I was only one. Since then I have not always been fortunate in my little speculations, and the sum absolutely at my disposal is a good deal less now than it was at the time of my marriage."

She forbore to say that the Recorder had tried his hand at doubling her modest little patrimony, and that he had succeeded extremely badly, his

business instincts being very much on a par with his journalistic abilities.

In truth, however, Basil Hayes' only instinct was one of soldiering. Our French neighbours are never tired of telling us that we are a nation of shopkeepers; and true it is. Yet it is no wild statement to say that the thoughts of nine out of ten of our youths turn to the scarlet jacket of the soldier, and certain it is that when Basil Hayes, finding that his dream of entering the Service was impracticable, was called upon to make choice of some other profession, he found that he had no preferences. If he had been going into the army he would have gone to Sandhurst or to Woolwich as a matter of course, and his education would have been carried on straight from his school days; as it was, he went home to the beautiful old house in Northtowers Close, and he lived for a time that wretched, uncomfortable, inglorious, objectionable life which we call "at a loose end."

"And what are you going to make of Basil?" was a question which was put over and over again to Mrs. Drummond.

"Ah, that is just the difficulty," she replied, time after time. "His only idea is the army, but his being a younger son with no more than three hundred a year, makes it out of the question. I am sure I cannot tell what we are to do with him. I lie awake at night thinking about it, and wondering and wondering what would be the best plan—what to suggest."

"But what does he feel inclined to do himself?" asked the Dean's wife one day.

"My dear Mrs. Blake," said the Recorder's wife, blandly, "he does not feel inclined to do anything; that is the unfortunate part of it."

"Why don't you put him into the Church?" suggested Mrs. Blake.

"The Church—well, that is not a bad idea. Now that I come to think of it, Summerhayes Rectory is in the gift of his brother. The Church! I must see how he feels about it."

She promptly put the question before Basil.

"Basil," she said to him one morning, when he lounged, good-looking and good-natured, into her own little sitting-room, "has it occurred to you that you might go into the Church?"

"The Church! And qualify for a finger-post? Oh, Aunt Adelaide!"

"Summerhayes Rectory is in Walter's gift."

"Yes, but I don't want to go and live at Summerhayes as Walter's dependent! Oh, no, thank you!"

So that scheme was knocked on the head, and Mrs. Drummond set her wits to work once more.

"I sounded him about qualifying for the Church, dear," she remarked to her liege lord, in the privacy of their own apartment that evening, "but he does not seem to see it."

"I did not expect that he would," replied the Recorder. "He is not at all the sort of boy that one makes a parson of."

"No. Well, somehow or other the Hayes never were cut out for parsons. I wish he would read for the Bar."

"Take an opportunity of sounding him on that," said the Recorder. He was singularly sympathetic with boys who did not quite know their *métier*.

"How would you like to be a barrister, Basil?"

"A barrister? That's not a bad idea. One might get a recordership, eh? But, Aunt Adelaide,

could one read for the Bar and live in London on three hundred a year?"

"No. I don't think you could," she said, quickly; "but I will ask your uncle."

"I mentioned the Bar to Basil, Roger," she said to him, when an opportunity presented itself for private conversation. "He did not seem unwilling, but he put one trenchant question before me. 'Can I,' he said, 'read for the Bar and live in London on three hundred a year?'"

"Most decidedly not," returned the Recorder.

"And in any case, Roger dear, is he not too young?"

"Much too young; eighteen is much too young to send a boy to London on his own hook, no matter how clever a man you place him with. How would it do, Adelaide, if I were to take him on for a couple of years as my secretary? He could be studying law with me, and I could superintend his reading and give him enough to do to keep him out of mischief until the time came for him to eat his dinners."

It was not a judicious arrangement; but to the two people who were honestly trying to do their

best for the boy, it seemed the most protective at the moment.

And so Basil Hayes began to learn to be a man in the old city of Northtowers, where everybody knew his circumstances, where he had little or nothing to do, and where, by virtue of his guardian's position, and also the county position of his aunt and of his father, he was, socially speaking, very near to the top of the tree. He was then nearly nineteen years old, a tall, finely-built young man, long of limb, broad in the shoulder, deep in the chest, and blessed with all the Hayes' good looks. He was enormously popular with all sorts and conditions of people, and nobody valued his popularity more than Mrs. Drummond, who, while she was devotedly attached to the Recorder, was painfully conscious always that personal popularity was not one of the circumstances of his life. He was open-handed and generous too, and herein again he appeared in strong contrast to his uncle and guardian; for nobody had ever known the Recorder of Northtowers to give a farthing to anything or to anyone. He would invariably reply to all requests for help:

"Ah, yes, indeed a most worthy object," he would say, in his most bland and unctuous voice; "but I, of course, have so many claims upon me, I am afraid I cannot help you this time. You must look to the richer people, to those who have no official claims upon them; I have, of course, so many. Really I sometimes say to my wife, I seem to live with my hand in my pocket."

"Wonderful man the Recorder," said a disappointed seeker after subscriptions one day; "he lives with his hand in his pocket, but, by Jove, no one ever knew him take it out."

Now Basil Hayes, whatever his faults and failings, was not troubled with meanness or niggardliness. As a schoolboy he had always been more than ready to share his belongings with those less fortunately placed than himself, as a young man it never occurred to him to say "no" if the occasion warranted his saying "yes," and the money was actually in his pocket.

So he became his uncle's secretary, and was supposed to be studying law under that dignified person's direction. And having settled down into

that easy and pleasant position in life, there, I am sorry to say, Basil Hayes remained.

When he was one and twenty he came into his kingdom, and being a young man strictly of honour, his first use of his cheque-book was to clear up all his infancy debts. They were not many—a few pounds here, a few pounds there, mostly for things he had found it quite impossible to do without, or to pay for from his minority allowance, which had but too easily slipped away in the sundry expenses of a popular young man. A good big tailor's bill was the most serious item, and, as I say, Basil's first use of his own cheque-book was to clear everyone of these off. It therefore soon became known in Northtowers that he was a young man of honour; that his first independent act was to pay his few debts, his second to buy a handsome present for his aunt. He became more popular than ever, and the question of his leaving Northtowers for London was scarcely ever mooted, certainly not seriously entertained by anyone.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Drummond, in answer to inquiries on the subject, "Basil is going to London,

and will eat his dinners all in due form. But not this year. You see, we are both so fond of him, and he has made himself so essential to the Recorder, that just now he would not like to go; and we should miss him terribly, especially as dear Roger is not in very good health. Next year we shall have to think about it seriously. There is no time lost; indeed, we are anxious not to be in a hurry, for London is full of temptations to a young man; and Basil is so happy here; he is just like our own son. But next year, next year, we must begin to think seriously about it."

But when the next year came there was still a shadow of excuse—a reasonable excuse, such an one as no living being could have taken exception to—and Basil Hayes remained at Northtowers, where he was far and away the most popular young man in the place. In truth, he was the head and front of everything.

His duties with the Recorder were not heavy, his expenses, seeing that he lived with his aunt and uncle free of charge and had also a small sum as an honorarium, were exceedingly light; they

consisted, in fact, of those which were entirely personal. He had plenty of time, and he cultivated assiduously those pursuits which tend to make for a man a local reputation.

Nothing was complete without the presence and co-operation of Basil Hayes. No cricket match, no football team, no hockey, tennis or golf club was worth speaking about unless Basil Hayes was in it. He was an excellent amateur actor, a first-class shot, he drove well, and rode across country—when he could get a mount—as straight as a die.

He could do everything except make money, and I doubt not that he would have done that too if he had once been put in the way of it. As it was, he stayed on and stayed on in the limited sphere of a not very large cathedral town, not so much from his own desire—because he, like every other young man, had more than a desire to see the world—but chiefly to suit the convenience of those who should have been the first to encourage him in any spirit of adventure which would lead him into a wider sphere.

CHAPTER III.

WELCOME.

"The only way to have a friend is to be one."
—EMERSON.

BREAKFAST at the Oriol House was fairly under way. The breakfast-room overlooked the Chantry garden, a quaint, triangular piece of turf, bordered by neat gravel paths, narrow flower beds, and shaded by a few fine old trees, which was sacred to the dwellers in the houses on one side of the Cathedral Close of Northtowers.

Each of the houses in the Close had its bit, large or small, of private ground, but the Chantry garden was a semi-private possession, of which those privileged to enjoy it were exceedingly proud. Mrs. Drummond's breakfast-room not only looked into the Chantry garden, but that side of the house lay so that it got every gleam of morning sunshine.

The sun was streaming in at the large oriel window that morning, although winter was not yet

passed, the trees had not begun to bud, or the jackdaws, high up in the cathedral towers, to busy themselves in nursery matters.

The room was singularly comfortable-looking, and was unmistakably the favourite sitting-room of a woman of taste, possessed of the means of gratifying the same. A bright fire blazed in the wide grate, a huge, smoke-grey Persian cat lay coiled like a ball of fluff on the black bear-skin rug; the Recorder sat at one end of the table and Mrs. Drummond at the other—he occupied with the *Morning Post*, and she busy with the pages of a fashionable feminine journal.

"Some more omelette, Adelaide?" he suggested, looking at her over the top of his newspaper. "It is unusually good this morning. You ought to mention it to cook."

"Yes, it is good, Roger; I will have a little more. Another cup of tea, dear boy?" She always called him "dear boy," although his beard was white and his close-cut hair had long since become scanty.

He replenished her plate and she his cup, and

just then the door opened, and Basil Hayes came leisurely into the room. Mrs. Drummond looked up as he closed the door behind him.

"My dear boy," she said, "you have missed the best omelette that we have had for weeks. How incorrigible you are."

"Yes, Aunt Adelaide, I am rather late. I am so sorry," he replied, in a tone which carried its own condonation with it. "Good morning, Uncle Roger. Any news?"

"No, the usual thing," replied the Recorder, glancing slightingly down the columns of the paper. "Our men have had a bit of a brush in the hills, and things seem pretty dark in Egypt; otherwise there is no news."

"I have a bit of news for you, Basil," said Mrs. Drummond, as she handed him his coffee-cup.

"Oh, have you, Aunt Adelaide? And what is it? Good, I hope?"

"Oh, neither good nor bad—inclining to good, if anything. The Percivals are coming back to the Chantry."

"The Percivals! Back to the Chantry! You don't

say so? The Percivals coming back after having let the Chantry all these years. Well, I am astonished. I wonder if Jack Percival will be as big a fool as he was before he went away?"

"Not very likely; eight or nine years of foreign schools will have done wonders for him. Let me see, Roger, it must be eight or nine years since the Chantry was let?"

"Oh, quite that, quite that."

"Well, I'm sure there was room for improvement," remarked Basil indifferently. "He was a sop, of course, and a sap, too, by Jove! But he was an out and out duffer—couldn't catch a cricket-ball—'Butter-fingers' they used to call him, and he was a butter fingers, and as soft as they make 'em; silly ass, too, you know. Oh, there was room for improvement. How did you hear they were coming back?"

"I had a letter from Mrs. Percival this morning—just now. They are coming immediately. They have spent the last two years in Berlin. They have been very home-sick the last part of the time, but having let the house on lease they felt that they

might as well stay there as anywhere else. She writes from London."

"Oh! Then they are back in England."

"Oh, yes; they have been in London several weeks, and are just waiting to have the house handed over to them."

Basil Hayes cut himself a generous slice of ham before he made any very definite comment on his aunt's news. She watched him almost eagerly.

"Well, unless they are very much altered," he said at last, "they will be very pleasant after the terrible people who have just gone away. "And I suppose," he added, "that my old friend Zoe is quite a grown-up young lady now."

"Oh, my dear boy, Zoe Percival must be eighteen or nineteen at least. Grown up? Yes, dear."

"And when are they coming?" Basil inquired.

"Almost immediately. Oh, by the bye, dear boy, here is a letter for you; it was under some of mine. It looks like Walter's writing."

"So it is," said Basil, taking the letter from his aunt's hand. "It is a long time since he has

honoured me with an epistle; and there isn't much in this one," he added, as he took out a thick sheet half covered with bold, black handwriting. "Oh, by Jove, what do you think——?"

"Going to be married?"

"Something much more startling than that. The Nineteenth are ordered here; they are to start almost immediately; they expect their route almost every day."

"The Nineteenth — ordered here — to Northtowers? Walter ordered here? Oh, how delightful! Roger, Roger! Do you hear that? Walter's regiment is ordered to Northtowers! And to think that we were bewailing the departure of the Sixteenth only yesterday! Well, that is delightful! I thought, as the Sixteenth were going to India, we should be sure to have a regiment newly returned from India in their place."

"Oh, no," returned Basil Hayes, without hesitation, "they would be sure to give them a dose of camp life first. That is the reason they are sending the Nineteenth here, so that those coming home may have room at Shorncliffe."

"Ah, I daresay," remarked Mrs. Drummond, vaguely. She knew nothing about soldiers, and was only interested in the 19th Dragoon Guards because her nephew happened to be one of its officers. It would enhance her position, of course, to have her nephew, Sir Walter Hayes, quartered in Northtowers, and on that account Mrs. Drummond was delighted at Basil's news. Her real interest, however, lay in the return of the Percival family, and she talked pleasantly on about them until the Recorder had taken his departure and Basil Hayes had followed in his wake.

When she was once more alone she drew Mrs. Percival's letter from its envelope.

"I am writing," it said, "to old Sarah, who, of course, has taken over the house from the Lindseys"—the Lindseys, by the bye, were the departed tenants of the Chantry—"and am telling her to get in things for our first meals, so that the cook we bring with us may not be too utterly strange. She is a French woman whom we have had in our service for the past six years; she has faithfully followed our fortunes from one con-

tinental city to another, and resolutely declines to leave us now.

"I expect, my dear Mrs. Drummond," the letter went on, "that we shall find everything more or less at sixes and sevens after so long a tenancy. I have sent the linen off several days ago, so hope that old Sarah will be able to put us up the first night; if not, of course we must go to an hotel. It seems rather a rush home at the last, but indeed we are all so homesick and so anxious to see the Chantry once more that now the house is free we cannot let a single day go by. We expect to arrive by the train reaching Northtowers at four o'clock, and we shall very eagerly look out for your kind, bright face, and that of the dear Recorder."

"I was fond of the Lindseys, too," Mrs. Drummond's thoughts ran; "but one's old friends are one's real friends after all. She will eagerly look out for my kind, bright face, will she? Then, indeed, she shall see it; she shall see it the moment that the train stops. Let me see, with a strange French woman coming into a strange kitchen—and probably most of the *batterie de*

cuisine worn out—it will be very awkward cooking a dinner that first night. I will just go in and tell old Sarah that they must all dine with us. Yes, I will go now."

She slipped upstairs, and put on a hat and a fur-lined cloak. She was an elderly woman to wear a hat—very few ladies of her age and position in Northtowers wore such headgear—but Mrs. Drummond had always been of the opinion that whatever she chose to do became her. The hat certainly did, and it was a stylish, comely, and winsome woman who passed in at the entrance gate of the Chantry and rang the visitors' bell. A quiet, motherly-looking person of about sixty years old answered the summons.

"Ah! Sarah, is that you?" said Mrs. Drummond, affably. "So we are to have the family back again, and immediately?"

"Good-morning, m'm. Yes, m'm. I've just had a letter, and rare good news it is. But do come in, Mrs. Drummond, m'm; I'm that pleased and that excited, I scarce know whether I'm on my head or my heels. I got the mistress's letter last night,

and I've got four charwomen at work this morning, trying to get the place made decent for them."

"Well, now, I came in to have a little chat with you, Sarah," said Mrs. Drummond, in her pleasantest voice. "You know, of course, the family must dine with us on the night of their arrival. I should not dream of allowing them to have a scramble dinner, or to go to an hotel for it. And if you are not able to get the bedrooms done, I will have my spare beds aired and made up at once."

"Oh, but I shall, m'm. The linen came two days ago, and I've got it all airing before the kitchen and the hall fires now. The bedrooms will be quite ready, but the dinner will be a relief, because you know, m'm, a strange cook coming in, and a French woman too, and probably used to a totally different kind of range, it would be a scramble. I have heard tell these French cooks are very wonderful, but still, human nature is human nature, whether it is French or English. Oh, now, that will be a relief, Mrs. Drummond, just what I should have expected of you, m'm.

Mistress always said you were the best friend that she had in Northtowers."

"I am glad she said that," said Mrs. Drummond. "Well, then, I shall arrange with cook; and anything that I can do, Sarah, to help them to settle, you have only to tell me; and I will come in in the morning with some flowers, and we will try and make the house look as full of welcome as our hearts are. I won't keep you now, you must be very busy."

"No, m'm, don't you hurry, m'm; but do just come into the drawing-room, m'm; they've just finished it, and it does look so nice. I've kept the fires going, because, you see, there hasn't been a fire for over a week now, and I thought it possible the master might feel a chill."

Mrs. Drummond, thus invited, passed into the drawing-room. It was a charming room, looking straight down the Chantry garden, with six old-fashioned windows with deep window seats.

"Mrs. Lindsey was most considerate," old Sarah explained; "she kept the last set of chintz covers on till they were quite dirty, so that she might

leave fresh ones and send the others to the wash. I really don't think, except for the photographs and the bits of things that the mistress always had about, that the room looks any different from what it did."

"It looks charming," said Mrs. Drummond, "and this view was always the prettiest in Northtowers, excepting the view from my morning-room. I could never put any other view in front of that. Then don't get any flowers, Sarah, I will bring some in during the morning, and I will stop and arrange them for you. We must give them a real welcome!"

"Ah, Mrs. Drummond, m'm," said Sarah, turning to look at the little lady who was smiling at her from under her black feathers, "but flowers or no flowers, I doubt but your face will be the best welcome the mistress has had for many a long day."

"They shall have both, Sarah," said Mrs. Drummond, as she turned towards the door.

CHAPTER IV.

ZOE.

"There's no place like home."

—*Song.*

THE Percivals had been for many generations residents and prominent citizens of Northtowers. The records of the cathedral and of the town showed that at various times all the most honourable offices had been filled by Percivals.

The present owner of the Chantry, Josiah Percival, was, by profession, a lawyer, and had been, up to the time of his leaving Northtowers, the head of one of the most respected legal firms in the city. A very serious illness, however, had resulted in his retiring from active practice, and it was then that, having been recommended to travel, he let the Chantry for a term of years, and took his children abroad, that he might combine the process of education with the relaxation and change which had been prescribed for himself.

There were three Miss Percivals of the Chantry: Geraldine, Madeleine, and Zoe. The Jack of whom Basil Hayes had spoken in such unsparing terms, was the sole masculine hope of the house.

They had been in many places since their departure from Northtowers. Mr. Percival had gone away a power; when he came back he was to all intents and purposes a cypher. He had gone away a man keenly interested in everything that concerned the welfare of the city—a man of judgment, of acute observation, of a most astute turn of mind; he came back, not exactly an invalid, but one of those irritating people who make a parade of taking care of themselves. He lived by line and rule; he had passed nearly nine years in communities in which he was, and could only be, an outsider, and the result was that he no longer took any interest in the welfare of his native city—the city which had been the cradle of his race for the last three hundred years.

"I think," he said more than once during the first days of his home coming, "that they manage

most things better abroad. My wife got very homesick, otherwise I don't think that I should have returned. I don't feel so well here—the food is very rich. Oh, yes, we have brought our French cook with us, an admirable person, but the meat is very rich, and the meals are heavy. Now, it was very kind of Mrs. Drummond, for instance, to ask us all to dinner on the night of our arrival, but I ate too much; I haven't felt myself at all since."

"But it was an excellent dinner, Josiah," put in Mrs. Percival. She was a stout, comfortable lady, and her soul had many times during the last nine years longed for the flesh-pots of Egypt, otherwise the good, plain, solid cooking of her native land.

"Yes, my dear, yes, an excellent dinner—a little long, a little long; and, I think," he said, with a sigh, "that I have learned to prefer my champagne sweet—ahem, it is better for the stomach."

Now Mrs. Percival had not learned, during her nine years of continental existence, to prefer her

champagne sweet. She was a rotund and comfortable person, with a tendency to rheumatism, and, as she very naïvely put it, a glass of champagne always made her pay for it.

However, in spite of the semi-invalid's remarks, the Percival family were delighted to find themselves back in possession of the Chantry—the dear Chantry, as they had always called it, the dear, *dear* Chantry as they called it when they had once more been all over it.

"Oh, Mother," exclaimed Geraldine, when they were gathered together in the long, low, elegant drawing-room for their first cup of tea, "how delightful the Chantry is—the dear, dear Chantry; I had no notion that it was half so sweet! Why did we appreciate it so little when we lived here before? Shall we ever want to go away from it again?"

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Percival; "when you have been here six months you will probably be talking about the dear Linden Strasse or the dear Boulevards, or something. It is human nature, you know, never to be satisfied with what is, but always

to be longing for change. If it were not so, we should be like limpets, and progress would be unknown in the world."

"Perhaps that is so," said Geraldine. "It is rather shabby, dear," she went on, looking round the room; "but when it is done up a little it will be charming. How cosy, how elegant it is, this long, low room with its big windows, the two great open fire-places, the bright steel of the grates, the soft, rich tones of the curtains, the pictures, the china—ah!" with a sigh, "it is delightful to be at home again!"

"I can't think," put in Madeleine, who was two years younger than Geraldine, "why we were always so desperately anxious to go abroad. Had you ever lived abroad before, Mother?"

"Never, dear."

"Then why were we all so anxious?"

"Entirely on account of your father's health—entirely. I put up with it because it was good for you children to have foreign education, and it was good for your father to have complete change from the worries and cares that beset him in North-

towers; but I always cordially detested continental life. I admit that it has its advantages — great advantages; still, one never realises what true friendship is till one comes home again after a long absence. How kind of Mrs. Drummond to think of asking us all to dinner this evening!"

Mrs. Drummond had asked no visitors to meet the newly-arrived family, and at half-past seven Mr. and Mrs. Percival and their three daughters went across from the Chantry to the Oriol House.

"Mrs. Blake is most anxious to see you, and Roger did suggest that I should ask her and the Dean to join us to-night, but I thought that your first night at home you would rather be quite *en famille*."

"Oh, yes, so much rather," said Mrs. Percival, keeping an anxious eye upon her liege lord.

The gentleman in question was painfully watching the clock. His accustomed dinner hour for years had been seven o'clock to the minute, and half-past seven, otherwise a quarter to eight, was a

great trial; and to have his first meal in Northtowers fixed for half-past seven, which in the natural course of events meant a quarter to eight, was a great trial to his digestive organs. He had eaten an extra slice of bread and butter—he called it a tartine—at tea, by way of providing against this irregularity, for although the Percivals had grown thoroughly continental in most of their habits, they had never abandoned the English fashion of afternoon tea. They probably would have done so, for it is not always convenient to keep up such a custom, had not Mr. Percival invariably felt what he described as "a sinking" soon after four o'clock.

"She is coming across to see you to-morrow. She was so interested in hearing all about your return. She is just as dear as ever she was," Mrs. Drummond went on. "Ah! here is the Recorder."

The Recorder came in and greeted his guests. He looked extremely well in evening-dress, and the three Percival girls, who scarcely remembered him, were much impressed by his fine appearance and

dignified manners. Then the door opened, and Basil Hayes came in leisurely.

"Here is Basil," said Mrs. Drummond.

Mrs. Percival gave a start of surprise as she looked up at the tall young man.

"Why, Basil," she said, "how extremely like your poor father you have grown. I never saw such a likeness. Don't you see it, my dear?"

Thus directly appealed to, Josiah Percival drew his eyes away from the clock, and gave the newcomer his hand.

"How do you do? How do you do?" he remarked, jerkily, then peered at him with his short-sighted eyes. "Why, God bless my soul, I never saw such a likeness in my life!"

"No, it is very remarkable," said Mrs. Drummond, with a sigh. "Basil is far more like dear Geoffrey than Walter is. By the bye, you will see Walter soon; he is coming almost immediately; his regiment has been ordered here."

"You don't say so! Then he is in the army?"

"Oh, yes, in the Nineteenth Dragoon Guards—

very much of a soldier!" said Mrs. Drummond. "Yes, Davidson, thank you. Now, my dear," to the Recorder, "take Mrs. Percival in to dinner."

"Allow me," said Mr. Percival, in a tone of much relief, "allow me to offer you my arm."

"I must ask two of you dear girls to go in together; another time, when you dine with me, you shall have a gentleman apiece, but if Basil takes Geraldine—yes, I think Basil must take Geraldine, being the elder—and Madeleine and Zoe cavalier each other, then we shall get to the dining-room quite happily."

So they went across the hall into the finely proportioned dining-room. The Oriol House was one of the handsomest houses in Northtowers, and the dining-room was not its least attractive feature. When they reached the table Basil Hayes found himself between his own young lady, Geraldine, and her mother, and immediately opposite to her two younger sisters.

"I look to you, Basil," said Mrs. Percival, in her kind and motherly accents, "to give us all the news

of the town, to put us up to the latest moves, to tell us what people have come fresh, and all that is going on."

"Faith, and I shall have my work cut out!" said Basil, with a gay laugh. "So many new people have come here to settle—goodness knows why, unless it is because there are soldiers here, who always help to make things spin. By the bye, did Aunt Adelaide tell you that Walter is coming?"

"Yes, yes, she told me; how very delightful! Are you here all the year round, Basil?"

"Yes, I am still in leading-strings," said Basil, with a jolly laugh, which told Mrs. Percival's quick ears that he had no particular wish to be out of them. "I'm going in for the Bar, you know, but I don't get there."

"Well, we can't do without Basil," put in Mrs. Drummond, from her end of the table. "Roger has not been very strong lately, and, of course, Basil can help him in a way that a mere ordinary secretary could never do. He is going to London; he is going to read for the Bar, and to eat his dinners,

and all that; but not just now; not till Walter has been and gone."

"Then there will be some other excuse," said Basil; "and so I hang on. I believe that some people think I am too lazy to do any work of any kind."

"But you do work; you help your uncle a great deal," said Mrs. Drummond, with dignity.

"Oh, yes, yes, a great deal. I'm a most valuable member of society, and justice could never be administered in Northtowers without my timely aid and assistance; now could it, Uncle Roger?"

At which the large gentleman at the foot of the table laughed and laughed again, as if his nephew and secretary had perpetrated the most brilliant and original joke in the whole world. Then he, having recovered himself, put some questions to Mrs. Percival about her boy Jack, who was studying medicine in Vienna, and the conversation ceased to be general, so that Basil Hayes was able to devote himself more exclusively to Geraldine.

Before, however, the ladies had left the table, Basil Hayes had quite made up his mind on one

point, which was that the three Percival girls were the prettiest trio he had seen for many and many a long day, and that, attractive as all three were, one was as far ahead of the others in loveliness as the rose is above all other flowers in reputation. Geraldine was pretty, and Madeleine was prettier; but of them all he found that Zoe, with her soft dark hair and blue eyes darkly fringed, was indisputably the prettiest of the three.

CHAPTER V.

FIRST LOVE.

"The future hides in it
Gladness and sorrow."

—GOETHE.

THE Percivals had been so long abroad, and were so thoroughly nomadic in their habits, that they never thought of denying themselves to callers until they had renovated the Chantry and arranged everything to their liking. So, when the first of the stream of visitors arrived to welcome them home, they were at once ushered up into the pretty drawing-room, and found the mother and daughters as much at home as if they had never left it.

Everybody agreed in saying that Mrs. Percival was wonderfully little altered. She had gone away nine years before a placid, motherly, rotund and comfortable person, with masses of smooth, fair hair coiled about her shapely head; she had come back a little more placid, and a little more rotund, wear-

ing her hair just in the same fashion as she had done nine years before; true, it was plentifully besprinkled with white, but it was still very luxuriant. The majority of people who called upon her went away with an impression that time had stood still with Mrs. Percival, also that she had three very charming and pretty girls staying with her—for, naturally, the Percival girls had grown out of all knowledge. Each spoke with a slight burr, which was due to their foreign up-bringing. They were like neither their father nor their mother, but were a mixture of both, and, while their mother had come "home," they were as strangers in the land.

Their manners, too, were very different to the manners of the ordinary Northtowers young lady. They could speak French, German and Italian with the utmost fluency and distinction; they were thoroughly well-travelled, thoroughly well-read, were adepts with the needle, and possessed a store of knowledge on many subjects on which the Northtowers young lady was profoundly ignorant. But they had not mastered the mysteries of golf, they

had never been in the way of learning cycling, and they did not try to take the entire lead in the conversation. "Dull as ditch-water," several girls who came with their mothers on visits of welcome, voted them.

"What is the good of a girl being able to talk four languages perfectly, if she has nothing to say in any one of them?" remarked one damsel. "I call it a very stupid way of bringing girls up; they are fifty years behind us."

"Basil Hayes did not seem to think so," remarked another Northtowers girl. "I have never seen Basil so completely bitten."

"Oh, well, of course, girls who have been brought up in foreign countries are always very keen on getting married; it is only English girls who don't care whether they get married or not," said the first speaker, with superb indifference. "Of course that Zoe always was a sly little thing—I never could bear her."

Meantime the Chantry drawing-room was filling rapidly, and the three Percival girls had all their work cut out to serve out tea to their many guests.

As for Basil Hayes, he went early and remained late — in fact he stayed all the time; and he attached himself to Zoe with a persistence which was not likely to pass unmarked.

"My dear boy," said little Mrs. Dallas, in a tragic whisper to him, when he brought her a second cup of tea, "pray don't make your attentions so terribly marked; you will have the Northtowers girls going out on strike!"

Mrs. Dallas was the wife of one of the minor canons, a gay and festive little woman, untroubled by the cares of a family and blessed with just sufficient of this world's goods to allow her to enjoy herself. There was probably nobody in all Northtowers possessed at the same time of so keen a sense of wit and of so judicious a tongue. She loved the place, and equally she loved the people.

"Dear old things," she used to say, "how did they ever get along before I came and livened them up?"

She certainly had "livened" things up very much since coming to Northtowers, although a good many of her jokes were only known to her husband. Mrs.

Dallas was, of course, a new importation since the Percivals had first left the Chantry.

"I suppose," she remarked to Mrs. Percival, "that, in strict etiquette, as you are really Northtowers people, I ought to have waited for you to call upon me; but strict etiquette is so unfriendly and stiff, isn't it? I am sure you like me to call upon you—now, don't you?"

"I am sure we are delighted," said Mrs. Percival, who was charmed with her visitor's gay and *insouciant* manner. "Besides, in strict etiquette, I really think you ought to call upon me, because, you see, we have been away for so long. And I hope that, having come, you will come very often. My husband is not always very strong, so we are very dependent upon our friends for brightness, and with three grown-up girls it is so essential to have a home that is not dull. That is one of the things of which I have always had the greatest horror."

"I am sure you have," said Mrs. Dallas, briskly; "and I should think you never have a dull house, Mrs. Percival."

"Only in so far as my husband's health controls us. He is not an invalid, you know; but he is nervous about himself, and takes care of himself accordingly."

"If ever you want anyone to chaperon your daughters, I shall be delighted if you will make use of me," said the parson's little wife, gaily. "I love girls; all the girls in Northtowers are my intimate friends. I love all girls; I like to see girls having a good time—I like to have a good time myself! And if ever you feel that you don't want to leave Mr. Percival, and there is anything your daughters want to go to, why, I am only just across the Chantry garden, and shall always be delighted to take your place."

Mrs. Percival turned and looked at her bright young visitor with her crown of fair, fluffy hair, her bright blue eyes, and her roguish dimples; then she laid a firm, soft hand upon the little woman's arm.

"Now, I do consider that that is the kindest thing that you could possibly have said to me," she exclaimed, in accents whose sincerity there could be

no mistaking. "I always feel that it is hard upon girls if they are held back from such amusements as come in their way, because their mothers are too tired or too lazy to take them out. Indeed, I shall most gratefully take advantage of your offer. I suppose you go to everything?"

"Everything," said Mrs. Dallas, promptly. "You see, dear lady, although my dear Joe is a parson, he is not, in any sense, what you call a stodgy parson. He is a reasonable person, who doesn't believe in the religion of going about with a long face, pretending he is a sort of fakir who never wants a good dinner, who never cares to enjoy himself, and is always trying to make everyone unhappy and wretched about him. No, Joe is not like that; he is always bright, always cheerful, and always unselfish; in fact, he is a dear fellow, a dear fellow, and he always wishes me to have a good time. I was one of a large family, and I had such a very good time before I married, that it is only natural I should want some gaiety now. So we go everywhere—oh, yes, everywhere, and I really have an uncommonly good time in Northtowers. Some people call Northtowers

dull," she went on; "I never do. But then, you know, Mrs. Percival, some people carry their dulness with them, and then they blame the place for it, which I always think so extremely hard on the place. Ah, here is Mrs. Blake; now I am going to talk to your girls."

She got up as the Dean's wife came with outstretched hand to the lady of the house.

"My dear Mrs. Percival," she said, "how pleased I am to see you back again. It was indeed good news when I heard you were coming back to the Chantry. Ah, my dear child, is that you? You ought to be good friends with the Percivals; they are dear, good, kind, delightful people."

"I have made a very good beginning, Mrs. Blake," said Mrs. Dallas, in her bright and winning accents. "I am now going to improve my acquaintance with the girls."

"Ah, she will get on with the girls—she is a bright little soul, she gets on with everybody; so bright and full of fun, and always the same—a dear little woman. Your girls are sure to like her, all the girls do."

Having made her way over to the tea-table where the three girls were, Mrs. Dallas, by way of beginning, demanded another cup of tea, and then gradually ingratiated herself into the young people's favour. Each of the three girls took some part of the dainty little repast to the Dean's wife, and after staying a few minutes in conversation, came back to their new friend; and as Mrs. Dallas talked a great deal to Geraldine and Madeleine, Basil Hayes was able to devote himself as much as he pleased to the youngest of the trio. It was then that Mrs. Dallas made that teasing remark about the Northtowers girls going out on strike, for her sharp eyes had seen very clearly how the land lay.

"Well, I haven't much chance, Mrs. Dallas," said he, in rather an aggrieved tone, when Zoe went off with a dish of cake for at least the twentieth time; "one has no such luck as a good square talk."

"All the better for you, my dear boy," replied the little woman, vivaciously. "By the bye, of course you've heard that Maud Garrow is engaged?"

"Not really!"

"Oh, yes; some man she met at her sister's—a very good match indeed, and the man everything that is desirable to the entire family."

"You don't say so! By Jove! I am awfully pleased! But how we shall miss her in the Northtowers A. D. C. That's the worst of girls; you get 'em trained and just up to their business, and then they go and get married, and go away from the place, and they're never any use afterwards."

"No, but Maud will go somewhere else, and she will be a perfect godsend, probably, to some other dramatic club."

"Perhaps; but one doesn't put oneself to no end of fag for other dramatic clubs than one's own."

"You ought to do; you would benefit society at large," she retorted. "Besides, you would surely never have a nice girl remain single just for the sake of your dramatic club, would you?"

"No, perhaps not, when you put it in that way; but still, she will be a great loss."

"Perhaps one of these girls will take her place," said Mrs. Dallas.

"Ah, yes, likely enough; I must be sure and ask them."

Then Geraldine came back and sat down on the lounge beside Mrs. Dallas once more.

"There, now," she said, "I have breathing time once more! Do tell me, Mrs. Dallas, who is that lady who has just come in?"

Mrs. Dallas looked up.

"Ah, that is Mrs. Grainger, and, poor little woman, she has rather a sad life."

"Why? Is she a widow?"

"Oh, by no means; but things have not gone quite right with her. She is a nice woman; we are very fond of her; but she always saddens me—always." Then, with a sigh, she turned the conversation and began to speak of other things. "You are just in time for the January balls," she said, with a determined effort not to continue speaking of Mrs. Grainger. "I suppose, like all other girls, you are very fond of dancing?"

"Oh, yes, we are very fond of dancing—very. How do Englishmen dance?"

"Oh, pretty much as other men do—on their

legs, you know, and more or less well, more or less well. Very much the same all the world over, don't you think?"

"Well, I don't know. Of course, most foreigners dance extremely well. We have wondered, my sisters and I, how we shall like Englishmen."

"I daresay you won't care for Englishmen's dancing," said Mrs. Dallas, decidedly; "but you will surely like Englishmen better than foreigners—that, I think, is only natural. And you will have a very good time here; everybody says the town is so much gayer than it used to be; I have certainly done my best to liven it up, poor old place; the Northtowers girls, indeed, have got quite rapid."

"What *does* 'rapid' mean?" said Geraldine.

"What does it mean? Oh, well, of course you don't understand—gay, hearty, up-to-date, the latest fashion. There are no old maids nowadays, you know; they are all 'bachelor girls'; and a girl does not want a chaperon, except to a very important dance or ball. It is not as it used to be, when a girl could hardly walk down the street by herself. We have altered all that."

"I don't think," said Geraldine, taking her quite seriously, "that Mother will like it if we become rapid."

Mrs. Dallas laughed long and heartily.

"My dear child," she said, "you are not the kind of girl who ever becomes rapid; you need have no fear."

"There was a Miss Dangerfield here just now," said Geraldine, turning her lovely eyes upon Mrs. Dallas.

Mrs. Dallas laughed.

"I see," she said, "that you and I are going to understand one another exactly. You are quite right," she went on, in a different tone, "that is what I mean by a rapid young woman, and that is a very ordinary type in Northtowers; very straight and tall, tailor-made clothes—not that I wish to say a word against tailor-made clothes, my dear, I adore them—very stiff collar and cuffs, board-fronted shirt, a sporting pin in her necktie, dogskin gloves, a very thick stick, and the shiniest of boots, with very square toes and a good deal of breadth at the heel. There are lots of them about here, and upon my

word one of my curiosities is to know what they look like in their nightgowns, and what sort of nightgowns they wear? I am sure if I were to meet one of them in the frills and lace which the ordinary woman sleeps in I shouldn't know her. It is my opinion that they either wear pyjamas, or else check nightshirts."

CHAPTER VI.

ALL IN UNCERTAINTY.

"Love is ever busy with his shuttle,
Is ever weaving into life's dull warp
Bright, gorgeous flowers and scenes Arcadian."
—LONGFELLOW.

THE friendship begun on the day of Mrs. Dallas's first visit to the Percivals, grew and throve apace until it became an intimacy. Between the good offices of Mrs. Drummond and the friendliness of little Mrs. Dallas, it came about that Mrs. Percival seldom or never went with her daughters to such junketings as were going on in the old city; for she, good, comfortable woman, was greatly tied by the invalidishness of her husband.

As a matter of fact, very little ailed the old gentleman. The doctors who examined him from time to time reported him to be as sound as a bell, and so in truth he was; but he had so grown into the habit of considering his health as being the first and most important matter in the world, that now when he ailed actually nothing whatever he could

not bring himself to realise the fact, but insisted upon always treating himself as a piece of singularly fine and delicate machinery, which might give way and break down at any moment if the greatest care and regularity were not exercised in the management thereof.

So to junketings Mr. Percival never went. He said that the vitiated atmosphere of heated rooms invariably affected him injuriously, and, in fact, made him ill for at least a week; all forms of afternoon parties he abjured, because ladies would insist upon his eating what he termed "trash"; solemn dinner-parties, when he had been duly fortified by a little extra subsistence to make up for the lateness of the hour at which the feast began, were the only dissipations in which he indulged. Naturally he did not like Mrs. Percival to leave him alone of an evening to sit without a soul from ten o'clock until bed-time, and Mrs. Percival, on her side, was never happy or easy in her mind when she did thus leave her liege lord.

So it came to pass that Mrs. Drummond or Mrs. Dallas generally took charge of the three

pretty young ladies from the Chantry. It was not a very onerous office. They were so pretty, so well dressed, so distinguished in appearance, that they attracted everybody who saw them. They all danced well, and were each blessed with pleasant, unaffected manners, such as commended them not a little to the sterner sex.

"Such nice girls to take about with one, Joe," said Mrs. Dallas to her husband; "not like the unfortunate creatures one has to hunt up men for. Why, I remember when I took Miss LeGrange to the Hunt Ball, that I spent half my time chivvying after partners for her, and Captain Challoner had the impudence to tell me he would give her a dance to please me. But these girls never give one any trouble; there's a rush for them as soon as they walk into the room. That's the kind of thing I like to see," the vivacious little woman went on. "Depend upon it, Joe, that when a girl sticks partnerless about a ball-room, and all the men sheer off as if they were frightened of her, there is something wrong about that girl. But the Percival girls really are nice to take about—quite a pleasure;

indeed, I am beginning to find the men make up to me because I am in charge of them. Oh, no, you needn't laugh, Joe; it is the truth."

But the Rev. Joe did laugh all the same, for little Mrs. Dallas was still young, and was exceedingly pretty, and had never in all her life owed her partners or her admirers to anything but her own charms.

One effect of the great intimacy between the three Percival girls and Mrs. Dallas was that Basil Hayes was able to see a great deal more of them than he would have done had they been strictly and solely under the escort of their mother. The chaperon who sits by the wall, watching with an accurate and unerring eye the doings of her progeny, is a different person from the chaperon who has her own programme filled as soon as those of her charges.

Mrs. Drummond did not very often go to dances, for the Recorder was not very strong, and suffered from a bronchial tendency, and Mrs. Drummond herself seldom stayed more than an hour, or an hour and a half, at such balls as she considered too

important to be ignored. So a mighty friendship sprang up between Basil Hayes and Zoe Percival. The world looked on and saw it all; and as the world regarded Basil as the Recorder's heir, the world made but little comment. It seemed as if it would be a suitable and a natural marriage enough.

"Basil Hayes seems to be tremendously taken with the youngest Miss Percival," said a lady to Mrs. Dallas one night, when the last of the sisters had just been taken away from her side.

"Yes, they are great friends," said Mrs. Dallas.

"Oh, more than that."

"I don't think so; not at present, at all events."

"How will the Percivals like it?"

"How should they like it? Basil Hayes has some money of his own."

"Three hundred a year," said the other.

"Well, three hundred a year, and he is the very apple of his aunt and uncle's eyes."

"I suppose he will be very well off by and by. Such a pity he doesn't do anything."

"Such a pity they won't let him do anything," said Mrs. Dallas. "He is dying to go to London and eat his dinners, and get called to the Bar, and so on; but they are always making some excuse to prevent it. Now they have made the excuse of his not wanting to go because his brother is coming. As if it is necessary to check a young man's whole career because his brother is to be quartered in the same town. Absurd, I call it!"

"Well, it does seem rather absurd, but it never struck me that Basil cared anything at all about work."

"Oh, yes, he does," said Mrs. Dallas. "Oh, yes, indeed he does. He has told me over and over again that he is most anxious to go to London and prepare for the Bar."

"He looks like it now, doesn't he?" said the other ironically, looking to where Basil Hayes was slowly swinging round with Zoe Percival in his arms.

"Oh, well, he makes the best of things as he finds them. It is no use his sulking and making a fool of himself, because he is not encouraged to do what he wants."

"There is many a young man gets called to the Bar with less than three hundred a year of his own," said the first speaker, significantly. "He would go fast enough if he was really anxious about it."

"Oh, well, the Recorder is very rich. I suppose he feels that he is just as well here as he would be there. Yes, this is my dance. Well, I shall see you again, dear."

Meantime Basil Hayes had given himself up to the full delight of the dance, which he was enjoying intensely.

"How perfectly our steps go together!" he said at last, when he had brought Zoe to a standstill.

"They do go well together, don't they?" she answered, innocently enough.

He had only known her about three weeks, but an almost irresistible temptation came over him to suggest that they should take their dancing steps as an example of their lives, and try them together for the rest of time. Something, however, in the girl's face deterred him from speaking, and instead of allowing the burning words which were trembling

on his lips to find utterance, Basil put his arm round her once more with a gentle "Shall we have another turn?"

He went home that night in a not very happy frame of mind. He was desperately in love, and that for the first time in his life. I don't mean to say that Basil Hayes had never been in love before, because his was the kind of nature which was always in love, more or less; but this was the first time that he had ever been seriously in love; it was the first time that he had ever known what it was to be nervous in the presence of a girl who attracted him; it was the first time that he had ever known what it was to feel diffident towards a woman. He had always gone before on the "look-at-me-and-die" system, with a jolly, comfortable sensation that fair women were plentiful and kind enough, that if he failed with one, there were always others—as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. With Zoe Percival all this was changed. He felt, as he sat that night smoking a last pipe before he got into bed, that if he could not have Zoe Percival for his wife, all would be Dead Sea

fruit; all life would be as dust and ashes; life would be over; hope, joy, peace, and satisfaction all dead.

His was not that kind of nature which gave any thought to or troubled about questions of ways and means; he had a beautiful, childlike, and perfect belief in the future. It never troubled him that he might one day be less well off than he was at that moment. He gave no more heed to the morrow than if he were one of the lilies of the field.

But what did trouble him, what did fill his mind with doubt, almost with despair, was the uncertainty that Zoe would ever care for him. She was always ready to dance with him; oh, yes, to let him take as many dances as he pleased, to give him the supper dances, to let him fasten her cloak before she went away, to show her the thousand and one attentions which a man shows to the woman he loves.

But he never seemed to get any nearer. He had never dared to call her Zoe without prefix, although he had been in the habit of calling her so years and

years before, when she was a little fairy of nine and he a big hulking boy of fourteen.

He had no fear but that his aunt and the Recorder would approve of her as his wife, and that was a consideration which weighed with him very decidedly, for he was genuinely fond of them both, and would not have liked, would not have wished, to take any very decided step in opposition to their ideas and desires.

But Mrs. Drummond liked and admired Zoe above the average of girls. Many and many a time during the last week or two he had heard her say, "What a dainty little girl it is; so bright and fresh; such a little lady!" In truth, Zoe Percival looked like a tall young poplar tree against a little evergreen bush by comparison with Mrs. Drummond, who was a little tub of a woman whose dignity did not in any way come from her inches.

Yet he did not feel, although he was conscious of the difference between them, that Mrs. Drummond had erred in her description, or that the diminutive was inconsistent when applied by her. Oh, yes, that would be all right; he had no fear of any

opposition on his aunt's part; all he had to fear was Zoe herself.

He could not make up his mind whether she cared for him or not. He felt that had he been attracted by either of her sisters he would have found the way more easy; but then he had always felt that the way was easy with all other women; it was only Zoe about whom he was doubtful.

He got into bed with a vast sigh, determined that, come what might, he would end the suspense one way or the other within a few hours. Yes, it was absurd going on like this; he would speak his mind out plainly, clearly, and at once.

So Basil Hayes fell asleep, only to dream and dream again of Zoe Percival, with her soft dark tresses, her dark-set blue eyes and her lovely rose-leaf skin; to dream and wake and dream again, still in a glorious maze of uncertainty and doubt.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ELDER BROTHER.

"Advice, like snow, the faster it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into, the mind."

—COLERIDGE.

IT was not many days after this that the first detachment of the 19th Dragoon Guards marched triumphantly into Northtowers under the command of Captain Sir Walter Hayes. It happened that Basil Hayes was standing in the big bow window of the club when the troopers came riding past. As soon as he saw his brother's face he bolted out to speak to him.

"Hullo, Walter, old chap!" he called out.

"Why, Basil, old fellow, is that you?" sang out the bronzed and mud-splashed soldier in reply. "I wondered whether I should see you somewhere about. All well?"

"Oh, yes, all right. Glad your march has come to an end?"

"Deuced glad," said the other; "it's a long march for weather like this, and the roads out in the

country are infernally muddy. I say, old fellow, I sent my things on early this morning to the station, I wish you'd go and fish them out for me. I shall come down to dine at the Oriol House, of course."

"And to sleep too?" asked Basil. "Surely."

"Oh, yes, yes, it will be most convenient. Give my love to Aunt Adelaide and tell her to expect me as soon as I have settled things up at barracks. That's the blessing of finding a senior in command —I have no further responsibility when I have once got my men into barracks." Then he turned half-round in his saddle. "By George, Basil, those are good-looking girls! Who are they?"

Basil turned with a start.

"Those are the Miss Percivals," he said, in a would-be indifferent tone. "You know—they live at the Chantry."

"The Chantry? Is that the next-door place to the Oriol House?"

"Yes."

"Oh, really! Well, I expect my visits to the Chantry will be pretty frequent; those are the best-looking girls I have seen for a long time."

"They are good-looking," Basil admitted, as he replaced his hat on his head after saluting the Percival girls.

"Good-looking! I should think they were! Well, good-bye, old chap; I'll be down at the Oriol House in next to no time."

For a moment Basil Hayes stood watching his brother as he rode gaily along. What a handsome chap he was, his thoughts ran; what a gay, devil-may-care air there was about him; just the sort of man that a girl would be likely to fancy; just the sort of man—yes, the thought would have expression, though he tried hard to smother it—just the sort of man that might take the fancy of such a girl as Zoe Percival!

It was with an ugly word ground out between his teeth, and a still uglier thought in his heart, that Basil Hayes turned on his heel and went off at a brisk pace in the direction of the station. What a fool he had been not to make sure of Zoe before Walter, with his superiority of age, his attractiveness, his title, and his four thousand a year, came along to oust him from her good graces! He forgot that

if Zoe cared for him, as he hoped and believed, no other attractions could outweigh his own; he forgot everything, excepting that he loved her, and that another man—a man who might be a dangerous rival to himself—was about to appear on the horizon of her acquaintance.

Long before he reached the railway-station, he had in his mind's eye seen Zoe married to his brother, and himself left outcast, a mental and moral derelict upon life's ocean. Then it occurred to him what an utter and complete fool he was; and so uncompromisingly did the knowledge come home to him that he burst out laughing as he strode along.

Well, he was an ass, he said to himself, to be building a bridge over that particular trouble. It was unlikely enough that Walter, who had passed unscathed through the manifold attractions of the last seven years, should come to a sleepy old place like Northtowers, and there meet his fate. Pooh! It was absurd!

"Upon my soul," he said to himself, as he strode in at the great entrance, "that little girl has so

completely taken hold of me that I am little better than a maundering idiot! To dread a dear old chap like Walter coming along is really too absurd, upon my word it is."

He straightway shook himself free of all foolish thoughts, and set about claiming his brother's baggage.

"You had better put it on to a cab," he said to the porter, by whose aid he discovered it, "and send it up to the Oriol House. Sir Walter is going to dine and sleep there."

Sir Walter did not, however, dine at the Oriol House that night. In less than an hour he turned up, a disgraceful object for a lady's drawing-room, as he apologetically remarked.

"I am so annoyed and disgusted, Aunt Adelaide," he said to Mrs. Drummond, "that I shall have to dine with the Seventeenth to-night. They have not broken their mess up yet, as the headquarters don't go out till the day after to-morrow, so I shall have no choice but to dine with them. You won't mind my dressing and sleeping here, will you?"

"My dear boy," exclaimed Mrs. Drummond, "of

course not. I am but too delighted to have you; and you will have many opportunities of dining with us during the next two years, I hope."

"As often as you like, Aunt Adelaide. I can never get away too often from mess—that is quite impossible."

He stayed gossipping with Mrs. Drummond until the last minute, then rushed away, reappearing presently in all the glory of his becoming mess-dress.

"He is a fine fellow," said Mrs. Drummond, enthusiastically, when he had betaken himself away in a cab.

"You think he is?" said Basil, whose thoughts had once more drifted back to Zoe Percival.

Mrs. Drummond looked up in surprise.

"Why, Basil!" she said.

"Eh?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"By what?"

"By saying 'Do you think he is?' Of course I think so; I think he is one of the handsomest men I ever saw."

"Yes? Well, it's all right if you think so. I

don't think I should call Walter very handsome myself. He's a dear old chap, of course; but I don't know that I should call him handsome."

"A mere matter of taste," said Mrs. Drummond, as if she did not wish further to discuss the subject.

"It is most curious," she said, later on in the evening, to her Recorder; "I cannot make out what has come to Basil. He seems almost as though he was sorry that Walter has come to Northtowers."

"Do you think so? Don't you think it's fancy? I thought they seemed just as friendly as ever."

The Recorder never saw more than a quarter of an inch in front of his handsome nose, so it was not to be wondered at that he did not see anything of the turmoil that was going on in Basil's inmost soul. Mrs. Drummond, however, was not so easily deceived, and she determined that she would find out, sooner or later, what it was that was troubling her favourite Basil.

It was not until the next afternoon, when Sir Walter had got out of his uniform, and was luxuriating in the comfort of a light biscuit-coloured suit,

that he made any mention of the three young ladies at the Chantry.

"By the bye, Aunt Adelaide," he said, helping himself to another piece of buttered muffin, "who are those girls at the Chantry?"

"The Percivals, dear. Don't you remember them?"

"The Percivals?" doubtfully. "Let me see—oh, yes; that was the old chap who was ill?"

"Yes, he was. They let the Chantry for nine years; that is to say, they let it first for two years, and then the people who had it took it on for another seven."

"That was rather what you would call good luck, wasn't it?"

"Yes; I suppose it was. And then they went abroad, so that old Mr. Percival could have thorough rest and change, and that the children might be educated at the same time. He was always mixed up with everything in the town, don't you know, and I think he got worn out and nerve broke. They have only come back quite recently."

"So I hear."

"They are charming people."

"Yes, I should think they were. Pretty girls?"

"Oh, yes, extremely pretty; particularly Zoe."

"Which is Zoe?"

"Oh, Zoe is the youngest."

"I see. Well, it's all one to me, so far; but if they're such pretty girls, why don't you have them in to tea one afternoon, Aunt Adelaide?"

"My dear boy, they are always in and out. Perhaps they thought, as we had a visitor—as you had only just come—that they didn't quite like to come in to-day."

"I don't quite see why my being here should keep pretty young girls away." Then, taking another piece of muffin, "I say, Aunt Adelaide, your muffins are good."

"Yes, I think they are. Most people make them so hard, don't they?"

"Yes, I suppose they do. Have you got any more downstairs?"

"My dear boy, just touch the bell. Thank you. Your uncle says the muffins here are the only ones he dare eat; those dreadful hard things always give

him indigestion frightfully. Another muffin, Davidson."

"I say, Aunt Adelaide," said Sir Walter presently, "you might take me to call at the Chantry."

"Eh?"

"You might take me to call at the Chantry."

"Oh, my dear boy, you will get to know them soon enough. Mr. Percival is sure to call upon you."

"Oh, yes; but you might take me to call, all the same. I'm sure they'd be very pleased to know me. By Jove! yes, now I come to think of it, I used to know them pretty well. I'll go by myself. I don't need anybody to take me."

"You can't very well go by yourself, my dear boy."

"Oh, can't I? You just wait and see if I can't! Mrs. Percival, if I remember rightly, was a stout old party—a light-coloured woman, with a lot of tow twisted round her head."

"My dear boy! Mrs. Percival had the most exquisite head of hair in England!"

"Regular crown of glory, eh? Is it all her own? By Jove! I always thought it was bought by the yard! I remember she used to wear a green satin gown with white pearl buttons. I remember her quite well. I'll go and call on my own hook. Does Basil know them?"

"Naturally."

"Oh, I thought he seemed a bit queer yesterday when we saw them—kind of shut me up about them. Does old Basil think he's going to keep all the prettiest girls in Northtowers to himself? Because if he does, he makes a mistake. I have come here to live for two years, and he can't want three of them."

"I don't think he does want three of them," said Mrs. Drummond, in significant tones; "but I fancy he's what you boys call very gone on one."

"Oh, is he now, poor old chap! The tall one, of course?"

"Well, yes, I'm afraid it is the tall one," said Mrs. Drummond, a little unwillingly. "Of course it's no good. Poor dear boy, he is not in a position

to marry, and naturally the Percivals will look for their girls to do better; but I can't tell him so."

"I can't think why the chap stays here."

"He's so useful to your uncle, you know."

"Yes, but he's only useful as anybody else could be, and Uncle Roger can't require a secretary very much. It seems a poor sort of living for a chap to settle down to, doesn't it?"

"Oh, but he's going to London to prepare for the Bar, and eat his dinners, and so on."

"Then why doesn't he go?" asked Sir Walter, with uncompromising plainness. "Because time is going on, you know, Aunt Adelaide, and those chaps won't stand still till Basil comes along to hook up a Recordership."

"Well, but he has enough to live on," returned Mrs. Drummond. She felt, poor lady, that the excuse was a lame one, but it was the best that she had at command at that moment.

"To live on in a very poor kind of way," said Sir Walter, brusquely. "You ought to urge him to go."

"He does want to go," said Mrs. Drummond.

"Well, then, you ought not to stop him. It's all very well his pretending to do secretary to the Recorder. Uncle Roger is very well off, and he can quite very well afford to pay a regular secretary. He oughtn't to keep Basil on like this. It's all very well now, but where will he be when anything happens to Uncle Roger?"

"My dear Walter!"

"Well, yes, I know it's none of my business to say so, and it's not polite; but, after all, Basil is my brother, and these are the best years of his life, and the years when he ought really to be working, to be doing something. Why doesn't he go to London?"

"Oh, my dear Walter, the temptations of London!" began Mrs. Drummond, in tragic tones.

"Temptation, my dear Aunt Adelaide—fiddle-de-dee! Don't talk such nonsense as that. The temptations of London are no more than the temptations of Northtowers! Basil must take his chance like every other young fellow—as I have had to do. Of course, if Uncle Roger is going to leave him all his money, and you are going to leave

him all yours, that would make quite another matter of it."

"Oh, no, no. I am going to leave him all my money, because he is like my own child, and always has been—he is much more to me, if you will excuse my saying so, Walter, dear, than ever you were. I brought him up; I had him quite young. I shall leave him every penny that I have. Just a little souvenir to you, dear boy, just one or two things of your dear father's and grandfather's that were given to me, I shall leave to go with the title. Of course, you quite understand, my dear boy, that were you both equal, I should leave my little money equally between you, but it is a mere pittance—not more than a hundred and fifty pounds a year at the outside—and that is all that Basil will have to look to from us."

Sir Walter straightened himself, sat back in his chair, and helped himself to another piece of muffin.

"Then what is the Recorder going to do with all his money?" he asked bluntly.

"The Recorder—your uncle? He is going to leave it, of course, to his own people."

"Oh, is he—is he? H'm! after Basil had done all his work for him for the last three or four years! H'm! is that what you call right—is that what the Recorder calls just? I don't. If that is so, the sooner, if you will forgive my saying it, one of the Recorder's own people comes and does secretary for him the better."

"Well, my dear boy, money is a subject which I never mention to your uncle. My own money I have as and when it comes, and I spend it as and when I please. His own money your uncle will leave to his own relations. Myself, I detest them all. I detest the whole Drummond family. I always have detested them, root and branch, ever since I married your uncle; but, at the same time, it is only justice that your uncle's money—which is Drummond money—should go back to the Drummond family. You know, Walter, I am very conscientious, very strict; I would do right by everybody, and I feel that it is right—particularly as I dislike them so intensely—I feel that it is quite right for me to urge their claims upon my husband."

"I thought you said just now that you never mentioned money to him."

"No, dear; but when I did mention it to him, which was many years ago—in fact, when your poor father died—I said to him then, 'Roger, your money ought to be left to your own family.'"

"Oh! Then you don't think it wrong or unjust to leave Basil with under five hundred a year after bringing him up to no profession? Because you can't call writing my uncle's half-dozen letters of a morning a profession?"

"My dear Walter, if you put it in that way——"

"No, my dear Aunt Adelaide, don't mistake me; I am not putting it in that way to be disagreeable or to be interfering; but you are my nearest relative after Basil; I am very fond of you—excessively fond of you, and I have always looked upon this house as my home, upon the Recorder and yourself in the light of my parents; I wouldn't say anything to vex you for the world, but at the same time I do think that you three are all shutting your eyes to the truth of Basil's position. One of these days he will wake up—when the time has gone by and it is too

late—and he will say to himself, 'What have I done?'"

"Meaning, when I am dead and gone?"

"Well, Aunt Adelaide, again I don't mean to be disagreeable, but you are like the rest of us, you are not immortal. You may live to be very old, but at the same time Basil is losing the best years of his life, he is wasting them. I hear, I have heard it said, people in the town have told me, that he is a good all-round fellow, goes in for all kinds of sport, and spends his three hundred a year on himself. What is he going to do when he hasn't got the Oriol House at the back of him? What is he going to do when his three hundred a year has to pay for his food, his clothes, his lodgings, his drink, his club, his games, his everything? That is much too serious a subject to be passed over lightly without consideration."

For a moment Mrs. Drummond was almost too offended to speak; she sat on in silence, stirring her tea round and round as if she were trying to stir a hole in the bottom of the cup. Then she looked up at her handsome nephew.

"I am afraid, Walter, that you are terribly right," she said, "and that we have been selfish in keeping the boy here. But it is not too late; I will speak to your uncle about it. You were always a steady old slow-coach, Walter, in spite of your being a gay and gallant Dragoon; you always had a head-piece; you are your father over again. I will speak to Basil and also to your uncle; I will make an effort, and you know I generally get my own way, so I will see if I cannot get the matter arranged and Basil put in the right way of preparing for the Bar."

"And it is to be hoped," said Sir Walter, helping himself to muffin once more, "that you will not find that the habit of work has gone by with him for ever."

CHAPTER VIII.

"CHERCHEZ LA FEMME."

"Oh, that men's ears should be
To counsel deaf."
—*Timon of Athens.*

It must be confessed that that talk with her nephew, Sir Walter, succeeded in making Mrs. Drummond feel intensely uncomfortable. Although she was more than old enough to be his mother, Mrs. Drummond had, in common with many other persons who think a good deal of family, an intense respect for Walter Hayes as the head of her house, and the effect of their little talk about Basil was to make her feel, and feel very distinctly, that she had entirely failed in her duty towards her dead brother's youngest son.

She recognised the bare and actual truth of every word that Walter had uttered; and while she was full of admiration for him, for his plain and frank speaking, his blunt yet gentlemanlike remarks, she was full of dismay when she recognised how terribly true they were.

She therefore lost no time in approaching the subject with the Recorder. That very evening, indeed, when they were safe in the sanctuary of their own apartment, she launched forth upon the matter so near her heart.

"My dear Roger," she said, drawing her chair up to the brightly burning fire, and brushing away at her hair as if salvation depended upon it, "there is a little matter, dear, that I want to speak to you about very particularly."

The Recorder put down the evening paper which he was reading, and gave her his best attention.

"Yes, dearest, what is it?"

"Well, Roger, I have been having a talk to Walter to-day about Basil."

"About Basil? Yes?"

"And it has set me thinking."

"Yes?"

"You know, dear boy, Walter thinks—and I must say that I agree with him—that Basil ought to be doing something."

"He is doing something."

"Yes, dear; but he is only doing a little of what one might call child's play—only such work as I could do. Walter thinks that Basil is getting into bad habits here."

"I have never heard a breath against him," said the Recorder.

"No, dear, not in that way; but he thinks that he is not going in for a profession."

"But he is—he is going in for the Bar."

"Yes, but he doesn't get there."

"Time enough, time enough."

"Well, Walter thinks—and I must say that I agree with him—Walter thinks that Basil is wasting his time, living an idle life here in Northtowers. Of course, he is the same as our son, and it is delightful to have him with us; he is a good, dutiful, affectionate boy, too, but that won't get him on in the world; and, of course, he hasn't much money, poor boy—just three hundred a year—and it isn't much to live upon."

"We thought of his going to London and eating his dinners when Walter had left Northtowers," said the Recorder, who was most unwilling to

part with Basil, and the help which Basil gave him.

"That may be two years first; and as Walter puts it, so clearly, Roger, so trenchantly, and with so much soldierly common-sense that really my heart went out to the dear boy—as Walter puts it, even now he may have lost the power of working altogether."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"Well, dear, Basil is nearly four and twenty, and if he stays two years longer, what kind of an age is six and twenty to begin working for a difficult and highly competitive profession?"

"My dear, the Bar is not a competitive profession."

"No, not in the sense of getting in, but in the sense of doing any good when you get there, it is competitive," retorted Mrs. Drummond, sensibly. "After all, Basil has his own way to make, and we ought not to retard him by keeping him in leading strings here when he ought to be out in the world doing for himself. It is not right, indeed it is not right. What is to become of him?"

"Very well, my dear—very well; then the sooner Basil begins to read up the better. I am sure I am willing to give him all the help in my power."

"Yes, dear boy, I know you are; but you must not forget that you are his uncle, that this is his home. If he wants to break off work and go a-pleasuring, he has no compunction in doing it. He would not mind asking you, and you would never dream of refusing him. In London he would have, if he was reading with some barrister, to keep regular hours, and to account for every moment of business. Here it is a perfectly different thing. He says, 'Oh, Uncle Roger, I am going to such and such a cricket match, or to that football match,' or 'I am very busy with these theatricals, or getting up those *tableaux vivants*, arranging for this steeplechase, or that dance,' and where are you?"

"I am just where I was," said the Recorder, who could be as stupid as an owl when it suited his purpose.

"Yes, but where is he? Pleasuring instead of

thinking about his profession?" cried Mrs. Drummond, vexedly. She began to have more sympathy than ever with her nephew, Sir Walter.

"Very well, my dear," said the Recorder, recognising the vexation in her tones; "then we will get him sent off to London. I will write to Crackenborough and see whether he can find room for him."

"Of course if you will do that," said Mrs. Drummond, mollified instantly by the acquiescence to her wishes, "we need have no further anxiety about him, because Basil is clever enough, provided he has a certain spur and incentive to work. And Walter is quite right. It is not a good thing for a young man in the very prime of his youth to be idling round, spending his life as a *flaneur*."

"No, no, I quite agree with you. You are perfectly right, my dear, as you always are. Bless me, what a head the little woman has screwed on her shoulders!"

"I am afraid," said Mrs. Drummond, modestly, as she busily plaited her hair into a tail ready

for the night, "that in this instance it is more Walter's good sense than my own. "I often think, do you know," she went on, looking reflectively at her handsome lord and master, "that it is very true that onlookers see most of the game. Now as soon as ever Walter got here that seemed to strike him at once. And, you know, he is right; and of course one cannot forget that Walter with his title and beautiful old house, and his unencumbered, comfortable income, of his own free will took up a profession in which he has distinguished himself more than once. The day for soldiers to be regarded as mere creatures to stir the feminine susceptibility has gone by for ever. He was explaining to me only yesterday the general routine of his work, and indeed there is no child's play about it, so that I feel that Walter is not speaking from the idle elder-brother point of view; if he were his words would not be half as telling as they are now."

"Yes, yes, I am sure you are right; I will write a line to Crackenborough to-morrow," said the Recorder, who wanted to get back to his paper,

and wished to hear nothing more on the subject of his nephew that evening.

So the following day the Recorder wrote a long private letter to his friend Crackenborough, Q.C., and Mrs. Drummond set herself to pave the way with Basil. Not a little to her dismay Basil took the whole affair with a high hand.

"What the devil has Walter got to with my business?" he demanded, irritably.

"My dear boy, he is your elder brother!"

"Well, what if he is? That only means that he has collared all the money!"

"Oh, my dear, my dear!"

"Well, it is all very well to say, 'my dear, my dear,' Aunt Adelaide, but let Walter mind his business and let me mind mine. I have done very well without Walter so far, and I can do very well without Walter now."

"But, my dear boy, Walter is only anxious for your good—that you should go and really start your work!"

"That's all very well, but I don't intend to leave Northtowers just at present."

"But why?"

"That doesn't matter. I don't choose to do so."

"But why?"

"Never mind; I won't leave. I will go away from here, if you wish it; I will chuck up the bit of work that I do for the Recorder and take my own way; but to leave Northtowers at present I absolutely refuse."

"But, my dear Basil——"

"I don't care, Aunt Adelaide. Up to the present time I have been as dutiful and obedient and as complacent as any aunt and uncle could desire. When I wanted to go to London and to get myself on in the world, neither you nor the Recorder saw the matter in the same light; you made excuses to prevent my going—you kept me here. Now, for some reason or other, you want me out of the way. If you really want me out of the house, out of the way, I will go; but leave Northtowers I will not."

"My dear Basil," said Mrs. Drummond, "it is not likely that we want you to leave the house;

you are like our own son! I was speaking entirely—and so was Walter, I am sure—for your good, and for your good only."

"For my good? Oh, yes, I know; Walter wants me out of the road."

"But why should he want you out of the road? Your roads do not clash nor cross."

"Well, I am not going, Aunt Adelaide, so it is no use saying any more about it. Don't let the Recorder write to Crackenborough, for I won't put myself under him. I have been let to take my own way, indeed, forced to take my own way, up to the present time, and I am not going a way that doesn't suit me now because my brother chooses to come interfering. I am very fond of Walter, and so long as Walter chooses to mind his own business, I am glad to be on the best of terms with him; but when he comes interfering with my business, then I put my foot down—I won't allow it."

It was with dire dismay that Mrs. Drummond repeated this conversation to her elder nephew and to the Recorder.

"I can't think what it means," she said.

Sir Walter laughed.

"My dear Aunt Adelaide," he said, "of course it means a woman. *Cherchez la femme*, and when you have found her, there you have the full solution of the mystery."

Mrs. Drummond's mind at once jumped to the conclusion that the attraction in question was one which she would not care to discuss; but in Sir Walter's mind was exactly the opposite conclusion.

"And it is a lady, of course," he went on. "If it wasn't, he would not have thought twice about going away."

There, however, the discussion came to a standstill. Basil had been given his chance, and he had definitely refused it; and, if the truth be told, the Recorder breathed a sigh of relief that he was not to lose his pleasant and easy-going secretary.

CHAPTER IX.

AT ARM'S LENGTH.

"Without employ
The soul is on the rack."

—YOUNG.

IN due course of time Mrs. Drummond gave a large tea-party to meet her nephew, Sir Walter Hayes. She waited until the Nineteenth were all comfortably settled down in Northtowers Barracks, and until the Recorder and Basil had called upon the Mess. Then she intimated to Walter that she would be glad if he would bring as many of his brother officers as was possible, and Sir Walter, being a highly popular man in his regiment, duly appeared accompanied by half a dozen well-groomed and good-looking dragoons. It was then that he renewed his acquaintance with Mrs. Percival, of the Chantry.

"I have been coming in every day to see you, Mrs. Percival," he said, when his aunt had pre-

sented him to that comfortable lady; "but it is a tremendous business shaking down a regiment after a long and tedious winter march. I hope you will let me come and see you one day very soon?"

"Certainly, Sir Walter; any time that you like we shall be delighted to see you," said she, with perfect ease.

"And I must renew my acquaintance with your young ladies," said he. "I think, of the three, that Madeleine was my chum, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I fancy she was," replied Mrs. Percival, genially. "Yes, I fancy that it was Madeleine."

When, however, Sir Walter was formally made known to the three Miss Percivals, it was to Zoe that he paid the most attention. He asked her to go down and have some tea with him, and he kept her so long sitting in the great oriel window, that his younger brother was reduced to a state of impotent fury. Yet there was no one to whom he could speak, no one to whom he could unburden

himself. Twice he went into the dining-room and found them still there, she laughing and evidently highly amused, and he talking to her with that tender and protective manner which nobody knows better than a cavalry man how to assume.

"That is the meaning of his wanting to get me off to London, the meaning of his tender solicitude for my welfare," his angry thoughts ran. "He had seen Zoe; he wanted me out of the road. That is all his brotherly solicitude is worth. Not an inch out of Northtowers do I budge as long as Walter is in it!"

It was nearly an hour later before he came suddenly upon Zoe Percival, who was sitting in one of the drawing-room window seats.

"Why, Mr. Basil," she said, "what is the matter? You look like a thunder-cloud!"

His face cleared instantly.

"Do I? I didn't mean to do so. Perhaps I was not enjoying myself because I have not been talking to you."

"And whose fault was that?" she said, archly. "You have never been near me. Why, I began

to think that I had offended you, only that I knew that I had done nothing, that my conscience was perfectly clear."

"Your conscience!" He sat down beside her on the broad window-seat. "Your conscience!" he said. "If my own was as clear as yours, I should have little fear of anything."

He was like a good many other young men—he loved to seem a bad lot; he loved to speak of himself as being burdened with sin.

She stood up at once. It was wonderful how instinctively she always seemed to recede from him, if he approached a step nearer!

"Take me to have an ice," she said. "I won't pretend that I want tea, because I have had ever so many teas already; but I would like an ice."

He gave her his arm without a word. Once more the passionate declaration of love was frozen upon his lips, held in check by the modest distancy of her manner. Together they went down again to the dining-room.

The end of that party found him in deeper and

blacker depths of despair than any which had yet troubled him. Should he never be able to speak his mind? What was it that crept in and froze the very words upon his lips? Was it fear? Was it diffidence? It seemed absurd, for he had never been diffident in his life before. Yet if it was neither of these, what was it? It was the dread of her saying no; the dread of finding out that, after all, she did not care for him beyond all others; it was the dread of putting his fate to the touch, and of putting her love to the test; it was the fear of failure that beset him so mercilessly; the fear that Walter, with his superior place in the world, his title, his handsome looks, his assured income, and his military dash, would step in and oust him in Zoe's estimation.

As a matter of fact, in real truth there was little or no military dash about Walter Hayes. He was an extremely good soldier, an enthusiast in his profession, a man who grudged no amount of work to perfect himself in the line which he had taken up. He was extremely good-looking, and

was, moreover, a fine, active, athletic-looking young man.

Of swagger and dash, however, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, there was nothing about him. His manners were well-bred and quiet, his way of expressing himself, if a shade blunt, was always that of a gentleman. He was amazingly popular with his brother officers, without being in the least the show man of the regiment.

He was a man whom most women trusted, and towards whom all dogs were friendly; a man that children did not fly from; one essentially of clean and wholesome life. He was not half such a fine fellow as his brother, having nothing of Basil's devil-may-care, breezy easiness of manner. Mrs. Drummond had called him, in affectionate playfulness, a steady old slow-coach; nobody had ever called Basil Hayes that.

Without being in the least conscious of the fact that he was treading on dangerous ground, Sir Walter Hayes drifted into an intimate friendship with the family at the Chantry. Many an afternoon

he turned in there quite naturally, and sat for half an hour talking to Mrs. Percival, in the absence of her daughters.

She, not unnaturally, made him extremely welcome to her house. No mother of three daughters, however unworldly, could shut her eyes wholly and entirely to the fact that Sir Walter Hayes was a very eligible young man.

Josiah Percival was rich; their only son had gone in for the higher walks of medicine, and was pursuing his studies, not from any need to make a livelihood but wholly from motives of scientific research, under the greatest medical *savants* of Europe. His future was assured; the Chantry would be his after the death of his parents, and an income of some five thousand a year. There are many such families in old cathedral towns, people of much wealth, who live quiet, unostentatious lives, who never dream of launching out further than their fathers have done before them.

Mrs. Percival knew that her husband had left each of his daughters a fortune of twenty-five

thousand pounds, and it was a very natural thing that she should feel that, if one of them wished to marry Sir Walter Hayes, she would be a very good and desirable match for him. So she welcomed the young man to her house for these reasons, besides the natural liking which she had always felt for him.

It would have taken a very clever person, however, to say definitely which of the three sisters was the attraction which took him so frequently to the Chantry. Mrs. Percival herself thought that it was Madeleine, Mrs. Drummond believed that Geraldine was the lode-star, and Basil was quite sure that it was only Zoe who had any attraction for his brother.

He seemed to be no nearer to that young lady than he had been before Sir Walter's arrival in Northtowers. He tried over and over again to speak out, but something always held him back; that same curious, shapeless, undefined dread, which had been with him from the beginning. He fancied more than once, as the weeks went on, that she was looking troubled, and thin, and worn. He had

once or twice caught a wistful look in her dark set blue eyes, such as had smitten him to the very heart. Yet, when Walter was there she seemed to be more at ease, more gay, more light of heart than when he was absent. Was it possible that she was, in a sense, breaking her heart for him? Was it possible that she had given herself, her precious perfect love, to one who was only dallying with it, who was only playing with her? Go to the Chantry when he would, after Walter was free of regimental duties, he seemed to find him there, as much at home as though he were in his own quarters, as kindly affectionate towards Mrs. Percival as if she were his mother.

He could see no difference in Walter's manner towards the three sisters; if anything, his glance was a little more tender as it rested upon the younger. Did he mean to marry her, or did he not? It was a question which Basil Hayes put to himself over and over again. If he did, it was all up with his chance; if he did not, then his brother was spoiling the game for him. He felt that it was hard, unjust, cruel, unbrotherly, take which course

he would; and at last, in the depths of his despair, Basil Hayes summoned up all his courage and determined that he would put an end to his suspense and misery one way or the other at once and for ever.

And having thus determined his course of action, he went at once to the Chantry, determined to seek out Zoe, and to wring an answer from her one way or the other. Alas! alas! He found his brother in possession of the field, in possession of the particular plot which his soul desired; for he was very busy describing to Zoe certain characteristics which he was anxious she should caricature for a big mess joke which was to be played that night.

"Now that is ripping!" Basil heard him say, as he opened the door. "I declare that is the most ripping thing I have seen for ages; it'll fetch 'em. Now, look at this photograph, Miss Zoe, and see if you cannot do something in the same style which will prominently accentuate Murdoch's moustache. He is awfully proud of that moustache, is Murdoch; it's his first duty

and pleasure in life. There's an old story about him, you know, which said that he got it planted in somewhere in Bond Street, grafted on like a rose-bush, don't you know. Can't you embody that somehow?"

"Of course I can," said Zoe's softer accents. "But is it true? Does it grow, or does he get it renewed every now and again?"

"Well, that's a secret nobody quite knows; but they say, I don't know how far it may be true, they say that poor old Murdoch went up to Bond Street to get it renewed one day, and not having any hair exactly the colour by them, they bleached some red hair till they got it exactly to the right colour, and it took root and grew, don't you know; and, of course, after the first, it grew red. Poor old Murdoch's moustache is certainly much redder than it used to be, and that's the way the fellows account for it."

"You will never give me away?" said Zoe.

"Give you away! Of course not; by Jove, I never will!"

There was unmistakable tenderness in the tone,

and Basil Hayes backed out of the room and shut the door behind him gently. For a moment he stood on the landing irresolute; then a sudden impulse seized him. He turned and went down the stairs, and knocked at the door of Mr. Percival's study.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIAT OF COMMON-SENSE.

"To some kind of men
Their graces serve them but as enemies."
—*As You Like It.*

WHEN Basil Hayes heard Mr. Percival's voice saying "Come in," he had no chance of drawing back. He went in quaking very much, feeling a little weak about the knees, and as if he did not quite know what he was going to say. He found the old gentleman sitting in an arm-chair in front of the fire. If the truth be told, he had been indulging in forty winks, and it was against his principles to own that forty winks were ever necessary or habitual to him; therefore he was distinctly cross.

"Oh, it's you, Basil, is it?" he said. "I hope, my dear boy, that nothing is the matter?"

"No, sir, there's nothing the matter. I wanted to speak to you, that's all."

"He might have chosen a better time," said Mr. Percival to himself. Then rubbed his hands

together, and said, aloud: "You had better sit down."

Basil did sit down.

"I wanted to ask you something, Mr. Percival," he began, finding that the old gentleman did not seem inclined to help him out.

"Certainly. Ask away." "Inconsiderate young puppy, I shall say no, whatever it is," was the thought which went through Mr. Percival's brain.

"I want to ask you for something," Basil went on, edging up to the subject as if it were a mad bull and might prove dangerous.

"To ask me for something. Well, then, ask it and have done with it," said Mr. Percival, who was now distinctly impatient.

"Well, the truth is, I want to ask you for Zoe!"

"To ask me for Zoe? What do you mean by 'to ask you for Zoe?'"

"To ask you for Zoe," said Basil, stammering painfully.

"To ask me for Zoe! Why, what do you mean? What does Zoe want that she cannot ask for herself?"

"But it isn't Zoe who wants it, it's I who want it. I want to marry Zoe. I want her for my wife!"

The old gentleman at this sat up, and put a hand on either arm of his chair.

"Say it again," he said, leaning forward and peering into Basil's excited face.

"I want to marry Zoe," said Basil.

"Zoe—my daughter?"

"Yes, Mr. Percival, your daughter Zoe."

"Oh!" A long pause. "What are you going to keep her on?"

"To keep her on? Oh, well, I hadn't thought of that."

"Oh, you hadn't! You're a nice young man to come asking for a girl, when you have not even thought of what you have to keep her on. Go away, and don't talk nonsense!"

"But it isn't nonsense. I'm in downright sober earnest, Mr. Percival."

"Sober earnest? Oh, go away—go away and play ball or shuttlecock, or some such suitable game. Do you suppose, young sir, that I think

so little of one of my daughters as to give her to a husband who does not know whether he can keep her or not? Oh, go away, go and play—that's all you're suited for!"

"Damn!" said Basil.

The old gentleman looked up at him in surprise.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said he. "Damn! Then go away and damn."

"Have you any objection to me, sir?" demanded Basil.

"Any objection? Of course I have, the very greatest objection."

"Then why did you admit me to your house, and allow me to be on intimate terms with your daughters?"

"Lord bless us! I never interfere with who comes to my house. Mrs. Percival looks after all that kind of thing. But when it comes to marrying one of my daughters, and you haven't even thought of what you are going to keep her on, that is my business, that is something that I must manage. Oh, go away, and don't come disturbing me at this hour!"

"What objection have you, may I ask? My family?"

"Your family? Oh, your family's all right, but you can't live on family. At least, if you could, you would be the cleverest couple I ever heard of."

"My profession?"

"Hey?"

"My profession," stammered Basil, trying to bluster, and succeeding very badly.

"Your profession? I didn't know you had one. You are going to have one by-and-by, I fancy I have heard. Well, go and get it, and when you have made a thoroughly good start at it, then I will talk to you."

"I will make a thoroughly good start at it, Mr. Percival," said Basil, trying to speak with dignity, and only succeeding in being very loud.

"There, don't bawl at me, young man, I'm not deaf; all that ails me is a delicate digestion. Go away and make a good start at your profession, come back with a good income, and then we will talk about your marrying one of my daughters."

"But I don't want to marry one of your daughters, Mr. Percival. I want to marry Zoe—I want to be engaged to Zoe."

"I daresay you do, I daresay you do. But you go away, and make something like a profession, and get something to be engaged on."

"It's not my fault, sir, that I haven't been called to the Bar long since," said Basil, indignantly. "My uncle and aunt would never let me out of leading-strings, although I have enough money of my own to have kept me while I was eating my dinners and preparing for the legal profession. If I only had Zoe's promise I could work, aye, slog with the best of them—I should have a motive, an object."

"Yes, well, that's all very fine. What does Zoe say?"

"I haven't spoken to Zoe."

"Oh, you haven't. Well, you've more sense than I gave you credit for. Take care you don't speak to Zoe, that's all."

"Oh, but I must."

"No, you must not. I absolutely forbid you to do anything of the kind. Zoe is very young, much

too young to be engaged, or to be married, to you or to anybody else, and to deliberately tie her down to the heart-breaking work of waiting till her sweetheart makes a living for her, especially when he has to start from the very beginning, is the kind of thing I will never give my consent to."

"Then if I had an income, a position, if I were already called to the Bar, for instance, it would put matters in a different light."

"It might make a difference," the old man admitted.

"If I were in my brother's shoes, for instance?"

"Yes, it would be a different thing."

"It's not fair!" Basil burst out.

"No, perhaps not—perhaps it is. But, young man, you wait until you have three daughters of your own, and then you'll understand my position better."

"I haven't got the chance of having three daughters of my own," snapped Basil.

"Well, you mind what I say, that's all. I decline to consent to any engagement until you are in a proper position to be engaged, and you are not to

speak to my daughter until you are in such a position. There's time enough—she's very young. I daresay you think I'm most hard-hearted and cruel, but by-and-by you will understand that I have acted for the best for both of you."

"But somebody else may come along——"

"If she likes somebody else better, you would have no choice but to submit. At least, that was the doctrine which was taught to and believed in by gentlemen when I was young."

"Am I not to say a word?"

"Not a word. Does your aunt know, does the Recorder know, of your intentions with regard to Zoe?"

"Not a word," said Basil. "Why should I tell them?"

"You live with them, you are like their son. You will, I suppose, be your uncle's heir, all in good time?"

"I don't know! I think not. My aunt has always told me otherwise—that all his money will go to his people."

"Then there is all the more necessity for you to

make good use of your time, while you have health and strength and youth. You are, let me see, four and twenty—or is it five and twenty?"

"Just four and twenty," said Basil, in rather a shamefaced way.

"Yes, four and twenty. I had been enrolled as an attorney-at-law just two years before I was your age. At four and twenty I was junior partner in my father's firm, and I had the entire management of one of the departments in a very large and influential business. You have yet to begin. The last six years you have lost. I have no doubt that you are very proficient in many accomplishments of a most fascinating kind, but they are accomplishments, my good young man, which will never yield you one penny. The fact that you can ride longer on two wheels than any other man in the town will never buy your wife a dress. The fact that you can coach—I think that is the term—coach a lot of foolish ladies and gentlemen into doing badly what they can go to any theatre and see better done for small sums varying from one shilling to half a guinea, will never buy your wife

a carriage. I could mention similar instances of the waste of time that the last six years have been. If you really have any deep feeling of affection for my daughter, you will not grumble at my decision, but you will applaud me for my far-sighted reasonableness in wishing to secure her happiness in her later years—no, don't interrupt me, if you please, I am accustomed to finish what I begin.

"Your affection for my daughter, if it exists, will be the strongest inducement and incentive to you to start now, and make the most of your way in that honourable and distinguished profession which you spoke just now of desiring to enter. It is not easy to master the intricacies of the law; it is not easy to be a good lawyer; it is a much more difficult thing to be a good barrister, because, you see, a man who is a good lawyer can be the commonest, the vulgarest, I may almost say the most uneducated person in the world: he may squint, or have any attribute that is uncomely, but so long as he understands his business, so long as he is sufficiently astute, ahem,

comparatively honest and fairly wide awake, he will contrive to make a living.

"For a barrister many more personal attributes are necessary and requisite if that barrister wishes to make a success in life. He must be able to speak well, clearly, briefly, and to the point; he must also be able to speak on occasion well, clearly, lengthily, and to the point—a most difficult combination, my dear Basil, a most difficult combination. He must be a man of social parts; he must leave behind him all those frivolous accomplishments to which you have given the six years that have gone by. Your successful barrister never dabbles in amateur theatricals, nor *tableaux vivants;* he may play tennis sometimes, and he may trundle himself on two very uncomfortable wheels in moderation; golf is not forbidden him, but is not wise if indulged in too much.

"I have always thought," said the old gentleman, folding his hands over his lean stomach, and patting his toes and heels alternately upon the floor, "I have always thought that the only recreations in which a successful barrister can unharm-

fully indulge himself are in going out to dinner, and in a gift of caricature. It is a most curious thing," he went on, gazing up to the ceiling as if Basil had come upon some quite ordinary errand, "it is a most curious thing that the most successful man, with the weightiest criminal case upon his mind, with all his reputation hanging in the balance, can positively enhance his position by drawing impertinent pictures of the most distinguished persons present in the Court.

"The advisability of dining in the company of others is indisputable. I have always made it a rule through life, Basil, never to refuse an invitation to a dinner, unless absolutely unavoidable. When I was a young man, in the partial or whole direction of a large and influential business, I always acted upon the principle that it was a wise thing to dine with anybody of decent respectability who asked me. You see, you never know what kind of people you may meet; you never know what influential people you may meet; you never know where your next good turn comes from; and the man who has learned to talk well at the dinner-

table is the man who may be presumed to speak well in a court of justice."

"What has all this got to do with Zoe and me?" asked Basil, in a voice of thunder.

Mr. Percival sat upright with a jump.

"Dear me, dear me, my dear boy, I was forgetting! Well, it has nothing to do with either you or Zoe; for the present you and Zoe will have, can have, shall have nothing to do with each other. I am sorry to blight your young hopes, my dear boy, but it is quite out of the question that I could give my consent to a marriage, or even an engagement, with my daughter. When you are in a position to make a settlement upon her—to show that you will be able to keep her in the same style to which she has been accustomed from her birth, then we will speak of the matter in a different light, and, I sincerely hope, with a different termination. For the present, my dear boy," holding out a clean, lean hand, "I can only wish you well, and give you the advice of an old legal man, to lose not a moment in striving to win your laurels in an extremely honourable yet difficult profession."

Basil Hayes got up from his chair.

"Then, Mr. Percival," he said, in a dogged, determined voice, "there is nothing more to be said."

"Nothing," said Mr. Percival, "nothing."

He never went through the form of shaking hands and saying good-bye, but turned and went out of the room, shutting the door with a bang behind him.

"Dear me," said Josiah Percival, folding his hands once more across his stomach, "this has quite upset me; I shall have indigestion to-night to a certainty. What an exceedingly unpleasant young man he can be! I thought he was quite the reverse! Dear me, I hope he won't go straight up to Zoe and propose to her! I wonder what he is doing?"

As a matter of fact, at that moment Basil Hayes was standing on the door-mat saying "Damnation!"

CHAPTER XI.

ALIKE IN LIKING.

"Two children in one hamlet born and bred."
—TENNYSON.

WHEN Basil Hayes found himself standing outside the door of the Chantry his first impulse was to go and find his brother and confide everything to him. Then he remembered that he had left him sitting alone in the drawing-room with Zoe.

He was not very sure that they had been actually alone, the room was so long and so broken up by screens and tall palms that one of the other girls might have been sitting with them.

Still, he was with Zoe, so it was no use trying to seek him out to confide his trouble to him. His next thought was to find Mrs. Drummond, his aunt who had been more than a mother to him. She would understand, he told himself, she would know all that he was suffering, she would be able to sym-

pathise with him over the treatment he had had at the hands of that old curmudgeon, Zoe's father.

But when he turned in at the Oriol House he could not find his aunt anywhere, and the excellent Davidson told him that Mrs. Drummond had gone to tea at the Deanery. He thanked the man with an outward semblance of calm, and when he withdrew, began marching impatiently up and down the long dining-room, wondering what had best be his next move.

"The old screw, the old curmudgeon, what does he care if he breaks Zoe's heart and mine?" he muttered angrily between his teeth. And yet, in his heart of hearts, he knew that the astute old lawyer had been perfectly right in every word that he had uttered, wholly and absolutely right. For was Zoe a girl that he could expect would marry him on nothing? No; most emphatically no! If he were Walter, now, it would make all the difference. He would have been welcome as flowers in May as a son-in-law; his wooing would have sped easily and softly; it would have thriven apace. But he was not Walter; he was only a poor younger son

with a mere pittance that he could call his own, and younger sons were not wanted where there were daughters to settle. He even went so far as to repeat a certain line out of a celebrated poem:

"With a little store of maxims, preaching down a daughter's heart,"

forgetting quite, poor boy, that Zoe's heart had never yet been preached down, and that, so far, she had not been spoken to on the subject. Still, the quotation fitted his frame of mind, and that was the principal thing at such a moment.

He could not see his way clearly at all. If he went straight off to London, put himself, through his uncle's influence, under Crackenborough, Q.C., and worked like the very devil—his phrase, not mine, gentle reader—it would be years before he would be in a position to seek Zoe. Whoever heard of a barrister making a living within five years after starting to prepare for the Bar? Why, it was absurd! And to wait five years for Zoe was an impossibility. It was preposterous, absurd, not to be thought of for a moment. He must evolve some other way out of the difficulty, some way

which would give him Zoe at once. It was simple enough. It meant money. He could have Zoe and welcome, if he would pay for her.

He sat down before the cheerful fire to think out the problem of how he was to make sufficient money to be able to get Zoe without undue delay. He had heard of fellows who had gone to London with a few pounds, and had gone "On 'Change" and made fortunes while other people were talking about it. Why couldn't he do that? He had heard of other fellows who had made pots of money by watching the tapes. That was another speculative business, pretty closely akin to the Stock Exchange. Yet that, even as the Stock Exchange, would have to be learned. Men didn't make money in speculation by instinct. He had a sort of idea that men had to be so long in recognised offices as sort of pupils before they could get on to the Stock Exchange at all; and then to be a chap on 'Change, a City man, even for Zoe—oh, that way wouldn't do at all! He might make a bit during the next racing season; but he shook his head more than doubtfully over that, for his small efforts in that

way had not, so far, been crowned with success. Besides, even if he did make a pot of money one season, the old curmudgeon at the Chantry would never accept that as a guarantee for the future; and even if he could guarantee it, they would not allow Zoe to marry a turf man, a betting man. No, no, that was out of the question. If he went in for the law, why, it would take years before he was through, or, indeed, before he was through in any other profession which they would think good enough for Zoe's husband. And all the time Zoe was going, going! It would not be so hard if they were engaged. But they were not engaged, and Mr. Percival had no intention of allowing them to be engaged. Oh, it was hopeless, hopeless!

He stirred the fire angrily, walked about the room a little more, then took up his hat and went out. His steps led him at first irresolutely across the Chantry garden, then, as he turned into the Close itself, he ran full into Mrs. Dallas, who was on her way home from Evensong.

"Ah, Basil," she said, "is that you? And how is the world using you?"

"Very badly," he replied, savagely.

The gay, bright little woman looked up at him.

"Why, what is the matter?" she exclaimed.

"Everything!" he said.

"Poor boy! What has happened? Come in and have a cup of tea with me, and let me see if I can't cheer you up a little. We shall be all alone. Joe has gone to have a cup of tea with the archdeacon. Come, we will go this way in by the study."

There was a little door which led straight from the Close into the garden of the Dallas's house, and from this again a private door led straight into the minor canon's study.

"Shall we have tea in here?" she said. "It is warm and cosy, and free from visitors."

As she spoke she rang the bell, and when the smart maid answered it, she asked for tea at once, and said:

"Don't say that I am at home, if anybody calls."

Apparently the maid had prepared the tea in

readiness for her mistress's return, for in less than two minutes she reappeared, bringing the tray and a shaded lamp. Then she replenished the fire again, and left them alone.

"Now," said Mrs. Dallas, as she removed her gloves, "tell me what is troubling you?"

"Well, Mrs. Dallas," he said, wretchedly, "I am in love."

"Ah, the old story. Zoe, of course?"

"What—you saw it?"

"Oh, my dear boy, of course I saw it. I saw it ages since. Didn't I tell you the Northtowers girls would go out on strike, if you didn't mind?"

"Oh, yes, so you did." But he was too far gone in misery to smile at the little joke.

"Well, and Zoe has not refused you?"

"I haven't asked her," he said, wretchedly.

"Then, my dear boy, why don't you?"

"I meant to," he admitted. "I meant to ask her to-day, and when I got into the drawing-room, Walter was there."

"Your brother?"

"Yes."

"And was he making love to Zoe?"

"Well, I don't know that he was—exactly; but it was something very much like it."

"Well?"

"Well, Mrs. Dallas, so I went straight down to the old man's study, and asked his consent."

"You went straight down—what, to the Recorder's study?"

"No; to Mr. Percival's."

"Well?"

"And he refused it."

"Why?"

"Well, he said I hadn't anything to keep her on."

"Oh! But you have some money?"

"Yes, I have three hundred a year."

"That's not much," said Mrs. Dallas, thoughtfully. "Three hundred a year certainly isn't much, Basil; but then, you will be your uncle's heir?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so? Then who will—not your brother?"

"Oh dear, no! But, you see, the Recorder has a lot of relations of his own. I shall come in for what my aunt has, but that's not very much."

"What did Mr. Percival say to you?"

"Oh, he prated about his digestion, and what he did when he was a young man—as if that had anything to do with it; and he said a great deal about Zoe's good, and all the other moral platitudes in which people wrap up something intensely disagreeable; but when I tried to pin him down to a definite understanding, he would not have it at any price."

"Then he didn't refuse you?"

"Yes, he did. He said that if it were Walter it would be quite another thing; which, of course, I knew already. And then he said that if I could come back and show that I could keep her in the same luxury in which she has been reared he would not withhold his consent. Of course he wouldn't."

"But what did you want him to say?"

"I only wanted him to say that we might be

engaged. I don't mind going to London, and working like the very—ahem!—like anything you like, you know, as long as I know that it is all right down here?"

"You think someone else may come along?"

"Of course I do. Anybody may come along."

"Of course they may; Zoe is a most attractive girl—much the most attractive of the three. Don't you think it would be rather unfair, Basil, to tie her down, spoiling all her chances, when you really haven't much to offer her? I know it sounds hard, dear boy, but don't you think it is rather hard upon the girl?"

"Not if she is in love with me," he maintained, stoutly.

"Yes; but is she?"

"That's just what I want to know."

Now it happened that Mrs. Dallas had for some little time past been nursing a pet scheme for the settlement of Zoe Percival; it was that she should, in course of time, become Lady Hayes, of Summerhayes. She had known, of course, that Basil admired her; but she had known him so long as a

flâneur, that she had never taken him into her calculations as a serious quantity.

"Why didn't you make sure—why didn't you find out?" she asked, almost abruptly.

"I would find out easily enough if I didn't care so much."

"Ah, yes, yes, it wouldn't worry you then. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. You evidently think that I ought not to let her engage herself to me."

"Not until you have some reasonable chance of marrying; no, I don't think you ought to expect it," she replied, simply. "I think it is very hard upon a girl to have all the tie and anxiety of being engaged, and to have no reasonable prospect of being married. An engaged girl does not get a very good time, unless she is likely to marry soon. I don't think you ought to sacrifice her in that way —I think it is very hard on a girl."

"I suppose it is," he admitted, unwillingly. "And yet, just see the difference between my brother and me. He has only got to lift a finger to be made welcome anywhere—while I——"

"No, no; I don't think you ought to say that, because you—if you were in a fair way of making a suitable provision—would be made welcome anywhere, just the same. I don't think that your brother's title carries very much weight with it, after all; certainly not with people like the Percivals—old-fashioned, simple, quiet people, as unworldly as possible."

"You wouldn't think that, if you had heard old Percival jawing at me——"

"Ah, I didn't say they had no worldly prudence about them—that's quite another matter. But nobody could call the Percivals worldly people; they are as simple and unaffected as they are charming. Mr. Percival would be very wrong, and a very bad father, if he allowed his daughters to drift into engagements which might ruin all their lives. You are not reasonable, Basil, really you are not. I know," the little lady went on, "that if I had a daughter, I should be most awfully particular whom she married."

"And wouldn't you let her marry me?"

"No, not in your present circumstances, and

with only your present prospects, certainly not."

"And would you let her marry Walter?"

"Why, yes, naturally. There would be no reason, if she liked him, why she should not marry Walter—I mean, your brother. He is young, good-looking, popular, and, as far as one can judge, an eminently square man. He has every attribute for a husband such as would satisfy a mother. You see, Basil, I am speaking quite frankly."

"Oh, yes, everybody speaks frankly," said he, rather ill-temperedly.

"Ah, that's not quite fair to say that, because, you know, really you and I are good friends, and always have been, and anything that I could do to make you happy, I am sure you must know that I would do. Why, we have been no end of chums, you and I. But still, my dear boy, that doesn't alter the fact that the world looks upon you in a sense as a detrimental. It is not unkindness which makes me tell you this, it is the simple truth."

"Oh, it is the truth, it is true enough—I know that, bless you. I have had Walter's superiority

dinned into my ears ever since I could remember anything, though never so thoroughly as just of late."

"Then why in the world," said Mrs. Dallas, "do you not set to work and try and make yourself Walter's superior? After all, he is not very rich, he is really no more than your equal in birth, and he is not equal to you in looks. You are clever, you can do anything you turn your hand to—why don't you go off to London like a man, and say, 'I *will* succeed—I *will* make my way—I *will* make myself a name!' You don't know what you can do till you try—but you don't try."

"Everyone knows I have never been let."

"Oh, well, but who was to prevent you, if you had really made up your mind to go? You have your own money."

He looked up at her with ingenuous frankness.

"Of course you are right, in a sense, Mrs. Dallas," he admitted, half shamefacedly; "and if I had really wanted to go, I suppose I should have

gone; but the truth was I was very happy here, and my aunt and the Recorder pressed me to stay, and I just stayed; and now I'm paying for it."

"My poor boy, I'm afraid you are," she said. "But I believe the very best advice I can give you is to go off to London at once, and leave all the rest to time and chance."

"And leave Walter here?" he blurted out.

The words slipped out almost involuntarily, and Mrs. Dallas looked up in surprise.

"Oh, that is what is in your mind?" she said, slowly. "It is absurd to be jealous of your own brother."

"I believe," he rapped out, "that I am a good deal more than jealous of my own brother. I believe that I hate him!"

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. PERCIVAL'S OPINION.

"He jests at scars who never felt a wound."
—*Romeo and Juliet.*

MRS. DALLAS faithfully kept, even from the Reverend Joe, the confidence which Basil Hayes had reposed in her; but the gay and volatile little woman did not, on that account, think it necessary to keep her eyes shut. She saw that Basil Hayes' visits to the Chantry had practically ceased. She saw that his brother Walter found his way there almost every day.

"Dear me," she said to herself one day, as she watched him part, curtly, from his brother at the door of the Oriol House, "why can't the tiresome boy go to London and begin work, instead of hanging about here and trying to spoil Walter's chances? It is like the dog in the manger; he can't have her himself, because the old gentleman won't allow it—and the old gentleman is quite

right—and he won't let Walter have her, because he's everlastingly in the way to make things unpleasant for both of them."

It must be added that the thought of Zoe's feelings never entered into the little woman's calculations. If the truth be told, she so much more admired Sir Walter of the two herself, that she jumped to the conclusion that Zoe would also prefer him. Zoe's father and mother were by no means so sure, for Mr. Percival had naturally enough, and as in duty bound, disclosed to his wife the conversation which he had had with Basil Hayes.

"Dear, dear," said Mrs. Percival, in comfortable dismay, "what a tiresome thing, to be sure! That is the worst of having girls, Josiah; there are always lovers worrying one. As if Basil Hayes could not have gone on being happy and friendly with the girls, without wanting to marry them."

"My dear, he doesn't want to marry *them*," corrected Mr. Percival, in his most precise tones, "he wants to marry Zoe."

"But he can't marry Zoe, Josiah; it's absurd a

young man with three hundred a year wanting to marry Zoe, or any girl in our station of life. Why, it would only just dress her and any children that were there, and she would want as much as that for her pocket-money."

"That was what I represented to the young man, and that is why he is so furiously angry with me," said Mr. Pervcival, querulously. "I'm sure he was so violent, and he made such a scene, that he has upset me completely; my digestion has never been right since. And such behaviour is so likely to make one anxious to include him in one's family!"

"Ah, well, my dear, boys will be boys, and you were well off when you met me. You had only to ask Papa, to get his consent quite easily. Perhaps if you had been poor, he would have looked at the matter in a different light."

"If I had been poor, Georgina," said Mr. Percival, in a severe tone, "I should never have wished to drag you down into the depths of my poverty."

"Well, I don't know so much about that," said Mrs. Percival, in her most comfortable tones. "I

expect you would have been just like other young men, Josiah, dear. If you couldn't have had me, you'd have wanted me just the same. But, of course, it is out of the question his being engaged to Zoe until he has something like a position. Of course, if the Recorder and Mrs. Drummond were going to make him their heir, as they ought to do, after bringing him up in that way, it would make quite another matter of it."

"Do you think Zoe is touched at all?"

"Well, I really couldn't say, Josiah. You never know with girls what they really think, they are so difficult to understand. Two or three times lately I have thought she has looked rather dull, and as if her thoughts were far away; and I've seen her watching the door, but whether it's Basil or his brother, I really don't know."

"Nor should I try to find out if I were you," said Mr. Percival, who, during the whole of his legal career, had gone on the principle of leaving well alone, and had found it pay.

Mrs. Percival, however, did not allow the matter to drop. She took an opportunity of bringing the

question forward with her neighbour at the Oriol House, not divulging the whole truth, but gradually working round to the subject, so that in the end Mrs. Drummond told her that she knew that Basil was hoping to marry Zoe eventually.

"Yes, so I understood from my husband," said Mrs. Percival, in a lugubrious tone, and with a sad, motherly shake of the head. "I am sure I was most sorry for the poor boy, and yet I couldn't but say that Josiah was right. You see, my dear Mrs. Drummond, although Basil is such a dear boy, such a fine fellow in every way, there is the house rent, and the butcher's bill, and all the rest of it to be thought of."

"Of, yes, of course, Basil is much too young to be married; I told him that it was quite absurd."

"Of course, if he were the Recorder's heir, it would be another matter."

"The Recorder's heir!" echoed Mrs. Drummond.

"Yes," said Mrs. Percival, taking a great interest in the bubbles on the top of her tea.

"But Basil is not the Recorder's heir," said Mrs. Drummond, sharply. "Basil will have what I have, and that is under two hundred a year; and that is the outside of what he expects from us. Basil must make his own way. I am most conscientious, Mrs. Percival—the most conscientious woman, I think, that ever existed—and, as I have told Basil several times, I should never dream of expecting that my husband should leave any of his money to my relations—it would not be right, nor fair, nor just to his own family. After all, any private money that he has is Drummond money, and to Drummonds it must go. I do not say that he might not leave Basil a legacy—he is very fond of him—but a legacy is one thing, and to be the heir is another. It is a matter that I never speak about to the Recorder in any way whatever; I have not spoken of it since my dear brother died and the boys came to live with us. Basil must work his own way in the world as other young men have had to do.

"Then why don't you make him do it, Mrs. Drummond?"

"I have tried to make him do it. Walter blew me up sky high when he first came here, because Basil was not in London working for the Bar. He talked most seriously about it; really I never felt so small in all my life. And I spoke to the Recorder immediately about it, and I spoke to Basil himself, too. I really tried my very best to arrange everything, and get him started off. But Basil absolutely refused to go, so what was I to do? I couldn't turn the boy out into the street, could I?"

"No, you couldn't turn the boy out into the street, of course not; but I think you ought to have urged him to go earlier. I have no sympathy with young men who idle their time away."

"But Basil is secretary to his uncle."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Percival, with all the contempt of a woman who has been for years associated with a large business connection—"oh, yes, he is acting as secretary to his uncle, I know, but that is not real work. Helping his uncle a little with his correspondence will never advance his interests in the world—you know that as well as I

do. For my own part, I think that there are great capabilities in the boy; I like him extremely, and provided he could keep her he would be quite welcome to marry one of my girls, if one of my girls wanted to marry him."

"Of course, that goes without saying," said Mrs. Drummond, with a sudden accession of dignity which would have told a more observant woman than Mrs. Percival that the idea of a Percival being unwilling to marry a Hayes was one of the most preposterous suggestions that had ever been made.

It is an old saying which says, "One man may lead a horse to the water, but twenty cannot make him drink"; and certain it is that all the combined efforts of the Recorder and his wife, Sir Walter Hayes, Mrs. Percival and Mrs. Dallas, did not succeed in sending Basil Hayes off to London to start working at the profession which he had chosen.

"No, no," he said, "I am not going to London at present. We agreed that I should remain here as long as Walter was here, and now Walter has

come, I refuse to be turned out. There is only one condition upon which I would go to London, and that condition is not likely to be fulfilled."

He meant, of course, poor boy, that he would go willingly enough if Zoe were his promised wife. His advisers understood his meaning well enough, and Mrs. Drummond went so far as to hint to Zoe's mother that an engagement—quite kept to the family circle—might surely be permitted. Mrs. Percival, however, promptly vetoed any such suggestion.

"No, I am really sorry to refuse you anything, because you and I have always been good neighbours and good friends; but just think, my dear, if it was a pretty young daughter of your own, and you were to let her launch upon a very doubtful engagement to a young man without any profession whatever, do you think that any satisfactory conclusion could come of it? If you like to ask the Recorder to put down twenty-five thousand pounds to-morrow in settlement on her, I have no doubt that my husband would put down a similar amount."

"I really couldn't ask the Recorder anything of the kind, it would be against my conscience," said Mrs. Drummond, in quite a frightened tone.

"Well, then, it goes against my conscience to say yes where I know that I ought to say no. Besides, there is Josiah to be considered. If I were to coax the consent out of him, I should never hear the last of it. No, no, your boy must wait, as any other boy has to do, and he ought to be thankful that he has got something to work for!"

So a couple of months went by. Basil Hayes only saw Zoe when they met in other people's houses.

"You never come to see us now," she said to him one day, in a very reproachful tone.

"No," he said. "I have been ousted in favour of my brother."

"Oh, Mr. Basil, how can you say so? I think it is very unkind of you not to come."

But Basil did not go—he could not go in the face of Mr. Percival's fiat.

It was a miserable and an unhappy time. The once pleasant and happy relations between the Oriol House and the Chantry were completely changed,

and apparently at an end. The only person who went freely to both houses was Sir Walter Hayes. Mrs. Drummond took him severely to task for not considering his brother.

"Well," he said, "if my brother is such a precious young ass as to prefer loafing about doing nothing, and making a fool of himself, instead of setting to work for the woman he professes to care for, I don't see why I should shut myself out from the pleasantest house I know. My shutting myself out of the Chantry won't help Basil in the least. Besides, I've got a pair of eyes in my head, as well as he has, and I admire the Misses Percival very much."

"You admire the Misses Percival very much? Which of them?" Mrs. Drummond looked startled.

"Well, really, that's rather begging the question, isn't it, Aunt Adelaide? I will tell you when anything is settled."

"You are not thinking of Zoe?" said Mrs. Drummond.

"Well, perhaps I am, perhaps I am not. It doesn't matter to anyone else, does it?"

"If you are thinking of Zoe——" began Mrs. Drummond, hotly.

"Well, Aunt Adelaide, if I am thinking of Zoe—which I haven't by any means acknowledged—the question, in this case, of whether she will have me or not, is for the lady to decide. In Basil's case it was for her father to decide, and he did decide it very rightly and properly. I have not said that I am going to ask one of the Misses Percival to marry me, but if I do I hold that I have a perfect right to do so, and to marry any one of them that I like, and that likes to marry me. You get Basil off to London——"

"And out of my way," said a voice in the doorway.

"Oh, lord!" Sir Walter fairly groaned. "Here's melodrama in private life. My dear Basil, I am sorry you are making such an arrant ass of yourself, but——"

"Take those words back!" thundered Basil.

"I shall certainly not take them back. Why should I? I meant them."

"Will you take those words back?"

"No, I won't take them back. I never say anything that it is necessary to take back."

"Not about going to the Chantry?"

"No, certainly not."

"If you don't take those words back——"

"I beg that you will have no unseemly quarrel in my presence," said Mrs. Drummond, rising, and drawing her small figure up to its full height. "Basil, I am ashamed of you! Do you remember where you are? To make a low quarrel in a lady's presence—I never heard of such a thing in my life. Shake hands with your brother at once—I insist upon it. Of course, Walter has a perfect right to go to the Chantry as much and as often as he chooses. You are letting your so-called love affair get the better of your good feeling and your manners. Shake hands this moment; and, pray, never let me again hear anything so near a vulgar quarrel between you as long as I live!"

"Shake hands, old chap," said Sir Walter; "I hadn't any intention of quarrelling with you."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FUTURE LADY HAYES.

"The sunniest things cast sternest shade."
—HOOD.

WHEN Sir Walter Hayes held out his hand to his brother, Basil had no choice but to accept it; but he laid his hand in his brother's with no very good grace, and immediately afterwards left the room.

"Aunt Adelaide," said Sir Walter, when the door had closed behind Basil, "if this goes on Basil will go to the bad."

"Oh, my dear boy, don't say that!"

"I do say it, and I mean it. I never saw a chap make such a fool of himself in my life; he is like a child crying for the moon! And the beauty of it is, he hasn't asked the girl at all—he doesn't know whether she would take him?"

"I suppose he feels pretty sure on that score," said Mrs. Drummond.

"Well, that's as it may be. I don't see why he need make such a precious ass of himself. Why, he was ready to eat me alive! And, after all, I cannot but sympathise with old Percival; he is perfectly right in his objection."

"Yes, dear, but you could hardly expect Basil to agree with you."

"I suppose not. It's a pity you didn't get him off to London earlier."

He did not, however, attempt to argue the point further; he knew that Basil was his aunt's favourite; that his brother, in fact, stood to her in the light of her own son.

The immediate result of this small altercation was that Basil Hayes, after duly consulting his uncle, began vigorously reading up certain law books. He did not acquire much knowledge of the law, it must be confessed, for although he gave up most of his outdoor life, and frequently complained of headache, he found the picture of Zoe Percival so continually between his eyes and the page which he was reading, that his mind was blank to everything else.

His health, of course, suffered visibly. Since he had left school he had, with the exception of attending to his uncle's not very voluminous correspondence, not been accustomed to apply himself to brain work; he had led a life which was almost entirely one of outdoor pursuits, and the sudden change to a sedentary occupation told upon him most frightfully. He began to get dark circles round his eyes and a hunted look on his face.

He never went near the Chantry, but he dogged Zoe Percival's footsteps with a persistence which was little short of terrifying to her father and mother. He did something which was more foolish, for he began to keep a diary. And Mrs. Drummond watched his every look with an anxiety which was pitiful to behold. At last she sent a note up to the Cavalry Barracks, asking Sir Walter to come down and see her.

"Walter," she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Good. What is it, Aunt Adelaide?"

"I want you to give up going to the Chantry."

"Why?"

"Oh, because Basil is so unhappy. Really, Walter, it is killing me, this dreadful life that we are living now. He is breaking his heart for that girl."

"Well, Aunt Adelaide, I am very sorry for that, but really I do not think that Zoe Percival is breaking her heart for Basil."

"She hardly could be. You see, she doesn't know what has taken place; her people have kept it from her, most foolishly, I think. It would be so much better to have it out, and let them settle it for themselves. After all, if a girl is in love with a young man, she can't go running around and telling everybody about it; and she possibly doesn't know how entirely poor Basil is in love with her."

"No, I don't think she does," said Sir Walter, deliberately; "and I don't think that she will be particularly edified when she does find it out."

"Oh, Walter!"

"Well, Aunt Adelaide, I am very sorry for Basil; but at the same time I think he is an awful

ass. You wanted my opinion, and I have given it to you."

"Will you give up going there?" said Mrs. Drummond, in desperation.

"No," said Sir Walter, "I will not."

"Why not?"

"Because I cannot. I should not be right to do so. I have my own reasons for going there."

"Which of them is it, Walter?"

"Well, if you must have it, Aunt Adelaide, it's Zoe."

"Walter!"

"No, Aunt Adelaide, don't say 'Walter!' as if you thought I had stolen my brother's sweetheart from him. We don't know that she ever cared for him at all; and even if she did care for him, we know perfectly well that her parents would never allow an engagement between her and Basil. Basil is a very good-looking young man, and a very attractive young man, but at the same time he is not all the world and his wife; and if Zoe prefers me, why——"

"Prefers to be Lady Hayes, you mean!"

"Oh, well, put it that way if you will; the taunt does not annoy me, nor affect me in any way."

"You have proposed to her?"

"No."

"You have made love to her?"

"If you like to put it so; but I am going to ask her father's consent to-day."

"You are!"

"Yes, I am."

"And what am I to say to Basil?"

"Well, Aunt Adelaide, I am very sorry, but I really cannot be false to myself, to my own instincts, and to the girl I love—to the girl whom I know loves me—because Basil chooses to fancy her. I am sorry for Basil—I have said so—but, as I said in the beginning, it is for the lady to decide this question, and apparently this lady has decided it."

"You understand each other?"

"I think so."

"And you are going to propose for her to her father?"

"Yes."

"And then to be married at once?"

"I suppose so—we have nothing to wait for."

"What am I to say to Basil?" reiterated Mrs. Drummond.

"Ah, that I cannot tell you."

"What will Basil say?"

"He can say nothing. He must abide by the lady's decision, as I should have had to do if she had preferred him to me."

"As if Basil would have a chance with worldly people against your title, your income, your place."

"Oh, no, I can't allow you to say that, Aunt Adelaide; that is absolutely absurd! Man for man, Basil and I are very much on an equality, so far as looks, position, and all the rest of it goes; but of the two I am much the superior both in experience, in temperament, and in sound common-sense; I shall make Zoe a much better husband than ever Basil would have done."

"You have no right to say that, Walter."

"I have every right to say it, my dear Aunt

Adelaide, and I repeat it—a much better husband than Basil would ever have done. I am very sorry for his disappointment, but he has made an arrant ass of himself, and I am afraid, if he goes bleating around, that he will get very little sympathy from anybody. After all, you know, he had the first innings."

"If you can call it an innings."

"You mean because he was not in a position to marry? Well, that was your fault and the Recorder's; you took the charge of him, and you neglected him, as most likely you would not have neglected your own son. I told you my opinion as soon as I got here, and I still hold to it. Basil owes you no thanks, Aunt Adelaide, nor the Recorder either, for allowing him to waste the best years of his life here fooling around as a *chevalier des dames*."

"He has not been fooling around very much lately, Walter," said Mrs. Drummond, with dignity.

"No, Aunt Adelaide, that is true; on the contrary, he has gone about for weeks past like a bear with a sore head, looking the personification of

gloom and misery and sulkiness. I have asked him to dinner at least a dozen times; he always curtly refuses, without giving me a reason. I met him in the street yesterday when I was walking with Fitzmaurice, and he gave me a nod such as made Fitzmaurice ask who the devil that Johnnie was—why the devil didn't somebody teach him manners? It was a pleasant thing for me to have to confess that it was my brother."

Mrs. Drummond sat back in her chair with a sigh.

"It is a dreadful thing," she said; "only you two in the world, and you cannot keep friends."

"Nay, nay, don't blame me, Aunt Adelaide; it is not I who wouldn't keep friends with Basil, but Basil who is continually and persistently out at elbows with me. I suppose he will make it a standing quarrel when my engagement to Zoe is announced, and he would never believe me if I were to assure him in all good faith that he never had the ghost of a chance with her."

"The little minx!" exclaimed Mrs. Drummond; "what does she want—what does she want?"

"I think, most of all, Aunt Adelaide, she wanted a husband that she could respect. At all events, Aunt Adelaide, I will ask you not to call my future wife names; I know you are vexed for Basil, but that is a subject on which I am, and I hope always shall be, extremely touchy."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Walter; I forgot—that is, I didn't think of her in the light of your future wife—pray forgive me and forget it. But I am as fond of Basil as if he were my own son, and naturally I am upset that he should be in trouble, poor boy."

Sir Walter went away a few minutes later, leaving Mrs. Drummond sitting alone by the fire. For a few minutes she did not move, then she stretched out her hand and rang the bell.

"Oh, Davidson," she said to the servant who answered it, "I am not at home this afternoon; I do not wish to see anybody."

"Very good, m'm," was the man's reply.

Davidson withdrew, closing the door softly behind him, and Mrs. Drummond went back to her thoughts again. So the crash had come at last!

Walter was, even now, uttering the words which would put an end to Basil's love story for ever! She felt stunned and helpless in the face of this great and inevitable catastrophe which she was powerless to avert.

"What will Basil say? What will be the effect upon him after all the weeks of anxiety which he has gone through?" she asked herself. She was afraid to answer the question, even in her own mind, and she determined, as she sat there alone, that she would not be the one to tell Basil that his dream had come to an end.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONGRATULATIONS—AND DOUBT.

"People who are always taking care of their health are like misers, who are hoarding a treasure which they will never have spirit enough to enjoy."

—STERNE.

AFTER all, Sir Walter did not speak to Mr. Percival first. The servant who let him in told him that Mr. Percival was not at home, but that he had gone out with the mistress. Sir Walter then asked whether the young ladies were within, to which the servant replied that he believed Miss Zoe was at home.

So Walter was ushered into the long drawing room, and a moment later Zoe came to him. He had made up his mind to speak that day, and he spoke then and to some purpose, for when Mr. and Mrs. Percival arrived in time for afternoon tea—five o'clock to the minute—Sir Walter got up from the couch on which he was sitting by Zoe, and went straight across the room to her mother.

"Mrs. Percival," he said, "I have been asking Zoe to marry me; I hope that you and her father will give us your consent."

So it was all arranged quite simply and naturally, and Zoe, who had remained at home alone on account of some trifling indisposition, became the domestic heroine of the hour.

Mr. Percival's reception of the news was characteristic enough.

"Delighted, I am sure," he said, "most delighted and charmed." Then, with an anxious look at the clock, "You shall come down to my study and talk to me a little later on. I never attempt to do two things at once. Zoe, my dear child, it is one minute past five; I shall be obliged to give Moore notice, he is always late with meals! Ring the bell, Zoe." At that moment the door opened, and the tea-tray, followed by Moore, appeared. "Late again, Moore," said Mr. Percival, in an unctuous tone.

"I beg your pardon, sir, the cathedral clock has not struck yet," replied Moore, respectfully, yet in a tone of conscious innocence and rectitude.

As he settled the last plate in its place the four quarters chimed out from the tall cathedral tower, followed immediately afterwards by five booming strokes.

"Then this clock is wrong," said Mr. Percival, indignantly. "Zoe, my dear, I wish you would step in, when you happen to be in the High Street, and tell Jenkinson that he must take the clock away and attend to it at once."

"But, Father, the clock is only a minute fast; surely it is not worth going to Jenkinson for that?"

"I dislike having any uncertainty about my meal times," said Mr. Percival, irritably; "nothing upsets me so much. I like all the clocks in the house to be showing the same time."

"Very dangerous thing to like that, sir," said Walter Hayes. "Did you never hear the story of the old gentleman who made a vow that he would get seventy clocks to strike at the same moment?"

"No, no," said Mr. Percival; "I never heard that story."

"He never did get 'em all right, but he went mad in trying to do it," said Sir Walter, helping

himself deliberately to a hot scone reeking with butter.

It was remarkable with Mr. Percival that he never pursued a subject which was likely in any way to turn to his detriment. He did not notice the story of the gentleman and his seventy clocks, but instead, directed the full force of his attention upon the choice morsel which Sir Walter had just taken between his finger and thumb.

"Are you going to eat that?" he said, pointing to the buttered scone.

"Certainly I am."

"Ah," with a long breath, "what a rod in pickle you are laying up for yourself."

"Not at all, sir; not at all."

"But you are. If you had the digestion of an ostrich it would not hold out against such diet as that."

"You used to be very fond of hot scones, Josiah," said Mrs. Percival, mildly.

"Did I?"

"Yes, Josiah, extremely fond of them."

"And I have paid for it since," replied the old

gentleman, in a voice full of the most serious import.

He descanted, as he disposed of his tea and tartine, on the necessity of laying up a happy old age by taking the greatest care as to diet in early and middle life; but when, half an hour later, he took Walter down to his own sanctum for a little chat over his affairs, he proved himself to be the same astute, clear-sighted man of business as had once been the head of the great legal firm which still bore his name. He professed himself to be thoroughly well pleased with his daughter's choice—as indeed he was, and had every reason to be—and when the two men had settled the business side of the interview, he coughed in a way that told Walter Hayes that there was still something left for him to say.

"I—I—I feel a certain delicacy in trenching upon another matter, my dear Walter," he said, at last; "but may I ask whether you are aware that your brother had an idea of marrying Zoe?"

"Yes, Mr. Percival, I know that my brother

wanted to marry Zoe; but I take it that Zoe's own wishes are paramount in such a matter."

"Certainly so, quite so, I agree with you. I think I ought to tell you that Zoe does not know that Basil proposed to me for her. I could but treat his proposal as a preposterous scheme which I could not, as a business man, or as a father, entertain for one moment. I do not wish to say one word of unkindness, but between ourselves, Walter, I do not think that the Recorder and Mrs. Drummond have acted very wisely regarding Basil. He has wasted the best years of his life."

"I told him so when I came here first, sir; I also told my aunt exactly what I thought. She was ready to quarrel with me over it, but I brought her round to what I considered reason, and she did her best to get him to go to London and begin legitimate work. Unfortunately she was unable to make any impression upon him. Basil is as strong —as headstrong—as he is high. He has got this idea into his head about Zoe, and until Zoe is married to somebody else he will never be cured of

it. It is a thousand pities; my brother has the making of a fine fellow in him."

"I don't know," said Mr. Percival; "I don't know. He has not shown himself in very good colours since his interview with me. He has made my daughter appear conspicuous, for one thing, and he has behaved in a very foolish, in a very—I had almost said in a very ungentlemanlike manner. For this reason I shall be very glad to have Zoe's future decided on. The only thing was that I wished you to know that he had such an idea in his mind."

"Oh, he makes no secret of it," said Sir Walter; "he makes no secret of it. Perhaps, when he realizes that Zoe really does not care for him, and is not a poor princess shut up by a cruel father in an enchanted tower, he will make up his mind to settle down and begin life in real earnest."

"He is on friendly terms with you?" said Mr. Percival, in a tone of inquiry.

"Well, he throws a nod at me when we meet, and that is about all the intercourse we have had for some weeks past. I have done my best to show

him what a foolish part he is acting, and he, perhaps not unnaturally, is very much inclined to resent it. Of course, you know, Mr. Percival, the Recorder is his guardian, and I never, although I am five years older than he is, in any way come the elder brother over him. If I had thought for one moment that Zoe cared for him, I would have stood on one side, and would not have tried my luck; but, so far as I can tell, Zoe has never cared for anybody but me, and I have always held that the lady's wish in all such cases is law."

"Well," said Mr. Percival, "it will ease my mind to have told you this. I am very well satisfied that you should be Zoe's husband; I hope that you will be very happy together—that you will be as happy, when you are my age, as I am with Mrs. Percival."

So the engagement between Zoe Percival and Walter Hayes was decided. Sir Walter, after staying an hour or so in the Chantry drawing-room, went into the Oriol House. He found Mrs. Drummond sitting precisely where he had left her.

"Aunt Adelaide," he said, "I have come back to tell you that everything is settled."

"And that you and Zoe are engaged?"

"Yes, we are engaged. You will wish me happiness, won't you?"

"Oh, Walter," she cried—"oh, Walter! How can I wish you happiness when you are breaking my poor boy's heart?"

"Nonsense, nonsense! How can he break his heart for something that he has never had?"

"Oh, yes, yes; I have no doubt that she prefers you, but you are breaking my poor boy's heart! How am I to tell him?"

"I will write to him if you like?"

"No, no, he shall not have the news in that cruel way! My poor boy! Oh, how I dread it! I cannot think of you, Walter! Of course, you are my own nephew—my dear brother's eldest son and the head of my family, and, of course, I wish you to be happy—I should be an unnatural wretch if I did not; but I cannot say that I am glad that of all the women in the world you have just chosen the one that my poor boy had set his heart upon. It is hard upon him—very hard."

"My dear Aunt Adelaide," said Walter, "what is

hard upon Basil is that he has been allowed to come to his age without being in a fair way to make a suitable provision for a wife. He ought to be now grinding in London, without a thought in his head about wives and marrying. You have great influence over him; do let me entreat you to use that influence to the only end which can be of any real service to him! Don't let him idle his time here any longer!"

"He is not idling, Walter—he has not idled for weeks, poor boy; he is quite pale with work, his eyes have black circles under them; he hasn't been to a single enjoyment for weeks past, he has given up all the pleasures of life; and all for a girl who doesn't care for him, a girl who is dazzled by a title!"

"No, no, Aunt Adelaide, I cannot allow you to say that. But, however, I must go; I have to dine at mess to-night, for I have a man dining with me, and I must leave you. Pray do you try to smooth things over as well as you can. I know that it is putting a disagreeable task in your hands, but nobody can do it so kindly and so

gently as you will; do you let Basil know what has happened, and try to make him see that he has but one course open to him, to try to be a man!" He bent down and kissed her. "You haven't congratulated me yet, Aunt Adelaide," he said, with a certain amount of yearning in his voice.

"Oh, yes, yes, I congratulate you," said Mrs. Drummond, heaving a deep sigh; "I congratulate you, and still more do I congratulate Zoe Percival —still more. And for my boy's sake I will do my best to make him see how hopeless his love has been from the first. Yes, I will do it for my poor boy's sake."

CHAPTER XV.

THE REALIZATION OF THE WORST.

"What folly will not a pair of bright eyes make pardonable."
—THACKERAY.

MRS. DRUMMOND waited till the last moment before she went to change her day dress for a tea-gown, so anxious was she that nobody should break the news to Basil but herself. Basil, however, did not return home until after his usual time; indeed, the Recorder and Mrs. Drummond were already seated at the table before he made his appearance.

Mrs. Drummond looked at him anxiously as he sat in the full light of the lamp at the side of the table. She saw with a sinking heart that he was looking drawn and haggard, with dark lines under his eyes, and with an air of extreme depression pervading his entire person. He talked a good deal, but though his conversation was brilliant it was caustic, bitter, and unlike his old genial self. Mrs. Drummond sighed for the time when he had been

the very light of their life, bringing them in smart, genial scraps of news, told in the most amusing way, and with never a word of ill-nature to take off from their charm. He was still brilliant, still clever, still amusing enough, but it was a different personality to the old Basil whom she so intensely and bitterly regretted.

"Are you coming upstairs, Basil, or are you going out?" she asked him, as she left the room.

"I was not going out, Aunt Adelaide, I was going to work," he answered.

"I wish that you would come and sit with me for a little while before you begin," she said, gently. She knew that there would be no work for him that night, but she did not know otherwise how to deal with him.

"All right, I'll come up as soon as I've finished a cigarette," he replied.

She had warned her Recorder to keep out of the way, so when Basil made his appearance in the drawing-room he found his aunt alone.

"Come and sit down here, Basil," she said, patting the sofa on which she sat.

Something in her tone made him look at her more closely.

"You have something to tell me, Aunt Adelaide," he said, quickly. He did not sit down, but stood before her on the hearthrug. "What is it?"

She looked at him pitifully.

"My dear boy," she said, "I have a piece of news for you which I am afraid will give you great pain."

His mind jumped to the truth at once.

"She is going to be married?"

"She is going to be married," said Mrs. Drummond, simply.

"And to whom?"

"My dear boy," said the little woman, rising from her seat, and putting her hands upon his shoulders, "there is only one person to whom she is likely to be married."

"Not Walter?"

"Yes, dear boy, Walter."

There was a long pause, during which he looked at her incredulously.

"So Walter has supplanted me!" he said, at last.

"Well, dear boy, we can scarcely call it that."

"You can call it what you like, but the thing is the same."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Drummond, in a trembling voice, "I need hardly assure you of my feelings towards you; you know that where you two are concerned, you and Walter, you take the first place, and always will do so, and I think, perhaps, that you will allow me to say things to you which you would not hear from others. Dear boy —my more than son—you must not forget that you have never spoken to Zoe herself."

"Zoe knew."

"But you had never spoken?" looking at him anxiously.

"I have never asked her to marry me. How could I?"

"No, dear, that is what I mean. And, of

course, Walter felt that her father's objection would not have been—at least, it was not very likely that her father's objection would have been—done away with, and——"

"And so Walter took the chance he had, and supplanted me. You may smooth it over, Aunt Adelaide, you may call black white if you like, and white crimson, but you can't alter the fact that my only brother—my father's heir, the one who took everything, leaving me with a pittance—came and stole away my ewe-lamb from me. You can make nothing else of it. She was mine—the one thing in the world that I desired. He could have married, with his looks, his title, his income, his place in the world, he could have married where he chose, he could have married anybody; but he must needs take my one ewe-lamb from me. A right clever thing to do, Aunt Adelaide—an achievement for a man to be proud of. I suppose he came and told you to-day?"

"Yes. He asked me to tell you."

"Wasn't he even man enough to come and tell me himself?"

"Well, he suggested it," said Mrs. Drummond, who was always strictly just—or who, at all events, had always the desire to be strictly just—"but he thought, and I thought, too, dear Basil, that I should tell you more kindly, that you would take it better from me. I acted, as I believed, for the best; and so, I am sure, did your brother."

"Yes, oh, I believe you, Aunt Adelaide; you have always been as good as gold to me, as much as ever any mother would have been. I have always stood second to Walter, and I suppose I ought to be quite used to it by this time; but I am not quite used to it, I don't like the position, and I like it least of all now. He thinks he has stolen a march upon me; but he hasn't got his wife yet, and while I can raise a hand to prevent it, he never shall have his wife—at least not that wife."

"But, my dear boy, you will not make a scandal—you will not do anything violent?"

"No; but, as I say, he is not married to Zoe Percival yet."

"My dear Basil, what have you in your mind? Dear boy, won't you now see how hopeless it is; how hopeless it has been from the very first? Won't you, darling, try to put her out of your head, out of your mind——"

"I shall never put her out of my mind." He thrust the words in between her anxious entreaties as one might thrust a knife between a man's ribs.

"But, my dear boy, don't you see how hopeless it is? Won't you now turn your attention to yourself —to your future? Won't you let your uncle make arrangements for you to go to London, and let them see that there is more in you than they think? Won't you justify yourself?"

"I am not going to London at present," said he, in his most determined tones; "I have other work to do."

Mrs. Drummond was still clutching his arm anxiously.

"What do you mean by 'other work,' Basil?" she asked, in a frightened voice.

He looked down at her from his vastly superior height.

"I am going to stop this marriage. They've never let Zoe know that I care for her. The last time that I spoke to her she reproached me for never going near the Chantry now. How do I know that she really cares for Walter? How do I know that she is not breaking her heart for me, as I am breaking mine for her? I am going to see Zoe; I am going to have it out; and if, as you seem to think, Walter has supplanted me in her heart, I shall know what to do then."

"What do you mean?"

"Only a fool tells his plans beforehand," said Basil Hayes, in a voice of deep concentration.

"What! You cannot trust me!" cried his aunt.

He changed his position, and put his arm round her.

"It is not a question of trust, Aunt Adelaide; that is another question altogether. I must go now, I can't stand ragging this business over any longer. Forgive me if I have not taken it very well; I have been expecting it, and yet it

is a knock-down blow to me now that it has come."

He bent down and kissed her roughly, almost passionately, and then he set her free, and dashed out of the room.

Mrs. Drummond sat down upon her couch again, trembling. So it was over; she had broken the dire news, and he had taken it—well, he was young, impetuous, head-strong, and in love. He might have taken it worse. He had said a few foolish things, but only such things as most young people would have said under the circumstances. After a little while, when he had got more used to the inevitable, he would calm down, he would submit; he must, he had no other choice. Poor boy! She felt that it was hard, utterly hard. Yet no feeling of compunction came into her mind, no thought that she and the Recorder were to blame in any way for this disastrous ending to her boy's first love story.

CHAPTER XVI.

SUDDEN DEATH.

"We cannot hold mortality's strong hand."
—*King John.*

ALTHOUGH it had been so plainly put to her by Sir Walter and by Mrs. Percival, Mrs. Drummond's curious balance of mind never showed her how unjustly Basil Hayes had been treated; how, by bringing him up in the position of their heir, by allowing him to waste six of the best years of his youth, she and the Recorder had wronged him beyond all power of reparation. She was one of those curious people who, having once taken an idea into their minds, never see a situation excepting by the bias of that standpoint.

She had, early in her married life, declared to the Recorder that, of course, his private fortune would, as they had no children, revert to his own nephews and nieces. She had made, in a small way, quite a parade of the fact that, although she should leave to her brother's younger son

such fortune as was hers by right of inheritance and birth, she should never expect one farthing of Drummond money to find its way into Hayes' pockets.

If she had been wholly just, she would have said, "Because Basil cannot look to my husband for a large inheritance, he must therefore work for himself," and she would, while he was still young and pliable, have acted upon this decision, and Basil would have been, by the time of which I am writing, in a fair way of making a handsome income for himself. But no, Mrs. Drummond had lacked the moral courage necessary to deal with such a boy. She had preferred to have this bright young life resting indefinitely under her own roof; she had preferred that Basil should spend his whole energies upon amusements which could never help him, making a mere pretence of work in the position of unpaid secretary to his uncle. She had lived in the present, she had taken no heed for the morrow. To live in the present and to take no heed for the morrow is very beautiful in the lilies of the field; it might have done eighteen

hundred years ago; at the end of the nineteenth century it is a madness; and Mrs. Drummond, poor lady, now found what it was to reap in bitterness unspeakable the harvest of what she had sown in the years that were for ever gone beyond recall.

She saw no more of Basil that night. She knew not whether he stayed in or went out. Her own pillow was watered with many and bitter tears. She looked back upon the past with regret, and forward to the future with dismay. And all the while her heart was aching with a reflected pain—a pain which was not lessened by an ugly, uncomfortable, haunting feeling which came ever uppermost in her mind that things might have been otherwise; that if she had taken a different stand, all this trouble and misery would not have come about. No sleep came to the poor lady's eyes that night. Two spectres stood beside her bed—the one a vision of the mistaken past, the other a semblance of her nephew Basil—Basil, with his hard-set, pain-filled eyes, saying over and over again in a dogged, determined voice, "Walter has supplanted

me; he has not got Zoe yet; so long as I can raise a hand to prevent it, she shall not be his wife."

Nor did she sleep for many a long night after that, not such sleep as that to which she had been used during the greater part of her life, for three days later Basil Hayes was found in his brother's quarters at Northtowers Barracks, lying dead, with his sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling, and just over his heart a little blue wound which told its own tale!

It happened on that memorable evening that the barracks at Northtowers were all astir, for there was a guest-night of unusual importance. The occasion was the anniversary of a great battle which had taken place in years gone by, a battle in which the regiment had been gloriously engaged; and all the men of any importance in Northtowers and the neighbourhood were invited to help the officers of the regiment to celebrate the great event. Among others the Recorder and Basil Hayes had been bidden to the feast. Basil had refused the invitation, but the Recorder, having, as he explained to

his wife, no quarrel either with Walter or the regiment, accepted, and in due time was driven to the scene of the festivity.

During the greater part of the evening cabs and carriages seemed to be coming and going through the barrack gates. The Bishop, the Dean, the Canon in residence, the Mayor, the General commanding the district, the Lord-Lieutenant, and the principal landowners were all there; speeches were made, and the memories of the glorious past were duly toasted after that first toast of all, "Gentlemen, the Queen," had been given and honoured.

A big guest-night in a cavalry mess is, as a rule, a very jovial entertainment, and this one was as pleasant and amusing as any of its predecessors had been. But all pleasant things come to an end in time. The last good-nights were said, the last guest seen into the carriage which would take him home. Then the Colonel, who, like St. Peter, was himself a married man, said good-night to his officers, and he too went away. No sooner had he departed, than Walter Hayes prepared to clear out of the ante-room also.

"You're not going, Walter?" said Fitzroy, quickly.

"Yes, I am. I've got a very bad head to-night; I am going to have a quiet pipe, and then turn in."

"Are you, old chap? By Jove! you're right. I think I'll come with you."

The two men turned out of the ante-room and went along the veranda together, then passed in by the door leading to the larger block of officers' quarters, and went talking, as great friends do, along the broad corridor, and up the echoing stone stairs to the storey above. When Walter Hayes threw the door of his room open he found that it was in darkness. The fire had burned down so that only a dull red glow showed in the grate.

"That ass, Pawson, has let the fire down!" said Sir Walter, in tones of disgust. "Stop a minute, old chap, I'll get a light." He moved forward through the darkness, but the next moment he uttered a smothered ejaculation, and fell headlong to the ground. "Hullo! What's that? Why, it's Pawson — drunk, or in a fit, or something. I

suppose he came in with an idea of mending the fire. By Jove! I've shinned myself!"

Just then a little flicker of light shot up out of the dying fire, and Fitzroy, avoiding the recumbent figure on the floor, walked straight across the room to the mantelshelf, where the matches stood. The next moment he had struck a light, and was holding the match to one of the candles which graced the chimney-shelf. Meantime, Sir Walter, who had come a regular cropper, had gathered himself together, and was kneeling beside the figure on the floor.

"By Jove, the chap's dead!" he exclaimed, as he lifted the helpless hand. "Bring the light here, Fitzroy; something horrible has happened! Oh! Oh!! My God!!!" He called out the last three words in a tone of terrible anguish, for as Fitzroy brought the candle close to the recumbent figure he saw that it was not that of his servant, but of his brother Basil! "Fitzroy, Fitzroy—do you see? My God! It is my brother—it is Basil—he is dead! Good God above us—what is the meaning of this?"

"Are you sure?" said Fitzroy.

"Sure? He looks it, doesn't he? Or is he shamming, do you think? Basil, I say, old chap—speak to me, Basil. We weren't friends, you and I—you've come here to give me a fright—you've—oh, my God! I asked him to dine to-night—he refused to the mess, not to me! He came to his death! God Almighty—am I awake or dreaming? Who could ever have foretold anything so horrible as this?"

For the space of a minute or so Fitzroy stood paralysed, not knowing what to do for the best; then he was seized with a sudden thought, and he turned and went swiftly back to the ante-room once more. At the first glance he saw that the senior of the surgeons then quartered in Northtowers had comfortably settled himself at a card-table. He went straight across the room and clapped his hand down heavily upon the surgeon's shoulder.

"Wargrave," he said, "will you come, please?—something has happened upstairs."

"Something happened?" said the senior Major, looking up. "What is it, Fitzroy?"

"I went up with Hayes just now, sir, and he fell over his own brother lying dead in his quarters!"

"What!!"

"Fell over his own brother—he's dead—at least, I think so. I want Wargrave."

The surgeon flung down his cards and sprang to his feet.

"Here, show me the way to Hayes' quarters—I don't know it. Perhaps it's not so bad as you think," he said, already, with professional instinct, making for the door.

Together the two men, followed by a stream of others, went quickly along the way which had been traversed only a few minutes before by the two comrades in absolute unsuspicion of the tragedy which had already been enacted in the barracks that evening. They found the room exactly as Fitzroy had left it, the dead brother lying on the floor, the living one half kneeling, half crouching over him.

"Get up, Hayes," said Fitzroy, taking his comrade with rough kindness by the shoulder; "here's Wargrave. Get up, old chap."

Sir Walter got up rather unsteadily and went to the fire-place, where he stood gripping tight hold of the ornamental shelf which held his photographs and other knick-knacks.

"He's dead, doctor," he gasped out. "I've been trying to wake him, but it's all up; he's dead!"

He could scarcely speak for the horrible trembling of his under-jaw, and he put up his disengaged hand to hold it still, to try and master the horrible emotion and shock which, combined, were fast overwhelming him.

"Yes, poor chap, he's dead," said the doctor. A glance had been sufficient for him, and he began gently unfastening the dead man's clothes, searching with keen professional fingers for the cause of the death. "Ah!" he said, comprehensively, as he laid bare the chest, "see here, Fitzroy—a bullet wound! I don't suppose he knew anything about it; it must have been over instantly; the shot must have been fired quite at close quarters. Hayes, my dear fellow, your worst fears are true—your brother has been dead for at least a couple of hours. He glanced instinctively

at the clock; it was then twenty minutes past one.

As the doctor ceased speaking, Walter Hayes made a step forward.

"Are you sure?" he said, unsteadily. "You can do nothing?"

"My dear fellow, there is nothing to be done but what will be done later on. Your brother has been dead for hours, poor fellow—at least two hours."

"But I don't understand," said Walter Hayes, holding one hand to his head and looking first at the doctor and then at Fitzroy in a dazed, bewildered fashion. "How came he here? He refused my invitation to dine to-night; he must have known that I should be occupied—that I should be in the mess-room. He could not have come to see me? What was he doing here? Why did he come? Did he come here to put an end to himself in my rooms?"

"I see no sign of a pistol about," said the doctor. "Besides, why should he do that?"

"Oh, I don't think he was quite himself. You

see, he was very much in love with the lady to whom I am engaged."

"I don't think you had better say anything about that, Hayes," put in Fitzroy warningly.

"Why should I not? It is the truth. The facts are these, doctor: We proposed for the same lady. Her father stoutly and utterly objected to my brother's suit. I don't think he ever had the smallest chance with her. Indeed, I know that she would never have married him—I am sure that her heart is entirely given to me; but I could not convince him of it. He resented my engagement so much, that although we never actually quarrelled, yet for weeks past there has been a coolness between us—a coolness which has been horrible to me. I asked him to dinner to-night, because I didn't want to make a quarrel of it. Oh, I don't know how to explain it all to you."

"Better not," said Fitzroy—"better say nothing."

"But why should I not?" said the other,

mildly, turning a surprised gaze upon his comrade. "I have nothing to conceal; ever so many people know it. What I want to know is, what was he doing here? Why had he come? With what object? And, having come here, who killed him? You say that there is no sign of a revolver about; a man couldn't kill himself and not leave a weapon somewhere near by."

"It is no use," said Fitzroy, putting his hand through his friend's arm—"it's no use trying to puzzle your brains and ours over that question, old fellow; the police will find all that out; there will be an inquest. Your work in the present is enough, without trying to do more. Your brother lived at the Oriol House, didn't he, with——"

"With my aunt and the Recorder."

"Well, the Recorder has only just gone; don't you think that we ought to go down there and let them know what has happened?"

"I suppose we ought—yes, I suppose we ought. You will go with me, Fitzroy? I don't feel as if I know altogether what I am doing. What are you

going to do with him, doctor? You can't leave him lying there on the floor."

"I must leave him for the present. I will stay here till the police come; I have sent for them," the doctor replied.

"And you will come down with me and break it to my aunt, Fitzroy? She was like a mother to him. My God, what will she say?"

"There is nothing to be gained by putting it off," said Fitzroy. "Come, old chap, let us see if there is a cab waiting outside; but there is pretty sure to be one."

There was but one solitary cab waiting at the door of the officers' mess. Fitzroy hailed it, saw Walter Hayes safely inside of it, and then gave the cabman instructions where to drive.

They found the Oriol House in darkness, all save a glimmer of light on the first floor. In answer to his imperative summons a window above the door was opened, and the Recorder's voice was heard asking who was there, and what was their business?

"I am so sorry to disturb you, Mr. Drummond,

but it is your nephew and I, Sir Walter Hayes and Fitzroy. Will you come down, we have important news to tell you."

In less than two minutes, the Recorder, who was still in evening dress, came down, and admitted them into the hall.

"Is anything the matter?" he said.

"Something very dreadful is the matter, something very dreadful has happened," answered Fitzroy, shutting the door behind him. "Mr. Drummond, I scarcely know how to tell you, and Hayes here is too cut up to do so with any attempt at softening the news; a dreadful murder—at least, we think it is murder—has been committed in his quarters to-night, and your nephew is dead!"

"My nephew! My nephew Basil?"

"I am sorry to say yes. We have sent for the police; we have left the doctor with him; Hayes and I came down to break the news to you."

"You are sure he is dead?"

"Yes, dead. He had been dead for hours when we found him."

"Who found him?"

"Hayes and I. We went up to Hayes's room together, and Hayes knocked against him, that is to say, he fell over, the body."

"Good God!" exclaimed the Recorder. "But who could have murdered him? The boy had not an enemy in the world that I know of!"

"We don't know. We don't know why he was there. Hayes asked him to dine to-night, and he refused."

"What has happened?" said another voice; and then the dainty little figure of Mrs. Drummond, wearing a long white dressing-gown, came into the room. "What has happened? Is something wrong with Basil?"

"Oh, Aunt Adelaide, indeed, yes; something is wrong with Basil. I don't know how to tell you—you tell her," looking at his uncle.

The Recorder put his arm round his wife.

"My dear, something very, very dreadful has happened to-night. Basil—Basil is dead!"

Some women would have fainted. Not so Mrs. Drummond—she heard the story to the end.

"I am going up to the barracks to see him," she said; "will you wait for me? You have a cab? I did not hear it drive away. I am going up now, I must see for myself. I will not be five minutes."

She never shed a tear, she never uttered a moan, no exclamation escaped her; her sole thought apparently was to get at the boy's side at once.

"No, don't come with me, Roger; I shall be quicker by myself."

Then Fitzroy opened the door for her, and she passed out, not forgetting to bend her head in acknowledgment of his courtesy.

She mounted the stairs steadily till she reached the first landing, then she stood still, pressing the palms of her hands close against her temples, as if to fully realise all that had been told her.

"Dead, and murdered, in Walter's rooms! Ah! It is, as they say, *cherchez la femme.* Zoe Percival is at the bottom of this. What does it mean? Did he go there to kill Walter? He was mad,

mad enough for anything. Did he go there to kill Walter, and did—did Walter kill him? Oh! the very thought is horrible! And if Walter killed him, even in self-defence, and all comes out about Zoe—oh-h! they will hang him, or they will shut him up for all the rest of his life! Oh-h! it is horrible. What can I do to prevent it? I have five minutes before I need show. I must see if there is anything in Basil's room."

She turned and passed swiftly down the corridor leading into Basil's own large room. Once there she turned up the electric light and began eagerly searching around.

"He used to keep a diary. Ah! is that it? I will take these letters and papers."

She pulled out drawer after drawer.

"I will take these. There is nothing that looks suspicious, no letter to me! Dead! My God, dead! And this is the end of it all! At my door lies the whole mischief!"

She was a resolute woman, as little women sometimes are. She glanced once more round the room, turned off the light, shut the door softly behind her,

and crept to her own chamber with light and noiseless footsteps.

"It is a big book. What shall I do with it? Oh, where can I hide it to be safe? If the police come, and they search the house, they may ask to see my belongings. Ah! I will put it up there between the ceiling and the canopy. Yes. Oh, I can't reach! A chair on the bed. Is that somebody coming? No! Ah! There, now it is safe for a time. I will stay in bed to-morrow; I will examine it at my leisure. Now to get my things changed. Need I? If I put a long cloak on, surely that will be enough. Oh, Walter, Walter, was it you, was it you, or was it all my fault?" She put the chair in its place, smoothed down the bed, ran with eager footsteps to the great wardrobe at the other end of the room, and took out a long, sombre velvet cloak.

"This will cover me, this will hide me," she said, brokenly. "Now something for my head. Ah, that lace will do. Now I am ready, I am ready to go and view the body of my loved victim!"

CHAPTER XVII.

PAROLE OF HONOUR.

"Great souls are always loyally submissive, reverent to what is over them."

—CARLYLE.

IN silence the Recorder and his wife drove up to the barracks with Walter Hayes and Fitzroy. They found the entire place in an uproar, and as they drew up at the door of the officers' quarters—or rather at that block of the officers' quarters in which Walter's rooms were situated—the Colonel came hurriedly out.

"Oh, is that Hayes? Is that you, Hayes? They said you'd gone—thank God you've come back again! My dear fellow, you mustn't go out of barracks until this is cleared up."

"Not go out of barracks, sir?" said the other. "And why not?"

"Well, you had better not. The police are upstairs investigating everything—asking a thousand questions—and their first was for you."

For a moment or so Sir Walter stood staring at his commanding officer, his face white, his eyes all in a blaze, his hand nervously clenched; then with an effort he controlled himself, and answered, quietly enough:

"I shall be here when I am wanted, sir. I went to fetch my aunt; some one had to break the news to her."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, indeed. Is that Mrs. Drummond there?"

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Vandeleur went a step forward.

"Let me assist you, Mrs. Drummond," he said, devoutly hoping that she had not heard his comments to her nephew. "I need not tell you, I am sure, how sorry and grieved I am that you should have come in this way on such an errand. You wish — you have come — you want——"

"Yes, I want to see him," said Mrs. Drummond, who was still quite calm and dry eyed. "I suppose the police are up there—I suppose they are in possession?"

"Yes, we sent for them. Of course there was nothing else to do."

"And they think——?"

"I do not know what they think—they wouldn't tell us anything. In any case there will be no difficulty about your going in."

He turned and walked beside her up the empty, echoing stairs. A policeman was on guard at the door of Sir Walter's quarters, but at a word from the Colonel he knocked at the door and summoned the inspector within. It was only a moment or so before the portal was flung wide open to admit her.

Sir Walter Hayes had furnished the larger of the two rooms allotted to him as a sitting-room, while of the little room leading out of it he had made his bedroom. It was in this small room that the police had laid the body of the boy who had been the very light of Mrs. Drummond's eyes.

"Come this way, madam," said the inspector, seeing her look round inquiringly. "We have laid the poor young gentleman on the cot here. A very sad thing, madam."

"Yes," said Mrs. Drummond, simply.

She passed into the inner room with the same composed air that had characterised her from the beginning; in truth, her thoughts were more occupied with the living than with the dead. She wanted to assure herself that the news was really true.

Alas, it was true enough. After the first glance at that pathetically solemn figure lying prone upon the little bed, Mrs. Drummond needed no more assurances to help her to realize the awful truth. She stayed for a few minutes blankly silent, then she turned to the inspector, who was standing a little behind her, and said:

"Was it suicide, do you think?"

"I think not, madam," was the reply. "We have found no trace of any weapon so far."

"How was it done? A shot—a stab—how?"

"There is a bullet wound, madam, just above the heart. Death must have been instantaneous."

"And you have not found the weapon?"

"No, madam, but one of Sir Walter's revolvers is missing."

"What!" thundered Sir Walter.

"One of your revolvers—if you are Sir Walter Hayes?"

"I am."

"Is missing."

Sir Walter turned and strode back into the larger room. His steps carried him direct to the shelf in the recess by the fire on which his revolver-case usually stood; it had, however, been moved to the centre table, and a policeman stood beside it.

"You must not touch that, sir."

"Must not? My good man, you forget to whom you are speaking!" he said, haughtily. "These are my rooms—these are my revolvers. The inspector tells me that one is missing; I wish to see for myself."

"My orders were——" began the man, when Sir Walter broke in impatiently:

"Nonsense, your orders could not apply to me! My good fellow, I am as anxious as yourself, or as your inspector can be, to get to the bottom of this mystery."

He took out the remaining revolver and examined

it; and as he did so the inspector came back from the inner room and approached the table.

"Whoever has done this, inspector," said Sir Walter, turning to the police officer, "is some one who knows me well—I mean who knows my rooms, knows me intimately—unless the choice of a weapon was the merest fluke in the world."

"How is that, sir?"

"Well, of these two revolvers, which I have had for several years in my possession, I always use the one that is missing. I got them when I went to Egypt, and when we got out there, I found that there was always something wrong with this one; you see how little it has been used. The other one is a beauty, I was always sure of myself when I had it in my hand; I never was with this one, it failed me several times, and so it was always the one to be left behind. Whoever chose that pistol must have have known what he was about—he or she."

"Why do you say 'she,' Hayes?" asked the Colonel, who was standing by listening.

"I don't think that Sir Walter had better explain himself further, if you will excuse me, gentlemen,"

said the inspector, quietly. "The poor young gentleman's death took place in his brother's rooms; it seems as if he had been murdered with one of his brother's revolvers, and the less Sir Walter has to say on the subject, until everything is cleared up, the better."

"What! You don't mean to say that you suspect my nephew?" thundered the voice of the Recorder at this juncture.

"Our business, sir, as you very well know, is to suspect everybody until we find out the truth. If you will be advised by me, sir, you won't leave the barracks until the inquest is over."

"You can arrest me," said Sir Walter, simply.

"No, sir, I cannot do it to-night on mere suspicion."

"Well, inspector, I am quite at your service; I will go back with you if you like."

"You will come back with me, Walter," put in Mrs. Drummond. "You cannot stay here, in these rooms, with our poor boy lying there!"

"Oh, certainly not, madam. Two of my men will remain in charge of the corpse, so that Sir

Walter would hardly like to stay here—in fact, he could not. But I advise you not to go out of barracks, sir."

Sir Walter looked at the Colonel, who, recognising the question in his mind, decidedly shook his head.

"If it will make you any the easier, Mr. Inspector," said Sir Walter, quietly, "I will give my parole to my Colonel. Don't trouble about me, Aunt Adelaide, I shall be all right," for an indignant cry had burst from Mrs. Drummond's lips. "You must let those who have charge of such cases as this work in their own way and do nothing to hamper them. Colonel Vandeleur will accept my parole of honour not to leave the barracks until this matter is cleared up."

"Certainly," replied the Colonel.

"As for me," Sir Walter went on, "I shall be all right. I shall not need to think of sleep to-night, but Fitzroy will give me a shake-down in his quarters, won't you, old fellow?"

"Of course, certainly; I was just going to propose it," said Fitzroy, unhesitatingly.

"And now, Aunt Adelaide, do you let the Recorder take you home; there is nothing more that you can do. To-morrow they will come to you and tell you anything that may have transpired. I am sure that you must be thoroughly knocked over by all this dreadful business; you are looking like a ghost, my poor little aunt; you ought to be in your bed."

"Yes, I will go home," said Mrs. Drummond, looking at the Recorder; "I can do no good here, as you say. It hurts me to think that it could be necessary for you even to protest your innocence in the matter; but murder will out. I have no belief in the innocent suffering for the guilty."

Sir Walter was still holding the little lady in his arms, and he smiled tenderly down upon her as he heard her brave words.

"My dear Aunt Adelaide," he said, gently, "it will neither hurt me nor degrade me that I am willing to give every assistance in my power to the police in such a matter as this. Perhaps you will be kind enough in the morning to go into

the Chantry and tell them there all that has happened and why I do not come. They will quite understand me."

"I will tell them," said Mrs. Drummond. No names were uttered, but he knew, and she knew, that he meant only Zoe Percival when he spoke of the family at the Chantry.

But when morning came, Mrs. Drummond did not go into the Chantry to break the news to the Percival family in general and Zoe in particular. She meant to do so, but when her usual time for rising came, it found her prostrate in her bed, her little slight body racked with pain, her head, which had carried her so bravely through the previous night, throbbing with agony, and she was fain to beg her Recorder to go to their neighbours at the Chantry and break the horrible news to them, if they had not already heard it.

"And perhaps, Roger," she said, gently, "you will tell little Zoe to come here; I have a message from Walter for her."

Of course the Percivals had already heard the news, and the Recorder found himself over-

whelmed with questions as soon as he showed his face among them.

"I can tell you nothing," he said, very gravely. "The whole affair at present seems to be shrouded in mystery. I dined with Walter last night, and he had invited Basil also. Basil would not go. They have not been the best of friends lately, although now one hardly likes to say it." Involuntarily, as he spoke, he looked at Zoe, who flushed a bright rosy red all over her marble pale face. "By the bye, Zoe, Mrs. Drummond told me to ask if you would go in to see her this morning; she has a message for you from Walter."

"I suppose Walter will be down during the course of the day?" said Mrs. Percival.

"I—I—I believe not. He has given his parole not to leave the barracks until the inquest is over. If Zoe will go in to Mrs. Drummond she will tell her all about it."

"Shall I go now—may I go now?" asked Zoe.

"I think the sooner the better, my dear. My wife is utterly broken down with all this business," he added, turning to Mrs. Percival. "She was so

brave last night—made no scene—not even when she went and saw the poor boy, but she is paying for it now."

"Of course, of course," said Mrs. Percival, tenderly.

Before ever she had spoken, Zoe had fled out of the room, and Mr. Percival, from his comfortable elbow-chair at the head of the table, delivered himself of some precious remarks on shocks in general, and tragedies in particular.

"I am sure," he said, holding his stomach very tightly with his clasped hands, "that it will take me months to get over the effect of the dreadful shock which it was to me this morning when they burst in upon me with the news—on an empty stomach, too. I have never given in to the pernicious habit of taking morning tea, a glass of hot water with a few drops of lemon-juice is all that I indulge in before my regular breakfast, and the moment I came down, before the coffee had actually come into the room, they burst in upon me with the dreadful news, which they blurted out without any consideration for my state of health, or my

digestion, or anything else. Servants are always like that—so indelicate, so inconsiderate. I am sure, my dear Recorder, you could not have felt it more yourself."

The Recorder of Northtowers was not a clever man, but he delivered himself that morning of a scathing reply to his old neighbour's peevish complaints.

"I fully agree with you, my dear Percival," he said deliberately; "there is nothing so inconsiderate as tragedy—unless it be servants; and in the presence of tragedy one is apt to forget such important matters as digestion and nerves. I feel, if our poor boy were here, he would be the first to apologise to you for having put you to any inconvenience. Good morning, my dear Mrs. Percival, good morning."

"I think," said Mr. Percival, resignedly, when the door had closed behind the indignant Recorder, "that trouble has turned our poor friend's head a little."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ANXIOUS POSSESSION.

"A little fire is quickly trodden out,
Which being suffered, rivers cannot quench."
—*King Henry VI.*

It was natural enough that for days Northtowers talked of nothing else than the terrible tragedy which had been enacted in Sir Walter Hayes' quarters at Northtowers Barracks. At the closely shrouded Oriol House a stream of anxious inquirers besieged the door, and the excellent Davidson had his work cut out to satisfy all inquiries. To each and all he told the same story. Mrs. Drummond was extremely unwell, was, in fact, confined to her bed; the shock had been a very dreadful one to her, and although she had borne it wonderfully well when Sir Walter had brought the terrible news home, she had given way the following day, and had not seen anybody since.

As a matter of fact, Zoe Percival had been to the Oriol House every day, and had spent most of

her time at the sick lady's bedside. Nobody knew precisely whether Sir Walter was to be accused of the murder of his brother or not, but certain it is that he was never seen in the streets of the city between the first news of Basil's death and the day of the funeral.

"Really," said Mrs. Dallas to a lady who was commenting on the fact, "really I don't see that anybody need say anything on that score; it wouldn't be decent if Sir Walter were gadding about the streets talking things over with Tom, Dick, and Harry, while his own brother is lying murdered in his quarters—well, of course, poor Basil is at the Oriol House now, as a matter of fact, but it is the same thing—he is lying dead, murdered. And although they were both in love with the same girl—I know they were, because Basil told me so, poor boy—at the same time, the fact of his being engaged to Zoe Percival does not render Walter impervious to all ties of brotherly affection. I do think people are unreasonable."

"Well, perhaps they are; but at the same time, you know, people are saying things—people will

talk. They say that he is under arrest at the barracks, and will not show at the funeral."

"Well, well; we shall see, we shall see. Have you heard anything about the inquest?"

"Oh, it has been adjourned, of course."

"You have heard nothing definite—nothing fresh?"

"Well, the only thing I have heard is that it came out that the pistol was found the next morning between Sir Walter's quarters and the mess-room. I did hear," continued the lady, "that it came out, too, that nobody was very certain whether Sir Walter had left the mess-room or not that evening."

"He didn't leave it during dinner, that's very certain, for Joe was dining there, and sat opposite to him. He swears that he never left the table during dinner. And, indeed, it is not likely that there could be any premeditation on his part. He asked Basil to dinner, and Basil refused, and it puzzles me beyond expression to think why he should have gone there, when he knew perfectly well that his brother would be occupied with guests.

Poor fellow! the whole thing is too inexplicable for words."

It was inexplicable, that was perfectly true, and Mrs. Drummond, in her bed, went over every detail again and again to Zoe Percival with a persistent reiteration which was little short of maddening.

"I can't think, my dear, why Basil wanted to go up to the barracks that night—what object he could have had? He must have known perfectly well that Walter would be at dinner; he knew that the Recorder was asked, for instance. He could not expect to see Walter privately, alone. What could he have gone there for?"

"Ah, that is what I cannot understand," said Zoe, fixing her anxious eyes upon the fair little woman propped up among her pillows. "He came to see me that afternoon, Mrs. Drummond, and you know how unreasonable Basil could be! He had not been for, oh! for ever so many weeks—months, I may say. And then suddenly he came, and he upbraided me for having engaged myself to Walter, and said that I had jilted him, and altogether poured out a torrent of reproaches upon me. And,

after all, what did I do? Walter proposed to me and Basil did not."

"But, my dear, Basil proposed to your father!"

"I never knew it," said Zoe, "they never told me. Why didn't Basil tell me himself?—he had several opportunities. I told him one day how unkind he was never to come near the Chantry and never to come near us, and he never said a word! Besides—besides, I couldn't have said anything different; I never meant, I never wanted, to marry Basil—I was never in love with Basil. Why, my dear Mrs. Drummond, I was in love with Walter the very first time I saw him, before ever I knew him, before ever I spoke to him. So when Basil poured out that string of reproaches to me that afternoon, what was there for me to say, except that I was very sorry, very sorry? I told him as plainly as I could that I was pledged to Walter, that I wanted to marry Walter; and then he asked me whether I cared for Walter. Why, of course I did! I told him so; and he said I didn't know my own mind. I was quite angry; of course I knew my own mind. What girl of my age," with an emphasis which

might have indicated ten years more of age than Zoe Percival possessed—"what girl of my age does not know her own mind well enough to say which man she wants to marry? Why, it's nonsense! But he wouldn't listen to reason. He told me that he would expose Walter, that he knew enough about Walter to make my father break off the engagement, and that he would expose him. I told him that he was very silly, and that it didn't matter what people said—that I should stick to Walter whatever happened. And you know, Mrs. Drummond, I had no idea that anything like that was going to happen. It seems dreadful now to have called him silly, but I didn't know anything was going to happen—how could I?"

"Oh, my dear child, no, of course you couldn't know; nobody could know—you least of all. But it will come out, Zoe, it will come out, sooner or later, as sure as there is a God in Heaven above us. As for those fools who think that Walter had a hand in it, that is absurd, it is preposterous! There never was a Hayes yet stained with his brother's blood! But Walter, poor fellow, was all

anxiety from the first time of his coming here that we should do our best for Basil. It is all my fault; at my door lies this dreadful tragedy! I ought to have insisted upon Basil being got to London years ago, before ever you came back. If he had never known you, he could never have been in love with you. It is all my fault!"

"Oh, no! pray, pray don't say that!"

"My dear child, I must say it, for it is true. I may as well say it as only think it. The truth was, I liked having him in the house; he was young, and bright, and popular, everybody liked him."

"Oh, yes, yes!" put in Zoe.

"It was a daily pleasure and joy to both of us to have him here with us. It was the purest selfishness that kept him here. I suppose," she went on brokenly, "that I ought to be thinking of nothing but vengeance; and yet it seems now so pitiful, so unnecessary. My one great desire is that nothing of this shall fall upon Walter. I feel that it is all my fault, mine and the Recorder's—but unintentional, God knows, God knows!"

If the truth be told, Mrs. Drummond was not

nearly as much collapsed as the world believed. She had kept her bed that day solely through fear of the police finding it necessary to search the Oriol House. They had, of course, quite early been down and looked over Basil's belongings, and to see whether they could find some clue to the mystery of this terrible murder.

The Recorder had, as a matter of course, offered to lay the entire house open to them, but the inspector in charge of the case had contented himself with a thorough search of the dead man's rooms. Still, Mrs. Drummond was not by any means sure that the rest of the house would escape the same minute search as Basil's apartments; and she felt that while she was in her bed that, at least, would be held sacred.

So the weary hours dragged themselves away. Walter Hayes, at the barracks, fretted and fumed, held consultation after consultation with the police, with the Colonel, and with his uncle; but beyond the fact that nobody could say with certainty whether he had left the mess-room during the evening or not, nothing was brought to light.

There was forthcoming no adequate motive either for the crime or for Basil Hayes' presence in his brother's quarters. The entire affair was shrouded in unspeakable mystery.

Then came the day of the funeral, when Walter Hayes followed with the Recorder immediately behind the coffin, when Northtowers people turned out in thousands to see the *cortège* pass. Never had there been so many flowers at one funeral within the memory of man. Never so much excitement, never so much hustling and jostling and crushing to get a glimpse of the velvet-covered coffin of him who had been struck down in the flower of his youth, or of the bowed head and marble-white face of the brother who was, by a very large number of those present, suspected of having given the death blow.

And at home, in the darkened room of the Oriol House, Mrs. Drummond lay in her bed, wondering when she should have an opportunity of examining and disposing of Basil Hayes' diary. It did not prove so easy.

The Recorder, poor man, being devotedly at-

tached to his wife, and desperately anxious about her in this terrible crisis, never left her for a moment that he did not seek somebody to come and take his place. He had a duty to perform to the living, he could do nothing for the one who was dead. He did not feel that it would help Basil in the least if he were to seek out his enemy on the principle of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but he did feel that there was something that he could do for the brother who was left, he did feel that if he could help to clear an honourable name from an imputation, even if it was only an imputation of doubt, he would be doing a task worthy of himself and of the trust which he had received in these two boys from their dead father. Therefore he passed the whole of his time either at his wife's bedside or in Sir Walter's quarters.

So day after day went by, and still Mrs. Drummond kept her bed. Zoe Percival spent hours at a time with her, always encouraging her, reassuring her, bolstering up, as it were, her faith in him who

was on parole of honour a prisoner in Northtowers Barracks.

"If there were a motive," said the Recorder, when the inquest had been adjourned for the second time—"if there were any shadow of a motive—it would be more understandable. If the cases had been reversed, if Zoe had cared most for Basil instead of having given her promise and her heart to Walter, then the thing would seem as clear as daylight. If Basil had killed Walter it would be easy enough; but there is no reason or sense of likelihood of Walter desiring to harm Basil. One can see it quite clearly; that is what baffles the jury, baffles everybody—the inadequacy, or rather the total want of motive."

"What did they ask to-day, Roger? Were you questioned?"

"Of course. I was at the inquest, I sat with Walter. I swore, as did Dallas, that he never left the table while dinner was in progress. We got up from the dinner-table at a quarter to eleven. I happened to look at my watch."

"You swore to that?"

"Oh, yes."

"And afterwards?"

"Well, my dear, I couldn't swear to afterwards, for I was talking to other people. You see I had no notion of anything of this kind happening—how should I? I said that to the best of my belief Walter had not left the room, that I felt convinced that he had not been absent for any length of time."

"Who else was questioned?"

"Walter's servant."

"Pawson?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he said he made up the fire at half-past ten, and that there was nobody in the room then."

"Oh, he did?"

"Yes."

"And he was found," said Mrs. Drummond, in a thoughtful tone, "at twenty minutes past one. The doctors said that he had been dead

at least two hours. That leaves a distinct gap, Roger."

"Yes, that leaves a gap."

"Yes, what was he doing in Walter's rooms? Why had he gone there?"

"Adelaide, my dear, there was one question raised to-day which perhaps you could satisfy."

"I?"

"Yes, there was a good deal of comment on the singularly few letters and papers which were found in the poor boy's room."

"In Basil's room?"

"Yes. Now, if I remember rightly, Basil had at least eight or nine letters that morning at breakfast. Who got them?"

"How should I know?"

Mrs. Drummond breathed the words with trembling lips. Indeed, it was well for her that she was lying in her bed, for had she been standing she must have fallen to the ground with the wave of tumultuous and fierce emotion which swept over her.

"You knew his ways so much better than I—do you think that he was in the habit of destroying his letters?"

"Nay, I cannot tell you. They saw his rooms—they searched everything; they were undisturbed. I cannot help them."

"My dear, nobody expected you to help beyond a suggestion. It is curious. I quite had an idea that Basil kept a sort of diary."

"Did you tell them so?"

"Well, yes, I hinted at it."

"Then they will come and search again?"

"Possibly; they are not satisfied. You see, they are trying to get at the motive—they want to get at his reason for being there at all."

"Yes? Well, they must come and look for themselves; I have nothing to do with it. The rooms are there, all Basil's things are there; they must look for themselves. You told them, of course, that they could come again?"

"Oh, my dear, yes. I told them that the house was open to them."

"The house?"

"Certainly; we have nothing to hide."

"Oh, no, no, no; I didn't quite understand you, Roger. I think all this has been a little too much for me. I feel so numb, so stupid, as if I scarcely took in the meaning of words. I am not myself just now."

"My dear, how could you be—how could you be?" stretching out his hand, and patting her arm with infinite pity. "Why, my dearest, you are trembling—positively trembling."

"No, no, it is nothing—nothing. You see, I am not like some women—I don't cry much. I think, Roger, that I might go to sleep if you let me alone. Don't send anybody to me. I want to be by myself for a while."

"Shall I send in for Zoe?"

"No, no, the child is here too much; it is too great a strain upon her. She promised to come in later on, about tea-time. Don't send for her. Go down and eat your lunch. Don't think of me. I shall be all right. I shall be best by myself."

So the Recorder went away, leaving her alone

with a problem—how she, trembling, nervous, watched upon as all loved invalids are watched, was to climb up to that dizzy height, where in her desperation she had thrown the diary which might, nay, which probably would, incriminate him for whom all her thoughts and care now were?

CHAPTER XIX.

HEART OF GRACE.

"Scorn the whispers of fear,
Be righteous, and bravely bide on."
—*Waugh.*

It is quite one thing to do a certain act when one is nerved by desperation and almost by despair, and it is quite another thing to repeat that same act in cold blood and with deliberation.

Mrs. Drummond proved the truth of this when she made a valiant attempt to repossess herself of her murdered nephew's diary. She had been in bed for days, and staying in bed is not conducive to nerve, it is not conducive to steadiness of head or limb. So she found when she tried by means of a chair to reach the canopy above her head. She might as well have tried from that vantage ground to reach straight into the Kingdom of Heaven. Several times she almost fell. Not once did she manage to touch the upper edge

of the canopy even with so much as the tips of her fingers. How was she, then, to reach into the well which held the letters and the book? Eventually she gave it up in despair, and, replacing the chair by the side of the bed, she crept in between the bed-clothes and wept bitterly over her failure. Then she took heart of grace, and wondered whether she might confide in Zoe; whether Zoe would, being tall and lithe and active, be able to climb up and reach into the cavity above the canopy? And yet, what would Zoe think? She was a young girl. It was a matter which might be one of life or death. Was a young girl to be trusted? She almost thought not. Should she ask Walter? No; she was afraid of Walter; afraid in this sense, afraid of his saying that, whatever her fears, whatever her doubts, she had no right to attempt to cheat the law, and that as the wife of a legal official of high standing, she was specially culpable. No, she must not tell Walter; that would never do, never. It must, perforce, be Zoe.

So, when Zoe came that afternoon, dressed in black and looking very mournful and forlorn, Mrs.

Drummond felt so drawn towards her that it seemed as if she could not do better than take her straight away into her confidence. Yet, even then, she did not speak straight out.

"You have heard from Walter?" she asked her.

"Yes, Mrs. Drummond, I have heard from Walter. He is still keeping his parole. It seems unnecessary, doesn't it? Nobody in their senses could think that Walter wanted to kill his brother. Why should he?"

"People think—at least, I have no right to say that," said Mrs. Drummond, half hesitatingly, "but people might think, people might be excused for thinking, that he had killed him in self-defence."

"I think Walter would speak, in that case."

"I don't know. He may have been advised not to do so. We can tell nothing until he comes, until we have seen him. The jury are not satisfied, Zoe."

"And my father is not satisfied," said Zoe, turning distressed eyes upon Mrs. Drummond.

"My father is so peculiar, he sees things in such extraordinary lights, quite different to everybody else. What do you think he says?"

"Nay, how should I know?"

"He says that, unless Walter is cleared, our engagement must be at an end. That is nonsense. I didn't tell Walter I would marry him if all went well with him. I just promised."

"But supposing—my child, I only say supposing, merely by way of argument, so to speak," poor lady, she was so likely to argue on this subject merely for the sake of argument—"I say supposing that you knew that Walter had done it—what then?"

"I couldn't suppose such a thing," said Zoe.

"But supposing that there was no doubt about it, supposing that, as has occurred to me, that Basil went there mad, poor boy, oh, quite mad, to take his brother's life, and that Walter wrenched the pistol from him, and that it went off, and it was really done in self-defence, what then? Would you think it necessary to give up Walter?"

"No; I shouldn't think it at all necessary."

"You would expect him to make a clean breast of it?"

"I know that he would do so. I should not expect it, because I know that he would."

The trusting young voice rang out clear and sharp as a bell. Mrs. Drummond lay back upon her pillows and watched her, curiously; and mingled with her wonder was a certain pride that this girl had been loved by both her nephews. It was certainly a strange frame of mind to be hers at such a moment, and in such a time of unutterable sadness, but such was her attitude of mind at the time.

"But supposing, Zoe," she went on, presently, "that you knew, that you had evidence in your hands which would put the blame upon Walter, what then?"

"I would destroy them."

"You wouldn't think it necessary——"

"Oh, Mrs. Drummond, how can you talk in that way, at such a time? I should do everything to save the man I love. It would break my heart to find that he was—guilty," she uttered the word

with a shudder, "but I should save him before I thought of anything else."

"Still, it was only a supposition. I could not admit that such a thing could be true."

"Oh, no, no, no! Why, I would trust Walter to the ends of the world!"

"And so would I, my dear," said Mrs. Drummond, quickly. "But, Zoe, I want to tell you something. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"I am certain."

"Will you keep something, if I confide it to you?"

"Yes."

"You know, the other night, when they came to break the awful news to me that my poor boy was dead, I had only one instinct in my mind. My mind was dazed, my brain seemed as if it were dead, like him. I couldn't believe it, I didn't believe it, until I had seen him. They came down here not very long after the Recorder came back from that dinner. Well, it had happened in

Walter's rooms; Walter was the one to find him. I can't tell you quite what came over me—what came into my head——"

"Not the belief that Walter had murdered his brother?"

"Oh, no; but a sort of fear that it might be put upon him—the blame—because everybody knew that Basil had been in love with you——"

"Everybody but me," said the girl, correcting her.

"Everybody but you, dear. I felt like this—supposing that it was true, that he went there to kill Walter, that Walter struck him or wrested the pistol from him in self-defence, there would be an end of everything. He would be, at the very best, an exile for the rest of his life! I thought of you, I thought of him, of his engagement, and when I ran upstairs to get my cloak, that I might go and see for myself if it was true, I slipped into Basil's rooms, and I took every letter that seemed in any way like a private letter, and a diary that he had kept. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't quite understand you," said Zoe.

"Well, there was a diary—I haven't looked at it—but a diary and a lot of letters; I took them all. I brought them in here; I didn't know what to do with them. I wanted them out of the road; my fire had burned low, it was late. I hid them. Zoe, they've missed those letters; the police have commented on the fact that there were no letters. They are going to search the house again. I can't get them, but they will find them. I don't know what is in them—anything may be in them."

"You don't think that Walter did it—that's not in your mind?" said the girl, towering above the shaking little woman in the bed.

Mrs. Drummond looked at her, then on beyond her to the door.

"I don't know what I think. I haven't slept for half an hour since Walter brought the news. My head refuses to think; I seem as if I have no brain inside it, only a something that won't work, that beats and throbs and maddens me, but that won't think. I only seem to grasp half of what I am

told—I think I shall have brain fever in the end. I am trying not to let myself go beyond my own control, I am trying to keep up, trying to keep my senses so that I cannot babble it out when I don't know what I am saying. But they are up there, and I can't get at them, Zoe—I can't reach."

"They are up there—up where?"

"Listen! There is somebody coming! Don't let them hear us talking about it. It's Margaret."

The next moment a trim maidservant entered carrying a tea-tray. Mrs. Drummond sank back again among her pillows, and closed her eyes, leaving Zoe to cope with the servant. The girl was quite equal to the occasion.

"I think you had better set the tray there, Margaret; I will do everything for Mrs. Drummond. Have you served tea to the Recorder?"

"The Recorder is out, miss. A soldier came down from the barracks with a note from Sir Walter, and the Recorder told me to say that he should not be gone very long. The note was urgent. He was afraid that mistress was asleep, or he would have come up."

"Thank you. Very well, I will do everything for Mrs. Drummond now. She will enjoy her tea very much, I am sure."

The maid fussed about the room a little, pulling down the blinds, drawing the curtains, and replenishing the fire, which was burning rather low in the grate. When she had gone Zoe bent over Mrs. Drummond tenderly.

"Now, have your tea before you try to talk at all. All this has upset you most terribly, as it well might. See, she has brought you some toast that looks like a perfect dream; do try to eat and drink a little, because you may need all your strength."

CHAPTER XX.

MIZPAH.

"I hold it cowardice
To rest mistrustful when a noble heart
Hath pawned an open hand in sign of love."
—*King Henry VI.*

It seemed as if Mrs. Drummond and Zoe were doomed to interruptions. First came the doctor, who accepted the offer of a cup of tea, told Mrs. Drummond that she was wise to remain in bed, talked a little of the sad event—of which, by the bye, Northtowers was beginning not exactly to grow weary, but to be a little satiated—there is a difference, my reader. Then he went away, and Zoe rang the bell for Margaret, and when that young woman had replenished the fire and carried the tray away, she went back to the subject of the diary once more.

"Now, Mrs. Drummond," she said, "hadn't you

better get this matter off your mind? What is it you want me to do for you?"

"Do you think anybody will come back?"

"No, I should think not; the Recorder won't be long; but if you want me to do anything privately you had better tell me now at once. You said you couldn't get at the book and letters. Where are they?"

"They are up there."

"Up where?"

"Well, dear, I couldn't think what to do with them, or where to put them, so I flung them up into the canopy."

"What! Up there?"

"Yes."

"But how did you reach?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do; I put a chair on the bed and I—I threw them up into the canopy. I was desperate. I have been out of bed trying to get them out, but I can't reach—I can't reach quite to the edge of the canopy, do as I will."

"Poor little lady!" cried Zoe, with tender

pity. "And you so ill and so broken down by all this terrible affair. And you want me to get them down?"

"Oh, Zoe, if you only can! And can you keep them? Can you take them away? Have you anywhere that you can keep them safely?"

"Oh, yes, nobody is at all likely to go into my drawers; if they did they wouldn't look at papers."

"I don't think you will be able to reach," said Mrs. Drummond, looking hopelessly at the top of the bed.

"Oh, well, we will see. I am a good deal taller than you are. Can you move over to that side a little?"

It was a very large bed, and Mrs. Drummond was a very tiny woman, so that she was able to move well to one side to allow of Zoe planting a chair in a safe position. But, alas, tall as she was, she could not quite reach.

"If I hang on to it with my whole weight," she said, "I know I shall bring the whole thing down, and perhaps hurt you, too. Let me see—a foot-

stool, that might help me. There are two, are there not?"

She brought the two footstools and piled them up on to the chair. It was a very tottering and unsafe erection, for a spring bed is not the safest foundation for any kind of staging. However, the girl was desperate, as Mrs. Drummond had been, and, with several hair-breadth escapes, she succeeded in rescuing the book and the various letters and papers from their hiding-place. As she dropped the last that she could reach upon the pillows, she felt the chair totter beneath her weight, and, jumping down, just managed to save herself from a bad fall.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with an unmistakable accent of pain.

"You've hurt yourself!" said Mrs. Drummond.

"Yes, I have sprained my ankle, I think. It is nothing. Never mind. Do not think about me. What are we going to do about these letters?"

"Give them to me," said Mrs. Drummond.

"Here, put the book under the bed-clothes. Nobody will dream of searching there. As for the letters—let us look them over. Poor boy! It makes no difference to him now whether I read them or not. Goodness knows I never thought of casting so much as a glance at a letter of Basil's before!"

She did but barely glance at them then. They were all letters of but small import. A few tradesmen's bills, a few notes of invitation, a letter asking his advice about some theatricals, and some club letters.

"Put them all into the fire, Zoe," said Mrs. Drummond. "Burned letters tell no tales. Don't burn them in a block, dear; let each sheet lie wide open on the fire. They will soon consume away then."

"You would not burn the bills?" said Zoe, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, yes; they will all come in again, no fear of that. And nobody will expect ordinary invitations and letters to be answered, of course not. Put them all into the fire. I must think of

myself. It would never be forgiven if it was known that a Recorder's wife had concealed even the most innocent letters. And, God knows, I did it with a good motive!"

In a few moments the little heap of letters had been reduced to ashes.

"Now mend the fire," said Mrs. Drummond, with feverish anxiety to cover up the last trace of her crime. "You think you can keep the book safely for me?"

"Oh, yes, of course I can. And I don't believe," said the girl, bravely, "that there is anything more in it than there was in the letters!"

"Well, well, we shall see—we shall see," said Mrs. Drummond. "I hope not, with all my heart and soul, for Walter's sake, for yours, and for my own, for everybody's sake. Tell me, child, what will you do with it?"

"I will lock it up in my own drawers. It will be quite safe. Nobody ever interferes with our things. I believe it would be quite

safe here among your own belongings, Mrs. Drummond. The police could not ask to search your private rooms. It could not be for a moment suspected that you had a hand in the dreadful business."

"No, child, no; I feel that nothing is safe here. If you are not afraid of taking care of it, I should feel so much happier and more comfortable to know that it was right out of my hands. I cannot tell you how much I feel it."

"But why don't you examine it and make sure—set your mind at rest?" cried Zoe.

"I cannot. It is a Brahma lock."

"You could force it."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't like to do that. After all, it is not mine."

"Neither were the letters, and if the police had got hold of it they would not have stopped to consider whose it was. I should certainly examine it at once, if I were you."

"Not to-night; I hear the Recorder on the stairs. Now, Zoe, put it under your cloak, take it right

away, and promise me that nobody shall get hold of it."

"Nobody shall get hold of it if I can possibly help it; it will be a very unforeseen circumstance indeed that gives it to anybody else."

"Stop!" said Mrs. Drummond; "I hear two voices. I believe that is Walter. If that is so, then he is released from his parole."

Mrs. Drummond's surmise proved to be correct. Scarcely a minute later the Recorder came into the room.

"Walter has come back with me, my dear," he said. "They told us downstairs that you were here, and he would like you to go down to him. I will stay with Mrs. Drummond."

Zoe went down at once, and so Mrs. Drummond was left alone with the Recorder, with the fatal book still concealed among her bedclothes.

Sir Walter was awaiting his sweetheart in the pretty drawing-room. She ran into his arms with a cry, as a child would run to its mother, and he caught her to him, kissing her many times,

and uttering all manner of exclamations over her.

"My dear, my dear, I am so grieved that you should have all this trouble for me."

"Nay, it is I who should be grieved for you!" she exclaimed, drawing herself away a little. "Why have you been released from your parole? Is there any fresh news?"

"No, I am on my parole still."

"Why—then—have you broken it?"

"Not at all, it has been extended to the town; that is all."

"But of what do they suspect you—not of a hand in your brother's death? It is too horrible!" she cried.

"My dear, my dear, that is not the worst! I have no fear for myself—I have never yet believed in the really innocent suffering for the guilty—they could bring no such dastardly crime home to me, my whole life bears witness against it. I have no fear for myself, my only fear is for you."

"For me!" she echoed.

"Yes, for you; because—it is the reason that I have got my parole extended—because I have had a letter from your father, Zoe."

"What—already?"

"Yes. He says, and in a certain sense he has reason, he says that so long as I am a suspect there can be nothing between us."

"There shall be nothing between us," said the girl, indignantly; "nothing shall ever come between us, that I swear. As to my father, he doesn't think what he says; he is old, crotchety, in a sense almost peculiar. I shall take no notice of what he says, this is a matter in which I must judge for myself."

"In one sense you must take notice of what your father says. It may mean waiting a little time, but that is all. I only felt, dearest, that I must satisfy myself that you felt as I do—that there was no change in you."

"There could be no change!" cried the girl, passionately.

"No, I thought not, I felt there would not be; and yet I was not quite sure. I wanted to make

sure—I wanted to be certain. I shall set good men to work—we will not leave a stone unturned. And you will help me all that you know—won't you?"

The words of promise were upon the girl's lips, then she remembered the secret which she had sworn to keep but that very afternoon. She remembered with a sinking heart that she had promised, aye, and promised faithfully, that she would actually take charge of the book which, in all probability, contained that which would firmly and surely establish her lover's innocence. The book was lying deep down among the bed-clothes, just where Mrs. Drummond had thrust it in an agony of apprehension. She had promised, and it was a promise which at all hazards she must keep. Mrs. Drummond had acted foolishly, although there could not be the smallest shadow of doubt that she had acted in all tenderness, in all love, and in the interests of the brother who was left. She could not break faith with her—that was impossible and out of the question.

What should she—what could she do? Was she

to rest day and night with that fatal book in her possession? Was she, possibly, to let her lover—the man she adored—bear the brunt of a crime which she was assured he had never committed? Or, if not the brunt, was he to go all the rest of his life tainted by the suspicion of it? Her father had taken fright already. What was she to do? She had no time in which to think. He was waiting then for an answer, hanging upon her lips, upon her looks. Oh, was ever any girl so cruelly, so unfortunately placed in all this world before?

"Zoe," he said at last, "what is it that you have in your mind?"

"In my mind? Oh, Walter, how can you ask me such a question at such a time? My mind is at war with itself, it is like a chaos. I scarcely know, waking or sleeping, whether I am myself; whether this horrible, ghastly thing is true. I try not to think how it may go with you."

"My dear child, we must hope——"

"No, I dare not. I have gone through the very worst over and over again in the last few days."

"But you believe in me?"

"Oh, Walter, Walter!—yes, yes, a thousand times yes. I shall always believe in you. How could I possibly do otherwise?"

"And come what may, happen what will, you will never change?"

"Never! You mean if my father keeps to this line which he has taken up? I will never, never change. I will wait for you till crack of doom, if need be. If one of us two tires, it will not be me."

By common consent they did not talk more of the affair that was then uppermost in the minds of both. She had given her word to him, and he knew that she would keep it. So for some little time they sat in the pretty firelit drawing-room, talking over their plans; not the plans of to-day or to-morrow, but of the time years ahead when they would be all the world to each other.

Then, at the appointed hour, Walter Hayes got into his cab and was driven back to barracks again, strengthened, fortified, purified by the outspoken

love of the girl who, until that day, had always been the one to hold back, the one to be sought, the one to be wooed, the one who had taken all and given so little in the way of protestation and promise. With the shadow of tribulation all that had been altered, and Walter Hayes realised in that precious hour what the love of woman can be and often is.

"I go," he said at the last moment, "relying upon your promise."

So he went, and she remained behind with the weight of a great secret in her keeping.

CHAPTER XXI.

TERROR.

"Raw Haste, half-sister to Delay."

—TENNYSON.

FOR more than a week the diary remained in Zoe Percival's keeping. After the departure of Sir Walter, on the night of their first meeting since the discovery of the tragedy, she had with great difficulty smuggled it from Mrs. Drummond's bed to the seclusion of her own cloak, and thence she had carried it to her own bedroom. Once safely there she hid it in the deep recesses of a cupboard within a large cupboard, one of those curious, roomy conveniences which are only found in very old houses. In the cupboard itself Zoe kept many of her clothes, but the inner sanctuary was devoted to such girlish secrets and treasures as most young things possess.

She took every precaution in concealing this secret of hers. She wrapped the volume in several sheets of paper, and sealed it with her own private

seal, then she put it in the middle of a bundle of music. At all events, whatever happened, it would be safe there. Then she tried bravely and valiantly to put the idea clean out of her mind; but it was not an easy task. With every fresh detail of the inquest that came to their ears there always came to her the horrid remembrance of the fact that she, in all probability, held the clue to the mystery of Basil Hayes' death in her possession at that very moment. She devoured every line in the papers which in any way related to the tragedy of the nineteenth of March, and her very blood boiled with indignation as she read the string of questions which had been put to the brother of the dead man.

Yet, in the end, the verdict was one of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and Walter Hayes was released from his parole of honour, and told that he was as free as any of his fellows. Yes, he was free, but he was not absolutely cleared. He had never been arrested or openly accused, or even openly suspected of having been the cause of his brother's death; yet the manner of

all the world, with the exception of his aunt and uncle and of his chum Fitzroy, was changed towards him. Mr. Percival had gone the length of formally breaking off the engagement with his daughter, and he plainly asked him not to renew his visits to the Chantry. His ring, the badge of engagement, remained upon Zoe's fingers simply because she had absolutely refused either to give it up or to return it to its giver herself. She only spoke once to her father upon the subject.

"You order me to give up my engagement to the man I care for, the man I love with all my heart and soul, whom I trust as completely as I trust yourself," she said. "I am sorry to disobey you for the first time in my life. I cannot do what you ask. Nothing will induce me to break faith with Walter. It is hard that he should have to wait so long, but he will wait until I am of an age to marry him without your consent."

"You defy me?" said Mr. Percival in astonished accents.

"No, I don't defy you. I am going to wait, that is all."

"And you think that he will wait for you?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, time will show. We shall see."

"Yes," said Zoe, quietly, "we shall see."

So she still went on wearing his ring, and she still saw him sometimes at the Oriol House, for Mr. Percival had not cared to make the curb so tight as to forbid her visiting with their old neighbour.

It happened one day, when she had just come in from the afternoon service at the cathedral, to which she very frequently went, that she received a message from Mrs. Drummond begging her to go in and have tea with her.

"My dear," said Mrs. Drummond, when she entered the drawing-room, "I am going away."

"Going away?"

"Yes. I have been so ill lately. I cannot sleep, I cannot shake off the horror of what has gone by, and the doctor and the Recorder have put their heads together, and they insist upon it that I must go away."

"But what about that book?" said Zoe.

"My dear, that is why I sent for you. We ought to do something with it—we ought to examine it; but I do not know that we shall have the chance. We shall not be away for long. Do you think that you could keep it until I come back?"

"Oh, yes; but I think it would ease your mind if you looked at it before you went."

"So it would, my dear, so it would; but since I have been ill I feel as if everybody was watching me. The Recorder never leaves me alone if he can avoid it, and Margaret seems to be always about. I never seem to have half an hour to myself. Zoe, I wish I had never touched that book!"

"No, don't say that; you don't know what there is in it. I will keep it for the present. Don't allow yourself to worry about it, but try all you can to get strong and well, so that you may dispose of it yourself. Tell me, where are you going?"

"Oh, to London first, after that I cannot say—probably down to Bournemouth; possibly, we may

move about and get change in that way. I wish, Zoe, that you were going with us!"

"And so do I," said Zoe. "You can imagine, Mrs. Drummond, that it is not very pleasant for me here in Northtowers, where everybody knows us, where everybody knows Walter, and suspects and believes the worst!"

"Oh, no, don't say that!"

"Yes, but it is true. At the best, everybody knows that my father has put an end to our being married when we originally intended. Those that don't pity me openly—and open pity is very hard to bear—as openly sneer at me. And then sometimes I see Walter, and that is the hardest of all to bear."

"But nothing will change Walter, my dear."

"No, I am not afraid of that; all I am afraid of is that he may go on all the rest of his life without anything more definite being brought to light—that he may go on with the shadow of this half suspicion always with him."

There was a moment's silence, then Zoe sank down upon the hearthrug at Mrs. Drummond's feet.

"Oh, Mrs. Drummond," she cried, clasping the little lady's feverish hands with her own. "I do want to ask you something. Don't you think you could find time and opportunity to examine that book before you go, and get it off our minds? Supposing that it made everything quite clear—no, it couldn't do that—but if it made things a little clearer—if it gave a clue——"

"My dear child, how should I account to anybody for having it? Remember, the police have been here three times, and they have searched the place thoroughly."

"Not all the house, Mrs. Drummond."

"No, dear child, not all the house; but all Basil's rooms—all parts of the house where anything of Basil's was likely to be found."

"Mrs. Drummond," said the girl earnestly, "only think for a moment! Walter's whole life is hanging in the balance; I am sure that you would not like to feel that by leaving undone something you could do, you might be helping to keep him under a baneful and disgraceful shadow, and mind you, it will be—always will be—both baneful and

disgraceful. After all, need you account for the book—couldn't you leave it somewhere so that it could be found? At all events we might satisfy ourselves that there is nothing in it—nothing of any import to Walter; then it would be off my mind, it would be off yours, and we should have done all that we could. Oh, Mrs. Drummond, don't go away without satisfying yourself, without satisfying me, on this point!"

For a moment Mrs. Drummond was irresolute. Her little frail hand was shaking visibly, so that the lovely rings that adorned it caught a thousand gleams from the glance of the firelight. In desperate anxiety the girl awaited her reply. At last she seemed to brace herself together.

"Zoe," she said, "you will think me a terrible coward, but I—I daren't do it. If I came into your house—to your bedroom—everybody would suspect; they would suspect that we were after something unusual, something we were afraid to disclose. My dear, the whole world suspects us."

"No, no!"

"But I say yes! Not in ourselves, only because we are the nearest to this dreadful crime which they are trying to find out."

"And we also want to find it out!" Zoe exclaimed.

"Yes, yes; nobody so anxious as you and I. And yet—oh, I know you think me foolish—Zoe, I have been married more than thirty years, I have never, never had, in all that time a single dispute of any sort with my husband; we have never had so much as a difference of opinion, and yet, Zoe, I confess to you that now—that now—I am afraid of him."

"Afraid of the Recorder! Oh, Mrs. Drummond, what nonsense!"

"No, it is not nonsense—it is the truth. Zoe, my dear, I did wrong in touching that book, I see it so plainly now, and I am genuinely afraid to tell my husband what I have done."

"But he wouldn't say anything to you?"

"No, that is just it, but he would look at me. He has always loved me, he believes me to be a just woman; he would look at me, and that look

would kill me. My dear, Walter is in no danger. If he were in danger—why, I would openly confess everything; I would give the book, unopened, to my husband. I assure you, when I took it I had no thought but to save the one that was left. Even in that first dreadful moment of anguish, I thought of the living before the dead."

"You thought that Walter had done it?"

"No, but I thought he might have done. My first instinct was that Basil had gone there to kill him—that he had done it in self-defence."

"But how could the diary or the letters tell anything of that?"

"I don't know, my dear. If I had stopped to think I should never have touched the book at all; but I acted on the impulse of the moment, and it was only a moment in which I had either to think or to act. I know, Zoe, that I must seem a terrible coward to you. Well, just now I am a coward. My dear, I have not slept once in such a way as to give me any rest, since the

dreadful night of the nineteenth of March. I am worn out, broken; when I have been away and have had change, and perhaps even rest, I shall be braver, I shall feel different, I shall not be afraid then. As it is now, I am cowardly—anything you like; but I entreat you not to drive me any further!"

"My dear Mrs. Drummond—Aunt Adelaide, if I may call you so—how could you think that I—I, who was so fond of poor Basil, who love Walter with all my heart and soul, could want to drive you to anything? It was more for your own sake than for mine, or even for his, that I begged you to set your mind at rest as far as possible. But to drive you, why, that is too foolish! Of course I would not press the point further than I have; but I will keep the book safely until you come home again, and never, Mrs. Drummond, never, as long as you live, as long as I live, never, I entreat you, use such a word as that to me again!"

She looked up anxiously into the little lady's excited face, then, to her horror, Mrs. Drummond

sank back, gave a little sigh, and fainted quietly away.

There was nothing nervous or weak about Zoe Percival. When she saw that Mrs. Drummond had fainted quietly away where she sat, she set about restoring her to consciousness without calling anyone to her aid.

"What happened?" were her first words when she came back to herself again.

"Oh, nothing—you fainted; keep still."

"You didn't call anybody?"

"No, no, it's all right; don't talk for a little while."

She chafed Mrs. Drummond's hands and held smelling-salts to her nostrils, and presently she was able to sit up and take a long breath again.

"Zoe," she said, in an anxious whisper, "I am glad you didn't call anyone. I might have said anything."

"No, no, I knew exactly what to do. You are overdone and exhausted. Tell me, have you anything special to take for this kind of seizure?"

"Yes; give me a teaspoonful of sal volatile in a little water; you will find the bottle on the little table there. I shall be all right in a minute or two. Zoe, I am glad Walter cares for you," she said, presently, "you are so sensible; you don't get frightened; you have ten times the courage I have!"

CHAPTER XXII.

OPEN AT LAST!

"God helps us to do our duty and not shrink."
—OWEN MEREDITH.

A COUPLE of months had gone by. The Oriol House was still closed, and nothing fresh had transpired concerning the murder of Basil Hayes. The Recorder and Mrs. Drummond were still absent from Northtowers, and of late the news which had reached the city of Northtowers of them was of a very disquieting description, for Mrs. Drummond was seriously, even dangerously ill. Twice the Recorder had written to the Chantry entreating that Zoe might be allowed to go to his wife, but on this point Mr. Percival was absolutely inflexible.

"Under the circumstances," he said, "it is an absolute impossibility that you can leave my house to stay with the Drummonds. I am very sorry for her trouble, and more sorry to hear of her illness, but it cannot be essential to her that you should be

with her; it is only a ruse to get you out of my own keeping, and to further matters between you and Walter Hayes. I neither can, nor ever will, consent to a marriage between you, unless, indeed, the unhappy events of the past were entirely cleared up to the general satisfaction of the world."

"That is as you will," said Zoe. "I shall marry Walter sooner or later; it is only fair that I should tell you honestly of my intention."

"Then you will do so at your own risk—the whole world will know that it is without my consent," said her father, not showing the least anger, but stating a plain fact as clearly and dispassionately as he would have stated a fact to a client twenty years before.

"I don't think that the whole world will blame me," said Zoe, quietly.

"I think that the whole world will be very sorry for you," said Mr. Percival, with more than usual deliberation.

"I don't agree with you, Father," said the girl, quietly. "I have no wish to quarrel——"

"Quarrel!" he echoed. "I wouldn't quarrel with anybody over anything. I should have my digestion upset for a month if I did. No, no, we will have no quarrelling. The whole affair is bad enough without that. But, once for all, I do object to your leaving my house for that of the Drummonds at present."

"Very well, then there is no more to be said," replied Zoe, in the same quiet tone.

She wrote to Mrs. Drummond, saying that her father had a strong objection to her accepting her invitation, and that, of course, she had no choice but to obey him. "But," she ended, "I want you to believe that this is no doing of mine—that I would gladly have come had I been permitted to do so; that I am always your faithful and affectionate niece to be—ZOE."

She thought that Mrs. Drummond would read between the lines, and understand that she would be true to her trust. Then she bethought her of yet another assurance which she might add, and quickly penned a postscript at the foot of her letter. "If there is anything that you particu-

larly wish to tell me, dear Mrs. Drummond," she wrote, "could you not tell it to Walter; he, I am sure, would carry out any instructions of yours."

To that letter, however, Zoe Percival never received a reply, for the very next news that came to Northtowers concerning the Drummonds was that the Recorder's wife was dead. The news was broken to Zoe in a letter from Sir Walter himself.

"My poor little aunt passed away at six o'clock this morning," he wrote, "and without doubt her life has been cut short by poor Basil's dreadful end. She spoke of you several times yesterday, and almost at the last bade me give you her love and to say to you that you were to use your discretion now in all things. I asked her to explain herself, as such a message seemed to me not a little vague; but she said so positively that you would understand her, that I did not like to press the question further."

Three days later they brought home the body of her who had been the life and soul of the Oriol

House, to lie there prior to the funeral, which was to take place at Summerhayes, for it was equally the wish of the Recorder and of Sir Walter that the aunt who had been as a mother to those boys should lie among her own people and beside him whom she had loved, next to her husband, best in all the world.

Not a few people wondered at the inscription which was written above Zoe Percival's name on the cross of snowy blossoms which lay next to Sir Walter's on the coffin. It was very simple, no more than the words, "In all understanding and love." And she did understand—understood that now she was free to do as she would with that hidden secret, that she was free to investigate, publish or destroy it.

She waited, from a curious sense of delicacy, until the funeral day had come and gone, then she locked herself into her bedroom and, for the first time since she had put it there, took the book from its hiding-place. She felt as one might feel who rifles a grave, and yet she did not falter or hesitate. She had seen on the day of the funeral—for Mr. Percival

had raised no objection to her being present at it—she had seen clearly an expression on the faces of the bystanders which said as plainly as if it had been put into words, that nine out of ten blamed Walter Hayes for his aunt's as well as for his brother's death, and the consciousness of this was simply maddening to her.

A chilly day had given her the excuse for a fire in her bedroom, and to the flames she quickly consigned the several wrappings of paper with which she had safeguarded the precious volume. Then she had the task of forcing the delicate Brahma lock which had kept its contents secret to the world. It was soon accomplished. The tools she used in wood-carving served her for the purpose. One wrench, one strain, a giving way of something, and the contents of the volume lay open at her disposal.

She turned back the cover with a loudly beating heart. Would she find anything—anything of any import? It began with a date of two years before; that was not at all interesting. She turned over quickly, until she came to the record of more recent

times. There was just the mention of a dance which he had attended the previous autumn, and then the name "Zoe" caught her eye.

Poor boy, poor boy! From that time on it was all Zoe. Zoe's perfections, Zoe's beauties, Zoe's charms, and, above all, the certainty that Zoe loved him. She wept piteously as she read these traces of a love which had been hopeless from the very beginning, although he had known it not.

"I met her with Geraldine to-day," one entry ran. "She gave me a bunch of violets that she was wearing in her bosom. I have been happy ever since. It is anguish to love as I do, and yet she is worth it. What dove's eyes they are! How sweet and gracious and good she is! Her sisters are both handsome and charming, but compared with her they are utterly insignificant and dull. I feel an idle, worthless scamp of a chap beside this angel of goodness! What can I have done that she should smile upon me as she does? I know she loves me! I can feel it in the touch of her hand, in the glance of her sweet eyes, in every smile, in every tone, in every gesture. I am almost too happy to live! I

have only one regret, that I have not set to work earlier to make a proper position for my darling to share. But I am going to work now. I am going to work so hard that I will win a name for which any woman in Europe would be proud to exchange her own. It won't be easy, but the moment I have her promise I shall clear out of this, give up all my frivolities, and think only of the glorious and blessed future."

Poor boy, poor boy! All the glorious and blessed future had existed only in dreams. She could never have married him. She liked him well enough as a friend, but as a husband, as one on whom she must lean and trust to all her life—no, no, that must be somebody of a very different calibre to what Basil Hayes had been—poor, dreaming, mistaken boy.

After this there were many entries less effusive in character, and yet each telling its own tale.

"Went to the Chantry to-day. Found the girls out. Waited with the old lady till they came in. Had no talk to Zoe."

"Went to the Chantry to-day. Found Zoe and

Geraldine at home, the others out. More in love than ever."

"Went to the Chantry to-day—other people there. Zoe taken up, serving tea, to my immense disgust. Believe the others are doing everything they can to put a spoke in my wheel."

"Walter came to-day. Splendid looking chap—handsomer than ever. Wish he hadn't noticed Zoe, but he did, and asked who she was immediately. I don't want Walter to get to know Zoe too well."

Poor boy! As if it had not been foreordained that she and Walter should become all the world to each other. Poor unhappy boy!

"Feel very much upset to-day," ran another entry. "Walter been worrying about my staying idle in Northtowers. Wish Walter would mind his own business. Shall refuse to go. Suppose he really wants to have the field to himself; anybody can see that he fell desperately in love with Zoe at first sight."

So the diary ran, giving a brief epitome of the story which I have already told, breathing with the intense bitterness and wrath which the dead

man had suffered to find a place within his heart, reiterating over and over again his determination not to leave Northtowers, not to be chiselled out of his position and ousted from his place, and asserting always the conviction that she cared for him, for him alone, that she was being cajoled and trapped into marrying his brother for his superior wealth and position.

Her divine and tender pity for this sad history was only varied by a feeling of resentment against her father and mother that they had left her in ignorance of this important event in her life.

"I suppose," she thought, bitterly, "that their idea was that I was in love with Basil, and they thought that they would nip it in the bud. As if I am the kind of woman who once gives up an idea for worldly considerations. Why, I would marry Walter if he had nothing—if he was a mere private in a marching regiment, and I had to marry off the strength, and had to scrub, and sew and stitch, and wash, I would still count myself the most blessed of women. They don't understand, those two. Father was always rich, always able to command a

certain position. Did my mother, I wonder, ever feel for him as I feel for Walter? It seems incredible. Still, they might have trusted me—they might have had some faith in my common-sense, not treated me always quite as a child." Then with a great sigh she added, "But parents seem to be so blind, they think nobody sees but themselves; and sometimes they're wrong. We should have been saved all this if they had confided in me. I should have told them that I could never marry Basil; I should have convinced him, and he would have gone off to London to work, and the very feeling that he had lost something would have given him a spur to go on. But there! One's parents cannot trust one!" She gave a great sigh, and turned over the page.

Ah! Here was something that at last was not of the same kind as she had been perusing—a heavily scented letter, written on cream laid paper with a gaudy scarlet and gold monogram on the top; a letter penned in a woman's bold, determined handwriting.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GERVAISE—GERVAISE.

"Heaven is above all yet; there sits a Judge
That no king can corrupt."

—*King Henry VIII.*

ZOE PERCIVAL could scarcely breathe as she took the letter in her trembling hands. Some instinct told her that this was no ordinary idle correspondence. The address conveyed nothing to her.

"The Woodbines,

"Cedar Road, N.W.

"March 18th.

"MY OWN LOVE," it began; then there was a fierce splutter, as if the writer had given a start which had scattered the ink over the fair page.

"Nay, I should not say this, and yet, I will say it—you are my own love, though I am not yours. Walter, Walter, why have you always been so cold to me? Why have you maddened me so that I have done you an irreparable wrong? I

told Gervaise yesterday, I don't know why—because I was mad, I think—that in a sense you had supplanted him. He was furious. I told him—oh, well, never mind what I told him—I lied! I said everything that could rouse him against you. I don't think that I wish ever to see him again. I believe that he has done with me for all time, and now that he is gone, and I am alone here with nothing but my own thoughts to occupy me, I feel that I have over-shot my mark, that I have failed in my object, that I have lost him and that he will kill you! Walter, I was fool enough to tell him your name, to give him your address, to set him on you, like a bloodhound after his prey! I believe he will kill you, and then he will come back and kill me; either that, or he will wipe me out of his life as if I had never been. Well, I can bear that; I have been tired of Gervaise this long while; I never really loved him! It seems as if all the love in my heart had been taken in the palm of my hand and laid at your feet—and you, you trod upon it; you set your foot upon it; you scorned it and me alike; you would have none of me! I felt, right up to

yesterday, as if, if I could only strike deep and hurt you, wound you, as you have hurt and wounded me, I should be happy, I should not care what came next, I should not care what I sacrificed. To-day, after lying awake all through the long black hours, I feel that if harm comes to you there will be no rest for me in this world or in the next! I am a wretched, unhappy, slighted, miserable woman! All my life things have gone wrong with me, ever since I first crept out of my mother's house, a shrinking child, to set my first footstep on the road to a painted glory that was a sham! I have reached the culminating point now. All through the long hours of the night I have been treading the road to a Calvary of my own. I know it is no use protesting my love; I know that you have never cared for me, that I never attracted you; that you have only been bored by the passion that I have poured out before you; but at least in the time to come, if it is not too late, you will bless me for having saved you.

"Your heartbroken

"MONA."

The girl read this extraordinary letter scarce taking in half its meaning. Who was Mona? Who was Gervaise? What had they to do with Walter? What had they to do with each other? What did it all mean? How came this mad ebullition of passion to be locked up in Basil Hayes' diary? She eagerly turned over the page so that she might see if there was any clue in the entry on the day previous to the nineteenth of March. Yes, here it was:

"Have just received by evening post this extraordinary letter. It came to me—I opened it and read it before I saw that I had opened a letter of Walter's which had reached me between two of my own. It is evidently some woman in London whom he knows who has set her husband or lover at him, as you set a dog upon a rat. What shall I do? I think my best plan will be to go rather late up to the barracks and wait quietly for Walter in his own quarters. He will be able to explain, or rather he will be able to recognise, any danger that there may be—explanations, of course, would be out of place between us. One thing is very certain, that the

lady exonerates him from all blame; no statement given in a court of justice, with all the forms of legality, could more completely do that. After all, if he has stepped in before me Walter is my brother, my own flesh and blood—the nearest that I have; and by this woman's warning harm awaits him. On second thoughts I won't take the letter with me, it might lead to complications. I will make Walter come back here and stay until some explanation has taken place with this Gervaise. Gervaise—I wonder who you are? Another man gone wrong through a woman! I wonder why we love women so? It seems a mystery to which there is no solution."

She sat with the diary and the open letter before her for a long, long time without moving. So, after all, the book with the Brahma lock had held the solution of the whole mystery! So poor little Mrs. Drummond, in her anxiety to shield the one who was left, had done the greatest possible damage, but mercifully not beyond reparation. After all, Basil's life had been given for another; his last act had been one of generosity; his last thoughts towards his brother had been prompted by the instinct that

blood is thicker than water; he had gone generously, unhesitatingly, bravely to save his brother, and he had met death in his stead. Oh, if only she had more strongly persuaded the poor little frail, shrinking woman who had loved him, so that she had opened the book, she would not have gone out into the unknown in ignorance of the truth; she would have been, and she would have had cause to be, proud of her boy's nobility, and of his generous heart.

Now all these people who had glanced askance, with scarcely veiled sneers of contempt, at him who was nobler and better than any one of them, should eat their proud looks, should take back their hard words, and acknowledge once and for all that they had been wrong, that they had traduced, if only by their silence, the bravest and most innocent of men.

There was no thought in her mind of keeping the new revelation a secret. She felt that no longer had she any need to hide the fact that out of her love—her great love—Mrs. Drummond had sinned against the law. Nobody would blame her, not

even the husband whose glance of surprise and displeasure she had so entirely dreaded.

She sat there for a long time in thought, then she took a sudden resolve, and hastily shut the book and the papers within it. She dressed herself in her outdoor garments, put on a thick veil, and taking the precious book in her arms, she descended the stairs. In the hall she met her sister Madeleine.

"Oh, are you going out, Zoe?" she asked.

"Yes. I shall not be long," she replied.

"Has anything happened?" asked the elder sister, looking at her questioningly.

"Yes, something has happened—something very extraordinary. I will tell you when I come in. I shall not be very long."

"Can't I come with you?"

"I would rather go alone. I shall not be long,' the girl reiterated.

She passed on, leaving Madeleine staring uneasily after her. However, the resolute shutting of the front door told her that Zoe had left the house, and running to the staircase window

she saw her walking briskly across the Chantry gardens.

"Now where can she have gone?" she said to herself. "I wish I had had my things on, I would have gone with her in that case. Surely she and Walter are not going to make a bolt of it?"

Zoe meanwhile had reached the street. At the corner by the Cathedral yard a couple of cabs were standing for hire. Into one of these she got, and bade the man, in a firm voice, drive to the cavalry barracks. No thought of the unconventionality of the proceeding ever entered her mind; her only instinct was to reach Walter with the news, and the sooner the better. At the gate the man drew up, and asked to which part of the barracks she wished him to drive. An orderly came out of the guard-room, and to him Zoe appealed.

"I wish to see Sir Walter Hayes at once on the most important business," she said, in her clear and ringing voice.

"I think, miss," he replied, "that Sir Walter

Hayes is in the orderly-room; if you will wait here a minute I will ask."

It seemed even to her impatient calculation scarcely more than a minute ere he returned, followed by Sir Walter in undress uniform.

"Why, my dearest," he exclaimed, as he caught sight of her face at the cab window, "what on earth are you doing here?"

"Oh, Walter, can you come back with me—is it impossible?"

"No, it is not impossible, but I am not free. Why?"

"I have the most important news for you. Can't you get free—couldn't you ask your Colonel? I want you to come back with me at once."

"Where?"

"To the Oriol House. I must see the Recorder and tell him this wonderful discovery I have made."

"About Basil?"

"Yes. Everything is clear now—I have had the clue to the mystery all the while, only your poor aunt would not let me speak—would not

let me search. That was what her last message that you brought me meant. Pray go—try, try to get leave—say that it is urgent, a matter of life and death—only get leave and come back with me."

He turned without a word, and went back into the orderly-room, and almost in less time than it takes me to write the words he returned and got into the cab, telling her that all was right, and that he was at her service.

"Tell him to go back to the Oriol House," she said.

Then as the cab lumbered back again towards the town, she poured out to him all that she had discovered.

"So," she ended, "that poor boy came to warn you, and he met his death in your stead. I thought, Mrs. Drummond thought, and, though you have not said it, I believe that you have thought too, Walter, that he went there with murder in his heart, bent upon taking your life and breaking my heart. But it was just otherwise! He had been angry, hurt, indignant, sore, but in the first

moment of threatened danger to you he forgot everything, except that you were his brother, he forgot everything except that he loved you. My only regret is now that his more than mother died without knowing the truth."

"But," said Sir Walter, holding his sweetheart close, "she understands all now—she knew before we did."

* * * * * *

It was late the following day ere the police sought out the beautiful woman who was called Mona. They enquired for Lord Gervaise.

"You come too late," she said.

"He is gone from here?"

"Yes."

"You can put us on the track?"

"Yes; but you won't find him. Lord Gervaise knew as soon as the details were published in the papers that he had mistaken Basil Hayes for Sir Walter. It seemed at first as if the truth would never come out, and yet he has had a presentiment all along that it would not be hidden long. He had a telegram this morning from someone in

Northtowers—here it is, but there is no name to it. Then he—he went——"

"Where?"

"Come in here—I'll show you the way he went; but you won't find him."

She led the way into a room on the right, and there, lying stretched upon a table, was the figure of a dead man with a bullet wound in his temple—all that was left of him by whom Basil Hayes came to his untimely end, on March the nineteenth, in his brother's quarters in Northtowers Barracks.

THE END.

LIST of WORKS by JOHN STRANGE WINTER.

CAVALRY LIFE.
REGIMENTAL LEGENDS.
*BOOTLES' BABY.
*HOUP-LA!
*IN QUARTERS.
*ON MARCH.
ARMY SOCIETY.
*PLUCK.
GARRISON GOSSIP.
*MIGNON'S SECRET.
*THAT IMP.
*MIGNON'S HUSBAND.
A SIEGE BABY.
*CONFESSIONS OF A PUBLISHER.
*BOOTLES' CHILDREN.
BEAUTIFUL JIM.
*MY POOR DICK.
*HARVEST.
*A LITTLE FOOL.
*BUTTONS.
MRS. BOB.
*DINNA FORGET.
*FERRERS COURT.
*HE WENT FOR A SOLDIER.
THE OTHER MAN'S WIFE.
*GOOD-BYE.
*LUMLEY THE PAINTER.
*MERE LUCK.
ONLY HUMAN.
MY GEOFF.
A SOLDIER'S CHILDREN.
*THREE GIRLS.
*THAT MRS. SMITH.
AUNT JOHNNIE.
THE SOUL OF THE BISHOP.
*A MAN'S MAN.
*RED-COATS.
A SEVENTH CHILD.
A BORN SOLDIER.
*THE STRANGER WOMAN.
A BLAMELESS WOMAN.
*THE MAJOR'S FAVOURITE.
*PRIVATE TINKER.
A MAGNIFICENT YOUNG MAN.
*I MARRIED A WIFE.
*I LOVED HER ONCE.
THE TRUTH-TELLERS.
*THE SAME THING WITH A DIFFERENCE.
THE STRANGE STORY OF MY LIFE.
*GRIP!
*THE TROUBLES OF AN UNLUCKY BOY.
INTO AN UNKNOWN WORLD.
*A SEASIDE FLIRT.
EVERYBODY'S FAVOURITE.

* One Shilling Novels.

THE TRUTH-TELLERS—continued.

gains in power and brilliancy. There is no apparent limit to her energy, and the sparkling fountain of her playful humour never loses its perennial freshness. No one, of course, takes too seriously her social censorship, and yet she is always presenting us with new materials for reflection, gathered out of her intimate knowledge of Society and its ways. This material she clothes in the prettiest of masquerade attire. Unlike her daring contemporary, Sarah Grand, she shrinks from going deeply into human delinquencies, which are, perhaps, better left to the scientist to discuss than to the writer of fiction, and the 'social lies' which her pen delights in dwelling upon in 'The Truth-Tellers' are scarcely of the class that has the power to 'warp us from the living truth.' They are, in fact, the pretty 'sophistries'—as one of the characters in the novel describes them—which social conventionalism has stamped with its approval as necessary in the artificial condition of things which surround us; and these she has made use of in this most amusing book with singularly felicitous results. . . . All who are in want of that cheap and effective medicine, a good laugh, cannot do better than obtain the book at once."—*Birmingham Daily Post, October 27th*, 1896.

"There will be plenty of readers for 'The Truth-Tellers.' Here the author has hit on a happy idea, and carried it out with considerable success."—*Globe, July 13th*, 1896.

"John Strange Winter's new story is the best she has written for a long time. The terrible infants known as 'The Truth-Tellers' are as natural as they are inconvenient. While it is amusing to read of their escapades in print, it must have been very trying to put up with them in actual life. The humour of this volume is spontaneous, and it would be impossible for anybody to read the book without getting many a hearty laugh out of it."—*Academy, September 12th*, 1896.

"This book must be read to be appreciated. We must thank the talented authoress for the delightful work she has given us. It cannot fail to interest and amuse everyone who reads it."

—*Court Circular, November 14th*, 1896.

"Of her recent stories this is by far the best that John Strange Winter has written. Its pages are full of fun and wit, humour and pathos, together with occasional quiet little digs at Society manners and customs of the present day. . . . The little satires on Society are well done, and not overdone. The story conveys several morals, but the morals are not put forward prominently, for the novelist is too much of an artist to preach at her readers—an unpardonable offence, of which too many writers are guilty. For pleasant light reading of a wholesome type we can recommend this latest essay of the author of 'Bootles' Baby.'"—*Publishers' Circular, July 26th*, 1896.

"It is very gratifying and interesting when a writer who is an old favourite with the public suddenly develops new powers. This is very markedly the case with John Strange Winter. Her 'Truth-Tellers' is very vivacious, and shows fresh and most agreeable qualities."

—*Queen, October 24th*, 1896.

GRIP—continued.

ever, have been revelations of new power, both in construction and in treatment; and whereas before we admired her cheerful and light-hearted characters, we now have to acknowledge that in 'Grip' she displays dramatic power and something more than an insight into the deeper subtleties of human nature. . . . In 'Grip' we have a powerful story, containing at least one splendid character, and displaying a knowledge of certain French institutions, that shows the authoress has not wasted the period of her enforced residence abroad. Her pictures of the life of a convict at the old prison of Toulon are realistic in the extreme; and, altogether, we may safely predict, what we also desire, a success for John Strange Winter's latest work."

—*Brighton Guardian, November 4th,* 1896.

"We cannot recall any other instance of a novelist having published her fiftieth book before completing her fortieth year. In the case of our distinguished fellow townswoman, this phenomenal activity has been unaccompanied by any sign of 'writing herself out'; indeed, the majority of those who read 'Grip,' will certainly agree that her latest story is by far the strongest and most finished work that has been produced by its author's prolific pen."

—*Yorkshire Gazette, October 31st,* 1896.

"It is a capital tale admirably told. . . . There is no writer who mkes her people live more thoroughly than she does. From the first page to the last, she keeps up a lively and intelligent interest."

—*Yorkshire Herald, November 11th,* 1896.

"The popularity of Mrs. Stannard's productions, ever since she made her great success with 'Bootles' Baby,' has been almost phenomenal. Lively, pleasant, sometimes exciting, always free from the least trace of modern taint, these stories have been read by hundreds of thousands of young and old. . . . 'Grip' is a story which, while not needed to enhance the already established reputation of John Strange Winter, will not in any way detract from it."

—*Newcastle Weekly Chronicle, November 21st,* 1896.

"It is without question one of the best and most interesting stories she has yet penned—and that, in the case of an authoress of so much repute, is saying a great deal."—*Kent Messenger, November 7th,* 1896.

"The issue of 'Grip,' by John Strange Winter, makes the fiftieth novel from the pen of this versatile writer. Even with such an output, the author has lost nothing of the freshness, refinement, and vigour which characterized 'Bootles' Baby,' and she still continues to sustain her popularity, and satisfy the demands of her ever-increasing host of admirers. This latest production is of absorbing interest and excitement."—*Dundee Courier, December 16th,* 1896.

"Nor has literary merit been sacrificed to sensationalism, for never, in all its forty-nine predecessors, has the authoress made so marked an advance both in what she has to tell and how she tells it. In 'Grip,' as in her other books, she has a story to tell, and—she tells it. In it will be found one of the most striking situations in contemporary fiction, and one which has never, to my knowledge, been previously used in either novel or play. . . . It is a superb fancy, and most naturally worked out, and ought to carry the book into a brilliant success."—*Northern Figaro, November 21st,* 1896.