

Roslyn's Fortune.

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ROSLYN'S FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

GEOFFREY.

A pleasant, old-fashioned Southern country-house, embowered in trees and standing amid wide gardens and grassy meadows, an air of serene comfort overspreading the whole, in the long, golden light of a summer afternoon, is the familiar picture which rises before the eyes of a young man, who at four o'clock walks up to the gate of the Vardray place, a mile or so out of the town of Kirton.

He is tired, and warm, and dusty, yet he smiles as his glance roves over the placid scene before him. How well he knows every gable of the house, every bough of the trees, every turn of the paths! How quiet the whole place is! But that is natural enough, since what sensible creature would be awake at four o'clock on a blistering July afternoon? There is certainly no place like home, he thinks, especially when it holds the girl you love best in all the world, and when the brightest of memories cluster round its hearth-stone. It is only such memories that this house holds for Geoffrey Thorne, although it is the home of his step-father — a relation seldom held in high esteem by the youthful mind. But, kind and gentle to all who come under his influence or authority, Mr. Vardray was not likely to fail in kindness to the son of his wife, particularly since Geoffrey was in himself a person likeable in the extreme. The boy had been only twelve or thirteen at the time of his mother's marriage to Mr. Vardray — himself a widower with one child, a girl three or four years younger than Geoffrey; and hence he had readily taken root in the home thus made for him, had looked forward with keen delight to spending his vacation there, and had been, from that day to the present, the willing slave of petty, imperious, spoiled Roslyn. Now he has left college, the world is all before him where to choose, and he has come home with the definite determination to win from the companion and tormentor of his youthful days a promise to be his, when he shall have conquered fortune — a trifling preliminary, which at twenty-one seems hardly worth considering.

Up the avenue, under the branching elms, he walks, and ascending a flight of steps stands on the veranda which encircles the house. All is stillness save a sound more expressive of somnolence than even stillness — a long-drawn snore. Geoffrey walks to an angle of the building and looks round on the picture which he expected — a gently swinging hammock, within which reclines the slumbering figure of Mr. Vardray, strewn with the newspapers over which he has fallen asleep. The young man does not disturb him, but, entering the house by a conveniently open window, stands in the sitting-room, filled with signs of household-work — his mother's work-table, the children's toys, and a very straggling bundle of scarlet crochet-work, that he at once identifies as Roslyn's. "I don't believe it has advanced any since Christmas!" he thinks; and then, while he is mentally debating whether he shall attempt to rouse any one in the house, there is a rustle of a dress in the hall, and a lady enters, who utters a cry of surprise and delight at seeing him.

"Geoff! my dearest boy! Why, where do you come from?" she cries. "We did not expect you until to-morrow."

"Got off a day earlier than I expected, mamma, and so just came along," he answers, gayly, not merely submitting to her embrace, as is the custom of Anglo-Saxon men, but heartily returning it. "It is delightful to be back! — and how is everybody?"

"Everybody is very well. I can not see how you look, you are so sunburned and dusty; did you walk out from Kirton? I am so sorry! Mr. Vardray wanted to send in on the chance that you might come, but I did not think it at all possible."

"There was no need — the walk did not matter. I am a capital pedestrian, you know. Where is Roslyn — asleep?"

"Of course. I suppose I am the only person in the house who is not asleep, and it must have been some instinct of your coming which kept me awake. Tell me all about your visit to your uncle — how was it that he let you off sooner than you expected?"

"Oh, he took indigestion so badly that the doctors sent him to the springs for sulphur-water. I could have shouted when I heard it, for I knew it meant freedom for me, and I was most awfully tired of Heathdale by that time. If the capricious old fellow should ever leave it to me, it would be a glorious place in which to live; but I have often been driven to wonder whether any possible pleasure to be derived from it some day could compensate for the acute boredom I have suffered there."

"For shame!" says Mrs. Vardray. "I am sure your uncle has always been very kind to you, and it should not be very acute boredom to spend one month out of twelve with him."

"By Jove, but it is — when I think of you and Roslyn here!"

"It is kind of you to put me first," says Mrs. Vardray, with a smile. "But, my boy, I am afraid you think too much of Roslyn."

"Why too much? " asks Geoffrey, shortly. "A man can't think too much of the girl he hopes to make his wife, can he?"

Mrs. Vardray shakes her head.

"That is just what I mean," she says. "You are too young to be thinking of a wife at all — and very unwise to be thinking of Roslyn, who looks upon you as a mere boy."

"Indeed! Whom does she consider a man, then? — old Colonel Duncan?"

"Colonel Duncan is not old — except in the opinion of twenty-one. He is in the prime of life, and Roslyn likes him, I think, very well."

"Roslyn *likes* everybody; the question is, does she show any signs of *loving* him?"

"How can I tell? A girl like Roslyn is not easy to read. Her head is more full of amusing herself than of anything else now."

"A very good proof that it is not full of Colonel Duncan," says Geoffrey, cheerfully.

"Now, mamma, being warm and dusty and a trifle tired, I think I will go and make a toilet."

"I ought to have thought of that before," says Mrs. Vardray, with compunction. "You will find your room ready."

With eyes full of pride and fondness, she watches the tall, handsome young fellow as he goes out. "I wish he did not think so much of Roslyn," she repeats to herself as he disappears, and she listens to his bounding step go lightly up-stairs. "But then if his heart is really set on her, there is no use in trying to make him wise."

She rises and moves across the floor — a slender, graceful woman with traces of past beauty on her face — and goes out on the veranda, where she comes upon the slumbering occupant of the hammock. That the sleep of the latter is less profound than it was, is evidenced by the fact that he has ceased to snore, and as Mrs. Vardray draws near he opens his eyes.

"Confoundedly hot! " he says. "And the flies" — striking viciously at them with a paper — "torment one so that it is hardly possible to sleep! Why are you wandering about, Ellen, at this time of the afternoon?"

"Geoffrey has come," she answers, in a tone which indicates that this would explain the most erratic conduct. "Something kept me from sleeping, so I dressed and came down to the sitting-room, and there I found the dear boy."

"Indeed! What brought him earlier than he expected?"

"His uncle left Heathdale earlier than he expected; so Geoff came without delay. He was so eager for the pleasure of being at home."

"The pleasure is not all on his side," says Mr. Vardray. "I am glad the boy has come. Where is he?"

"Gone to make himself a little presentable; for, besides traveling all day, he walked out from Kirton."

"You see you ought to have let me send! Well, this is wonderfully warm and drowsy weather, so I think I will go to sleep again, and, when it grows cooler, I will rouse up and make myself presentable."

This resolution he promptly proceeds to execute, and Mrs. Vardray, thus left without any one to whom she can talk of Geoffrey, has no resource but to retire to a shady corner of the veranda, and think of him.

While she is sitting, her work-basket by her side, her needle traveling back and forth over a bit of needle-work, she chances to look up and see a small figure, clad in white and crowned by a large shade-hat, coming across the lawn. Her first impulse is one of slight annoyance, her next to check herself, and smile pleasantly, as the new-comer — a delicate, demure maiden, whose child-like appearance is somehow compatible with the fact that she is not a child — ascends the steps and comes toward her.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Vardray," she says, in a voice as delicate and demure as her appearance.

"Good-evening, Lettice, my dear," replies Mrs. Vardray. "Did you not find it very warm walking over?"

"Not very — I came through the woods, and there it is shady. Is Roslyn not down yet?"

"Not yet — Roslyn's siesta is generally of long duration, you know. You can go and wake her if you like, and tell her that Geoffrey is here."

"Geoffrey! — has he come?" says the girl with a start, her eyes opening, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"Yes, quite unexpectedly, an hour or two ago."

"What a surprise it will be for Roslyn!" says Lettice, in her soft, demure voice. "I must go and tell her."

She flies lightly away, enters the wide, airy hall, and passes up the broad staircase — at the head of which she comes face to face with Geoffrey himself, who, freshly attired, has issued from his room and is about to descend.

"Why, Lettice, is it you?" he says, cordially putting out his hand. "How glad I am to see you again!"

"And how glad I am to see you back!" says Lettice, glancing up from under her hat. "Mrs. Vardray was just telling me of your arrival, and I am going to carry the news to Roslyn."

"Tell her to come down quickly. I want to see — you both, so much. I want to hear all that you have been doing since our frolics last Christmas."

"We have been vegetating, chiefly," says Lettice. "It will not take long to tell what we have been doing, but *you* — you ought to have a great deal to tell."

"Not particularly much. I have really been studying hard, and I had my reward in coming out with pretty fair standing."

"We heard that, and were so glad."

"It was nothing to be proud of — I only aimed at the safe medium of respectability. Books are not much in my line — but I must not keep you here; only, by all means, come down as soon as possible."

"With Roslyn," says Lettice, smiling — a quiet, inscrutable little smile — "I understand, and will bring her as soon as I can."

She gives him no time for reply, but trips past him and knocks at a closed door. A sleepy voice says, "Come in." She opens it and enters. In the half-light made by closed blinds, only dim outlines are apparent, but on the white-draped bed a reclining figure turns drowsily and says:

"What is it?"

"It is I," Lettice answers, coming to the side of the bed. "You lazy creature, wake up! How can you sleep so long?"

"Oh, there is no difficulty about it," says Roslyn, opening her eyes. "If I did not sleep a great deal, I should not have so much vigor when I am awake. What are you doing here at this unhallowed hour?"

"I don't call six o'clock an unhallowed hour to be anywhere. I came to see you, and it is charming to be so hospitably received. But rouse yourself — I have some news for you."

"As if I cared for any news! Please go away and let me alone."

"Shall I tell Geoffrey that? It is not very complimentary, when he has just come home, and is dying to see you."

"Has Geoffrey come?" asks Roslyn, opening her eyes again, though with not much more animation.

"He has, and he begged me to bring you down as soon as I possibly could."

"Dear old Geoff!" says Roslyn. "I am glad he has come — but I could have seen him an hour hence as well as now."

"What cordiality!" says Lettice, with a slightly mocking accent. "But I suppose it is always so — 'one holds the cheek and the other kisses it.' You were born to hold your cheek to be kissed."

"And was Geoffrey born to kiss it?" asks Roslyn, with a smile which ends in a yawn. She rises as she speaks — throwing back with one hand a cloud of loose, dark, half-curling hair, out of which her face looks like a flower. The white lids are still weighed down with sleepiness; but that shows to advantage the length of the lashes which fringe them, and, when they lift, not even the influence of the drowsy god can veil the splendor of the eyes — eyes so liquid, so full, so clear, that in their depths dwells a golden light like that of a gem. The skin is of creamy whiteness, with the tint of a pomegranate in the flushed cheeks, and the features have that delicate piquancy of outline which is perhaps more charming than absolute regularity, while the expression, the regard, as the French say, of the countenance is of sparkling brightness.

"He seems to think so," Lettice says, in reply to the last words; "and, after all, he might do worse. It does not harm one to love a little better than one is loved, I suppose."

"When you say such things as that you always make me feel as if I were so selfish — receiving much and giving little," says Roslyn. "How can one help it? I am sure I care for Geoffrey enough! If I had a dozen brothers, I could not be fonder of them than I am of him!"

"Poor Geoff!" says Lettice. "I don't think he cares to represent a dozen brothers; but, like the rest of us, he must take what he can get, instead of what he wants! Let him have what he wants just now, however, and that is the sight of you. Do dress, for I promised to bring you down soon!"

Thus adjured, and being by this time fully awake, Roslyn proceeds to make a most becoming toilet — misty, corn-colored organdie, a knot of black lace at the throat; a crimson rose in the dark hair, dainty slippers on the slender feet. Lettice observes and draws her conclusions, but makes no comment — being one of those people that observe much and say little. She has had a somewhat hard life, poor Lettice, and has learned the wisdom of reticence. For all her child-like aspect, it is a very unchild-like knowledge of life that looks out of her grave, gray eyes; and a perception of this sometimes makes Mrs. Vardray entertain a vague distrust of her — a feeling for which she takes herself to task, and for which she endeavors to atone by marked cordiality of manner. "Lettice sees too much and says too little," she occasionally remarks; "but then one must excuse a great deal in a girl who has such a father" — for Lettice's father is a man mentioned as seldom as possible to ears polite. He is a graceless adventurer, of good family but scant principle, who persuaded a foolish heiress to marry him, against the advice of all her friends. The latter, finding they could not prevent the marriage, did her the service of settling her fortune on herself; and so it chances that although the Stanleys are always in pecuniary difficulties — the result of

dark ways and tricks not vain on the part of the head of the household — they have so far been saved from absolute ruin.

"Ready at last?" says Lettice, as Roslyn finally turns from the mirror. "I will take off my hat before going down."

She steps to the glass and lifts her hat from a small head, covered with pale brown hair — the kind of hair which always lies smooth and silken — and which, not having the least inclination to curl, is cut in the fashionable fringe across her forehead, a style not unbecoming to her face. She looks at the reflection of herself with a little mocking air of self-contempt.

"One certainly has no temptation to vanity after watching *you*, Roslyn," she says. "I wonder if you are a lucky girl to be so pretty? — I wonder if you will make anything of it?"

"What odd ideas seem to strike you, Lettice!" replies Roslyn. "I don't want to make anything of it — it is enough just to be young and happy."

"But you can't always be young, and it is not likely you'll always be happy," says Lettice. "The question is, what prize in life are you going to win with such a high card as your face?"

"None at all, very likely," answers the girl, gayly, "and I don't think I care for any. Don't stop to moralize. Let us go down."

She opens the door and goes out, singing as she flits down-stairs, and Geoffrey, hearing the well-known voice, rushes eagerly into the hall and meets her.

"Geoff, dear Geoff, I am so glad to see you!" she cries; while *he* can say nothing — being struck dumb by the brightness of her beauty, and by his delight in seeing her.

"It was so nice of you to come when we were not expecting you!" she goes on. "There is so much pleasure in a surprise!"

"There is so much pleasure in being at home even twenty-four hours earlier than one expected," he replies. "O Roslyn, how pretty you are!"

"Geoff, I am grieved to see that you have not improved at all in *savoir faire* — you pay just as broad compliments as ever. Shall I return your kindness by saying that you have greatly improved? Is that a mustache you are cultivating?"

"I wonder you need to ask. I consider it a very promising one. A condescending barber assured me the other day that it will be very heavy in six months."

"Why not in six weeks? I detest to wait for anything — even for a mustache — to grow."

"Jack's bean-stalk is the only thing that would have satisfied you in the way of growth," says Lettice, coming down the staircase as the first effusion of meeting subsides — after which they go out on the veranda, where Mr. and Mrs. Vardray and the children are assembled.

Nothing could be more lovely and peaceful than the scene at this hour, for the sun has nearly touched the horizon, and his last level rays are lying on the velvet sward like a mantle of gold. The spreading fields and distant, shadowy woods are full of summer richness and beauty, and the light breeze which is playing among the leaves brings many fragrant odors on its wings.

"I am glad that you are not too much spoiled by the grandeurs of Heathdale, Geoff, to appreciate our quiet charms," says Mr. Vardray, who in slippered ease is reclining in a large chair. "I have heard that it is a very fine place."

"Very fine indeed," says Geoff, "and about as lively as a penitentiary. Uncle James amuses himself taking medicines, you know; but there's nothing on earth for me to do, and I am sometimes almost driven to thoughts of suicide."

"Why don't you brace yourself with thoughts of the change you will make when it falls to you?" says Roslyn. "I can tell you we all count wonderfully on the good time coming, when you are master of Heathdale — don't we, imps?"

"Yes," replied the children in chorus — while Rob, the eldest boy, says, "I think I'll live with you, Geoff."

"Much obliged," says Geoff. "But, frankly, I don't count on Heathdale at all. Apart from the uncertainty of reckoning on dead men's shoes, my uncle's prospects for long life are as good as, or better than, mine. Hypochondriacs always live long."

"You are quite right," says Mr. Vardray. "Put Heathdale, and any thought of possessing it, as much as possible out of your mind. Nothing is so ruinous to a young man's prospects of usefulness as to have a possible inheritance dangling just before him. 'Why should I toil, and deny myself pleasure, and lead a laborious life?' he thinks; 'I shall be rich some day.' And so when that day comes — if it comes at all — he has frittered away his life in waiting for it. You must do better than that, my boy. Your uncle, as you have said, may live thirty years longer — and I am sure you would not grudge him one day of it; while there is no telling what caprice may influence his disposition of his property at the last. Do not, therefore, suffer yourself to build any expectation or hope on it; act as if Heathdale did not exist, and make yourself independent of any man's last will and testament."

"Thank you, sir — I will!" answers Geoffrey, with rising color and kindling glance. "What you say indorses my resolution. My uncle wants me to live at Heathdale and attend to his business — which means, have no independent existence at all — and I have told him that I could not do it, that I must adopt a profession and make a place in life for myself."

There is a moment's pause. Nobody thinks of Lettice, and Lettice's quick eyes travel round the group and take in the different expressions of the countenances — the unqualified approval on Mr. Vardray's, the struggling disappointment on Mrs. Vardray's, the startled surprise on Roslyn's, the steadfast light on Geoffrey's. Then —

"You are right," says Mr. Vardray. "Wealth can be bought too dearly, if independence is paid for it."

"But it seems to me that his uncle — his father's only brother — has a right to provide for Geoffrey almost as if he were his father," says Mrs. Vardray. — "I fear, my dear, you have been rash."

"My opinion is not worth much," cries Roslyn; "but I think you have been brave and wise, Geoffrey. Fancy spending your youth giving pills to Mr. Thorne!"

"Fancy spending it in any capacity subject to another man's control and whims!" says Geoffrey. "I would not endure such bondage for a dozen Heathdales! — Don't look so grave, mamma. If I am not able to rise on my own merit, I had better sink and be done with it."

"That is a boy's idea," says Mrs. Vardray. "I hope I am not mercenary; but certainly —" she looks appealingly at her husband — "Heathdale should be yours; and, if you refuse to be your uncle's companion, he may find another, and so be influenced to leave the property away from you."

"So be it," says Geoffrey, cheerfully. "I can bear that prospect a great deal better than the prospect of spending the best part of my life waiting for a man to die. It would simply come to this: I should murder him at last."

"Geoffrey!"

"Sorry to shock you, mamma; but truth is mighty, and must prevail. There is the tea-bell, and, if ever a hungry mortal was glad of the sound, I am."

"I should think so, after traveling all day, and walking out from Kirton," says Roslyn. "You shall have your old seat, and plenty of peaches and cream — are you still so fond of peaches?"

They go in laughing to the tea-table, a very happy, merry group. There is generally fun of some description afloat in the household, but the arrival of their elder brother has sent the mercury of the children's spirits up to fever-heat; and Roslyn is quite ready to aid and abet them.

Tea over, Geoffrey goes out to smoke a cigar, and, having lighted it, volunteers the information at the sitting-room window that there is lovely moonlight.

"Yes, it is far too lovely to stay in-doors," says Roslyn. "Come, Lettice, let us go out."

"You and Geoffrey may take me home, if you like," says Lettice. "It is time I were going, and the walk will be pleasant."

"The walk will be pleasant any time between now and midnight; there is no need for you to be in haste."

"No need, as far as you and Geoffrey are concerned; but, if I wait, somebody may be sent for me, and that is useless."

Since Roslyn knows that the somebody in question will be a rude and disagreeable brother, she does not press delay, but only says:

"We can change all that, now that Geoff has come. Tell them hereafter you need never be sent for; that you have an escort here."

Lettice only smiles and gets her hat, kisses Mrs. Vardray, says good-night to Mr. Vardray, and announces herself ready. Roslyn makes no preparation, beyond gathering up the filmy skirt of her dress, and, unheeding dew or night-air, or any other terror of the prudent, steps out into the clear moonlight of the mid-summer night.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

Attended by the tall young man, whose cigar glows like a fiery eye, the two girls take their way across the lawn and flower-garden to where a gate opens on a path that runs through the woods for half a mile, and emerges at the borders of the Stanley grounds. In daylight it is a lovely walk, and very shaded, as Lettice averred to Mrs. Vardray in the afternoon; but after dusk has fallen, it is a little awesome — darkness is so deep along this woodland way, and the forest so full of strange sounds, the echo of waters, the murmur of leaves, the multitudinous voices of the insect world!

"What contemptible creatures girls are!" says Roslyn, meditatively, as the gate closes behind them. "How dreadfully afraid you and I would be to take this walk alone, or with each other, Lettice; while, with Geoffrey to guard us, we have not a sensation of fear, but are brave as lions!"

"I don't call that being contemptible," says Lettice. "Girls are so weak — what could we do if anything frightened us?"

"We could run — and Geoffrey knows that, when I run, nothing can catch me."

"I know you are fleet as a deer," says Geoffrey; "but Lettice is right: girls are too weak to be daring. I wonder that women possess as much courage as they do; it must be such a demoralizing thing to feel helpless."

"It is," says Lettice. "I am glad you acknowledge that when we are brave we deserve more credit than men do. I often think that if I had a man's strength I should fear nothing on earth. I once had a pistol, and while it was in my possession I felt that I could defy man or beast."

"O Lettice! Why, a good-sized grasshopper could demolish you!" cries Roslyn, laughing. "Well, I am not so brave; even if I had a pistol, I fear I should be more likely to injure myself than anything else. And I am glad Geoffrey is with us now."

"I am glad of that, too," says Lettice, quietly.

"And I most glad of all," says Geoffrey, heartily.

"I am not sure that you are most glad," says Roslyn. "I think we all feel that it is good to be together again — we have been friends and comrades so long. Three is an odd number," she goes on, putting one hand through Geoffrey's arm, the other around Lettice's shoulders, "but I like it. Two people make a kind of *ego ïme a deux*, and four people virtually form two couples, but it shows a great deal of friendship and sympathy for three people to harmonize as we do."

"I think it does," says Lettice, "especially since there are so many uncomplimentary proverbs about that number. It is very good of you and Geoffrey not to make me feel like the third wheel of the cart, as the Germans say. But I really never do."

"How could you?" cries Roslyn. "Third wheel of the cart indeed! Why, the cart would stop without you! It would be no longer a league of friendship, but a stupid kind of family affection."

"That is putting it rather strongly," observes Geoffrey. "I mean about the stupidity — otherwise I beg to agree. You are a most necessary member of our league, Lettice, and any nonsense about third wheels should be promptly dismissed."

"But it is good of you and Roslyn," persists Lettice, "and I assure you I feel it, for, you may never think, but I often do, what a difference your friendship makes in my life. I — ah, well! you know perhaps how little else I have. I am not social — how can I be? I never feel at ease with people in general — I am always thinking what they must think — but you two are like part of myself to me."

This is so remarkably unlike Lettice — these quick words full of feeling — that for a moment Roslyn and Geoffrey are too much surprised to reply. Then the former, recovering herself, says, with an affectionate pressure of the shoulders round which her arm is thrown:

"You dear old Lettice! I am so glad we are all that to you, but think what you are to us! What should we do without you? Think of all the blunders your wisdom saves us from committing! You advise, and Geoffrey acts, and I — ah, humiliating thought! what do I do?"

"You are the ornament of the league," says Lettice. "We personify the good, the useful, and the beautiful."

"Capital!" says Geoffrey. "I am the useful."

"I meant that for myself," says Lettice.

"Oh, no. Geoffrey is certainly the useful," cries Roslyn. "Fancy him posing for the good! I have the highest possible regard for him, as he knows, but I do not think that is exactly his line."

"Far from it," says Geoffrey. "I am useful or nothing."

"And what can anybody be better than that?" says Roslyn. "I am sure it is a great deal more complimentary than to be held merely ornamental, as I am. Now that I think of it, I begin to appreciate the sting in that and to feel insulted accordingly. Nothing could really be more insulting than to tell a person that she is of no manner of use, merely an ornament, a — a —"

"Flower," says Geoffrey, as she hesitates, "a thing to gladden one's eyes and one's heart."

"But I am not a flower; I am a human being, and there is a prejudice in favor of human beings having some brains. Lettice entertains the same complimentary opinion of me. 'You are a creature made for sunshine,' she said to me the other day — a butterfly, in short."

"What can we do to soothe her?" asks Geoffrey, addressing Lettice. "We can not say that she is not ornamental, you know. What subject will be agreeable to her ladyship?"

"Oh, anything frivolous and childish," says her ladyship. "Tell us what you did at Heathdale, besides pouring out Mr. Thorne's medicine."

"Nothing very frivolous. I read and smoked and — and thought about you."

"Indeed!" (with scorn). "And you don't call that frivolous! Now, if you had meditated on your future career, what heights of fame you mean to reach, there might have been some sense in it. Ah! if I were a man —"

'By Heaven, methinks, it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon!'"

She looks up laughing at the apostrophized moon; and the radiance of that enchanted and enchanting luminary falling on the upturned face lends it such magic that Geoffrey is inclined to think that any leap were easy which it inspired. The beauty which he has known so long and well, and which is chiefly proved to be beauty in this, that it is ever fresh in its power to charm, has never before thrilled him so keenly. He is conscious that they, who even at their last meeting were boy and girl, are now man and woman, and that this face, with all its fairness and its unawakened passion, is destined to bring more than one new revelation to him before the end comes. It is a

moment of instinct and of feeling that stirs him deeply. When he speaks, his voice has wholly changed.

"I should like to do that, or anything else — for you," he says. "I wish I were not such a commonplace fellow."

"Geoff!" says Roslyn, astonished by the gravity of his tone. She looks up quickly. "Have I said anything to vex you?" she asks. "You know I was only jesting."

"Vex me!" he repeats. "How could you? Of course I know you were jesting, but I have often wished that I were not such a commonplace fellow, or that the times afforded a little more scope for heroic deeds. I should like to do something great — something worth doing!"

"The occasion comes to him who hath the will," says Lettice. "The times are not heroic, certainly, but there are things worth doing yet, Geoffrey."

"And you will do them!" cries Roslyn's eager voice. "Then, whomever else you may astonish, there will be three people whom you can never surprise — no, not if you became anything — and those are mamma and Lettice and myself."

"I ought to be invincible with three such believers," says the young man, laughing. But, though he laughs, there is something like moisture in his eyes. Surely praise is sweet from lips that we love, and, although he tells himself that he is foolish to be so much affected by those words, he is really not foolish at all. That old metaphor of the "harp with a thousand strings" is more applicable to the spiritual than the physical nature of man. We have, indeed, a thousand strings of feeling ready to vibrate at a touch, and such a touch has stirred Geoffrey now. It is not the first time that he has felt the natural longing of a young, ardent soul for some opportunity to prove itself, but now this longing is quickened to resolve.

"It must be," he says, after a short pause, "that every man has a chance, once in life, to show what is in him. I ask no more than that."

"According to my experience," observes Lettice, "one might as well ask for as much as one wants — one does not get it for asking."

"How cheerful Lettice's views of life are!" laughs Roslyn, "while her general tone of experience would become the Wandering Jew."

Before Lettice can reply, the lovely, shadow-haunted road, which looks as if it might continue indefinitely, comes to an abrupt end at a stile, beyond which lies an open field, flooded with silver light. They cross this and reach a gate, where Roslyn pauses. They are within a stone's-throw of a house, which they have approached from the side — a large, rambling structure which looks imposing in this kindly moonlight, that hides all signs of dilapidation and decay.

"We will bid you good-night here, Lettice," says Roslyn. "I know all at home are anxious to see Geoff."

"But mamma will be sorry if he does not come in for a moment and speak to her," says Lettice.

"Of course I must go in and speak to Mrs. Stanley," says Geoffrey. "I will not be long, Roslyn."

They enter the gate and cross the lawn toward the house. As they approach they perceive two men standing together on the piazza-steps, and Roslyn knows that just what she wished to avoid is coming to pass — they are going to meet Mr. Stanley. As has been already stated, nobody respects and few people like this gentleman, but there is no one, perhaps, who so thoroughly despises, so cordially dislikes him, as Roslyn Vardray. She has not only seen him more closely than any one else, except those who have the misfortune to belong to him, but she entertains for him an aversion which has its root in an instinctive consciousness of all the evil that he embodies. This aversion she has never concealed, and Mr. Stanley is as well aware of it as possible. Not one of her glances or tones has been lost on him, and it is not hazarding too much to say that there are few people to whom he would better like to do an ill turn than to this girl, who has looked at him from her childhood with such clear, scornful eyes.

At present he recognizes her as soon as the group enter the gate, and smiles — not a pleasant smile — as he turns to his companion — a dark, handsome man, with a great deal of the air of the world in his appearance.

"It is odd, but lucky," he says in a low tone. "*Here is the girl.*"

"Ah!" replies the other, quietly. He glances at the approaching trio. "Which?" he asks.

"The taller," Mr. Stanley replies. "Oh, there is no mistaking her. And no denying her good looks. Shall I introduce you?"

"Certainly not," returns the other, with a decision which seems to imply that he is aware how little to his credit Mr. Stanley's introduction would be. Then he laughs. "She does not mean to give you the opportunity," he says.

In fact, Roslyn has paused, at a rustic seat under a group of trees, saying:

"Some visitor is with your father, Lettice, so I will not go on. I can wait for Geoffrey here."

"Very well," replies Lettice, understanding and quietly accepting the fact that her father and her father's visitors are not pleasant people to meet. "I will not let Geoffrey stay more than a minute."

She goes with Geoffrey, and Roslyn sits down on the seat, silver moonlight lying all around, and delicate shadows falling over her. She is not thinking of herself enough to be conscious of the lovely picture she makes, but only wonders how long Geoffrey will be detained, and, so thinking, taps her foot impatiently on the dewy grass, while her gaze follows the two figures passing toward the house. She sees that the other two figures on the steps part just before the former reach them — one standing still and shaking hands with Geoffrey, the other walking away.

When taking her seat, she forgot that it was very near the circular approach to the house; but she becomes conscious of this fact when she perceives the stranger advancing directly toward her. He passes hardly three feet from where she sits, and in passing gives a steady look at her. She is certainly worth looking at, this beautiful girl, bending forward in the moonlight, with her fleecy draperies, and certainly well-accustomed to being looked at, too; yet she has a strange consciousness, as if she had never been looked at before, as her glance meets the intent regard of the most brilliant eyes she has ever encountered. Their brilliancy is all that strikes her at first; but after an instant she knows that she has also received an impression of a keen, handsome face, and a slender, graceful figure — indeed, the figure can still be scrutinized as it walks onward, though perhaps less rapidly, to the gate.

"Who can he be?" she thinks, catching her breath quickly. Certainly, unless appearances are very deceptive, a gentleman — not one of Mr. Stanley's usual associates — and not only a gentleman, but the most distinguished-looking man she has ever seen. The warm flush roused by his look is still on her cheek as she sits motionless; and she has not stirred, but is still so sitting, when Lettice and Geoffrey return.

"You might as well have come in, Roslyn," says the former. "As you saw, papa's visitor left before we reached the house; and in any event, you know, he would not have troubled you."

"Of course I know that," Roslyn answers; "but I like the fresh air and the moonlight. Lettice, who was your father's visitor? I saw him as he passed along the walk, and he is a very handsome man."

"I do not know," Lettice replies. "He was a stranger, and I did not ask papa who he was. I will, however, if you desire."

"Do!" says Roslyn, as she rises; "and ask, too, what makes his eyes so wonderfully brilliant; I never saw such eyes before! Good-night."

She takes Geoffrey's arm, and they walk across the lawn to the side-gate through which they entered. It is not until they are outside of this that the young fellow says in a low, vexed tone:

"I hope Lettice will have the good sense to say nothing to her father of your having noticed and spoken of that man, Roslyn."

"Indeed!" says Roslyn, flushing quickly. "May I ask why you hope so?"

"Surely you know. Mr. Stanley's friends are not a class of persons for you to notice, and he has himself an insolent tongue. Fancy his telling some gambler or horse-jockey that Miss Vardray inquired who he was, and admired his eyes!"

"I know a gentleman when I see him," says Roslyn. "This man was a gentleman."

"In dress and appearance, perhaps so; but the odds are very much against his being a gentleman and a friend of Mr. Stanley's."

"There is no reason for supposing that he is a friend of Mr. Stanley's simply because he happened to be there," she answers, coldly. "I am not aware that you have any right to take me to task, Geoffrey; but I don't want to quarrel the first night that you are at home, so we will say no more about it."

"I did not mean to take you to task," says Geoffrey. "I only meant to warn you; you are heedless and know of no harm; but Mr. Stanley is not to be trusted."

"I am heedless, am I? Your opinion of me seems to be very exalted."

"It is very exalted," says the young man, quickly. "Roslyn, don't be vexed or hurt by my blundering; don't you know we only find fault with that which is so near our heart that we want it to be perfect?"

"But I am not perfect," she cries, with a laugh — "nor likely to be; and, if I were, you would find me very insipid. But no more fault-finding 'an' thou lovest me'; for, as I said before, it would be too bad to quarrel the first night you are at home."

CHAPTER III.

"COME YE IN PEACE HERE, OR COME YE IN WAR?"

Half a dozen miles from Verdevale — the name of the Vardray place — stands a much older and more stately house, which has been since its erection the home of the Duncans, the family of largest wealth and most influence in all the country-side. Of this family there have never been many representatives, and of late years these have diminished — some falling in battle, some dying from natural causes — until but one remains, the soldierly-looking man well known in all the country as Colonel Hugo Duncan, who stands in the morning sunshine on the stone steps of Cliffton (so the house is called, crowning as it does a bold and beautiful cliff above a rushing river), drawing on his gloves preparatory to mounting the horse that is waiting for him.

A soldierly-looking, but not a handsome, and certainly not a young man. Geoffrey is right enough on that point. Hugo Duncan has reached his forty-fifth year, and looks every day of that age. In figure he is a model of strength, though the square breadth of his shoulders detracts from the grace of his appearance; but he has little of which to boast in symmetry of feature. It is a frank, resolute, attractive face, however — a face characterized by striking energy and expressing in every line the faculty of command, yet also full of a kindness so genial that, when it shines from the deep-set eyes, it is quite possible to forget what heavy eyebrows hang over them, what a square jaw and firm mouth lie below. Originally of fair complexion — as the auburn hair and red beard prove — exposure to sun and wind has deeply bronzed all his face, except the broad brow, which preserves its whiteness, and lies like a snow-drift under the rich wave of his hair.

Yes, strong, brave, forceful — "a man every inch" — Colonel Duncan looks: a man to win and possess any good of life which he desires. Yet there is one good which he has not yet won, and which no one can say that there is any certainty of his winning. All the world around him knows that, with the strength of such a passion as comes only to mature manhood, he has set his heart on Roslyn Vardray, but no one knows — not even those nearest to her — what Roslyn thinks of him. It certainly puzzles Colonel Duncan to tell. He is not blind to his own advantages;

though neither is he foolish enough to overrate them. He knows what he is and what he can offer, and he knows that few women would look coldly on him if he came to woo. But, unhappily for himself, he is not that very common character, a man in search of a wife, but a man who loves one woman so well that the rest of the sex is non-existent to him. She is not in the least a coquette, pretty, willful Roslyn, but, "like the sun, she shines on all alike," and a man can not be encouraged by kindness that is indiscriminate. As he draws on his gloves, this bright summer morning, he is considering that he will go to see her, and for the hundredth time resolving that he will try to draw some sign from her — when, looking up, he sees a rider entering the gate. This is by no means unusual, but he frowns a little, for it is not pleasant to be detained just when one is ready to go out, and the person approaching is a stranger to him: a man of slender, handsome figure, and good seat, evidently a gentleman, but whom he does not know — still does not know when the stranger has paused, has dismounted, has left his horse in charge of a servant, and advancing toward the steps where Colonel Duncan stands, lifts his hat.

The moment that he uncovers, a flash of recognition appears on the face of the elder man, and he comes forward with extended hand, though with something lacking from the usual spontaneous cordiality of his greeting.

"This is a great surprise," he says. "Unless I am mistaken, you are Victor Laurent."

"You are not mistaken," answers the other, taking the offered hand with much frank grace of manner. "I am Victor Laurent — your kinsman, whose existence I thought it probable you had forgotten."

"I never forget any one," replies Colonel Duncan, "though it has certainly been a long time since I have heard anything of you." He hesitates almost imperceptibly for an instant, then adds, "You are welcome to Clifton."

"Thanks," says the new-comer, glancing up at the house, on the threshold of which they stand. "I am glad to see it at last. The home of one's forefathers has always a claim on one's interest. It is a fine old place."

"I think so — naturally," says Colonel Duncan, with a subtle coolness in his manner which only one who knew him intimately could detect. "But let me take you in."

With a courtesy which sits well on him, he leads the way across the stone-flagged portico, through a large, lofty hall, and into a room where cases of books, easy-chairs, and couches, a writing-table covered with papers, a variety of guns, pipes, whips, and many other implements of peace and war, prove that it is a familiar sitting-room. There is, perhaps, no better index to a man's character than the aspect of the apartment in which his life is chiefly passed. This is the room of a man of intellectual culture, of active pursuits, and of refined tastes. The stranger who enters takes in the whole at a glance, a very comprehensive glance, which passes rapidly over other details to linger on the photograph of a girl, in a standing-frame on the mantel, just below an engraving after Landseer.

Colonel Duncan offers a large, leather-covered chair to his guest; then, taking one opposite, regards him steadily, while his own strong head, with the rich tints of his hair and beard, comes out effectively against the walnut-paneled, book-lined wall behind him. What he sees is this:

A man so singularly handsome that, but for a certain masculine fire and vigor about him, the feminine term beautiful might almost be applicable to his appearance. He is in the full flush of youth — not more than twenty-five or six — with something suggestive of French or Spanish blood in his dark, clear-cut face, his brilliant eyes with their mingled possibilities of softness and passion, in the grace of his slender figure, the peculiar classic beauty of his head and throat — the very throat of Antinous. With such a physique, in nine cases out of ten, an idea of effeminacy would be suggested; but there is nothing of the kind here. The face is expressive of thought and daring; the figure is muscular and lithe as that of an Indian; the dark, slight hands are full of nervous energy and strength.

"You have not lost your good looks, Victor," says Colonel Duncan at last, with the same subtle inflection of coldness in his usually genial voice. "Whatever else your years of dissipation have robbed you of, they have spared your appearance."

"For two good reasons," replies the other: "first, that I have a fine constitution; secondly, that I have given much time to out-door life and sport. A man who aspires to be a crack shot and a good rider dare not spoil his nerves."

Colonel Duncan smiles. "Quite true," he says. "Well, your crop of wild-oats has been plentiful, I hear. What is the harvest?"

It is now Laurent's turn to smile, which he does with flashing effect — the whiteness of his teeth showing under his dark, silken mustache.

"I believe the harvest is generally the same," he answers, with a quietness verging on indifference. "There is not even the merit of variety in our cases. We all reach the same goal, with more or less quickness."

"And that is—?"

"Ruin."

"Ah! — is the case so bad as that with you?"

"Quite as bad, and not remarkable. Larger fortunes than mine have vanished in less time between Paris and Monaco."

"Opportunities for ruin not being great enough in this country, you felt bound to seek greater ones in Paris and Monaco!" says Colonel Duncan, with a little sarcasm. "But I heard of you in New Orleans last winter?"

"Oh, yes — I returned to Louisiana a year ago. When my agent wrote that he could no longer send me any money, I felt bound to come and look into my affairs. Unfortunately, there was by that time little or nothing left to look into."

"What has become of your fine plantation on the Bayou Têche?"

"It was mortgaged to the full extent of its value, and I was obliged to let it go."

"A pity! What, then, remains to you?"

"So little that it is hardly worth enumerating. A few half-worthless stocks, some dearly bought knowledge of life, and a pair of useless hands. *Voilà tout!*"

"And what do you mean to do?" asks Colonel Duncan, pursuing his inquiries in the same business-like tone.

The young man lifts his shoulders with a very French gesture. "*Ma foi*, that is hard to tell," he replies. "Will you pardon me if I say that, as my senior and near kinsman, I hoped you might be able to throw some light on the question?"

"Let me understand," says Colonel Duncan, quietly. "Are you asking my advice or my assistance?"

"Your advice," answers the other, a flush mounting to his forehead. "I am aware that there are reasons which make it strange that I should seek it, but, in thinking over those of my few connections to whom I could apply for a little practical counsel, my thoughts have turned to you. You are my nearest kinsman on my mother's side, and —"

"And you remember in what relation you stand to me," interrupts Colonel Duncan, shortly. "Why should you hesitate to say so? You know that, by the terms of my uncle's will, you inherit this place if I die childless. Well, it would be no great inheritance — for not much of the land goes with it; but the chance that you might (if I should die to-morrow) be the last of the family left here, gives you, of course, a claim on my interest."

"I am glad that you allow it," says Laurent. "I have felt it — not on account of my uncle's will, to which you allude, for that I have never thought of any importance — but because we are the last of those who planted their name and influence here. You know better than I the cause of the family estrangement, to which I have only heard allusions; but, whatever the cause, surely it need not extend its influence to us."

"There is no reason why it should," replies Duncan, slowly. "Yet there are cases in which one feels the wrong done to another more keenly than if it had been done to one's self — and so I have always felt this." He pauses for an instant, then looks at Laurent with the expression of his face grown almost stern. "If you do not know the cause of the estrangement between the different branches of the family," he says, "it is right that you should know it, and I am the only person who can tell it to you. Briefly, then, you know that my grandfather — your great-grandfather — had three sons, Hugo, Robert, and Allan. Hugo, the eldest, was passionately attached to a girl who seemed to return his affection and promised to be his wife. They had been engaged for several months, and were to be married soon, when the second brother — who was a naval officer — came home, and for the first time saw the girl. It is supposed that he fell in love with her, at least he made love to her, and one day — a week before the time appointed for her marriage — they eloped. It takes few words to tell a tragedy that can blast a life. My uncle was crushed to earth by the double treachery, and never again was the same man. He had the fatal gift of constancy in affection, and I do not think he ever looked at another woman; he certainly dreamed no more of marriage than if he had been a monk. Fortunately, my father — the youngest brother — married early, and, dying soon after, left me an orphan to my uncle's care. I need not speak of his kindness to me — that is beside the story — but, devoted as he was to me (and, thank God! I was something of a comfort to him), when the hour came to make his will he showed that he could put aside that devotion, and rise above the memory of his wrongs. The woman who betrayed his trust was an heiress, and, after her elopement and marriage to Robert Duncan, they never returned here, but went to Louisiana and purchased the plantation which you have just lost. They had only one child — your mother. Now you know, perhaps, that the Duncans brought with them to this country certain Old World ideas, the strongest of which was the belief that the family-seat should descend to the oldest son; failing him, to the next, and so on. Acting on this principle, my grandfather left Clifton to my uncle Hugo, and he left it naturally to me. I had not only been as a child to him, but I was the last of the name — Robert Duncan having left no son. But, after that, what he conceived to be his duty to his brother came in, and, if I die childless, you are named as the next heir. But, to prevent any false impression in your mind, I must distinctly state that the entailed inheritance comprises only this house and a small part of the land. The remainder of the estate is partly my inheritance from my father, partly was bought by my uncle (and left unconditionally to me) when, by your grandfather's orders, all that he inherited under his father's will was sold. Have I been clear?"

"Perfectly," replies Laurent, with unmoved composure. "The whole story is plain to me now, and I regret that my grandparents bought their happiness — if they were happy — at so dear a cost. But what will you? Love vanquishes all things, and no doubt they believed that our uncle would be philosophical and find another bride."

"This explanation over," says Colonel Duncan, ignoring the latter part of the above speech, "you see exactly how we stand to each other, and what your claim upon me is. Now be good enough to tell me frankly what you desire to ask of me."

"I have already told you," replies Laurent, in the tone of one who, being slightly wounded, draws within himself. "I remembered you as I saw you once — the impression of self-sustained strength which you made upon me — and I thought, 'If I could see that man he might give me the counsel and help I need.' It is for you to say whether I was right or wrong. Believe me" — he spreads out his hands with another light French gesture — "I shall not blame you if you say — adieu."

"I could hardly say that to a stranger who came to me for help; and you are a kinsman," answers Duncan. He rises as he speaks and walks to one of the windows, where he stands gazing out over a fair, wide prospect — the green valley spreading for miles, the river like a silver thread laced across it, the frame of soft hills and shadowy woods. He is not a little puzzled and annoyed. What is he to do? He has none of the usual dislike of prosperous humanity for anything in the shape of misfortune — on the contrary, he has a heart easily touched by any cry of distress: but is

it the old prejudice against Robert Duncan stirring within him, or why does he feel as if it were no genuine appeal to which he had listened? Yet in the man's nature is an imperative need to do the thing which is just, and after a minute he turns and goes back to where Laurent sits, a model of serene quietude.

"I have thought what will be best," he says. "I can not possibly offer you either advice or assistance until I know a little more about your affairs and your capabilities. I propose, therefore, that you stay here for the present, and let us discuss the matter at our leisure. What is done in haste is seldom well done."

"You are very kind," says Laurent "Few things could tempt me more than such a prospect. I will stay with pleasure for a short time."

"The matter is settled, then," says Colonel Duncan, turning to ring a bell. "I shall order a room prepared for you, and send to Kirton for your luggage — I suppose you have some?"

CHAPTER IV.

CONFIDENCES.

"So here I am established in the fortress which I have come to storm! It did not open its doors to me very cordially, but nevertheless they have opened — *et me voilà!* If it is the first step which alone costs, that first step has been taken, and I see clearly the nature of the campaign which lies before me. It is one which promises a little more entertainment than I anticipated, for you know with what far from cheerful expectations I set forth to look after this possible inheritance. Of itself, and in itself, it proves less worth looking after than I imagined — the entailed portion of the estate being small, and its present possessor, a man in the prime of life, with matrimonial intentions, or at least with matrimonial desires. Why, then, have I established myself here, and why do I take the trouble to think of a campaign? *Eh bien*, when one has come to the end of one's resources, it is necessary to do something; and this presents itself as the easiest and most probably profitable thing to be done at present — to establish myself here (very good quarters, though a trifle dull), to be recognized as Colonel Duncan's heir, to induce him to regard me in that light, and above all to frustrate his matrimonial intentions. It is the last that gives zest to the campaign. I always had a passion for comedy, and this promises some good situations and scope for intrigue — for which, also, I have always had both a taste and a talent.

"Not that I flatter myself the matter will be easy. I am fully alive to its difficulty. It will require great care to escape suspicion; but I think that I am equal to what is required of me. A man trained in the school of the great world should certainly not find much difficulty in baffling these dull provincial intelligences. And what I have to do is, after all, very simple, though it is necessary it should be well done: it is only to make a sufficient impression upon the heart or fancy of the young lady whom Colonel Duncan honors with his affections to induce her to refuse him.

"For I am told that I have come in time — that she has not yet accepted him. I am indebted to an old acquaintance, whom, with my usual luck, I have met in this neighborhood, for the command of the situation which such knowledge gives me. When I told him that I had come to learn what were my chances of inheriting the Duncan estate, he laughed and snapped his fingers. 'Your chances are worth *that!*' he said. 'Colonel Duncan is about to make a fool of himself by marrying a girl half his age.' Naturally interested by this intelligence, I asked a few questions, and, while he was engaged in answering them, the girl herself appeared on the scene. Then the situation was at once made clear to me. A beauty, and with every outward sign of coquetry, there could be no doubt how best to influence her! Happily, young ladies in this country are allowed to marry, or refuse to marry, whom they please; and unless Miss Vardray is a very

exceptional young lady, I do not think it likely that after a little time she will have any inclination to marry Colonel Duncan. Indeed, from what Stanley — the acquaintance referred to — tells me, I imagine that she has not much inclination at present; so I am really about to save him from one of the most unenviable positions in the world — that of the unloved and consequently jealous husband of a beautiful young girl."

So far has Mr. Laurent — sitting at ease in his own chamber — written, in the intervals of making and consuming many cigarettes, and of pausing now and then to glance through his open window at the sloping lawn and wide prospect before him. At this point he hears the ring of horses' feet on the drive below, and, just as he is in the act of rising to look out, a knock at the door is followed by the entrance of a servant, who, with Colonel Duncan's compliments, asks if he would like to ride.

He answers in the affirmative, locks his unfinished letter in a strong writing-case, makes a toilet quickly, and goes down. He finds his host on the portico, and two well-appointed horses in readiness.

"Hope I did not disturb you," says Colonel Duncan, as he appears. "I thought you might like to ride. The air is very pleasant now."

"I shall like it extremely," Laurent answers. "I have a passion for horses and riding, under all circumstances. What a fine animal!" he goes on, patting the arched neck of the horse destined for him.

"He is a very fine animal," says Colonel Duncan, "and is specially detailed for your service while you are here. Do not hesitate to order him whenever you like."

"Thanks; you could not give me a better mount. I shall like him extremely. Now" — as they are both in their saddles — "where do we go?"

"To Kirton first; I have a little business there. Then, if you do not object to paying a visit in an informal manner, we may call at Verdevale — the home of some friends of mine."

"I have not the least objection," replies Laurent, who decides that the stars in their courses are certainly fighting for him. "There is nothing more agreeable than informal visiting at a pleasant house; and of course I leave the question of my introduction entirely to your discretion."

Colonel Duncan does not answer for a moment. Perhaps he doubts his own discretion in the proposed introduction: but if not to-day, it must take place to-morrow or next day — for, if Laurent is to remain his guest, he certainly can not be excluded from the acquaintance of the family with whom he (Duncan) is most intimate. He has gone over the whole ground before setting out, but now reviews it again rapidly in his mind. With friends whom he knows so well as the Vardrays, it is not necessary to go through the form of asking leave to present his cousin, and since the introduction must be a necessity sooner or later, why should he deny himself the pleasure of seeing Roslyn to-day? He decides once more that it is not necessary, that it would be very foolish to deny himself this pleasure, yet the doubt that is in his mind makes itself slightly heard in his voice, when he says:

"Oh, they will be delighted to know you — they are the most kind and hospitable people imaginable. But perhaps it will be well for you to remember" — he pauses, colors: how can he say what is in his mind? — "that they are people altogether unfamiliar with your type," he ends, hastily.

Laurent smiles, but answers readily: "Pray make your mind easy. I shall not shock them by betraying the cloven foot of worldly vices. There is nothing I admire more, or would less think of disturbing, than Arcadian simplicity."

"You mistake me entirely," says Colonel Duncan, directly enough now. "They are neither Arcadian nor simple, but they are old-fashioned enough to believe in certain old-fashioned virtues, and not to hold in very high esteem those who are lacking in them."

"But I hope that I shall not always be lacking in them," says Laurent, lightly, as he pauses. "Reform is allowed to be possible even by the strictest moralists, and when I range myself and marry —"

"Marry!" exclaims Colonel Duncan, involuntarily. "You!"

"Yes, I," the other answers, smiling. "Of course, I could only marry an heiress, but if one is ready to put out her hand — In fact, the matter is pretty well settled. My cousin, Julie Devine, who is one of the richest heiresses in Louisiana, has kindly promised to marry me."

"In that case," says Colonel Duncan, suddenly turning toward him, "I confess that I am at a loss to understand why you have sought my assistance."

"re you?" says Laurent, quietly. "Then let me explain. In the first place, Julie's family object to my financial position, and they have carried her off to Europe, insisting that I shall show some sign of retrieving my affairs, some capability of self-support — so they put it — before they will agree to the marriage. They really can not prevent it, for she will be of age in a year; but I agree with them so far that I should feel much more self-respectful if at that time I could prove that I have some capability of retrieving my past errors. And this is why I have come to you for help."

"Which you shall have to the best of my ability!" says Colonel Duncan, more cordially than he has spoken yet. "And I may be able to help you better for having passed through something of the same experience," he goes on. "I, too, have had to redeem a fortune. Coming back here at the end of the war, I was forced to go to work at once to clear off debts and save the old lands from passing to strangers. I worked too hard to be lonely, too hard to think of society, or — marriage, or anything else. But, thank God! I succeeded in my object: every mortgage was paid, and not an acre lost."

He speaks quietly, and if Laurent does not know all the story of labor and energy and self-denial which lies under these simple words, there are men and to spare in Eldon County who could tell him of it, and what a hopeless task Hugo Duncan seemed to face when he inherited the property, impoverished not only by war, but by the reckless expenditure of two generations.

"I congratulate you!" the young man says. "It must be a proud consciousness to feel that you have redeemed your fortune and saved your inheritance — a very different consciousness from that of having cast it to the winds! But pardon me if I say that in your place I should have acted differently — I should have sold the place, and gone into the world to make a free life for myself."

"Yes, I dare say you would," answers the other. "But I — well, I preferred to stay. And then you forget — I could not sell Clifton. So I thought it better to increase than to lessen the inheritance which had descended to me. After all, wealth is a very good thing. It gives one a great power to help others."

"It gives one a great power to help one's self," says Laurent, with an honest sigh.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG THE FLOWERS.

The last low light of sunset is streaming across the lawn and reddening the shrubberies, when Roslyn comes out all in a cloud of misty white muslin, with roses at her throat and in her hair, and takes her way toward the garden. She looks like a rose of the summer herself, Geoffrey thinks, as he throws down a book which he has been trying to read in a shady corner of the veranda, and joins her.

"Where are you going, my pretty maid?" he asks, smiling, while his eyes say all of which his heart is full.

Roslyn, quite accustomed to their language, meets them with her own, as gay and unembarrassed as a child.

"I am going after some flowers," she answers, "and you may come, because you can save my dress and my fingers from the thorns."

"The best use to which I could be put," he replies. "What can I ask better than to save you from thorns?"

"How very gallant you have become!" she says. "Did you learn how to make pretty speeches at Heathdale?"

"Was that a pretty speech?" he asks. "I did not know it — it was only the truth."

He speaks with so much simplicity that she does not answer. There is a certain decision about Geoffrey now, which makes her realize that he is no longer the boy she has so long ruled and tormented. The change is subtle but marked, and more than once since his arrival she has glanced at the strong young face — the face of a man with definite aims and tenacious purposes — as if it were the face of a stranger. This impression is transient, however; the expression changes, the old fun comes into the eye, the old mischievous curl to the lip, and it is the playmate of her childhood that is again before her. So it happens now. In five minutes they are laughing like children among the roses; but suddenly Geoffrey sobers, as he chances to glance across the flower-beds and lawn.

"Who are those riding up to the house?" he asks. "One is Colonel Duncan, I believe; but who is that with him?"

Roslyn glances round a tall bush, and says:

"Yes, it is Colonel Duncan; how could you be in any doubt about him? I am sure he does not look like anybody else. The other" — she pauses — "I don't know who the other is — at least not from here."

"Shall we go to the house?" asks Geoffrey, somewhat stiffly. "I suppose Colonel Duncan has come to see you."

"Papa is on the piazza," she replies. "There is no need to go back until I have finished getting my flowers."

"Is that the way you treat your admirers? It is not very flattering."

"I never think of Colonel Duncan as an admirer of mine," she answers, clipping roses to right and left, rather indiscriminately. "It seems only yesterday that I sat on his knee and he gave me a doll — I think I have that doll's head somewhere now."

"If it was Marie Antoinette, I remember her very well," says Geoffrey. "She underwent many vicissitudes of fortune, and finally was beheaded, in order to resemble more closely her royal namesake."

"That was your suggestion," says Roslyn, laughing. "Do you think I have forgotten how you persuaded me to let you be headsman, and how I held her on the block while you decapitated her?"

"And then how you cried over her? But I am glad I did cut off her head — very glad!"

"Are you? But you need not cut off the heads of the roses by striking the bushes in that savage way. What has made you so sanguinary?"

"I don't like Colonel Duncan," says Geoffrey, abruptly.

"Then I am ashamed of you," replies Roslyn, promptly. "Everybody likes Colonel Duncan, and I do not see how anybody could help liking him."

"Oh, I help it very well. You see he never gave me a flaxen-haired doll. I have no memories of that kind clustering round him."

"I don't think that anybody who ever knew Colonel Duncan could have other than pleasant memories of him," says Roslyn, turning toward the house.

Somewhat chafed, and conscious of his own want of reason and tact, Geoffrey walks by her side. It is a pretty picture — the evening light, the green lawn, the graceful, white-clad girl with her hands full of flowers, the tall young man strolling beside her; but, as is frequently the

case, the outward appearance of the scene is more idyllic than the reality. When the gentlemen on the veranda perceive them, Colonel Duncan says:

"So Geoffrey is back, I see! I had not heard of his arrival."

"He came only yesterday, and rather unexpectedly," answers Mr. Vardray.

"What a fine young fellow he has become!" says Colonel Duncan. Then he rises, and, descending the steps, goes to meet the two who are advancing. Greeting Roslyn, he turns to shake hands cordially with Geoffrey; and the latter, despite an uneasy sense of what he has just been saying, can not resist the genial charm which all who know Hugo Duncan acknowledge, nor forget courtesy far enough to be churlish. They exchange a few words, after which Duncan turns to Roslyn.

"I have taken the liberty of bringing with me, this afternoon, a young cousin whose acquaintance I have made — or, perhaps, I should say renewed — to-day," he says. "I think you will like him."

"That is very probable — since he is your cousin," answers Roslyn, smiling, and not at all averse to Geoffrey's seeing the deference in Colonel Duncan's manner. "I am sure mamma will be glad that you brought him. Have I ever seen him before?"

"Never. He has never been here before."

"What is his name?"

"Laurent. It is a French name — his father was of French descent. He is very handsome, you see."

Roslyn does see — for at this moment they approach the veranda, and, glancing up, she meets again the brilliant, steady gaze of the eyes which met hers the night before.

She is so much surprised as to be almost startled, and Laurent sees instantly that she recognizes him. "She is prettier, even, than I imagined," he thinks, as he is introduced. Geoffrey looks at him distrustfully; he is too handsome, too elegant, too admirably dressed, not to be a mere society fop, the young fellow thinks. "Just the kind of man to fascinate a girl, however," he says to himself — unconscious that in this he is doing the only girl who is in his thoughts great injustice. Women — especially women who are beautiful themselves — seldom think much of beauty in a man; and the distinction, the harmonious grace of this man's appearance, does not appeal so strongly to Roslyn's imagination as might be supposed. She takes it all in, but it is less of a charm to her than she would herself have thought possible — though there is no doubt that she feels the magnetism of the eyes, and is pleased by the first tones of the voice.

"What beautiful flowers, Miss Vardray!" — this is all that he is saying — "even the heat of July spares them for you, I perceive."

"Yes, there are some roses to be had all through the summer; but they are not blooming their best, now," she replies.

"I think I notice some very beautiful buds among those in your hands," says Colonel Duncan. "May I not have one?"

"Certainly you may," she answers, as, sitting down in a chair which Geoffrey places for her, she lets the whole wealth of color and perfume fall into her lap. "Here is your favorite," she says, taking up a deep pink bud with the true rose fragrance, and handing it to him. "One must not put anything with a rose; it is sufficient for itself." Then she looks at Laurent. "Should you like a flower?" she asks. "If you sympathize with Geoffrey here, who scorns such adornments, pray don't hesitate to say so."

"So far from scorning, I shall be very grateful for a rose," he replies. "I always like to wear a flower, but I especially value it when given by fair hands."

"That is a proper and commendable spirit," says Roslyn, demurely, with only a smile at the corners of her lips. "I confess I like anything that I give to be appreciated."

"Could you possibly give anything that would not be appreciated?" asks Laurent, the amusement of his tone relieving it from the appearance of any attempt at gallantry.

"Oh, yes," she answers, lightly. "You have no idea how little proper appreciation of the true value of things some people have. Do you like this bud, Mr. Laurent? It is my favorite rose."

"It is beautiful," says Laurent, looking at the delicate, half-opened Sofrano she holds. "It is *my* favorite also. Thanks — as she gives it to him. "Now, pray, believe that one thing which you have given is appreciated at its true value."

"Allow me to add two things," puts in Colonel Duncan, looking down at *his* button-hole adornment.

Geoffrey, very conscious just then of the scratched hands which he obtained in securing those treasures, walks away in a rage of disgust. "She will be spoiled, utterly spoiled," he says to himself. "No woman's head will stand such nonsense! With those two men standing over her, complimenting her, and looking like — like fools, what is to be the end?"

"Geoffrey, what is the matter?" asks Mrs. Vardray, who meets him in the hall. "You look as tragic as Hamlet."

"Nothing is the matter," answers Geoffrey, trying to smile; but the next instant he says, abruptly, "Colonel Duncan is on the piazza, and has brought a cousin with him — somebody that no one ever heard of before — a very great liberty, *I* think."

"My dear!" says Mrs. Vardray, in a tone of expostulation, although she knows now what the cloud springs from. "You forget what a friend of ours Colonel Duncan is. He would not bring any one whom it would not be pleasant for us to meet, and of course he knows that his cousin will be welcome. I must go out and speak to them at once. Is my hair smooth?"

"Oh, yes, very smooth," replies Geoffrey, without a glance at it. "Roslyn is doing the honors very well, I think," he continues, sardonically; "but of course you had better go and add your tribute of incense."

Ashamed of himself, almost before he has finished speaking, he hurries on, and Mrs. Vardray looks after him with a glance of anxious pity.

"Poor boy!" she thinks. "But it is better, a great deal better, for Roslyn to marry Colonel Duncan — and better that he should realize this at once."

She appears on the piazza a moment later, greets Colonel Duncan very cordially, and receives Laurent graciously. Then the group fall into general conversation, and it is not at least until half an hour has elapsed that Laurent finds an opportunity to say to Roslyn:

"I wish you had deferred gathering your roses, Miss Vardray. I should like to see that fine old garden of yours."

"There is not much to see," Roslyn answers; "but if you have a fancy for old trees and old shrubberies, and a few flowers, I shall be glad to show them to you now."

"Thanks; I shall be delighted," he answers, quickly.

So they walk away, leaving the elders of the party together; and, if Colonel Duncan looks after them a little wistfully, it is not because of jealous apprehensions. Wiser, indeed, in many respects are the children of darkness than the children of light, and Laurent judged shrewdly in making his confidences respecting his engagement. According to Duncan's simple creed of honor, no gentleman could be guilty of making love, either directly or by implication, to one woman, while his faith is pledged to another; so with a mind at rest and a heart free from jealous pangs, he watches the two who walk away — not grudging Laurent the pleasure of spending a short time among the roses in the summer twilight with Roslyn, but only feeling that he would also like to walk by her side, and listen to the music of her sweet, gay tones.

Mrs. Vardray catches the expression on his face, and divines the feeling which accompanies it.

"Why do you not join Roslyn and Mr. Laurent?" she asks. "Pray do not let us detain you."

But he smiles, and says in his cordial voice:

"My dear Mrs. Vardray, do you think that you are detaining me? I assure you that it is a great pleasure to me to be here. And I am glad for Laurent to see your garden with such a guide. By-the-by, what do you think of him?"

"If I were younger, I should probably think that he is charming," replies Mrs. Vardray, smiling. "As it is, I think him very handsome, and — shall I say agreeable?"

"Why not?" asks Duncan. "But I know what you mean. Attractive though he is, one is conscious of a sense of distrust. In my case, it is founded on my knowledge of his past career; in your case, on feminine instinct, perhaps."

"I lay no claim to that anomalous power," says Mrs. Vardray, shaking her head. "But experience — the experience of nearly fifty years of life — has taught me something. There are many signs of face and manner by which, almost unconsciously, one judges people — and —"

"Do not hesitate," says Duncan. "Laurent is a kinsman but not a friend of mine. Pray let me hear frankly your opinion of him."

"Frankly, then, he strikes me as a man more fascinating than trustworthy."

"My dear!" says her husband; "I really think —"

But Colonel Duncan interrupts him. "I am glad to have my judgment indorsed by Mrs. Vardray's," he says. "I have been afraid that I might do the young man injustice from — well, from inherited prejudice. It is not fair to visit the sins of a man's parents or grandparents upon him, and one should give the blackest sheep a chance. This is a very black sheep, I am afraid; but, if he is willing to do better, one should give him the opportunity. He has come to me for advice, and I could not refuse to help him. He will stay with me for some time."

"Indeed!" says Mrs. Vardray. Almost unconsciously she looks after the two who have walked away, and the thought that is in her mind is, "I am sorry to hear it."

"I felt sure that it was a beautiful old garden," says Laurent, "and now I can see that I am right."

"Almost any place is pretty in mid-summer," says Roslyn; "but I like this — though of course it is natural that one should like one's home."

"Who could help liking it?" says Laurent, looking up at the fine old trees, half covered with ivy, at the luxuriant hedges of evergreen-box twelve or fifteen feet high, at the riotous roses and climbing vines. "It is a place of which to dream. How particularly lovely it must be in spring, when that orchard to the right is in blossom!"

"It is lovelier than you can imagine," says Roslyn. "Fruit-trees are nearly the most picturesque things in the world at all times; but when they are in bloom, and the clover is springing under them, then I like the orchard even better than the garden. But here is something I like best of all, I think " — she pauses as she speaks at the end of the garden, which they have reached, and indicates the woodland stretch before them. "There is a charm about woods which no pleasure-grounds can possess."

"Are you so much of a gypsy as to feel that?" he asks, resting his arm on the top of the gate, and smiling as he looks at her.

"I am very much of a gypsy," she answers. "I like all free, wild things. I suppose you don't understand the taste, since I heard you say you have been chiefly accustomed to living in cities."

"Yes, I have lived in cities nearly all my life; but, for that very reason, do you not think I might appreciate sylvan things even more than you do?"

"I hardly think so. Is it not said that artificial pleasures spoil the taste for natural ones?"

"It is said so, yes; but all general rules are subject to exceptions, and I flatter myself that I am a very decided exception to this. As a proof, I have promised my cousin to stay with him for some time."

"I hope Colonel Duncan appreciates the compliment," says Roslyn, with a little more of laughing sarcasm in her tone than he exactly fancies. "Cliffton is a charming place," she goes on, "but unless you like, *really* like, the quiet monotony of country life, I am afraid you may be repaid for your sacrifice by being very dull."

"I do not think that is at all possible," he says, decidedly. "I am already greatly pleased with everything. It is merely by chance, as it were, that I am here; but I feel that it is one of the luckiest chances of my life."

"I hope you will remain of that mind," says Roslyn. "But I warn you that you must not expect anything in the way of social pleasures. I do not think there could be a duller neighborhood than this. But perhaps you like riding, or fishing, or walking; or do you take an interest in agriculture?"

"I am afraid I do not take an interest in anything very useful, Miss Vardray. But I like — I do more than like — riding; and walking, under some circumstances, I consider delightful. By-the-by, can we not extend our walk?"

She shakes her head. "Not this evening — it is too late, and our friends would wonder what had become of us."

"It is not so late as the hour at which I saw you yesterday evening," he says. "Perhaps, however, you are not aware that I *have* seen you before?"

She looks at him coolly. "Yes," she says, "I am aware of it. I recognized you at once, and I saw that you recognized me. It would be difficult, I think, for either of us to escape recognition — the moon was shining brightly as you passed me on Mr. Stanley's lawn."

"Then the precedent holds good. You *do* walk late sometimes; and why not now, when the moon has not yet risen?"

"The case is very different. Geoffrey and I were taking Lettice home; and I only sat down on the lawn a moment to wait for him. "Besides," she laughs, "yonder is the moon."

She points toward the east, where fiery-red, and large as a cart-wheel, the full moon is rising over the fields and forest. It is a beautiful scene, an hour full of loveliness and peace, and Laurent feels that what can he, an adept in flirtation, desire better than this — a witching face for inspiration, a summer twilight, a rising moon? He has a consciousness of being fully equal to the occasion — when Roslyn says:

"Now, I think we had better return. You have seen the garden, and I have introduced with fine effect a moonrise for which you did not ask, and for which, therefore, you should be greatly obliged."

"For which I am greatly obliged," he says, without moving. "But I have hardly taken it in yet; it is but an instant since you pointed it out. Surely you do not mean that there is any absolute necessity for retracing our steps?"

"That depends upon how you define an absolute necessity," she answers. "No one will interfere with you if you stay here and look at the moon for an hour, two hours, any number of hours — but I must return."

She moves away as she speaks, and Laurent — surprised, amused, a little piqued — turns at once to accompany her. "She is either very self-willed, or she knows something of the game herself," he thinks. Aloud he says:

"You are really cruel, Miss Vardray. This is a lovely scene, and we shall lose it entirely at the house."

"And are there no attractions at the house to atone for it?" she asks.

"There is one attraction which would atone for the loss of anything," he says; "but it is not necessary that I should go there to find that."

"It is very necessary you should go there to find it," she replies, "if you intend my vanity to appropriate the compliment. Now there is a fine opportunity for revenging yourself, by pointing out that you did not intend anything of the kind," she adds, with another laugh so sweet and gay that Laurent smiles despite himself.

"Revenge is sweet," he observes, sententiously, "but not even for the sake of tasting its sweetness, can I affirm that I did not distinctly and entirely intend that your vanity should appropriate the truth which you call a compliment."

She makes a little courtesy, full of mirth and coquetry.

"That is magnanimous, as well as graceful and gallant, Mr. Laurent," she says; "and I am your debtor — for really I should have felt the blow keenly if you had told me that you did not mean *me*."

"You would not have believed me if I had told you so," answers Laurent, with one of his practiced glances.

It is a game which is old and common enough to him— only deriving freshness from the freshness of the subject — but to Roslyn it is new and somewhat alluring. She has already seen enough of the world to understand what he means, and mingled with a little resentment comes the thought, "What if I should turn his amusement into earnest!" There is attraction in the thought, and she has the first requisite for victory — thorough confidence in self, confidence in her own power to charm and subdue. Nor is this confidence without a basis in experience, for when has she ever failed with any man who has crossed her path? Even now, she knows that Colonel Duncan's eyes are looking eagerly through the twilight for her; and is not Geoffrey sulking in the background, solely on her account? This sort of thing gives a woman a feeling of assured power; and so, with all the rashness of one who has never known defeat, Roslyn feels herself fully capable of trying conclusions with Mr. Laurent. They stroll slowly back to the house, and, when they reach the piazza, Mrs. Vardray says:

"You are just in time for tea."

After tea, Geoffrey has an opportunity to judge for himself of the reputed devotion of Colonel Duncan, and of Roslyn's manner of receiving it. Of the first, he speedily sees there can be no doubt. The idea of concealing his hopes and intentions has never for an instant entered Hugo Duncan's mind, and no one could be with him in Roslyn's society for half an hour without perceiving that he has given her the whole of his heart. That Roslyn herself is aware of this there can be no doubt, either; but whether the girl has not yet learned the meaning of love, or whether she only exercises that reserve which comes as a matter of instinct to the most untried women, Geoffrey is at a loss to tell. He only knows that there is no consciousness in her manner, no wavering color, no drooping lashes, none of those signs which he has been instructed to regard as love's language.

It is not only Geoffrey who is puzzled on this score. Colonel Duncan himself feels, as often before, completely baffled. There can be no doubt that the girl likes him — she is gracious and kind and sparkling whenever he draws near; but will this liking ever grow more? has it any shade of love in it? These are questions he asks himself, and to which he receives no satisfactory reply.

Even if he had the disposition, he has not the opportunity, to make any definite avowal to-night; but the desire to have Roslyn to himself for a time grows strongly on him, and before the evening is over he draws her away from the general group by asking her to sing. This means to leave the cool and lovely moonlight of the veranda for the warmer atmosphere of the lamp-lit drawing-room; but she does so without demur, and goes in, attended by him.

Those outside hear her clear, sweet voice in one or two songs, and then silence falls — at least for them. But, that silence does not reign within, they can have abundant evidence by glancing through the open windows to where Roslyn sits at the piano, talking to her companion, who leans across the instrument. That she is well-content to sit there and talk, the lookers-on clearly perceive — Geoffrey with jealous pain, Laurent with a feeling of annoyance which surprises himself. This might be partly soothed, perhaps, were he aware that he is, during part of the time at least, the subject of conversation.

"What do you think of my cousin?" Duncan has said, lightly, yet with some anxiety.

Roslyn lifts her eyes to his with the frankness of a child. "I think he is the most handsome and the most elegant man I have ever seen," she answers; "but he thinks — oh, he thinks very well of himself!"

"Most men do, I am afraid," says Duncan, laughing. "Vanity is such a common failing with people who have no such excuse for it as he has, that one feels almost bound to pardon it in him."

"I don't feel inclined to pardon it in anybody," she says, "at least not in any man. A woman, now, has a prescriptive right to be vain. I am afraid I am vain myself, but I don't think I am nearly so vain as Mr. Laurent."

"You are rather hard on him," says Duncan. "Such a handsome young fellow must be pardoned some foibles. He has been spoiled, you see. I have no doubt he is an accomplished lady-killer."

"I have no doubt of it, at all," says Roslyn, with a curling lip. "That is just what I mean — that is what is the matter with him. He has lived among small things, and had small ends. I don't know very much of the world, but it seems to me that, to make a noble character, one must have a noble aim. If I were a man, I would be a man, and endeavor to kill something higher than the hearts or fancies of foolish women."

"You are right about the noble aim," says Duncan, smiling. "But are you certain that the women are foolish who lose their hearts?"

"I think they are worse than foolish," she answers. "It seems to me that falling in love is a great absurdity from any point of view; but, if I fell in love at all, it certainly would not be with Narcissus."

"That is hardly fair to Laurent, who may be a manly fellow, for all his handsome looks and delicate grace. Do you remember

'The fool who last year at her Majesty's ball
Sickened me so with his simper and pride,
Is the hero now heard of, the first on the wall
With the bayonet- wound in his side?'

I don't mean to insinuate that Laurent is the least of a fool, or could even sicken one with a simper of pride; but I mean that it is well to remember that we never know how much manly stuff there may be even in a curled darling of fashion."

"You never fail to have something kind to say of every one," says Roslyn, looking up at him with admiration, "and you make me feel very uncharitable; but I meant no harm with regard to Mr. Laurent. He may be as admirable within as without, only I don't think so! Now, what shall I sing, or do you want to hear me sing any more?"

"You know I am never tired of hearing you sing — but I fear I have monopolized you too long. Shall we go out again, or shall we call in Laurent and make him sing? I fancy he sings very well."

"Oh, by all means call him in. I wonder that I did not think of that before. He has a singing face."

So Laurent is called in, and admits that he sings "a little." He proves to have a charming tenor voice, and gives several songs — an operatic air, a German serenade, and a French song — accompanying himself with ease. But presently he springs up from the piano with a laugh.

"I am unconscionable, I fear," he says; "and I think I see by my cousin's face that it is growing time to say good-night. — If you see me very soon again, Mrs. Vardray, do not be surprised, for I can scarcely say how much I have enjoyed this evening."

A few minutes later the cousins are riding away, and, as Roslyn stands on the steps in the moonlight watching them, Geoffrey hears her humming to herself the air which Laurent sang last.

THE COMEDY PROGRESSES.

"There is such a thing as being too close to a girl when you are in love with her," says Geoffrey, moodily.

It is to Lettice he is speaking; and they are alone together in the garden, he lying on the grass, she sitting demurely upright on a rustic bench.

"I suppose there is such a thing as being too close to anybody whom you particularly love or admire," she replies. "There are few idols that will bear too near inspection."

"You don't suppose I meant that one might be too close as far as she is concerned?" exclaimed Geoffrey, more energetically than lucidly. "I meant that, as far as one's own interest is concerned, one might be too close — too familiar, you see. Perhaps I ought to go away and let Roslyn learn to have some kind of a feeling of strangeness toward me, for now she treats me exactly as if I were her brother."

"And how else should she treat you?" asks Lettice. "Are you not like a brother to her? Have you not always lived with her, and are you not living with her now in just that relation?"

"You know that I am not!" he answers. "I am no brother to her at all. I love her, Lettice; I have loved her all my life — but I have no hope that she will ever marry me."

He is lying back, with his hands under his head, and as he utters the last word his eyes meet Lettice's with such a look of pain in them that the girl's eyes soften from sympathy.

"You despair too soon," she says. "It seems to me that if I were a man I would not easily give up anything on which I had set my heart or my will. A woman is different" — her slight hands clasp together — "a woman must submit to circumstances; but a man should conquer them. You have many advantages in being so close to Roslyn, though there is a disadvantage connected with it, no doubt. She sees you at all times — when you are dull, when you are cross, when you are altogether out of sorts — not like Mr. Laurent, whom she only sees when he is on his best behavior, and exerting himself to be agreeable; but then there is the compensation that you see her also at all times, and know or ought to know better how to please her than he does."

"You are a kind comforter," says Geoffrey, "but I do not think there is any compensation in the position at all. It is more tantalizing than anything else, to be so near and yet so far — like the star we have heard of, you know — to be treated with the easy familiarity of an old shoe, and to see that fellow come in and have the best of everything — confound him!"

"It is Laurent you are jealous of, then — not Colonel Duncan?"

"I am jealous of everybody," says the young man, frankly; "but I certainly think there is more to fear from Laurent than from Duncan. He — I mean Duncan — is too old, and Roslyn is too gay. I don't believe she would marry for position and wealth, and I don't think she could have any other reasons for marrying him. But Laurent — well, he is different: and what is he doing here?"

"I do not know," answers Lettice. She is half inclined to add, "I think my father knows," but refrains — partly from habitual caution, partly because she seldom mentions her father's name when it is possible to avoid doing so. Mr. Stanley has smiled significantly on hearing of Laurent as domiciled at Clifton and made familiar at Verdevale. "A gay young sprig," he said, "a very gay young sprig. Well, I wish him good luck. I'm always glad of the luck of my friends."

Now, to be a friend of Mr. Stanley's is not a distinction in the opinion of Eldon County; and being painfully aware of this, Lettice (bearing herself no ill-will to Mr. Laurent) does not mention the fact. She only pauses a moment, and then adds:

"Of course, it is not likely that I would know — but I suppose it is natural that he should stay with Colonel Duncan, who is his cousin."

"And who knows no more of him than we do," says Geoffrey. "Lettice" — he hesitates — "have you ever heard your father speak of him at all?"

"Very little," answers Lettice, coloring. "I think father has known him in New Orleans, and he met him accidentally in Kirton the day you got home. Mamma told me he brought him to tea that evening; but I was here, so I did not see him until, if you remember, he was on the piazza as we went up."

"I remember," says Geoffrey, grimly. It occurs to him with a sense of surprise that "Mr. Stanley's associate," against speaking of whom he warned Roslyn that evening, should be at this present moment sitting with Roslyn in the drawing-room — for she was called from this pleasant garden-spot by the intelligence of his arrival. "Come, Lettice, you and Geoffrey," she said. But Lettice shook her head, and Geoffrey did not stir. "I will stay here," said the former. "Mr. Laurent has certainly not come to see me."

"I echo that with emphasis," says Geoffrey, doggedly; and so Roslyn goes alone to the house, and the conversation just recorded takes place between those left behind.

"While it is taking place she has entered the drawing-room — where Mrs. Vardray is entertaining, or being entertained by, Mr. Laurent — and has greeted that gentleman. It is his third visit, the first which he has made alone; but already he advances to take her hand with the air of a familiar visitor.

"You must forgive an idle man for coming to cast himself on your charity, Miss Vardray," he says. "My cousin has business to occupy his time, but I have none; and with a horse at my command, and the road to Verdevale open, what could I do but come?"

"We are very glad to see you," answers the girl, smiling. As yet she is so fancy-free that the words come easily and lightly from her lips. She is really glad to see him, and her bright, clear glance tells him so as well as her words. He is young, handsome, entertaining, ready with graceful compliments and glances full of homage: what girl would not be glad to see such a cavalier, especially in the monotony of a country life, where any fresh element is desirable?

"The ride alone would be a sufficient inducement for going out to-day," she adds, as they sit down. "What a beautiful day it is! — and what a lovely road from Clifton here! The views of the valley from the bluffs are so fine. By-the-by, Mr. Laurent, have you seen yet the one lion of our neighborhood, the falls of the river?"

"I have not seen them," Laurent answers, "but I think I have heard them; at least, at night, when all other sounds are hushed, there comes into my window a sound suggestive of some distant Niagara."

"That is the falls. It is a beautiful place, for the hills close in upon the river, which cuts its way through them in a series of splendid rapids."

"I must see it," says Laurent, with an appearance of the deepest interest. "Will you be my guide? Can we not ride there? I should like it very much."

"So should I," answers Roslyn; "but it is rather far for a ride. We usually make the excursion as a picnic, and spend the day on the rocks. We have not been there at all this year. — Why should we not go to-morrow, mamma?"

"There is no reason why we should not," Mrs. Vardray answers, "if you can make the necessary preparations."

"We do not need to make many preparations," says Roslyn. "I am tired of picnics in which the whole neighborhood joins. Do you not think" — she looks at Laurent — "that it would be pleasanter if we just went ourselves?"

"Very much pleasanter," he answers, eagerly. "I suppose you mean just you and me."

"Oh, by no means," she replies, laughing. "Setting aside Mrs. Grundy — or mamma there, who represents her at present — I could not think of subjecting either of us to the test of a whole day's *tête-à-tête*. When I said 'just ourselves,' I meant mamma, if she will go — you will, mamma, won't you? — and you and I and Lettice and Geoffrey and Colonel Duncan and the children — they will never be satisfied to be left."

"I think it is a very good idea," says Mrs. Vardray; "and if I can not go, Miss Mills will take care of the children and look after the lunch."

"It is settled, then," says Roslyn, gayly. "I hope you do not feel dismayed, Mr. Laurent — a rural picnic is sometimes a very formidable affair."

"Do I look dismayed?" asks Laurent. "I assure you I feel delighted. But," he adds, as Mrs. Vardray is at this moment opportunely called from the room, "I can not refrain from wishing that my original programme was to be carried out."

"Do you mean you wish that only you and I were going?" asks Roslyn, with her piquant smile. "Then to keep you in that mind, it is a fortunate thing that the programme is not to be carried out. One bit of wisdom my limited experience of life has taught me, and it is that if one does not want to grow tired of things or people one must not see too much of them."

"That bit of wisdom sounds as if your experience of life had not been very limited," says Laurent. "Generally speaking, it is a sad and disillusionizing truth; but there are some people of whom one feels instinctively that one could never tire."

"Are there?" says Roslyn, in a tone of slight incredulity. "But one's instincts are sometimes mistaken, you know; so it is well not to subject them to too severe a test. I am glad you like the idea of a day of gypsying," she adds, changing the subject quickly; "and now do you not think it would be pleasanter to go into the garden and join Lettice and Geoffrey, than to sit here?"

"I am at your command," he answers, "only venturing to remark that it is pleasant to be anywhere with *you*."

"But out-doors on a summer day is better than indoors with anybody," she says, taking up her wide straw hat; "so come."

He rises, and leaving the house, they stroll side by side, as on the first evening of their meeting, across the wide lawn into the pleasant old garden. Here, under a spreading tree, they find the rustic seat, the impression of a figure on the turf, and an open novel, but Lettice and Geoffrey have vanished. Roslyn strongly suspects the truth — that, seeing Laurent and herself issue from the house, they, by mutual consent, doubled around the hedge and made away; but she only smiles, and says, lightly:

"I left them here, but it seems they are gone. Lettice, perhaps, went home, and Geoffrey accompanied her — it is a pleasant walk through the woods over to Mr. Stanley's place."

"Where I saw you first," says Laurent, in a tone that gives a good deal of meaning to the words. "I never imagined that I should have reason to congratulate myself upon possessing the acquaintance of Mr. Stanley; but I did that night when I saw you in the moonlight. Will you forgive me if I add, but, for having seen you, and desiring to know you, I should hardly have remembered that I had a cousin living in this neighborhood?"

Considering that this statement is purely an inspiration of the moment, it is one which does credit to Mr. Laurent's inventive power. Roslyn flushes a little, for, although she has a steady head, this is very subtle flattery.

"I have no doubt you are indebted to the chance which turned your thoughts in that direction, then," she says; for whether or not I am worth knowing — no, Mr. Laurent, please don't say that I am, for really the opportunity for a compliment was too obvious, and really, also, you don't know — there can be no doubt that Colonel Duncan emphatically *is*."

"He is a very fine fellow, indeed," says Laurent, with the least possible tinge of patronage in his tone. "I am glad to know him; but if you fancy that pleasure would detain me —" A slight shrug of the shoulders completes the sentence, expressively.

"If it does not, it ought to do so," says Roslyn, decidedly. "Colonel Duncan is my hero, my chevalier, my type of a noble gentleman."

"Happy Colonel Duncan!" says Laurent, letting his dark, brilliant eyes, full of expression, rest on the bright, young face — while to himself he says, "She cares nothing about him, or she could not talk of him in this manner."

"He ought to be happy if the admiration of every one who knows him can make him so," says Roslyn.

"I am inclined to think that the knowledge of your admiration would go further to do that than the good opinions of every one else," says Laurent, thinking that he will sound her a little.

She blushes like a rose, but no change of expression comes into the frank, clear eyes.

"Colonel Duncan has always been very kind to me," she says; "but I have too good an opinion of his sense to fancy that he rates my judgment at any such absurd valuation."

"There are some valuations with which wisdom has nothing to do," Laurent replies, "though I am far from meaning to imply that any possibly high valuation of your opinion would be absurd."

"In other words, you are trying to see how many graceful things you can say to me," she answers, gayly; "but please don't say any more, for I assure you I am not accustomed to compliments, and they might have a very bad effect, if taken in too great a quantity. Since we have not found Lettice and Geoffrey, shall we return to the house?"

"On the contrary, if you will allow me to make a suggestion, can we not explore those woods which it was too late to enter the other evening? I am sure there are many delightful nooks of shade and coolness in their depths."

"Indeed, yes," replies the girl. "I do not think there could be more beautiful places anywhere than in those woods; but" — she pauses, hesitates — "it is rather warm, I fear, to walk this morning."

"Now, Miss Vardray," says her companion, seriously, "I call this most cruel and unkind. It was too late the other evening, and now it is too warm! Are you determined that I shall not enter your enchanted forest?"

"No — if you really care to go, I shall be glad to show you all my favorite places. I only thought that another time might be pleasanter — and with Lettice and Geoffrey."

"There is no time like the present," he says; "and as for Miss Stanley and Mr. Thorne — well, you must forgive me if I say that I think we do admirably without them. "Will you come?" He holds the open gate in his hand, and his eyes plead more strongly than his words.

Roslyn hesitates an instant longer — but the woman that hesitates is lost. She goes.

CHAPTER VII.

"UNDER THE GEEENWOOD-TREE."

The next morning finds a very merry party starting from the door of Verdevale. In an uncovered wagonette the children with their governess, Miss Mills, and the lunch-basket, are packed; while Roslyn, Lettice, and Geoffrey are on horseback. Neither Laurent nor Colonel Duncan appears in the cavalcade, for the road leads past Clifton, and they will join the party there.

"I hope you will have a pleasant day," says Mrs. Vardray, standing on the veranda-steps, as they prepare to start; and Roslyn answers, gayly:

"I am sure we shall."

Geoffrey is not so sure; but he holds his peace, and prepares to make the best of things. "You can never win a woman's heart by being sulky and cross," Lettice has said to him; and he has determined to bear her counsel in mind and endeavor to mend his manners, which of late have certainly tended toward the decidedly sulky and the objectionably cross.

In fiction, as in actual life, a man in such a position obtains but little sympathy: his suffering — which is most real — seems to those who are not enduring like pangs, very fanciful; and our good wishes are likely to go with the successful rival from the mere fact that he is successful. Yet, in truth, there is no more miserable creature on earth than the lover who recognizes that the heart on which all his hopes of happiness are set is either beyond his reach or

hopelessly drifting away from him. Geoffrey has never, from his early boyhood, made any plan of life in which Roslyn did not bear a part, and, when he tries now to brace his courage to the thought of a life without her, a sense of desolation comes over him, which can hardly be expressed in words. To temper this, however, some such wisdom as that contained in the proverb, "*Les malheurs des malheurs sont ceux qui n'arrivent jamais*" occurs to him, for even in a love-affair he has much of the sound sense which we call practical. "A wise man does not cross his bridges till he comes to them," he says to himself. "Why should I go to meet what may never occur? What everybody expects Roslyn to do is hardly the thing she is likely to do. If she does, I must bear it like a man, I suppose; but there is no good in being miserable by anticipation."

Fortifying himself with these reflections, he consented to join the picnic, and now prepares to endure a day in the companionship of the two men whom out of all the world he, at this time, most heartily detests. Of which of the two he is most jealous, it is hard to tell. What good reason he has to fear Colonel Duncan as a rival, he is well aware; while his distrust of Laurent is as strong as it is instinctive. But, for the present, neither of them is here to share or to monopolize Roslyn's attention. As he rides by her side, her eyes, her voice, her smile, are all his own, and so sweet and blithe are they that he is beguiled into forgetfulness of the disturbing element ahead, until Lettice, looking down the shadow-flecked road, says:

"Yonder are Colonel Duncan and Mr. Laurent waiting for us. How punctual they are!"

"Very punctual, indeed," says Geoffrey, as he, also, looks forward and perceives two horsemen waiting at a point where the road divides — one fork leading into Cliffton, the other continuing along the river. "They must be anxious to start. I hope we have kept them waiting."

"For shame, Geoffrey!" says Roslyn. "I can not imagine what is the matter with you of late — you are so bad-tempered! To think of hoping that you have kept people waiting — the very most disagreeable thing in the world! — I hope that you have not waited for us long," she adds with a smile as the two gentlemen ride forward to meet them.

"Not at all," answers Colonel Duncan. "You have forgotten what an extended view there is from Cliffton. We saw you half a mile away, and so rode down to meet you. I am glad we have so fine a day for the excursion," he goes on, as he turns and takes his place by her side.

"And I am glad you have been tempted to join us," says Roslyn, looking up at him with frank, sunshiny eyes. "I was half afraid that you would scorn the whole affair."

"Why?" he asks, smiling. "Do you think me so old, or so grave, that I should be indifferent to a day of summer gypsying?"

"Certainly neither old nor grave," she answers, with a laugh, "but dignified, perhaps — and then the falls are not new to you, as they are to Mr. Laurent. But I am very glad you have come," she repeats quickly, fearing that he may think otherwise; "and I am sure we shall have a very pleasant day."

"I am sure that you are enjoying it," says Colonel Duncan, looking at the joyousness of her face, which seems to reflect all the sparkling brightness of the summer morning, the glad sunshine on the hills, the glancing lights and lovely shadows of the river.

"Of course, I am enjoying it," she answers. "I can not understand how people can go through life, taking it in a quiet, undemonstrative way — like Lettice, for instance. What I enjoy, I enjoy with my whole heart, and soul, and strength."

"It is a great gift, that of being able to feel so intensely," says her companion. "The only drawback is that you suffer as keenly as you enjoy."

"I suppose I would if I had anything to suffer," she answers, "but I have never had a grief in my life; I don't know what sadness is. I sometimes think that I must be a very shallow creature to be able to say that, but it is true."

"I do not think it follows at all that you are shallow," says Colonel Duncan. "Such a nature is rare, but it is a priceless gift — not only to yourself, but to others. Why, it is like going into sunshine, just to be where you are."

"It is kind of you to say so," she replies, glancing at him with a smile; and, in doing so, she meets the expression of his eyes, an expression of admiration and tenderness which no one could mistake. All the passionate love of his heart is clearly revealed at that instant; and the girl — who, standing on the threshold of this strange mystery of feeling, unconsciously shrinks from it — flushes to the roots of her hair, and adds, hastily: "What a fine road this is just here! Do let us have a good, stretching canter."

She touches her horse with the whip as she speaks, and while they are galloping over the smooth road, Duncan has time to wonder what that sudden blush and confusion meant. He has some knowledge of women, and it seems to him that it is a good sign — a sign of hope for him. It is the first, the very first, token the girl has ever given of recognizing his devotion; and he feels for the first time as if he trod on something like assured ground. At least she knows, she understands — "and it shall not be my fault if she does not understand more," he thinks.

Meanwhile Laurent, who has no mind to excite his cousin's suspicion or jealousy by any attempt to engross Roslyn's attention, has been riding with Lettice and Geoffrey, making himself agreeable, and impressing them both with a realization of his powers of attraction. "I don't think that even I could resist him, if he were to make love and look at me in the way he looks at Roslyn!" thinks Lettice; while Geoffrey admits to himself with grim disdain that this is "the kind of fellow" to play havoc with women's hearts.

Roslyn's canter lasts with little intermission until the place of their destination is reached — a wild and picturesque gorge, where the river in a rushing, turbulent flood, cuts its way through the hills that tower abruptly above it, and falls in a series of beautiful cascades.

The party dismount and fasten their horses some distance from the river-bank, then on foot follow a winding path that leads around the base of the hills to the margin of the rushing water. What words can describe the beauty of such a spot as this, so "lovely, lonesome, cool, and green," that it almost seems as if one might be refreshed to think of it amid the burning sands of a desert! The reposeful charm of the great heights, clad in green from base to crest, is intensified by contrast with the whirling, surging water, lashing itself to foam around masses of gray rock, and sending clouds of spray heaven-ward from the feet of its cataracts.

Roslyn has hurried forward, while Colonel Duncan is fastening her horse and his own, and Laurent finds her on the margin of the stream, balancing herself in an apparently precarious position on a shelving rock.

"What do you think of it?" she asks, as he reaches her side. "Is it not splendid?"

"The gorge, do you mean?" he says. "It seems to be very fine; but I must ask you to show me its beauties — and I beg most earnestly that you will find a safer position."

"Than this?" she asks, laughing. "Why, I was just about to ask if you do not want to follow me out to the middle of the river. I have often gone to that large boulder which you see yonder, by springing from rock to rock."

"I admire such wonderful agility," says Laurent, measuring with his eye the distance from point to point, "but I do not think I can possibly venture to imitate it. If there were any danger to brave, it would be a different matter; but consider how very uncomfortable and how very ridiculous one would be if one fell into the water, and had to wade ashore!"

"Geoffrey can tell you how one feels under those circumstances," says Roslyn, turning to Geoffrey, who, with the rest, has now come up. "It was his unhappy fate once to test the depth and coldness of the water in just that way."

"You don't add that you were the cause of it," says Geoffrey; "but Lettice will bear witness that you were."

"Yes, she was the cause," says Lettice, "for she insisted that you could take a leap which you could not. It was so foolish of you to try, that I think you deserved your wetting."

"How severe you are, Miss Stanley!" says Laurent. "Have you no sympathy for the follies into which masculine humanity is beguiled by the influence of your own sex?"

"Not any at all," answers Lettice, decidedly. "If men are so weak as to be influenced to folly by women, I do not pity them — especially since, in nine cases out of ten, I am sure that their own want of sense is the cause of their folly."

"Thank you, Lettice," says Geoffrey. "I call it uncommonly kind to stand by a fellow in this handsome way."

"As if you thought that I meant you!" says Lettice, with a smile. "You were only a boy then, and Roslyn — well, Roslyn was always a tyrant."

"I shall certainly not come to you for a character, Lettice," says Roslyn.

Laurent looks up at her as she stands still balancing on the rock, somewhat above him.

"*Ma reine*" he says, softly — so softly that no other ear catches the words — "who would not bow to your tyranny!"

"Come, then," she says, with a mischievous light in her eyes — and before any one can interfere to prevent or expostulate, she is springing from rock to rock toward the center of the river.

Laurent hesitates an instant — it is rather a dismaying prospect, that of missing some slippery rock, and finding himself in the surging, eddying water; but he feels that having embarked on a career of gallantry, and being, as it were, put upon his mettle, he can not decline the challenge. He follows, therefore, with commendable courage, and soon finds himself standing safely by Roslyn on a large bowlder in the middle of the stream.

"Now," she says, turning to him, "are you not repaid for coming? Look up the stream — what a fine view we have of the two falls! I think I like them better as seen from here than from any other point."

"It is a beautiful spot," says Laurent, "and the view is superb of all that body of water sweeping down upon us. But it does not need the view to make me feel repaid for coming," he adds, with a direct look into her eyes — "for," he thinks, "since I have been forced to run this absurd risk, I will make the most of the opportunity."

"I am afraid that you are not a lover of nature, Mr. Laurent," she says. "At least I observe that, whenever I direct your attention to a beautiful scene, you manage to imply something complimentary to me, who am insignificant beyond measure when compared to it."

"That is a statement open to question," replies Laurent. "It is not that I love nature less, but that I love — forgive me!" he says, abruptly changing his tone of badinage to one of serious meaning. "Some subjects should be held apart from jest — though jest may sometimes border so close on earnest that it is rather a veil than a flippancy."

"Yes," says Roslyn, somewhat unmeaningly. She has thrown a stick into the water, and is apparently engaged in watching its gyrations on the tossing current, while thinking that this is going a little further than she likes — or, at least, a little faster. It is not to be denied that her fancy is enlisted in Laurent's favor; but, despite this fact, she has been conscious, from the first, of an instinctive distrust of him, an instinctive sense that his words of homage do not ring wholly true. She suspects him of desiring to trifle with her, and she has decided to meet him at his own game. "Perhaps I may make it earnest for him before he knows what he is about," she thinks, with a little thrill of anticipative triumph. "It would serve him right."

But these were the reflections of reason and coolness in solitude. Now, alone with him, exposed to all the fascination of his poetic face, his eloquent eyes, his modulated tones, she feels that her best safety lies, perhaps, in retreat, although she does not part with her armor of nonchalance.

"Excuse me," she says, with a slight start; "I answered at random, I fear, for the water makes so much noise that it is difficult to hear distinctly — and then I was so much engaged in watching my stick. See, there it goes! Fancy if it were you or I being tossed about like that! It may be our fate really, if we should miss our footing."

"It is already my fate — in a typical sense," says Laurent, readily accepting the diversion, and thinking that she has more *savoir-faire* than he would have given her credit for. "Have you

ever thought what it must be, Miss Vardray, to be tossed from one wave of circumstances to another, to be the plaything of the currents of life, as that stick is of these waters?"

"Why should I?" asks Roslyn. "A human being is not an inanimate stick; a man ought to be able to guide himself, and not be the plaything of waves and currents."

"*Ought!*" he repeats, with a smile half-sad, half-bitter. "Yes, I grant you, he ought; but do many of us do what we ought to? I, at least, am a striking example of the contrary. I have frittered away my time, my talents, my opportunities, until now that stick typifies my life only too accurately."

"I hope you are too severe on yourself," says Roslyn — he has gained his point and interested her, as the expression of her face shows. "Even if you have done all this, you are not a stick, and you can do better yet."

"Perhaps," he says, with meditative mournfulness; "if I had an object, an aim, something to nerve my purpose: but this is what I lack. Life has never seemed to me to hold anything worth striving for. Now, you know, to bring out whatever is good in him, a man must have something for which to strive — some object above and beyond him, to be at once inspiration and reward."

"Yes, I suppose so," says Roslyn; "but is not this to be found?"

"Many people find it easily," he says, with a slight accent of contempt; "but they are people readily satisfied. I do not find it — I mean that my life heretofore has not found it — because the aims that satisfy most men do not satisfy me. I search for Egeria, perhaps — do you know where she is to be found?"

The look that accompanies this question says more than a volume of speech, and Roslyn thrills with that mingled sense of danger and pleasure which gives a subtle zest to episodes of this kind. It is not a vulgar flirtation, but a playing lightly with issues which may be fraught with gravity, a warding off seriousness because feeling that the time for it has not yet come.

"No," she answers, shaking her head. "I do not number any nymphs among my acquaintances. But they are generally found in sylvan haunts, I believe; so this might be a good place to look for her."

"Perhaps I have found her," he says, smiling.

"Then in that case there is no need to look," she replies. "But now I think that we had better go back to the shore, for it is a laborious climb to the upper fall, and I see the others have started."

"Let them start," says Laurent. "Why can we not stay here? We see the fall without the trouble of climbing to it."

"You may stay if you like," says Roslyn. "You will make a very picturesque object alone on this rock in the middle of the river. I will tell you how you look from the upper fall."

With a laugh she turns away, and, before he can answer, is half-way across the river, springing lightly from rock to rock. He has no alternative but to follow — his vexation tempered by amusement, and a dawning sense that there is to be even more piquancy in the affair than he had reckoned upon.

They rejoin the rest of the party at the upper fall, and an hour or two are spent in climbing over rocks, being wet by spray, gathering ferns, rescuing children from perilous positions, and all the other amusements of a day of gypsying. Finally, Miss Mills proposes luncheon; and with somewhat exhausted energies and very good appetites the party assemble in a romantic spot by the side of the brawling stream. Here they are discussing, with much relish, sandwiches and cold chicken, jellies and cakes, when a sound is heard which carries consternation with it — a long, low, distant roll of thunder!

CHAPTER VIII.

"On the Same Spot."

Knives and forks are laid down, and the party gaze at one another in dismay. A thunder-storm out in the woods is no trifle, and shelter near by there is none. Miss Mills looked up appealingly to the blue sky overhead.

"Do you think there can be a storm at hand?" she asks, vaguely and generally, of the company.

"I'll take an observation," says Geoffrey, rising.

Colonel Duncan goes with him, and they climb the hill which overshadows them, so as to obtain a wider view of the sky. On gaining the eminence, they at once perceive great masses of dark clouds in the southwest, at sight of which Geoffrey shakes his head.

"There is certainly a heavy storm coming," he says. "The sooner we start for home the better."

"Yes," says Colonel Duncan, "but you will not be able to reach Verdevale before the storm bursts. We may reach Clifton, however, if we ride fast; so let us get off as soon as possible."

Their report ends the feast summarily, and preparations for departure are vigorously made. The children, with their mouths still full, clamber into the wagonette, where Miss Mills is exhorting, entreating, and commanding to haste — being one of those people whom the mere thought of lightning fills with nervous terror — and the equestrians mount their horses as soon as the latter can be saddled. Meanwhile the cloud is moving close, while louder and more loud the roll of thunder comes.

"We must ride very fast," says Colonel Duncan, as he lifts Roslyn to her saddle. "A cloud of this kind advances rapidly."

"So will we!" she answers, gayly. "If it can catch us, it may wet us — now for a breathless gallop!"

It is a very breathless gallop, and, by the time they reach the gates of Clifton, the heavens are obscured by darkness, lightning is flashing around, and thunder roaring above them. But they accomplish the distance well, for the first heavy drops of rain are falling on the leaves of the trees as they ride up the avenue. They dismount as hurriedly as they mounted, the wagonette is unloaded, and the horses have hardly been led away, when the storm bursts in all its fury.

It is a fury which makes them truly grateful to be sheltered from it, as they watch the descending torrents of rain, and see the trees tossing and swaying in the wind. "How fortunate that we reached here just in time!" they are saying to one another. Roslyn, alone, does not join in the congratulations, having walked to a window, where she stands looking silently out.

"What fascinates you?" asks Colonel Duncan, going to her side. "Are you thinking how wet you would be if we had been ten minutes later in starting, or the rain ten minutes earlier in coming over?"

"No," she answers, turning her bright eyes on him. "I was thinking that I shall probably never have as good an opportunity again to be out in such a storm as this — and I have always wanted to be!"

"Why? You don't suppose that it would be pleasant, do you?"

"Not in the sense you mean, perhaps — but it would be exhilarating. Don't you want to test everything? What is the good of living, if one does not taste every possible sensation?"

He smiles as one might at a child.

"I confess that ambition has never occurred to me," he says. "Where did you learn such ideas?"

"Are they strange?" she asks. "It seems to me the most natural thing imaginable — to desire to extract from life all that it holds. But," she goes on, with a quick change of subject, "do you know that I have never been at Clifton before, except once, when I was a very little girl, and papa brought me here with him?"

"I remember it well," says Duncan. "It was soon after I returned from the army, and your father came to see me. He had you with him; you were so pretty — such a fairy rather than a child — that I think I lost my heart to you then. That was ten years ago. I have been very constant, have I not?"

"Very," she answers, lightly. "I remember that you were as kind to me then as you have been since. We went into the garden, and you feasted me on grapes. Can we not go into that garden again?"

"I wish it were possible — perhaps it may be when the rain ceases, if you do not mind getting your feet wet. Meanwhile, look around my bachelor's quarters, and tell me if you do not think them fairly comfortable."

"Much more than that," she answers, glancing over the spacious, handsome room — then, catching sight of her own picture, she blushes quickly.

"You see that I have at least your shadow here," he says.

While this conversation is taking place at the window, Laurent has been endeavoring to console the nervousness of Miss Mills, who has retreated to a remote corner, and assures him that she always retires to a dark room, and if possible to a feather-bed, when a thunder-storm is abroad; while Lettice and Geoffrey are trying to restrain the restlessness of the children. But the latter detects presently a smile on Lettice's face as she glances at the window *t âe-à-t âe*, and he forthwith demands to know the cause of it.

"You are a very inquisitive person," she says. "Can not one smile without being called upon to render an account of the why and wherefore thereof? Well, if you must know, I only smiled because I wondered how Roslyn feels with the consciousness that the attention of every man here is centered on her, that she is the supreme object of interest to each one of you, and that you each regard with jealous envy whoever happens to engross her for the time being! Yonder is Mr. Laurent, fidgeting while Miss Mills describes to him minutely how her great-grand-aunt was struck by lightning; and here are you dying to go and challenge Colonel Duncan! There is too much monotony in the matter — there ought to be a rival introduced for the sake of picturesque and dramatic effect — I ought to be one of the bewitching *intriguantes*, who, in novels, come in to cross the path and distract the admirers of the heroine."

"What nonsense!" says Geoffrey, smiling in spite of himself. "Do you know I think you are very well calculated to be a bewitching *intriguante*?" he adds, looking at the girl for the first time in his life as a stranger might look. "There is something about you very attractive, and then one feels that you don't lie altogether on the surface, as so many women do — and that is a great thing."

"It is my turn to say 'nonsense,' now," replies Lettice, flushing a little. "Don't be so personal, Geoff. Do you know — pray don't murder me — that I think, if I were Roslyn, I would marry Colonel Duncan? He is a splendid creature! Look at him now as he stands talking to her; how much homage and deference, together with simplicity, his manner expresses!"

"You see wonderful things, Lettice," says Geoffrey. "I think the half of them are in your own imagination. Heigh-ho! will this confounded rain never stop, I wonder? I don't like being shut up in this place, at all. I think I would rather have been drenched."

"The rain is too violent to last long," says Lettice. "I have no doubt it will be clear in an hour."

She proves a true prophet. In an hour the clouds have dispersed, and the whole drenched world is bathed in golden sunshine again. Since the woodland dinner was cut short in so unsatisfactory a manner, Colonel Duncan, as soon as they entered the house, ordered a collation to be served; and so it is that they are lingering in the dining-room around the table, playing with

their wine-glasses and talking lightly, when the sudden burst of glory comes, which transforms the dripping, glittering earth to fairy-land. Through the French windows they look out on the garden, and, as the sunlight falls upon it, Roslyn utters an exclamation of delight.

"Oh, how beautiful, how wonderfully beautiful!" she cries. "What a lovely place! It looks as if it were enchanted. Colonel Duncan, you promised that, when the rain ceased, I should go out there. Now I claim your promise."

"I am really afraid it is too wet," says Colonel Duncan, doubtfully — divided between his desire to gratify her, and his fear of the imprudence.

"My dear Roslyn, you must not *think* of such a thing!" cries Miss Mills.

"The idea is absurd," says Geoffrey, shortly. "You might as well have stayed out in the storm."

Roslyn rises from the table with a smile that from her childhood has always meant a serene and immovable intention of having her own way.

"I am very much obliged to you all," she says. "I do not insist upon anybody else being drenched; but I do not mind it — and I am going."

She moves toward one of the windows as she speaks, and Colonel Duncan follows her. No one else stirs, and Laurent smiles as he watches them — a quiet, rather pleased smile, so Lettice curiously notes — as he lifts a glass of wine to his lips.

"Well, this is certainly damp," says Roslyn to her companion, as they walk along the wet gravel-paths, and receive a shower of rain-drops from every shrub that they unguardedly touch in passing. "I feel as if I were very selfish in having brought you out to be made uncomfortable, just to gratify my caprice."

"You did not bring me out," he answers. "I came of my own free-will and pleasure; and as for my being a little wet, it is a matter of no importance. But I am concerned about *you*."

"There is no need to be, I assure you. I do what I like — I have always done what I liked — and I never take cold. Besides, I love water, and I would not miss rambling through this garden just now for anything. It is like Aladdin's magic garden, every tree and shrub hung with precious stones. Only Aladdin's garden had no such delicious odors in it."

He smiles, well pleased with her delight, and so, unheeding the dampness, they wander on — he pointing out what he has done and what he yet hopes to do in the way of improvement, she listening with interest and making suggestions. Finally, pausing at a large grape-arbor, he says:

"Do you remember this?"

"Oh, yes; I remember it well," she replies, looking around. "This is where you brought me when I was here as a child. What a feast of grapes I had, to be sure! And there is the very seat on which I sat, is it not?"

She indicates a roughly twisted rustic bench under the shadow of the arbor, and he answers, quietly:

"It is the very seat; I have never let it fall to decay. I would ask you to sit down on it again, but it is too wet. I should like to ask you the same question that I asked when we sat on it before."

"Must I necessarily be sitting on the bench for you to do so?" she asks, with utter unconsciousness of his meaning. "If that is the case, I think I can venture to sit down long enough to hear the question, at least. Now" — she sits down and looks up at him — "was it, 'Do you like grapes?'"

"No," he answers, smiling, yet with a certain gravity of tone. "It was not that. You had finished the grapes, and we were sitting here talking, when I said to you, 'Will you be my wife?'"

Like a flash, a tide of scarlet comes to Roslyn's face, and she springs to her feet as if he had stung her. Her first instinctive feeling is that of resentment — a dim sense that he has taken unfair advantage of her.

"I was a child then," she says, abruptly, "so I suppose there was no harm in such a jest; but I am not a child now."

She would walk away and end the matter, but he stands in her path and looks at her with serious, astonished eyes.

"Surely you do not think I meant the question as a jest?" he says, with a controlled power, a depth and meaning in his tone, which at once assert their influence over her. "Surely you know better than that. Women are not blind to the fact that a man loves — as you know, you must know, how long and how well I have loved you. The question I have just asked has trembled on my lips for many a day; but I should not have asked it now if the chance to speak here had not seemed so propitious. The past seemed to link itself with the present; and the child to whom I lost my heart is the woman I love. Tell me, is there any hope that you will be my wife?"

As his voice trembles over the last words — too eager, too earnest, for an unnecessary phrase — the girl realizes the power which rests in her hands, and the value of that which is offered her. She feels awed and humbled by this consciousness, touched by the knowledge of the devotion that has so long followed her careless footsteps, and more than sorry for the pain she must inflict. She looks at him with eyes that express all this before she speaks.

"Why do you ask me?" she says, in a low voice. "I can not — you must know that I can not."

"Why can not you?" he asks, quietly — hardly a sign betraying the pain that wrings his heart. "Is it because you do not love me?"

"Not in that way," she answers, hurriedly. "I can not think of such a thing" — half unconsciously, she shrinks as she speaks: "please forget it — please do not talk of it again!"

"You need not fear," he answers. "I only wanted certainty, and now I have it. No, I will not talk of it again. Here, where the hope had birth, I will bury it."

"I am sorry — I am very sorry!" she says, looking wistfully into his face.

"So am I," he answers, with a strange, half-sad smile; "but we can not help it, either of us, so we will say no more about it. Now I think we had better return to the house, for I fear you are very damp."

"It does not matter," she answers. "I have only myself to blame, you know. Oh, I wish, I wish this had not happened!" she says, clasping her hands. "But you must see yourself that I don't suit you in the least."

She speaks with an air of appealing argument that almost makes him smile again. But he only replies, quietly:

"Not in the least, my dear — since you don't think so, certainly not in the least."

CHAPTER IX.

A WARNING- — AND ITS RESULT.

One person, at least, has no doubt of what has occurred in the garden, when the two people, who went out so gayly, return with grave and serious countenances. He smiles to himself with a sense of pleasure, keener because tinged with relief. For, after all, who can count on a woman? — and this woman has by no means proved so susceptible to his attractions as he anticipated. It was quite possible that she might have accepted all that Colonel Duncan offers, and no one knows better than Laurent that, had she been wise with the wisdom of the world, she would have done so. But, instead, she has exhibited just the degree of folly on which he counted, and has served his purpose in the most complete manner. "Good Heaven! how lucky I was to come in the nick of time!" he says to himself, with a comfortable assurance that the result for

Duncan might have been very different had he (Laurent) not brought his fascinations to bear on Roslyn.

Meanwhile, to Duncan himself, at this time, there is nothing very clear, except that it is necessary not to betray to Roslyn how deeply the blow has struck. He bears himself well so long as the party remain; but that is not very long, for Roslyn is nervously anxious to be gone, and Geoffrey seconds her with such hearty good-will that they are soon homeward bound. Their host sees them off with a courtesy which does not fail in the least particular, and, standing on the portico, watches them until they pass out of the gate. Then he turns and goes into the house, to face alone the realization of what has befallen him.

Yet it is simple enough. He has asked Roslyn to be his wife, and she has said no. All is over — his hopes, his plans, his very life, as it were, blotted out by that word from a girl's lips. He has been so single-hearted in his devotion — he has given so much, and thought so little of return — that he is startled now by the passionate strength of his despair. "I knew how I loved her, I knew the thought of her was twined into my heart," he says to himself; "but I did *not* know how awful it would be to have to do without her."

Then he thinks, or tries to think, how mad he has been to hope for any other end. How staid, and grave, and middle-aged he must seem to this girl in the first flush of her youth — the girl who has by her side a lover fitted for her in every respect! "What could be more natural than that Geoffrey Thorne should win her heart?" he thinks, in his sadness. "God grant he may deserve her! But how I would have loved her, and cared for her, and made her life a thing of sunshine, if she had but given me the power!"

So it comes back to that bitter "if," which makes the burden of such anguish. The mystery of it is almost appalling. Why should that be denied to one which is given to another, with often less desert? How is it that love (be it ever so true-hearted) can not win love in return, but must stand back and see its crown of life taken down by careless and sometimes by unworthy hands? There is no answer for these questions, asked as they are by many passionate hearts; and there is no hope, no comfort, to lighten the darkness of such an hour as passes over Hugo Duncan now.

It has set its mark upon his face, deepening lines which, before this, were scarcely to be perceived, and giving an altogether new expression to his eyes when Laurent sees him next. Even the man who holds himself accountable for this suffering is moved to pity it a little. "Of course it is better so," he thinks; "for, apart from its interference with my claims, the marriage would have been absurd; but I am sorry for him! This comes of the folly of loving one woman instead of loving woman in general. Like the uncle, whose pathetic story he related to me, he will probably live and die faithful to his present passion. Otherwise, it would hardly have been worth while to interfere."

"I have been thinking," says Duncan — the two men are sitting together with their cigars in the summer dusk; and Laurent, absorbed in the thoughts given above, starts at the sudden sound of that quiet voice — "I have been thinking, Victor, what is best to be done about your affairs. But I am at a loss how to advise, or to help you, unless I know more of your tastes and capabilities."

Laurent utters a slight laugh. "My tastes! Well, my tastes have not much to do with the matter," he says. "They are all for easy, luxurious things, and strongly, most strongly, opposed to anything in the form of work. And my capabilities are even less to be consulted. They are chiefly for spending money — not at all for saving or making it."

Involuntarily Duncan draws his brows together as he glances at the young man. The incorrigible lightness of the other's tone jars upon him, such a nature as this being the last with which he can put himself in sympathy. But he makes an effort to be patient.

"You have surely," he says, "some idea of what you would like to do — or, at least, of what you can do!"

Laurent flings away the end of one cigar and lights another, as he answers: "There are a number of things that I can do, but none of them very useful things. I have a good dramatic talent

in an amateur way, but my mother was ready to faint when I talked of the stage. I might go on the turf as a jockey, but there is a vulgar prejudice against that as a gentlemanly employment. I have, also, an exhaustive knowledge, expensively acquired, of many games of hazard; but, while it is eminently respectable to lose money on the green-cloth, to make it professionally is not so respectable. This is an honest list of my acquirements. You can judge for yourself how far they are likely to prove available."

The look of disapproval on Duncan's face has deepened as the other speaks. He now says, coldly, "You have certainly some other acquirements — for instance, a good knowledge of languages, have you not?"

"Oh, yes," the other answers, carelessly. "I know French, Spanish, and Italian, as well as English. But what, then? There is nothing to be made of languages, unless one sells one's self into bondage to teach them; and that for me is not even within the limit of possibility."

"I was not thinking of that," Duncan answers. "But a knowledge of languages is very useful in commercial life. You might undertake the foreign correspondence of some house with large business abroad."

Laurent shrugs his shoulders. "I abhor commerce in all its branches," he says.

"In that case," says Duncan, quietly, "I think that you have already hit upon the only career open to you — marriage to a rich woman."

Laurent laughs again. "You are quite right," he says. "But the rich woman happens to be out of reach at present, and may remain out of reach, unless I can prove my capability of being something besides a lily of the field in uselessness. So, perhaps, it would be well to consider the foreign correspondence. Do you happen to know any one in need of such a correspondent?"

"I know a man who may make a place for you to oblige me," Duncan replies. "Of course it will depend on yourself whether or not he finds you useful enough to keep. He is head of a large commercial house, with an important South American trade."

"Well," says Laurent, with the tone and air of a man about to swallow a very bitter dose, "if he will have me, I am willing to try self-immolation in this form — for a time, at least."

"I will see, then, what can be done," says Duncan. "And, since a personal application is always best, I will go to see my friend. I shall leave to-morrow morning, and I may be absent for some time; but I hope you can manage to get along comfortably here alone."

"There is no fear of my not getting along most comfortably," answers Laurent, very truthfully; "but I must protest against your taking such a journey on my account —"

"Not on your account alone," interposes Duncan. "I have business of my own, also, which may detain me a week or so — I can not tell. But I leave everything here at your disposal and service until my return. I suppose you will not be lonely?"

"Oh, no. I have an unlimited capacity for indulging in *dolce far niente*. And then" — a hardly perceptible pause — "there is Verdevale, where I can go now and then for a little society."

"Yes," says Duncan; but his tone has changed. He, too, pauses, hesitates, then goes on, as if feeling it imperative to speak: "But I hope you will not go there too often," he says, gravely. "Remember that there might be danger in such intercourse, for you — and — for some one else, perhaps. Don't misunderstand me. - I have no reason to doubt that you are a man of honor, but harm is sometimes done by want of thought; and no harm must be done in that house which I can prevent."

"I do not misunderstand you," says Laurent. "I accept your warning in exactly the spirit in which you mean to convey it, and I assure you that I shall avoid anything that may lead to possible danger. I hope I am a man of honor — at least I know what is due to the woman I have promised to marry. If I fancied that there were any danger for Miss Vardray or myself, in our association, I should leave here instantly. But" — he again shrugs his shoulders lightly — "I am somewhat too *blas é*to fall in love with a girl's charming face; and I should insult Miss Vardray if I supposed myself to be so fascinating that my presence is fraught with danger to her peace of

mind. However," he pauses for a moment, then goes on, "I appreciate your feeling, and, if you think it better, I too will leave to-morrow morning."

"By no means," says Duncan. "I should prefer that you waited here until my return; and I only intended to warn you of what might be a danger — or, rather, a possibility of danger. People often drift into things without considering where they may end until too late."

"Very true," says Laurent; "but I promise you that I shall not drift into anything at all."

So the matter ends, and the next morning sees Colonel Duncan drive away from the door of Clifton — his destination a distant city, his probable length of absence entirely uncertain. In such a malady as his, the impulse of flight is always strong; the sufferer feels as if passive endurance is more than can be borne; as if there may be relief elsewhere, or, at all events, as if motion is in itself a sort of relief.

It is with the most sincere satisfaction that Laurent bids his host adieu, and watches him borne rapidly away. "Poor fellow!" he thinks. "He has certainly had a 'facier.' But how fortunately it chances for me!"

To fully explain this good fortune, it may be stated that Mr. Laurent has become interested in Roslyn beyond the point necessary for strategic success. Not that he has in the least fallen in love — for that is something of which, he is absolutely incapable — but, like many men of boundless egotism and small passion, he has a facile fancy which is easily taken captive by a new charm, easily stimulated by resistance, and utterly ended by possession. This temporary interest being genuine, gives a character of earnestness to his flirtations, which is the chief secret of their success. He not only seems to be, but is, thoroughly taken captive for the time being; and real ardor, like real everything else, has a power which the counterfeit can never possess. Interest, especially in love-affairs, can never be very well simulated; and if it ever successfully imposes upon its victim, it is because that victim is, for the moment, incapable of an act of judgment. Now, Laurent, being well assured that Roslyn has refused his cousin, might readily feel that his self-appointed task as a strategist is unnecessary; but, in truth, the girl herself has awakened his admiration and excited his vanity to a degree which makes him eager to pursue the affair for his own gratification and amusement. He feels that his fascination has been, in a manner, defied, and this consciousness acts upon him as a challenge. He must see those frank and fearless eyes fall before his, the lovely color deepen as it has never deepened yet at his coming, or his voice. For him, a veteran in flirtation, to be baffled by a girl as narrow in experience as she is young in years, is, he feels, altogether unendurable. The longing to win her favor, the desire to draw from her some sign that she reciprocates the feeling so strong in himself, is almost as intense with him as with a real lover; only there is the great and essential difference, not only that his motive is altogether selfish, but that the desire, once gratified, will prove as short-lived as it is now keen.

Under these circumstances, he naturally does not long delay presenting himself at Verdevale. Before half the morning has elapsed, he is sitting with the family group on the broad, vine-shaded veranda, and has told the news of Colonel Duncan's departure. If he had doubted what share Roslyn had in this, the expression of her face, as he speaks, would assure him of it. She starts, her color changes, and she looks downward, uttering not a word, while the rest express their surprise.

"Why, you are left quite alone at Clifton, then, Mr. Laurent," says Mrs. Vardray. "Will you not be very lonely?"

"I shall be alone, but not lonely," answers Laurent, with a smile. "I can not affirm that I am one of those people that make it their proud boast that they 'are never less alone than when alone'; but I have some resources within myself, and I do not object to a little solitude now and then; it gives one time for reflection, which the rush and whirl of one's ordinary life do not."

"Yet I should think you were much more at home in the rush and whirl," says Mrs. Vardray, who is distrustful of this fancy for solitude, and inclined to the opinion that Colonel Duncan should have taken his guest with him.

"I am afraid the meaning of that is not very complimentary to me," replies the young man; "but I am bound to confess that in a general sense you are right. I must also confess that I should doubtless look upon solitude at Clifton in a very different light if I had not society at Verdevale to cheer me."

This is well brought in, and obliges Mrs. Vardray to make a becoming rejoinder, in the form of a hope that he will not hesitate to cheer himself with the society of Verdevale. "But we must not monopolize you," she goes on. "There are some pleasant families in the neighborhood whom you might like to know."

Anxious not to excite distrust, Laurent does not avow his decided disinclination to meet any of these pleasant families, but replies in general terms, and waives the subject, being quite determined that he will suffer no diversion of the kind.

The morning passes in pleasant idleness; but, although Mrs. Vardray acknowledges the charm of the intruder, this charm only steels her purpose the more against admitting him to any greater familiarity than can possibly be avoided.

"He must go home; I shall not make a precedent by asking him to stay to dinner," she says resolutely to herself; and in order to avoid the awkwardness of disregarding what seems almost an obligation of hospitality, she leaves the veranda about the time when she knows that Laurent must order his horse. But, alas! "the best-laid plans gang aft alee," and it chances that Mr. Vardray steps accidentally upon the scene just as the young man has reluctantly issued the order.

"What, Mr. Laurent," says that hospitable gentleman, without an instant's consideration, "going to ride home at this hour of the day? Tut, tut! you'll have a sun-stroke! Take dinner with us, and go home in the cool of the evening; that is the proper thing to do. Since you are alone at Clifton, we need have no compunction about keeping you."

"It is I who should have the compunction, I am afraid," says Laurent. "You are very kind, but really to trespass upon your hospitality so much —"

"Nonsense!" interrupts Mr. Vardray. "We are always glad to see our friends; and I feel that we ought to take particular charge of you, since Duncan has gone off and left you in this shabby way. —Never mind about the horse, Jim; the gentleman is going to stay."

Laurent does not gainsay this, for in fact he would be very much disappointed if forced to go. He has not seen Roslyn alone at all, this morning, and he wants to see her alone, for several reasons, which may be briefly summarized: first, to gratify himself; secondly, to carry his wary siege of sentiment a little further; and, thirdly, in order to discover the meaning of a change in her which is very perceptible. She has been remarkably quiet all the morning, and there is an air of effort about her which strikes and puzzles him. The true solution does not occur to him — that she is thinking of Duncan, with a sorrowful and impersonal realization of the pain she has inflicted upon him; but he does think that she may be regretting her answer, perhaps, in which case it is, from all points of view, essential that he should efface this regret with stronger feelings as soon as possible.

When Mr. Vardray has countermanded the order for his horse, he turns, therefore, to Roslyn, and says:

"If I stay, may I not beg for the pleasure of a ride with you this afternoon? Pray, say yes" — as she hesitates; "you don't know how much I have built upon the hope of it."

"You must have built very quickly, then," she says, with a flash of her accustomed brightness as she looks at him, "if the idea has only occurred to you since papa begged you to stay."

"I was not speaking of this special idea, but of the general hope of riding with you," he replies. "If you remember, I proposed that instead of our excursion yesterday."

"Don't speak of our excursion yesterday," she says, with a little shudder. "It was a failure from beginning to end."

"It was not all a failure to me," he says. "That time on the rock, for instance —"

He breaks off abruptly, but his well-trained eyes say much, and Roslyn meets them. But now, as before, he is uncertain what effect the eloquent glances have upon her. She only smiles with a gay maliciousness.

"The time on the rock would be still more memorable if you had fallen into the river, as I fancied you would," she says. "A day at the falls seems incomplete without anybody having been wet."

"And you are absolutely sorry that I was not covered with absurdity as with a garment?" he says, reproachfully. "What have I done to deserve such vindictiveness? But I will forgive you all evil hopes and intentions if you will go to ride this afternoon."

"I usually ride with Geoffrey," she answers; "but for once — yes, I will go with you."

CHAPTER X.

GEOFFREY FORMS A RESOLUTION.

Three weeks have passed since Colonel Duncan left Clifton, when Geoffrey goes up to Roslyn one morning as she stands on the veranda, and says, abruptly:

"Will you take a walk with me? I have something to say to you."

She looks at him with a little surprise, not so much on account of his *brusquerie*, for that of late has become a marked characteristic of manner with poor Geoffrey, as on account of the formality of the request; but she answers quickly, with the air of one anxious to conciliate:

"Of course; I shall be very glad to take a walk, if you will bring me my hat and gloves."

He goes into the hall, finds the hat and gloves, and returns with them. She ties on the first, draws on the second, and then, looking at him with a smile, says: "I am ready; where shall we go?"

"Oh, anywhere," he answers. "It makes no difference to me; but we had better go into the woods, I suppose; there we may be free from interruption."

She understands exactly to what special interruption his sarcastic emphasis refers, but she answers:

"By all means, let us go into the woods; I always enjoy a walk there."

So they set forth — more like a pair of new acquaintances than like two people who have grown up from childhood together — take their way through the garden, and, passing out of the gate, soon find themselves in the wood beyond. Avoiding the path which leads in the direction of the Stanley place, they follow another that takes them deep into the heart of the green shades, and finally brings them to the bank of a limpid stream, that runs gayly over its stones "in little sharps and trebles."

"This is where we used to come to fish," says Geoffrey, flinging himself down on the mossy bank. "Many a minnow have I caught here — and so have you, Roslyn. You were very fond of fishing in those days."

"I wanted to do everything that you did," says Roslyn. "I wonder I did not kill myself in trying to keep pace with you in all possible sports. My great grief was that I could not use a gun; but after I nearly shot you, papa forbade it, you know."

"*Did* you nearly shoot me?" says Geoffrey, looking up at her as she stands over him, in the flickering light and shade, a sight "to make an old man young," in the grace and sweetness of her youth. "By Heaven, I wish you had succeeded!"

If spoken lightly, the words would mean nothing, but there is a passionate earnestness in the young man's voice and eyes that startles Roslyn.

"Why do you talk so?" she says, in a reproving tone. "It is very wrong — very foolish."

"It may be foolish; but it is not wrong," he answers. "At least it is not untrue. Don't you know that I would rather have died, than have lived to suffer what I do now?"

"Are you suffering?" she says, gently, sitting down by him. "I am very sorry."

"Yes, I have no doubt you are sorry; I have no doubt you would be still more sorry, if you could know all that I suffer," he replies; "but you are not sorry enough to help me, Roslyn."

"How can I?" she asks, in a low voice.

"You know," he answers, not looking at her, but at the sunlight flickering down through the green boughs overhead to the flashing water. "You know what I feel for you — that is, you know *something* of it; and you may judge, therefore, what it costs me to see you drawing farther and farther away from me every day."

"But I am not drawing away," she says, eagerly. "Why do you fancy such things? You are just what you always were to me, Geoffrey — just what you always were!"

"Am I?" he says, still not looking at her. "Well, I suppose I ought to be content with that — but I am not. I wanted to be more to you, and I see that I can not be. There is the trouble, and you can't help it — not unless you tell me that some day you will love me well enough to marry me."

Silence — a troubled silence on Roslyn's part, in which she dimly hears the gurgle of the brook over its stones, and the rustle of the leaves above her head. This is no new revelation to her of Geoffrey's feeling; but now, as ever, it troubles her — coming as an element of discord into her life, marring the serenity of her attachment to him by demanding something which she can not give. It is in the nature and necessity of love to do this — to cast away that which it has as valueless, because it can not have more. Friendship and affection are scorned by the imperious tyrant — "all or nothing," is his demand, and he flings aside much that might sweeten life, as failing to satisfy the cry of his hot heart. So it is now with poor Geoffrey. What is Roslyn's affection to him, when the love of which she is capable is reserved for some other man? "I want her heart, her whole heart!" is what he says to himself; and, while he says it, he feels that it is not for him to win that heart.

"I don't know how to answer you," she says at last, slowly. "It seems to me strange that you should think of such a thing. We have always been like brother and sister, and I — I can not have any other thought. If you would put away such ideas, Geoffrey, we should be a great deal happier."

"You might as well tell me to put away part of myself," says Geoffrey. "It has grown with my growth, and strengthened with my strength. I have never had any other idea, Roslyn, as far as you are concerned. But I did not bring you out to tell you this," he goes on, abruptly, "for I think you know it as well as I do; I only wanted to tell you that I am going away."

"Going away!" repeats the girl. A sense of dismay comes over her — what malign fate is this which seems to force her to estrange and send away her friends? The tears rise into her eyes.

"O Geoffrey, don't — pray don't go!" she says. "What harm have I done to you? Why should you leave home because I can not feel toward you exactly as you desire?"

"That is not why I am going," answers Geoffrey. "If it were simply that, I would wait and hope; but I can not stay and see another man win you before my eyes; and that is what is coming to pass, Roslyn."

She answers not a word. Her eyes fall before the searching gaze of his, and she begins nervously to pull to pieces a daisy that she has gathered. She would reassure him if she could; but can she?

Seeing his fears confirmed by the expression of her face, and by this significant silence, the young man struggles for an instant with the sharpness of his pain — for how deceitful in hope the heart is we never know, until some such moment of keen, realizing certainty comes — and then, having mastered it by an heroic effort, goes on:

"It is hard for me to see this; harder than you can even imagine," he says. "But will you believe me when I tell you that I almost forget myself in thinking of you? I am certain — more

certain than I can express — that you are making a great and terrible mistake in giving your heart to this man; and I would be willing to suffer all that I do, and more besides, if I could only warn you to some purpose."

His earnestness is pathetic in its sincerity; and if he feared to speak, he sees when Roslyn lifts her eyes that there was no need of fear.

"I have not given my heart to him, Geoffrey; at least, I don't think so!" she says, almost in a whisper. "But tell me — I want to be reasonable — why do you think it would be 'a great and terrible mistake' if I did so?"

"Because I do not trust him!" says the young man, energetically. "You will think that is no reason, perhaps; but, if one's distrust has good ground, it is not to be despised; and it is not jealousy that makes me distrust him. There is Colonel Duncan; it would cut me to the heart to see you marry him; but I should know that you had given your heart and your life to one who is incapable of betraying any trust placed in him; and, therefore, I should not be without comfort. But what should I feel if I saw you give yourself to this other man? He is careless; he is selfish; by his own confession he has idled away his life, and sought nothing but the gratification of his own pleasure; if he has a high thought, or a high aim, I have never heard him utter the one, and he has certainly lost sight of the other."

"You are very severe," says Roslyn, flushing deeply. "I thought something like this of him at first; but a man may drift into modes of life which he would not deliberately adopt. He has had everything to tempt him to idleness and pleasure; but, now that he is old enough to think seriously, he says he feels the need of higher aims and more definite objects."

"I have no doubt he tells you so," says Geoffrey, "for, young as he is, he knows that no plea is so effective with a woman as that which says, 'Help me to mount to higher things.' Well," he goes on, after a moment's pause, "I have said my say, and I am glad it has not made you angry. Give it a little thought, won't you, Roslyn? Indeed, I speak as if — as if I were your brother."

He looks pleadingly at the girl, who returns his gaze with an expression which perplexes him — the expression of one who is awakening to the consciousness of new perceptions.

"es, I will think of what you have said," she answers, "but I wish that I could hear no more of the subject — I mean from anybody. I thought love sweetened and broadened life; but, instead, it seems to fill it with bitterness, to make one hurt one's friends, and take them away from one. But you won't go away, Geoffrey, surely you won't go away?"

"There is no reason why I should stay," says Geoffrey, gloomily. "I am sure I am not agreeable company to anybody; while, if I go to poor old Uncle James — I had a letter from him this morning, begging me to come — he won't care how miserable I am."

"But *I* care," says Roslyn, who feels as if this is more than she can bear. "Geoffrey, it is not just — it is not right," she cries, passionately. "You should not make me feel as if I had willfully made you wretched. How could I help it?"

"Of course you could not help it," replies Geoffrey, whose chivalry is stirred by this appeal. "I am a brute and a fool to have said anything about it — but don't fret! If you want me to stay, I'll stay. No doubt I should be more miserable away from you than with you; so I won't go — now."

CHAPTER XI.

"Honor Before All Things."

On the afternoon of the same day, Roslyn ends her *siesta* somewhat earlier than usual, and comes down-stairs equipped for walking. From the lightness of her step in passing through the house, it is evident that she does not wish to attract attention; and Geoffrey, who is stretched at ease on a sofa in the sitting-room, does not stir as he sees her pass swiftly and almost

noiselessly through the hall. "She is going out," he says, to himself, "and she does not want a companion. She must expect to meet Laurent."

Jealousy and injustice generally go hand in hand, and so they do in this instance; the truth being that Roslyn, as she lies awake during the long hot hours of the afternoon, pondering the perplexities of her situation, has decided that she will take counsel with Lettice, who she knows possesses a remarkably clear power of judgment. "It will be a comfort to speak to somebody," she thinks — and, so thinking, determines to walk over to the Stanley place, since Lettice is detained at home by the illness of some members of the family.

Outside the house the heat is not so great as within, for there is a light, fresh breeze stirring, and the sun in declining westward has lost the fierceness of his power. Long shadows are stretching over the greensward, while floods of level light stream between the trunks of the trees, and light up all the sylvan picture with glory.

Roslyn, who is quick to feel the beauty and sweetness of nature, is walking along the woodland way, swinging her parasol in one hand, while her eyes roving to right and left take in all the loveliness of the scene, when suddenly a turn of the path brings her face to face with Laurent.

She is so much astonished that for an instant she can not speak, and it is he, who, lifting his hat with a smile, says:

"What a wonderful thing the power of divination is! I felt sure that I should meet you, and here you are, all alone, like a fairy princess."

"I am on my way to see Lettice," she replies, "so it is very natural that I should be here; but I am surprised to see *you*."

"The explanation of my appearance is very simple," he says. "I was paying a visit to Mr. Stanley, and being tempted to go to Verdevale by this path — for I felt an instinct approaching to a certainty that I should meet you — I asked him to send my horse over later by a servant. Now, may I ask if your intention of going to see Miss Stanley is fixed as fate, or may I not propose a diversion?"

"My intention is by no means so fixed that it does not admit of a diversion," says Roslyn, smiling; "but, before I speak positively, I must know what you propose."

"I propose that we shall take a walk through these beautiful woods, and find, perhaps, some spot as lovely and lonely as the glen where you led me one morning — do you remember? — where we can rest and talk."

"I can lead you to that same glen, if you like," she says. "It is a favorite haunt of mine, but —"

She stops, remembering that it was in the very place of which he spoke that Geoffrey gave his warning so short a time ago; and, fraught as it is with that association, she hardly feels like going to it now.

"But what?" he asks, as she pauses. "Surely you don't mean that there is any reason why you can not go? Is there any important matter demanding that you shall see Miss Stanley?"

"Oh, no, not any at all," she answers. "I was only thinking that novelty is a desirable thing sometimes, and that I can take you to many other places quite as lovely as that."

"Novelty is not always desirable," he says. "When certain places are associated with pleasant memories, one prefers to return to those places in preference to the loveliest that have no such associations. But what made the charm in this place can make it in another; so lead me where you like."

"Let us see what we can find, then," she says, turning into the woods.

What they have found, half an hour later, is a cool, green nook, all in shade, save that its tree-tops are gilded still with the declining rays of the sun. An abrupt hillside covered with a wealth of tangled greenness rises over it, and at the base of this flows the same, bright, capricious stream which runs through the glen Roslyn has avoided. It is likely that she has forgotten all her

reasons for avoiding it, and that the stream brings no reminder to her thoughts, for Geoffrey would certainly groan in spirit could he see how interested she is in the talk of her companion.

That the latter knows so well how to command this interest is no small part of his attraction, and yet, as Roslyn has sometimes felt, if she were called upon to state clearly in what the charm of his conversation consists, she would be unable to recall anything that could be expressed in words. It is, indeed, a charm of manner more than of words, and it is also largely owing to the infusion of a personal element. Unconsciously, as it appears, but in reality very consciously, Laurent's talk falls into the channel of discussing his own or his companion's life and character, tastes, and opinions. "When we are talking of ourselves, we do not weary; and if we feel anything like a keen interest in another, we do not often weary while he talks of himself. Lovers, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, are tireless in egotism, for the exchange of confidences on all these points of personality is only an exchange of egotism.

The conversation on this occasion, however, is drifting into deeper meaning than usual, for Laurent, as he lies back on the grass and looks up at the sun-reddened tree-tops and the blue sky beyond, says, meditatively:

"What a perfect existence this is! What an ideal life — a dream of summer days, and happiness, and peace! If only life, the whole life, might be like it, what could one ask better?"

"One would not ask anything very extravagant, then," says Roslyn, who is sitting on the root of a large tree. "Of course, it can not be always summer, but life in the country flows in the even current that you see, very much the same at all seasons. Frankly, I think you would grow very tired of it after a while," she adds, with a laugh.

"You say that because you don't know, or you don't care to acknowledge, what makes the charm for me," he answers, quickly, with an irritation in the words like the irritation of pain. Nor is this feigned. Those who play with edged tools are likely to be wounded; and, to Laurent's great surprise, he has found of late that he is wounded very deeply indeed. He meant to trifle, and trifling has grown into earnest before he knows where he stands. Whether it be impulse, fancy, madness, or what, he feels at the present moment that he would give anything of which his life holds the possession or the promise, to be free to make the girl who sits before him entirely his own. But he is not blind to the real and tangible obstacles to such a step. He is an engaged man, a man overwhelmed with debt, and a man who must "do the best for himself," let the consequences be what they may. But he is also a man who is accustomed to following the fancy of the moment, whenever it does not interfere with the more serious matters of life, and he has grown day by day more recklessly anxious to win from Roslyn a confession of love, at least.

"Whatever makes the charm for you," she answers, a little surprised by his manner, "there is no harm in saying that you might grow tired of such a mode of life. I can tell you, by experience, that it is quite possible to grow tired of it. And if *I* feel this, what would *you* feel, whose existence has been so different?"

"Very different, indeed," he says; "but it is the fact of this difference which makes me appreciate what I have found here. I have told you before this how I have squandered my fortune and thrown away my chances in life, been an idler, a good-for-naught, a spendthrift in every way; but I have not told you yet what is the heaviest fetter upon me, what I feel most bitterly now." .

"No," she answers, looking at him with something of curiosity, but more of apprehension, for she is instinctively aware that some blow which may strike her very hard is about to fall — "you have not told me. If it is anything you dislike to dwell upon, don't tell me."

"I *must* tell you," he says, in a voice that seems hoarse with resolution. In truth it has occurred to him as a sudden inspiration that perhaps by means of the truth he may most readily and with least responsibility arrive at the full knowledge which he desires, and which it is now an imperative necessity with him to gain. "I ought to have told you long ago," he says, "but I have been living in a paradise of dreams, and I put away all disturbing recollections, thinking that forgetfulness for a little while could do no harm. But it *has* done harm, for awaking must come at

last to all dreaming; and to me it has come in the bitter realization that I love you with all my heart — and that I am engaged to marry another woman!"

Silence — a silence which may be felt. The world seems going round with Roslyn, and there is the sound as of many waters in her ears. The shock is so great that for a minute she is stunned, and she feels with a dull sense of consternation that she has absolutely no control of her countenance or her voice. She is incapable of uttering a word, and after a moment he goes on:

"Do you know what this means for me? It was a family contract made with my cousin, a mere arrangement *de convenance*; but my honor is bound, and I, who carelessly entered into the bondage, feel now that I have sold every possibility of happiness in life. Roslyn" — he draws nearer, and takes her hand before she can prevent — "what am I to do? I love you, you only, you alone!"

Then Roslyn forces her stiff, dry lips to speak, and says, with a composure that surprises herself:

"It seems to me that there is only one thing for you to do. If your honor is bound, you must fulfill your engagement. As for what you feel for me" — drawing her hand from his clasp — "*that*, fortunately, is a matter of no importance."

"Is it not?" says Laurent, stung more deeply than he would have believed possible. "If you mean to you, that may be true; but to me it is a matter of supreme importance. I feel as if nothing else in the world were of importance, compared to it; and I hoped — I believed —"

He stops short, seeing that he has gone too far; for now, like a flash, pride and anger come to Roslyn's aid. She turns her eyes on him, and he sees in their expanding glow that he has failed in what he wanted to draw from her. Many women, as he is well aware, would have cried out anguish-stricken, "I, too, love — is there no hope for us?" But this girl is not made of such stuff. Were what she suffers tenfold greater, she has the courage and strength to say:

"You hoped and believed that it would be of supreme importance to me, also? I am glad to tell you that you are mistaken. It is not your fault that it is not so — I am aware of that; but I am quite able to wish you much happiness, and to be very certain that your feeling for myself will not long disturb your peace."

It is the simple instinct of pride and self-respect which gives her power to say this, but, if the most subtle knowledge of man's nature had dictated it, she could not have spoken better. To Laurent she is at this moment irresistible, her spirited indifference giving the last touch of fascination to the charm she has for him.

"I do not deserve your reproach," he says, "for I am glad that I have not involved you in my miserable suffering. I had not thought of danger when I met you first, nor did I realize that I loved you until very lately — too late to draw back from the peril. Indeed, some peril is so sweet, that a man can ask nothing better than to perish in it."

"But a man of honor has no right to draw others into peril," says Roslyn, proudly. "I do not mean to reproach you — nor is there any need to do so — but I can not forget much that it seems you have forgotten."

"I have forgotten nothing," he answers. "If I have let my love speak in glance and voice, if I have sought your society and made you feel that your presence was the highest good in life to me, how could I help it? I never knew, I never dreamed, that I could feel for any woman what I feel for you; but I could as soon let the blood out of my veins as alter the fact now."

The passionate sincerity of his tone affects the girl as nothing to which she has listened has ever affected her before. She is trembling from head to foot, and she feels that the scene must end, or she can not answer for her self-control. The longing to escape is the one overmastering desire of which she is conscious, and she rises to her feet as she says:

"I do not think I care to listen to such words. They mean nothing — or, rather, they mean a breach of honor, after what you have told me. It seems strange that I should need to remind you of what I thought every gentleman must feel, that honor should be held before all things. Even if

— if I loved you, I should say that. There is, indeed, nothing else to say. Now, will you be kind enough to return to Mr. Stanley's, and let me go home alone? I should prefer it."

"But why? Why should you banish me?" he says, imploringly. "Nothing is different from what it was before — I have only told you what you must have known."

"Nothing different from what it was before?" she repeats. "What! You tell me in the same breath that you love me, and that you are engaged to your cousin, and you think I could have so little perception of what is fitting, so little self-respect, as to suffer matters to go on as they have done? No, Mr. Laurent, your amusement is at an end. I shall not decline to see you if you come to the house — for that would render explanation necessary — but I hope you will not come often; and I think that the best thing you can do is to go away."

"Are you in earnest? Do you mean it?" he says, in the tone of one moved to the quick.

"Can I fail to mean it?" she answers, lifting her head. "It seems to me it is the only honorable thing to do. I take it for granted that you wish to do what is honorable, even at this late day."

Certainly, in the experience of most of us, "it is the unforeseen which happens"; but never has the truth of the proverb been so clearly illustrated to Laurent as at the present moment. Least of all things that he had foreseen was such a spirit as this in Roslyn; and in his surprise and perplexity he feels that it is better to let her go than to attempt to detain her in her present mood. Uncovering, therefore, he says:

"I can not defend myself; but perhaps you may think of me more kindly and justly after a time. At least, if I have been wrong, it is I who will suffer the penalty. Will you not say good-by, if I may not go with you? Will you not give me your hand? It is surely no crime to love you!"

But she does not answer, and she does not give her hand. She turns, instead, and flies away like one who seeks a haven of safety. Where she is going, she does not know until she finds herself at the familiar garden-gate. Then she looks around half bewildered, as if questioning whether all that has so recently passed is not a dream, and as one arousing to consciousness out of stupor, cries:

"Thank God, I did not let him know!"

CHAPTER XII.

MR. STANLEY AMUSES HIMSELF.

It chanced that, while Laurent has been in the woods with Roslyn, Mr. Stanley, having some motive of business or pleasure to take him into Kirton, and not thinking it worth while to order a horse of his own while one stands ready saddled before him, has mounted the animal which Laurent left, and gone into the town.

This trifling event would not be worth recording — although it is the occasion of much impatience on the part of Laurent, when he returns, to find that his horse has vanished — but for the consequences flowing therefrom, and flowing very immediately. Having transacted his business, Mr. Stanley is briskly riding out of Kirton in the yellow light of sunset, when to his great surprise, in sharply turning a corner, he finds himself by the side of Colonel Duncan, who, also mounted on horseback, is riding out of town.

They exchange salutations, and then, seeing that the latter gentleman looks rather curiously at his own horse, Mr. Stanley says:

"You recognize your horse, eh, colonel? It is by a mere accident that I happen to be riding him. Laurent called at my house an hour or two ago, and when he left, wanting to go over to Mr. Vardray's by the foot-path — in order, I suppose, to keep some tryst with pretty Miss Roslyn — he asked me to send the horse around by a servant later in the evening. After he left, thinking of

something I wanted in Kirton, and this animal being convenient, I mounted him and rode in. He goes well — remarkably well."

"He is a fine horse," says Colonel Duncan, "and I know you to be a judge of fine horses, Mr. Stanley."

"Well, yes, I have a little knowledge of horse-flesh," admits Mr. Stanley, modestly. "Not much more than your friend young Laurent, however," he adds, with a laugh. "He is as good a judge of a horse as of a pretty woman."

Colonel Duncan frowns slightly, for this mode of talk is as objectionable to him as possible; but for the first time it flashes across his mind that Mr. Stanley probably knows much more of his "young friend Laurent" than he does himself. This ignorance would not seem to him a matter of any importance, were he only concerned himself, but those words, "keep some tryst with pretty Miss Roslyn," have suggested a fear that has come to him more than once before — that, in fact, has been a potent cause in bringing him home unexpectedly and unannounced. He has an instinct that Laurent does not possess the high sense of honor which alone can make it safe to trust a man in a position of temptation; and an awakening consciousness of this aroused him out of his dull lethargy of pain to the realization that he had not acted well in leaving the girl he loved exposed to such a danger. Now a pang contracts his heart — a very unselfish pang — as he thinks, "Have I come too late?" and, for her sake, he proceeds to draw out Mr. Stanley.

That gentleman is easily drawn out — reticence, unless to serve some end of his own, being by no means one of his characteristics. In the space of fifteen minutes, Colonel Duncan is greatly and not encouragingly enlightened concerning the character and antecedents of the man who is a stranger within his gates; and then follows a still greater shock, for Mr. Stanley does not hesitate to assert that a regular "love-affair" is in progress between Laurent and Roslyn.

"It has not seemed my business to warn anybody concerned," he says, with a careless shrug, "but it is a pity for the girl — a great pity! It is not in the least likely that he thinks of marrying her — he can hardly keep his head, financially, above water now, and is the last man in the world to indulge in the expensive freak of marrying a woman for her pretty face; but even if he were inclined to marry, he's not the man I'd like to give my daughter to."

"But is it likely — have you seen or known of anything to make you believe it likely — that Miss Vardray has become attached to him?" asks Duncan, hating himself for the question, yet feeling that he must learn all that he can, in order to be sure of his ground for future proceedings; and being aware that, through Lettice, Mr. Stanley has opportunities of acquiring accurate knowledge on the subject.

The other laughs — a slight laugh, but more significant than many words.

"You know Laurent," he says. "Does it strike you as probable that any girl could hold her own against the attentions of a man as well fitted to please women as he is?"

There is no reply. Colonel Duncan answers the question to himself, but it is not an answer he is disposed to give Mr. Stanley. Indeed, at this point their roads separate, and the former says:

"If you see Laurent, I shall feel obliged if you will let him know that I have returned."

"I'll send him word to that effect when I send the horse," replies Mr. Stanley. "I am not likely to see him again to-day. Good-evening."

He turns into the road leading to his own house, with a cheerful air and light spirit. He had done a bit of work which satisfies him very well. Many an old grudge has he against Colonel Duncan — such grudges as the black sheep of civilization generally have against their white brethren — and he feels comfortably conscious that he has paid them all off in the news which it was his good fortune to communicate. As for Laurent, if he bears no grudge against him, neither has he any reason to spare him; and since his chief delight, from his youth upward, has been in the doing of mischief simply for the sake of mischief, he is very well pleased with that which he has just had the opportunity to do.

Meanwhile, the man to whom he has done this good turn has been inwardly execrating him almost as heartily as if he had known of it, as he sits on the veranda in the twilight, waiting

for his horse. Lettice has come out to explain the absence of the horse, and to do a little duty work in the way of entertaining him; but she finds the latter very up-hill work, for Mr. Laurent is distinctly and unmistakably in a bad temper. Indeed, so marked is this, that it occurs to the shrewd young maiden that some deeper reason than that which appears on the surface must be the cause of it.

"I hope you found them all well at Verdevale," she says, with the most innocent air. "I have not seen any of the family for a day or two."

"I have not been to Verdevale," answers Mr. Laurent, quite shortly.

"Ah! you met Roslyn, then?" she says, in the tone of one drawing a natural and inevitable conclusion.

Laurent is very much inclined to exclaim, "Why the mischief should you suppose that?" but some vague idea of the courtesy due to a woman interferes to prevent the speech, and he reflects that there would be no good in denying that he met Roslyn, since it is so easy for Lettice to discover that he did. Therefore he answers, with more than a shade of irritation in his tone:

"Yes, I met Miss Vardray."

"And she did not come back with you to see me!" says Lettice, ignoring the irritation. "I consider that very unkind on her part — unless you stopped her in order to enjoy her society yourself."

"We took a short walk," says Laurent, stiffly, "and then she returned to Verdevale, while I decided to come back here for my horse."

"I am sorry you should have to wait for him," says Lettice — while her thoughts are busy with the problem thus set before her. Something is plainly the matter — something which has ruffled the equanimity of Laurent to a most unusual degree. "Can things have gone so far that he is forbidden to visit Roslyn, and is making a convenience of us in order to meet her?" she thinks.

While she is pondering this question, Laurent rises to his feet with an exclamation of relief. "There he is, at last!" he says, and goes hastily forward, as Mr. Stanley comes riding up to the door.

"What, my dear fellow, are you here?" says that gentleman, cheerily. "Why, this is quite unexpected. Was Miss Roslyn not at home?"

"I decided to return for my horse," replies Laurent, brusquely — "and I have had to wait a considerable time for him."

"Sorry to hear it," says Mr. Stanley carelessly; "but, I bring you some news in return for having borrowed him without leave. I met Colonel Duncan as I was leaving Kirton, and had the pleasure of riding a mile or so with him. He asked me, if I saw you again, to let you know that he has gone on to Clifton."

"Indeed!" says Laurent, without any indication of surprise. He mounts his horse almost as soon as Mr. Stanley has dismounted, and, with scant adieus, rides away.

"He was in a very bad temper at not finding his horse, papa," says Lettice, quietly, as her father comes on the veranda where she sits.

"Very likely, my dear," replies Mr. Stanley, calmly. "He is a young gentleman much given to bad temper when things do not suit him; but what brought him back, when he said that he did not mean to come?"

"I don't know," answers Lettice, the prudent. "He only mentioned that he met Roslyn and took a walk with her."

"And she sent him back here!" says Mr. Stanley, with a laugh. "She is a sensible girl, and knows how to keep things smooth at home. But I think Mr. Laurent will have some good reason for bad temper before long," he adds with, a complacent nod, as he walks into the house.

A prophet could not have spoken more truly, for Laurent has reason for very bad temper, indeed, before he is many hours older. Colonel Duncan is a man without the faintest power of simulation, and it would be impossible for him to meet his kinsman as if no change had come over his feelings toward him, when in reality he is filled with wrath and indignation. In his first

greeting, Laurent sees tokens of this, and divines what is to follow — what does follow speedily. Duncan is not a man of many words; so the reproach, when it comes, is keen, the charge direct. Its very directness makes it almost impossible to evade it, were Laurent disposed to do so. But he is not. To-night, at least, he is ready to avow the worst, ready to say, "If this be treason, make the most of it!" And, as is natural, his candor disarms the elder man somewhat. What can he reply to such a *mea culpa* plea as this?

"Yes," says Laurent, "your instinct, or your information, is correct. I have behaved like a scoundrel, I suppose — and you may call me one if you like. That is, I have fallen in love with Miss Vardray, and I have made love to her — the last, however, not until I told her the whole truth. I told her that I am engaged, but that I have the misfortune to love her; and she told me scornfully that the information did not interest her in the least. That is how the matter stands: so you see that I am the only injured person — which ought to be, no doubt, a solid and substantial comfort to me, but is rather the reverse; for, if she had acknowledged that she loved me, I should as certainly break my engagement with my cousin as I stand here now."

"And do you think that would be honorable conduct?" asks Colonel Duncan.

"Who can tell?" replies the other. "It is hard, sometimes, to know where honor lies. It strikes me that it would lie rather in marrying a woman who loves me and whom I love, than in making a cold-blooded marriage of convenience."

"You should have considered the cold-bloodedness of a marriage of convenience before engaging yourself to make it. A matrimonial engagement, once made, is something from which no man of honor can recede. Roslyn Vardray is not the girl I believe her to be if she did not tell you that."

"She did tell me so — with the most unmistakable emphasis," says Laurent. "But — she did not deny that she loves me; and, what a woman does not deny, she almost affirms. That is my only hope."

"You have no right to talk of hope while your engagement binds you," says Colonel Duncan, sternly. "Remember that I introduced you into the Vardray household, and therefore I feel myself accountable for your conduct. I should feel it in the case of any girl, but especially do I feel it with regard to Roslyn, for whom I have always entertained a peculiar affection. I insist, I have a right to insist, that you do not see her again under present circumstances. If you choose to break your engagement, you can then go to her as a free man, and see what she will say to you; but now I am determined to shield her from bitterness of any kind, and I repeat that you must go away without seeing her again."

"I am by no means sure that you have a right to insist upon it," says Laurent, coolly; "but it is pretty much what I have myself determined to do. Only" — he pauses an instant — "I hardly see how breaking my engagement will bring me much nearer to her; for, placed as I am, I confess that it would be simple madness for me to think of marrying a portionless wife."

"And will you tell me," says Colonel Duncan, with deep, concentrated indignation, "why you did not think of this before uttering a word of love to a portionless girl?"

"Because the utterance came like the love itself, without thought," answers Laurent. "Some impulses are beyond a man's control."

"Beyond some men's control," says Colonel Duncan dryly; and there abruptly ends the conversation.

CHAPTER XIII.

TAKING COUNSEL.

Colonel Duncan's meditations, during the night which follows, are of a very perplexing order. Setting aside his own feelings altogether — as, with the unselfishness of a great nature, he is able to do — he decides that it is incumbent on him to apply whatever remedy may be in his power to the state of affairs between his cousin and Roslyn. He does not doubt that the latter returns the passion of Laurent, but the doubt in his mind is, whether it might not be better that she should suffer from that common calamity of youth, "an unfortunate attachment," than to unite her life to one who, according to his judgment, would not be likely to make any woman happy. This is the question which he debates during the long watches of the night; and his final decision is, that he will see Roslyn herself, and be guided by what he can learn or can judge of her state of feeling. "If the attachment is strong and likely to endure with her," he thinks, "matters must be arranged so that she will not suffer. I could endure anything better than to see that radiant face clouded by sorrow and despair."

Acting on this resolution — of which, however, he says nothing to Laurent — he mounts his horse the next morning, and rides over to Verdevale. He is welcomed cordially by all the family, with the exception of Roslyn, who does not appear; and, when he inquires for her, he is told that she is not at home.

"She went early this morning into Kirton," says Mrs. Vardray, "to spend a few days with her aunt Lavinia."

"I will call and see her, then," says Colonel Duncan, "since I am going to ride into Kirton myself."

An hour later he is dismounting at the gate of a large, old-fashioned house, set far back from the street, in spacious greenness, which is the residence of Mr. Vardray's widowed sister, Mrs. Arden. Her only daughter having married and moved away, she lives here alone, save when provided with companionship by the visits of her grand-children, or of Roslyn, to whom she is greatly attached. But being always the center of a social circle, she can not be said to lead a lonely life, although it is, in great measure, a solitary one.

Colonel Duncan feels it necessary to ask for her, although he is burning with impatience to see Roslyn, and Roslyn alone; but it is only in the power and presence of some great emergency that we can violate the useful and necessary conventionalities of civilized life. He is shown, therefore, into Mrs. Arden's sitting-room, and received by her most kindly. She is a blithe, elderly lady, with a cheery manner and a charming smile, whose popularity arises from her genuine warmth of heart, although this warmth is not indiscriminate. She has her favorites, and, among them, few rank so high as Hugo Duncan. It has long been one of the chief desires of her heart that he may succeed in winning her pretty niece; and she has consequently regarded with the most marked disfavor all other candidates for that young lady's hand.

Duncan's eager eyes sweep the apartment as he enters, in search of Roslyn, hardly knowing until this moment how hungry is his heart for the sight of her; but she is not to be seen. Only Mrs. Arden rises from her accustomed seat and comes forward to welcome him.

"This is a very unexpected pleasure, Colonel Duncan," she says, "though not the less for being unexpected. But I heard of your departure some weeks ago, and did not know that you had returned."

"I only returned yesterday, quite unannounced," Duncan answers. "It is among the doubtful privileges of a bachelor existence that one can come and go when one likes, without feeling bound to give warning of arrival or departure."

"A very doubtful privilege, I should think," says the lady, shaking her head. "I don't know which is most desirable, to have some one to say good-by when one goes, or to welcome one when one returns."

"But if one is not so fortunate as to possess any one to perform either of those gracious offices, one must find what consolation is possible in the freedom of loneliness," replies Duncan, smiling.

"I don't believe there is much consolation in it for you," says Mrs. Arden. "I have a better opinion of you. But, however that may be, your journey has not done you any physical good, if I may judge by your appearance. You are looking fagged and worn."

"A usual result of travel and warm weather," says Duncan; and then, being so much preoccupied in mind, that it is with an effort he sustains the conversation, his eyes wistfully travel around the room again.

Mrs. Arden catches the glance, and smiles.

"I know who it is you want to see, my dear colonel," she says; "and I am not so obtuse or hard-hearted that I intend to monopolize your visit. I will send for Roslyn presently; but, first, will you let me ask something about the young man of whom I have lately heard a good deal as being with you at Clifton? Laurent is his name, I believe."

"He is a son of Ada Duncan, a cousin of mine, whom you may remember as having been at Clifton once in her girlhood," Duncan answers. "I confess that I know little of the young man himself. He came to my door as a kinsman, and you know the clanship feeling that goes with Scottish blood. It was enough for me that he was a kinsman, until — until lately."

Mrs. Arden nods.

"Yes," she says. "I understand. It was like a man not to think of consequences, not to realize that his being a kinsman was not warrant enough for letting him carry off our bonny Roslyn."

"Has it come to that?" asks Duncan, in dismay. He thought he had prepared himself to know the worst — to know that her heart had gone forever beyond his reach — yet the certainty which seemed to him contained in Mrs. Arden's words sends a sharp, sick throb of pain through all his being.

"I am afraid it has," replies the lady. "I have heard rumors and reports, of course — you know how such things get about — but I would not believe that there was any danger until the child came to me this morning. The first look in her eyes was enough to tell me that a change has come over her, that she has lost the gayety of an untroubled heart and drank her first draught of sorrow. I don't know what her coming here means, but I will tell you what she said — I think you have a right to know."

"If the desire to serve her is a right, I have," says Duncan.

"She said," Mrs. Arden goes on: "I have not come to see you from an entirely unselfish motive, Aunt Lavinia — in fact, not from an unselfish motive at all. I have come because I want to be away from home for a few days. I may be forced there to see people whom I do not want to see; but here I can refuse myself to whom I like."

"Of course, I did not ask whom she wished to avoid. I only kissed her and told her that I was glad to see her from whatever reason she came, and that she should refuse herself to whomever she liked. But I had no difficulty in conjecturing whom she meant, and neither, I suppose, have you."

"I know very well," he answers. "I have heard the whole story from the man whom I blame myself bitterly for having left in a position of temptation. It is because I have heard it, that I am here this morning to see Roslyn."

Mrs. Arden looks at him hesitatingly for an instant before she speaks. Then she says:

"I do not know whether or not to ask if you feel at liberty to let me know the whole. It is needless, I am sure, to say — you will understand this — that my interest does not arise from curiosity, but from my love for the child. If I can be of no service in any way, we will not waste time in a useless discussion; but if I can help you by advice or otherwise, you know how glad I shall be to do so."

"I think, perhaps, you may help me by advice," he says. "I feel the need of counsel, and I know that you are competent to give it — that I may rely both upon your good sense and your love for your niece. I will tell you, then, all that I know, and see whether your opinion coincides with my own, as to the course which I have thought of taking."

So he tells it all — his accidental meeting with Mr. Stanley on the preceding evening, the gossip which that gentleman related, his indignation against Laurent, the story of the latter, and his own mental debate thereupon.

"You see, I reproach myself so much for having introduced this young man at Verdevale in the familiar manner I did, that I feel responsible for the result of the intimacy thus established," he says. "He could not, even if he had been presented by myself, but in a more formal way, have had the vantage-ground of such unrestrained intercourse as my folly gave him; for Mrs. Vardray had an instinctive distrust of him from the very first. She would have been on her guard, and would have kept him at a ceremonious distance, but for my indorsement of him as my kinsman. And since it is by my fault that this unfortunate state of affairs has come about, it is incumbent upon me to do what I can to smooth matters. I must straighten the tangled threads, if it is in my power to do so."

"I do not, I confess, see any way by which you can straighten them," says Mrs. Arden. "If the man is engaged to another woman, and ruined besides, it seems to me that the only thing, as well as the best thing, is for him to go away — the sooner the better. He has certainly not acted as a man of honor."

"He certainly has not," says Duncan; "but remember that he is young, impulsive, and the temptation was great. Few men in his position would have acted differently — many would not have acted as well, for he might have told his love without telling of his engagement."

"A man does not tell his love only in words," says Mrs. Arden. "He tells it in unnumbered ways — in look, in tone, in devotion of manner. Do you think women are blind? — do you fancy we are insensible to the whole course of wooing until the end comes in the question, 'Do you love me?' If Mr. Laurent wishes to save his character for honor in that way, I consider it a very shallow device. By every means in his power he tried to win Roslyn's heart, and then he says that he told her of his engagement before telling her of his love! What right had he to mention love then? I should have called it an insult!"

She speaks with energy — color flushing her cheeks, and fire flashing from her still bright eyes; and Duncan feels that a female Daniel has come to judgment, on whom no plea of mercy will have effect.

"No doubt you are right," he answers. "I can not condone his conduct — I can not even excuse it on any ground save that of overwhelming temptation. Of course, he would not have yielded to the temptation, strong as it undoubtedly was, if he were not weak as well as —"

"Unprincipled," was the word he is on the point of uttering; but he checks himself, and goes on after a scarcely noticeable pause, "Putting him out of the question, however — for, on his own merit alone, he would receive no consideration from me — I must ask you to remember this, which is my sole concern in the matter, that we have every reason to believe that Roslyn loves him, and it is her happiness of which I am thinking, and which I desire to secure."

Mrs. Arden looks at him as if she would read the very depths of his heart, were such a thing possible. "What is the man made of?" she wonders. "Does he love Roslyn himself, and if so, by what power of self-abnegation can he talk so calmly of securing her happiness by giving her to another man?" These are her thoughts, but she does not express them when she says:

"To gratify an unwise passion would be to insure her unhappiness, rather than to secure her happiness, believe me, Colonel Duncan. I, for one," she continues, very earnestly, "am altogether opposed to anything so short-sighted. Say that she is in love with the man, what then? She will not be the first girl, by many, who has suffered a heart-ache and been cured in due time — and she will not be the last. Neither do I think that she is likely to suffer long. But, even if she does suffer, will not that be better, a thousand times better, than for her to marry such a man as this must be — a man without stable principle, a *mauvais sujet* of the worst description?"

"I am afraid she would not agree with you," says Duncan, quietly; but there is a look of pain on his face, which causes Mrs. Arden to regret having spoken so warmly and unguardedly; and she exclaims, quickly:

"Forgive me if I seem too harsh in my judgment, and if I forgot for the moment that one so totally unlike yourself is your kinsman."

"There is no need to apologize for anything that you have said," he answers, simply; "you can not think more harshly of him than I am inclined to think. But I wish to be reasonable and just; and indeed, as I said before, it is not of him that I think — it is of her."

"And you wish to do what is best for her, I am sure?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Suppose that Roslyn were your daughter — all the circumstances of the case being the same as now — would you permit her to marry Mr. Laurent if you could prevent such a thing? I am confident that you would not," she continues, as Colonel Duncan hesitates an instant.

"You would feel it your duty to oppose such a marriage to the utmost. And do you think it right to encourage, if not promote it, as you propose to do in the present instance?"

Duncan rises from his seat and takes a turn up and down the floor before he answers. Then he sits down again, and says, in a low tone:

"I can not endure to think of her suffering as she will — as she must suffer if she loves him and has to give up her love — and to feel that I am to blame for it."

"You will be still more to blame if you involve her in the life-long wretchedness of an unhappy marriage," says Mrs. Arden, gravely. "And there is another thing to be considered. Since your cousin is ruined in fortune, and frankly says that he must marry money, how do you expect him to marry Roslyn, who will have nothing till her father dies, and then very little?"

"I should settle that by securing *my* fortune to her," answers Colonel Duncan, calmly.

Mrs. Arden regards him with the air of one who is unable to credit the evidence of her ears.

"I beg pardon," she says, "but did I understand you rightly? — did you say secure *your* fortune to her?"

"I said that," he replies. "Is it strange? You surely know how deeply I am attached to her: what better use could I make of what is mine, than to secure her happiness with it? You know, perhaps, that Laurent is, by my uncle's will, the heir of Clifton, if I die childless: so I should simply be adding to what he will inherit the rest of the estate. That would be Roslyn's dower."

The simplicity of his manner, as well as of his words, carries conviction of his sincerity to his listener; and if for a minute she does not speak, it is because the tears, which rush to her eyes, also choke her. Then:

"And you — *you* love her like this," she cries at last, "to a point of generosity beyond anything that I have ever heard of in any other man, and are yet so blind as to think of giving her up — for her happiness, indeed! For her lasting misery, you will find, if you succeed in carrying out your scheme of ill-judged generosity!"

"But you forget," he says, "that it is no question of 'giving up' with me. I do not think I should be magnanimous enough for that. She has told me distinctly that she can care nothing for me — I suppose I was a fool ever to think that she could; and shall I be selfish enough to let any thought of myself stand in the way of what may make her happiness?"

"Putting aside the fact which I have already repeated often enough — I mean that I can not believe you would secure her happiness in this way," says Mrs. Arden, "have you wholly forgotten yourself — your own future? Surely you are not so foolish as to fancy that life is over for you, because a silly girl has said no."

"I do not fancy that, in any sense, it is over for me," he answers; "but I am certain that I shall never marry, and hence I have a right to dispose of my fortune as I like. What I desire is to see Roslyn, and learn from herself how she regards Laurent — for all depends on that."

"I have always trusted a great deal to Roslyn's sense," says Mrs. Arden, "and Heaven grant I have not trusted in vain! I will send her to you; but before I go I must say that I think it is an honor to have seen and known a man who can so nobly forget himself."

With this, and before he can reply, she has left the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

Roslyn Decides.

Some time elapses before Roslyn appears — so long a time that Duncan begins to fear she will not come; but at last the door uncloses slowly, and she enters.

The recollection of when and how they parted last is not much in the mind of either. Since then, time seems to have stretched out interminably to Roslyn — a new life filled with new emotions, and lately pierced with keen pain; while Duncan is thinking so much of her that he has not time to think of himself. He is struck, as he comes forward and takes her hand, with the change in her of which Mrs. Arden spoke: it is almost intangible and quite indescribable, but he sees it, though she smiles and lifts her eyes with the old frank look of welcome.

"I am glad to see you back again," she says. "When did you return?"

He answers her question — speaking half-mechanically — and then they sit down and look at each other: he with an anxious inquiry that he can not disguise, she with a shrinking from scrutiny that he observes in her for the first time, a feeling which makes her rush into speech, since he does not speak at once again:

"Have you been to Verdevale? But of course you have, or you would not have known that I am here. They must all have been delighted to see you."

"They were all very kind in welcoming me," he replies; "but I confess I did not think as much of their welcome as perhaps I ought to have done, for I went to see you, and you only."

"Did you?" she says, in a tone of surprise; then there flashes into her mind for the first time a recollection of his words when they were together last, and the color on her face deepens. "I only came into town this morning," she adds, hastily, and not very relevantly.

"I know," he answers. "I also know why you came," he goes on, thinking that it is best to plunge into his subject at once. "Will you let me speak frankly to you? Laurent has told me his story."

She changes color again — to paleness now. But she shows no sign of astonishment, for some instinct has warned her that it is with regard to Laurent that he is here.

"Yes, you may speak frankly," she answers; "but I do not know that there is anything to be said — concerning Mr. Laurent."

"There is this to be said," Duncan replies, "that I blame myself for having gone away without previously telling you of his engagement. It is true that I warned him; but I should have known that it was a position of great danger for any young man — and, for your sake, I ought to have been thoroughly open on the subject. I might have foreseen what would happen."

"Do you mean with regard to me?" she asks. Unconsciously she lifts her head proudly. If she is miserable, she does not mean to be weak. "So far as I am concerned, nothing has happened, except that I have come here to avoid meeting a man who has behaved in a dishonorable manner."

The curl of her lips, the light in her eyes, give added emphasis to her words — words that in their trenchant clearness astonish Duncan; for though Laurent has spoken of her scorn, he is not prepared for so explicit an expression of it as this. He feels for a moment uncertain how to answer. He has not come with any intention of pleading his cousin's cause, yet his next words are words of apology for the young man.

"I understand your indignation," he says; "but it is only just to remember how greatly he was tempted. I have had to remember this in judging him. No doubt with him, as with many another man, love surprised him."

"That may be," she replies; "but had he not time to think? Had he any right, any excuse, to come day after day, to ride, to walk, to talk, to imply all and more than all that he said at last? It is not his fault that I am not the most miserable woman on earth. But why do I talk of it?" she breaks off, abruptly. "You see there is nothing to be said. That he is engaged is enough for me. I do not wish ever to hear his name again."

"But," says Duncan, watching her closely as he speaks, "it is possible for engagements to be broken; and it is also true, as he has suggested, that there may be more honor in breaking than in keeping an engagement, under such circumstances as these."

"Has he suggested that?" she asks, the color flashing into her face again. "Surely he does not think that it would matter to me if his engagement were broken tomorrow."

"He did not venture to say that it would influence you," Duncan answers. "He told me that you had refused to listen to his love. But I —" He hesitates a moment, then goes on, speaking a little more quickly than usual: "I know how far pride can steel a woman's heart, even against the man she loves. So I have come, not as his advocate, but as your friend, to ask you, in the name of our old friendship, to tell me the truth, and give me the right to serve you. If you mean exactly what you say in declaring that you wish never to hear his name again, then I pledge my word that he shall go away, and that you never *shall* hear it again. But stop and think whether you do mean it. If you care for him — as it is very natural that you should — don't make the mistake of sending him away for a scruple of honor. I frankly tell you that he is not a man whom I should select as the man for you to marry; but if he is the man you love, you must decide whether or not you will trust your life to him. I appeal to you as a woman, not a fanciful girl, and I beg you to believe in the sincerity of my desire to secure your happiness."

"Could I know you and doubt it?" she asks, in a low voice. The serious gravity of his appeal has affected her as strongly as he could possibly desire. All the feeling that has filled and swayed her since she parted with Laurent seems suddenly calmed — whether by the power of the voice that has addressed her, or by the weight of responsibility thrown upon her, she does not know. Perhaps it is the latter, for a recognition of all that depends upon her reply makes passionate haste impossible. As she looks at him he sees in her eyes — eyes that never seemed to him so beautiful before — the spirit of reasoning womanhood to which he has appealed.

"I will answer you as you deserve that I should, with perfect candor," she says. "You ask if I really mean what I say in wishing that I might never hear Mr. Laurent's name again. An hour ago I thought so; but wounded pride and indignation had so much to do with the feeling, that perhaps it was not real. What I feel now is that whether or not there would be any excuse for his conduct, there would be none for mine if I listened to the suit of a man who is engaged to marry another woman, or if I permitted him to break that engagement in order that I might listen to him. You talk of a scruple of honor — but surely that is more than a scruple, if there be such a thing as honor."

"You are right," he says, "it is more than a scruple; it is a very grave question of honor. But you can not blame me for thinking more of your happiness than of anything else."

"Yes, I blame you," she answers, "because you ought to judge for me as you would for yourself; and what have I ever done that you should think so much of my happiness?"

"Never mind about that," he says. "If I choose to make your happiness my care, that only concerns myself. What I desire to know is, how best to serve you. I see the situation — your heart is on one side, your pride, your conscience on the other. How to reconcile them is the question."

He rises, walks across the floor to a window, and stands there for a minute looking out, though evidently seeing no feature of the prospect before him. Roslyn sits motionless and silent. Once she uncloses her lips to speak, but closes them again without uttering a sound. What can she say? Has he not stated the matter truly? If she contradicts him, how can she state it better?

"Please do not talk of it any more," she says, with child-like simplicity of manner, when he again resumes his seat near her. "I only want to be let alone. I came here in order that I might not see him again. If I am foolish enough to care anything about him, I do assure you that I am at

the same time wise enough and honest enough to despise myself for doing so. All is said in the fact that he is engaged. I will not hear anything beyond that."

"But if he were free — pardon me that I must ask this — if he were free, would you forgive him?"

"Why do you ask?" she says, shrinking away from the directness of the question; and turning her face so that he could not see it, she gazed straight out of the window with eyes as unheeding the green beauty they rest upon as his had been just before. "I will not entertain the thought of his breaking his engagement; and I beg you to let him know that it would be useless for him to do so," she goes on. "He can not mend one dishonor by another, and you are the last, the very last, person in the world who I should have thought would be the advocate of such a thing."

"I am not the advocate of it," he answers. "You mistake me entirely if you think so. But engagements are often broken — indeed, they seem very much made to be broken at the present time — and I confess that I am thinking much more of your happiness than of Laurent's honor."

"But it is my honor as well as his that is concerned," she says. "What should I be if I listened to him now while his engagement exists, or if I suffered him to break it in the hope that I would listen to him then? Do you think that I do not know and feel how generous, how more than generous, you are?" she says, turning toward him with eyes full of unshed tears. "But you think too much, far too much, of me — and indeed there is no need for you to consider this affair so gravely. I do not look as if my heart were breaking, do I?"

If the smile with which she says this is brave, it is also tremulous. And the man before her — the man who would give his heart's blood to serve her — feels that he is utterly at a loss to know how that service shall be rendered. He hesitates an instant, gazing at the bright face which is now overshadowed by the change so intangible, yet so marked, which had struck both Mrs. Arden and himself, and then takes her hands abruptly.

"You have fenced me off," he says; "you have not spoken the whole truth to me! How can I appeal to you more strongly and directly? — how can I persuade you to be perfectly frank and trustful? I can only say, Roslyn, that I think I deserve your trust; I can only implore you to give it to me! Tell me if you love this man so that his going will make you miserable, so that his staying — if he could stay with honor — would make you happy?"

He speaks with such passionate earnestness, that Roslyn's tears are ready to overflow, and there is a choking sob in her throat which she can scarcely swallow. But she makes a great effort and does swallow it, and force herself to speak calmly.

"There is no such *if*," she answers, "no such possibility — and if there were, how do I know that it would make me happy? I do not know; so I beg you to do nothing in my behalf. Let him go — make him go! That is all I can say."

She sinks back in her chair as she ceases speaking, and looks so suddenly pale, that he sees it will not do to press her further — even if further insistence would be likely to tell him more than he has learned already — and this he doubts. So he takes her hand again — this time with a gentle friendliness.

"My dear child," he says, "you must forgive me for tormenting you in this way. But remember how you have been our pet, how we have wanted to keep you always bright and glad, and how little I at least like to be baffled by the fate that has brought this cloud upon you. I feel, too, that it is my fault; that I am accountable and responsible — and hence I have endeavored to see if it could not be taken away. I thought you might be like other girls — that love and its gratification might be all in all to you; but I see, and I am proud to see, that you think more of honor than of love, and would rather suffer than be happy unworthily. You leave me, therefore, nothing to say but God bless you, and good-by!"

He goes without another word, and, before the echo of his footstep has died away, Roslyn's shield of bravery and pride is gone, and she is sobbing like a heart-broken child. Hardly until this moment has she realized what has been offered her, and now the realization comes with

the sense of final loss. She feels perfectly assured that, had she uttered a word expressive of her desire that Laurent should remain, Duncan would have smoothed matters to that end — and the temptation was not so sharp when it was offered, as now when it is passed. We are doubtful of the value of many a thing while we hold it, which seems to us absolutely good after it has escaped from our grasp.

Before her passion of grief has quite exhausted itself, Mrs. Arden comes in — knowing that Colonel Duncan is gone — and great is her astonishment at the scene before her; for the matter had seemed to her very simple. If Roslyn cares for the man, she has but to say so, and, with an unexampled generosity, Colonel Duncan is ready to play the part of fairy god-father and bring the affair to a happy conclusion. If she does not care for him, she has also but to say so, and the matter is at an end; in either case Mrs. Arden fails to perceive any need for tears. And here is Roslyn, lying prone on the sofa, her face buried in a cushion, her lovely hair all disordered, and her whole form shaken with convulsive weeping!

The intruder upon this storm of grief — for such Mrs. Arden feels herself to be, for an instant — pauses and regards, with mingled distress and amazement, the prostrate figure before her — hesitating whether to advance or retreat. But, after a moment's indecision, she yields to her impulse, and, going forward, puts a kindly arm around the girl's shrinking form.

"My darling," she says, "how sorry I am to see you so much distressed. Is there nothing I can do for you?"

"Nothing at all," answers Roslyn, battling with her sobs, and choking them down; "I am a fool, aunty — a fool! — and you ought to despise me!"

"Why, my dear?" asks Mrs. Arden; and, seized with sudden uneasiness, she adds, gravely, "Are you going to marry Mr. Laurent, Roslyn?"

"Do you mean that you would despise me if I were?" asks the girl.

Mrs. Arden does not answer at once; she looks at her niece apprehensively, restraining the inclination she feels to answer the question just proposed strongly in the affirmative — for she does not understand how anybody, with a due sense of honor, could think for a moment of overlooking the breach of honor which Laurent has committed. Hot words were quivering on her lips; but she is old enough to have learned that violence is much more likely to injure than to help a cause — particularly in a case of this kind. She speaks quietly, therefore, but there is an unconscious inflection of coldness in her voice, which is very perceptible to her hearer.

"I confess, my dear, that I should be very sorry to see you do anything which, I am convinced, would make you miserable for life."

Roslyn smiles bitterly, as she pushes back the damp tendrils of hair that are clinging to her brow and cheeks, and looks up.

"You will not be called upon to despise me, or to be sorry for me, either, Aunt Lavinia," she says — "at least, for this reason. I have some sense of honor. He is engaged to another woman, and I have told Colonel Duncan that I will not suffer him to break the engagement for me."

"Thank God!" says Mrs. Arden — and she kisses the tear-stained victor, adding, "You are right — and some day, my dear, some day, you will be as glad, as I am now, that you have come to this decision."

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL DUNCAN MAKES A MISTAKE.

When Colonel Duncan returns to Clifton, to find Laurent comfortably established in a cool, shaded room, smoking cigarettes and reading newspapers with a tranquil air, it is natural

that irritation should be his first and predominant sensation. On account of the conduct of this man, he has not only been taking trouble and discomfort upon himself, but, what is far worse, he has just seen marks of suffering on the face he loves best — the face he had so fondly and vainly hoped to keep ever without a shadow; and now he comes from that painful interview to find the culprit, the sole cause and occasion of it, apparently without concern or remorse — a picture, as he lies at ease, of sybaritic self-indulgence!

It is no wonder that his heavy brows contract, and that, when Laurent glances up, he sees a stern as well as a heat-flushed face. But as he quietly swings his legs to the floor, and from a recumbent assumes a sitting posture, his own manner remains as unruffled as before.

"I have been expecting you for some time," he says. "I suppose, however, that you have been to Verdevale — and, as I can testify, that is rather a difficult place to tear one's self away from."

"I have been to Verdevale, yes — but not all the time," answers Colonel Duncan. "After leaving Verdevale, I went to Kirton and paid a visit. Miss Vardray is there."

"Indeed! With whom?"

"With her aunt, Mrs. Arden, who lives in that place. I tell you of her whereabouts, because she has gone there to avoid any possible chance of seeing you again — such a chance as she thought might occur at Verdevale."

"Thanks; you are very kind," says Laurent, quietly. "But may I ask why Miss Vardray thinks it necessary to resort to such extreme measures to avoid me? I have certainly not evinced any intention of troubling her."

"Did you have no such intention?" asks Duncan, looking at him keenly. "Not, however, that you are to imagine that she anticipated or feared anything of the kind. She only thought it probable you might be at Verdevale, and that for her to avoid seeing you there would excite attention; so she went to Kirton, where there would be no difficulty."

"It was very considerate of her," says Laurent. "But, since I am on the point of taking my departure, she need not have given herself that trouble."

"It is certainly well that you should go," says Duncan, promptly, "and I was about to suggest as much. I mentioned, last night, that my friend Mr. North has kindly agreed to give you a place and a trial; so that it is best you should go to him at once."

"Yes," says Laurent, in a meditative tone. He looks down at the cigarette which he is rolling between his fingers, while he speaks, and he is asking himself what it is best that he should do. Of really putting his shoulder to the wheel and accepting distasteful work, he has never had the least serious idea, though it served his purpose very well to allow Duncan to believe that he had. And if, in consequence of this belief, that gentleman chose to take a good deal of trouble, that surely was his own affair altogether, and did not bind him (Laurent) to anything at all. Shall he now quietly announce that he has no intention of troubling Mr. North, or shall he make a feint of accepting the offered situation, in order to propitiate Duncan? In the latter case, what is to be gained by such propitiation? These are the questions he asks himself as he deliberately lights his cigarette. At length he says:

"We will discuss that matter presently. Just now I should like to know something more about Miss Vardray — for example, whether she could not be induced to see me. Don't misunderstand me!" — as Duncan starts angrily — "I should only like, before bidding her a probably final adieu, to remove an erroneous impression from her mind — the impression, apparently, that I insulted her by telling her of my love."

"And was it not an insult to have told her, in the same breath with your declaration, that you were engaged to marry another woman?" asks Duncan, hotly. "There may be women — no doubt there are women and to spare — who would think lightly of such a breach of honor, but Roslyn Vardray is not of the number. I was sure of that, even before I saw her."

"And you have been made more sure by seeing her, I presume," says Laurent, calmly.

"Yes," Duncan answers, forgetting prudence in indignation, "if you wish to know how sure I have been made, I will tell you — in order that you may realize, once for all, what Roslyn Vardray is." And then follows a brief recapitulation of his own resolve to secure the girl's happiness at any cost, and of Roslyn's answer.

Laurent fairly holds his breath as he listens. He can hardly believe that he is not in a dream. With regard to Duncan's conduct, his sentiment is one of mingled amazement and contempt. Such unparalleled generosity is to him only unparalleled folly. But what a prospect it opens for him — the positive assurance of the inheritance of Clifton, and the girl who has captivated his fancy, made not only possible, but desirable as his bride, by the rich gift of the fortune which is Duncan's own! Was ever mortal man so mad before? and was ever mortal man so favored by luck, surpassing his wildest dreams? He can hardly contain himself; his head is whirling with excitement, yet he controls himself sufficiently to realize that he must not let Duncan suspect that this revelation has entirely changed all his resolves and plans. A minute before, he had been satisfied that nothing remained for him but to put Roslyn out of his life, and rest content with his success in diverting her heart from his cousin. *Now*, he says to himself, that all is clear before him, and that he will never resign the hold he has won over her.

But he takes good care not to betray this new resolve to Duncan. To the latter he only expresses, after a minute or two, his sense of the wonderful generosity that prompted the offer which Roslyn refused, and his deep regret that, having so refused, she has left him nothing to do but to go.

"For that is of course what it comes to," he says. "I will accept what your kindness has provided, and go to Mr. North at once. Work is said to help one to a good many fine results — forgetting, among the rest. I will see what it can do for me."

"You are right," says Duncan, a little mollified by this. "I hope that it may do a great deal for you, and you should not delay in presenting yourself to Mr. North."

"I will go at once and make my preparations for departure," says Laurent, glancing at his watch.

But, although he leaves the room, it is not so much to make his preparations for departure as to decide what his course of action shall be. One thing is plain — that, for the present, at least, it is necessary that he should go; but he determines that he will not go before he has seen Roslyn. He will leave Clifton, so as not to be under the surveillance of his cousin, but he will remain in Kirton until, by one means or another, he has carried his point, until he has seen her and established his influence on a surer basis.

He does not, however, think it necessary to announce this resolution to Duncan; but he does decline the offer of the latter's companionship into Kirton. When, with the spirit of a host *du ancien régime*, Duncan says, "Of course, I shall drive in with you, and see you off," the young man coolly answers:

"I hope that you will not do anything of the kind; for, if you drive into Kirton, it will only be to say good-by to me at the hotel instead of here. I shall not leave by the afternoon train, which is a slow one, but shall wait for the midnight express."

"Then why not wait here?" asks Duncan — though he knows very well what purpose the excuse of the midnight express covers.

"To give you the trouble of sending me in after nightfall?" says the other, carelessly. "No, thanks — I shall go in this afternoon."

CHAPTER XVI.

Geoffrey's Good Offices.

"When Laurent, on his way into Kirton, calls at Verdevale to make his adieus, there is much surprise manifested, and even more felt, by the family. Geoffrey, in especial, is astonished and suspicious. It flashes upon him, with the force of an instinctive conviction, that there is some connection between Roslyn's going to Kirton, Colonel Duncan's return, and this man's departure. He drove Roslyn into town himself; and he remembers now how pale and preoccupied she looked. Jealousy suggests an unworthy thought to him again, and he wonders if she did not go to Kirton in order to meet Laurent there before his departure — which he shrewdly argues to have been in some way a necessary consequence of Colonel Duncan's return.

These thoughts are strongly in his mind when, Laurent's hurried visit over, he stands on the veranda watching that gentleman drive away, and debating in his mind whether he will not ride into town and see for himself the extent of Roslyn's infatuation and duplicity. He is only deterred from doing so by a feeling that to act the spy, in even the least degree, is a very unworthy part to play. It is impossible to say how his indecision would end, did not a slight chance determine the matter for him. While he still stands with a gloomy brow, saying to himself — "If she has a secret, is it any of my business to pry into it? No— I will not interfere and act like a sneak!" — a servant on horseback rides up and gives two notes to him.

One is for himself and one for Roslyn, and both are evidently from the same person. He opens his own, and finds that it is an invitation to an informal dance that evening at the house of a young lady in Kirton, well known to them both. She signs herself, "Your old friend Rose Gilray"; and never before has Geoffrey felt so warmly conscious of the claims of old friendship between himself and the bearer of that name. Go? Of course he will go, and he will make it his instant duty to carry Miss Gilray's note to Roslyn, and persuade her to go also. The excuse he wants is given him, and, sending word to Miss Gilray that he will report to her in an hour, he orders his horse at once.

When he dismounts at Mrs. Arden's gate and walks up to the door of the house, it is with not a little fear of what he may enter upon. He almost wishes now that he had not come, that he had remained away until certain that Laurent was out of Kirton.

"How like a spy and a sneak I shall feel if I find them together — as no doubt I shall!" he thinks, with a strong impulse to retreat. It is too late for retreat now, however: if any one is in the drawing-room, he must have been seen from one of the windows; so he pulls the door-bell, and hears the peal ring through the spacious, silent house.

Into the broad hall with its waxed floor, its old claw-footed furniture, and pleasant lounging-chairs, comes a neatly dressed maid, who says:

"Walk in, Mr. Geoffrey, and I'll go up and tell Miss Roslyn you're here. I don't expect she's awake yet."

"What!" says Geoffrey, so much surprised that he forgets to be relieved, "isn't she down?"

The girl looks at him, in turn, surprised. What is he thinking of, to imagine that a young lady is likely to be down from her *siesta* with the sun two hours high!

"Oh, no, sir," she says, in a tone of rebuke. "But I'll let her know that you are here."

She goes away up the wide, shallow staircase, and Geoffrey, sitting down in one of the inviting chairs, revolves the situation in his mind. Has Laurent been here and gone? Clearly not, for it has been too short a time since he left Verdevale for that. Has he an appointment yet to come? Hardly possible, or Roslyn would surely be ready to receive him, knowing that railroad trains, like time and tide, wait for no man. But can it be that he will go away without bidding her farewell at all? Such a proceeding can have only one meaning, the young man feels, and that he is not prepared to credit. Altogether the mystery puzzles him, and when a clock suddenly chimes

out on the stillness, striking the hour, he starts, for the distant whistle of a railroad train answers it, and he says to himself that Laurent is off.

"Roslyn must have known that he is going, and she must have come here to avoid him," is Geoffrey's next thought as he sits patiently waiting. "What the deuce does it all mean? Only yesterday she talked of him in a way that showed she was very near caring for him. What has happened since then? I am not a curious fellow, as a general rule; but I *should* like to understand this."

No explanation comes, while half an hour wears away in drowsy silence; then a door opens and closes again in the upper regions of the house; a pair of high heels and a trailing dress are heard, and around the bend of the staircase Roslyn comes into view, prettily dressed and smiling — only a slight heaviness about the eyes (which might pass for the effect of an interrupted *siesta*), making any difference from her ordinary appearance.

"Geoff, what do you mean by disturbing one at such an hour as this?" she exclaims. "Have you come to pay me a visit because I happen to be away from home for a day? Of course, I should be glad to see you at a reasonable hour; but to rouse one in the middle of a warm afternoon is *so* provoking."

Her petulance pleases rather than annoys Geoffrey, for he thinks, reasonably enough, that she would hardly speak so if his coming were seriously disagreeable to her.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you," he says. "It is true that I might have sent this note to you, but I brought it, because I wanted to take your answer with my own to Miss Rose."

He gives her Miss Gilray's note, and watches her as she reads it. No flush of anticipated pleasure comes to her face, no light to her eyes. When she reaches the end, she looks up and says, quietly:

"I am sorry you took the trouble to come just for this. I don't care to go."

"Not go!" he exclaims. "Why not?"

"Because I don't care to. Isn't that reason enough?"

"No," he answers, "I don't think it is. Miss Rose will certainly expect a better one. And your not going will be all the more remarkable from your being in town. What possible excuse can you give? You know they count — that everybody counts — on you."

She makes a gesture of indifference.

"Let them," she says. "There is no reason why I should constrain myself to do what I don't want to do, merely because people expect it of me. Geoffrey, please don't worry me. I will not go."

Geoffrey's face grows dark. He knows what this means, and, looking steadily at the countenance before him now, he sees that some of its bloom is gone, and that the heaviness of her eyes may be the result of weeping.

"I am sorry to worry you," he says, "but I am bound to tell you that very disagreeable things will be said of you if you decline this invitation without being able to give any good excuse for doing so. It will be known that you are in town, it will be remembered that you have never failed to appear on such an occasion before, and, of course, people will draw an inference — an inference that may or may not be true, but that, in your place, I should dislike for them to draw."

Her eyes kindle as she meets his gaze, and she lifts her slender neck with the air of pride that on rare occasions belongs to her.

"I do not, in the least, understand what inference you mean," she says, coldly.

"Do you not? Then I must remind you that Mr. Laurent left this afternoon, and I am sure I need not point out what connection people will find between that and your refusal to go to a dance."

Despite her utmost power of self-control, she can not prevent a change of countenance which tells him that his news is news to her, but, for the rest, she has herself well in hand, and bears the ordeal gallantly.

"Has he gone?" she says. "I did not know that he — was leaving so soon. Are you certain?"

"He was at Verdevale an hour or two ago on his way to take the train in Kirton, bade everybody good-by, and left a message with my mother for you," answers Geoffrey. "That is all I know. I suppose he has gone. His trunk was along, and Colonel Duncan *wasn't*."

He regards her keenly, as he utters the last words; but her face does not betray her further. She only looks down nervously, closing and unclosing the fan she holds.

"You see how the matter stands," the young man goes on, stiffly. "Your name has been very much coupled with his lately, and people will say — well, you can imagine what they will say. Of course, it is nothing to me whether you go to the dance or not — further than that I should be sorry for you to be the theme of such gossip as I know will be the result of your not going. You must decide, however."

There is a moment's pause. A breeze, blowing lightly through the hall, brings a fragrance of roses and jasmine with it from the garden behind the house; the clock ticks; the sunshine streams on an old engraving of the "Death of Montgomery"; and Geoffrey has no instinct of what cause he is pleading — for whom he has won — when Roslyn, looking up presently, says:

"I do not believe that any such result would follow my not going to a stupid party in this warm weather; but since you have thought fit to say such things to me, perhaps somebody else may be found foolish and ill-natured enough to say them of me; and so I will go."

CHAPTER XVII.

Midsummer-Night's Dream.

Fortunately for Geoffrey's peace of mind, he has no intuition of how Miss Gilray is engaged when he calls at her door half an hour later, and is informed that she is out. He scribbles a few lines on his card accepting her invitation, and then continues his way out of town; for he is charged with the important commission of having an evening dress sent to Roslyn.

The young lady whom he has failed to see is not very far away. A few squares distant, her pony phaeton is drawn up close to the sidewalk, and she is talking eagerly to a gentleman, who is no less a person than Mr. Laurent. She was driving rapidly down the street when she saw him sauntering under the trees, with the low sunlight streaming on his handsome face and figure; and having met him once or twice during the past few weeks, at Verdevale, she instantly conceives the idea of securing him for her evening's entertainment. It is the work of an instant to utter his name and draw up her carriage by the spot where he pauses.

"How fortunate that I should meet you, Mr. Laurent!" she says, eagerly. "I was just thinking of sending a note to Clifton, asking if you will not come to a little dance at our house this evening. Pray, don't say no, for in that case I shall feel sure that you scorn anything like village festivity."

"You are very kind, Miss Gilray," says Laurent, "and nothing would give me more pleasure than to accept your invitation, if I were not intending to leave Kirton to-night."

"But why should you leave it — at least until late — and I believe there is a moon? You only mean that you are going out to Clifton, do you not?"

"I regret to say that my meaning is, I am going to much more remote regions. I leave on the midnight express."

"Oh, but don't leave!" says the young lady, pleadingly. "Is there any very particular reason why you should? Can you not stay until to-morrow? Can I offer you no inducement to stay? Not even a dance with Roslyn?"

Few things could have been more distasteful to Laurent than is the arch expression which accompanies the last words; but they suggest a thought to him. He is really yet undecided whether or not to leave on the mid-night train; and also wholly undecided whether or not to make any attempt to see Roslyn before he goes. He was debating this question mentally, when Miss Gilray stopped him; and now her words suggest to him a solution of it. By yielding to her request, he provides himself with an excuse for not leaving; and although he entertains little hope that he will see Roslyn, there is a shadow of a chance that he may do so, and have an opportunity, not of his own making, for speech with her. These reflections pass swiftly through his mind before he answers:

"You tempt me very much; and since there is no pressing reason for my going to-night, I think I will defer my departure in order to accept your invitation. It will be a pleasant memory to carry away, as a close to my very pleasant visit to this part of the country."

Miss Gilray is delighted, and expresses her delight frankly. Then, urging upon him that he must not change his mind, that he must not fail her on any account whatever, she drives away, charmed with herself and her capability to grasp an opportunity.

Whether or not Roslyn is charmed with the result of this capability, when she hears of it, is quite another thing.

"So glad to see you, my dear," says Miss Gilray, meeting her effusively. "I have a pleasant surprise for you. By the most delightful accident I met Mr. Laurent on the street this evening, and induced him to delay his departure — of course, you know that he was intending to leave on the midnight express — in order to be here to-night. Are you not heart-broken at the thought of his going? I am sure I should be, if he were my admirer."

Roslyn puts up her lip and her shoulder with pretty carelessness. Her start had been too slight to be noticed, and she is buttoning her glove, so that her eyes do not betray her.

"Heart-broken!" she says. "That is very likely. Of course, I am sorry Mr. Laurent is going; but somebody else will take his place — or, if not, we shall manage to exist without him. 'Men may come and men may go' — and it isn't worth while to mourn over their coming or going." Then, walking to a mirror to scrutinize herself, "How do I look to-night, Rose?" she asks. "Without flattery, mind. I ask, because I have not been very well to-day."

"I never saw you looking better," replies Miss Gilray, with emphasis. "Your dress is so very becoming."

"I sent for it because it is the most becoming dress I have," says Roslyn, looking at herself approvingly. Glad is she that she did send for her prettiest toilet; that she did rub the color into her cheeks, and summon light to the eyes that look back at her from the mirror. Her object was that nobody should be able to say that she is mourning for Laurent; but now that she hears he is himself to be present, she is doubly determined to look her best, to seem her brightest. "He shall know that I was under the impression that he was gone," she thinks, with a sense of cordial gratitude to Geoffrey for having made her come.

Geoffrey, who is standing at the foot of the staircase waiting for her in rather a dejected mood — for up to this time he has not been forgiven, but has been treated with an appalling dignity and reserve — is altogether surprised by the tone of her voice when she comes down and lays her hand on his arm.

"You have not asked for the first dance, Geoff," she says, "but I suppose you want it, don't you?"

"I should think so, indeed!" he answers, quickly. "There has been a set or two danced already — we are rather late, you know — and there is a waltz just commenced. Come!"

The next moment they are in the room, his arm is round her lissome waist, and they are circling over the polished floor to the strains of "The Thousand and One Nights."

They have waltzed together so often, they know each other's step so well, and the delight of both is so great in the exercise, that fatigue is impossible to either; and so, when Laurent arrives, some time later, the first sight that meets his eye is Roslyn's flushed, radiant face over Geoffrey's shoulder, as she is borne round and round in the swift, intoxicating whirl.

What a shock that sight conveys to his self-love, it is difficult to express. "She thinks that I have gone — gone, too, without a word of farewell; and this is how much she cares!" he thinks. "Is it possible that I have been the sport of a heartless flirt? What a consummate fool I have been! Why, from present appearances, she may very likely marry Duncan to-morrow — and I will have gained nothing at all! By Jove, she has a steady head!"

This tribute of admiration is involuntarily wrung from him by the recollection of how many women, in the course of his extensive experience, have proved to have had the reverse of steady heads where he has been concerned. And this girl could be subjected to all the dangerous fascination of his society, could hear his declaration of passion, and then, with blooming cheeks and laughing eyes, can dance on the night of his departure! As he watches her, as his gaze follows the graceful figure, the flower-decked head, he is torn by so many conflicting feelings that he can scarcely reply to the remarks of his hostess. Mortified vanity, anger, admiration, love stimulated to resolve, all these emotions occupy his mind, and distract his attention from everything but the observation of the brilliant creature who flashes past him again and again, all unconscious, seemingly, of his presence. It is with him the old, old story of his sex — that which is given loses its value; while that which is beyond reach seems priceless.

What Geoffrey's sentiments are when, having at last placed Roslyn in a seat, he stands fanning her, and chancing to glance across the room, suddenly perceives the well-known face of the man whom he fancied to be many leagues away by this time, it would be vain to say. A cloud comes over the whole gay scene to him, and, with a change of voice which would in itself tell Roslyn what is the matter, he says:

"Why, yonder is Laurent! Did you expect to see him here?"

"Is it probable that I did?" she asks, quietly, "when you told me this afternoon that he was gone."

"I told you what *he* said — that he was going, that is."

"And I had no reason to doubt it. I was quite surprised when Rose told me, as she went up to the dressing-room with me, that she met him this afternoon and persuaded him to remain for the evening."

"He was not hard to be persuaded, I imagine," says Geoffrey, with intense bitterness of feeling, and not a little bitterness of tone. "I don't believe he ever meant to go!"

"He may have meant to go, and changed his mind," says Roslyn, impatient at his manner of speaking; while Geoffrey, in turn, who now knows — or thinks he knows — the meaning of the brightness which has been shining on him, feels much aggrieved at her excusing Laurent. All his ideas are again thrown into confusion, and the green-eyed monster is rampant in his breast. As he sees Laurent advance across the floor, he puts Roslyn's fan abruptly into her hand.

"I had better go," he says. "You won't need me any more."

She glances up quickly, with something like a flash in her eyes.

"You are foolish, and utterly unreasonable," she says. "Whose fault is it that I am here? But go, by all means, if you like. I confess I am tired of jealousy and ill-nature."

Permission thus given him to go, Geoffrey naturally does not take advantage of it; and he is still holding his place, looking irresolute and lowering, when Laurent approaches.

"How glad I am to meet you here to-night, Miss Vardray!" says the last-named, with easy grace. "I was on my way to bid you farewell this afternoon, when Miss Gilray stopped me and induced me to defer my departure until to-morrow by holding out the hope that I should see you to-night."

His tranquil, unruffled manner, his conventional words, may veil anything or nothing, Geoffrey feels — but, to Roslyn, his eyes are sufficiently intelligible in their message when she meets them. If her own express anything, however, it is the same careless indifference which fills her voice, when she says:

"I am a little surprised to see you. Geoffrey told me this afternoon that you had gone."

"A very natural conclusion on Mr. Thorne's part," says Laurent, looking at Geoffrey with a slightly amused expression. "I made my adieu at Verdevale, expecting to leave; but, since I was so unfortunate as not to find you there, I certainly could not have been so neglectful as to leave Kirton without seeing you; therefore I deferred my departure to a later train, and Miss Gilray prevailed on me to postpone it until to-morrow. Now, may I beg for a dance?"

Again Geoffrey, unknowingly and certainly unintentionally, has served his rival's interest well. Were he not standing by, it is probable that Roslyn would refuse this request, although it is accompanied by an entreating glance from eyes that well know how to entreat; but to refuse it is to acknowledge that something exists between Laurent and herself beyond the pale of conventional intercourse. She hesitates an instant, then rises, not able to tell whether she most regrets the necessity for doing so, or whether she is most glad that circumstances force upon her this last taste of bitter-sweetness. . . .

Half an hour later the dance is over, and Laurent's opportunity has come. In the dusk dimness of a summer night, at the remote end of a vine-shaded veranda, with fragrance and music filling the air — what fitter place or more suggestive surroundings could be found for a lover's passionate pleading? And his pleading is very passionate, for everything unites to make the thrill of real (which can never be mistaken for simulated) earnestness in his voice. It seems to him that the summer starlight never shone upon a fairer woman than she who sits beside him, so near that he sees the trembling motion of her hand as she listens.

For she does listen — and as Laurent grows more eloquent, more urgent, he remembers that the woman who listens generally yields; while Roslyn, conscious of the traitor within the fortress of her heart, feels that the struggle is too great for her, that the temptation is beyond her power of resistance. Even the talisman "honor" seems to have failed. She sits and listens as one under a spell, and it will be many a long day before summer starlight and summer fragrance will fail to bring back the words and tones she hears.

"You do not deny that you care for me," says Laurent at last, exultantly, "and what is not denied is partly owned. My beloved, will you not own it in words? Will you not tell me that I have won your heart, and trust me that I will find the means to claim it? — and this!"

He takes her hand as he utters the last word; and she does not withdraw it, but, although it remains in his clasp, it is not with the yielding softness with which some hands surrender themselves, but it is instinct, as he feels, with nervous energy that, like electricity, thrills the slight fingers to their tips. Laurent, who has held many hands, acknowledges to himself that he has never held one like this before, one that by the mere sensation of touch makes him so conscious of its spirit and individuality.

"I should despise myself if I told you that," says the girl at last. "You have no right to ask it of me — you should not press me in such a manner as this! If I am weak, if I imply a great deal by merely listening, you ought to be content with that. You ought to go, and only ask the rest when you can ask it with honor. And if that time never comes, why, then —"

"What then?" he asks, as her voice pauses abruptly.

"Then," she says, gathering self-control again by an effort, "do not fancy that I shall break my heart. It may be well for both of us that time and absence should test what we feel. I have a suspicion that it may prove only a midsummer-night's dream," she ends, with a smile that fires the young man's heart afresh.

"A midsummer-night's dream, my fairest?" he says. "Ah, wait and see! But for the pain of leaving you, I should be glad to be tested, for then you might trust me more than you do now."

Now I am conscious that you are holding back, that you will not even let yourself love me; but if I come back free —"

"Free with honor," she interrupts.

"Do you think I could be free otherwise?" he asks, with a touch of wounded pride. "You judge me too hardly, because I could not prevent my love for you from bursting all bounds of control. You fail to realize the peculiar circumstances of my engagement —"

"I have just heard you dwell on them all," she says; "but it seems to me that if it is merely a family arrangement, you are none the less bound in honor to fulfill it."

"Pardon me," he says. "I grant that I am to a degree bound in honor to fulfill it; but surely you can not think so much bound as if my cousin's affections were involved? I am sure she cares no more for me than for any other eligible man who will marry her for her fortune."

"But if you were about to marry her for her fortune," says Roslyn, "you must need a fortune; and remember that I have none."

"You are worth a thousand fortunes in yourself !" he says, with (for the moment) passionate sincerity. "How could money add to your surpassing sweetness?"

She is not old enough, or cold enough, to suggest that although it could not add to her sweetness, it might add very materially to comfort. Indeed, what young, fair woman, with a pleading lover and a heart treacherously inclined toward him, would be likely to remember how midsummer nights end, and the solid things of life return with the daylight? Roslyn is no wiser than her age and sex would warrant. She listens, and, listening, forgives and trusts.

"If I am worth so much," she says, "you must heed me. It is not right for you to talk of love, or for me to hear you now. But I will hear you when you return — if you will go away tomorrow, and only come back when you can come with freedom and honor."

This decision is not at all what Laurent desires. He has no mind to tear himself away from the "roses and rapture" of love's dalliance in the fair summer hours that open before him, to face the practical and most disagreeable difficulties of his position. But he is intuitively conscious that, although he has gained much from Roslyn, he will gain no more; and that to hesitate now will be to forfeit all that he has gained.

"You do not know how hard, how more than hard, it is to leave you!" he says, with unfeigned reluctance. "How do I know that you may not shut the door of paradise in my face when I return?"

"I have never broken my word yet," she replies, "and you have it: I will hear and I will answer when you return."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Our Doubts Are Traitors."

There are, at least, three pairs of eyes that watch Roslyn closely and distrustfully — though it is with the distrust of love — after Laurent's departure. These eyes belong to Colonel Duncan, to Mrs. Arden, and to Geoffrey Thorne. Each looks anxiously for signs of unhappiness, following what they suppose to be the girl's final separation from her lover — and each looks in vain. Roslyn takes up her usual life in her usual manner, and those who watch for failing spirits or drooping looks watch vainly.

Of course, had they been aware of it, the reason of this is not far to seek. Roslyn has not parted, in any final sense, from her lover, and she is not only sustained by his promise to return, but she is also conscious of commanding the situation. If — and this *if* is in her mind a great one — she is certain enough of her own heart when he returns, "free with honor," she has only to hold out her hand like a princess, and it will be taken on bended knee. But if time and thought shall

prove apparent love to be only fancy, then she is bound only to hear — not to answer, save according to the dictates of her heart.

And to say that this heart is a mystery to her, is only to state something familiar to experience from the beginning of the world. When she sent Duncan away, pronouncing with her own lips the sentence of separation from Laurent, pain had weighed her to the earth, longing and regret swept over her in a flood, and that which had passed beyond her reach assumed all the appearance of being eminently desirable with which imagination is apt to endow unattainable things. But when another change came, and it was again placed where she had but to put out her hand and take it, then again doubt rushed in. Was it, after all, so very desirable? Did she, after all, care so very much for it? Was it a proved and certain good, or only a doubtful and uncertain one? No girl of seventeen, ignorant alike of the world and of her own heart, could answer these questions. But not every girl of seventeen would have been quick as Roslyn to recognize their existence. She not only recognizes it, but she acknowledges to herself that she is glad for a time to try Laurent, and to try also herself. Since the immediate fascination of his personal presence is withdrawn, the original sentiment of distrust with which she regarded him again asserts itself. Doubts of his stability, and, worse yet, of his sincerity, recur to her, though she strives to put them aside. But they will not be stifled, and as time goes on she grows a little more thoughtful. Should Laurent return — and she believes in him sufficiently to think that he will return — what is she to answer? How is she to learn what she really desires?

Older people than Roslyn often find this a difficult dilemma. To know clearly and positively that one wants a thing is more desirable than those are aware who are not tormented by doubt and indecision. The fear — in a choice for life — of making an irretrievable mistake, of finding rose-wreaths turn to chains; or, on the other hand, of letting slip a good that can never be reclaimed, and of being forced perhaps to cry in after-life —

"This could but have happened once,
And we missed it, lost it forever" —

it is this fear before which many a woman stands helpless, with no seer to read her heart, or prophesy for her of the future, and into one error or the other men and women fall every day.

How, then, can Roslyn hope to read aright the riddle of her own wishes? She is so little able to do it that she takes refuge in fatalism. "If he returns free — with honor — it will be a sign that I shall accept him," she says to herself, as a last resource.

But, meanwhile, Laurent makes no haste to return. He, too, is in a dilemma. Positive engagement with his cousin he has none, though it served his purpose to say that he had — her family having carried her to Europe to escape rather than to end an entanglement with him; but, once away from Roslyn, once removed from the influence of *her* personal charm, he begins to ask himself whether, after all, he shall do well to end the possibilities of life by marrying her. For it is not only that marriage ends some possibilities — as of greater heiresses — but there is more than the yoke of marriage involved here; there is, he thinks, the putting himself in Colonel Duncan's power. For if he receives wife and fortune from the hands of the latter, he will certainly owe a certain subservience to his wishes — he will certainly be bound by a chain of obligation too strong even for him to resist. Meditating upon this, and upon how little sympathy there is between his cousin and himself — the man whose kindness he has returned in a manner worthy of his grandfather's descendant — he almost feels as if a crust of bread and liberty might be better than Clifton and Roslyn under such oppressive conditions. Both had seemed very desirable when he was near them; and both would be very desirable still — without Colonel Duncan. But with him — Laurent shudders. "He may live as long as I — or he may outlive me," he thinks; "so there is no guarantee that if I enter into such bondage it may not be for life."

So he hesitates, delays — reading a noble generosity by the light of his own narrow conceptions, and unaware how little Duncan would think of exercising the surveillance which he

dreads. What he intended had been clear enough in the mind of the latter, when he went to see Roslyn that day in Kirton: he would settle upon Laurent a yearly income, with which he might live where he liked, and all of the estate, outside of the entailed portion, should be secured by his (Duncan's) will to Roslyn, so that it could never be alienated from her. This was the idea in his mind — an idea in which there was not the faintest thought of dictating any mode of life to Laurent, or of suffering Roslyn to know by what means her happiness was secured.

But since Roslyn had proved not to be made of the stuff of a love-sick maiden, he had not thought it necessary to enter into the details of his intentions to Laurent; and the latter, left to supply these details by his own imagination, did so according to his lights. "He would insist, of course, that I should settle down in that dull country neighborhood," thought the man, to whom the excitement of great cities was as the breath of life. "That would be purchasing financial ease at too dear a price." He had grace enough not to acknowledge openly to himself that it would also be purchasing Roslyn at too dear a price, but in his heart he thought so.

And therefore he procrastinated. Therefore he went and sat down in Mr. North's office, where he impressed that gentleman speedily as something far more ornamental than useful, while he said to himself that he would see what time — which solves many riddles — would do for him.

Meanwhile a few changes took place in the circle he left behind. Mrs. Arden — vaguely distrustful of Roslyn's serenity, and determined, that if it were possible, "that man should be put out of her head" — presently carried the girl away for a month of summer travel from one gay resort to another; while Geoffrey, with a sad heart, betakes himself to his invalid uncle and his studies. He, too, has tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge since he came home early in the summer, so full of hope and resolve, so eager to secure at once what his heart coveted. He has learned now that if he ever secures it at all — which he recognizes to be very doubtful — it will only be after long effort and patient waiting.

Of the effort he feels himself capable. "I would do anything to win her!" he tells himself with truth. But the waiting tries him greatly, for that "all things come to him who knows how to wait" is not a saying which commends itself to the impatient soul of youth. It certainly does not commend itself to Geoffrey, and, when he hears that Roslyn has returned home, he can contain himself no longer; down go his law-books, his uncle is informed that he is imperatively bound to see his mother without loss of time, and, leaving that poor gentleman in an inconsolable state of mind, at losing his society, he is off to Verdevale.

Reaching Kirton on an early morning train, he pauses only to take a cup of coffee, and then walks out to Verdevale in time for breakfast. The young fellow's spirits rise as he strides rapidly along the well-known road in the crystal freshness of a bright October morning. "Whether or not there is any hope that in the far future he may some time claim Roslyn as his own, he feels that he holds a present and tangible delight just within his grasp — that of seeing her, hearing her sweet voice, basking in the light of her radiant presence! — and he is glad with the unalloyed gladness of youth.

He finds the family at Verdevale in a state of cheerful commotion. Several trunks, and one plethoric black leather valise, are standing in the front veranda — children are racing, and servants hurrying about in every direction; and that there is a general air of bustle in the house, he perceives before he comes near it.

"What's the matter, little one?" he asks, catching up one of the children, who is the first to see his approach, and, proclaiming his arrival at the top of her voice, comes flying to meet him. "Who's going away?"

He is informed that "mamma, and papa, and auntie, and all us children, are going to see Uncle John."

"Roslyn, too?" he asks, in a very crestfallen tone — and is immensely relieved when the child shakes her head. Roslyn is not going — hearing which, he feels that he can support the absence of the rest of the family with exemplary fortitude.

He is in the house by this time, and the next minute is surrounded by all the children, who crowd about him with clamorous welcome, and then comes the equally warm though less noisy greeting of their elders.

"You are just in time, my boy, to take care of Roslyn and Mrs. Knight, while we are away," says Mr. Vardray, as they sit down to breakfast. "It is fortunate you happened to come just now."

"O Geoff," cries Roslyn, "don't you remember what a delightful time we had once when mamma and papa went to Uncle John's, and left Mrs. Knight with us?"

"Don't I!" replies Geoffrey, his eyes sparkling at the recollection. "I only hope we shall have an equally delightful time now — and I see no reason why we should not."

"I am afraid," says Roslyn, looking a little pensively at the roll she is buttering, "that we shall not be so easily made happy now as we were then."

"You may have outgrown the capability of enjoying simple pleasures," says Geoffrey, in a low tone, as he sees that the attention of his mother and step-father is engrossed by some discussion about their journey, while the children are busy with their breakfast — "but, for me, I shall like your society — and Mrs. Knight's— just as well now as I did then."

Roslyn laughs. "She is just the same quiet, excellent old soul that she was when we used to read to her after tea till bed-time — alternating 'Baron Munchausen' with 'Last Days of Pompeii.' I know she will be delighted to live the old times over again. You were always her special favorite, you know."

"Why do you make this visit so much earlier than usual?" Geoffrey asks, half an hour afterward, as he and Mr. Vardray stand together, waiting for Mrs. Vardray and the children to appear. The carriage is before the door, the luggage is by this time at the station, and Mr. Vardray is becoming a little impatient of the delay. "November used to be the time for it."

"Yes; but John has been urging us to come, and Ellen thought the change might benefit Effie. The child has not seemed altogether well lately. — Here you are at last, are you, Ellen? Come on, come on, children! I shall not be at all surprised if we lose our train."

"There is no danger whatever of that," responds Mrs. Vardray, as she kisses Roslyn good-by, and turns to Geoffrey. "Your watch is always too fast."

"I have railroad time," says her husband; and, hurrying her into the carriage, they drive off rapidly.

The two young people who are left behind stand looking at them until the vehicle has passed out of sight; and then Roslyn sits down on the veranda-steps and says:

"Don't you wish we could be changed back into children — just for the next month? I think it would be very pleasant!"

"I don't," says Geoffrey, decidedly. "I had rather be as I am, and see you as you are, than to go back to childhood, pleasant as it was while it lasted."

Roslyn sighs. "We were much happier as children than we are now," she says.

"Not happier than we might be!" cries Geoffrey, with a sudden wistful tenderness in his voice and eyes, at which the girl shrinks perceptibly. Putting her hand in her pocket, she draws forth three or four letters.

"Here is my morning's work," she says: "to answer these letters." She rises as she speaks. "One of the many advantages that children have over grown people is an exemption from letter-writing — which is certainly the greatest bore of civilized life."

"Roslyn, I wish you would sit down again and listen to me for a minute," says Geoffrey, earnestly. "Or," he adds, as she hesitates, "will you take a walk? Suppose we go over and see Lettice? The morning is beautiful, and we shall be in the shade all the way. Will you go?"

"Yes, if you like," she answers. "I will get my hat and parasol."

Geoffrey's gaze follows her as she goes into the house — a great many different emotions chasing one another in rapid succession over his face. There is love, there is pain, there is humor, there is bitterness — and, finally, a thoughtful gravity which does not vanish like the others, but

still remains when Roslyn rejoins him, and they are walking across the lawn, through the garden, to the gate which opens into the wood. Not many words are exchanged between them until they have passed through this gate, and are underneath the arching boughs of the forest, with a wealth of gorgeous autumn color all around them, and a breeze, soft and fragrant, as if it came from Araby the Blest, kissing them as they meet it. Then Geoffrey speaks so abruptly that his companion — who is thinking how short a time it is, and yet how long a time it seems, since she took her first walk along these paths with Laurent — starts perceptibly as his voice falls on her ear.

"Don't think that I have come to persecute you, Roslyn," he is saying. "I have kept the promise I made you when we parted: and I intend to keep the one I make now — that I will never annoy you again by my love or jealousy. And so I hope you will not shun me; nor look, whenever I approach you, as if you were in a dentist's chair, waiting while he gets his instruments ready to extract one of your teeth — resolute and resigned, but aware of the coming operation."

"O Geoff!" cries Roslyn, reproachfully; "how can you talk so! When did I ever shun you, or look — as you say?"

"When have you not looked so, since I came home in July?" he says, a little sadly. "But I don't mean to reproach you. It has been my own fault. You really have had more patience with me than I deserved. But now I want you to forget all the vexation my folly has caused you; and remember only that I am your brother — more than your brother — 'forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.' There — don't look so distressed!" — as she glances up quickly, with a suspicious dewiness in her eyes — "that is all. I only mentioned the subject because I want to put you at ease with me, or else we are not likely to have much enjoyment of the time we are to spend together. So now understand that there is a truce declared. I am not to make love directly or by implication, and you are not to make excuses for getting away from me. We are to turn back the hands of the clock of time half a dozen years and be happy like children — for a month. Do you agree to it?"

"Agree to it!" she repeats, divided between an inclination to laugh and to cry. "I should be only too glad if the thing could be done in earnest. But I am afraid it can not be done in play."

"Oh, yes, it can," says Geoffrey, resolutely. "At least, I am sure I can do my part. It is a simple thing, after all — to hold one's tongue."

"Is it?" says Roslyn, laughing now. "Many people differ with you — or, at least, if it is a simple, it is not an easy thing. But I did not mean that. I meant that to turn back and be happy like children is not possible."

"I think it might be managed — for a month," says Geoffrey. "At all events, we'll try. And if we can't be happy as children, we'll be happy as two not very old grown people. Upon that I am determined."

Roslyn looks at him with something wistful in her glance. The confident words touch her with a sense of foreboding. "I don't think it is well to determine upon happiness — not even for a month," she says. "Something might happen; things seldom occur as we expect or picture them to ourselves."

It is now Geoffrey's turn to glance at her doubtfully. "I don't know anything likely to occur to mar our happiness," he says, "unless — unless some one should come. Perhaps you have reason to expect that?"

Color flashes into her face, and she lifts her head haughtily. "I have no reason at all to expect any one," she answers, coldly. "If I had, I should not hesitate to say so."

Silence follows — silence broken only by the tread of their feet and the rustle of dead leaves along the woodland path. Geoffrey is owing to himself that he has been a fool to touch that subject; while Roslyn, glancing presently at his downcast face, sees what a shadow has come over it, and begins to regret her reply. She waits a little, and then says gently, yet still coldly:

"I think — if we are to be happy for a month — we had better forget, as far as possible, the existence of other people."

"As far as I am concerned," says Geoffrey, eagerly, "I desire nothing better."

But already it has been borne in upon him that, after all, it may not be so easy to secure happiness — even for a month.

CHAPTEK XIX.

"The Sign Of Despair."

When they return home, they find Mrs. Knight — who has arrived during their absence, and is sitting on the veranda, knitting.

"How natural the good soul looks!" cries Geoffrey, as his eyes rest on her before they are within speaking distance. "The same fresh-colored placid face that I remember ever since I can remember anything; and I am sure that is the same spotless gown and cap she has had on these ten years past. — Why, how are you, Mrs. Knight?" he exclaims, running up the steps and shaking warmly the hand she extends. "I'm very glad to see that you're 'come to take care of us children while mamma is gone' — as we used to say long time ago."

Mrs. Knight smiles as she adjusts her spectacles, and fixes her eyes on the tall figure and broad shoulders that look very unfamiliar to her in connection with the face that surmounts them.

"I am very glad to be here," she says, heartily; "but neither you nor Miss Roslyn look much like children now. You've growed since I saw you last — and if it wasn't for your voice and face, I shouldn't a-recognized you, Mr. Geoffrey, when I saw you come walking in."

"You haven't changed since I can first recollect," says Geoffrey, "unless it is to grow younger."

At this Mrs. Knight smiles again, and resumes her knitting. She is an elderly woman, of humble station, but whose upright character and exceptional good sense have made her greatly respected in the neighborhood where she was born and has spent her life. A very unhappy life it was for many years, in consequence of the brutal treatment she endured at the hands of a worthless and dissipated husband. Death, however, ended her bondage at last; and, shortly after her husband died, she inherited from a distant relative a sum of money, which, though small in itself, was competence and ease to her. "It seems like Providence ordered it so that it shouldn't come while Robert was alive," she said to Mrs. Vardray, with great simplicity. "He would soon a-run through it. But now it'll make me comfortable the rest of my life, and be a great help to Sarah and the children after I'm gone." During the time of her trouble she had received much and constant kindness from Mrs. Vardray — a fact which she never forgets. If there is illness in the family, if the house is full of guests, or if Mrs. Vardray is leaving home, Mrs. Knight is always available and perfectly trustworthy to take charge of the house, servants, and children; and comes at a moment's notice to devote herself conscientiously to the performance of any duties that may devolve on her. And so it has chanced that she is here now. Roslyn having expressed a wish to be excused from the annual visit to "Uncle John" — a bachelor brother of Mr. Vardray — no objection was made to her remaining at home.

"Of course, my dear, you can stay if you prefer it," Mrs. Vardray had said. "You know Mrs. Knight will be here; and I dare say you can persuade Lettice to stay with you a good deal."

"Don't sleep away the whole of this glorious afternoon, Roslyn," says Geoffrey, when they are about to separate after dinner. "Shall I order the horses for a ride or a drive? — and at what hour?"

"A ride, by all means," is the reply. "I suppose four o'clock will do. It is rather early —"

"Not too early," interposes the young man. "Pray be on time."

With which exhortation, he betakes himself to Mr. Vardray's hammock for his own *siesta*.

At half-past four they are cantering lightly along the road which leads to Clifton, and have just come to the point where the Kirton road branches off to the left, when they meet a servant riding one horse and leading another. Horses and servant are all three acquaintances of Geoffrey and Roslyn, and as the glance of the latter rests upon the slender, dark-brown horse on which Colonel Duncan's groom is mounted, she remembers that the last time she saw the animal he carried a rider handsome and graceful as himself — for this is the horse Laurent rode during his stay at Clifton.

The groom has halted at sight of them; and as, perceiving this, they pause an instant, he touches his hat and says:

"How do you do, Mr. Thorne? Is Mass' Hugo at your house, sir?"

"No," answers Geoffrey, in some surprise — his eye falling on the horse the man was leading. "Why should you think so?"

"He came to town this morning with Mr. Shelbourne, and they was going shooting to-day — and Mass' Hugo told me to fetch Redgauntlet to the creek to meet him — that he would be at the bridge about four o'clock, he expected; but, if he wasn't there, I was to wait awhile and then go on to Verdevale."

"He was not at Verdevale when we left," said Geoffrey, "but he may have got there since, if he was shooting in the woods the other side of the creek. So you had better go on; and, if you find him there, ask him to wait till we return. We'll be back before long."

It requires a magnanimous effort on Geoffrey's part to say this; for the demon of jealousy stirs suddenly in his breast when he hears that Colonel Duncan, who he knows was at Verdevale only yesterday, intends to be there again this evening. But, remembering his promise, he refrains from saying or even looking what he feels. He is, on the contrary, about to remark upon the beauty of the two horses, as the servant passes on, when Roslyn makes a little exclamation, and points before her.

A dog has come running out of the woods a short distance in front of them, and, standing still in the middle of the road as it sees their approach, begins to bark frantically, in a most distressed manner.

"I think it is Zoe — Colonel Duncan's setter," says Roslyn. "How singularly she is acting! She must have lost her master; or perhaps she saw the horses go by just now. O Geoffrey!" — as the animal comes tearing to meet them — "what is that around her neck?"

Geoffrey has already sprung to the ground as the dog draws near, and stoops over her with an exclamation of surprise and dismay; while she seizes his coat-sleeve as soon as it is within reach of her mouth, and, holding fast to it, uttering at the same time a pitiful whining between her teeth, tries to pull him in the direction from which she came.

"I am afraid Duncan may have met with an accident," the young man says, hastily, after one glance at the object which has attracted the attention of both his companion and himself — a white-linen handkerchief knotted around the dog's neck. As he unties it and holds it up, they perceive that it is half-saturated with blood.

"I must see what the meaning of this is!" cries Geoffrey; and, starting to his feet, he puts the rein of his horse into Roslyn's hand, saying: "Wait here, and I will follow Zoe and find out if anything is the matter. Of course, I will be back as soon as I possibly can."

Without staying for a reply, he hurries after the dog, which, at a sign from him, has bounded away, retracing her steps to the place where she emerged from the wood a minute or two before. At this precise spot she disappears in some bushes, and Geoffrey plunges through them after her.

If Roslyn were a veteran soldier, and Geoffrey her officer, she could not obey his order more promptly and unquestioningly than she does. Drawing up at the side of the road, she remains just where he left her for what seems to her a long time — a very long time. She has an instinctive conviction that something terrible has befallen Colonel Duncan; and, as the lingering minutes drag on, feels the suspense to be very trying. Suddenly it occurs to her that she might as

well go on to the place at which Geoffrey left the road. No doubt he will return the same way he went. She rides forward to the spot, therefore, and stops at the clump of bushes where he vanished from sight. Looking anxiously down into a dim region of shadow — for the ground slopes away from the road here by a steep declivity — she fancies that she sees a figure some distance away, moving swiftly toward her; but the undergrowth is thick on the side of the hill, and the foliage of the dense forest-growth shuts out the light so effectually that she is by no means certain but that her sight may deceive her, until her ear catches a sound as of something or somebody crashing through the bushes. She calls in a rather tremulous tone:

"Geoffrey, is that you?"

"No'm, it's me — Jack Curry," a shrill voice responds — the crashing, which continues more vigorously than ever, drawing nearer and nearer. The next moment the interlacing boughs of two tall shrubs close by part, and a half-grown boy pushes through the aperture and stands beside her horse's head. Taking off his hat with one hand, he extends the other to her, saying:

"Mr. Thorne sent it, ma'am; and he says please hurry."

Roslyn takes the note he offers; but when she sees that, like the handkerchief, it is "red with the sign of despair," she is seized with a nervous tremor that shakes her from head to foot, and dims her sight so that she can not for an instant distinguish anything on the paper before her but a faint, blurred confusion of pencil-marks. It is not until after several efforts, that she manages to decipher the hurried lines which Geoffrey has written on a leaf of his note-book. This is what he says:

"Colonel Duncan has accidentally shot himself, and I am afraid his wound is a bad one. Give Jack Curry my horse to go over to Kirton, and do you hurry home and send the carriage to me, to the bend of the creek. I will take Duncan to Verdevale, as it is much nearer than Cliffton. Have a room ready, and tell James to take the new road in coming. Be sure about this.

"G. T."

CHAPTER XX.

Colonel Duncan's Accident.

Mrs. Knight's somewhat large-featured, fresh-colored face is benign, almost smiling, as she sits by a window in the dining-room, where the light is good, and knits many pleasant fancies into the heel of a small stocking which she is manufacturing for her little grand-son. She is thinking what a nice couple Mr. Geoffrey and Miss Roslyn will make, and wondering when the wedding will "come off"; and reflecting that if they should want her to keep house for them — as Mr. Geoffrey used always to say they would — she doesn't know how she could refuse: though Sarah and the children would think hard of her leaving them, to be sure.

At this point of her meditation, her ball of yarn, which has rolled gently from her lap to the floor, is taken possession of by a pet kitten, who tosses it back and forth from paw to paw, until the thread becomes taut, and the attention of its owner is attracted. The good woman rises deliberately from her seat, a motion of her hand sends the kitten flying, with arched back, in sidewise leaps across the floor, and she stoops more deliberately to pick up her purloined property, when she hears a light footstep and soft sweep of drapery in the hall. Thinking that it is probably Lettice, she walks forward to receive her, and is transfixed to the spot by astonishment at sight of Roslyn — Roslyn still in riding-costume, but looking so pale and quiet — so altogether unlike the laughing girl who rode away but a short time before — that if Mrs. Knight were either fanciful or

superstitious, she might well take the figure before her for a wraith instead of a reality. Being very matter-of-fact, this idea does not occur to her; she only asks, with a little trepidation, whether anything is the matter, and what has become of Mr. Geoffrey.

Roslyn explains in few words; and with many expressions of regret that such a misfortune should have happened to Colonel Duncan, Mrs. Knight bustles off to have a chamber prepared, while the girl goes mechanically to her own room and takes off her habit. She has sent the carriage as Geoffrey directed — having ridden at speed to the stable, and seen herself that there was no delay in setting out on the part of the coachman. There is nothing more for her to do; and she sits down at a window from which she can see the new road — which runs a hundred yards or so to the rear of the house — with a sense of mingled helplessness and depression such as she never felt before in her life. It is impossible to do anything but think of Colonel Duncan wounded and suffering.

After a while Mrs. Knight taps at her door and invites her to come and see if she thinks everything which can by possibility be needed has been prepared for the reception of the wounded man; and glancing at the large, airy, pleasant apartment which has been made ready, she finds but one deficiency in its arrangement.

"Everything looks as nicely as possible," she says; "and of course you know a great deal better than I do what is needed, Mrs. Knight. But I will go and get some flowers."

"That does look pretty," Mrs. Knight says a few minutes later, when Roslyn has placed a vase of roses on the toilet-table, directly opposite the foot of the bed.

"I hope he will understand that I put them there," she thinks, as she turns away and goes back to resume her watch by the window.

Time passes: the sun's bright lances slant more and more, grow golden, pink, crimson, and finally disappear — twilight even is fading into dusk night — before there is any sign or sound on the road she has been watching so steadily and so long. At last the clatter of a horse's hoofs is audible, the stable-yard gate is opened, and presently in the starlight she recognizes Geoffrey's figure, as he comes hurrying to the house. Palpitating with eagerness, she runs down-stairs and meets him just as he enters the back-door and stands in the full glare of the hall chandelier.

As her eyes take in his appearance, she starts back with a cry of horror. His face is very grave, and his hands, wristbands, the whole front of his light gray dress, are soaked with blood.

"I was in hopes that I might get into the house without you hearing me," he says. "I knew you would be shocked if you saw this" — glancing at the crimson stains; "and I am sorry to say that I have nothing good to tell you."

"You don't mean that Colonel Duncan is — dead?" she says, with a gasp.

"No, no!" Geoffrey answers quickly. "He is alive; but the doctors have not much hope of his being so this time to-morrow. — The room is ready, I suppose, Mrs. Knight? — You had better go to your own room, Roslyn, and stay there. The carriage will be here in a few minutes, and there is a crowd of men with it," he adds, hastily, as he passes her and runs up-stairs, taking three steps at a bound.

It is late, and the house has at last settled to more than its usual stillness, after much more than usual bustle and commotion. The news of Colonel Duncan's accident, which was carried to Kirton by the messenger who was sent for medical aid, created great excitement in that place. Numbers of his friends — and no man in all the country-side has more friends or warmer ones — hurried to offer their services in any way which might be needed; and not a few accompanied the carriage which conveyed him in a state of insensibility to Verdevale, and waited there for some time to learn the verdict of the physicians after their examination was made.

These supernumeraries have at length been persuaded by the medical men to go home; and there remain now only the two principal physicians of Kirton, Doctors Kirke and Chelmsom, Mr. Shelbourne, the intimate friend of Colonel Duncan, his host for the time being, Geoffrey Thorne, and Mr. Stanley.

That the latter is no friend of Colonel Duncan's, it is needless to say; and that, to everybody concerned, his presence is extremely unwelcome, Mr. Stanley is perfectly aware. But he has a reason of his own for being interested in the question of life or death which is pending — a reason strong enough to induce him to remain in the house, though Colonel Duncan may die before morning, the physicians say. It is not his habit voluntarily to face the disagreeables of life — and, of all disagreeables, that of coming into immediate contact with the presence of death he avoids most. As he is here, however, and means to stay here until there is more certainty as to the issue of the accident than now exists, he makes himself comfortable: enjoys the supper which is served, and the cigars and liqueurs which Geoffrey has provided for his guests; and, still more, enjoys the annoyance exhibited in different ways by all four of the men upon whom he has forced his company. The two doctors are cold, Mr. Shelbourne is curt, and Geoffrey is very stiff, in manner; but he is all suavity himself, and even offers to sit up for the night in the chamber of the wounded man. This offer having been declined without thanks, by Dr. Kirke, he establishes himself in the sitting-room with a cigar and a novel.

But reading anything except a sporting journal is not much in his way. He soon throws down the volume, starts up suddenly, and, ringing the bell, tells the servant who answers it to bring him writing-materials. His request having been complied with, he dashes off a short letter, having sealed and addressed which, he leaves it lying on the table, extends himself upon a sofa, and goes contentedly to sleep.

"How is he? what do the doctors think now?" Roslyn asks, when, after several unsuccessful efforts, she finally obtains an opportunity of speaking to Geoffrey.

"They think just what they did at first — that it is very doubtful whether he can survive the night," is the reply. "His pulse is barely perceptible."

"How awful! oh, how awful! How infinitely sorry I am!" the girl says, in a quivering voice — and adds, after a short silence, "How shocked and grieved papa and mamma will be! — he was such a friend of theirs."

"Yes," says Geoffrey, "they will be greatly distressed. I wish very much that they were at home."

"So do I," says Roslyn. "But Mrs. Knight is an excellent nurse, you know. They will be glad you brought him here, Geoffrey — glad that you did all you could for him."

Geoffrey nods. "It would have been certain death to him to have been taken such a distance as to Clifton," he says. "Indeed, I never thought of it from the moment I saw him. But I am sorry my mother is not at home; and my father — I wish still more that he had not been absent at such a time."

"I expect he will come when he hears of the accident," says Roslyn. "I shall not be surprised if he and mamma both come as soon as the news reaches them."

Neither speaks again for several minutes. They are standing in the moonlight, outside one of the dining-room windows that opens on a small balcony, from which a flight of steps descends to the ground. Presently Roslyn lays her hand on her companion's arm, and silently leads the way down the steps, and along a gravel-walk toward the garden.

"I feel oppressed in the house," she says, when they have gone some little distance. "It is so sudden and so terrible — to think that Colonel Duncan may be dying! It seems impossible! How plainly I can see him when he was starting home last night, as he stood in the moon-light shaking hands with papa just before mounting his horse! And to think —"

She breaks off abruptly, and closes her fingers tightly on Geoffrey's arm, as she asks, in a tone wistful even to pain:

"Is there no hope for him?"

"You know while there is life there is hope — and he has an excellent constitution," Geoffrey answers. But his voice is less sanguine than his words.

"How did the accident occur?" inquires Roslyn. "I have not heard a word about it."

"You remember what Wash said about bringing the horse to meet his master?"

"Yes."

"Duncan drove into Kirton this morning with Mr. Shelbourne, who spent the night at Clifton, and after getting his gun from the locksmith's, where it had been sent to be put in order, they both went out shooting. Shelbourne says that, after a good day's sport, they parted, about four o'clock, in the woods just the other side of the creek. Shelbourne went back to Kirton, and Duncan started in the opposite direction, going down the creek toward the bridge, where his horse would be waiting for him, he said. He was passing within sight of the road, though a considerable distance from it, when he saw Wash riding by, and called to him to stop. But Wash did not hear his voice, and rode on. Then he mounted the fallen trunk of a large tree, and, with his hand resting on the stock of his gun to steady himself, shouted to the boy again. As he did so, his foot slipped on the rounded surface he was standing upon, and he went over backward, involuntarily pulling the gun with him as he fell. The trigger caught against something, and the piece was discharged, pouring its contents into his side. It was only a load of bird-shot, and, if the weapon had not been so near him, the injury would have been trifling, as the shot would have scattered and merely peppered him severely. But, you see, when the gun went off, the muzzle must have been within six inches of his body; and so the charge, which happened to be a heavy one, entered almost like a bullet, and tore through the cartilages just under the left shoulder-blade, making a terribly lacerated wound, which bled fearfully. Still, he did not think it at all serious, but started to make a direct cut across the woods to come here. Before he had walked far he began to feel faint, and, putting his hand to his shoulder, found that the blood was streaming from it. He sat down, and had presence of mind to think of sending one of his dogs for assistance. If he had not done so, and but for the chance of her having met us, and my getting to him as soon as I did, he would have bled to death. I found him lying in a pool of blood, and he had barely time to explain in a word or two how the accident happened before he fainted from exhaustion. I did what I could to stanch the wound, and was then writing the note you received, intending to send Joe with it, when I heard somebody whistling, called, and Jack Curry, who was fishing in the creek not far off, came running up."

"Dr. Chelmsom is a good surgeon, isn't he?" says Roslyn.

"He ought to be," answers Geoffrey. "He spent two years in the Paris hospitals, I have heard."

"Surely, then, surely he will be able to save Colonel Duncan!"

"He will try, you may be sure," says Geoffrey. "But both he and Kirke — who is an able physician, you know, though not so good a surgeon as Chelmsom — are very apprehensive. The bleeding was so excessive that Duncan has been insensible ever since he fainted first; and they are afraid he will sink, from sheer exhaustion, before there is time for a rally of the forces of nature."

"And to think," exclaims Roslyn, "that this terrible accident should have happened merely from an act of carelessness! Oh, why will people be so reckless in handling fire-arms!"

"Only, I suppose, because familiarity destroys the sense of danger," says Geoffrey. "It certainly is deplorable to think of a man like Duncan losing his life in such a way."

"Do let it be a lesson to you, Geoffrey!" says Roslyn, looking up wistfully. "I have often been very unhappy when I saw you walking off with your gun, for you always were so reckless!"

The expression of the sweet, upturned face, seen clearly in the moonlight, goes to Geoffrey's heart, and passionate words spring to his lips. But he remembers his promise, and only says, in a tone of gentle gravity:

"I will, indeed, be more careful in future; for it seems as if a life lost in this manner is a life thrown away. But do you know what time it is? After twelve o'clock! You must go to bed — and do try to go to sleep."

CHAPTER XXI.

"HERE IN ONE LINE IS HIS NAME WRIT."

Geoffrey's advice is good, and Roslyn is well disposed to take it; but, unfortunately, it does not always rest with ourselves whether we can do what we wish. Since she can in no wise aid in the struggle which, she is well aware, is going on so near by, between man's skill and death's perhaps irresistible approach, she would be glad to escape the sense of intense regret and sadness that weighs on her, and to lose, for a time at least, consciousness of the pains she feels.

But she is too much excited to be able to sleep. All manner of thoughts crowd upon her. It seems so hard, so hard, she repeats again and again, that such a trifle — a mere heedless movement — should bring about such a result!

Colonel Duncan's face in many different aspects is constantly before her mind's eye. She sees it with its ordinary expression, genial and serene; she sees the look of bravely repressed pain which it wore that day when he asked her to be his wife, and learned by her manner that the very suggestion was repugnant to her; and, in imagination, she sees him now, lying white and insensible, with life ebbing low in his veins — or already gone, it may be.

At this thought, tears for the first time suddenly burst forth, and she sobs passionately, feeling that until this moment she never realized how much a part of her life he has always been, nor ever appreciated all his goodness and nobleness. Recalling the generosity of his conduct with regard to Laurent, a sharp spasm of remorse clutches her heart — as if a human hand had seized it and was crushing its fibers in a cruel grasp.

"Always so good and kind and gracious!" she thinks; "and I never did anything but give him pain. I could not help it! But oh, I wish, I wish, I wish he would not die!"

Her pillow is wet with tears when at last, like a child that has cried away its grief, she sinks to sleep.

She awakes the next morning with a confused sense that something has occurred, something is the matter. What it is, she can not at first remember; but the next instant the recollection rushes over her, and she clasps her hands at the thought of what may have happened since she parted with Geoffrey last night. She is glad that her maid has not appeared yet, knowing that, like most servants, the girl delights in telling news; and the idea of hearing the news which she is dreading, told as a matter of enjoyable gossip, is intolerable to her.

"I will dress and go down-stairs," she thinks — rising at once. It seems to her that she can better bear to learn the worst from Geoffrey than from anybody else — if it is the worst that must be borne. But, before she has half completed her toilet, the maid appears, and, almost as she enters the room, announces that "the colonel ain't much better this morning, they say."

Roslyn is so much relieved by this even negatively good report, that she does not reprove the servant for her eagerness to impart the information, but, with her assistance, goes on dressing — asking presently:

"Is not breakfast nearly ready?"

"Oh, yes'm! I expect they's most done breakfast by this time," is the reply. "I've been up twice before, but you was asleep — and Mass' Geoffrey told me to be sure and not disturb you this morning. I come up now to see if you was awake yet, and if I should bring up your breakfast."

"No," says Roslyn; "I will go down. Who is here besides the doctors?"

"Nobody but Mr. Shelbourne. Mr. Stanley was here; but he e't his breakfast before any of the other gentlemen was ready, and's gone home."

"Mr. Stanley?" cries Roslyn, astonished. "You must be mistaken, Margery! What would he be doing here?"

"No, indeed, I'm not mistaken, Miss Roslyn. I couldn't be mistaken; for I saw him myself. He staid here all night."

Roslyn makes no further comment on this intelligence — but her face is very expressive of sentiments the reverse of pleasurable as she leaves the room.

On the stairs she overtakes Mrs. Knight, who never goes to the table when there are guests in the house, and who has now just left Colonel Duncan's room.

"O Mrs. Knight," she cries, eagerly, "how is Colonel Duncan this morning? I am sure he must be better — you look as if he were!"

"The doctors don't seem to think there is much change," answers Mrs. Knight; but she smiles, and her face, which has lost the solemn expression it wore when Roslyn saw her last, is placid as usual.

"But what do *you* think?" asks Roslyn, anxiously. "You know so much about sickness and everything of the kind, that you ought to be able to judge almost as well as the doctors."

"I don't pretend to set up my judgment ag'in theirs," says the good woman, modestly. "They ought to know."

"Do you agree with them, though? Tell me that!" exclaims the girl, impulsively. "Don't you think he — that he may recover?"

"I hope so," says Mrs. Knight, with evident sincerity; "and I do think that his pulse is a little stronger just within the last hour. If he isn't any better, I can't see that he's any worse — and that's encouraging."

"Of course it is!" cries Roslyn, brightening wonderfully at these cheering words, as a weight of apprehension seems lifted from her mind. "Oh, I am sure he will get well!"

They are at the dining-room door as she utters the last sentence; and Mrs. Knight passes on, while she enters the apartment.

Her face is full of light and color as she exchanges salutations with the gentlemen, and takes her seat at the table.

"I am so glad to hear that Colonel Duncan is better," she says, addressing Dr. Kirke in particular and the company in general.

"If he is better," says Dr. Kirke, in a deliberate and somewhat dogmatic tone, "a favorable change must have occurred very lately. When I saw him last, about half an hour ago, there was no appreciable alteration for the better."

"There was a slight indication of the approach of a favorable change, I thought," says Dr. Chelmsom, sorry to see how suddenly and entirely Roslyn's face has become overcast. "I remarked this, as we came down-stairs, if you remember. I should not be surprised to find a decided improvement in his condition very shortly."

Roslyn glances at the young man gratefully, as he speaks.

"Mrs. Knight thinks his pulse has grown a little stronger," she says.

"Ah!" exclaims Dr. Kirke, with roused attention. "That certainly is a favorable symptom — if it exists." He moves slightly in his chair, then starts to his feet, and says:

"If you will excuse me, I'll go and see. I can't say I have much faith in Mrs. Knight's opinion; though she is a sensible woman, and one of the best nurses I ever met with. But I had rather see for myself. — Suppose you come, too, Chelmsom?"

He leaves the room while speaking, and Dr. Chelmsom, with a bow of apology to Miss Vardray, rises and follows him.

"It seems to me," says Geoffrey, when they are gone, "that, taking a common-sense view of the matter, Colonel Duncan must be better, or he could not have lived so long as he has, after such profuse bleeding."

"I agree with you," says Mr. Shelbourne. "He has extraordinary rallying-power. And," adds the lawyer, with the suspicion of a smile on his firm, well-cut lip, and a very decided glitter in his blue-gray eyes, "Kirke is always a little disposed to draw the long bow in his estimate of the dangerous condition of his patients."

"Is it not," says Roslyn, "that he is inclined to take a gloomy view of their condition? I have often noticed that, in cases of ordinary sickness."

"Perhaps so," says Mr. Shelbourne. "At least" — he smiles — "yours is a more charitable explanation than the one I suggested."

And probably it is the correct explanation; for when Dr. Kirke returns to the breakfast-room a moment later, and resumes his place at table, he looks very much more cheerful than he has looked since he saw Colonel Duncan first, and says at once:

"His pulse *is* stronger. He may pull through — if fever doesn't supervene now."

"I don't think that likely to occur," says Dr. Chelmsom, whose sympathy is again exhibited by Roslyn's face of concern at this suggestion. "The worst is over, I trust," he adds, encouragingly.

"Pray, Mr. Thorne," says Dr. Kirke, after finishing his breakfast, "how comes Stanley to be so much interested in Colonel Duncan's case? I was not aware that there was the most ordinary association between the two men."

"There is not," replies Geoffrey. "I was astonished at Mr. Stanley's intruding himself here last night. I wish my father had been at home, and he would never have presumed to do so. He knows that it is not possible for a man of my age to treat one of his in the manner he deserves; and he takes advantage of the fact. Why he should affect an interest on Colonel Duncan's account, I don't understand — unless it is for the pure, abstract pleasure of making himself disagreeable."

"His interest is real, not affected, I fancy," says Mr. Shelbourne, dryly.

Both Dr. Kirke and Geoffrey look at the speaker in surprise; but, before there is time to ask his meaning, Colonel Duncan's servant enters, with the information that his master has "come to his senses, and asked where he is and what is the matter."

Geoffrey and Roslyn are the only members of the party who do not move precipitately at this announcement. Leaving them still sitting at table, Drs. Kirke and Chelmsom, and Mr. Shelbourne, hurry up-stairs at once.

"Oh, I hope he is better — that he is out of danger!" says Roslyn, fervently. "Why don't you go and see, Geoffrey?"

"I will go presently," he replies; "but three men are enough at a time to claim his attention, I think. He ought not to be fatigued or excited, I am sure."

"Of course not," assents Roslyn. Then, after a moment's silence, she says, thoughtfully, "What did Mr. Shelbourne mean by saying that Mr. Stanley's interest in Colonel Duncan was real, not affected?"

"You are too hard for me," answers Geoffrey, with a short laugh. "I can not conceive what he meant — if he was in earnest."

"He did not speak as if he were in jest," says Roslyn. "I was amazed when Margery told me that that man had staid here last night. What put it into his head to come, in the first place, I wonder?"

Geoffrey shakes his head. "Impossible to say," he replies. "As a matter of course, I was obliged to treat him civilly; but it goes awfully against the grain with me to do so. I don't think I could tolerate him at all, if it were not on Lettice's account."

"He may thank Lettice for most of the toleration he gets," says Roslyn — "for all that he gets from anybody in this house. As for his wife, she brought her fate on herself, and does not deserve the least sympathy, in my opinion."

Geoffrey smiles. "Can't you imagine any excuse for her?" he says. "Stanley is just the sort of a man who must have been exceedingly attractive to women in his youth."

"How can you say so? I am sure he must always have been just what he is now — disgusting!"

She rises from the table as she says this, and walks into the sitting-room. At the same moment, they hear somebody coming down-stairs; and Geoffrey, who has followed her, goes into the hall, where he meets Mr. Shelbourne.

That gentleman seems in excellent spirits. "Poor Duncan is all right again as to the head," he says; "but I am afraid he will have trouble with that shoulder of his. And the doctors say he must be kept perfectly quiet; must avoid excitement of every kind. I wish you would see to this."

"I will," says Geoffrey.

"I have some business that ought to be attended to this morning," continues Mr. Shelbourne; "and, as he seems so much better, I'll borrow a horse from you and ride over to town. Of course, I'll be back this evening."

So much of the conversation Roslyn hears, as they walk slowly through the hall, and out into the veranda, where they sit down to wait until the horse which Geoffrey orders for Mr. Shelbourne is brought around. She, meanwhile, chances to notice a letter lying on the table, and is reminded by the sight of it that she has neither seen nor heard anything of the mail this morning yet. Perhaps it arrived before she came down-stairs, she thinks, as it not unfrequently is received very early — a servant going over to Kirton for it every morning, and generally returning by breakfast-time. Geoffrey may have left this letter here. She picks it up — it is lying with the direction down — to see if it is for herself.

It is not, she finds. It is addressed, "Victor Laurent, Esq."

With an almost ludicrous expression of surprise, she stands looking at the name. Who could have been writing to Laurent? It has evidently just been written, for it has neither stamp nor post-mark. If Colonel Duncan had not been insensible, she might suppose that it was done by his request; but, since he only recovered consciousness a few minutes before, this is impossible. Could Mr. Shelbourne have thought it necessary to apprise Laurent of the accident, expecting it to prove fatal?

All these conjectures are comprised, as it were, in one flash of thought — her first thought. Her second thought is, "Mr. Stanley!" — and she drops the letter as if its touch soiled her fingers; but her eyes still rest on the name with a sort of fascination. There is a fascination to her in that name! — the first sound or sight of it always recalls so vividly the man himself. But, after a moment, she thinks a little. Even in the recollection of the man himself there is much that is not pleasurable.

As we are aware, from the very first evening that she saw him, her sentiments toward Laurent have been very mixed and varying. While keenly sensible to that personal power of attraction which he possesses in a remarkable degree, she has always felt a certain uncomfortable sense of doubt, that at times has amounted to positive distrust, and has never at any moment left her mind, not even when her fancy was most thrall'd and dazzled. Latterly this distrust has been growing and strengthening. His strange silence, his prolonged absence, and the remarks of many of his acquaintances whom she met during her summer wanderings — all have conspired to shake more and more the faith to which she has clung, and yet clings. For it is the instinct of love — whether it be true or false love, genuine passion or any of the counterfeits that often deceive the lover himself — to be incredulous of all accusations made against its idol; and this instinct has been strong with her throughout the whole course of her acquaintance with Laurent — notwithstanding the counter-current of secret doubt already alluded to. She listened to the gossip she could not avoid hearing, just as she had listened to Geoffrey's earnest warning — with repressed indignation and annoyance, and also with some willful blindness. . With an unacknowledged feeling that there was partial truth in what was said, she still believes that jealousy on the part of Geoffrey, and envy and ill-nature on that of the gossiping people she met, had much to do with the matter. And so, up to this time, she has never willingly thought ill of her fascinating lover.

Now, however, as she stands motionless by the table, with her gaze fixed upon vacancy, she is thinking of the many things concerning Laurent which she heard unwillingly, and unwillingly remembers; and the hope she has always cherished, that he would ultimately prove the injustice of it all — prove that he loves her better than he does his cousin's fortune — this

hope is shaken to its foundation. There is something almost like contempt in her face as she turns away and walks to a window.

Glancing out, she sees Geoffrey and Mr. Shelbourne standing on the gravel-walk before the house. The latter is putting on his gloves, and the next minute mounts the horse a servant is holding for him, nods to Geoffrey, and rides away.

Roslyn watches Geoffrey, with a look of indecision, as he comes up the steps, enters the house, and is evidently taking his way up-stairs. He has passed the door of the sitting-room, when suddenly her resolution is taken, and she hurries after him.

"Geoffrey!" she says, rather hesitatingly. "Are you going up to see Colonel Duncan now?" she asks, as he turns and pauses at the sound of her voice.

"I was going; but I am not in a particular hurry, if you want anything with me," he answers, coming to her side.

"No," she says; but adds almost immediately: "Yes, I do — I want to ask you a question. Come here a minute, please."

As he follows her into the room, she points to the letter lying on the table. "How did that come here?" she inquires. "Do you know who wrote it?"

Geoffrey looks a little surprised — more at her manner than at the presence of the letter, which he takes up as he answers, "No, I did not notice it before." He glances at the superscription, and there is a sudden flash of intelligence in his eyes; but he only says, in a matter-of-course tone:

"This is Mr. Stanley's writing. I suppose he amused his leisure last night by writing to Mr. Laurent, and forgot to take his letter away with him this morning when he left." He tosses the letter carelessly back on the table as he adds: "Now I will go up and see Duncan, and will come back and let you know how he is getting on. The doctors are still with him."

"You will find me in the garden," Roslyn says. "I am going to gather some roses for him."

CHAPTER XXII.

"He Will Come."

Half an hour afterward, when Geoffrey goes to look for her in the garden, he is not a little shocked to see, as she glances up at the sound of his approaching steps, that her eyes are full of tears. She is sitting in a listless attitude; the roses she has been gathering are heaped beside her on the rustic seat she occupies; her hands are lying idly in her lap; altogether, her appearance gives the idea of profound dejection.

Such a mood seems to Geoffrey so unnatural in Roslyn — is so utterly unprecedented in all his experience — that he looks aghast for an instant, and then advances impulsively, exclaiming:

"What is the matter? Is it possible that you are crying, Roslyn?"

"Yes, I have been crying a little," she answers, with a smile that looks as unfamiliar as does her air of depression — a smile half -amused, half -sad. "But pray don't be alarmed," she goes on. "There is nothing alarming in the matter, I assure you. How is Colonel Duncan?"

"Better. I suppose the danger is over for the present, if he can be prevailed upon to be prudent. But I am afraid that will be difficult, with a man not at all accustomed to illness or confinement of any sort."

"You suppose the danger is over for the present?" repeats Roslyn. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Why, you know there is a charge of shot scattered under and about the shoulder-blade, which ought to be removed; but, as any further loss of blood just now would be certain death, there is nothing to be done but to let the wound heal without touching it. Then, when his strength is entirely restored, these shot will have to be extracted — some of them, at least. The doctors were torturing his shoulder when I went in — that is, Chelmsom was replacing the bandages which were necessarily put on so hurriedly yesterday evening as to cause great pain. The wound is doing very well, they say; and there is no indication, as yet, of fever. But old Kirke is so strenuous in his orders about quiet, that I see they are afraid it may come on."

"How does he look?" asks Roslyn.

"Like Seneca's wife," is the reply.

"So very pale?"

"Pale is not the word," answers Geoffrey. "Literally, there is no more life-color in his face and hands than there is in that linen" — pointing to her handkerchief, which lies on the bench beside the roses. "Of course, his skin is not precisely that tint — though, comparatively speaking, it is very white; which," he adds, "is not surprising, considering the amount of blood he lost. I did not think there was as much blood in a man's whole body as flowed from his wound."

"Does he talk much?"

Geoffrey shakes his head. "He doesn't talk at all — he is too weak. He kept his eyes shut while they were manipulating his shoulder, and showed no sign of what he was suffering, except that his lips were compressed. The pain must have been acute."

"How dreadful all this sounds!" says Roslyn, with something of a shudder. "I can't imagine Colonel Duncan in such a helpless condition. Oh, I am so sorry for him, Geoffrey! To think of being shut up in a dark room, with two physicians mounting guard over one, on such a day as this!" — she looks around at the mellow beauty of the autumn morning. "And I suppose it will be some time before he is perfectly well again?"

"Yes, indeed," says Geoffrey.

He speaks rather absently. He is thinking of the day before, when, just at this hour, Roslyn and himself were walking through the woods together, and he was confidently counting upon a month of happiness. Colonel Duncan's accident is certainly no personal grief to him — though he is more moved by sympathy and compassion for the wounded man than he would have believed possible — but the *bouleversement* of the household and Roslyn's anxiety have effectually put an end to any plans of pleasure.

"*L'homme propose,*" he says, abruptly. "You were right, after all, Roslyn. Something has occurred to interfere with that month of happiness on which I was reckoning so confidently yesterday."

"Ah, yes! I warned you," says Roslyn, in a tone of reproach. "I felt that you were too confident. I was afraid that something would happen — because you were so sure."

"Because I was so sure!" repeats Geoffrey. "Why, this is rank superstition. Do you really believe that Colonel Duncan shot himself because I had determined upon a month of happiness?"

"Of course not — how absurd! But it is not right to be so confident. It is like tempting Fate."

"Well, I shall remember this experience, and be more cautious in future. But I meant no harm. I only wanted one more month of simple pleasures, such as we have known, to look back upon. But I am not to have it. That is very plain now."

"Oh, I hope Colonel Duncan may soon be well."

"He may — and again he may not. But, in any event, he has ended my hope of an idyllic four weeks of happiness — confound him!"

"Geoff!"

"Why should I not confound him? He could not have played me a worse trick if he had done it purposely. All the family will rush back as soon as they hear how we are situated here: if I had remembered that in time I should certainly have taken him to Clifton."

"No, you would not," says Roslyn. "Why do you talk so? Why do you try to make yourself out so much worse than you are? You can not deceive me. And I think that to have helped Colonel Duncan as promptly and well as you did, is better than a month of foolish, idle riding and walking and talking."

"Foolish!" says Geoffrey, gloomily. "You may call it so if you like, but it would not have been foolish to me. However, that is not the worst." He pauses, hesitates, then goes on almost harshly, "The worst is that Laurent will come."

Roslyn starts. "Why should you think that?" she asks, in a low tone.

"Do you need to ask?" Geoffrey answers. "You saw that letter. Stanley — confound him, for his officiousness! — wrote, no doubt, to tell the news, which will be good news to Mr. Laurent. You think I am unjust?" — as she looks at him quickly and reproachfully — "but I have remembered something, which is what Mr. Shelbourne meant at breakfast. Laurent is Colonel Duncan's heir — the property is entailed on him. Of course, therefore, news of the latter's death would be good news to —"

"Geoffrey!" she turns on him indignantly. "You have no right to say such a thing — no right at all! It is cruel — it is unjust! What has Mr. Laurent ever done that you should think him capable of such baseness!"

Geoffrey does not answer for a moment. He is struck dumb by the strength of her emotion. A suspicion that she might not have forgotten Laurent was one thing; this passionate confirmation of his worst fears is quite another. He absolutely turns pale as he looks at her — not understanding her fully, yet understanding enough to make his heart cold.

"I did not mean to accuse him of baseness," he says, at length. "It is the way of the world: men do not usually mourn for those whom they succeed in an inheritance. And there are special reasons here. But I would not have mentioned the subject if I had thought you would — mind so much."

"Mind!" says Roslyn, with trembling lips. "Of course, I mind. Whatever Mr. Laurent may or may not be, we have no right to think *that* of him. And Colonel Duncan — you talk as if he were going to die, when the doctors believe that he will get well."

"That he *may* get well," Geoffrey corrects. "He is not out of danger yet. But, whether he lives or dies, Laurent will come. I am sure of that."

Roslyn is silent. She, too, is sure; yet in her heart she shrinks from the certainty. For him to be brought in this way, it seems worse than that he should never come at all.

Suddenly Geoffrey rises to his feet. "Yonder comes Lettice," he says. "I think, Roslyn, you had better get her to stay with you. This unfortunate state of affairs depresses you too much. As for me, I must go and look after the doctors, who are staying to watch Colonel Duncan."

When Lettice approaches the seat, where Roslyn remains without stirring, Geoffrey's figure is still in sight, crossing the lawn toward the house. She looks after it, but makes no comment, and, after an exchange of greetings, sits down by Roslyn.

"I am so sorry for you," she says, gently. "It would be bad enough to hear of such a dreadful accident to one you know so well. But to have the dying man absolutely under your roof — that is dreadful!"

"He is not a dying man," says Roslyn, quickly. "The doctors are agreed that he is better, and may recover — have you not heard?"

"No. When papa came home he said he would certainly die."

"So the doctors thought last night; but there is a change for the better, and they say now that, with care, he may get well."

"I am rejoiced to hear it. Poor Colonel Duncan! It seemed terrible to think of his dying — so! But, Roslyn, it is still very hard for you, his being here —"

"Oh, no," Roslyn interposes. "I am glad he is here; it is such a little thing to do."

"But it is not as if your parents were at home," Lettice persists. "Mamma and I have been talking of it, and she has sent me to say that she will come gladly to stay with you, if — if you care for her to do so."

"Mrs. Stanley is very kind," says Roslyn, to whom such an offer is at once astonishing and embarrassing; for Mrs. Stanley, who is not a capable person in her own household, would certainly prove a most incapable and troublesome one in such a household as that of Verdevale at the present time. "It is very good of her to think of inconveniencing herself so much — she who never leaves home," the girl goes on; "but really I do not see any reason why I should allow her to trouble herself so greatly. Nobody is thinking of me — indeed, I might leave home myself, only that somebody must look after the housekeeping, now that Mrs. Knight is confined to Colonel Duncan's room; and it seems to me that it would be very foolish to think of such trivialities as a shade of propriety, more or less, at such a time."

"We did not intend to imply that there is any impropriety in the position," says Lettice; "but I — that is, we thought you might feel lonely and uncomfortable, with the house so full of men, and that you would like to have some one — some elderly lady — with you."

"I have not had time to think of myself," says Roslyn, simply, "and I doubt if I shall have time before mamma comes — as, of course, she will come at once. Thank your mother for me, Lettice — I shall not forget her kindness; but I do not feel that there is any reason why I should put her to so much inconvenience. I have no compunction, however, in keeping you with me as long as you can stay, and you have come for the day, have you not?"

"I will come back, if you want me," Lettice answers; "but, no — I did not come, intending to stay. I came to deliver mamma's message, to see how Colonel Duncan is, and — to get a letter which papa left here this morning."

"Yes," says Roslyn. A flush comes to her face, but she speaks quietly. "I saw a letter which he left on the sitting-room table. Shall we go and get it?"

Lettice assenting, they rise and walk toward the house — their voices falling to a hushed tone as they approach and look up at the closed blinds of Colonel Duncan's chamber. Lettice gives her head a little shake. "It is strange that he should have been brought here," she observes, "and not pleasant for you, Roslyn — say what you will."

"I never said it was pleasant," Roslyn answers; "but I did say, and I repeat, that I am glad he is here, because Mrs. Knight is a better nurse than any he could have had at Clifton, and I — am of a little use. I can see that the doctors have all that they want or need. But here we are. Come in, and let me see if the letter is still where your father left it, or if some servant has misplaced it."

The letter is still lying where it first met her eye; and, having pointed it out, she hesitates for an instant, then with an effort says, hastily:

"I could not avoid seeing to whom it is addressed, Lettice; and, since your father wrote it last night, when Colonel Duncan was believed to be dying, I think he should add a postscript, telling Mr. Laurent that the doctors now think he may recover."

Lettice nods. "Certainly, that should be done," she says, "and I will endeavor to see that it is done. But don't deceive yourself, Roslyn. "When Mr. Laurent receives this letter, he will come."

CHAPTEK XXIII.

A WILLFUL MAN.

The next morning the physicians pronounce Colonel Duncan decidedly better.

"Not out of danger, however," says Dr. Kirke, at the breakfast-table. "The least imprudence would bring on fever — and the worst sort of fever — a low typhoid form.

But he is progressing favorably so far, and if he will be very careful — avoid all exertion and excitement — why, he will do very well now. — Don't let him talk about business" — this to Mr. Shelbourne. "I see he is inclined to be unruly on that point. He asked for you yesterday — said he must see you about some business matter of urgent importance — and we had no little difficulty in putting him off. I was glad you were not here; and the best thing you can do will be to go to town without seeing him again this morning. He must not talk or think about anything exciting — I mean anything that would excite his mind to active thought. Perfect quiescence of mind and body is what he needs at present. — Mr. Thorne, I wish you would remember this. Don't talk to him, or let him talk to you. As to his diet, Mrs. Knight will attend to that, and will give him what little medicine he has to take. She's a capital nurse. It's very fortunate that she happens to be here."

"I will do my best," says Geoffrey, smiling. "But I agree with you in thinking that your patient is inclined to be willful. You must not hold me responsible if he injures himself. If he insists on talking, for instance, what can I do to prevent it?"

"Tell him that it's against my orders; and then walk out of the room."

"You are always for high-handed measures, Dr. Kirke," says Roslyn, laughing. "You always treat your patients as if they were refractory children."

"Only when they are refractory," answers the doctor; "and then they deserve to be treated so. When a man calls me in as a medical practitioner, it is my business to tell him what to do — and his to do what I tell him."

"But human nature is weak," says Roslyn; "and, when one is ill, it is very hard to be patient and reasonable, I think."

"Very hard, indeed," says Dr. Chelmsom, looking at his brother physician with a smile. "Dr. Kirke will concede that, I am sure."

"It is necessary," responds Dr. Kirke, uncompromisingly — ignoring the fact that he is himself the most impatient of men when he is ill; "and such being the case, a man of sense will be reasonable, whether he is patient or not."

"I'm not sure of that," says Mr. Shelbourne. "There's as much difference between Philip ill and Philip well, as between Philip drunk and Philip sober. For instance, I flatter myself that I am a mild-mannered man when I am well, and not a fool; but let my familiar demon *tic* lay his finger on one of my cheek-bones, and I am as irascible as any fool you could find; and as intractable to control."

"I can certify to the truth of that statement," says Dr. Kirke, dryly; "but there is some excuse for a man's irascibility, when *tic-douloureux* is gnawing his facial nerves. Colonel Duncan will have no such pain as that to support — no pain at all, to speak of — unless he should bring on fever by some inexcusable imprudence. All that he has to do for the present is to keep quiet — perfectly quiet."

"Will not he be more likely to satisfy you in this respect," asks Geoffrey, "if he is allowed to see Mr. Shelbourne, and say whatever it is that he wants to say, than if he is kept from doing so? I should think it might be more injurious to a sick person to be thwarted in his humor, than to make a temporary exertion in gratifying it."

"You are right," says Dr. Chelmsom, decidedly—"eh, Kirke?"

The latter hesitates a moment; then he replies a little reluctantly: "Well, yes; he ought not to be thwarted, certainly — for that is the sort of thing to irritate and excite him. If his mind is set upon it, I suppose he must have his own way. I'll see, however, if I can't induce him to put off attending to business until he is better able to talk."

Accordingly, when he pays his parting visit to Colonel Duncan after breakfast, before leaving for the day, Dr. Kirke endeavors to convince that gentleman of the propriety of letting business matters take care of themselves for the present.

"The more entirely you discharge your mind of all thought whatever," he says, "the better it will be for you. Every exertion you make, whether physical or mental, accelerates the

circulation, and thereby increases the danger of fever, you see. Nor is it merely fever which we apprehend — though, in your weak state, that would be dangerous, to say the least. But, besides this, we have another thing to consider. We find that a stray shot glanced from the direction which the others took, and lodged in the arm-pit — in close proximity to the brachial artery. This is serious. We have not yet ascertained its exact location, because it is impossible to do anything about it at present, and it would be useless, therefore, as well as injurious to harass you by an examination. The moment that your strength permits, we will see to it, as we fear the formation of an aneurism. I need not explain what the result of that would be if not attended to in time."

"I understand," says the wounded man, in a faint voice. "I heard what Dr. Chelmsom said on the subject yesterday morning; and that is why I am so anxious to accomplish this business, which is important. It is to make my will."

"To do so is, I hope and believe, unnecessary," says Dr. Kirke, with gravity. "If I see reason to change my opinion on this point, I will give you immediate warning of the fact."

Colonel Duncan smiles faintly.

"Let me see Shelbourne for five minutes," he says. "I will not excite myself, I promise you. A few words will explain all that is requisite; and, when the thing is done, my mind will be tranquil — which is not the case while it remains undone."

"Very well," says the doctor; but he does not look or speak as if he thought such obstinacy well. "A willful man must have his way, I suppose. I will go and send Mr. Shelbourne here; but, recollect, I warn you distinctly that, in exerting and exciting yourself, you are risking your life."

He puts his finger on the pulse of the hand that lies like a piece of marble — as white, almost, and as inanimate-looking — on the coverlet, and finds it, though very languid, increased perceptibly in strength since he felt it last, about two hours before.

"Your pulse is improving," he exclaims, with satisfaction. "You are doing very well indeed; so well, that I can conscientiously assure you that you may safely let the making of your will stand over for the present. However" — seeing the expression of his patient's countenance — "since you are so set on it, it may be better for you to get it off your mind."

Colonel Duncan proceeds to do this in the most expeditious manner possible, when, a few minutes afterward, Mr. Shelbourne appears at his bedside. He was never a man to waste words needlessly about anything; and on the present occasion he says tersely, speaking slowly, and with evident effort:

"Shelbourne, I want you to write my will."

"Very well," replies Mr. Shelbourne, sitting down at a table and drawing pen, ink, and paper toward him. "Give me your instructions, and I will put them in legal form. I suppose" — he hesitates an instant — "that I need not remind you that you have power to dispose of only part of your estate?"

"I have not forgotten," Duncan answers. "It is what renders this so essential. If I die intestate, Laurent will inherit everything. Now, Clifton must be his — there is no help for that; but I am not inclined to endow him with anything else. Write, then, Shelbourne, that I give and bequeath all of which I die possessed — both real and personal estate — to Roslyn Vardray."

The lawyer elevates his eyebrows, and pauses for an almost imperceptible space of time before he puts his pen to the paper before him. It is on the end of his tongue to say — for, like every one else, he has heard something of current gossip — "My poor friend, is it possible that you are not aware that by this means you will endow Laurent with all you possess?" But he remembers the doctor's caution, he looks at the pale face on the pillow, and holds his peace. After all, is it likely that Duncan is unaware of what every one else knows? He shrugs his shoulders and proceeds to write.

"Add," says Duncan, after a minute's silence, "that I desire she shall have uncontrolled possession of the property as long as she remains unmarried, but that when she marries her estate

shall be settled on herself in such a manner as to preclude the possibility of its alienation from her, even by her own act."

"Ah!" says Mr. Shelbourne, involuntarily. He is quite certain now that Duncan does know all that he or any one else knows. But, without further comment, he writes, then pauses and asks if these are all his instructions.

"Yes; I have not strength for more now," Duncan answers. "That is all which is essential. Make it ready for my signature at once."

"You shall have it in half an hour," the lawyer answers. But, as he leaves the room, he says to himself, "I hope that you may live — to destroy it."

Having thus made his arrangements to die, Colonel Duncan proceeds to gratify his friends and physicians by rapidly getting better. In the course of a day or two he is so much improved that when Mr. Vardray — whom the news of the accident at once brings — arrives at Verdevale, he finds a man who seems on the high-road to recovery.

For Roslyn was right in supposing that her parents would hasten home immediately; only, instead of Mrs. Vardray — who is detained by the illness of one of the children — it is Mrs. Arden who accompanies her father.

"O Aunt Lavinia, this is very good of you!" she says, gratefully. "I am so glad you have come!"

"Since Ellen could not leave Effie, I felt that I must come; for it is out of all question for you to be left here alone," the kind-hearted lady answers. "I am afraid it has already been too much for you. Poor child! you look pale."

"Do I?" with slight surprise. "Then it must be only because of fright and anxiety. I am very well; but it will be a great relief to know that you are here. It is not that I have really needed any one — at least, not for practical help. But I have needed moral support."

"I should think so, indeed!" says Mrs. Arden, with a laugh. "A wounded man, a couple of doctors, and half a dozen other men, more or less, might well make you feel the need of moral support. It is most unfortunate that we all left when we did, or that Colonel Duncan had not shot himself a day earlier."

"My dear aunt!"

"My dear Roslyn, if the shooting was a settled matter, why should it not have occurred a day earlier? I am sure, if I had my way, it should not have occurred at all; but, if it was to be, the convenience of all parties concerned might, it seems to me, have been better consulted."

"If it had been a day earlier," says Roslyn, "Geoffrey would not have been here to find Colonel Duncan, and — and he might have bled to death in the woods alone."

"Never!" says Mrs. Arden, promptly, though she shudders a little. "There is too much for Colonel Duncan yet to do in the world, I am sure. For that reason, I have felt certain that he will recover."

"There is every ground now to hope that he will," says Roslyn. "But the doctors are still very careful, and do not relax the vigilance with which they watch him. They seem particularly afraid of the effects of excitement for him."

"I hope your father is not staying with him too long," says Mrs. Arden. "I think I had better go and end the visit. I want to see him myself."

But, instead of ending the visit, her advent rather prolongs it — for so glad is Colonel Duncan to see these friends that he is loath to let them leave him, and, when reminded of the doctor's warnings, he laughs them to scorn.

"All that is nonsense!" he says, disrespectfully. "Kirke is making a tremendous fuss over a very small matter. It strikes me as the height of absurdity for an old soldier — one who has been wounded with serious missiles — to be lying here as the consequence of a discharge of bird-shot. But I am getting well, and there is no need whatever of all this parade of caution."

Mrs. Arden shakes her head. "With all her cheerful optimism, she believes in being on the safe side. "It does no harm to be careful," she says, "and, if one has a physician, I think it is

only just to him to follow his advice. I should not like you to endanger the life, that you have so nearly lost, by any imprudence. So we must leave you. — Come, George!"

Colonel Duncan looks regretfully at Mr. Vardray, who rises in answer to this appeal. "At least, you will let me see you again before you go away," he says.

"Are you going away?" asks Mrs. Arden, turning to her brother with some surprise.

"Yes," he answers; "I find Duncan getting on so famously that I think I had better return to Ellen. I am a little uneasy about Effie. And you are here to take charge of everything."

"Including the invalid," she says, with a smile. "Perhaps it is best that you should go. I don't think there is much the matter with Effie, but one can never tell — and you are not needed here."

"There I beg to differ with you," says Colonel Duncan. "He is needed to aid and abet me in the rebellion I clearly foresee that I shall have to make."

"Don't count on me for such a service as that," says Mr. Vardray. "I am rather inclined to beg you to be patient and run no risks. After all, the doctors may be right, you know."

This candid admission — which might amuse one doctor, but would certainly not amuse the other — is soon verified. Mr. Vardray takes his departure early the next morning; and, when Mrs. Arden and Roslyn are sitting at the breakfast-table, an hour or two later, Geoffrey enters, looking rather grave.

"I have just been in Colonel Duncan's room," he says, "and I am sorry to say he is not so well this morning. He did not sleep last night, and he seems a little feverish."

"Oh," says Roslyn, "that is what the doctors have been afraid of!"

Mrs. Arden looks startled. "How unfortunate!" she says; "I fear that our coming has had something to do with it."

"Something, perhaps," says Geoffrey. "But he has been impatient and imprudent all along. Dr. Kirke will be here presently, and then we shall hear if it is anything serious."

"I don't think it can be anything serious," says Mrs. Arden, with her happy optimism.

But Dr. Kirke, when he comes, is inclined to be of another opinion, and he reissues stringent orders against excitement of any kind, though admitting that at present the dangerous symptoms are slight. When he returns in the afternoon, however, he finds the patient in a condition which excites his serious apprehensions, and he decides to spend the night at Verdevale, in order to watch closely, and ward off, if possible, the danger which he fears. The result appears when Geoffrey is awakened at daylight by a knock at his door, and, in answer to his "Come in," Dr. Kirke appears, with a note in his hand, looking both serious and irate.

"I shall be obliged if you will send this as soon as possible to Chelmsion," he says.

"I hope Colonel Duncan is not worse!" Geoffrey exclaims, starting up.

"He has done just what I have been warning him against from the first," answers the doctor, dryly — "brought on an attack of fever, which as likely as not will finish him."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"When We Two Parted."

The next few days are days of gloom and anxiety at Verdevale. The grave faces of the physicians tell every one of Colonel Duncan's danger, and that the battle between life and death is likely to be a hard and close one. Inch by inch they dispute the ground; but inch by inch they find themselves baffled by the fever, which like a flame seems suddenly to have leaped beyond control, until the life of the sick man may be said to hang upon a thread.

While matters are at this crisis, Roslyn leaves the house one morning — the morning of a day so soft and brilliant that the glory and beauty of nature seem to mock the thought of death —

and, with an impulse to escape, if possible, from the sense of hopeless sadness that weighs upon her, takes her way down the lawn. She is not thinking at all of where she is going, as she follows the great sweep of the carriage-drive, until she finds herself at the gate which opens upon the high-road. Here she pauses, and, leaning her arms upon the topmost bar, looks absently and wistfully over a fair prospect of sloping fields, and soft, green meadows, belted by glowing woods. She is thinking of the wide scene which Clifton overlooks, all steeped in beauty by this autumnal sun and mist; and of Clifton's master, lying in his darkened chamber, between life and death, behind her. Will he ever look on the kindly, familiar face of Nature — of his own woods and fields, which he loves so well — again? She knows how doubtful — how more than doubtful — it is, and, as she puts her hand to her eyes, blinded both by sunlight and tears, she does not observe a horseman advancing along the road from Kirton, who at sight of her suddenly halts. It is only as he springs to the ground that she lets her hand fall and looks up — to see Laurent.

Notwithstanding all predictions of his coming, his appearance at this moment startles her greatly. Her face tells him so, as she says, involuntarily, "Mr. Laurent! is it possible this is you?"

"Yes, it is I," Laurent answers, advancing toward her. "Surely you knew that I would come!"

"I? No. Why should I know it?" she replies. Then she adds, hastily: "But you have come, of course, on account of Colonel Duncan. He is very ill."

"Is he? I am sorry," says Laurent.

And then he stands silent for a moment, looking at her. He has come on account of Colonel Duncan, and to look after his own interest — yes. And the necessity has not been altogether an agreeable one to him. He had hesitated and delayed for several days before deciding to come — fearing his own weakness, fearing further entanglement — thinking (perhaps it would be too much to say, hoping) that news of his cousin's death might arrive and make his way clearer. But now, as he stands looking at Roslyn in the morning sunlight, he is at a loss to understand his own delay. To see that face again — why did he not fly? And if — and if, indeed, good fortune is to attend him — if Clifton is to be his — "Do you not know," he says, in a low tone, "that if I had listened to my heart, I should have been here long ago?"

Roslyn lifts her head — a little proudly. That tender tone stirs, stings, rouses her to the necessity of composure and self-control.

"Why should I have known it?" she repeats — this time more coldly. "But it is natural that you should have been anxious about Colonel Duncan. His wound has proved very serious."

"Is there, then, no hope — of his recovery?" Laurent asks.

How hard it is to control the voice so that it shall not betray anything of one's inmost feeling! Despite his efforts, Laurent's voice betrays something of his. There is a shade too little of solicitude, a shade too much of eagerness in his question. Roslyn's ear feels, rather than hears, both. She glances at him quickly. A sudden recollection flashes upon her. She hears Geoffrey's voice saying, "It is the way of the world: men do not usually mourn for those whom they succeed." She had indignantly repudiated such a thought when he suggested it; but now — why does she recall it now? Her clear eyes, with the moisture of unshed tears still clinging to their lashes, and violet shadows beneath them, look keenly at Laurent as she says:

"While there is life there is hope — is not that what one is always told? — but Colonel Duncan is in great danger. For a time he was much better — almost convalescent; but he committed some imprudences, and fever came on. Then there is trouble about an aneurism: so that his situation is most critical."

"I am very sorry!" says Laurent again; and this time his voice seems to express only deep regret. "In that case I had better go on to Clifton at once. Of course, I shall see you again — as soon as possible."

"To Clifton!" she repeats. "But he is here with us. Are you not aware of it?"

"Here — yet?" says Laurent, with surprise. "I knew that he was brought here at first; but I supposed that he had been removed to Clifton."

"He has never been well enough to be moved. You will come in? Though I warn you it is not likely that you will be allowed to see him."

"I can see" — he hesitates — "the doctors, at least. Thanks, yes — I will certainly go in."

He lays his hand on the gate as he speaks — for, up to this point, their conversation has been carried on across it, and, when Roslyn draws back, opens it and leads his horse in. Then, as they walk side by side toward the house, it is a minute before either speaks. The thought of their parting is in the minds of both, and renders ordinary conversation difficult. As for Laurent, he is more deeply stung than he would have believed possible by the apparent indifference with which he has been met. There have been no blushes, no smiles, no drooping eye-lids to greet him. Roslyn is beautiful — more beautiful than he remembered her — but a change has come over her which is beyond his power to fathom. The gay coquettish girl he left is transformed into a fair, stately woman who seems as unmoved by his presence as if she had never promised to listen — when he returned.

Presently he glances at her delicate, spirited profile as she walks beside him and speaks abruptly. "You are changed," he says, "greatly changed, since I saw you last."

"Am I?" she says, with a slight smile. "Well, it is natural. One does not stand still, you know."

"But in so short a time one does not usually change so much as you are changed," he says.

"Does one not?" she answers, carelessly. "But a short time is sufficient for a good many different experiences, and that produces change — is it not so?"

"Yes," he replies — wondering what these experiences have been, but not daring to ask. More and more he realizes that his position is even more difficult than he anticipated. A few direct, passionate words might — though he is not sure of it — put matters right with Roslyn. But how can he utter these words, in absolute uncertainty of what his future prospects may be? If Colonel Duncan dies, Cliffton will be his; but Cliffton alone is a small inheritance — and to whom will the remainder of the estate go? Whereas, if Colonel Duncan lives, will he be ready to carry out his promises of the summer? Who can tell what changes these past months may have wrought? The great change in Roslyn prepares him for other changes as great. He came thinking the ball still at his feet, and that with him alone decision was to be; but now it is suddenly borne in upon him that everything is doubtful, and that the situation may find him unequal to its demands.

This is so novel an idea to him — that any situation could find him unequal to its demands — that unconsciously he relapses into silence — silence which, on her part, Roslyn makes no effort to break. And so they, who parted as lovers, meet again.

Naturally, however, only themselves can be aware of their changed relations. As Mrs. Arden and Geoffrey stand, gravely talking on the veranda, the unwelcome and to them significant sight which presents itself is Roslyn, advancing toward them, with Laurent walking by her side, his horse's bridle over his arm.

CHAPTER XXV.

MRS. ARDEN MAKES A SUGGESTION.

Mrs. Arden is a woman of fertile resource and great decision of character. "Anything that one desires to accomplish, one generally can accomplish if one only tries long enough and hard enough," she has often said; and having resolved to prevent Roslyn "from throwing herself away" on Laurent, she is quickened to energy and perseverance in her resolve by the appearance of that gentleman.

"I am afraid there is no hope," Geoffrey says, when they are discussing the matter, soon after the inopportune arrival. "If poor Duncan dies, as I suppose he will, and this fellow inherits Clifton, Roslyn will marry him. We can not prevent it."

"But what has his inheriting Clifton to do with the matter?" demands Mrs. Arden. "You do not think that would influence Roslyn?"

"Roslyn — no. But it will influence him. It will make it possible for him to marry. I doubt if it is possible now. And then" — Geoffrey hesitates — "I have reason to believe that Colonel Duncan has left all of his fortune that he could leave to Roslyn. I know he made his will the other day — I was called to witness it — and, from something Mr. Shelbourne let drop, I inferred as much."

"It would be like him!" says Mrs. Arden, startled but not surprised, for she remembers the day when Duncan came to her house, eager to secure Roslyn's happiness at any cost, and what had then been his intentions with regard to her. Is he likely to have less generous intentions in the face of death? It would be like him!" she repeats, wiping the tears from her eyes. "And oh, what fools, what fools, women are! To think of Roslyn turning away from such a man, for a nobody like this Laurent!"

"He is worse than a nobody," says Geoffrey — "a man without character, and I suspect without principle, who I am sure is altogether mercenary in his intentions —"

"Well, I know Roslyn," says Mrs. Arden, with energy, "and I am sure of one thing — that she would not marry Mr. Laurent if she could once be fully convinced of his mercenary intentions."

"But how is it possible to convince her?" says Geoffrey. "It does not seem to me that she ought to need any further conviction than his conduct has already afforded."

"Women are very foolish sometimes," says Mrs. Arden, shaking her head. "It requires a great deal to convince them that a man who talks love means money. I wonder has this man any idea that Colonel Duncan may leave his fortune to Roslyn?"

"I hardly think so. Who would tell him? Only Mr. Shelbourne positively knows."

"Then I think we may test him," says the lady, with an air of reflection. "A thought has occurred to me, though I won't tell you what it is until I see whether it can be executed. It depends, in the first place, upon Colonel Duncan. I know the doctors would forbid my talking to him on such a subject; but I don't mind them — only I must choose my opportunity when they are away."

"It will be a risk," says Geoffrey, rather startled by such an announcement. "I don't think I would trouble him about the matter, if I were you, Aunt Lavinia. What can he do, except, perhaps, put a condition in his will that Roslyn shall not inherit the fortune if she marries Laurent? That would outrage her, and make people talk tremendously."

"I have no idea of that kind," says Mrs. Arden. "Don't be afraid, Geoffrey! I have always fancied that I possess an undeveloped talent for intrigue, and now we shall see if I do."

She goes away smiling; but Geoffrey is not at all easy in his mind. He does not fear her "intrigue," except in its result on Colonel Duncan; but that, he thinks, may be seriously hurtful. To talk to a man in a desperate fever on the most exciting topic that could be suggested, does not commend itself to him, any more than it would to the doctors, as an advisable thing to do; and he determines to frustrate Mrs. Arden's purpose if possible. So far, the knowledge of Laurent's arrival has been kept from the sick man; and Geoffrey is unable to perceive any good end to be gained by informing him of the fact. "I would have given Aunt Lavinia credit for more sense," he thinks. "If Roslyn will throw away her life, in the face of all warnings and expostulations, that is no reason for killing poor Duncan, who is fool enough to care for her, even more than I do."

Full of an irritation which is comprehensively directed against Mrs. Arden, Laurent, and Roslyn, he walks into the hall, and there comes face to face with the latter, who is entering from the veranda.

"Geoffrey," she says, somewhat hesitatingly, "Mr. Laurent has returned" (it is now afternoon), "and desires to know if he can not see Colonel Duncan."

"Mr. Laurent knows what Dr. Kirke told him this morning; and of course we are bound to observe the doctor's orders until he changes them. He said that Colonel Duncan must on no account be excited or disturbed; and a visit from Mr. Laurent would both excite and disturb him."

"Will you tell Mr. Laurent so?" she asks. "He is on the veranda."

Geoffrey looks at her doubtfully. Why does she want him to go to Laurent? "Can you not tell him?" he asks, a little brusquely.

"It will be better for you to speak to him," she answers. "I am going up-stairs."

Without giving him time to reply, she turns and passes the staircase, so that he has no alternative but to walk out on the veranda where Laurent is sitting.

Their meeting, like all their intercourse, is courteous without cordiality. Geoffrey, with the intolerance of youthful feeling, is unable to constrain himself to more than mere civility to a man whom he both dislikes and distrusts; while Laurent, amused by a reserve which he ascribes entirely to jealousy, treats him with an off-hand carelessness that has sometimes a dash of patronage in it. At the present time, however, the latter is not evident, as he receives with considerable hauteur the decision with regard to Colonel Duncan.

"I do not feel at all bound to observe Dr. Kirke's orders," he says, "and I must beg that Colonel Duncan shall be informed that I am here. If he declines to see me, that is another matter."

"I am sorry that it is impossible for me even to do that without the doctor's sanction," replies Geoffrey.

An angry flush comes to Laurent's face. "Is the doctor not here?" he asks. "Can I not see him?"

"He is not here just now," answers Geoffrey, "but he will be here before long, and then you can appeal to him. Pray understand that I have no desire to assume any responsibility in the matter; I simply feel bound to observe his directions."

"A very good rule in general cases," says Laurent, still haughtily, "but in this particular instance you forget that, as Colonel Duncan's nearest relative, I have a right of admittance to his chamber."

"That," Geoffrey repeats, "I regret to say, you must settle with the doctors. I have nothing to do but to observe their orders. I hope, however, that you may not find it necessary to wait very long to see them. Either Dr. Kirke or Dr. Chelmsom will be here in the course of an hour."

"I shall wait, then," says Laurent, resuming his seat with a quick, impatient movement.

Geoffrey hesitates for a moment, then sits down also, thinking that Roslyn will return in a few minutes and relieve him; but minutes pass, and Roslyn does not return — somewhat to his surprise, and more to that of Laurent. To the latter, this is a fresh grievance and source of exasperation, which he is not slow to ascribe to Geoffrey also. He feels certain that the latter has said or done something to keep Roslyn away, and his easy indifference of feeling begins to be replaced by a quite active sense of resentment and dislike.

Meanwhile, the stars in their courses appear to fight for the execution of Mrs. Arden's resolution. The absence of the doctors and the detention of Geoffrey afford her just the opportunity she desires. Of the latter fact she is informed by Roslyn, who meets her in the upper hall on her way to Colonel Duncan's room.

"I wish you would go down-stairs and take Geoffrey to walk, my dear," she says, with fine disinterestedness. "The poor fellow needs a little exercise and diversion."

"I should be very glad to do so. Aunt Lavinia," Roslyn answers, "but unfortunately I can not — Geoffrey is with Mr. Laurent."

"Indeed! I did not know that Mr. Laurent is here."

"He only came a few minutes ago, and wanted to see Colonel Duncan; so I sent Geoffrey to tell him what the doctors said."

"He is very persevering — in his desire to see Colonel Duncan," says Mrs. Arden. "I suppose you will go back to entertain and console him?"

"No," answers Roslyn, quietly. "I sent Geoffrey, because I did not wish to stay."

The elder lady smiles — a very well-pleased smile. "Two such congenial spirits will entertain each other delightfully. I am very glad that you sent Geoffrey. I am going to see Colonel Duncan, and I will send Mrs. Knight out for a little relief. Suppose you take *her* to walk?"

"I shall be very glad to do so," Roslyn answers, honestly. "We can go out the back way, so as not to be seen — or waylaid."

Having thus arranged matters to her satisfaction, Mrs. Arden enters the sick-chamber and whispers to Mrs. Knight, who is placidly knitting by the window, that she will relieve her for a while. "Go out," she says. "You need fresh air, and Roslyn means to take you to walk."

Mrs. Knight smiles. "Miss Roslyn's kind as she can be," she says, "and I think it *will* do me good to take the air a bit. The colonel's quiet now " — nodding her head toward the bed where the recumbent figure lay motionless — "and I shouldn't be surprised if he dozed off a little after that last dose of medicine."

She rises as she speaks, and goes away very quietly; while Mrs. Arden, hearing a slight movement of the sick man as the door closes, advances to the side of the bed and bends over him.

He opens his eyes, that shine large and hollow, out of the pallid, wasted face, and looks at her with a faint smile, as she puts her cool fingers on his pulse.

"I do not think your fever is quite as high as it has been," she says, almost more to herself than to him.

"I have been asleep for a few minutes," he says; "and I think I must have dreamed a little, for I awoke with the sound of Laurent's voice in my ears."

"Indeed!" says Mrs. Arden. For a minute she can say no more, so much is she surprised by the opening thus afforded for what she wishes to say; and so wholly is she at a loss how to take advantage of this opening. But her irresolution is short. She quickly decides that the opportunity shall not find her unequal to it; and that the risk (if risk there be) must be run. She therefore goes on:

"You were not dreaming, or else you slept so lightly that real sounds mingled with your dream, for Mr. Laurent is here, and you probably heard his voice through the open window."

She speaks very quietly; and is glad to see that, though Colonel Duncan looks surprised, he is neither disturbed nor excited. He is silent for a moment before saying:

"When did he come?"

"This morning. He is very anxious to see you; but Dr. Kirke did not think it well that he should do so."

"There is no reason why he should." He says this indifferently, and is silent again for a minute. Then there comes a wistful expression into the eyes that, even before his lips unclose, tell her what is in his mind.

"Has he" — he hesitates for an instant — "do you know why he has come?"

"To see you," she answers, promptly. "At least he says that it was hearing of your accident and illness that brought him."

Duncan's lip curls into a slight, scornful smile.

"That is likely," he says. "There is much involved — for him. But he will inherit no more than my uncle's will gives him. I have taken care of that."

Then the fear of consequences vanishes from the mind of Mrs. Arden, as she sees this opening given her — a far better opening than she could possibly have hoped for.

"Pardon me," she says, quickly; "but since you have spoken of the matter yourself, I must ask this: in providing against that danger, have you not opened the way to a greater one? I mean" — for he looks at her in surprise — "have you not left your fortune to Roslyn?"

"Yes," he answers; "I have done so. Why do you speak of it as a danger?"

"Because I perceive what you have overlooked — the probable result," she says. "God grant, for every reason, that you may live to enjoy your fortune yourself; for so surely as it passes to Roslyn, so surely will she marry Laurent!"

A brief silence follows. The sick man lies and gazes with his hollow eyes at the stream of golden sunshine pouring in long rays across the room; and Mrs. Arden watches him and wonders if she has done any mischief, or if she can venture to proceed.

"I must" she says to herself. "This is my only chance."

But, just as she is opening her lips, he speaks — slowly, as one who is pondering a new thought.

"I did not consider that," he says. "I thought, I hoped, that he had gone out of her life. Surely she is not the woman we believe her to be, if she would accept a man who waited until she inherited a fortune to ask her to marry him."

"I do not know — the position in which she stands to him is not quite clear to me," says Mrs. Arden; "but I do not think that matters are at an end between them, by any means. This," she adds, quickly, "is only my impression, however. Roslyn has said nothing to me."

"It may be a right impression," says Duncan; "but what can we do? Last summer, as you know, I was willing to smooth away the obstacles between them; but now — having learned, in the interval, a great deal about Laurent's character — I would place any obstacle that I could in the way of her marrying him."

"There is one obstacle which you might place," says Mrs. Arden, eagerly. "Shall I tell you what it is?"

"Yes," he answers, his eyes growing bright with excited interest, and the fever-flush, which she is too absorbed to notice, deepening on his wasted cheeks.

"You must forgive me," she says, "if I speak very plainly; but I know what is best for her happiness and yours — ask her to marry you!"

He looks at her in amazement — as if he doubted either her sanity or the evidence of his own senses.

"Ask her to marry me!" he repeats. "In the first place, I have done so, and she said that she could not think of it. In the second place, do you know that the doctors think me a dying man?"

"Not a dying man — only a man in danger of death," says Mrs. Arden. "I do not pretend to disguise the fact of your danger from you; and I know that you have faced it in your own thoughts, else I should not venture to speak of it. But I believe that, whether it be for life or for death, the best thing that could happen to Roslyn would be to become your wife."

"You have not thought of what you are suggesting," he says, with an agitation which begins to alarm her. "Through her sympathy she might be induced to think of such a thing — but if I lived, she would be bound to a man she did not love; and if I died, she would be as free to do what you wish to prevent, as if such an empty ceremony had never taken place."

"I look at the matter very differently," she says, eagerly. "If you lived, Roslyn would, I am sure, make as happy and as attached a wife as you could desire; while, if you died, she would be compelled to wait for some time at least, before marrying Laurent — and, with that time secured, I do not believe she would marry him at all."

"But the apparent selfishness of such a request!"

"There would be no selfishness if you left the decision to her, and put your request on the ground that you wish to secure your fortune to her beyond the danger of any contest. Think of this — pray think of it!" she says, hurriedly, "for I hear the doctors' voices, and I can say no more. Heavens! what would they do to me if they knew what I have said already?"

"Stop a minute," he exclaims, as she rises — and his hand clutches her dress. "I can not deny that what you propose would be to me a great happiness; but I have never for an instant thought of asking — I could not for an instant think of asking it on that ground. But when you speak of Roslyn, and of the danger to which she is exposed, I can only say: I put myself in your hands. Do what you will, so that you make clear to her that I do not ask this on my own account; and that I will not ask it on any account, unless the doctors distinctly declare that there is no hope

for my life. I will not consent to run any risk of her being tied to a man who may live instead of die. But if she will take my name and my fortune from me on my death-bed, I shall be grateful."

"I will tell her. Trust me, and do not think of it again!" cries Mrs. Arden, really frightened now, to consider what may be the probable result of this agitation. "Leave the matter in my hands; I promise you I will do what you wish, and as you wish. Don't excite yourself! — don't let your fever grow worse! I shall never forgive myself if this harms you."

"I don't think there is any danger that it will," he says, with another faint smile; "but if it does, it is no matter. I have done my work in the world as well as I could, and I leave no one whose grief for me will darken an hour of life: so why should I fear the coming of death?"

"You do not know how many there are who would feel that your going darkened life for them," says Mrs. Arden, hurriedly; "else you would not think this."

But, as she speaks, tears gather thickly in her eyes at the realization of the truth of his words. Gallant and noble and true though his life has been, many a worthless existence would, in going out, leave a greater blank behind it; for the place which we hold in the world is measured exactly by the hearts that love us — not in the general sense of friendship, but in the particular sense of that close affection which death has no power to sever — in which Fate had made Hugo Duncan poor indeed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ROSLYN CONSENTS.

It is certainly in Geoffrey's mind to wonder what spirit, intriguing or otherwise, has taken possession of Mrs. Arden, when, after the doctors have gone up-stairs, she appears on the veranda, and greets Laurent with a graciousness which leaves nothing to be desired.

"Dr. Kirke is still obdurate, I perceive, about permitting you to see Colonel Duncan," she says, as she gives the young man her hand. "You must pardon him. He is always a tyrant in a sick-room; and this case is one in which he is particularly interested."

"That is natural," replies Laurent; "but what I feel is, that Dr. Kirke should realize that *I* am particularly interested, also — and probably more deeply interested than he is."

"But if you are so deeply interested, you certainly would not wish to run even the least risk that might be hurtful to Colonel Duncan?" says Mrs. Arden, looking at him with keenly observant eyes.

"Certainly not," he answers, promptly; "but I do not believe that my presence could have any hurtful effect upon him. Why should it?"

No one attempts to answer this question. Mrs. Arden only says:

"The doctor has the responsibility of the case, you know, and must guard against any danger."

"I should not like to characterize the doctor exactly," says Laurent, "but he has agreed to mention to Colonel Duncan that I am here, if he finds him no worse than he left him this morning."

"Well, that is a concession with which I think you ought to be satisfied," says Mrs. Arden. "Meanwhile, you will take tea with us?"

The invitation is, within the bounds of civility, unavoidable, but to Geoffrey it seems altogether superfluous; and turning quickly as Laurent answers, "I shall be very happy," he walks around the veranda, which nearly surrounds the building, and is rewarded by meeting Roslyn and Mrs. Knight at a side entrance.

"Why, where have you been?" he asks, in much surprise, as the girl comes up to the steps, and pauses beside him.

"I have been taking a walk with Mrs. Knight," she says; "and I should have asked you to go with us, only you were engaged, you know."

"Yes, I know," he replies, with a vain attempt at reproof of look and tone. "Pray, whose fault was it that I was engaged?"

"Mine, if you like," she answers, carelessly. "I thought it was more your place than mine to entertain Mr. Laurent."

"I assure you that Mr. Laurent did not think so. I never saw a man more disgusted than he looked when you did not return. I was surprised myself. I thought you certainly meant to come back."

"No" — she shakes her head — "I had no such intention. Mr. Laurent came to see Colonel Duncan, not to see me."

"Roslyn" — a new fear strikes Geoffrey — "you are not vexed about that?"

"Vexed!" She lifts her eyes a little indignantly. "Do you think I could be so petty — even if I cared? No; what I felt was, that I would not let him do one thing under cover of doing another: and I did not act without good reason, Geoffrey."

"I am sure of that," says Geoffrey, warmly. "You were perfectly right, and I enjoyed amazingly seeing the disappointment and disgust grow more and more evident on his face; but I am sorry to say that Aunt Lavinia has asked him to stay to tea."

"How could she avoid doing so? You see it is sunset now. I do not mind that — I feel quite equal to the occasion."

"I think you are quite equal to it," says Geoffrey, smiling at her. "But where are you going? — just when I have a little opportunity to talk to you!"

"I am going to make a slight improvement in my toilet. See how my hair is falling down! — and my dress is soiled from the walk."

She nods, smiles, and, walking across the veranda, is about to enter a glass door which stands open, when a sudden thought seems to strike her, and she turns back.

"Geoff," she says, almost in a whisper, "you don't know how frivolous I feel when I talk of such trifling things in the face of anything so grave and serious as Colonel Duncan's illness. I suppose the coming of — of Mr. Laurent has made me think, even more than I have before, of all his goodness and generosity and unselfishness. No one is like him!" says the girl, with a rush of tears in her voice; "and he is dying, perhaps, and I — I to whom he has been so more than kind — I can care whether my hair is smooth, or whether Mr. Laurent comes or goes! Geoff, you ought to despise me, for I despise myself."

"I see no reason to despise you," says Geoffrey. "Of course, it is sad to think of Duncan; but you can not be overshadowed by the sadness all the time."

"But I ought to be! — who in the world ought to be, if not I?" she says. "It is strange that he should care for any one so like a doll or a child; but he does — you know that he does. And I —"

She turns quickly and goes away without pausing again, leaving Geoffrey in his inexperience to marvel over the incomprehensible moods and variations of the feminine nature.

He has reason to marvel over them still more before the evening ends. Roslyn makes her appearance at tea dressed simply, but with a simplicity that greatly enhances her beauty; and her manner to Laurent is worthy of the approval and admiration with which Mrs. Arden regards it. It is easy, natural, sufficiently cordial, yet indifferent. Reserve may mean constraint, injured feeling, suppressed passion — anything; but in Roslyn's manner there is no shade of effort. If Laurent's presence has power to move her in any way, Laurent owns to himself that he can read no sign of it. She looks at him with unshadowed eyes; and her voice takes no different tone in addressing him from that which it takes in addressing any one else.

In truth, the chief secret of her unconcern is preoccupation of thought; for she, like every one else, reads on Dr. Kirke's face the evidence of anxiety.

"I found Colonel Duncan's pulse much higher than it should have been," he has said to Mrs. Arden — whose guilty conscience accuses her most clamorously — "and it is a sign that alarms me very much. I shall stay until midnight to watch the effect of the medicine I am giving — and, after that, Chelmsom will take my place. The patient can not be too closely attended now, nor all causes of excitement too carefully kept from him."

Mrs. Arden silences her guilty conscience sufficiently to say:

"You do not intend to let Mr. Laurent see him, then?"

The old physician makes a gesture of contemptuous dissent. "I never entertained such an idea!" he says. "Mr. Laurent would probably have very little power to excite him; but, except for some good reason, I am not going to run any risk — not the least."

"What would he say if he knew what I have done?" thinks Mrs. Arden, though she can not bring herself to regret it.

Laurent, on his part, has received the decision of the doctor without further remonstrance, appreciating fully how useless such remonstrance would prove in the face of Dr. Kirke's resolution and increased anxiety. He only expresses his intention of remaining during part, at least, of the night, and hopes that he may be of service in some way.

It has been already said that Roslyn reads the meaning of the shadow on the doctor's face, and after tea she waylays him in the hall. He had paused a minute in the sitting-room, to give Geoffrey a prescription which he wishes sent at once into Kirton — and, when he comes out, a figure in white is standing by the staircase.

"Please excuse me, doctor" — it is Roslyn's voice that speaks — "I know you don't like troublesome questions; but is Colonel Duncan worse?"

The tremulous anxiety of her tone is not lost on the doctor's ear, and, looking into the upturned face, he sees that this anxiety is very genuine.

"I don't so much object to troublesome questions," he says, "as I object to questions which I can not answer. Colonel Duncan is not very much worse just now, but there are indications that he may be seriously worse before long. That is exactly the truth."

Exactly the truth, because spoken, as he thinks, to ears indifferent, save from the interest of friendship; but, as he passes on, a sob rises in the throat of the girl whom he leaves.

"I know he will die! I am sure he will die!" she thinks. "People who are useful and would be missed, always die — and worthless, ungrateful people live."

Whether or not she stands in her own mind for the type of worthless ingratitude, it is a very subdued Roslyn who presently joins the group now returned to the veranda, where the soft moonlit night is as bright as day.

"I was just wondering what had become of you," says Geoffrey, as she appears.

"And I was just fearing that you had deserted us again," says Laurent, speaking in a tone of reproach. During the afternoon he had determined to play the role of injured indignation; but, when he met Roslyn at tea, her manner at once changed his intention.

"I stopped to speak to Dr. Kirke," says the girl, as she sits down; while the moonlight, falling on her face, shows what a troubled look it wears. "He is very uneasy about Colonel Duncan."

"What an unfortunate accident it was for you that Duncan should have been brought here!" says Laurent. "A thing of this kind affects one just in proportion as it is near one."

"I think I should have felt for him just the same if he had been at Clifton," she says, with a little indignation in her voice. "But even if I had not realized the sadness quite so much, I could not on that account wish that he had been taken where he might not have had as much care as he has had here."

"He must wish it himself, I should think," says Laurent. "One does not like to be the cause of so much trouble in another person's house."

"I hope Colonel Duncan trusts our friendship too much to imagine that we think of any trouble," says Mrs. Arden. "If he only can recover —" Then she pauses.

"You have no need to tell me," the girl says, in a low voice. "I know; and that is what cuts me to the heart. He has given me everything; and I have given him nothing — hardly a kind word; not even an anxious thought."

"You are reproaching yourself too much," says Mrs. Arden; but in this self-reproach she sees a better ground than she had hoped to find for her scheme. She realizes that the situation is in her own hands; and that it will be very easy to influence Roslyn to her purpose, if she approaches the point with care and skill.

"It is as well, perhaps, that you have not known him as he deserves to be known," she says, after a moment's pause. "It is better to reproach yourself for having felt too little, than to suffer as you would necessarily suffer if you had felt more. Ah!" — it is a very genuine sigh — "I should be sorry if any woman who loved Hugo Duncan were here now!"

"You think he is so certain to die?" asks Roslyn, almost in a whisper.

"I don't think the doctors have much hope; and his situation is certainly very critical and dangerous. Since it is so," she adds, after a minute of hesitation and reflection, "I feel that I must not delay telling you something which he told me to-day — something which concerns you very much."

The tone in which these words are uttered is more expressive than are the words themselves; and Roslyn turns her face around with a quick motion of surprise.

"Something which concerns me very much?" she says. "What was it, Aunt Lavinia?"

Mrs. Arden leans forward and takes her hand — a little, soft, chill hand.

"You reproach yourself because you have never given Hugo Duncan anything in return for all that he has given you," she says. "Are you willing to give him something — a great thing to him, yet a slight thing to you, for he only asks it in case he is dying?"

"I can not imagine anything that I would not give him if he asked it," answers Roslyn. "But I have no idea what it can be."

"He asked you for your love once, my dear," says the elder lady; "and you told him that you could not give it. He asks now that, in case he is dying — 'remember,' he said, '*only* in case I am dying' — you will let him give you his name and his fortune."

Silence follows these words, for Roslyn is so much astonished that she hardly takes in the full meaning of what she has heard.

"His name and his fortune!" she repeats, after a minute. "I do not understand — what does he mean?"

"Simply that you will marry him, my dear," answers Mrs. Arden. "Not for his own sake," she adds, hastily, seeing the girl shrink, "but for yours. He wishes to leave you his fortune — he has already done so in his will — but, to put the matter beyond all danger of contest, he desires to leave it in this way."

"But I can not — I can not!" says Roslyn, in a choking tone. "To do for money what I would not do for love — oh, I should feel as if it were too base!"

"There is no reason for such a feeling," says Mrs. Arden. "Look at the matter in this light — the light in which *he* will regard it — that you do it, not for money, but to gratify a dying man, who loves you devotedly: to make him secure that what he wishes you to have, you *will* have; and to show a last appreciation of all he has desired to do for you. If you know how much this has been — how nobly and how utterly he has been willing to set aside self to serve you — think of it, and I am sure the thought will make you feel that this last favor will be a small one for you to grant."

Almost unconsciously to herself, Mrs. Arden's voice has taken a tone of pleading that is not lost on Roslyn. The latter is already wrought to a state of feeling which seconds such an appeal powerfully; and when to the forces of pity, regret, and reproach, this eager persuasion is added, the result is not difficult to forecast.

"You think I ought to do it?" she asks, breathlessly.

"I do not see how you can hesitate," answers Mrs. Arden, impulsively. "Remember that he does not ask you to run any risk of his living — on that point he was most emphatic. Only in case the doctors declare he must die, does he ask you to do this."

"He is always generous and thoughtful," says the girl in a stifled voice. "Yes, I will do it — how can I refuse? But, O Aunt Lavinia, it does seem horrible to say, 'only in case he is dying.'"

"My dear, how could he ask it otherwise? — and how could you grant it otherwise?"

There is no answer; and, after a moment, Mrs. Arden goes on:

"Another thing which I would like to say to you is about Mr. Laurent. I do not know — and pray understand that I do not ask — how matters stand between you; but if you have any distrust of him, any desire to test him, and discover how far he is governed by mercenary hopes and wishes, this will give you an opportunity to do so. Tell him to-morrow what you think of doing, and see what he will say."

"I do not need to test him," says Roslyn, proudly. "I understand him thoroughly."

"Nevertheless, it is well to be certain," says Mrs. Arden. "If he is weighed in the balance, and found wanting, you will be justified in believing what you now only suspect. But I must not stay any longer," she says, abruptly, as the striking of a clock in the hall breaks the silence of the house. "You must go to bed, my dear, or else we shall have a very pale Roslyn to-morrow. Good-night. Try to sleep, and not to think."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Arden's injunction to the contrary, Roslyn passes the remainder of the night in thinking rather than in sleeping. It is long after she is left alone before she even lies down; and then the hours, as they go, leave her as wakeful as they found her. Dawn is breaking before the lids at last close over her eyes and she falls asleep.

When she wakes it is with a sense of having overslept her usual hour of rising, and she is scarcely surprised to find Lettice standing by the bed, looking at her with a smile.

"Why, Lettice!" she says, springing with a start to an upright position. "Am I very late? — or are you very early?"

"It is you who are very late," answers Lettice. "I found breakfast over when I came in; and Mrs. Arden said that you had been awake late last night, so she would not allow you to be disturbed."

"Yes," says Roslyn, with a shadow of recollection falling over her face. "I was late last night, and — how is Colonel Duncan this morning?"

"No better, I was told," answers Lettice, gravely. "I think Dr. Kirke is very anxious about him."

Roslyn does not answer. The memory of last night, of all that Mrs. Arden said, and of her own promise, is too strongly in her mind for her to be able to speak on the subject in her usual manner; so without a word she rises and begins to dress.

Lettice watches her some time, silent but observant, according to her usual fashion. Then she says, abruptly:

"And so Mr. Laurent has come — at last! I expected him some time ago. What has delayed him?"

"I have not inquired," Roslyn answers, indifferently. "He came yesterday — to see Colonel Duncan. That is all I know."

"To see Colonel Duncan!" repeats Lettice. "Well, yes — no doubt he is deeply interested in Colonel Duncan; but I fancy he is more interested in something else, Roslyn."

"Perhaps so," says Roslyn; "but it is a question I do not care to speculate upon, as I have no knowledge of Mr. Laurent's subjects of interest. Now, will you come and breakfast with me?"

"I have breakfasted, but I will go down with you," says Lettice, rising, and feeling as if some change which she did not understand had come over Roslyn.

No one could be more conscious of the change than Roslyn herself, as she walks past the door of Colonel Duncan's room, and wonders with a sense of awe and dismay whether Mrs. Arden's proposal of the night before may not have been a dream or a hallucination.

The first look at Mrs. Arden's face, when they meet in the hall below, assures her, however, that it was neither. The elder lady's glance is eager, interrogative, full of interest and anxiety. Yet her words are simple.

"I would not let you be disturbed, my dear," she says, "because I kept you awake so late last night. I hope you feel well to-day?"

"Quite well, thank you, Aunt Lavinia," answers Roslyn; but she does not repeat the question which she has already asked Lettice — the inquiry about Colonel Duncan which is usually first on her lips in the morning. "I shall hear soon enough," she thinks; and then she goes into the breakfast-room.

While she is sitting there, drinking some coffee, and trying rather unsuccessfully to eat, Geoffrey comes in.

"Good-morning, Mademoiselle Laziness," he says, with his cheerful smile. "You were certainly determined not to be the early bird that catches the worm, or the worm that is caught by the early bird, this morning. Laurent is here to represent either bird or worm, as the case may be, however."

"For shame, Geoffrey!" she answers. "What disagreeable comparisons and suggestions! Sit down and entertain Lettice. I am so stupid that she looks disconsolate."

"Geoffrey need not sit down to entertain me," says Lettice, "for I have been only waiting until you finished your breakfast — or pretense of breakfast — to say good-by. I just ran over for a little while, to hear how Colonel Duncan is, and to have a glimpse of you."

"But you have not had a glimpse of me yet," says Roslyn, "and I want you to stay; so you must stay."

"Must I? I think not, with your majesty's permission. I never knew any one to whom the imperative mood came so naturally."

"Geoffrey has spoiled me, and so have you. But please stay, Lettice. I am in earnest when I say that I want you."

"Not very much, I think," says Lettice. "You don't want me yet — you have not decided what or how much to tell me. When you do decide, if you have any real need of me, you can come to me, or send for me. Meanwhile, I must go home."

"I will go with you," says Geoffrey; who, being a good deal puzzled himself by the existing state of affairs, feels that he would like a confidential talk.

Lettice understands him, and says nothing dissuasive of his attention as she takes up her parasol. "A pack-horse to bear other people's burdens is what I was made for," she said once a little bitterly to Roslyn — but at least she is a willing pack-horse; and for no burdens so willing as for those of Geoffrey Thorne.

Roslyn says nothing to detain Geoffrey, nor makes any further attempt to persuade Lettice to remain. Seeing that she is destined to a *tête-à-tête* with Laurent, she determines to make the use of it which Mrs. Arden has suggested; and, as far as may be, to test him thoroughly.

"I am tired of uncertainty," she thinks. "I must know whether they are right or wrong. He shall be weighed in the balance, and, if found wanting, I am done with him once and forever. What do I hope? what do I desire? I am sure I do not know. I feel as if I were being impelled by circumstances toward some end which I have not wisdom enough either to desire or to seek."

"Roslyn!"

It is Mrs. Arden's voice speaking unexpectedly; and the girl lifts her head with a start from the hands which have been supporting it.

"Yes, Aunt Lavinia," she says. "What is it?"

"Nothing startling," answers Mrs. Arden, observing the expression of apprehension in her eyes. "I only came to say that Mr. Laurent wants to know if he may not have the pleasure of seeing you this morning."

"There is no reason why he should not," Roslyn replies, as she rises. "I was just thinking that I would go to him, else he may fancy that I am afraid of him."

"He is not likely to fancy that," says Mrs. Arden, looking with a smile at the proud young face. "But you had better go; and pray, remember what I suggested last night."

"I shall not forget," Roslyn answers. Then she pauses an instant. "Was it a dream, Aunt Lavinia," she says, wistfully — "the other which you suggested? I almost think it must have been."

"No, my dear," the elder lady answers; "it was not a dream. I hope you do not mean that you regret your promise?"

"No," the girl answers, gravely; "I do not regret having made it; but I hope — oh, I hope very much that I may not be called on to fulfill it!"

With this, she walks away, leaving Mrs. Arden to look after her anxiously; and wonder whether she had not better have left things to take their course.

Such a doubt as this is not likely long to prevail in a mind so well-poised and well-satisfied as her own; and she is considering what her next step shall be, by the time Roslyn is shaking hands with Laurent.

The latter is standing in one of the open French windows of the drawing-room when, hearing a light tread, and the sweep of a dress across the floor, he turns quickly, with such a light of pleasure leaping over his handsome face, that Roslyn — who, up to this time, has steeled herself against him — suddenly feels, with a sharp pang, how hard, how very hard, it is to doubt him.

"How glad I am to see you!" he says, impulsively. "I really began to fear you were not coming."

"I am very late this morning," she answers, "and have just breakfasted. If people come so early, they must expect to wait," she adds, with a smile.

"I came early because I was anxious to hear how Duncan spent the night," he says. "Before I left Kirton it was reported that he was either dying or dead."

"But it is not so bad as that," says Roslyn, with all the color suddenly leaving her cheeks. "I believe he is no better, but not worse — not so much worse."

"No, the doctors say that his condition is much the same; but, since he is no better, they fear the worst. It is a sad case; and I am sorry that there seems no prospect of my being able to see him."

"Is there no prospect of that?"

"The doctors are unwilling, and of course I do not desire to press the point."

Silence for a moment. Roslyn looks out with troubled eyes over the brilliant world, thinking of Duncan, and of what hangs for her upon his life or death; while Laurent, watching her face, and failing to read her thoughts, presently speaks.

"I must repeat what I said last night, that this is a most unfortunate state of affairs in its result upon you. I never saw any one so changed as you seem to be."

"Am I?" she says, coming back hastily to the recollection of things immediately around her. "It is not strange. I have much to change me — much besides the sadness, I mean."

"May I ask what?" (in a tone of solicitude which she well remembers). "Surely you know that there is no one whose interest in all that concerns you is deeper than my own,"

"I do not know that at all," she answers, "and I should give my other friends poor appreciation if I believed it; but I am not sure that you have not a right to know something which is at present concerning me."

Her manner, even more than her words, surprises him. She looks at him with grave, quiet eyes; and he, astonished and uncertain, replies:

"I have the right of a deep interest, at least. You will do me great injustice if you doubt that."

She smiles a little — a smile which means, "You have a deeper interest than you know"; but he is not able to read the meaning, and it puzzles him. By this time his curiosity is awakened, and his interest stimulated. The fair face at which he looks baffles as well as charms him, and no man likes to be baffled — especially by a woman.

"Yes, I will tell you," she says, quietly, "because I feel that, being Colonel Duncan's nearest relative, you have a right to hear. You must know, then, that, in his generous kindness, he desires to leave his fortune to me" — her eyes, that do not swerve from the face before her, read all the change that comes over it as she utters these words — "and he thinks that the best way to do this will be for me to marry him."

Her voice stops, and it is fully a minute before Laurent can decide what to say, or find words in which to utter it. This revelation is so wholly unexpected, that he can not at once see what it is best to do, or how he should face it. He is conscious that his countenance has betrayed his dismay; but after a quick reflection, a quick rallying of his forces, he hopes that this dismay can be turned to good account.

"And do you mean to do it?" he asks, at length, his voice quivering despite his efforts to control it, and his eyes expressing all the emotions that have rushed over him.

"That I do not know," she answers, slowly. "My decision depends on many things." Then she looks at him with a full, challenging gaze. "What do you advise me to do?" she asks.

The pause which ensues is more full of meaning and uncertainty than any which has preceded it, for both are aware how much hangs on the next words. Roslyn feels her pulses beating with a vibrating rush, and Laurent has an instinct, though no full recognition, of all that is at stake for him. If such a marriage takes place and Duncan lives, Roslyn, of course, is lost to him forever. But, then, if Duncan lives, is not Roslyn probably lost to him in any event? Whereas, if Duncan dies — he almost grows giddy as he thinks of what may follow then: Clifton his, and all the rest of the fortune which he covets, Roslyn's — his eyes glow as he looks at her. All doubts of his hold upon her disappear. Would she come and ask his advice, throw the virtual weight of decision upon him in this manner, if his power were not as great as ever with her, if whatever was hers might not, at a word, be his? These reflections pass rapidly through his mind — and then he speaks:

"Since you ask my advice, I can only say that it is hard to refuse a dying man anything he asks. And this man loves you."

"Yes, he loves me, too well," she says, in a low tone. "But this is a great deal to ask. And then — I must think — mistakes are possible: what if he should not be a dying man?"

"That is taken in the risk," says Laurent, too absorbed in his own view of the matter to consider that hers may be different. "It is like playing for a high stake. The chance of failure enters; but one thinks of the gain, and plays boldly — to win or lose. And there is so much to win here — wealth, happiness: for you must know that only want of wealth has held me back from you!"

"I thought — I understood," says Roslyn, "that the obstacle which held you back was honor."

"Ah, what did that signify?" he cries, spreading out his hands with a dramatic gesture. "Do you think I would not have burst that bond without a thought — to come to you? But I could not, I dared not. I was held, as in a chain, by the bitterest curse of human existence — want of money. I could not ask you to share — ruin. But fortune has come to our aid as I never dreamed

that it would. When Duncan dies, Clifton, you know, will be mine; and if the rest is yours — ah, then happiness will be ours at last!"

"Will it?" says Roslyn, in a cold voice. At that moment every shred of illusion falls, and she sees him as he is — with his beautiful exterior, and his hard, selfish heart. "My God! to think that I nearly loved him!" she says to herself with a shudder. The repulsion which overcomes her is stronger for the reaction from the fancy which went before. She can hardly force herself to go on addressing him.

"Will it not?" he says, quickly. "Of course, there is no certainty until Colonel Duncan's death; but then —"

"But then you are ready to take his inheritance and enjoy it!" cries Roslyn, possessed with passionate indignation. "I suppose one should not blame you for that. Men like you must feel and act according to their nature. But, gracious Heaven! what a heart you must have, to deliberately plan — and hope — like this, while he lies between life and death who has been so kind — so generous — !" She pauses, almost choked by emotion; but, recovering herself, goes on hurriedly: "This, however, concerns only yourself. What concerns me — me, whom you desire to use as the ball that is thrown for good or ill fortune in play — is to let you know at once the greatness of your mistake, when you dare to fancy that I am yours, to be played for the high stakes you covet!"

He sees his mistake, indeed, in the flashing lightning of her eyes, and absolutely quails before her.

"I never dared to think you mine," he says; "but, since I love you —"

She stops him with a gesture of scorn. "Love!" she says. "Do not make me hate the word which ought to represent a noble thing! You love me — and yet you are willing to risk the absolute loss of me! You are willing that I should become the wife of a man who may live — in the hope that he may die, and so I would be able to come to you as his widow, enriched with his fortune! I do not understand such love, Mr. Laurent — or, rather, I understand and despise it. God grant that Colonel Duncan may live; but, whether he lives or dies, I am done with you forever! You deceived me once — when you talked of honor, and thought of money. You will never deceive me again. It may spare you future disappointment to understand and believe this at once."

With these words, she turns, and, before he can speak, were he so inclined, has crossed the room swiftly and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GEOFFREY GIVES HIS OPINION.

So far, things have worked so smoothly toward Mrs. Arden's end, that she is not prepared to encounter finally a spirited opposition. This comes from Dr. Kirke, who hears of what is proposed with mingled wrath and disgust. Indeed, it is difficult to express within due bounds what he thinks of such sentimental folly.

"If you want to kill the man," he says, brusquely, "you could not find a better way to do it — that is all!"

"But, doctor," says Mrs. Arden, "you forget what I have told you, that Colonel Duncan only wishes this in case he must die. If there were already no hope of his recovery, it could not kill him, you know."

"While there is life there is hope," replies the doctor, sharply. "I never give up fighting until the patient is in *articulo mortis*. Besides, where is the sense of such a proceeding? If he must die, why may he not as well die single as married?"

"That," says Mrs. Arden, with dignity, "you will admit is for him to decide. He simply desires that this ceremony may take place when you declare that he can not recover."

"When I declare that he can not recover, he will be too far gone to admit of any ceremony," says the doctor; "and if you attempt such a thing in his present condition, I warn you that you will probably kill him, and I shall decline any further responsibility in the case."

With this ultimatum he walks away, leaving Mrs. Arden in a state of indignation and indecision. To proceed in the face of such an opinion seems impossible, yet to abandon her plan is more than she can think of doing. The result is, that she goes to Geoffrey for advice, and amazes him scarcely less than she has amazed the doctor by the revelation of her intention.

Nor is Geoffrey's surprise unmingled with other sensations. To give up Roslyn — that is, all hope of winning her — as he has done in his heart, is one thing; and to hear that she is absolutely on the point of marrying another man, is quite another. The old passion, the old jealousy, rises hot and strong in his breast, and he dismays Mrs. Arden by the manner in which he says:

"Great Heaven! Aunt Lavinia, what are you thinking of? Has Roslyn consented to such a thing?"

"Yes, Roslyn has consented," answers Mrs. Arden. "I do not see how she could refuse. Colonel Duncan only asks it in case he is dying."

"Then why should he ask it at all?" demanded Geoffrey, as the doctor has asked before him. "I see no reason why, for a mere sentiment which can do him no possible good, he should want to turn Roslyn into a widow! The mere thought is intolerable."

"It is for her own sake — I have told you that. He wishes to secure his fortune to her."

"Has he not already done so by leaving it to her in his will? The whole thing is nonsense, Aunt Lavinia, and I am surprised that a woman of your sense should have entertained such an idea! It is not like Duncan to have so little thought — not to consider how much unnecessary pain he would give Roslyn — and I really think he must have made the request when he was delirious."

"He was nothing of the kind," says Mrs. Arden, who has not courage to acknowledge her own share in the matter. "He was as clear in his mind as you are this moment. I wish you would be reasonable, Geoffrey, because I want to ask your advice how to proceed. Dr. Kirke will not hear of countenancing the matter. He says it will kill Colonel Duncan — although I have distinctly told him that Colonel Duncan only wishes the ceremony performed in case he can not recover."

"There is absolutely no reason for such a request," says Geoffrey; "and I thought Duncan was a man of more sense and unselfishness than to make it. I have no advice to offer, Aunt Lavinia. I don't at all see how you are to proceed, unless by simply being prepared to seize the final moment when the doctor says, 'He is dying' — a moment not very favorable for anything of the kind you propose, in real life, whatever it may be in romances."

"Geoffrey!" says Mrs. Arden, in a tone of reproach. Then she rises — "I see that I need not have consulted you," she says. "I gave you credit for more good feeling than it seems you possess."

"It does not strike me that good feeling is what is called for, so much as common sense," says Geoffrey. "Have you thought how painful in many respects it would be to Roslyn?"

"Roslyn is quite willing to undergo the pain," says Mrs. Arden. "She feels that it is a very slight thing which is demanded of her, to gratify the wish of a dying man who would count no sacrifice to serve her."

With these words she leaves the room, without giving Geoffrey time to reply — a fortunate thing, perhaps, since Geoffrey's reply would not be likely to please her.

"Count no sacrifice to serve her!" repeats the young man. "There are others besides him, of whom that may be said, but who would not make it a reason for asking a very painful sacrifice of her. I would not have thought it of Duncan — I really would not!"

And in this judgment Geoffrey is no more mistaken or short-sighted than the most of us are in judgments that we pass every day — drawing conclusions from erroneous premises, and pronouncing opinions upon actions the motives of which we can not gauge.

"I'll see Roslyn at least," he thinks, after a short reflection; "and if she is averse — as well she may be — to this thing, she shall not be forced into it by Duncan's selfishness, or Aunt Lavinia's scheming. The fortune, indeed! Confound the fortune — as if Roslyn needed any fortune beyond herself!"

With such thoughts the impetuous young fellow swings himself out of the room, and proceeds to search for Roslyn. But that young lady is more easily sought than found. She is not to be discovered in the house; so he turns his steps in the direction of the garden, and fails, also, to find her there. He might imagine that she has gone out with Laurent, but for the fact, of which he has heard, that this gentleman went away alone some time before. Much puzzled, therefore, he is retracing his steps toward the house, when Ruby, Mr. Vardray's favorite setter, and Roslyn's devoted attendant, espies him, and comes dashing to him from the orchard.

"By Jove! why didn't I think of it before? — that is where she is!" he says aloud, as the dog springs upon him.

A pleasant place it is in the orchard, and a favorite place of Roslyn's, under the low-spreading apple-trees, where a minute later he finds her. She is sitting on the grass, and, without stirring, she looks up with a slight smile as he draws near.

"So you have found me?" she says. "I did not fancy any one would think of looking for me here."

"Which means that you came here to avoid being found," he says. "After that, I would beg pardon and go away, if I had not a special reason for seeking you; but I have one: so I hope you will bear with me and let me stay."

"Oh, yes," she answers, indifferently; "stay, if you like — it does not matter. I only wanted a little while to myself to think; and I have had it."

"Do I know the subject of your thoughts?" asks Geoffrey, throwing himself down on the grass, and looking at the fair face which of late has grown so much graver.

"Do you know the subject of my thoughts?" she repeats. "In a general sense, you know the subject of them; but you could scarcely know what I was thinking on that subject."

"Tell me the subject, and let me guess."

She shakes her head. "If it were worth while for you to guess, I might," she says; "but it is not."

"Were you thinking of something of which I have just heard," he asks, quickly — "something which Aunt Lavinia has just told me? Roslyn, are you troubled about the promise which has been drawn from you with regard to Colonel Duncan?"

"No," she answers, quietly, "I am not troubled about that. Why should I be? It is not much that he asks in comparison to all that he has given."

"But this is not a matter of debit and credit," says Geoffrey. "I was afraid you were taking that view, and therefore I want to tell you that it is wrong. You are not bound in the least to do this thing, Roslyn, if it is painful to you; and painful it must be. It is a very selfish thing of Colonel Duncan to ask — although I suppose one should make allowances for a man who is in love and has a fever."

"I don't think it is a selfish thing," says Roslyn, hastily. "It seems to me that it is as unselfish as everything else about him. He is not thinking of himself, but of me."

"He desires to give you his fortune, I know," says Geoffrey; "but this is a very unnecessary step to that end. His will is sufficient to secure it to you."

She makes a slight gesture, significant both of impatience and indifference. "I care nothing about that," she says, "whether it is or is not necessary. He asks it — that is enough."

A short silence follows. Roslyn looks away across the meadows, toward the fringing, many-tinted woods, while Geoffrey looks at her thoughtful face and ponders the situation.

"I can't understand it!" he breaks out at length. "I am puzzled as I never was before in my life! What motive Duncan has for this request, and why you should accede to it from a man for whom you have no liking beyond friendliness, I can not make out. If I could imagine that the fortune tempts you, it would be another matter."

"I have not thought of the fortune at all," she says, "except that I realize how kind it is of him to wish to give it to me; and I have made it a test, for — some one else."

Geoffrey's heart leaps. "You mean Laurent?" he exclaims.

"Yes," she replies, "I mean Mr. Laurent. I could not be satisfied of being quite just to him unless I tested him in some way, and this way presented itself. I told him what it was proposed I should do, and he — but stop a moment! Tell me, Geoffrey, what you would have answered in his place."

"In his place," answers Geoffrey, "loving you and hoping that you might love me, I should have begged you not to think of doing such a thing. I should have said that no fortune could repay me for the fact that you were, even for one hour, the wife of another man!"

"Mr. Laurent was less romantic," she says, with a faint, bitter smile. "He at once advised me to marry Colonel Duncan."

"Of course — thinking that he could in that case win both you and the fortune."

"Yes: and was it not my fault that he should have thought he had but to speak — and win me? Oh, what a fool, what a fool I have been! Geoffrey, I scorn myself as much as you can scorn me!"

She looks at him with eyes that shine; the color has risen into her face, and he sees that her hands are trembling with excitement.

"If you scorn yourself," he says, "no more than I scorn you, Roslyn, you need not torment yourself with that sentiment at all. How could you know at first what is plain to you now?"

"But to trust at all, to think at all of a man who was avowedly acting a dishonorable part — that is what I can not forgive myself!"

"You forget how many extenuating circumstances there were or appeared to be," says Geoffrey. "Don't be hard on yourself! You were only a little foolish, as any girl would have been; and you acted in a difficult position with a dignity and discretion which few girls could have displayed."

"Ah, you say so to comfort me; but I — 'I am shamed through all my nature,' to remember my folly!"

"If the wound is only to your pride," says Geoffrey, "I am content — and so should you be."

"It is only to that," she says — but says with a quiver in her voice, "I am hardly contemptible enough to break my heart about such a man! I don't know that any man is worth breaking one's heart about, unless — unless it be the man who is dying yonder, and for whom I never cared."

Her voice sinks, and Geoffrey makes no answer. Indeed, a light dawns suddenly upon him like a revelation, and in the surprise of this revelation he can find no words. As has been already said, the old passion and jealousy have been roused within him, and now they stir tumultuously.

"Have I not given you as much as he?" he is inclined to ask, but restrains the impulse, being wise enough to understand (many a man does not) that only received love has a claim upon its object, not that which is given without recognition or return. Besides, has he not promised Roslyn to be only her brother henceforth? And as her brother he feels that now he may find opportunity to serve her. These thoughts require some time to pass through his mind, and hence several minutes elapse before he speaks again. Then he says, with something of wistful gentleness:

"I should be sorry for you to break your heart about any man, Roslyn. It always seems to me — it always has seemed to me — as if you were made for the brightness and sweetness of life, not for its pain and gloom. You remember my old quotation about you:

'The world, that knows itself too sad,
Is proud to keep some faces glad' —

and your face was made to be glad."

"You want me to take all and give nothing, then? I always said that you thought me a soulless creature, a human butterfly, only fit for sunshine. I don't say that you are not right. I am frivolous, and I know it. But I can feel a little — at last."

She has not looked toward him as she utters these words, but still away across the meadows toward the woods; so he does not see how tears are filling her eyes, but he does hear the ring of pain and reproach in her voice, and he answers, quickly:

"If it is to be a soulless creature to make sunshine and gladness and happiness for others in a world that is too sad, then I think you so. But with all your brightness I was never dull enough to fancy that you could not feel; and my only fear is that you may feel too much — that at this present time you are willing to sacrifice yourself from pity and causeless self-reproach."

She shakes her head. "You are mistaken," she says. "There is no spirit of self-sacrifice in me. If I were unwilling to do this which is asked of me, no doubt I should be selfish enough to refuse; but I am willing, quite willing — pray believe it."

"Who is't can read a woman?" Geoffrey thinks, looking into the clear yet baffling eyes that meet his own. What to make of this woman he does not know; but his doubts do not shake his loyalty of intention. "Of course, it is a matter which you alone can decide," he says, at last. "I only felt bound to let you know what I thought. I hope you will not imagine that I have been actuated by selfishness or jealousy."

"I could not do you such injustice," she answers. "I know well that you think too little of yourself, and far, far too much of me. I don't deserve it, Geoffrey — I have been worse than a fool!"

"Never mind what you have been," he says, smiling; "you are queen of all our hearts, and you shall have your birthright of happy fortune yet. Now, come" — he rises and holds out his hand to assist her to her feet. "Let us go to the house. No one would know where to find you if — you were needed. And I want to see the progress and end of Aunt Lavinia's schemes."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE END OF SUSPENSE.

The day wears away in a suspense which the household of Verdevale are not likely soon to forget. In the sick-room, which the doctors have hardly left at all, the most critical period of the prolonged battle between life and death has come, and, when the sun sets, no one knows what its issue will be.

"To night the final crisis occurs," the physicians say.

"If by morning he is not materially better, he will die."

It is a night of crisis for Roslyn, as well as for the almost dying man. Alone through its long hours, unable to sleep and racked by sore anxiety, she arrives at a clearer knowledge of herself, of her own needs and desires, than she has ever had before; and she weighs in a balance many things besides the spurious devotion of Laurent. The latter, indeed, has little place in her thoughts; his influence on her life, which was but weak and transient, has passed away so

completely that she recalls it only as one waking from sleep might recall a feverish dream. All her thoughts are given to Duncan; and she goes back over the life-long record of her association with him, and the record, quite as long, of his affection for her, with that aching sense of the "too late!" which is the most keen of all the bitter pains of existence. "Does one never realize the value of a thing until it is taken from one?" she asks, with sobbing breath. "All these years I have been so utterly indifferent; and now, now that I appreciate at last what he is, he is dying, and I can never, never let him know that I am not the weak, vain fool he has taken me to be, and that I have been."

In this way the night passes; and, when the first ray of daylight streams into the room, she turns her face away — for what news may it herald? As the light slowly broadens, her anxiety grows more intense to learn how the night has sped; but she can not bear to end the suspense by going to inquire, for even suspense is sometimes better than crushing certainty. The only comfort which she has is that, if he is dying, there is one thing which she may yet do for him before he goes, though he can never learn with what a willing heart it is done. "I must be ready and strong enough for that," she thinks, choking back her tears.

A little later, just as the sun rises, a step comes down the passage and pauses at her door. Her heart seems to pause also — literally to suspend its pulsations — in the interval of apparent hesitation before the door uncloses, and the kindly face of Mrs. Knight looks in.

"I thought you'd be awake, Miss Roslyn," she says, as the girl's large, dilated eyes meet hers; "so I've come to tell you that the colonel's better."

"Better!" repeats Roslyn, with a gasp. So entirely has she prepared herself to hear the worst, that the shock of surprise is too great for her to take in the idea at once. "Do you mean that he will not die?" she asks, after an instant's breathless pause.

"I hope not," says Mrs. Knight. "The doctors seem to think he won't. Dr. Kirke looks cheerfuler than I've seen him for a long time. So now you may try and go to sleep, my child — you are as white as a sheet."

She closes the door and goes away, leaving Roslyn in a trance of amazed relief. She has not thought of this at all; she has been sure that he would, that he must, die! The reaction of emotion is so great, she has been so spent by the vigil and suffering of the night, that consciousness almost leaves her as she sinks back on the pillow of the bed, saving, inarticulately, "Thank God!"

She is still as pale as a lily, but her expression is more bright than it has been for many a day, when Mrs. Arden sees her a few hours later. "She is glad to be spared the marriage," that lady thinks. "Poor Colonel Duncan! What a pity that he has set his heart on a girl who will never care for him!"

"Good news this morning, my dear," she says, aloud. "The crisis passed so favorably that the doctors think Colonel Duncan will recover. I would not disturb you at daylight to tell you, and I went to sleep soon afterward; but I suppose you have heard."

"Yes, Mrs. Knight came to tell me very early," answers Roslyn. "You might have known that I would be glad to be disturbed to hear such news, Aunt Lavinia."

"You had certainly a personal interest in hearing it," says Mrs. Arden.

The girl flushes. "I did not mean that" she says. "There was nothing personal in my gladness."

"I know there was not," says Mrs. Arden, kissing her with an impulse of self-reproach.

Later in the morning Laurent comes, and, as it chances, Roslyn is on the veranda when he enters the gate at the foot of the lawn. She turns at once to Geoffrey, who is with her.

"Yonder comes Mr. Laurent," she says. "Tell him the news — which will be very unwelcome news to him. I do not wish to see or to speak to him."

"But if he asks for you?" says Geoffrey, quickly, as she moves away.

"He will not ask," she answers, passing around the corner of the veranda and disappearing.

But, though she disappears, she does not enter the house. The day is too beautiful, and her heart is too light, in its relief from anxiety, for her to be satisfied indoors. By a retired, hedged path she takes her way to the garden, and, after wandering idly to and fro among the flowers for some time, she decides that she will go and carry the good news to Lettice and Mrs. Stanley. It has been long since she has taken the woodland walk — long since she has felt any inclination to do so — but to-day it will be a pleasure; to-day —

"Miss Vardray!"

Her hand is on the latch of the gate, which opens on the woods, when her name, called low and eagerly by a well-known voice, arrests her steps and makes her turn. As she sees Laurent advancing toward her, her face grows hard. "How dared he!" she says to herself. Then she stands quite still — waiting for him.

But when he approaches there is something about him which, even before he speaks, softens the heart of the stern young judge. He is paler than usual; he looks like a man who has suffered: and what touches a woman so quickly as that? He speaks, too, very humbly.

"I am afraid you think this a great presumption. But, when I asked for you, I was told that you had gone out toward the garden; and I wished so much to see you that I have ventured to follow you."

"I am at a loss," says Roslyn, coldly, "to imagine why you should wish to see me."

"You will let me tell you, then," he says. "I am going away to-day; but, before going, I should like, if possible, to put myself right in your estimation."

She does not say, "That is impossible," but her face says it for her, as she asks (still coldly), "Why should it matter to you what my estimation of you may be?"

"It matters," he answers, "because you are doing me injustice, and because — whether you believe it or not — I love you."

"If I have done, or am doing, you injustice," she says, "I am sorry. But the other — we will not discuss that, if you please."

"Yet it is of that I wish to speak," he says, "because it is with regard to that you are doing me the greatest injustice. Having discovered that I am not wholly true — a model of honor — you disbelieve in my sincerity altogether. But men are more complex than you think; and a man who violates the truth occasionally may love as well as if he were a paladin. So I have loved you — not enough, perhaps, to make me forget myself entirely, but enough to make me come nearer doing so than was ever the case before in my life. As I told you yesterday, the fact that I was bound to my cousin would have counted little against the force of this love, if I had not, by my own folly, put marriage out of my power, if I had not been a man too poor —"

"Mr. Laurent," Roslyn interrupts, haughtily, "I repeat that this is a subject of which I will hear no more. It does not interest me, and every word that you utter only sinks you lower in my esteem."

"That is because you do not comprehend," he says, eagerly — "because you know little of the power of love. Heaven seemed to open to me when I came here, thinking that I might be able to claim you. And those calculations which offended you so deeply yesterday — what were they but counting steps to you?"

"I have heard," says Roslyn, "that there are women who can forgive anything done for their sake. But I am not one of those women. Your excuse has no weight with me. I care nothing for such love."

"But you cared when we parted!" he says, as if in last appeal. "And if I had hope, the faintest hope, that you might care again, I should not regard poverty or —"

"Honor!" she says. "I do not doubt the last, at least. But you have a short memory, Mr. Laurent, if you have forgotten already what I told you yesterday. It was surely plain enough. But if you wish, I will be more explicit. I will tell you, once for all, that if you were as free as air, and as wealthy as your highest hopes or wildest dreams, I should say to you, as I say now: I care nothing for you, I have no trust in you, and nothing on earth could induce me to marry you!"

"You are certainly explicit enough," he says, bitterly. "I shall trouble you no further. I have here a telegram announcing my cousin's arrival in New York. I meant to leave it to you whether I should go or stay. But I see now that there is nothing to do but to go. You will give me your hand in farewell, perhaps. And, if you trust me in nothing else, trust me, at least, in believing that I love you."

She holds out her hand. Some instinct tells her that his last words, at least, are true. "I should prefer — for your sake — to believe anything else," she says. "But I will try to think better of you, and I hope that you may be happy."

"Think of me as one who leaves his best hope of happiness here," he says, kissing her hand.

A moment later she is standing alone, with a feeling as if all that had passed had been a dream. She leans her head unconsciously down on the gate, and, before she raises it, a familiar voice says:

"Was that the last act of the comedy?"

"Lettice!" says Roslyn, looking up with a start. "Where do you come from?"

"From home, my dear," answers Lettice. "Do you think I dropped from the sky? But, just as I reached the edge of the woods, I saw you standing here with Mr. Laurent; so I paused — naturally not wishing to interrupt you. Then I saw that tender farewell, and then I came."

"It was a farewell," says Roslyn — "a final farewell. He is going away to-day."

"Heaven be praised! That is — I don't want to rejoice too soon — if his going means nothing to you."

"Nothing," answers Roslyn, quietly — "absolutely nothing." She looks away for an instant, and then goes on: "That is the strange part of it — that it should be absolutely nothing. Three months ago I fancied myself in love with him! And now there is no one whose going could move me less. Is it not strange, Lettice, 'such a little while ago, such a little while'?"

"At our own inconstancy, should we sigh or smile?"

says Lettice, adding the line her words suggest. "I think, in your place, I should smile, for you know you never cared for him. At least, *I* knew it. I knew you were too true yourself not to detect the ring of false metal."

"I did detect it," she says. "There never was a time when I felt quite sure that he was true. But let us not speak of him any more — not any more at all. He is dead and buried, as far as we are concerned. But, while we talk in this way, you have not heard the news, the great news that Colonel Duncan is better, that the doctors think now he will get well."

"It is great news, indeed," says Lettice, watching the light which comes over the face of the other, and drawing her own conclusions therefrom. "There could not be any better news, and I must go and tell it to mamma. Will you not come, Roslyn? The walk may do you good."

"I think I will," says Roslyn. "It is such a glorious day. And what a day it might have been!"

CHAPTER XXX.

AN ANTICLIMAX.

"This I consider decidedly an anticlimax," says Colonel Duncan.

He speaks with a smile, as he finds himself, for the first time since his illness, down-stairs before the cheerful sitting-room fire. His welcome from all the family has amounted to an ovation; and now that he has been, despite his own demur, enthroned in a deep easy-chair, with an outlook

through the glass door on the bright November day, with its wealth of many-tinted foliage, while within are all the signs of pleasant family life — Mrs. Vardray's work-table, with Mrs. Vardray herself beside it, the open piano, the center-table strewn with odds and ends, and last, but not least, Roslyn's bright eyes and brighter smile — he feels that life is a very good and pleasant thing, even while he utters the above remark.

"What is it that you think anticlimax?" asks Mrs. Vardray. "It seems to me that it is a very perfect and delightful climax to see you well again."

"It strikes me altogether in the light of an anti-climax," he says. "After making all his arrangements to die, a man ought to die, and not come back to life again and be made much of, as you are making much of me."

"We are only too glad to have you to make much of," says the lady, cordially. "Roslyn looks as if she thought you were very ungrateful for your recovery."

"I was not thinking that," says Roslyn, with a slight blush; "but I was wondering if Colonel Duncan appreciates how anxious all his friends were about him when he was ill, that he talks of its being anticlimax to be well."

"I am not ungrateful for the kindness of my friends," says Duncan, looking at her and wondering if she understands how much of an anticlimax this recovery is to her. "I only feel that, having got so far, it was hardly worth while to have all the trouble over again. But it is a boon to be alive on such a day as this!" He breaks off abruptly as he rises and walks toward the glass door. "I have not been out yet, and I think this is the best time to begin to take a little open-air exercise. Will you join me?" he asks, turning to Roslyn.

"If you think there is no reason why you should not go," she answers.

"I can not imagine why there should be any reason," he says. "I feel as if I had played invalid and convalescent long enough."

So the door is opened, and they go out into the sparkling sunshine, tempered softly with autumn haze. The day is of that enchanting loveliness which never touches us so much as when it contains a premonition of decay, when Nature arrays herself in her most gorgeous robes before lying down to die. Every tree and shrub is aflame with color, while the turf is still freshly green, and the flowers are blooming more brilliantly than during the summer.

"You can not go far," says Roslyn to her companion, as they descend the veranda-steps; "so we will take a walk around the garden. The chrysanthemums and dahlias are worth seeing."

"Everything is worth seeing," he replies. "How I feel the truth of those lines! —

'The common air, the sun, the skies,
To him are opening paradise.'

It is what every one recovering from illness must feel — but what I feel peculiarly, to whom the outer world has always been so much."

"I know that you have always led a very active existence," she says; "and the doctor thinks it is to that — to the strength of constitution which it gave — that you owe your life."

"Very likely. I certainly owe to it health of mind and body during all my life; so I am quite willing to owe to it the preservation of life also. Ah, what a scene! what an atmosphere! 'Opening paradise' could scarcely be more beautiful to eyes that have only seen the walls of a sick-chamber for weeks."

"I have thought of you often when I have been walking here," says Roslyn, "when I would look at so much beauty — and then at the closed blinds of your windows."

"If your glances could have penetrated those closed blinds, I might have been consoled a little by their sympathy," he says, smiling. "I certainly needed comfort very much. I found myself not made of heroic stuff at all, in the way of endurance."

"Men seldom are heroic about enduring illness or confinement, I believe; that is our prerogative."

It will be seen that up to this point the conversation has proceeded easily, and been of very indifferent character. Now Duncan feels that he must brace himself to say something which he fears may be very painful to his companion, but which it is quite essential that she shall hear, which she must hear sooner or later — if not from him, then from some one else. So, with a nervousness which betrays itself a little in his voice, he says:

"I think I ought to tell you that I had a letter from Laurent the other day. He wrote from New York."

"Indeed!" says Roslyn. Unconsciously she looks at him inquiringly — but it is because his tone surprises her, not because she is interested in any news from Laurent. "I hope he is well," she says, with the conventional instinct which is frequently of such good service to us in life.

"Quite well, I believe," Duncan answers. He hesitates an instant — then thinking, "I have no finesse, I had better blurt it out!" he goes on: "His expressed object in writing was to inquire about my health; but his real object, I think, was to tell me that he is on the eve of marrying his cousin, who had just returned from abroad."

Roslyn says "Indeed!" again, very calmly; for now she knows why Duncan looks away from her, and why his voice has taken that tone of nervousness. "He is afraid I care!" she thinks, with a scorn which would steady her nerves, if they needed any steadying. "I knew that Mr. Laurent went to New York to meet his cousin," she says aloud. "I am not surprised to hear that they are to be married."

"You knew that he was going!" says Duncan, looking at her with surprise. "Did he tell you so?"

"Yes, the day he left," she answers, quietly. "That was his excuse for going away without seeing you — after coming to see you!"

"Coming to see me!" he repeats. "I should not like to say what I think was his motive for coming — besides, of course, his desire to see you."

"I think we may leave that out of the question," she says. "I have no idea that he would ever have come back but for the news of your accident."

"But being here — forgive me! — did he ignore what passed last summer?"

"Oh, no. I think he was quite willing to take up the matter just where he left off. Finding that I had no intention of permitting that, however, he was moved to offer to resign his cousin and remain here — if I said the word."

"And you—?"

"He went: so it is plain what I replied."

"You replied, no doubt, as you did last summer, that you would not permit him to break his engagement for your sake."

"I do not know whether or not I told him that, but I am sure I told him that if he were as free as air, I would not marry him. I was a fool last summer, but happily my folly was not of long duration."

"Let me beg that you will not call yourself by so harsh a name — and one so undeserved. You were dazzled — what girl would not have been? But, even though there was a little glamour over your sight, what a wonderfully steady head you kept!"

She shakes that head with an air of deprecation and denial. "You are very good," she says. "I can never forget how good, with regard to this very thing; but I can not condone my own folly."

"I hope you do not judge others as rigorously as you judge yourself," he says, smiling.

Here the subject drops, but the fairness of the day is wonderfully enhanced in Duncan's eyes by the great load that has been taken from his mind; and, as he walks by Roslyn's side around the garden, he feels again and again how good a thing it is to be alive. What he has just heard gives him no hope whatever of winning her himself, but it disposes of the fear that she may be taken away out of the familiar place she has brightened so long, by one unworthy of her. No

doubt, she will marry some one else — Geoffrey, perhaps — some day; but, meanwhile, she is here, as the sunshine is here, and Duncan rejoices in both.

When they turn to retrace their steps toward the house, he says, breaking rather abruptly a pause which has lasted for several minutes:

"I have not thanked you yet — I hardly know how to thank you — for your kindness in acceding to my request made when I thought myself about to die. It was like you to be ready to do what I asked; but I am glad you were spared a thing so painful. It must have seemed selfish of me to ask it — but I had a reason."

"I never, for a moment, thought it selfish," she says, in a low voice. "How could I — when I knew you were only thinking of me?"

"Yes, I was only thinking of you. But, you see, if I had properly appreciated the strength of my constitution, I might have spared you the request. However, I am not sorry to know that you were willing to do even as much as that for your old friend. I only want you to be certain of two things: first, that I appreciate your consent; and, secondly, that I make no mistake about it — that I base nothing upon it, and that I have no intention of tormenting you with the same request now that I am well."

To this comforting assurance, Roslyn makes no reply, and a few minutes later they are in the house, where Mr. and Mrs. Vardray meet the late invalid with many hopes that he has not made his first walk too long.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GEOFFREY GIVES A HINT.

A week later Colonel Duncan has returned to Clifton, and Verdevale has settled into its normal condition. The only change marking what is past is in Roslyn, and this change Geoffrey alone perceives. It is not likely that he would perceive it were his eyes not sharpened by previous knowledge; but, as it is, he sees a subtle difference in her — a difference too subtle to be described in words, yet which tells him that she is suffering from a regret none the less real because in a measure unacknowledged even to herself. "I am not the first person who has ignorantly and blindly thrown away a treasure," she thinks; "but I hope I have self-respect enough to abide by the consequences of my folly and blindness, without making any idle moan about it."

She certainly makes no idle moan; but Geoffrey sees that all is not light with her — that the blithe spirits are not so blithe as usual, the sunny eyes a little shadowed, the smiles not so frequent or so bright.

"Now would be my chance, perhaps, if I were like the lovers one sometimes reads of in novels," he thinks. "I might widen the misunderstanding between these two and keep them from ever coming together. But I don't think it would advantage me much if I did. I begin to see that, if I lived with Roslyn a hundred years, I would be no nearer to her at the end of that time than I am now. This being the case, I think the best thing I can do is to try and make her happy in the way she desires. Duncan — confound him! — has won her heart at last, and he is so stupid that he does not know it; so I suppose I had better try and make the fact plain to his comprehension — but how?"

A question more easily asked than answered: so Geoffrey betakes himself to his adviser-in-chief — Lettice.

"I am always bothering you about something," he says to her, apologetically, when he finds an opportunity; "but it is not about myself — at least not about myself directly — that I am

going to trouble you now. It is about Roslyn. Tell me if you have observed any change in her of late?"

Lettice nods. "There is a change," she says. "What do you think is the cause?"

"I would rather hear what you think. I am as clumsy in observation as in everything else, compared with you."

"Oh, no. Such modesty does not become you; but of course a woman reads, or ought to read, another woman better than a man can. Well, frankly, then, I am sorry to say anything painful to you, but I think Roslyn has found out that she cares for Colonel Duncan — now that he has gone."

"It is not as painful to me as you might think," says Geoffrey. "When a man makes up his mind finally and definitely that there is no hope for him, he is a fool if he can not submit to the inevitable. What good is it to tear one's hair and cry out against the hardships of Fate? I am a better philosopher than that."

"I am glad to hear it," says Lettice; "for indeed I begin to think at last that there is no hope for you."

"I have known it for some time — long enough to learn how to bear it. Perhaps, after all, my love for Roslyn has somewhat of the brotherly character. At least I know that I was so tremendously disturbed over the idea of her marrying Laurent, that this is a great relief to me."

"By this, I suppose you mean the prospect of her marrying Colonel Duncan?"

"Yes, for he is a splendid fellow, and a great deal more worthy of her than I am. No, don't look as if you thought me a marvel of generosity" — for Lettice glances at him with admiring approval; "I am only not stultified by self-conceit, and when I see a thing I know it. 'Let us come back to our sheep,' however, as the Frenchman said, and tell me what is to be done about Roslyn? I don't want it to be a case like those forlorn lovers whom somebody wrote about:

I was too proud the truth to show,
You were too blind the truth to know,
And so we parted long ago.' "

Lettice can not forbear smiling. "I really do not think that you are much hurt," she says. "I fear I have been wasting a great deal of unnecessary compassion on you. But I don't think any solicitude is needed about Roslyn and Colonel Duncan. He has been in love with her so long, that he is not likely to stop loving her now, and some day he will see the truth."

"You would not give him a hint?"

"No, I certainly would not. It is too delicate ground to venture upon; and, if you were mistaken, think how bad it would be!"

"I am not mistaken," says Geoffrey, remembering well that day in the orchard when the truth came to him as a revelation. "But I will abide by your decision — especially as I don't clearly see how I would set about giving the hint."

"It might be awkward," says Lettice, with a laugh.

When she laughs, Lettice is a very pretty girl, and so Geoffrey observes, looking down at her pure complexion, her delicate features, and clear gray eyes. What sound judgment she has too, and what a sweet, unspoiled nature, in circumstances where many people would be embittered! This is what he thinks, in the pause before he speaks again.

"Well, I trust to your judgment. But I hope you will observe how things drift, and let me hear. I shall be going away soon, you know."

"To your uncle, I suppose."

"Yes, to my uncle — poor old fellow! He is awfully hiped living alone; and he wants me to live with him — keeps on writing about it; so I suppose I must go."

"I think you ought to go," says Lettice, with decision. "It is not much to give him a few years of your youth in return for his affection — to say nothing of the fortune he will leave you some day."

"No doubt you are right — somehow you always are right — and I'll go to-morrow. Nobody at home would bolster up my resolution; so I have put off my departure from day to day."

"I did not mean to bolster up your resolution for such a speedy departure," says Lettice, smiling — though she feels with something of a pang how much sunlight will go out of her life with his bright presence.

"If a thing is to be done at all, it had better be done at once," says Geoffrey, philosophically. "Never mind!" This consolatory ejaculation is apparently addressed to himself. "A few months will pass and then I'll come back — to torment you less than I have during the past summer, I hope, Lettice, but to enjoy your society as much. And, meanwhile, you'll write to me?"

Lettice is inclined to think that she will not; but somehow the words of refusal stick in her throat, and, when Geoffrey takes his departure a little later, they have not been spoken.

Walking home with a glow of a virtuous resolution to animate his movements, he enters the grounds of Verdevale while the sun is sending a flood of level gold across them. Just as he emerges from the garden, he perceives Colonel Duncan entering the gate at the foot of the lawn, and he therefore strikes across the sward to meet him.

"We began to think we should have to send after you," he says, gayly, when reaching him. "Do you feel as if Verdevale were a prison, from which you had escaped, that you have been so long in coming back?"

"I think you know better than that," replies Duncan, smiling. "But I have not left Clifton since I returned to it, until to-day."

He does not add what a struggle it has been with him to remain away, nor how like a foolish moth rushing into a flame he feels in coming back.

"Well, we have all missed you deplorably," says Geoffrey, "and I assure you we feel as if we still had a right of jurisdiction over you. I am heartily glad you have come this evening, for I am thinking of going away to-morrow."

"Indeed! Where?"

"Oh, to my uncle, who has a most remarkable fancy for my society, and appeals to me in heart-rending terms to come and comfort his declining years."

"I am sorry you are going," says Duncan, "and I wonder that you are able to tear yourself away."

"I suppose you mean from Roslyn," says Geoffrey, who sees his opportunity, and prepares to take advantage of it, despite Lettice's advice to the contrary. "But I don't mind telling you that the best thing that can happen to me is to go away from Roslyn. She looks upon me as a brother, and, unless I want her to cease looking on me in any other light than as a tormenter, I had better be content with that. Honestly, I have not a chance with her — and I never have had."

"You may have, though," says Duncan, kindly.

The young man shakes his head. "I have given up," he says. "It is no great wisdom to do that, when one sees one has no chance."

They are near the house by this time — Geoffrey walking by the side of Duncan's horse — and he knows that, if he is to say anything more definite, now or never is his time. "I'll risk it!" he thinks — and then he looks up quickly.

"Only one man has a chance with Roslyn," he says, "and he — must pardon me for reminding him that 'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

There is not time for another word, since Mr. Vardray advances to meet them at this moment; and indeed Duncan is so much astonished that it is doubtful if he would be able to reply to Geoffrey's hint had he time to do so.

But this hint has opened his eyes, and by the aid of it he sees something in Roslyn's eyes when they meet, which without it he might not have seen or interpreted aright. The perception is almost overwhelming in its unexpectedness, and for the rest of the evening he is like a man moving, talking, having his being in a dream. He has no intention of making any opportunity to speak to Roslyn — he feels as if no time of waiting would be long now, with this strange, new happiness to ponder upon; but without any seeking, the opportunity comes, and he is not the man to let it pass.

It is the time for his departure, and he finds himself standing with Roslyn before the sitting-room fire, while Geoffrey has volunteered to go and order his horse. Both Mr. and Mrs. Vardray chance to be out of the room; and so, looking at the fair face before him, he feels that he must speak.

"Roslyn," he says, quickly, with the memory of Geoffrey's words in his mind, "it is said that faint heart never won a lady. Now, I have not a faint heart, but a very loyal and sore one — one that has tried to keep away from you, and has come back because the effort was beyond its strength. So, I break the promise which I made to you only the other day, and ask if you, who were so generous to a dying man, will be less generous to a living one? Life has been given back to me, as it were, but I am so ungrateful that I can not feel as if it had any value unless you will share it. Once more — I promise you, for the last time — let me ask if you will not do so?"

There is an instant's pause — then Roslyn, who has in her "no cunning to be strange," puts out her hand.

"It is for the last time," she says. "You need never ask me again, for I can imagine no better happiness than to share your life. I found that out when we thought you dying."

"When I robbed you of a fortune by getting well — do you know that?"

"To give me the better fortune of your heart," she says.

The End

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