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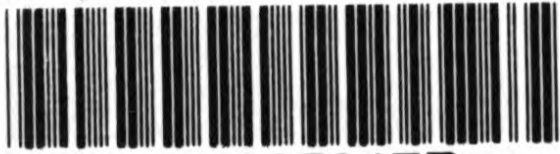
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WILFRED'S WIDOW.

A Novel.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'MRS. JERNINGHAM'S JOURNAL,'
ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. II.



LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1883.

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251. k. 413.





WILFRED'S WIDOW.

CHAPTER I.

'Get thee back, Sorrow—get thee back !
My brow is smooth, mine eyes are bright,
My limbs are full of health and strength,
My cheeks are fresh, my heart is light ;
So get thee back, oh get thee back !
Consort with age, but not with me.
Why shouldst thou follow on my track ?
I am too young to live with thee.'

MACKAY.



ILVA caught her hat from the stand in the back hall, and slipped out through the door into the grounds. She walked rapidly till she was

beyond sight of the house, and then set off running with all her might. She ran in that almost desperate manner down a long shrubbery-walk and so round a corner, where she was caught, breathless and panting, in the arms of Mr. Vaux.

‘Hullo!’ cried he, as she staggered backwards, ‘I beg your pardon. Who is it?—what, actually Mrs. Wilfred Lomax! Whither away so fast, fair truant? Art thou hastening to the theatre?’

She laughed and looked about her before she answered his question—indeed, she required a minute to recover her breath—then she said:

‘No; but I have had an interview with my father-in-law.’

‘Oh, I see!’ he cried; ‘ex—actly. And you were letting off the steam. You are frank, at any rate.’

‘Why should I not be frank?’ replied Silvia, with a dash of defiance in her manner.

‘Ah! why should you not? I don’t know, indeed. But, Mrs. Lomax, I have been wishing to have a little conversation with you for some time. I have a few words I want to say to you, if you will allow me.’

‘You are the second gentleman who has said that to me to-day.’

‘Well, you need not be alarmed. I am not going to make you an offer of marriage. I don’t approve of second marriages.’

‘Oh, you don’t, don’t you?’ and she gave him a queer look.

‘At least I would not approve of being a number two myself, or of seeing certain friends of mine in that position.’

‘Is that what you had to say, Mr. Vaux? It is uncommon kind of you, I’m sure; and now I hope I may wish you good-morning.’

‘Not so fast, please. That is not quite

all. You and I entered into a little compact together, I believe, Mrs. Lomax ?

‘What of that ?’

‘At least you asked me to keep a secret of yours—not to mention that I had met you on a certain night at a certain theatre by yourself.’

‘What of that ?’

‘Well, that was my side of the compact ; now I am coming to yours. I want you to do something for me in return for what you want me to do for you ; and if you won’t, I consider myself free to tell of your little escapade to whom I please.’

‘What is it ?’

‘It is that you won’t lead Percival Ross into an engagement, or make him give you any sort of promise of marriage.’

‘My goodness ! what have you got to do with him ? Are you my young gentleman’s keeper ? And why should not he marry me if he wishes it ?’

‘ Because it would be his ruin, and break his mother’s heart.’

‘ You are uncommon polite, Mr. Vaux.’

‘ Now look here, Mrs. Lomax—I don’t want to be uncivil to you—I don’t indeed. You are the widow of my old friend Wilfred Lomax, whom I have known from the time that he was a baby and I a big boy. And I’ll give another reason why I don’t want to be uncivil. I don’t think really ill of you. Of course I don’t know who or what you were before your marriage, but I don’t believe there was what the world would call harm in you. But I do think you were not quite in the rank you are now ; and I can see that you are fast and larky, and not a bit suited to our ——shire society, which is uncommonly strait-laced and ultra-respectable. I suppose by-and-by you might go to London with a lady-companion — you are just simply the most beautiful woman I ever

saw in my life—and you might marry a lord or some man of fortune and fashion, who would drive you about on the box-seat of his four-in-hand in Hyde Park, and show you at all the continental gambling-houses and be proud of you, and you might lead a gay rollicking life and be a happy woman; but if you marry that boy Percival, he'll go to the dogs, and his mother will break her heart—and what will you gain by it?’

Silvia heard him to the end in perfect silence, and then she said :

‘And if I don't make you this promise?’

‘Then I'll tell your father-in-law, and Aunt Lydia, and Lady Ross all about that lark of yours, and how you threw yourself on my mercy, and begged me not to tell.’

‘Poor dears, they'll only think it's colonial!’

‘Yes, I know; but that's all bosh. I

know a colonial lady when I see her, and I know a colonial who is not a lady. I have friends out there myself, Mrs. Lomax, in those very places to which poor Wilfred went—he took letters of introduction from me—and I could send out, or *telegraph* out, if needs be, and make inquiries; I wouldn't grudge the expense to save a friend.'

Silvia's face was scarlet, and then white again in a moment. With a struggle she recovered herself.

'Pray, sir, what makes you think that I have these dreadful designs on that boy?' she said, with assumed pertness.

'Well, I have my eyes, and I've a capital opera-glass—a first-rate opera-glass. And I have seen meetings, and partings, and walks, and comings and goings that have been supposed to be altogether on the sly. What fools men are, to be sure!'

'Oh, you have, have you? Well, Mr. Vaux, I may not be a lady, as you have

taken precious good care to tell me, but I'm not a spy, and I hope I may never sink so low as *that*.'

It was his turn to colour a little now, but he did not allow himself to be put out of countenance.

'I suppose,' he said, 'we understand each other. I'll keep your secret, and you'll leave that boy alone—honour bright.'

He held out his hand, and she put hers into it.

'Honour among thieves,' she said significantly, and had the satisfaction of seeing his colour rise again.

He gave her hand a hard pressure, as if to revenge himself; then dropped it, raised his hat, and walked away.

She laughed a little as she pointed after his retreating figure, shaking the hand in the air that he had actually hurt.

'“What fools men are, to be sure!”' she cried, repeating his own words, and by her

gesture applying them to himself; 'as if I could not run away with the boy if we wanted each other, and all he has to say about me come a day too late! "What fools men are, to be sure!"'

She lingered on the words quite lovingly, evidently taking a pleasure in saying them and then returned to the house.

In the drawing-room she found the two girls and Sir Percival Ross. He was sitting on a low stool at Ally's feet, holding on outstretched hands a skein of wool, which she deftly wound from off his fingers. She was stooping a little towards him; her lovely eyes were bright, and a slight wild-rose colour was in her cheeks. She looked very pretty, almost childlike, and innocence itself. His gay handsome face was upturned to hers; his brown eyes were full of laughing light; the sweetest possible smile played about his lips; his face glowed with health and youth in manliest browns

and reds. They made a charming picture, and looked in their very differences, in the very fact of the striking contrast between them, as if they were made for each other. They impressed Silvia, thus brought before her together, as they had never done before. Somehow they both of them looked so *good*. And she felt a keen little pang in her heart, which took her by surprise, and which she did not understand.

‘Good-morning,’ cried he, when he saw her. ‘Excuse me that I can’t rise or offer you my hand. I am sorry to tell you that I have called to say good-bye, and ask if I can perform any commissions for anybody in London. I’m a capital hand at choosing bonnets and matching wools. Ask Ally if I’m not.’

‘You are going to London?’

‘Only for a few days.’

‘It is a sudden plan, is it not? You did not mention it yesterday.’

Now no one had known that she had seen Sir Percival yesterday.

He gave her a laughing look of reminder.

‘I’m going to my Uncle Prendergast,’ he said; ‘my mother is uneasy about him, and insists on my looking him up. It is all that fellow Vaux’s doing. He keeps on bothering about the old gentleman’s health every time he sees her, and declaring that he looked ill when he was in London, and I don’t know what. She bore it pretty well for some time, but the constant dropping of water wears away the hardest stone; and by mere iteration he has made an impression, till she will not be content unless I run up to town and take him under my wing.’

‘Oh—h!’ said Silvia, in a prolonged way that was significant; she felt that she knew more about the reasons at least of Mr. Vaux’s anxiety for his Uncle Prendergast’s health than he did; ‘and I should not be

at all surprised if you find your uncle pretty well when you get there.'

'And to tell you the truth, no more should I,' he replied, laughing; 'though I suppose it is just as well I should go and see; for, as my mother truly says, why in the world should Mr. Vaux be anxious about Uncle Prendergast's health unless there was reason for it?—and for my part, I don't even see why he should if there *was*. He is not generally such an amiable, thoughtful, observant individual: it is not quite Mr. Vaux's *rôle*—is it now?'

He addressed the questions to the two girls, who knew Mr. Vaux well; but it was Silvia who answered him.

“There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,”

she said; and in so theatrical a manner that it made them all jump.

'Why, I thought you set yourself against

poetry and quotations, Silvia?' Percival said. 'I never expected to hear you quote Shakespeare.'

'Live and learn,' she replied. 'Wouldn't I like to go to London, too! It's well to be a man, and able to run about as you choose. Ally, do you never feel a desire *to escape* from your life? A mad craving for something else?'

'Oh no, dearest Silvia!' cried Ally, looking at her with soft, pitying eyes; 'life here is so sweet. I never wish for anything else' (at that moment she did not, with Percival Ross at her feet); 'but I can feel that *you*—and indeed,' she added, as the recollections of the last few weeks came back to her—'I think I know what you mean by that word *escape*, and can partly understand it. It is what makes dumb animals creep away and hide when they are suffering or going to die.'

'Oh, my dear little Ally, *that* was not

the sort of escape I meant—but never mind;’ and Silvia frowned while she laughed, and laughed while she frowned.

‘Where does Uncle Prendergast live?’ she asked abruptly.

‘No. 19, North Avenue Road, Regent’s Park—at your service,’ said he. ‘Would you like to escape there while I’m paying my visit?’

It struck Constance and Ally at the same minute that these two had a chaffing tone towards each other that they should not have expected. Recently, as we have said, Percival’s visits to the house had been much less frequent, and they had not noticed this manner before; but it was not what Silvia’s position as a mourning widow demanded, and it was unlike even the somewhat hushed and more reverent way in which, with all his boyishness, Sir Percival had involuntarily addressed *them* since they had passed through the furnace

of affliction. They never thought of *blaming* either of them, but they felt surprised, and a little sad.

Soon after this the young man took his leave, and Silvia went to her own room. Presently Ally followed her, having some proposal to make about an evening drive. She knocked at the door, and thinking she heard a sound that might be an invitation to enter, she went in. Silvia was busily engaged with the old occupation of looking over her things. There was an open box on the floor, and the table was covered with all sorts of knicknacks: cases that evidently contained ornaments, half-finished pieces of fancy-work, books, some water-colour drawings, and other things. She turned round and said sharply: 'Why did not you knock?'

'Oh, Silvia!' said poor Ally, little accustomed to be spoken to in that manner; 'I did indeed, and I *thought* you said "Come in."'

Oh, I did not mean to disturb you ; I will go away.' And she turned to leave the room.

'No, no ; I didn't mean that. Stay, since you are here ; only it is not so very pleasant looking over these old relics—but you may look over them too. See here,' placing her in a chair and the sketches before her. 'You did not know I could paint, did you now ?'

'How pretty — how charmingly done ! No, I had not an idea you drew at all. Oh, Silvia, how clever you are !' cried Ally, all admiration.

'Oh, that's nothing,' replied she, with a modest air ; 'only little sketches from nature, you know.'

Ally turned them over one after another.

'Why, this is in Switzerland, Silvia ! I did not know you had ever been out of Australia till you came here.'

'In Switzerland, is it ? yes, to be sure.

No more I ever had ; this is a copy, of course. They are not all from nature ; why should they be ?

‘And this,’ continued Ally, as the next in turn was in quite a different style. An oil-sketch of a girl ; rather short and fully formed ; dark, with black hair and eyes ; regular, though not particularly handsome features, and a sad and interesting expression. It had a foreign look about it. ‘You did not do this too ! Surely you don’t take portraits and draw in oils as well as sketch so beautifully, do you ? Who is it ? Why, what is this written below ? Silvia Lee ! Why it is you, Silvia ! What can it mean ? It is your name, but it is not you ! It certainly is not your picture !’

Silvia snatched it from her hand.

‘My picture !’ she cried, and her face was crimson ; ‘is it like me, then ?—*this* like me ?’

She spoke with a sort of scorn, and held

the sketch at a little distance from her, examining it with flashing eyes.

‘Well, not very,’ replied Ally, amused. ‘I never saw two more different faces ; but how is it that she has your name ?’

‘Why shouldn’t she, pray ? Might she not be a namesake, or a cousin ? or might not I have married under a false name ? I suppose it would be a real marriage all the same, wouldn’t it, Ally ?’

‘Silvia !’

‘Well, I want to know. I have a reason for wanting to know. Would it ?’

‘How can I tell ? I am sure I don’t know. But I wish you would not talk so, Silvia. It is too sacred a thing to joke about. But who is this Silvia Lee ?’

‘Well, if you must know, my very wise Ally,’ said Silvia, recovering herself, for she had seemed off her balance for a few moments—‘if you must know—it is—just the very person it is most natural that

it should be, having that name — my mother!

‘Oh, is it your mother?’ cried Ally, regarding it with the deepest interest. ‘It is not one bit like you, but it is a very speaking face. And how oddly you looked at it! Your mother!’

‘Oh, we have not all romantic memories, and that sort of thing, of our mothers, or our fathers either. And what’s the use of it if we have?’ and she impatiently took the picture from Ally’s hand and threw it aside.

Ally looked at her curiously.

‘I wonder whether you were happy before—before you—*married?*’ she said softly.

‘No, I wasn’t,’ replied the other abruptly, almost fiercely. ‘I’ve not had a very jolly time of it, I can tell you.’

Ally stroked her cheek with soft, caressing hand.

‘Poor Silvia!’ she said; ‘poor Silvia!’

Then she turned to the sketches again, and after a minute gave a little cry.

Silvia peeped over her shoulder, and echoed the cry; but there was a tone of amazed anguish in her voice, while Ally’s had only expressed moved surprise.

They were looking at the portrait of one of the handsomest and noblest faces that could be imagined—that of a very young man, wearing his unstained manhood proudly on his brow; with kind blue eyes, full of sweetest love and joy; curling fair hair, in an unfashionable but picturesque mass; straight nose, and a mouth that a Grecian statue might be proud of. There might, perhaps, lurk somewhere about that beautiful mouth the shadow, scarcely discernible, of weakness that a stern eye detects in those wonderful relics of art; but it would need to be a very stern eye that found any such fault with the

manly, gracious face that shone on the two girls from the picture.

Ally's were not those stern eyes, as they gazed through gathering tears on it.

'Wilfred!' she murmured, in a low, awe-struck voice.

And were Silvia's eyes stern as they sparkled and gleamed and glittered, and then their light also was quenched in sudden tears?

'My God, how came it here!' she cried, in a voice so hoarse and agitated that Ally would not have recognised it as hers.

'Is it not yours?' asked the girl, astonished.

'It was. He gave it me. I returned it to him. I never thought to see it again. Oh, Wilfred! Wilfred! Oh, my darling! come back to me—come back!'

She was like a creature beside herself. She wrung her hands, stamped her feet on the ground, almost screamed in her passion,

and dashed away her tears that she might cover the inanimate face with kisses.

Ally's tender little arms surrounded her, and drew her gently down on to a sofa by her side, where she held her against her fast-beating heart, and soothed her with inarticulate sounds, such as we utter to a child; for Ally herself was too much agitated to speak.

The extremity of her anguish subsided. She sat there a ghastly creature, looking blankly round her.

'What have I said?' she whispered loudly.

'Nothing—not much. Ah, Silvia, you so seldom break down—your self-command is wonderful—but sometimes you must. Dear, dearest Silvia, I love you all the better for it. Sometimes I almost forget what dreadful grief you really are in.'

'He gave it me. I returned it to him. I said *that*, and it is true,' said Silvia in the

same loud whisper, and not heeding, not seeming to hear, what Ally was saying.

Then she withdrew herself from the soft kind arms, and spoke aloud in a fixed formal manner, making almost a shocking contrast to the unrestrained passion of the scarcely past moment.

‘We had quarrelled, you see ; and I sent him back his picture. And here it is among his things, and I did not know I had it.’

‘Yes, dear, yes ; what a treasure for you !’ murmured the tender little comforter.

Again Silvia lost self-control ; she hid her face in both her hands, and swayed backwards and forwards as she sat.

‘I never thought to see his face again—I never thought to see his face again,’ she said over and over. ‘Oh, the evening he gave it to me ! It was not earth we were in—it was heaven. Oh, oh, oh !’

She now wept aloud in a wild hysterical manner, and the burst of unrestrained tears

relieved her, while it frightened Ally dreadfully. She did not know that the passion was thus expending its force ; she believed it was accumulating, and thoughts of having to fetch Aunt Lydia, or even send for the family doctor, disturbed her mind, while her tears flowed along with Silvia's.

And Silvia was the first to recover herself. She jumped hastily up all of a sudden and shook herself.

'Come, this won't do!' she said sharply. 'I had no idea I had it in me. What a fool I am! Who would ever have thought it? We've a deal to go through, Ally, between our first cry and our last ; and it's fool's work to make it worse ourselves. Take that thing,' with a side push at the portrait, but not turning her eyes in the direction ; 'I can't stand this sort of business at any price, you may say what you like. Such free use of the waterworks would spoil the finest pair of eyes in England. There,

I'll give it you, Ally ; take it away, child, and don't for your life ever let me set eyes on it again.'

'Do you mean that you will really give it to me, dear Silvia? Oh, I think you will want it.'

'Please yourself; but I'll burn it if you don't take it. Do you think,' vindictively, 'that I'll ever go through *this* again if I can help it?'

'Well, perhaps months or years hence you may feel differently, and then you have only to say a word or make a sign, and you shall have it. Thank you, very, very much.'

Ally kissed her tenderly and then left her, bearing her treasure with her; but even she turned the picture towards her, so that she could not see the dear face. Her loss was still too recent, too sacred, and her emotions too easily aroused, for her to be able to trust herself to look at it when she could not give way to them.

Left to herself, Silvia sprang from the sofa, and walked rapidly up and down the room.

‘Am I a born idiot—an utter fool?’ she cried, with fine self-scorn; ‘to allow what’s come and been and gone to make me miserable, and to cry like a baby over spilt milk! And when I am bearing such a tame, pitiful life so well, and don’t know what sort of a time’s coming, whether it will be all up with me, or whether I can carry on—and I so cheerful and not minding it, when many a one would give way entirely—and then a bit of a painted card, and a thought of what’s gone and over, and can never give me pain or pleasure more, sets me mad. Am I a born idiot—an utter fool? It is like crying for a dress that’s worn out, instead of trying to make the dress I have nice! Really, Mrs. Wilfred Lomax, I should have expected better things of you. But if I’m not able to make myself happy, and am unhappy, as

I was just now, whether I will or not, I don't see the use of anything. I declare I don't understand it one bit.'

And of a verity Silvia did not understand herself. However, she was determined not to give in to such nonsense. And drawing from a hidden recess one of those 'religious' books that Constance had found her reading soon after she came among them—and which, in fact, was of a class of novels that Mr. Lomax or Aunt Lydia or any other respectable head of a family would have thrown out of window or put behind the fire if they had been aware of its presence in the house—she lay down on the couch, tucked her feet up comfortably under her, and soon lost thought of her own story in the fictitious adventures of its heroine.

Two or three days passed, after the departure of Sir Percival Ross, of the quiet, sad, yet busy life that had taken

the place of one once so joyous at Woodlands. Every member of the family made exertions for the sake of the other. No one willingly gave way; everyone endeavoured to be cheerful, and to assist in keeping up the spirits of the rest. The usual occupations had been resumed; even the piano had been touched again, when it was found that music did not give Silvia, the chief mourner, pain—nay, that she herself was the first to bring the sweet sounds out of the ivory notes. They walked, and drove, and visited their poor, and gardened out of doors; they read, and worked, and practised, and talked within. And in the daily routine of duty and affection, each and all were gradually recovering, as far as such afflictions *are* ever recovered from; and Time—the great consoler—was, with unseen and unmarked progress, but none the less sure for being unseen and unmarked, doing his beneficent work.

So it was with Wilfred's father, his aunt, his sister, and his cousin ; but how was it with his widow ?

To her, the calm, tender, restorative life was intolerable. She had always lived in an atmosphere of excitement, and now she could not exist without it. She felt as if she would kill herself, or somebody else, if it lasted. Even with Sir Percival's help, and in all the novelty of and after her first arrival, and much in her own affairs to occupy her with plans and doubts ; even then the *tristesse* and weariness, as it was to her, of English home-life had been grievously felt ; but now—now, it was not to be borne. How could she escape from it ? What could she do ? She had fifty pounds in her pocket, the first instalment of her father-in-law's liberality. Oh that she could run away and be out on the spree, as a gay young man might, and not show her face at home again till the fifty

pounds were spent! Oh that she could be a prodigal son for the nonce! Why was she made a woman, with a man's wild love of freedom in her breast?

She chafed against the bars of her cage by day, and tossed on her restless, almost sleepless, couch through the summer nights.

At last, on the fourth morning after Percival Ross's departure—and I say at last advisedly, for though it was only the fourth morning, it seemed to her the fortieth—she came down to breakfast, pale after her bad night, with purple lines under her exquisite eyes, the result of her pining and vehement discontent, and with her face tied up.

'I have not closed my eyes with tooth-ache,' she said plaintively. 'I have made up my mind to run up to town to a dentist.'

'My dear, you will not go alone,' said Aunt Lydia.

'Oh yes. You don't know how used I

am to do things by myself. Girls always are in Australia. I should not think of anything else. It seems to me English girls are an odd lot that they don't.'

'But if you have a tooth out you will want some one with you. If Lady Vincent was not coming to luncheon there would be no difficulty ; but as it is——'

'Dear Aunt Lydia,' cried Silvia impatiently, 'that is just the one thing I can't stand, to be followed and fetched about like a baby. And as to the tooth, I never could abide anybody with me. I get all over nervous if I have a sympathizing friend ; and I could face the old gentleman himself on my own hook. Why, when John—when Willie was born I would not have a creature near me.'

'Very well, my dear,' cried Aunt Lydia hastily and volubly, and with a glance at the girls, hoping they had not taken in this allusion. 'Very well, by all means then.

I suppose you will go by the eleven o'clock train. You will be in London by 1.10, and if you leave by the 5.15, you will be home by 7.30. But you can't be all those hours, my love, in London by yourself, from one till five; it is quite out of the question. In the first place, James' (James was a steady old footman, under a steadier and older butler) 'shall go with you, and I will tell him to take you to A——, the dentist, in H—— Street; and then he shall take a note from me to my cousin Selina Fleetwood, to tell her that you are coming to them for luncheon after you have been at the dentist's—that is in Albert Terrace, not far off—and he shall return and fetch you there. Don't say a word, dear Silvia; it really is the only way it can be managed.'

Silvia shrugged her shoulders impatiently, and her face grew black as midnight. Only for a moment; the cloud

passed away before Aunt Lydia had observed it.

'Oh, very well,' she said, with recovered good-humour; 'needs must when somebody drives, you know. Have it your own way.'

'And I'll have it mine,' she added, *sotto voce*, to herself; but Aunt Lydia did not hear the words any more than she had seen the clouded brow.

She wrote her note and gave it to Silvia when she was ready to start.

'You will let James have it, my dear. I have told him all that he is to do. And, Silvia love,' she added rather nervously, and with a pink shade of colour stealing into her smooth old cheek, 'you will be a little careful how you talk, you know, in Albert Terrace. Don't say any slang words, please, dear; but speak as we do.'

'I'll do my best,' replied her niece, not

in the least affronted. 'I won't frighten the London ladies if I can help it.'

But when Silvia reached the station, she told James that he was to return home, and not go with her at all; and though he remonstrated at first, and pleaded the orders he had received, he was obliged to submit when she assured him that had been changed, and that she did not require his services.

She sprang into an empty first-class carriage as gay as a lark, rather proud of having a man in handsome livery to give her her ticket when she was seated there, and arrange her light summer wrap about her. And then the train started, and carried her off to London in it.

It was only seven weeks since she had travelled the same road from London to Woodlands, and what eventful weeks they had been to her! What delightful changes they had brought into her life, intolerable

as the burthen of them had at last become !
And now in what altered circumstances
was she retracing her steps !

She threw her arms up triumphantly in
the air, then jumped to her feet and began
dancing. It is not easy to dance in a
railway-carriage that is rushing through
space at the rate of twenty or thirty miles
an hour, but Silvia performed a sort of war-
dance notwithstanding, mingling the steps
with gay hurrahs and exclamations of
' Free ! free ! free !'

After a while she reseated herself, and
made herself decorously comfortable in the
corner of the carriage.

' Is there any blessing on earth like
freedom ?' she said ; ' it is almost worth
while to have been shut up for a month in
a cage in order to really enjoy it.'

She had not the faintest idea what she
meant to do with this glorious liberty of
hers. Mere liberty at the moment seemed

enough, without making any use of it at all. She knew no one in London except Sir Percival Ross, whom she would not dare to communicate with ; she had no toothache, and no more intention of visiting a dentist than of looking up Aunt Lydia's cousin, Selina Fleetwood, in Albert Terrace. She knew perfectly well what she should *not* do, though she had not made up her mind what she *should*.

But she was happy—gloriously happy ; and how pretty she looked in her happiness ! She tossed her bonnet away from her, her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed ; she laughed the joyous laugh of untroubled youth ; she threw herself about in twenty different attitudes, saved from vulgarity by natural grace. There was something charming in this abandonment, that spoke more of nature than of civilization. It was the freedom of the spirit that joyfully asserted itself through the limbs, for the body was

‘cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d’ within the space of a railway-carriage, and yet liberty was uncontrolled.

‘How have I borne it so long?’ she cried suddenly; ‘and how shall I bear it any longer?’

She was a little quieter before the train steamed into the London station, though she could not be said to have sobered down. She did not want to sober down. She preferred the delights of intoxication.

‘Any luggage, miss?’ asked a curt porter; then, as she turned round, and he saw the widow’s cap beneath the little black bonnet, he stammered, ‘Ma’am—I beg your pardon. Any luggage? Can I call a cab for you, ma’am?’ and an expression of the sincerest pity spread over his honest face. So young, so beautiful, and a widow!

The cab was called, the porter received a shilling, which he would have liked to

return, and the slender figure in deep black stepped into the cab, leaving a compassionate heart behind her.

She ordered the man to drive to a pastrycook's, where she got out, and ate cakes and tarts with the glee of a child. Then to Regent Street, and she alighted at chance, and going into one of the many shops for those purposes, spent two delightful hours in choosing and trying on hats and dresses.

She issued from it clad in a delicate pale blue muslin, profusely trimmed with lace, a white chip hat, and blue feathers. So attired, she was such a vision of beauty that every creature who passed turned to look at her again, or went startled on their way.

She had sent away the cab, and now, calling another drove off in it, with her, widow's dress as her luggage, carefully packed by the obliging shop-woman. She

had given no explanation of the proceeding.

‘Why should I?’ thought she to herself. ‘For two months I have had to explain everything—I have been accountable to others. I am unaccountable for a day; let me enjoy it. I will do just what I like—puzzling and astonishing as much as I please. Why should I mar my own pleasure myself, by giving reasons?’

She drove to the hotel where she had lodged when she had been in London before, and springing from the cab, asked if she could have her old rooms. Having received an affirmative reply, she ran upstairs. A young man was running down them at the same moment, in a manner decidedly imprudent for an hotel; and the next minute they had come in contact, and she was in his arms, extended to keep her from falling.

She drew back with a gay laugh,

looked up to see what he was like, and beheld—Sir Percival Ross!

What a vision of beauty she was—her light robes, of the hue of a delicate spring sky, floating round her, her lovely fair face, flushed and joyous, glancing out beneath the coquettish hat and pretty blue feathers! He looked at her, all amazement and admiration. He did not recognise her—how could he, in those bright colours, and with that happy face? He did not, and then he did. He started back—he disbelieved his eyes—it was a magical transformation—it was a miraculous likeness! It was not, because it could not be, the widow of his friend whom he had seen in her bereavement so lately—Wilfred's widow!

She slipped her arm through his, and led him upstairs into her room.

'Oh, Percival, Percival!' she cried, 'don't tell. I *could* not bear it.'

He stood looking at her, transfixed in his utter amazement.

‘Silvia!’ he cried at last—‘Mrs. Lomax!’

‘No, not Mrs. Lomax; let it be always Silvia. We are so young—I am so young, Percival. I *could* not bear it.’

‘But *what* could you not bear? what is it? Why are you here? and this dress?’ Then he looked at her—stared at her even. ‘Oh, Silvia, how beautiful you are!’

The young fellow blushed ingenuously after he had said that, and begged her pardon.

‘You need not beg my pardon; of course I am beautiful,’ she cried. ‘But I *could* not bear the life—and the grief,’ she added, as if by a second thought; ‘and I have escaped from it, and put on these pretty things just for a minute—only for a minute, Percival. I am so young!’

She looked at him piteously, and his kind unsuspecting eyes expressed only compas-

sion. She flung her arms out joyously when she saw this, caught him lightly as it were with the tips of her fingers, and the next moment they were in fitting position and waltzing round the room to the bird-like music of her voice. When they stopped, breathless, she sank into a chair and laughed softly.

‘It is only for a minute, Percival,’ she said; ‘let me forget. I shall go mad if I am always unhappy. How do they bear it—real mourners, I mean? How can one live always in black? It is insupportable. Oh, Percival, let me forget for one day! *Let me be happy!*’

‘Poor dear!’ said kind Percival; ‘yes, I know what it is to feel like *that*. I’ve done it at school when I was cut up at anything. I remember when my father died I cried myself sick, and next day I went out and played cricket. Old Longman, one of the ushers, said I was very unfeeling; but I

declare I was the most miserable little wretch on earth, and I think I should have gone clean mad if I had not run about.'

'That is it,' she cried, 'just exactly it! Dear Percival, you understand everything; and this is to me like running about to you—to wear pretty colours and take my pleasure. The *triste* life, the grave faces, the sensible conversations, the black dresses—black, black everywhere, nothing but black—and every now and then somebody beginning to cry. I know I shall go mad if I have much of it. I want to get out of it all, just as if it never was, for a few hours.'

'And Wilfred was such a jolly fellow,' said Percival. 'I can't fancy his making one unhappy, or liking one to be unhappy for him. Sometimes I wonder whether *they* like us to be so dismal because they've *got* everything that we are all hoping to get, I suppose—ain't we?—whether it

seems very queer to them up there?—that is, if they think about it at all.'

Silvia laughed.

'I dare say it is all a mistake,' said she; 'but oh, if you knew what I felt when he died!'

'You *must* have loved him; he was such a lovable chap,' said Sir Percival Ross simply.

'Loved him!' she cried; 'I think I adored him—I never saw anyone like him. It was as if a young god had come to me.'

She spoke with enthusiasm, and love and regret lighted up her beautiful face. Then she burst into a flood of tears, and cried loudly like a child, stamping her feet on the ground, and losing momentarily all control over herself in the violence of the emotion.

Sir Percival Ross looked at her with the tenderest compassion. If she had wondered a little at her gay dress, and had not understood her feelings, it was impossible not to

see that her affection was genuine. He took hold of her hands, and held her while he soothed her.

‘Don’t, my dear—please don’t!’ said the poor fellow, sympathetic and frightened, not knowing what to do, half wishing to run away, yet interested, thrilled, excited.

She leaned against him ; she could really hardly stand, and his arm went round her to support her, and her head rested on his shoulder.

She was growing calm by degrees. He was inexpressibly touched, and longed to do something, anything for her.

‘Dear Percival!’ she murmured very softly.

‘He was like a brother to me ; let me be one to you,’ he stammered, almost crying himself.

‘Dear brother!’ the voice murmured from where the face was hidden on his shoulder ; and then that beautiful face was

raised to his all wet with tears, and she kissed him.

The young man was amazed, with a sort of delicious amazement. He had never felt anything like this in his life before. It was all misery and delight together; the lovely creature in his arms, and the sweet sisterly kiss. He clasped her to him, and kissed her two or three times with a tender passion which was as new to him as it was enchanting. Then he let her go, his honest boyish face covered with blushes.

Silvia sat down. Her tears were gone now, and her beauty unimpaired by the hysterical burst of sorrow she had just suffered.

'This is not the way to forget,' she cried. 'I will be happy for this brief little space. I'll tell you what we'll do, if you only will.'

'I will do anything on earth for you,' he cried.

‘ Take me to the opera to-night.’

‘ To the opera ? Of course I will.’ He was so carried away by the scene that the proposal did not seem in the least strange to him. ‘ I’ll get a box directly.’

‘ And bring me some flowers,’ she cried, ‘ the most beautiful you can, and a fan. And oh, let it be real pleasure ! Order a nice carriage to take us—not a cab. Let us have everything pleasant. And if I get an opera-cloak, this dress will quite do. Oh, Percival, it is sweet—sweet !’

‘ Poor Silvia ! dear Silvia !’ he cried, as enthusiastically as herself ; ‘ yes, it shall be all as you wish—you shall be happy. I say, it is so horrid to be miserable. Do try at home, and we’ll all help you.’

‘ You *understand* me,’ she said ; ‘ you are the only person who understands me ; they none of them do.’

He was exceedingly flattered and pleased, and yet wondered a little at the idea that

those four people, Mr. Lomax, Aunt Lydia, Constance, and his own dear little Ally, all honoured or loved by him since his earliest childhood, should be found wanting.

‘No; don’t they really now?’ he said simply.

‘No, no; they would think me wicked and unfeeling—you don’t?’ And she looked up in his face with her beautiful eyes full of a piteous entreaty.

What man on earth could, with those eyes upon him, have said he did, or thought he did? Not Percival Ross.

‘I think you are all that is sweet and dear,’ he cried; ‘and I *do* understand you, and I will try to make the others do so too, if they don’t. You see,’ he added, as if struck by a new light, ‘people feel *differently*, and then I suppose they expect it to be the same; and when it isn’t, they think it’s not at all.’

The explanation was not lucid, but Percival knew what he meant.

She looked frightened when he said he would try to make the others understand her.

‘You must not tell them a *thing* of all this—not for your life!’ she exclaimed.

‘No, no; of course not. This is just between ourselves;’ and he was delighted at the secret, and proud of it too.

‘You see,’ explained Silvia, ‘people live in one groove all their lives; not young men like you, Percival, but old men like Mr. Lomax get into it, and ladies never get out of it—at least, not English ones—and that makes them narrow—awfully narrow. Now, I’d rather be anything on earth than narrow.’

Percival felt vexed to think that perhaps, after all, Ally *was* narrow; there was a sweet abandon about Silvia that Ally could never attain to. He supposed she was narrow; and if so, it was a great pity.

‘Now, you dear fellow,’ Silvia said, ‘go away and bring me all those pretty things. Or no, I’ll go out with you, and choose the fan and the opera-cloak myself; and then you can get me the flowers and come back and dine with me here at seven exactly, and order the carriage at eight to take us to this blessed opera. Oh, is not it delicious?’

The two young people went out together to one of the charming tempting shops with which Regent Street abounds; and passing along, Percival Ross, manlike, felt proud of himself because of all the admiring glances which were directed towards his beautiful companion. I don’t know how a woman’s good looks do credit to the man in whose company she may chance for the moment to be, but there is no doubt that he feels that they do, and enjoys the admiration she excites, sometimes even more than she does herself.

Silvia selected a lovely and expensive little white satin opera-cloak, gloves, fan, shoes, and two or three other trifles.

‘Have you money about you?’ she said, with ingenuous ease, to her friend. ‘I have not nearly enough.’

‘Oh, I’ll pay!’ he cried, pleased and blushing, and drew out his purse; but when he looked at the amount of the ‘little account,’ he found the two ten-pound notes and loose gold and silver he had about him would by no means suffice to discharge it, and thereon he blushed a good deal more.

‘Send the account with the things to ——’s Hotel, Jermyn Street,’ Silvia said to the shopman, laughing at Ross’s embarrassment, ‘at seven o’clock, and they shall be paid for on delivery.’

She evidently understood all about it.

‘I’ll get the money at my banker’s,’ Percival said to her.

‘All right,’ was the reply.

She took it more simply than he did. She was not in the least out of countenance, while his honest face was covered with blushes ; and she received the whole thing so much as a matter of course, that some might have considered she was in the habit of taking presents from gentlemen. An idea that never for a moment crossed the mind of Percival Ross.

They parted at the shop-door ; the afternoon had sped rapidly away in these pleasant conversations and occupations, and there was not much more than time for Percival to knock up his banker after hours, and buy flowers, before seven o'clock.

Dinner was a success. Silvia had ordered all the delicacies in or out of season, not having the slightest intention of paying the bill herself ; and the young couple sitting opposite to each other might have been taken for a very charming bride and bridegroom on their honeymoon tour. Percival's

spirits rose; his gay young mind was almost intoxicated with the pleasure and novelty of the adventure, and the exquisite beauty and flattering preference of his companion. Nothing of this kind had ever occurred to him before, even in thought.

The honest young fellow was not given to day-dreams, or building castles in the air. Perfectly content with his life, he had had no aspirations beyond it either for good or for evil, except those inevitable to all well-to-do and well-conducted young English squires, of a fair and dear little wife to make him the happiest of men; and to Percival Ross those dreams had never had anyone but Ally Lomax for their heroine.

Now everything was changed; the commonplace, matter-of-fact, pleasant country life had melted into air, with all that belonged to it. He was in fairy-land—Elysium; he was himself taking part in the

last scene of a well-got-up spectacle at the theatre, when everything, however lovely in hue or shape, is brought together and suddenly illuminated with silver radiance, while music swells and dies, and you scarcely know whether colour or sound is most enchanting.

‘However did you come to be at this hotel?’ cried Silvia, as she drank her champagne and ate her delicate entrée. ‘I say, how good this is! They don’t give us such things out there, where I came from, or on board ship either. What a capital invention eating is! I give the man the greatest credit who invented it.’

‘I suppose Adam was that individual,’ said Sir Percival; ‘but he took things *au naturel*, I rather imagine.’

‘To be sure—apples, for instance; and you are quite right: it is the man who invented *cooking* deserves our eternal gratitude, not eating. But that is no answer to

my question, young man. What brought you here ?'

'What I had utterly forgotten till this moment,' replied Percival, with rather a blank countenance ; ' I came to see an old friend of my Uncle Prendergast's, who is in London for only a day, and puts up here. And my uncle sent me to look him up and bring him word all about him.'

' Bless us and save us !' cried Silvia, putting down her knife and fork in pretended amazement. ' A miracle—actually a miracle ! And an old friend, too ! Shall we take the respectable old party to the opera with us ? I had entirely forgotten Uncle Prendergast—I had indeed.'

They laughed gleefully, like boy and girl, at the notion.

' I wonder,' he said, ' whether I shall have time just to run in for a minute after dinner.'

' Not you. I've ordered an exquisite

dessert, and a bottle of their best claret, and I expect you to partake of both. Oh, what a life it is! if one could always live such a life! I'll tell you what, I think the life of an actress is the best going—it is nothing but eating and drinking, and dressing up, and having fun by night and pleasuring by day.'

'I never knew an actress,' Sir Percival replied thoughtfully. 'I should like to meet one in private life.'

'Oh, didn't you now!' said Silvia, rather drily.

At this moment, the waiter, having put the exquisite dessert and bottle of claret on the table, informed them that the carriage was at the door.

'I am not going to hurry myself,' Silvia said coolly. 'I shall eat my fruit and drink my wine, and after that I'll go to my opera.'

They started as soon as all the delicacies were disposed of, and the young lady sank

back among the soft cushions of the comfortable carriage, and sighed with pleasure.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘why does anyone lead any life but this? Anyone who could, and doesn’t—is downright wicked, and no mistake!’

‘It’s very jolly,’ said he, ‘but one would tire of it.’

‘Tire of it!’ she almost screamed; ‘just you try me, that’s all! I’d like to be tried that way, I should!’

‘Well, a country life for me! To manage property, and look after my people, and hunt, and shoot, and all that sort of thing, is more to my taste than London, except for a short bit now and then.’

‘Percival,’ she cried eagerly, ‘you must give me a good mount, and take me out hunting when the season comes—you must!’

‘Of course I will, if you like it. But what will Aunt Lyddy say?’

‘Bother Aunt Lyddy! I’m not going to be Aunt Lyddied all my life. I *have* to be

now, till—till— oh, never mind when or why ; but I am married, and can stand on my own foundation, and *shall*, too, when the time comes. I say, how old *is* Mr. Lomax ?

‘ How old ? ’ answered Sir Percival, a little startled by this speech, but not giving himself time to take in all its bearings ; ‘ I’m sure I don’t know. He’s ever so old—he was as old as he is now when I was in petticoats.’

‘ He can’t live for ever.’

‘ Dear old boy, I hope he will ! ’ and again Sir Percival felt a little pained, and again he did not pause and reflect on what she meant exactly ; and as they drove up to the opera-house at that moment, they had no time for further conversation on the subject.

Silvia, once in the house, looked round her enraptured.

‘ Well, this *is* the ticket ! ’ she sighed softly. ‘ What a set of jolly swells, to be sure ; and what a palace ! ’

From Silvia's lovely lips slang and vulgarity seemed quaint and amusing, with a little dash of wicked piquancy in them, to Sir Percival's young ears. He had been very well brought up, and, spirited and manly as he was, had never given his mother a second of anxiety. He had had few debts, sown fewer wild oats, and though he had got into scrapes, they had never been of a disreputable character. He was a thoroughly good-hearted young fellow, and a gentleman in spirit as well as position and manners. Silvia amused him far more than she could have done a man more accustomed to fast society than he was.

I do not know which of the two young people enjoyed their evening's entertainment most. Silvia, radiant in beauty, attracted innumerable opera-glasses, and sometimes might almost be said to divide the attention of the audience with the stage. Occasionally Percival had to utter

a calming 'Hush' when her excitement became loud, rendering her too conspicuous an object; but on the whole she preferred the fine-lady airs of a languishing being accustomed to the luxuries of an opera-box and the glories which surrounded her, and to Percival the whole proceeding was an exquisite lark.

At last the evening came to an end; but Silvia would not allow a cloud to cross her mind because it did so—her twenty-four hours' freedom should not be shorn of their brightness by the future; no coming events should cast their shadows before. In her, past and future were nothing; the present was all in all. The present was the only fact that really existed, and when that was bright she would not be such a fool as to mar that which *is* by that which had ceased to be, and that which had never been.

'I hope they won't be frightened at your

not going home to-night,' Percival had said.

'Not they. I telegraphed to say that the dentist could not operate till to-morrow, so it is all right.' She laughed roguishly, but he did not know why; it had never occurred to the simple young fellow that dentist and toothache were alike myths.

'Sir Percival Ross's carriage!' the ready boys outside shouted, and the carriage took its place at the door of the opera-house.

If only it had been Lady Ross's carriage! If only she already occupied the place she hoped one day to fill, and which during the dinner at the hotel, and the evening at the opera, and still more during the *tête-à-tête* drive back, she could almost persuade herself she *did* fill! Had not the fates themselves come to her assistance in bringing Percival Ross to the stairs of ——'s Hotel just at the very moment that she was running up them? Of what possible use was

all her beauty, if she could not draw away a country-bred boy from a little white-faced girl, of whom, when you had said that she had a pair of eyes, there was really nothing more left to say ?

‘You must come in and sup with me,’ she murmured sweetly, as she roused herself from gracious thoughts like these. ‘I have ordered lobster mayonnaise, and some wonderful thing they do with chicken, the very name of which I can’t pronounce, and champagne in ice. And you must breakfast with me to-morrow, and settle the bill for me, like a dear good-natured man as you are, for I find I have not brought half money enough with me ; I had no idea of London expenses, you know.’

‘All right,’ was the easy reply. ‘I got lots from old Hawkins. I thought it best while I was about it.’

The carriage stopped, and they left it. Silvia tripped gaily upstairs, followed by

her true knight. She turned, laughing back as she was entering the half-open door of the sitting-room.

‘Now, young man,’ she cried, ‘prepare to make a night of it;’ and she softly warbled :

“You won’t go home till morning,
Till daylight doth appear”—

then slipped her arm through his, and they both entered carelessly, flushed, laughing, together; and there, sitting under the blazing gas-chandelier, the table spread with supper delicacies, they found—Aunt Lydia and Ally.



CHAPTER II.

‘But blame us women not, if we appear
Too cold at times, at times too gay and light.
The life unlived, the deed undone, the tear
Unshed—not judging *these*, who judges right?’

OWEN MEREDITH.



SILVIA uttered a piercing scream,
and Percival stood overwhelmed
with confusion.

Aunt Lydia did not recognise either of them. Silvia in her soft floating blue robe and white satin mantle, flowers twined in her uncovered hair, she beheld as a perfect stranger. And she only saw that the splendidly beautiful lady had a young gentleman with her. She rose with her pretty, old-fashioned politeness.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ she said. ‘I hope we have not been shown into a wrong room.’

‘Percival!’ exclaimed Ally, at the same minute; and Percival looked like the true culprit, blushing and abashed.

Silvia turned and flew from the apartment. She rushed upstairs, basely leaving the poor boy to bear the brunt, ran into her bedroom, double-locked the door, and flung herself down on the bed.

‘What shall I do? what will become of me?’ she cried. ‘How can I carry it on any longer? what will they do to me? And oh, how nice the lobster mayonnaise did look!’

‘It was Silvia, Aunt Lyddy,’ Ally almost gasped.

‘Silvia? that gaily-dressed lady! My *dear* Ally, you are dreaming—our poor Silvia!’

‘It is Percival Ross,’ said Ally.

And Aunt Lydia looked at him, and did not contradict her.

‘Why, Percival!’ she cried, ‘where is Mrs. Wilfred? We were told this was her room, and that she was out. But it is a mistake, and the poor child is in bed, I dare say, all this time.’

‘No, it is not a mistake; she is not in bed,’ persisted Ally; ‘that was Silvia who ran away. Oh, how pretty she is! Oh, Percival, what does it mean?’

‘She is so miserable I could not help it,’ said he, in a penitent manner.

Somehow he seemed to feel the enormity of the proceeding when he saw the Aunt Lydia and Ally of his childhood sitting there, so fair, and cool, and refined-looking in their different ways; and yet, and yet, his spirit rose within him in defence of that beautiful culprit upstairs, and of the lovelier world into which she had given him a glimpse.

‘That was Silvia!’ said Aunt Lydia, almost incredulous still.

‘She was so unhappy that she felt going mad, and just to forget for one evening she knew would save her. That was all. And what *is* there in a colour, if you come to that? There is nothing wicked in wearing a blue gown, Aunt Lyddy, or listening to what-d’ye-call-’em’s singing.’

‘Where had you been?’ asked Aunt Lydia.

‘Only to the opera,’ and Percival put a bold face on it.

‘It is such gross disrespect to his memory!’ sighed Aunt Lydia; ‘and shows the sort of girl she really is. I have had my fears. Oh, those colonials! I can’t *think* why we have any Colonies at all;’ and the poor lady took out her handkerchief and fairly cried.

Ally turned her large, sweet, reproachful eyes on Percival.

‘ I did not think *you* would have done it,’ she said.

‘ I couldn’t help it, Ally—how could I ? She is so jolly miserable. You don’t understand her. You none of you do. She can’t stand the sad life—she can’t indeed.’

‘ If the life in *his* father’s house does not suit her, she had better leave it,’ Aunt Lydia said, with spirit.

‘ Don’t be hard upon her, Aunt Lyddy,’ pleaded her young champion. ‘ She is a wonderful creature.’

As he said the words, Ally melted into tears.

‘ My darling Ally, what’s the matter ?’ and he advanced an eager step towards her.

‘ I don’t know,’ said the poor child ; and she really could *not* have told why she cried.

‘ It is all very sad, and I can’t see what we ought to do,’ said Aunt Lydia ; ‘ but one thing I do see,’ she added in a high

key, 'and that is that you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Percival.'

Poor Percival ! He felt inclined to have done with it, to escape from the new world so blissfully opened to him, and make full confession, kneeling in spirit at their feet ; but visions of beauty and flattering sweetness, of enchanting *tête-à-têtes* and bewildering operas, rose before him, mixed up in a jumble into fair beings so miserable that they *must* be happy, so overwhelmed by the sombre hue of mourning habiliments that life or reason must fail if they did not rush into colours and all the rest of it.

'I don't see why,' he said, in a dogged manner very unusual to him through all his fair, prosperous, open youth. 'I can't see why. Silvia really required change. She was getting too much of it. Some can bear it, and some can't. She can't. What harm is there in her going to hear music, or why should not I escort her ? Some

girls are very sensitive ; they can't be always miserable ; they'd go mad. They *have* to throw it all off for a bit, and then that gives them pluck to go at it again.'

'Would you like your widow to behave so ?' asked Aunt Lydia severely ; 'or would Wilfred have behaved by her as you have by his ?'

'My widow !' cried Percival Ross.
'Good gracious !'

He stared in her face for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

Aunt Lydia rose angrily. It was seldom that the gentle lady lost her temper. Not only he, but her own niece Ally, had never seen her so upset before.

'*Good-night*, Sir Percival Ross,' she said. 'I really do not see what use there is in sitting up or talking any longer ;' and she glanced at the timepiece on the mantelshelf. 'It is nearly one o'clock.'

'Good-night, Aunt Lyddy. I did not

mean to laugh. I'm no end sorry you are vexed. Good-night, Ally.'

'Good-night, Percival,' replied the girl; and there was resentment in her voice.

He felt unreasonably angry at this—more so than Aunt Lydia had made him with her severe words. The mere tone of Ally's voice went to his very heart, and, as he did not know how to make his peace, he flamed up all in a rage.

'I think you are very unjust and unkind,' he said. 'I would not have believed it of you;' and he looked longingly at her, pleading with his wistful eyes for a soft word to turn away his wrath.

But Ally did not see him. She had not dared glance at him after her cold 'Good-night.' She was struggling with her tears, and did not want him to know that she was crying.

Percival left them with a very sore heart. He did his best to consider himself an ill-

used individual. He declared loudly, as he rattled off in a hansom, that they were narrow—very narrow, and that they understood him as little as they understood Silvia.

‘A man can only do what he thinks right,’ he declared to the inside of that hansom. ‘I thought it right to help the poor thing. *I* understand her. *They* don’t. And as for me—they treat me as if I were a boy. They have been so used to me as a boy for such a number of years, they can’t remember I am a man. It is a pity when people have been too much used to one as a boy. It is pleasanter to meet first slapdash, when you are both of you grown-up.’

But for all that he said in the inside of the hansom, or thought to himself, Ally’s little pale face and big eyes haunted him more that night than Silvia’s radiant beauty, or all the enchantments that had accompanied it.

When Silvia's telegram had reached Aunt Lydia, another had been brought with it to say that a dear friend of hers, who lived in Eaton Square, was very ill, and desired earnestly to see her. She determined to start at once, and after visiting her friend, to go to ——'s Hotel, and spend the evening with poor lonely Silvia ; and to remain over the next day, and see her through her troubles at the dentist's. Aunt Lydia had a great dislike to travelling alone. Born and bred amid the good old fashions, such a thing as a lady going anywhere by herself till her hair was grey was unheard of in her youth. Now, if you are not allowed to do a thing till your hair is grey, it is very probable that you will not have to do it afterwards. We are creatures of habit, and at fifty it is not always easy to depart from the habits of those fifty years. Aunt Lydia had never become reconciled to solitary travelling, and on the few occasions

when she left home, as a matter of course, she took a niece with her. Ally had been looking pale lately ; the change would be good for her, and she wanted some boots. So she and Aunt Lydia caught an afternoon train, little preparation being needed for so short an excursion ; and after visiting Mrs. Somerville, the invalid friend, reached the Jermyn Street hotel about nine o'clock, to hear that Mrs. Lomax had dined with a gentleman, and that they had driven off together after dinner.

Of course this surprised Aunt Lydia a good deal. Poor Silvia had come up to see a dentist, but she could scarcely have had her dentist to dinner, and afterwards left the hotel in his company. A dentist might fairly dine with a patient to test the quality of his teeth, if it were the custom ; but it was not a usual proceeding, and Aunt Lydia did not think it a likely one or Silvia to adopt. It was more probable

that she had accidentally met with some old friend, or even relative—an uncle, perhaps—and had gone with him to visit others. It would be odd if Silvia had not some friends in London, though she might not have been aware of it herself till accident threw her in their way.

Aunt Lydia never went anywhere without her knitting, and Ally had a book. They were surprised at Silvia being so late, and still more surprised when the waiter entered and laid the table for supper for two.

‘An uncle, certainly,’ said Aunt Lydia, ‘and staying in this hotel. So they sup together. What a curious coincidence!’

And Ally, interested in her book, assented without comment or inquiry.

The next morning Silvia resumed her widow’s dress, with many a sigh and glance at herself as she did so. She felt uncommonly frightened. She wondered

greatly what Percival had said. She was very much afraid he had told the truth, he was so terribly honest. She really did not know what to do while she was ignorant as to what he had said. Conscious as he must be of his own weakness with regard to truth, the best thing he could have done would have been, as soon as he found that she had left him in the lurch, to follow her example and run away.

But she could not fancy Percival Ross running away. There was something simply brave and straightforward about him, poor boy, that put that line of action out of the question. He would always take his jumps straight; he would always be on the square, hardly understanding even that there *was* a round, or how much easier curved lines are to follow; and it would take years and years before he acquired sufficient worldly wisdom even to believe that discretion was the better part

of valour. No, she might put any idea of help from him out of the question. She might feel sure that he did just the two things he ought not to have done: he did not run away, and he told the truth.

Now there were so many things he *might* have said, but he had as little imagination as common-sense. In fact, she did not think he had a particle of either. And yet he was a nice dear boy, and she could not help liking him.

He might have said that she caught fire, and the clothes were burned on her back, and she had borrowed others. Oh, there were a thousand and one things he might have said that it would have been quite pleasant to have to say! and she felt the melancholy certainty that he had not said one of them. Well, she must fight her own battles now, as she had done many and many a time before in the course of her not very long life, and trust to her

usual luck in avoiding dangers, if she only did so by the skin of her teeth.

Aunt Lydia and Ally met sorrowfully enough that morning, and after waiting breakfast some time, the former said, with an uncomfortable and embarrassed air :

‘I suppose you had better go to Silvia’s room and tell her that breakfast is ready.’

Ally obeyed, though she would gladly not have done so ; and her air was even more embarrassed and more uncomfortable than her aunt’s, as, having inquired where Mrs. Lomax slept, she tapped at the door, and then entered.

Silvia was sitting by the window doing nothing. She rose when she saw Ally, and with a manner that was not by any means as awkward as that young lady’s, kissed her, and bade her good-morning.

‘I am so surprised at you and Aunt Lyddy being in town,’ she remarked calmly. ‘I hope nothing is the matter?’

‘No, not at all—at least, yes. A friend of Aunt Lyddy’s is ill, and I want a pair of boots ; so we came up.’

‘Rather sudden, was not it?’

She elevated her eyebrows a little superciliously as she spoke. It seemed more as if Ally and Aunt Lydia were in suspicious circumstances than that she was ; as if she were the judge and Ally the culprit—at least so you might have thought from the manners of the two young ladies.

‘She got a telegram at the same time as yours, from Miss Somerville, to say her mother was very ill, and had expressed the greatest wish to see her.’

‘Oh—h! and did you get a telegram about your boots?’

‘What do you mean, Silvia?’ asked Ally simply ; and at the downright question Silvia did wince a little.

‘I don’t know what I mean,’ she said, putting her hand to her forehead. ‘I have

such a dreadful headache. I say, Ally, is Aunt Lyddy in a great taking ?'

'She is a good deal shocked,' Ally answered, speaking slowly and colouring high at having to allude to the subject ; and then the two girls went downstairs.

Aunt Lydia received Silvia very gravely ; and breakfast began in almost total silence. Silvia, who, we must remember, had been baulked of her elegant little supper the night before, ate ravenously for a lady with a headache ; but some headaches *are* cured by eating.

Silvia was the first to break the silence.

'Do you stay long in London, Aunt Lydia ?' she said, and she made her manner as much as usual as she possibly could manage to do.

'I shall not go home till you do, Silvia. I will not leave you at this hotel alone.'

There was silence after that, but Aunt Lydia broke it this time.

‘At what o’clock do you see your dentist to-day?’

‘Oh—h, I am not sure that I need go to him at all. I think my tooth is quite well. The change of air has cured it. I will go home whenever you like, Aunt Lyddy.’

‘Very well. We might start by the two o’clock train, then. That will give Ally and me time enough to do our shopping.’

Breakfast over, Aunt Lydia said :

‘I must speak to you for a few minutes alone, Silvia.’

Ally was rising to go at once, but Silvia stopped her ; perhaps she thought there was safety in numbers.

‘Stay, Ally,’ she cried ; ‘it can be nothing you may not hear. What is it, Aunt Lydia?’

‘Very well, Ally can remain if you wish it. It gives me the greatest pain to have to speak at all,’ continued the kind-hearted lady, with tears in her eyes ; ‘but it is my

duty to tell you that I was inexpressibly shocked last night.'

'Now for it!' thought the culprit to herself; 'I hope I shall be inspired—I generally am.'

'There was no harm, Aunt Lydia,' she said gently.

'No harm! no harm in your coloured dress—in your going to the opera—in your *tête-à-tête* dining with Percival Ross, and his accompanying you?'

'Was that wrong?' she asked humbly; 'I did not know it. We do those things in my country. It is the custom. I did not know it was not done here.'

'Oh, those Colonies!' groaned Aunt Lydia to herself. 'What can England *mean* by having them at all?' But she was glad that at least some of the blame, though the least deadly, need not rest on the young widow's shoulders.

'I am only too glad to allow for a differ-

ence of customs,' she said ; ' only too glad. But, alas, Silvia ! that is the least part of the offence. The dressing in colours and going to the opera was shocking—quite shocking ; so soon—so very soon !'

She could not say more ; tears choked her voice.

Then Silvia raised her eyes to the ceiling of the apartment, and the inspiration she had hoped for came.

'It was his own wish,' she almost whispered.

'His own wish—whose ?'

'Wilfred's.' She quite whispered the name, and then spoke aloud, 'It was our wedding-day — the anniversary. He made me promise I would always wear blue on it, whether we were separated or together, and whether he was alive or dead—he did indeed !' she cried, with excitement and her face flushed.

'Wilfred did ?' Aunt Lydia exclaimed,

excited too, and only too glad to think there was a possible explanation.

‘Yes, yes! It was all in jest, you know. He never thought about dying; who would have believed he *could* die?’ she added with real feeling. ‘It was just lover’s nonsense; but he did ask it, and I did promise it—and I can’t bear not to do it. I was to wear blue—and—hear music.’ She said this a little doubtfully, and with a glance askance, not being sure how much her dupe could take in. ‘Accidentally, we came in for music, you know, on our wedding-day: there was a concert in the street we passed through—it is the custom there—and it was out of that it arose; you understand, don’t you?’

And Aunt Lydia was only too glad to understand, to think of questioning the truth of what was said to her.

‘Of course that explains it, my dear; but it is a great pity,’ she said.

‘ Sir Percival found me in a blue dress, and so I *had* to explain it to him ; and he said, by chance he had had an opera-box given him for that evening, and that that would be the quietest way for me to hear music. He was very kind.’

‘ I wonder he did not tell us last night.’

‘ I begged him never to tell anyone. It was just by accident he knew. I can’t bear talking of these things. I should have come quietly home, and never said a word about it ; but when I saw you and Ally here, it seemed so shocking, I ran away.’

‘ He said we none of us understood you, and that you did it because it was all so melancholy,’ Ally said.

How Silvia would have liked to beat him when she heard this !

‘ That is his notion,’ she said ; ‘ such nonsense ! The idea of your not understanding me ! why, no poor widowed girl was ever so understood or sympathized

with before! That is a notion of Sir Percival's; he thinks nobody can understand me or is good enough for me. He has taken up such ridiculous ideas about me, you know.'

And she looked wickedly out of the corner of her eye at Ally, who sighed and said no more.

'I *was* inspired this time, and no mistake!' Silvia cried triumphantly to herself, when the two others had left her to put on their bonnets. 'I could not have expected it, even from ME.'

As soon as they were safe out of the house she wrote a little note to Sir Percival Ross.

'DEAR FRIEND,

'I told you last night I should have to make you my banker to-day. Kindly let me have what your knowledge of hotel prices will show you I shall require by bearer.

We leave for home by the two o'clock train this afternoon. I have explained how my dear Wilfred always wished me to wear a coloured dress on the anniversary of our wedding-day (yesterday), and Aunt Lyddy is all kindness. I did not know I did wrong in asking you to dinner, and going to the opera with you ; our customs are so different from yours. I like ours best. I shall always consider you as the kindest friend I ever had. Perhaps I ought not to be writing this note to you. I shall never understand your cold English etiquette and manners. May I say that I am

‘ Your affectionate friend, poor
S. L. ?’

This note she sent off by a porter, with strict injunctions to bring an answer ; nor did she feel comfortable in her mind, or breathe freely, till on opening the reply she

felt the crisp paper of bank-notes between her fingers.

Sir Percival Ross was not great at letter-writing, and never put pen to paper for that purpose if he could help it. However, on such an occasion, and in reply to so sweet a billet from so fair a lady, he had to do his best.

‘DEAR SILVIA (he wrote),

‘I am very glad it’s all right. I put my foot in it last night, but it can’t be helped. They are angry with me. Beg me off if you can. I’ll come and see you the minute I get home. Bother harm in writing to me! What can there be? I am proud to sign myself

‘Your affectionate friend,

‘PERCIVAL ROSS.’

‘What a dear old goose he is!’ Silvia said pensively, as she rang the bell and ordered her bill. ‘Shall I ever be able to

strike real fire out of him and bring him to offer? Oh, the position of Lady Ross! and the safety, if it were nothing but the safety!

'Cold meat and lamb cutlets,' she said aloud to the waiter, 'for three, at one o'clock precisely; put it down in the bill, and bring me the bill directly, if you please.'

The waiter thought there was a curious difference between the simplicity of the luncheon to-day and the sumptuousness of the meals on the preceding day. He asked if he was to have a separate account made for the other ladies, and she replied in the affirmative.

'Whatever happens, Aunt Lyddy must not see my bill,' Silvia said to herself. But expensive as that bill was, she was not sorry to see that she had some crisp paper left to put in her purse after she had paid it.

It was a *triste* journey back to Woodlands which the three ladies performed. There was no dancing in the railway-

carriage now, no sweet abandonment to freedom and joy ; everything was dull and respectable. Aunt Lydia was grave and quiet ; Silvia still hovering on the brink of a hairbreadth escape, and wishing to appear mournful and subdued ; and Ally in such low spirits that she could scarcely keep from tears when anyone spoke to her, or she had to speak to anyone.

It was not a cheerful journey, and none of those who took it were sorry when it was over. After this, affairs returned to their accustomed way, and life at Woodlands became what it had been before Silvia's escape.

Ally told all that had happened to Constance, who seemed to see something beautiful in the injunctions Wilfred had given Silvia to wear blue and hear music on each anniversary of their wedding-day. Her cheeks flushed, and her eye glittered with soft excitement as Ally spoke.

‘How love elevates and spiritualizes the soul!’ she said, scarcely above her breath.

‘Yes,’ Ally answered doubtfully; ‘I suppose it is *that*. It seemed so unlike Wilfred. But then Wilfred was not married in the happy days.’ Tears dropped from her eyes. ‘I wonder it was *blue* he said. Why not white?’

‘How can we tell?’ cried Constance, who had ready comprehension for anything that Wilfred had said or Silvia repeated; ‘perhaps she wore blue the first evening.’

‘I dare say she did,’ Ally replied wearily; ‘but what did it matter? Nothing seems of any consequence now. I don’t care what happens.’

‘I have been afraid for some time, Ally dear, that you were not well.’

‘I am quite well,’ Ally said, her little white face becoming crimson; ‘it is only that I am so miserable. There is no comfort anywhere, Constance.’

She laid her poor little head down on the sofa-cushions, and cried like a child.

Poor Ally! it was no child's grief that was in her heart now, and which she neither recognised nor understood, but which by taking possession of her heart had parted her 'reluctant feet' for ever from her careless childhood.

Silvia met Percival Ross several times outside the house before he ventured within it after his return from London. At last Mr. Lomax noticed his unusual absence, and asked if young Ross had not been there, and desired that he might be told when he called. Upon which Aunt Lydia wrote him a friendly little note asking him to luncheon.

'One might as well quarrel with one of you as with Percival,' she said to Ally; 'it would be nonsense attempting it.'

'I shall always think he ought not to have taken Silvia to the opera,' Ally replied sadly.

‘I don’t know,’ said Aunt Lydia ; ‘it is not what we thought at first. She explained it. Percival is young and inexperienced— young men don’t see things in the same way that women do ; and it is very difficult to refuse Silvia anything.’

‘*He* finds it difficult,’ said Ally, and she sighed ; ‘but he need not have told Silvia that we misunderstood her. She is a great *deal* more beautiful than we are, and I dare say she is cleverer and better ; but—an— old—friend,’ the poor child’s voice faltered, ‘need not have talked to her in that way of us.’

‘Do you know,’ replied her aunt gently, ‘I think it is much more likely that Silvia said that to him, than that he said it to Silvia.’

‘But, Aunt Lyddy, she said it was he.’

‘Yes, I know ; and Silvia of course would not intentionally deceive, but she is not— accurate. I should be very sorry indeed

to judge Silvia hardly ; but she is not—accurate. Now I have noticed that, when people are not accurate, they sometimes repeat a remark they have made themselves to another, as if that other had made it to them ; and I suppose they really believe that to be the case. I must say I think it more probable Silvia said it than that Percival did. Very likely we don't understand her. I often think she does not understand you. You and Constance have been brought up so unlike her, that your ideas and thoughts are all unlike.'

Ally's face brightened. 'Perhaps he did not say it, after all, then. Still,' after a moment's thought, and her eyes growing sorrowful again, 'it does not make much difference.'

'She told him about—that wish—that she should wear blue—and very likely begged him not to repeat it because we should not understand her. And Percival

was very awkward in trying generously to defend her without being allowed to tell the truth ; and so blurted out that.'

'How little she knew!' cried Ally. 'And Constance entered into it so thoroughly, and thought it quite beautiful!'

'I think it was all a jest,' replied Aunt Lydia, her lip trembling a little, 'and that—he—did not mean it ; and it seems a pity she should do it, but one cannot blame her.'

Percival accepted the invitation, and, when he made his appearance, was a little shamefaced, but very warm and impressive in his manner, especially to Aunt Lydia, to whom it seemed as if he could not pay attention enough. Ally was extremely quiet, and kept herself in the background ; but the others carried on the conversation, and she was not wanted. Percival Ross soon recovered his usual ease. He was not accustomed to be on

uncomfortable terms with anyone, and he soon felt himself on his accustomed footing with his old friends. Only Ally remained withdrawn within herself; but Silvia left him little time to notice this—none to attempt to melt the ice that she had surrounded herself with. She did not seem forward or intrusive; but, in a quiet way, her claims on his attention were innumerable, and it cannot be said that he appeared to object to them.

Immediately after luncheon Ally left the others; she went into the garden, and in Wilfred's bower, where she had first felt comfort after his death while talking to Percival, she gave herself up to the most sorrowful reflections.

The time had been when she would not have been allowed to sit there alone, if Percival was in the house. The time had been when, after a very few minutes, he would have searched the drawing-room

with his eyes and then have cried out, 'Where's Ally?'—a question followed by the frank declaration, 'I say, I'll go and look for Ally;' and presently she would hear his cheery whistle approaching her, and his blithe voice calling out her name. Ah! how bitter-sweet were these memories of a year past to the lovely girl who sat there unnoticed and unsought! It is so sweet to be *missed*—so bitter to know that you are not wanted! and Ally's tears dropped on her roses, as she mourned the loss of two brothers—not only of Wilfred, but of Percival also.

The next day Silvia went out for a walk. She sought the usual lanes, but, for some reason or other, he whom she was looking for did not make his appearance. She had taken off her bonnet with the widow's frill inside it, and decked her hair with honeysuckle; but nobody approached to look at the lovely face beneath the pic-

turesque coronet. A heavy shower of rain coming on, she was glad to resume the black headgear and run into a neighbouring cottage for shelter.

She made a hasty entry, and was very much astonished at the sight which greeted her there.

A woman lay in bed. All about her was scrupulously clean, though there was every appearance of poverty in the apartment. Half a dozen small children were scattered about on the floor. And before a tub of water, with an unclothed baby in her arms, which she was tenderly dressing after having given him a bath, sat Ally. She appeared quite at home where she was ; put on the tiny garments as deftly as if she were a nurserymaid, and conversed cooingly with the little man who sprang and crowed in her arms.

‘There’s my good baby!’ cried she ;
‘there’s my poppet! Cutsha, cutsha, cutsha,

then, a darling! Here we are! "See saw, Margery Daw!" Give me a kiss! Ta ta, my fine fellow!" and so on.

'Ally!' cried Silvia, all amazement.

Ally for the first time saw that she had entered the cottage, but she did not seem to think that her own presence or occupation there was the least out of the way, or required to be accounted for.

'What brought you here, Silvia?' she said quietly. 'Mrs. Jones, this is my sister-in-law, of whom I have told you.'

Mrs. Jones spoke a few civil words, which Silvia noticed by a nod of her head.

'I came in from a pelting shower,' she said; but she addressed herself to Ally, not to the mistress of the house.

'And I am sure Mrs. Jones will give you shelter,' was Ally's reply.

'Yes, indeed, Miss Ally; anyone from the house is welcome here. I only wish, ma'am, I was up, and could make you

comfortable. Jemmy, Susy, where are your manners, that you don't set the lady a chair?'

Jemmy and Susy gazed, fingers in mouth, on the stranger, but neither of them made any effort to show her the hospitality their mother called for.

'You can find yourself a chair, Silvia,' smiled Ally; 'these young people are a little shy, you see. Now, Jemmy, you need not scowl and spoil your blue eyes because you were asked to set a chair for a lady.'

Then Ally laid the baby, laughing and cooing, on the bed by his pale mother's side; and taking a teapot out of the fender, poured out some tea, and gave it to the invalid, with a slice of bread and butter she cut herself, beating up her pillows, and helping her to raise herself in the bed. Then she cut bread and butter for the children, and put away the things, and tidied up the cottage a little.

‘Now I suppose Jane will be back soon, and I may venture to leave you?’ she asked.

‘Thank you ever so much, miss. I can manage nicely now,’ said Mrs. Jones.

Silvia had watched all Ally’s movements with astonished eyes. She had never seen her appear more entirely at her ease, or engaged in occupations at which she seemed more thoroughly at home than in this wretched hovel, as Silvia disdainfully called the cottage, waiting on a poor woman and her brats. What could it mean? Was Ally mad?

The rain having ceased, the two girls left the place together.

‘Now, Miss Ally, I’ll trouble you to account for yourself,’ Silvia said briskly.

‘What for? What have I done?’

‘What for, quotha? What earthly business had you in there?’

‘Oh, is that it? That is very easily accounted for. The poor woman is ill.

Her step-daughter is the only one she has to look after her children, and Jane was obliged to go out to take back some work she had been doing for a shop, so I promised to come in and act nurse. I have often done it since Mrs. Jones was laid up.'

'But what in the name of everything that was ever heard of makes you do it?'

'What do you mean, Silvia?'

'I mean why do *you* take the place of a beggar's step-daughter?'

'Mrs. Jones is not a beggar,' replied Ally, rather indignantly; 'though if she were, for that matter, she might only require help more. But Mrs. Jones is a hard-working, most respectable woman. She was our washerwoman till her illness, and will be again when she is strong enough.'

'And you have been bathing and dressing your washerwoman's baby!'

'To be sure I have, when there was nobody else to do it. How could I leave

the poor little thing unwashed and undressed, and his mother unattended to ?'

'Ah, ha!' cried Silvia, a sly look coming into her eyes. 'I begin to see light ; Mrs. Jones is Percival Ross's tenant, or she washes for his mother's house as well as for yours. Oh, you cunning little rogue !'

'What *are* you talking about?' replied Ally calmly ; 'what *can* that have to do with it ?'

'I am right then ! She is—she is ! Ha, ha, ha !'

'She is *not* ; but what has that to do with it ? I don't suppose Percival or his mother ever so much as heard her name. Her husband works for papa ; he is a labourer. But what surprises you, Silvia ? and if she had belonged to the Rosses, what would it have explained ? I can't make out what you mean.'

'And I can't make *you* out one bit, Mistress Ally !'

‘Are you surprised at my visiting poor people? We always do it, and have since we were children; and so does Aunt Lyddy. I think all ladies do. Used not you to do it at home?’

‘Heaven forbid!’ cried she from her heart; ‘and Heaven forbid I should do it abroad, either! Is *this* what will be expected from a country gentleman’s wife?’

‘Of course it is,’ replied Ally, smiling.

‘Do they all do it?’

‘Well, I suppose not quite all; but most of them do, more or less.’

‘And you, very much more, I suspect.’

‘I don’t know about that. I never thought about it. We do it as a matter of course.’

‘And I *don't* do it as a matter of course. You are a queer one, Ally! What a way of spending your morning! And I suppose nobody would have heard a word about it at luncheon; and you would have

been so dainty and refined, the greatest little lady of the party.'

'What *do* you mean, Silvia?'

'*Why* do you do it, Ally?'

'Oh, Silvia!' cried she, blushing; 'you know it is a duty—the most evident and simplest of all our duties. We must help one another, and we who are well off must specially help the poor.'

'But you were not giving her money.'

'I was giving her *time*, which I have to spare, and they have not, quite as much as money. Dear Silvia, you know you find it in every page of the New Testament. I need not teach you *that*—you know it as well as I do;' and Ally blushed again, and her manner of speaking was quite apologetic.

'And do you give much of your time, pray?'

'Yes, of course we do.'

'And why did you never tell me?'

‘Why, what was there to tell?’ cried Ally, opening her large eyes wide.

‘You never asked me to help you.’

‘No, dear, we never asked you to do anything; you were too unhappy. We liked you to do what you wished yourself. Aunt Lydia said, when first you came, that was the best way with great mourners. To *follow* their inclinations—not to try to *lead* them.’

Silvia gave a sort of impatient sigh.

‘It is well to be like you, Ally,’ she said; ‘but it must be deadly-lively if you are not used to it. It is like the eels, I think.’

‘If you would like to come to some of the cottages, Silvia, I will take you there with pleasure.’

‘Oh dear no, thank you,’ she replied hastily; ‘I have not any taste for the poor.’

‘Ah, you would soon take an interest in them. I am sure you would.’

‘Now, you are not doing as Aunt Lyddy

told you—you are trying to lead, not to follow.'

There was satire in the tone of her voice, and Ally's spirit rose at the sound.

'I do not see anything to laugh at,' she said very gravely.

'I am not laughing, dear knows,' replied Silvia; 'I am much more inclined to cry.'

'So am I, Silvia,' Ally said, quite appeased; 'my tears are always ready now. I can cry at anything. I am always just keeping from crying, I think.'

'Ally,' said Silvia quite solemnly, 'I think you good people go on a wrong tack. If it were a happy world, you could afford to be sorrowful; but in such a world as this, in which bad things are always happening, the only way is to be happy in spite of them. They are done and over; put them behind you, and go on with something else.'

Ally shook her head.

'But the loss is not done and over—*it* remains.'

‘No, it does not—not if you look at it the right way. You once had something—that is the past; you have not got it now—this is the present. The present has nothing to do with the past, and you must just get something else.’

‘As if that were possible! get something you don’t love, instead of something you did.’

‘Love is all bosh! Love is not everything; whether it is for relations, or what is called love, it is not the only thing in the world. There are lots of other things that have really more to do with happiness than love. People would always be pining and whining as you are if they pinned their happiness on the affections, as you do. It can’t be meant that we should in a world where death is as common as this, and wherein everybody must die some time or other, and the choice is only between dying yourself and seeing your friends die.’

“There’s as good fish in the sea as have come out of it”—that’s my motto; and it is the only motto for this earth of ours, Ally.’

‘Oh, Silvia! I hate to hear you talk so; though I know you don’t mean it.’

‘But I *do* mean it, thoroughly and entirely; and I want you to mean it too—because I do like you, Ally. I didn’t mean to, but I do.’

‘But why didn’t you mean to like me, Silvia?’ questioned Ally, whom Silvia was always surprising. She never got accustomed to her sister-in-law.

Just then a peculiar whistle was borne to them on the air—an unusual note, sharp and penetrating. Silvia’s eyes sparkled when she heard it; she pricked up her ears, and made a reply like its echo. Then she laughed, and glanced slyly at Ally.

‘Do you know what that was?’ she said.

‘No indeed. I was wondering. And how well you imitated it! Was it some sort of bird?’

‘Yea, verily, beloved. It is a sort of bird I am taming and bringing to my hand. It is my signal, Mistress Ally; so fare you well.’

And Silvia was gone.

Not far from where she left Ally she found Sir Percival Ross.

‘Now then,’ said he, ‘here’s a volume of Molière; shall we sit on this stile and have our lesson?’

‘Oh no,’ she cried; ‘I am not in a French mood this morning.’

‘Then come on; let’s go to the house and find the girls, and be off somewhere. It is a perfect day for an excursion.’

‘No, thank you.’ She gave him a little scowl before she could command her countenance; and then added, coquettishly, ‘I think it is a perfect day for a *tête-à-tête*.’

He smiled.

‘I’ll do anything you like, Silvia.’

‘Percival, I am getting desperate; I can’t live any longer in that nunnery, with

only one old Father Confessor at the head of it. I'll run away.'

'My *dear* Silvia!

'Do something to help me, then. Give me a little change. Ask me to Oakvale.'

Percival's ready colour grew high.

'I am sure there is nothing I should like better. I need not tell you that; but I never do invite ladies; that is my mother's department.'

'Look here, as your mother can't call on me, may not I come and see her?'

'My mother stands a great deal on old-fashioned forms and ceremonies. She is very much cut up by not being able to pay you the compliment of a visit; but I am sure she'll think it very kind of you to go to see her.'

'Take me now.'

But Percival hummed and hawed.

'No, Silvia,' he said at last; 'I feel somehow that that would not pay. You

are not expected to be doing things—and my mother, of all people in the world, would not—why, it was full two years after my father's death before—never mind *that*—but it would not *do*. I'll drive you and the two girls over some afternoon to take a cup of tea, and I'll tell my mother first.'

'Very well, Slowcoach: it must be as you please, I suppose; but let it be to-morrow.'

'By all means; I'll speak about it to-day, and it shall be to-morrow, if my mother falls in with the notion.'

'Percival Ross, you are a very good little boy.'

'And you, Silvia Lomax, are a very naughty little girl.'

Silvia, with all the influence she had acquired over him, could never have succeeded in making Percival uncomfortable or ashamed of his submission to his mother. He was far too simple and straightforward

for that, and also too intrinsically manly, boyish as his nature might be in some things.

‘As to staying at Oakvale, I am sure you would not take to it as much even as being here. You see, there are young people here, and Aunt Lyddy has not any notions. With us there are no girls, and my mother is very decided and very particular, and *has* notions. I like it, mind you, and admire her uncommonly; but then she is my mother. She is not yours, and you would not like or admire it one bit; and you’d be for ever calling out, “Oh, Percival! how dull it is! Oh, Percival, it is so dull!”’

He mimicked Silvia, and not badly; and she laughed approvingly, and was not in the least offended.

‘Pretty well done, young un,’ she said patronizingly; ‘we will have you on the boards of the the—a—tre yet.’

‘You must not call me “young un” or talk slang to-morrow,’ he said, ‘and I must be Sir Percival and you Mrs. Lomax for the occasion.’

She gave a great yawn and stretched herself.

‘Civilized life, English life, old life in an old country, *is* dull,’ she said wearily ; ‘we are better off in a land where we may speak, and look, and think, and act as we like. Percival,’ with sudden fire, ‘could you break through it all, turn your back on it, and lead a free life in a free land?’

She looked inspired as she stood there before him in her perfect beauty, her eyes fixed on him, full of seductive light ; a rich colour rose in her cheeks ; she stretched her arms out towards him.

He caught her hands in his, and returned the gaze, his eyes catching fire from hers. His heart beat, and his brain seemed to reel.

‘Yes, with you!’ he cried, scarcely knowing that he uttered the thought aloud.

She advanced a step nearer to him—the next moment, what might not have happened? *But* the next moment :

‘Hullo, Ross, here you are! I have been hunting all over the world for you,’ said a well-known voice, and Mr. Vaux turned the *tête-à-tête* into a trio.

I think Percival Ross was not sorry for the interruption ; and I think if Silvia had had a revolver in her hand, a weapon she could use as well as another, that she would have liked to shoot the intruder down then and there. They neither of them knew how much he had seen, they did not think he could have heard anything ; and so occupied had they been with each other, that neither of them could tell in what direction he had approached them. One way he would have seen little till he was close upon them ; the other, their figures might be visible for some time.

‘And what do you want with me, now you have me?’ the young baronet asked good-humouredly.

‘I don’t want you, bless your innocent heart,’ said Mr. Vaux; ‘but Lady Ross, on whom I have just had the pleasure of calling, had got some letters she is most anxious to consult you about before the post goes out, and thinking you were calling on—ahem!—*Mrs.* Lomax, I proposed to run across, and send you back to her if I could lay my hands on you.’

‘Oh—well, thank you very much. I must be off, then.’

‘You have reason to thank me, young gentleman,’ Mr. Vaux said in a marked manner.

The two men turned towards Silvia, Percival to take leave of her, Mr. Vaux to give yet more emphasis to his words—but Silvia was gone.

Swift and nimble, she had escaped while they were not attending to her, determined

to avoid the private interview which she saw clearly Mr. Vaux intended to have with her, as soon as he had got rid of her companion. He could not avoid admiring her dexterity, though he was himself defeated by it.

‘Another time, my lady,’ he said in his own mind; ‘deferred is not prevented. I will have it out with you yet. I’ll save this foolish good boy from you, if I can.’

A safe proviso. And did Mr. Vaux really think that he—a man—could baffle or circumvent a woman, who was at once beautiful and unprincipled?

Silvia saw that she had no time to lose; that was all that he had gained by his interference. If anything was to be done, it must be done at once.

The minute she reached her own room, she sat down, and wrote to Sir Percival.

‘Your words have made me very happy. For though, knowing you to be an honour-

able man, I did not doubt your affection, feeling sure you would not have won mine by such *devoted attention* if you had not meant me to be your wife, I did not know how long wretched conventionalities might keep you silent. I am sure you will agree with me, that we had better say nothing yet. We should only distress these kind creatures, who cannot understand us; so let us keep quiet for the present. But never doubt that *I* understand *you*, and am

‘Your own

‘SILVIA.’

She assured herself that this note was a masterpiece, and laughed gleefully over it while she folded and sealed it. Then she secured one of the servants to run over to Oakvale, and deliver it to Sir Percival Ross's own man, and not wait for any answer. After which she came down to dinner, as calm and composed as usual.



CHAPTER III.

‘ And one an English home, grey twilight pour’d
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,
Softer than sleep—all things in order stored,
A haunt of ancient peace.’

TENNYSON.

RERCIVAL ROSS, when he returned home, found his mother in the place which it was ‘her custom always in the afternoon’ to take in the drawing-room, since the illness which did not yet allow her to drive out. She was a very handsome woman of fifty, and always dressed in the richest black silks or satins, with the most becoming and suitable possible of middle-aged ladies’ caps and lace capes or collars. Her grey

hair was parted simply off her face ; her eyes were bright and piercing, her nose commanding ; and she had a very sensible mouth. She was a good woman, but not a particularly tender-hearted one. The one soft spot about her was her love for her boy, who was perfection in her eyes—and who could wonder at such a boy as Percival being perfection in his mother's eyes ?—and whom she endeavoured not to spoil.

She was seated at her desk, writing notes.

‘Well, mother, here I am,’ said he, walking up to her. ‘What is it ?’

‘What is what, Percival ?’

‘The important business you want me for.’

‘You are dreaming, my dear. I do not want you for any important business.’

‘Why did you tell Vaux to send me home, to see about some letter that must be answered by return of post ?’

‘ I did not do anything of the kind.’

‘ It must be Vaux who was dreaming, then ; for that was what he told me.’

‘ Mr. Vaux means well, I dare say,’ said Lady Ross, a little stiffly ; ‘ but he takes a great deal upon himself. He is officious. If I had wanted you, I should have sent a servant for you. A note of invitation came from Lord Villiers, which of course I shall decline for myself. But I did not know whether you had come in, and asked Robinson ; and then I remarked to Mr. Vaux that it could not be answered till the next post.’

‘ And upon that he chivied me home double-quick time. Really, Vaux is a very queer fellow !’

‘ And he sat here talking for fully a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes after I mentioned the note, and not another word was said about it, so he cannot have imagined I asked him to find you. I con-

sider it was quite impertinent. I have a great objection to people taking these sort of liberties.'

'What sort of liberties have you no objection to people taking—eh, mother?'

Lady Ross shook her head at him, and called him a saucy boy. To her, Percival's sauciness was like sunshine from heaven, though from no one else would anything of the kind be tolerated. This mother and son, differing as they did in character and manner, were exceedingly happy together.

'I say, mother,' cried he, plunging at once into the subject that occupied his mind, 'poor Wilfred's widow has heard a deal of us—of you and of me—from him—a great deal. I am surprised to find how much he has talked about us. And so she is very anxious to see you. As you can't call on her, might not I drive her and the girls over some afternoon, and you'll give them a cup of tea?'

‘If the poor young lady will kindly waive ceremony, and pay a visit to an old woman who can’t go to see her, I am sure I shall be most happy,’ replied Lady Ross, with stately grace.

‘You see there is very little ceremony to waive out there in the Colonies, mother. She is awfully puzzled and put out by our ways.’

‘She is not too old to learn, Percival.’

‘No,’ he said rather doubtfully; ‘but people sometimes think what they have been accustomed to all their lives is the best. You and I do, mother.’

‘Yes,’ Lady Ross replied, very shortly; ‘but that is because it *is* the best. I hope there is nothing in Mrs. Wilfred Lomax likely to cause trouble or annoyance to my good old friends, Mr. Lomax and Aunt Lydia.’

‘They all seem to like her, I think.’

‘I am sure they would be indulgent.’

But when poor Wilfred was allowed to go to his uncle, I always felt there was a danger of his bringing home a colonial wife with him ; and the idea was so very distressing that, though really I did not like to suggest it as a possibility, I felt it my duty to give Mr. Lomax a hint on the subject.'

'And what did he say?'

'He said Wilfred was not at all given to that sort of thing, and he was not afraid.'

'But what was there to be afraid of? Are not colonists our own countrymen and countrywomen, only living in another part of the world? Are they not made of flesh and blood like us? I don't understand it at all.'

'My dear boy, you have no experience, and don't know what you are talking of. Everything is different except the mere flesh and blood you speak of. Education and refinement are wanting, and the mere

word 'colonial' is sufficient. I had rather be carried to my grave than see you go to the Colonies for a wife. Our friends the Lomaxes may not agree with me in theory, but they would feel the facts quite as much as I should.'

'Well, mother, don't be prejudiced against poor Wilfred's widow. It is quite true her way of talking is—well, is sometimes not quite like ours; and she does not understand all our—what you call etiquette, you know. But she is a beautiful creature—very charming in her own way, and there is no harm in her. Her heart is in the right place, I am sure.'

'I hope so, indeed. It would be very sad if she was not what our old friends would approve—if she was not a good and improving companion for Constance and Ally.' ('Fancy Silvia an improving companion!' thought Percival.) 'I hope I shall never be unjust and prejudiced. Of

course a colonial girl *may* be an exception to the general rule. Married early to such an Englishman as Wilfred Lomax, and coming to England, she may be or may become all that Mr. Lomax can desire as the mother of his grandson.'

Percival did not go into his own room till it was time to dress for dinner. He had been writing out a recipe for a sick horse in the morning, and his desk, with papers, etc., on it, lay open on the table. He huddled everything into it, and put it away, not perceiving Silvia's note, which had been left by his man, among them.

The next morning Silvia, wanting to ask some question, went to the little sitting-room upstairs which belonged to Constance and Ally. Of course they had given her free *entrée* to it when first she came ; but she had seldom made use of the permission, though she knew the girls generally spent an hour or two there after breakfast.

When she had opened the door, she stood on the threshold astonished at what she found was going on within. She was unperceived by Constance and Ally, as their backs were towards her. They were reading the Psalms for the day aloud, taking verses alternately, and were just coming to the close as Silvia approached. Their clear young voices rose reverently with the sacred words which they gave forth as from their hearts, and Constance sounded the last with a pathetic triumph :

“As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.” Ah, Ally, that world without end is heaven, not earth.’

No one could doubt the meaning of the words, or that the fair young speaker longed earnestly for the world to come.

Then Silvia saw that her boy was at their feet, sitting there with exemplary goodness, his blue eyes looking up at them

through his flaxen curls, his finger on his rosy mouth.

As Ally spoke the last 'Amen,' the finger was removed, and the mouth spoke.

'Now Willy's turn!' he said joyously, and yet with a sweet gravity his mother had never seen in him before. Was he in the habit of spending his mornings here with his young aunts? Was this only a part of everyday occurrences on which she had accidentally stumbled? She almost held her breath to see what 'Willy's turn' meant, and she felt a motherly sensation towards the child as he sat there, so fair, innocent and sweet, that took herself by surprise.

Both the young aunts stooped and kissed him.

'Yes,' they said; 'now it is Willy's turn.'

Then he stood up, and clasping his hands behind his white pinafore, repeated very prettily, if not very distinctly :

‘I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth has smiled,
And made me in these Christian days
A happy English child.’

He went on to the end of the hymn, not saying the words as plainly as I have written them, but with no mistakes; keeping himself grave, and while his eyes smiled, not allowing his lips to relax into the smiles to which they were so accustomed. He was rewarded by a shower of kisses.

‘I am glad Aunt Lyddy lets us teach him hymns,’ Constance said; ‘and he learns them without any trouble.’

Then they went through a gentle little catechism about the first great truths of the Christian religion, the simplest questions, to which the little fellow gave answers which bore internal evidence that he understood what he was saying.

When the lesson was finished, he held his pretty face up, first to one lady and then to

the other, for the kisses which he knew must follow ; and then, turning eagerly to Constance, climbed on her lap.

‘ Now, Aunt Conny, tell Willy about papa.’

So ‘ Aunt Conny ’ told some simple little anecdote of Wilfred’s childhood, some trait of affection, or generosity, or unselfishness, teaching his child through his own life ; told it softly and reverently. And the boy listened, smiling and delighted, yet subdued, and with no boisterous signs of pleasure—and Wilfred’s widow stood at the door and listened also.

After this, Willy was told to run away, as nurse would be ready to put his hat on and take him out of doors ; and turning round as she spoke to him, Constance beheld Silvia.

She was paler than usual, very pale ; and her eyes looked unnaturally large, with the pupils dilated. She put her hand on her

side, almost as if in physical pain ; but in truth it was mental emotion, an emotion of a new kind in which she had no experience, that overpowered her. She came up to them quite silently, and sat down.

‘How happy you are—how happy you are!’ she cried, with a desperate regret, ‘while I have no chance.’

They mistook her meaning ; they hung about her with girlish caresses.

‘Dear Silvia, poor Silvia ! what would we not do to make you happy !’ they cried.

‘But we are *not* happy, you know,’ Constance said very calmly ; ‘and you have what we can never have—you have a *memory*. You are the creature he loved best ; we think you are to be *envied*, Silvia.’

‘Ah, if I was—if I had been ! Ah, if you knew——’

She spoke incoherently, and Constance looked at her with startled eyes. But she knew, as all who have loved and lost know,

that remorse of affection which sometimes seizes on every suffering heart, that yearning to have been more to, to have done more for, our beloveds who are gone. She knew the merciless pang, wounding like a sharp sword, of irremediable regret; and an instant's thought told her *that* was what had seized Silvia in its cruel grasp. But the grasp would relax, the pang would pass away; she knew that also. And Silvia grew calmer soon, and looked round her in a frightened way.

‘If we are not able to control our own feelings; if we are to be miserable in spite of all we do and all we intend; if we mean to be happy and *can't*—oh, that is dreadful, that is a thing I never thought of or believed possible! What is one to do, then? Oh, what is one to do?’

There was a sort of childish helplessness about her way of saying this. She was taken by surprise by herself; horrible pos-

sibilities were opening before her eyes. The fact that her own self, her own thoughts, her own feelings, might prevent that self from enjoying life, and that she herself could not hinder this—that *memory* alone might have that awful power—all this was new to her, and the novelty was terrible. The girls soothed her with soft, tender words and caresses.

‘It *will* come on one thus at times,’ Constance said, still blind to her real sufferings and feelings; ‘but the vehemence does not last: if it did, we should die.’

‘You are both of you *good*,’ she answered; ‘and what am I?’

‘You are wonderful,’ Constance said solemnly; ‘you can’t think how I admire you, Silvia. I think you are the most unselfish person I ever met. The way in which you conquer your sorrow for our sakes is wonderful.’

Silvia gave an impatient sigh, and turned

from her with something like contempt. She leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes.

‘I wish I had never come here,’ she muttered to herself, not to them.

They heard her, but they were not hurt. In the face of her transcendent sorrow, they could not think of themselves, and they were sure she meant nothing unkind ; they knew she was not meaning anything about them, but only how being there tore open all her wounds and prevented their closing again.

‘Yet really, dearest, though it is natural you should sometimes feel so, really you must be less unhappy here than you would be anywhere else ; and as time passes, I do think you will feel this more and more,’ Constance said very tenderly.

‘I have done it, and it can’t be undone,’ was the gloomy reply. ‘What would you say if I disappeared some fine day, and never was heard of any more?’

‘There is Willy,’ answered Ally, with a gay smile.

‘Oh, you may keep the brat!’ cried Silvia; ‘if I run away, you may be pretty sure I shan’t trouble myself with *him*. But oh,’ she added, as if she could not help it, ‘I wish I was good—I wish I was good!’

‘You *are* good, dear,’ said Ally, and kissed her.

‘In the face of a great sorrow one *feels* one is not,’ Constance said. ‘And when one remembers what he was, and what he is now——’ her voice faltered.

‘Don’t,’ cried Silvia sharply; ‘why do you pile up the agony?’ she added, with sudden anger. ‘You can’t *like* it—you can’t really *like* it.’

There was silence among them. They would never understand each other, and what each said jarred on the other.

‘I must do something,’ Silvia said. ‘I am going to try. Ally, will you take me to some of your cottages?’

‘Of course I will, dear, with the greatest pleasure.’

‘I don’t know whether this will last, you know,’ said Silvia. ‘I hope it won’t. If it should increase! I seem to have got little glimmerings and shimmerings. Oh, dear me! if they burst out into a blaze, what will become of me? Life would not be worth having. I should go and hang myself. I never felt like this before. Oh dear me!’

She spoke recklessly, but not in jest.

‘I do think it will pass away,’ she said, very seriously.

‘What is it?’ Ally asked. ‘I don’t quite understand.’

‘Does anyone understand another?’ said Silvia. ‘Strangers yet—strangers yet; yes, I understand you, you poor little transparent Ally!’

‘There is nothing to understand in me, is there?’ answered Ally simply.

‘Plenty,’ laughed Silvia. ‘I say, is Sir Percival Ross a very good man? is he like you two, I wonder?’

‘He is a dear, honest, high-principled boy,’ Constance replied, who always spoke of Percival as the boy she had known him and still considered him, a little to Ally’s annoyance.

‘He would help anyone who tried to be good,’ Silvia said; but she spoke low and addressed herself, and the girls hardly caught what she said.

‘I am very tired—I am very *very* tired,’ she said presently. ‘Why did not Percival come here last night?’

‘He had been here in the morning; he does not come twice a day,’ Ally said, a little stiffly.

‘Well, I think he will come by-and-by. He wants to drive us all over to see his mother, as she can’t call on me. I suppose you can go, if he proposes it, this afternoon?’

‘I have a headache,’ Constance answered — ‘not much, but I could not drive in the sun. Ally will go, of course.’

‘Oh yes ; I will go,’ Ally said, with a stifled sigh. ‘I shall like to see dear Lady Ross again.’

‘And here he is, driving up the road,’ cried Silvia, from the window. She was surprised that he had not answered her note, and she slipped downstairs, meaning to get a word alone with him ; but he was in the drawing-room before she was in the hall, and Aunt Lydia was there also.

She gave him a meaning look as she held out her hand, but his face was open and unconscious.

He at once proposed his plan.

‘I have business further on, and have promised to lunch at Elwood, so I have not a minute ; but I will call for them, Aunt Lyddy, on my way home at half-past three, and I will bring them back before dinner.’

Silvia graciously accepted the invitation, to which the aunt made no objection. She would be very glad for her niece to make dear Lady Ross's acquaintance, and she was truly pleased to hear she was sufficiently recovered to receive them. But she would send the pony-carriage to bring them back. Then Percival ran off so quickly that Silvia could not detain him outside without making her eagerness to do so too marked.

‘Why did not he give a word or a look?’ she thought impatiently, when he was gone. ‘It is that terrible straightforwardness of his, I suppose. He did not choose to have a secret understanding before Aunt Lyddy. This may be English manners, but in my opinion it is very bad manners not to answer a lady's note—and a note of such a nature, too. Well, at any rate, his behaviour gives me a little excitement; and excitement is the only thing worth living for, after all. Heigho !’

Silvia went into the garden, and strolling about there, endeavoured to shake off the feelings and thoughts that had been for the first time in her life awakened in her heart that day. She shrank from them with terror, only just having become aware of the fact that you cannot be happy because you choose, and that memory of a past will interfere with the present, even against the vehement opposition of the person whose memory it is; and that remorse might be awakened even in her heart, resolved as she was when she did things that she would be glad if they succeeded, and if they failed—try again.

Was she passing out of her own power? Had she lost mastery over herself? A few minutes' violent emotion, and then the clouds burst and the sky was clear again. She was accustomed to this. But were regret and remorse actually planting their stings in her breast—lasting stings? and

were dreadful plants to spring up and flourish from these roots, poisoning her whole life? Was it possible that such things really were? She had read, she had heard of such things—but did they really exist, and could they exist for her?

She shrank with terror; she cowered down on a bench in the garden. She was cold under that brilliant summer sky; she was frightened, she was helpless, she did not know what to do.

In this state Mr. Vaux found her; but he was too much occupied with the finding her, to notice the state.

‘Ah, ha!’ he cried. ‘I have run you down, have I? I have been prowling about, and come on my game at last.’

With an effort she gathered herself together, with a great mental shake she emerged from the panic that was on her. She was more in her element with this man, though he was opposed to her, than with any of the other people about her.

‘How do you do?’ she said, very politely.
‘What a nice day, is not it?’

‘Oh yes, it is a very nice day,’ he replied; ‘and you are a very nice young lady, Mrs. Wilfred Lomax. But for all that there are two sides to a compact, and you have broken yours.’

‘A compact!’ she said, opening innocent eyes at him. ‘What is that, please?’

‘It is an agreement between two people, ma’am. It is an exchange of promises. A promises B that if B does a particular thing, A will do a particular thing also. And it is a compact just the same if it is a negative—B is to abstain from doing something, and then A will abstain from doing something, too, and each will be content. But if B does *not* abstain, then A is down upon him without mercy, and does the thing that B deprecates; and perhaps B is a ruined man from that moment—or woman—you understand—or woman!’

‘All U P, Giles Scroggins,’ Silvia said softly, and then yawned visibly. ‘You talk like a scientific problem, Mr. Vaux, with your A’s and your B’s. You are not amusing this morning. Do you know, we are greatly in want of amusement here. Why don’t you ask us to go over and take luncheon at your place some fine morning? We are much more hospitable in Australia—we are indeed.’

‘I have no theatre at Longfields, unfortunately, Mrs. Lomax.’

‘That’s a pity. Why don’t you build one? You are rich, aren’t you?’

‘I have no occasion to complain of my rent-roll, ma’am, though I may not pretend to compete with baronets and such folk.’

‘Why should you? Yours is a different sphere. But you are very well in your way.’

‘Oh, I am—am I? I am happy to find favour in your eyes. But handsome is as handsome does, you know; and I am afraid

I shall not stand high in your good graces when I have had my little interview with your father-in-law.'

'I am sure you are incapable of a dirty action, Mr. Vaux.'

'But I think what I am about to do is a remarkably clean one.'

'You are altogether on the wrong tack—you are indeed—I assure you that you are. Do you really suppose that a woman who has had some experience, who has seen something, anything of the world, *could* make up her mind to marry a good-natured country lad?'

She turned her beautiful eyes upon him. Never perhaps had she looked more lovely, more seraphic than at that minute; and there was a meaning, a significance in her glance that sent a strange feeling through her companion's heart.

He answered boldly, notwithstanding:

'A woman who has seen the world, and

had some experience in Australia, might consider it an uncommonly good thing to be an English baronet's wife.'

'You do not understand me. It is what I could not do. In the terrible *ennui* of this place I may flirt with the boy, if you call it flirting; but, you may believe me, that is all. To settle at Oakvale with such a companion, or I may say two such companions, would to me be worse than death. You may believe me or not, as you like, but it's true.'

'Then oblige me by giving up the amusement of flirting with that good-natured country lad.'

'What am I to do instead? You hardly ever come here,' with seductive emphasis; 'why do you hardly ever come here? It would be *much* more jolly. You talk; he prattles.'

Mr. Vaux could not help a short sudden burst of laughter at the distinction so

drawn, nor can it be denied that he felt flattered. There is a vanity in the bosom of most men—not quite all, but most—that puts them in the power of any pretty woman who will condescend to flatter. Almost any woman who will thus stoop to a man can conquer. And Silvia was not only pretty—she was beautiful, and with that fair beauty which we call angelic, and which shows no evil feelings or temper on its soft unruffled surface, but remains angelic till more than ‘middle age hath set its signet sage’ upon it. Then the hard lines and coarse wrinkles may appear, which the soul has laid there, but which youth’s magic touch has concealed, and beauty and angel-light vanish for ever.

‘After all, I don’t believe she is a bad sort,’ wise and worldly Mr. Vaux was saying to himself; ‘and I do think she is only amusing herself with that young donkey.’

‘Honour bright, then,’ he said; ‘don’t encourage him any more.’

‘And give up the only fun I have. You *must* come here, then; and upon my word I only do it because you ask me. I am not a bit afraid of you. They would not believe a word you said if I denied it. They would think it was a wonderful likeness; or if they did believe it, I could explain it away. They are such innocent dears, they believe anything.’

‘And you would tell a—not to put too fine a point on it—a downright lie?’ (bending displeased brows on her).

Laughter flashed out from her eyes.

‘How do you know it would be a lie?’ she cried. ‘How do you know it *was* I? Oh you foolish, foolish man! do you really believe it?’

‘Why, you as good as confessed it to me!’

‘As *good* as confessed! Yes—but *didn't* you see I was amusing myself at your expense? Yes, most wise and reverend signior, *at your expense*. And did I really

take you in? Did you really think it was I? Have you not been playing too? What fun—what jolly fun!

She sprang to her feet, clapped her hands, and almost danced where she stood. A lovely Hebe, full of life and joy, her eyes gleaming, colour in her cheeks, smiles wreathed round her rosy pouting lips. Suddenly she made him a deep courtesy, and the next moment, swift as a flash of lightning, she was gone.

She had run away from him, before he had time to think even of pursuing her. He stared after her, laughed, stretched himself, and repeated the thought: 'I do believe that she is not half a bad sort after all.' Then he mused a little, and wound up his reflections thus: 'I don't think she means to marry Percival; I believe she would prefer your humble servant;' here he laughed a little scornfully. 'But for all that she *is* the beauty I met at the theatre;

and I'll punish my young friend yet, for her audacity in thinking she can throw dust in *my* eyes.'

He did not go on to the house, however. He had had enough of this sort of thing for one morning. Silvia had not made much progress yet, but she had made some. His opinion of her, and what was more, his feelings towards her, were changed. They were not the same that they had been a few minutes before, for it was in a very few minutes that Silvia by words and looks had wrought the change. I am not at all prepared to say that in due time she might not have married this man, if it had been her pleasure to do so ; but it would have taken some time and some trouble.

Sir Percival Ross appeared punctually at the appointed hour, and the two young ladies took their seats in the carriage behind him. It seemed to Silvia that the

Fates were against her. Never before to-day had she found the least difficulty in keeping up private communications with Percival; but to-day, when she really wanted it, when it was important to find how he responded to her note, and when she desired to enter on the *rôle* of his betrothed, every opportunity eluded her grasp, and she felt no more to him than to the rest of the world. Was he doing it on purpose? No; his countenance was open, his manner easy. Had he received her note? She began to fear that he had not.

There must have been a something—a change, however subtle, that she would have detected in him—a tremble of concealed smiles about the mouth—a conscious look in the eyes—a blush coming and going on the ingenuous young face: he would not be Percival Ross unless there had been these tell-tale signs, and she looked for them in vain. They were not there; and

fear that her billet had not reached him changed into certainty.

Lady Ross received the three young people in her morning-room upstairs; and Silvia, glancing round it, at once determined in her own mind what changes she would make in it when it was her own. There was much dignity, and some formality, in the way in which the elder lady took her part in the introduction, which her son performed very creditably. But she looked earnestly at Silvia, and her eyes moistened as they rested on the slender, youthful form in its deep mourning, and pale beautiful face crowned by widow's weeds. She had known Wilfred from his birth, and her heart melted at the sight of Wilfred's widow—a sight which, at her age, she had never expected to see.

If, as her first gesture seemed to show, she had intended only to shake hands with the stranger, reserving her rare kisses

till they had become acquainted, the piteous sight before her made her change her mind, and she impressed a kiss on the fair brow that in the course of nature should have been radiant with happiness, and to which the widow's cap gave such a sorrowful meaning. Silvia behaved uncommonly well, received the kiss dutifully, and said nothing.

Then Lady Ross greeted Ally with real affection.

'Dear child,' she said, 'I am so glad to see you.'

'If you think that is your daughter-in-law that is to be, my lady,' thought Silvia, 'you are uncommonly in the wrong box.'

The conversation was at first almost entirely confined to the two Rosses and Ally, Silvia taking little or no part in it. In fact, she was afraid to open her lips lest she should say something she ought not to say. But the silent *rôle* suited the young

widow, and raised her higher in the old one's estimation than the most agreeable conversation on her part could have done. Doubtless the poor girl had made a great effort in coming to see her, which effort showed a highly proper respect for her position, and for the friendship between the two families. And having made this effort, to sit languid and silent, listening but not joining in the conversation, was by far the best thing that she could do. But Silvia did not understand this. She thought she ought to talk, and felt awkward and ill at ease, longing to say something, and yet unable to find anything fitting to say. She found the dignity of Lady Ross quite terrible; Aunt Lydia was nothing to her. As to having her in the house when she became Lady Ross number two, that was out of the question. However, in these cases, on these great properties, there was always, she believed, a residence provided for ladies

who were done with and laid aside, who had had their day and must make way for others. 'Le roi est mort—vive le roi!'

Hence came the first remark she made.

'Yes,' Ally was saying, 'Constance is better, but she is not strong. Aunt Lyddy, I think, is quite well, but she will never be the same again. She can't, you know.' And the large eyes shone through unshed tears as she spoke.

'Time, my dear, works wonders,' Lady Ross replied; 'the young know so little about time that they are ignorant of that fact.'

'I think you should all go away for a bit; there is nothing like change—is there, mother?' said Percival.

'Is there a dowager's house here?' cried Silvia, her thoughts having filled her till they needed expression, and this sudden involuntary question being her first contribution to the conversation.

‘A *what?*’ exclaimed the amazed Sir Percival.

‘A *dowager’s* house?’ inquired the dowager, repeating the word as if she thought her ears must have deceived her.

‘Dear Silvia, what do you mean?’ asked innocent Ally; ‘what *is* a dowager’s house?’

Then Silvia saw that she had put her foot in it, and was very nearly saying so, but restrained her too ready tongue. She looked vaguely out of window, and in the distance saw a church spire rising among the trees, and caught inspiration from the sight.

‘I did not say dowager’s house,’ she said, with a little laugh; ‘I was asking about a parsonage. Is there one here? is it near? I see the church; it is awfully pretty.’

The ‘awfully’ grated on Lady Ross’s ears.

‘Yes, it is a *very* pretty church,’ she said, with an emphasis on the ‘very’ that was well

understood by two of those who heard it, and fell innocuous on the ears for which it was meant. 'And the parsonage is close by. We have an excellent clergyman—Mr. Gray.'

Tea was now brought in, and proved a diversion.

'After tea, Percival, you can take Mrs. Wilfred through the gardens and conservatories.'

'Oh, thank you, that will be jolly!' cried Silvia, for she was longing to escape, and also saw in this the possibility of a *tête-à-tête* with Percival, which might bring about an *éclaircissement*; 'and Ally can stay and talk to you.'

But Lady Ross was not at all accustomed to have her plans, or those of her guests, settled for her, and she took the initiative at once. 'Ally will accompany you,' she said; 'she will like a turn among her old friends the flowers.'

‘Aren’t you tired, Ally?’ asked her sister-in-law.

‘Tired, dear? no, not in the least,’ replied she unsuspectingly.

‘And if you were, the garden would refresh you,’ remarked Lady Ross, and thus settled the question.

Silvia quite stared at her.

‘Oh, this sort of thing will never do!’ she said to herself; ‘if there is not a dowager’s house, one must be built immediately. Those savages who leave their parents out on hillsides to die have much the best of it.’

They went downstairs soon after this, and Silvia became speechless at the size and beauty of the conservatories. Through them they wandered, out into the gardens. On passing a rustic seat, she glanced first at it, and then at her sister-in-law, saying, ‘I am sure you are tired, Ally.’

This drew Percival’s attention to Ally’s

delicate little face, and defeated Silvia's plan.

'Take my arm,' he cried ; 'you do look pale.'

Ally obeyed, and the youthful pair strolled on together ; while, when the walks were not wide enough for three, Silvia had of necessity to fall behind.

Inexpressibly provoked, she flung herself down on the next seat they approached, and the two still strolled on unheeding.

There was something home-like and pleasant to Percival in the position, which he enjoyed all the more, perhaps, because he had been under very different influences of late. Home and Ally seemed to go together by nature ; and here they were taking their arm-in-arm walk, as if indeed the one belonged to the other. It was a splendid summer day ; the dazzling blue of the sky suited the brilliant colouring of leaf and flower that the earth put forth to greet

it; the air was alive with soft summer noises, the hum of insects and flutter of birds, and redolent with sweet summer scents; and the trees lazily moved their leaves about ever so little, without a branch stirring.

‘It is a dear old place!’ quoth Percival, with a sigh of pleasure.

‘Nothing changes but we,’ was Ally’s answer, scarcely audible, and accompanied by quite a different sort of sigh.

‘I say, Ally,’ trying to look under her hat, ‘it is precious little I’ve seen of you of late.’

‘No.’

That was all she said, and it was the least little bit of a ‘no’ that ever was heard.

‘What do you do with yourself all day?’

‘I don’t know—much the same as usual, I suppose.’

‘Then how is it I don’t see you?’

‘I suppose because you don’t come often to the Grange.’

‘I come near enough, then, and Silvia runs out to me—every day pretty nearly. Why don’t *you* come, Ally?’

‘I don’t know. Why should I? Silvia never says where she is going; and I am somewhere else, or doing something else, I dare say.’

‘*Do* come, Ally; we read French. Do come, and join in the reading.’

‘If Silvia wished it she would ask me. I had rather not, Percival.’

‘Why the deuce shouldn’t Silvia wish it?’ said Sir Percival Ross.

‘Do you always read French?’

‘Oh yes, always—that is, we always mean to; but often we don’t, or only a very moderate quantity—a very moderate quantity indeed. We talk a great deal more than we read. But I always *did* like talking better than reading. Don’t you, Ally? It is much more jolly.’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Ally wearily.

‘If you won’t come out, I must go in,’ said Percival; ‘but then,’ he added simply, ‘I must come the front way, like a visitor, not through the garden, or she will waylay me.’

‘Why should she not? she likes being with you. I wish her to have what she likes. Poor Silvia!’

‘I don’t believe you care a bit for me, Ally.’

‘Oh, Percival!’

‘Would you like me to come and see you? Silvia really does care, and she doesn’t mind telling a fellow. You ought to like me better than she does, for you have known me all my life, Ally.’

What Ally might have replied, or how her reply might have led to further affectionate complaints from the young man, and what the result of such might have been, cannot be told, as Silvia, repenting of her ill-humour, which had doomed her

to dulness, recovered herself when she found her defalcation unheeded, and at this moment came running down a grass slope and intercepting them, her bonnet in her hand, and, according to her wont, her hair decked with flowers just gathered, fresh, fair, and scented.



CHAPTER IV.

‘ And, looking at the grave, he said, “ My brother !” ’

WORDSWORTH.

PERHAPS Silvia had never looked more lovely in her life than she did at this moment, when, like an apparition, she flashed before their eyes, flower-crowned, with eyes sparkling and cheeks flushed, from the run she had just taken. The extreme paleness which was customary to her might have been considered by many as a defect, though in looking at her the words,

‘ Her cheek, ah ! call it fair, not pale,’

would have been brought forcibly to the mind ; but there could be no doubt that

when she *had* a colour, it heightened and intensified her beauty into a vision of loveliness such as it is not often given to mortal eyes to see.

Who can blame Percival Ross if, with a little exclamation, he dropped Ally's hand from his arm and sprang forward to Silvia's side? The ostensible reason for this act was that the widow's bonnet had slipped from her hand to the grass; but her mere beauty, without any other reason, was sufficient to call forth such homage from anyone who was not either more or less than man.

'How dared you leave me alone, sir?' she inquired with pretty petulance.

'How dared you stay behind?' was the easy answer.

'I say,' said Silvia, 'do show me the dowager-house, will you?'

'Do you mean the parsonage?' replied he; 'why do you call it the dowager-house?'

Do they call parsons dowagers out there? with a little wave of his hand, intended to designate Australia.

‘Not by no means. I turned it off cleverly, because I had to. I’d put my foot in it, don’t you see? But to call a spade a spade, what I mean by the dowager-house is that mansion in which the queen-dowagers of the Ross dynasty take up their residence when the reigning king marries.’

Percival Ross knit his brow and blushed.

‘We have no such place,’ he said, rather drily.

‘What do you do with your dowagers, then?’ was the brisk reply.

‘I really don’t know what you mean, Silvia. I never remember any dowagers; why do you want to know? Hullo! I suppose my grandmother was a dowager, was not she? My grandfather died first, of course—poor old chap! he was killed out hunting, before I was born; but I was

very fond of granny, the dearest little old woman with white hair, who wore spectacles, and died when I was about four years old, I dare say.'

'And where did she live?'

'Where did she live? Why, here, to be sure. Where else should she live? My father was her son, you know; and do you suppose she wouldn't live with him? Why, she was as fond of him as ever she could be.'

'I was not thinking of any objection on *her* part,' said she drily.

But her manner was lost on Percival Ross, who remained quite innocent that there had been any allusion made to his mother, or even that she was one of the dowager class of which they were speaking. To him she was *his mother*—the dearest possession that he as yet had on earth—and the idea of her ever living anywhere but *at home* never crossed his mind. Oakvale was home, and it never occurred to him

to inquire whether it was *his* home or hers.

‘And now do tell me what set you off about dowagers?’ said he, laughing.

Silvia looked hard at him, and wondered whether it were possible he was as simple as he seemed. Then she burst into a laugh quite suddenly.

‘Why, don’t you know I am a dowager myself?’ she cried. ‘I was wondering whether my boy would turn me out some day.’

‘You a dowager!’ and ‘Oh, Silvia, why there’s papa!’ burst from Percival Ross and Ally together.

‘You are a couple of gabies,’ cried Silvia, ‘that is what you are. I do declare it is a pity to come between you. You’d make a good match any day.’

And again she laughed rather loudly.

Ally was jarred and displeased, and Percival asked her very quietly :

‘Why are we a couple of gabies, Silvia?’

‘Oh, never you mind why you are, Sir Percival Ross. You’ll know some day. Live and learn.’

‘I think it must be time for us to think of going home,’ Ally said rather shortly. She did not like Silvia’s manners to-day, and why had she come to interrupt that one little brightly soothing *tête-à-tête* which she and Percival were enjoying? He seemed to like it as much as she did, and it was a pleasure they had rarely tasted of late; and evidently he did not wish for such with Silvia. Had he not pressed Ally to make a third on those occasions? She had not felt so happy for a long time. A weight had risen from her heart. She knew not how or why, but so it was; and now why did Silvia come talking in this way, giving these loud, sudden laughs?

‘Dear me, what a hurry you’re in!’ said Silvia. ‘And I’m quite inclined to make a day of it now we *are* here; and a night

of it too. I say, would your mother put us up, Percival, eh ?'

'With the greatest pleasure in life. There are the young ladies' rooms, you know. The white-room, and the green-room, and the pink-room, all in a pretty little nest to themselves.'

'By-the-bye, won't you show us over the house ?' cried Silvia suddenly ; 'that was one of the things I came for, and I was just forgetting it. We've only seen that bit of a room upstairs. I want to see the reception-rooms, and the bedrooms, and all.'

'To be sure,' he cried. 'Come along, girls ; we'll go into every hole, nook and corner.'

'But it must be another day, I am afraid,' Ally said rather sorrowfully, for she would have liked to stay. 'See, there is the pony-carriage come for us.' And she pointed down the road as she spoke.

The arrangement had been for Percival to drive them there, and for their own carriage to be sent to bring them home.

‘And can’t we keep the ponies waiting a bit, pray?’

Ally looked at her watch, and shook her head.

‘No, I am sorry to say we can’t. We shall only just have time to dress for dinner, and you know papa likes us to be punctual—we never keep him waiting a minute.’

‘What a bore it is to belong to a respectable family!’ Silvia cried, flinging her arms up into the air, as if she would willingly have thrown the respectable family to the winds, could she have managed to do so.

‘You must come another day and see the house,’ said the young master thereof.

‘Thank you kindly, sir,’ and Silvia dropped a little courtesy. ‘But—but I’m not sure that the book is worth the preface.’

‘What preface?’ asked he simply.

‘There is an ordeal to be gone through first. I say, must we go in and say good-bye to the—to Lady Ross?’

‘Of course,’ said Ally, astonished at the question. ‘You would not leave without doing so, would you?’

‘Come along at once, then. On the same principle on which, as a child, I used to sit plump down in the dentist’s chair, I’m always for doing things slap-dash that *have* to be done.’

‘Hush, Silvia! he will hear you!’

Sir Percival had fallen a little behind the girls, the shrubbery-walk they were passing along now being only wide enough for two.

‘Oh, he’ll have to hear me before we’ve done. There are some matters that won’t stand being minced.’

Silvia peeped in at the windows of the rooms as they passed round the house, and made her comments on them.

‘That’s a jolly carpet. These are hideous curtains. And those are the state-rooms, I suppose? and with blue draperies! That won’t do. Yellow—yellow—yellow! I have always said yellow curtains for my drawing-room as long as I have said anything,’ looking over her shoulder at Percival. ‘See here, young man; you’ll have to put yellow curtains up here. It’s the only colour going. Yellow satin curtains—no others will do!’

He laughed lightly. ‘*Any* others will do in this case. It happens that yellow in a room is my mother’s abomination. Fancy her with yellow curtains!’ and he laughed again.

But Silvia frowned, and there was a gleam in her eyes which sometimes appeared there, and deteriorated greatly from her beauty.

They found Lady Ross in her afternoon seat in the little drawing-room, as a charming apartment opening into a conservatory

was called, round which Silvia looked with critical, appraising eyes. She kissed them both at parting, and hoped they would soon come again.

‘And Constance, too,’ she said kindly. ‘Mind you bring Constance next time. I want to see the dear child.’

Of course Sir Percival accompanied the girls to their carriage and put them in. Ally, as driver, got in first and gathered up the reins ; and then Silvia managed the one word to be said to him, for which she had been looking out for an opportunity all day. She lingered a few steps behind, and when he turned after having arranged Ally comfortably, he naturally went back to her.

She smiled her sweetest smile, and fixed him with her most seductive glance.

‘Did you get my note?’ she whispered.

‘Your note? What note? I didn’t get any.’

‘It was given to your man, I know.’

Enquire.' And then she had to take her seat beside Ally, who had noticed the momentary whisper with some surprise.

But not with more surprise than Percival Ross had received it ; and when the carriage had driven off, he thrust his hands down into his trousers-pockets and said to himself, ' Now, what the deuce is the meaning of that ? Did I receive her note ? What has she been writing to me about, and why this mystery ? Why didn't she ask me at once before Ally if I'd got her note ?'

Still, he was not very eager on the subject, for he went round by the kennel to examine some young puppies, and decide which were handsome enough to be kept and which were to go the way which so many puppies and so many kittens do go. Then he sauntered into the house, his hands still in his pockets, and shouted for Robinson, who appeared from some of those mysterious back passages and stair-

cases which abound in English country houses.

‘Did any letter come for me from the Grange yesterday?’

‘Yes, Sir Percival. I put it on your table, you being not in the house; and it was gone when I brought your hot water up, and laid out your things before dinner.’

‘Gone! and who took it?’

‘I supposed you did, Sir Percival, as you had been there yourself.’

So upstairs ran Sir Percival, and began a great rummage among his things; and at last, turning over the contents of his desk, he found Silvia’s billet.

Meanwhile, the girls drove home together. Ally occupied herself with her ponies, not feeling much inclined for conversation with her sister-in-law—this Silvia whom the whole family had received as if an angel from heaven had come among them—whom she herself had

first idealized, and then idolized her own ideal—but whom now—— How did her thoughts and feelings stand towards Silvia now? Ally was very little in the habit of analyzing her thoughts and feelings. She was not in the least self-conscious, taking herself as she came, and only endeavouring to know herself sufficiently to correct her faults. And was it her fault, or could she not help it, that her opinion of Silvia was so very different from what it had been a few weeks ago? It seemed an age of time, but in reality it was a few weeks. Aunt Lydia—kind, gentle, and charitable—had not her opinion in some measure changed also? And Constance? She thought Constance was still in that lovely dream, that radiant exaltation of feeling, in which they had all of them first received the beautiful mourner—Wilfred's widow! She thought, but she was not sure—sometimes momentarily the idea had flashed

across her mind that Constance also was *disillusionnée*, that Constance also knew there were two Silvias—the ideal and the real—and the real differing from the ideal as much as—— Here the current of her thoughts was suddenly checked by the voice of her companion.

‘Do you think that young gentleman really intends his mother to live with him when he marries?’ was what the voice said.

‘What young gentleman? whose mother?’ cried the startled Ally, utterly unconscious of Silvia’s meaning, and with a sensation of guilt at the disloyal thoughts she had been thinking by her very side.

‘Why, Ross, to be sure. I beg his pardon—Sir Percival Ross, Baronet, I believe I ought to say in polite society; do you think he really means it?’

‘Means what, Silvia?’

‘Means that old woman to share Oakvale with himself and his bride?’

‘Old woman? Ah, Silvia, what are you talking about? There is no old woman there.’

‘Old *lady*, then. Have I pronounced it in sufficiently big letters? I beg her pardon too, but I really thought she *was* a woman. What, is not *that* clear enough for my little goose? Let me put it into broad English, then. His mother, Lady Ross—does he mean her to live with him when he marries?’

She raised her voice, speaking loudly, as if Ally’s mental denseness betokened physical want of hearing.

‘But, Silvia, she lives there; it is her home. She brought him up there as a little boy; of course she will always live there—she loves it.’

‘A good lot of people love homes they have to leave, my dear. Do you mean to say you don’t know that the place is his and not hers? Now, honour bright, Ally!, *are* you such an innocent?’

‘Is it? really I never thought about it. What *does* it signify which it belongs to? They are mother and son living together, and of course they will always do the same. Fancy Lady Ross not at Oakvale, or Percival without her! It is perfectly ridiculous.’

‘And what will his wife say?’

‘What should she say?’

‘I’m precious mistaken if she doesn’t say, “Thank you, sir; I like to be mistress of my own house, and let the old lady go about her business.”’

‘Oh, Silvia, I wish you would not talk in that way! Dear Lady Ross! why, it has been her home ever since she was Lady Ross at all; it is certainly her home now. What does it matter if it belongs to him? Houses always do belong to men, I suppose, when there *are* men. But there she lived when he was a little boy, and we were children, and used to go and spend the

day with him—and the idea of its not being hers is absurd. She brought him up there, I tell you, when she could turn him out of the room if he was naughty, and let him sit up and have tea with her if he was a very good boy ;’ and Ally laughed, a little soft, happy laugh, as memories of her childhood came across her ; ‘and fancy her going away because he married !’

‘His wife would have a voice in that, Miss Ally.’

‘His wife ! what nonsense !—as if *she* would be so wicked ! However, he has not got a wife.’

‘No, but he will have, some day.’

‘How can you talk such nonsense ?’

‘Is it nonsense ? Time will show. I don’t think *he* considers it nonsense. I suspect Master Percival has notions on that subject at this very minute.’

‘Percival !’

‘Yes, ma’am, Percival. Oh, I daresay

you think butter would not melt in his mouth, don't you? But he knows a thing or two, he does; and he'll choose a wife for himself, if he has not done so already. And then what will become of my lady?'

By this time Ally had recovered her self-possession.

'Whenever Percival marries, Silvia,' she said with gentle dignity, 'you may be sure he will always wish his mother to live with him.'

'Not unless he's a fool,' persisted Silvia. 'Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, you know. Besides which, there are three words to that bargain; and the third is the strongest, you may be sure, and that is the wife's.'

'I don't think we need trouble ourselves about it,' Ally replied, with the same gentle dignity as before.

'And I do!' cried Silvia promptly. 'Suppose he wanted to marry one of us, now.'

‘ Please don’t, Silvia—don’t talk in that way.’

‘ Now, Ally, don’t be squeamish. I say, suppose he did.’

Ally’s little face was not pale now. It was covered with blushes of delicate china-rose pink. She turned resolutely from Silvia, and put the ponies into a fast trot.

‘ Oh yes ; you may gather up your reins and chirp to the creatures with your pretty little mouth, but that makes no difference. Boys will be boys. Young men will want to marry young women, and sometimes the latter have not any objection either—now and then, you know. Now, Ally, look here. Suppose this gentleman of ours had given me to understand that he wants a wife, and that he thinks *I* shall make him just the kind he wants ?’

The amazed eyes were turned full upon her now ; the reins were almost dropped from the little hands.

‘Silvia!’ she cried, with an emphasis of horror on the word. ‘Do not talk in such a frightful manner! *You!* Wilfred’s widow!’

‘My dear Ally, widows do sometimes marry again.’

Then Silvia grew frightened; Ally turned such a deadly white colour, and shivered and shuddered all over, so that she could hardly hold the reins. She thought she was going to faint. She saw in a moment that she had made a mistake. She had not contemplated this innocent terror of the girl’s. How could a heart like Silvia’s understand Ally’s? She had really been actuated by good-nature, wishing Ally to know at once what was likely to be, for her own sake, and believing that though she might not like it, that would be all. Such overwhelming emotion she had not in the least expected to excite. She would gladly now have retracted the words, but

it was too late. Did Ally really care so much for Percival as all this ?

But the next moment the words that broke from Ally's lips showed her that it was not of herself or of Percival she was thinking.

'Oh, Wilfred, Wilfred!' cried poor Ally, in a sort of wail.

Silvia, seeing her way, hastened to the rescue.

'Of course I should not think of it, not for years and years,' she cried hastily. 'Oh, of course you could not suppose I would. I can't help what he feels or thinks, you know, Ally. How can I? But I don't let him say a word, and I won't either, not for ever so long. No, no, I won't at all. I couldn't marry again, you know. I never mean to, of course I don't.'

Ally had recovered herself by this time. Big tears rolled down her cheeks, which had resumed their usual colour. By a mighty effort she contrived to speak.

‘Please do not,’ she said. ‘Pray, pray, do not say another word! It is too—too shocking!’

Silvia was astonished at the shame she felt. Why should she feel ashamed? How was it that some faint glimmer of the purity, the sanctity of Ally’s feelings made its way to her heart, awakening there a pang of regret, a new pain which, if it flourished and grew, she recognised as intolerable.

‘Oh, Ally, if you only knew—if you only knew!’ she cried out, for she could not help it; ‘it is not as you think.’

They had reached the house. Ally threw the reins to Silvia, sprang from the carriage, rushed upstairs to her own room, and there, locking the door, flung herself on the bed in a paroxysm of grief.

She really did not know that the light had gone out of her own life, that the world, and all that once was fair and

lovely in it, was changed, wrecked, ruined for herself; her thoughts were all of Wilfred, of the dear, noble, loving brother, and of his widow, his—Wilfred's—widow, coolly contemplating, and that within a few months of his death, marriage with another man!

Oh, the shame of it—the pain—the humiliation—the horror! Oh, Wilfred, Wilfred!

Thus lay Ally prone on her bed, mourning over the wreck of faith and love. Could she ever, ever, ever believe in anyone again? Oh, Wilfred, noble and good—Wilfred, tender and true! was this the woman in whom you had garnered up your heart? Was this your widow?

And while Ally lay thus, and thus mourned and wept, Silvia also, in her own apartment, with locked door, was in a scarcely happier or less disturbed frame of mind. She paced up and down the

chamber like a wild animal in a cage. She stamped her feet, flung her arms into the air, made gestures and gesticulations to rid herself of the weight on her mind, if by bodily exertion she could do so. She was not thinking of Percival ; she did not know what she was thinking of. Ally's purity and innocence, the sanctity of her affections, had seized hold of her. Her heart was racked by that unknown pain—an unsuspected remorse threatened to be master there ; she was herself, and not herself—what should she do ? Had she—could she have passed altogether beyond her own control ? Was she never again to feel as she chose, as well as do as she chose ? And what was the use of action and outward life if she were to have this—this *hell* within her ? She almost screamed in her helplessness against herself, and pressed her side vehemently, as if in the vain hope that she could press out the dreadful pain.

Just then came a gentle tap at her door. She rushed into the window, and turned her face to it, passing her hands over her disturbed brows and eyes—smoothing them—settling her features, as it were.

‘Come in,’ she said faintly.

And Constance entered, light in her eyes, a soft smile playing about her mouth.

‘Something has happened,’ she said; ‘something that pleases papa so much. There is a telegram. Geoffry is coming home.’

‘Geoffry?’ replied Silvia, in an odd, absent way, as if she did not understand what was said.

‘Yes, indeed; Geoffry, my cousin—your *brother*, you know, Silvia!’ this she said very tenderly.

‘My brother—oh yes, my brother!’ with fine scorn. ‘Do you know what *my brother* did, Constance?’

‘Silvia!’

Then Silvia recovered herself.

‘Geoffry is coming, is he? I am not so very glad. I am afraid of Geoffry. Is he like——’

‘No—yes—a little—there is a something that may remind you; but he is much quieter and more silent. He is clever, but in a different way from——. And he is not easily pleased; he is rather keen in seeing faults, but very kind and delightful when you know him; and he will like you.’

‘Well, he may like me or not, as he pleases. I am safe here. He cannot do me any harm.’

‘Dear Silvia!’

‘Why, what harm can he do me?’

‘He would not for the world, if he could. He is sure to like you—he loved—your Wilfred—dearly. We all love each other, Silvia, and we all loved Wilfred best, and we all love you.’

‘He won’t love my boy, then,’ said Silvia, with a sort of defiance.

‘Not love Wilfred’s boy! Ah, Silvia, he will love him dearly! His own little nephew!’

‘Well, Constance, when is he coming?’

‘To-morrow, or next day at furthest. He has got leave of absence, and left at once. He tried to get leave as soon as he could, after——’

Constance was turning to go, but Silvia called her back.

‘Don’t leave me,’ she said. ‘Help me dress; I shall be late for dinner. Don’t leave me alone—don’t let me think!’

‘She is very much moved by the idea of seeing his brother,’ Constance thought, as she marked the unwonted emotion in Silvia’s face, and the expression of absolute fear in her eyes, when she cried out: ‘Don’t let me think!’ She remained, of course, and in the tenderest way assisted her in her toilet.

‘He comes from India, does not he?’ Silvia asked abruptly.

‘Oh yes; and the telegram is from Marseilles. We knew he would come if he could, but he will be here as soon as he could have announced his arrival by letter, and we may expect him any time now.’

‘Does he know of—US?’

‘Know of you and the darling? Yes, dear Silvia, of course he does. Our letters have had very little in them on other subjects since you came. But wait a minute; no, I am not sure after all that he *does*. Let me see, when would he start—and when did you arrive? I rather think he must have left sooner than he could get even the first of the letters. It will be a delightful surprise for him. Poor old Geoff!’

‘Poor old Geoff,’ repeated Silvia somewhat drily; ‘yes, it will be a *very* delightful surprise for him.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Constance, struck by her manner, but not in the least understanding it.

‘ I mean that he is a man and a brother, and as such I suppose he will think and feel.’

‘ They loved each other dearly,’ was the reply, simply given, and with tears in the voice that uttered it.

‘ Yes, very likely they did ; but you must remember that for ever so many weeks, and all through the voyage home, he has been considering himself as eldest son and heir to five thousand a year.’

Constance blushed deeply.

‘ Dear Silvia,’ she said softly ; ‘ dear, dear Silvia—don’t pain yourself with thoughts like that. Our boys were never worldly. Geoff would *rather* God gave you that darling to comfort you, and have a son of Wilfred’s in Wilfred’s place, than be there himself—you may believe me that he would.’

‘ I dare say he would—rather !’ she spoke bitterly, and Constance could not but feel that she did so.

‘You are giving yourself pain now, Silvia,’ she said, with tender severity, ‘and the pain we give ourselves is of a dreadful kind God never sends us. Take all His sweetnesses of love and consolation that spring out of your deep affliction; don’t cast them away or poison them with deadly poison like this.’

‘Poison! yes—that ends all,’ Silvia said, answering to the word. ‘Do you understand suicide? Can you enter into it? Don’t you think it must require a deal of courage?’

‘No,’ replied Constance calmly, to Silvia’s immense surprise. ‘I can understand it quite in those who are not Christians. I think it the most natural thing in the world *then*; but not courageous—cowardly—very cowardly. A suicide, I think, *must* be a coward.’

‘Well, I always *am* in a corner with you good people!’ cried Silvia, who, though not

at all in a laughing mood, could not restrain a laugh at this most unexpected answer. 'I never *do* know what to think or say about anything ; and if I guess, I'm sure to guess wrong.'

'I am not half as good as you, dear,' said Constance tenderly. 'If I might reprove you for a virtue, Silvia, and dare do it, I should say you were too humble. People who did not know you as well as we do might be misled by the way you talk of yourself, and think you very different from what you are.'

'I'll tell you what, Constance : I'd give all I have, and all I may ever have, to— but there ! what's the use of making a hulla-baloo about what can't be, or what must ? Did I ever expect that it would be *I* who was crying for spilt milk ? Never. It is against all my ideas or intentions, and I *can't* understand it. I'll tell you what : I think it is this country life, in which there

is nothing to do but *think*; and so even those who never thought before, and don't want to, not one bit, find themselves at it. Has Percival Ross a town house? Do they ever go to London for the season?'

Constance had been much less with Silvia than Ally had—partly from the delicacy left after her illness, and partly from Silvia feeling more at ease in Ally's society than in hers—so that she was not accustomed to the questions and transitions that seemed so abrupt, from ignorance of the frame of mind and present intentions that led to them. She was greatly surprised now, and had to collect her thoughts a little before she was able to reply.

'What could make you think of that?' she said. 'No; they have no town house, and they never go up in any way for the season. Lady Ross goes to London occasionally for a few days, and Percival too,

sometimes ; but she has lived very quietly since her husband's death, and he hates the town—all his tastes and inclinations are for the country.'

'Then he must marry some humdrum countrywoman, who will fix at home with him. Anyone he *ought* to marry will insist on a season in town every year. Indeed, Constance, in my opinion you should all do it. One gets all nohow in the country. One has time for everything. It is a horrid thing having time—it is indeed. The only *go* is always to be in a hurry.'

'Ah, Silvia, and I love leisure. I love to be able to think. How can one think in a hurry?'

'You love thinking! It is just what I wish to avoid. Let me do anything but *think!* "That way madness lies."'

'Poor Silvia!' whispered Constance, very tenderly ; 'but as time goes on, that very thinking which overcomes you now will be

your greatest comfort. You will just live in his memory.'

'His? Oh, you speak of Wilfred—my poor Wilfred! Do you know, I fancy there are worse troubles than death—more endurable pains than the thought of those you have lost. Constance, tell me——'

Silvia was making her appeal with an amount of passion that surprised her gentle companion, but what she was going to ask Constance never knew. The gong sounded just as the 'Constance, tell me—' left her lips; and for Constance to disregard her uncle's wishes, and be unpunctual for a meal, was impossible.

She just took time to kiss her, and say, 'Dear, compose yourself; we must go now,' and so left her, and Silvia hurried to obey her advice and compose herself.

'What was I going to say, fool that I am?' she cried to herself, when left for an instant alone before she followed Constance

into the dining-room. 'What has come over me? Am I the same woman that entered this house a few weeks ago? Am I the same even as a week since?' She pinched her arm violently. 'Oh yes, I feel that. It is myself. But how shall myself live if myself changes into this? Is this Nemesis? Is this the result of my coming here? Is there truth in all the rubbish talked about judgment and punishment? Is there truth in repentance and remorse? God forbid!'

And downstairs she rushed, barely in time for dinner.

All the party assembled there appeared more under the influence of cheering thoughts and a little pleasant excitement than the widow of the darling of the house had yet seen among them.

Her father-in-law addressed her at once.

'So you see, my dear, we shall have a visitor soon. Geoffry is coming home.'

I shall be glad for you to know Geoffry.'

'I wish the beans were bigger—they are very late this year,' remarked Aunt Lydia pensively. 'I never did see anyone as fond of beans as Geoff is.'

'I must look out "No, sir!" and "London Bridge,"' Ally said, with a bright smile; 'but he will have new favourites by this time, which I shall have to learn for him. Dear old Geoff!'

'He seems the pet of the house,' Silvia said. She only said it because, distressed and miserable, she wanted to say something; but a cloud fell on the whole family as she spoke the words, smiles disappeared, silence reigned in the place of cheerful remarks, and some eyes filled with tears.

Aunt Lydia of course was the first to speak. When was Aunt Lydia ever backward when help was needed by her beloved ones?

‘Do you know, Silvia,’ she said, ‘I think dear Willy wants another frock. He is growing so fast, a darling, that the velvet is almost too small for him already ; but that can be let out : it is his common suits that he really *is* too big for.’

‘Is he?’ replied the young mother carelessly ; ‘I had not noticed.’

‘Oh, Silvia!’ cried Ally eagerly, ‘do get him some of those delicious little sailor-suits. The darling would look perfectly delightful in them. I have seen them on children not nearly as big.’

‘Such a baby as he is, my dear,’ said Aunt Lydia quite reproachfully.

‘There’s no good in making him look older than he is,’ acquiesced Silvia ; ‘but as for dressing children, I have no taste for it. You may get him what you like, Ally.’

Ally laughed.

‘I should feel quite grand doing that,’ she said ; ‘and I am afraid if you were in

earnest, Silvia, that I should put him into the sailor-suit notwithstanding Aunt Lyddy's objection. You know, Aunt Lyddy, you always say you only like what you have been used to ; and little boys used to be kept in petticoats till they were six or seven.'

'And now ladies are to wear divided skirts when they are sixty or seventy, I suppose,' tittered Silvia.

The news that had greeted Ally after her composure had been restored by the violent burst of sorrow to which she had given way the moment she found herself alone, had turned her thoughts from Silvia and those too dreadful things she had said in the pony-carriage.

It is not difficult to change the current of thought at eighteen years of age, or for the spirits to rise, however much they may have been depressed. The elasticity of youth is one of its most charming possessions — charming alike to those who

possess it, and to those who feel its cheery influence. Ally was talking of her little nephew's sailor-dress now with genuine interest and amusement. Yet she had been weeping bitter tears, wrung from a passion like despair, not half an hour before. Her mind had been bewildered then. She knew not exactly all that the words of Silvia were to her, of how much they deprived her if they were strictly true—and the very bewilderment helped her to recover herself. With the deep happiness of Geoffry's return arose the recollection of Silvia's wild way of talking; and how likely—how very likely it was that she did not mean one half of what she said—that Percival did not care for her, and that she—but here Ally shuddered at the profane idea of faithlessness to Wilfred—faithlessness even in thought, even in speculating on the possibility of unfaith—shuddered and turned her eyes resolutely away from

the dreadful thing, and forced herself to believe that Silvia had only been talking wildly, and that she herself had partly misconstrued her — that she had meant little, and that the *more* lay in Ally's own misconception.

She looked at Silvia as she sat there, angel-like, in fair and exquisite beauty—the widow's cap, worn for *him*, on her coils of golden hair, the sombre crape and heavy black drapery, all marking her out from the world as a supreme mourner. She looked at her and felt that it was impossible, and shame stole into her innocent heart, while she took the blame home to herself, and with gladness acquitted—Wilfred's widow!

Of course the acquittal was not really complete, though it seemed to her to be so at that moment. It was wholly unreasonable, founded only on the angelic style of Silvia's beauty, on the effect the widow's

garb of one so young and fair produced on the imagination, and on the girl's own earnest desire to escape from the intolerable pain of the truth.

Silvia was very much subdued during dinner-time. The new remorse in her heart, the dreadful change taking place in herself, that she could neither help nor hinder, appalled her when she could not forget it. Geoffry's return frightened her a little, not much. And she was exceedingly anxious to know the effect of her note on Sir Percival Ross.

Serious thoughts of ending all her difficulties by an elopement and marriage with him assailed her. That would be an easy way out of her troubles. By that, she might cut the Gordian knot at once. Safe and under no one's control, she could mould the boy to her will, at once charming and coercing him. They could go abroad: Paris, Rome, Vienna—she had heard how

brilliant society was in all these places—and then London. In a whirl of change and excitement she might forget herself, and exorcise these blue devils born of loneliness and *ennui*.

She had only to bring Sir Percival to the point, to seduce him into an elopement, and all the rest would follow. Perhaps she reckoned without her host. Perhaps she altogether misunderstood the young squire, who might be made of a stuff unlike what she imagined. The cleverest manœuvres have before now been defeated by a good heart and good principles.

The next day brought no answer to her note, and her impatience knew no bounds. What could the boy mean? Had her important letter been lost? but if so, why did not he write, or come to her to ask about it? She sought all their usual places of meeting, and sought them in vain.

While she was out on this unsuccessful

quest, Geoffry Lomax arrived at Woodlands. A tall, pale, aristocratic-looking young man, not one quarter as handsome as the portrait of Wilfred that had caused so much emotion in Silvia and Ally, and yet with that family likeness, indefinable, but ever there, about him, which caused many an ache in the loving hearts even at the moment of the warm welcome that he received from them.

Aunt Lydia and the girls were in his arms in the hall ; and with the latter clinging about him, while the other followed them closely, he was brought into the drawing-room, where his father received him on the threshold.

‘ Welcome, my dear boy ! ’ and the two men exchanged warm strong handshakings and pressures, forbidden by English manners to be more demonstrative.

A few sentences were exchanged among them, and then, as if by a general though

tacit consent, the father and son were left alone.

‘Ah, father!’ Geoffry exclaimed as he looked at him, ‘you have suffered much.’

‘I have suffered, but I have not complained; we must take our trials from whence they come, my boy, and submit.’

He spoke in a firm voice, but with a trembling lip. ‘We have unexpected consolation. He left us a legacy.’

‘A legacy, my dear father! What can you mean?’

‘You have not got any of our letters, then?’

‘None, since the first.’

‘There is much for you to hear, my dear Geoffry; he was married!’

‘Yes,’ replied Geoffry coolly; ‘I knew he was married.’

‘You knew it!’

‘Yes; he wrote to me himself—poor fellow!’

‘Very well ; but there is another thing I have to tell you, and that at least will surprise you. They are here!’

‘They—who? My dear father, what are you talking about?’

‘Of Silvia and her boy.’

‘What! that woman here?’ cried Geoffry, with curling lip and knit brow.

His father looked at him, greatly surprised.

‘But why do you speak about her in that way?’ he asked.

‘You do not know, then. Did not Wilfred write to you?’

The name thus outspoken wounded the father’s heart, but he bent his head submissively to the blow, and replied calmly :

‘He did, but the letters never came home. You are aware what posts there are in those wild parts.’

‘Then you know nothing about her?’

‘She is very beautiful and a little un-

trained ; and the boy is as fine a fellow as I ever saw.'

'I did not know there was a boy.'

'There is, and a noble little creature, too!'

'Well, I am glad there is a boy. He will be a comfort to you—but as to his mother!'

'My dear Geoffry, what *do* you know about his mother?'

'She had no right to come here. I need not distress you with the story of the marriage—it was a most unhappy one. They were separated, and in consequence of all this, poor Wilfred went off on that expedition which cost him his life.'

'They were separated!' Mr. Lomax grew very pale. 'You are not going to tell me that dishonour has been brought on our name—and through *him*? Oh, my poor boy!'

'No, no; there is nothing against her character in *that* way—it is not *that*. Still, she is no fit companion for our girls.'

She had no right to intrude herself into your house.'

'There is the boy, you see.'

'Yes, very true; that is her excuse—there is the boy.'

'But tell me, what has caused you to form such a bad opinion of this unhappy young lady? When you see her you will not wonder that—— I never saw more perfect beauty, nor more refined beauty either; though I admit there *is* a want of refinement in her manners—or, perhaps I should rather say, in her expressions sometimes, for her manners are exceedingly quiet; but a little intercourse with the world, or even living a few months with Aunt Lyddy and the girls, I think, will soon set that to rights.'

'I am afraid there is more than can be set to rights easily. I am afraid the want of refinement goes very deep. And then her temper—her temper made Wilfred

wretched ; she was always quarrelling with him, and at last insisted on a separation because he did not love her. But she knew that when he married her. My dear father, this woman cost him his life !

‘ But he loved her when he married her, surely ? Her beauty would excuse any infatuation, any mistake about her character. He must have loved her ; if not, why did he marry her ?’

‘ It shows how completely he had got over any fancy he ever had for her, and of how much more importance character is than beauty, that in his letter to me he never spoke of her being handsome at all.

“ Handsome ” is no word for it. It is the beauty of an angel. If she is not what she looks, her face would deceive any man. But you do not answer my question : why did he marry her ?’

‘ I would much rather not answer it if I could help it. It is an unpleasant story,

and one does not like to think of Wilfred touching pitch. Still it was his sense of honour led him to sacrifice himself, poor fellow! And it was a sacrifice indeed. She came to his house in the night in a fit of hysterical passion. She said her aunt had turned her out of doors, and she threw herself on his protection.'

'My poor, poor boy!'

'He behaved like himself, took her back at once; but the aunt said she had been away two hours. It seems to me it was a plot between the women. Then the woman slammed the door in his face; and he took this Silvia Lee to an hotel, placed her there for the night, went home, and married her a few days afterwards, when he found the story had got wind and her character would be gone. He could not stay in the place after this, and took her into the country; but the marriage turned out as unhappy as might be expected from this beginning.'

‘Oh, my poor boy!’ groaned rather than said Mr. Lomax. ‘My poor noble fellow, was this what I let you go for?’

Tears burst from his eyes, and the son turned away deeply moved, and respecting his father’s unwonted emotion. Mr. Lomax walked up and down the room, and was some minutes before he gained composure enough to resume the conversation.

When he did so his voice was firm, and his words showed that he had not been giving way to his feelings during those minutes’ silence, but had been considering the situation.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘that these facts, known only to you and to me—at least in England—had better lie buried between us. There is no use in disturbing the girls with them, or even our very dear Aunt Lyddy, or even in letting Silvia be aware of our knowledge of them. The past is past. She is here now, and she is

the mother of his boy, and,' putting his arm fondly on his son's shoulder, 'of my heir. She has certainly been in the deepest affliction, and has doubtless learned lessons while in the valley of the shadow of death. She is safer here than anywhere else, and more likely to be what she believes we think her. Let us act always, my dear Geoffry, as if this conversation had not taken place between us, and let us so act even to each other.'

'I hope I have not done wrong in laying the burden of such a secret on you, father. I hope I ought not to have held my tongue,' said Geoffry, with unusual humility, for he was a man who formed his own opinions, and was very little in the habit of doubting himself.

'Not at all, my dear boy ; you would have felt like a traitor among us, and indeed had no right to keep the story to yourself. *I* have the right, and I believe

it will be for the best. If anything makes it necessary I will give Aunt Lyddy a hint, but for the present we will say nothing.'

'Just as you think best, sir. Of course I will do as you wish, but it will be uncommonly disagreeable having to meet the woman.'



CHAPTER V.

‘She paused, she turned away, she hung her head ;
The snake of gold slid from her hair ; the braid
Slipt and uncoil’d itself—she wept afresh—
And the dark wood grew darker toward the storm
In silence.’

TENNYSON.



She spoke the words, the door
of the room opened, and ‘the
woman’ appeared on the thresh-
old. She had taken her hat off; the
widow’s cap lay on the splendid golden
hair, and the fair face shone like that of
an angel or a saint with a halo round it.
Her deep black flowing robes were re-
lieved by a white stephanotis which peeped
forth on her bosom. Her large luminous

eyes seemed familiar with unshed tears, so soft and subdued was their lustre. She was very pale, and her red lips slightly apart.

A vision of more exquisite beauty was never given for the eyes of mortal man to see. Geoffry actually started as he beheld her. He put his hand up to his eyes and brushed them across, as if he expected to brush this superhuman sight away by the motion. Then he turned with quite an appealing look to his father—a look that demanded an explanation of what was at once unexpected and impossible.

‘Geoffry,’ his father replied to the look, very gently, ‘this is Silvia. Your brother Geoffry has come home, my dear,’ he added, addressing her, and by those words ratifying the contract he had just made with his son.

She came forward very softly, and held out her hand to him. He took it, pressed

it, and then let it drop. He did not offer to kiss her, as a brother might well have done, but kept staring at her—he really could not help it—asking himself while he stared, if this indeed was she—if this *could* be the heroine of the horrid little story he had just told his father, and at which his fine lip curled in disgust when he even thought of it. Could this indeed be Silvia Lee? Could this be Wilfred's widow, the woman for whom he had such a profound contempt?

She said nothing; indeed, it was not for her to speak first. It could not be expected of her. The onus of speech lay with him. He felt it. He was not a man who shrank from either duty or responsibility, and so he spoke.

‘Yes, Silvia; I am your brother,’ he said. ‘But where is your boy? I long to see the little fellow.’

‘That is so kind,’ she murmured. ‘He

is with Constance. Will you come upstairs to them—Geoffry?’

She paused an instant before she spoke his name, and the word came with a slight hesitation—very softly, as if she felt timidity in using it. There was something exceedingly taking in this—a deprecating air, a pleading, yet hardly amounting to pleading. It was all lightly touched; it was charming; and Geoffry’s proud heart felt the charm. Again he asked himself, was this really the woman he had been despising and condemning for weeks? He did not wonder at Wilfred now. He understood how he married her; the only cause for wonder—the only thing he could *not* understand—was how, after marrying, he could have left her.

Such was the change wrought in a moment of time, on a sensible, obstinate man, by a pretty face and manner. It was not a lasting change, of course—at least, not

at first ; it was felt only in her presence, and Reason resumed her sway when Beauty turned her back. But still it *was* wrought, and wrought in a minute ; and it was there as the foundation of much more that might follow.

Willy, attired in his black velvet frock, with point-lace trimming—as fair as a lily, as rosy as a rose—with bright blue eyes and carefully brushed flaxen curls, was gently put down from Constance's knee as Geoffry entered the room, and marched bravely up to him, repeating the words she had taught him to say very distinctly :

‘I am Willy, Uncle Geoff. How do you do ?’

Then he turned round, having exhausted at once his vocabulary of polite greetings and his courage ; and running back to Constance, plunged his curly head into her lap.

He ran back pursued by his uncle, who

caught him in his arms, kissed his pretty blushing face, and mounting him on his shoulder, called out, 'There, my fine fellow—have a ride!' and forthwith commenced a canter round the room, the delighted Willy pushing against his cheek with fat baby hand, and lisping eagerly: 'Gee ho! gee ho! good horsey, gee ho!'

Silvia looked and listened. She beheld the uncle and nephew; she felt what the man had lost by the existence of the boy; she saw the proud, rather hard face all softened and relaxed, beaming with frolic and affection, while the fashionable officer played with the baby; and with a sudden cry, wrung from some intolerable anguish, she burst into a passion of tears.

The play stopped in a minute. Constance ran up to her, and twined her arms round her.

'Come with me, dear!' she cried, seeing how impossible it was for her to compose

herself, and gently led her into the next room, which was her bedroom.

‘What shall I do?—what shall I do?’ cried Silvia. ‘I don’t know how to bear it!’

‘Don’t *try* to bear it, and fortitude will come,’ was the tender answer; ‘it is too much strain—you exert yourself too much. If you gave way more, it would be less hard.’

‘You don’t know—you can’t understand!’ and Silvia shook her off passionately; but Constance was divinely patient.

‘No, I don’t know—I can’t understand. Who can who has not lost what you have? But I can *feel*, however far off—dear, *dear* Silvia!’

‘Oh, Constance! oh, Constance!’ wailed Silvia. ‘Are you angels, all of you? Why did I never *know* what people could be? It is cruel to make some white, and some black. It is cruel to *be* black. But how

can I help myself?' she added fiercely. 'And, after all, what a precious dull place heaven must be!'

Constance, quite unable to follow the rapidity or solve the contradictions of Silvia's thoughts, could only look at her in gentle amazement.

Then Silvia dried her tears, and carefully bathed her eyes at Constance's washstand.

'I am a fool,' she said, turning a fair, smiling face towards her. 'I had no idea I *was* a fool, but I find I am.'

'*I* do not think so,' replied Constance, kissing her. 'It was no wonder, when you saw—— Of course it reminded you—— I am sure your self-command is generally quite wonderful. And you pay for it by these bursts of anguish, these floods of recollection that sweep over you. Oh, my dear,' kissing her again, 'you have bought this depth of sorrow by a height of

happiness! Such a height, Silvia—such a height!

‘Let’s go back to them,’ was the reply, given in very much her usual manner.

They did so, but the uncle and nephew were gone.

‘Oh dear me!’ cried Silvia, looking blankly round her. ‘I can’t settle down to dulness and monotony after this! What has become of them? Where’s Ally? where’s anybody? What on earth is the matter that Percival Ross does not come?’

‘He will come to see Geoffry,’ replied Constance, greatly puzzled by Silvia’s flightiness, to which, however, she did not give that name.

‘Oh, he will come to see Geoffry, will he?’ said Silvia drily. ‘Very obliging of him, I am sure. He is an uncommonly fine man, is Mr. Geoffry, I can tell you, Constance; but as proud as the old gentleman, I am sure. I should be no end afraid

of him ; and if I saw much of him, I should get a crick in my neck.'

'A crick in your neck—what are you talking about, Silvia?'

'There is nothing so tiring as looking up.'

'Oh, Silvia! and I think there is nothing so refreshing. I always feel that as one of the great refreshments of prayer.'

Silvia put her hands to her ears, as if the word hurt her.

'Refreshing—well, to be sure,' she cried, with a forced scornful laugh, 'one would think you were talking of "ginger-pop"!''

Then, really afraid that she had shocked Constance too much, she ran out of the room and into the garden.

But she need not have been afraid. The scared expression that flitted across Constance's face only flitted, and was gone in a moment.

'It is always so,' she said softly ; 'when people try to conceal their feelings they

overdo it, and appear flippant and unfeeling—poor, poor Silvia!

Perhaps Silvia was even more to be pitied—deserved even more the double adjective—than Constance with all her tender compassion believed. Not as a mourning widow, but as something sadder still than the half-sainted, half-broken-hearted woman that Constance's faith imagined her to be. 'Yes, Constance—poor, poor Silvia!' a thousand times poorer than you deem her, with worse pangs in her heart than those caused by the memory of the loved and lost.

Constance was still very delicate, and she lay down on the sofa in her room, quite tired with the excitement of Geoffry's arrival and Silvia's grief. She closed her eyes, and her gently moving lips showed that she was seeking that sweet refreshment of which she had just spoken. In the garden Silvia wandered about till she found Ally and her brother together. They were

deep in conversation, and Silvia wondered whether they were talking of her.

If so, what was Ally telling him? Was she prejudicing him against her? His mind about her no doubt was a sheet of white paper, ready to receive any impression. She believed she had made a favourable one; but if Ally gave him a hint of what she had said about Percival Ross, she need hope for nothing good from him. She keenly felt the mistake she had made in having said what she did to Ally, but it had never occurred to her that her words could produce such an effect. She had really acted from good-nature, wishing to put the little girl on her guard. Ally perhaps would have rather she had not appeared just at this moment, for she was in all the melancholy enjoyment of talking over the past with her brother; but Geoffry received her with a bright, kind smile, and a readiness marked enough to show that he

did not consider her appearance as an interruption.

‘It is very pleasant out here,’ he said; ‘your boy has gone for a walk with his nurse. I assure you I was quite sorry to be deprived of his society—a nobler little fellow I never saw.’

The young mother smiled languidly. How beautiful she looked as she did so! Geoffry Lomax felt taken off his feet, as the phrase is, by the vision of loveliness, the fairness and innocence of the bewitching appearance before him. Wilfred’s wife—Wilfred’s widow—so young to be bereaved; and the marriage not to have been a happy one, that, he felt, was the most wonderful part of all. What did Wilfred want? what did he expect if he could not be happy with such a woman as that? Was not her character impressed on her face? could anyone doubt that she was as good as she was beautiful?

His smile grew kind with a sweetness that brought a vision of Wilfred to Ally's mind, and the ready tears to her eyes. The same memory rose up for Silvia from the expression of the smile in the eyes that so kindly regarded her. A shiver ran through her, and she turned pale.

'I *am* glad I have come home, if only to know you, my dear sister,' he said; and Ally looked up at him with a little start. It was unlike Geoffry to be demonstrative and make the first advances. From boyhood that had been Wilfred's *rôle*, not his. He had never taken the initiative, though never following in another's line—equally prevented from either by a reserve made up of pride and shyness.

And could Geoffry, the fastidious, be satisfied with Silvia? with Silvia as Ally knew her? Sometimes even in the earlier days, when nothing that the fair creature did or said could be wrong in Ally's eyes

any more than in Constance's, even then sometimes the thought had come across her that she hoped Silvia would have dropped her 'colonializations' before Geoffry came home, as otherwise, not understanding her, his admiration and approval might not be unqualified. But here was Geoffry, and Ally had hardly ever seen him put himself so forward to be kind, or with such an expression of tender admiration in his eyes. She almost wished Silvia would talk at her ease—talk as perhaps no one had heard her but Ally, and occasionally Constance, who, however, never penetrated into the real meaning of her words, misled by the tender light her own imagination threw over them. She would almost like to watch Geoffry's face if Silvia spoke to him as she did to her—not only the language, but the sentiments and thoughts expressed in it. What impressions would they make on her brother?—he

who was ever so fastidious, so hypercritical even about women, that Ally herself had to think twice ere she spoke in his presence.

Ally woke from her little reverie to find the other two in earnest conversation.

‘You are very, very kind to me,’ Silvia was saying; and ‘Could anyone be otherwise?’ was the warm reply.

Then Geoffry turned to his sister.

‘How are Percival and his mother?’ he asked.

The recollection of Silvia’s conversation, forcibly banished from her mind and misunderstood, rushed over Ally in all its original and real meaning. She blushed the deepest pink that her delicate complexion ever assumed.

‘They are quite well,’ she answered him; ‘at least, Lady Ross has been ill, but is better. We were there yesterday—Silvia and I.’

‘They are some of our chief intimates,’

Geoffry informed Silvia. 'Do they know I am here, Ally?'

'Yes; Aunt Lyddy wrote to Lady Ross as soon as your telegram came, so they know we expected you any day. They don't know of your actual arrival.'

'We shall have Percy over here to look me up; dear old Percy, it will be good to see his honest face again! I have remarked few changes among us hitherto—except, indeed, in Constance.'

'Do you think Constance changed? In what way, Geoff?'

'I left her a nice pretty girl, and find her a Fra Angelico.'

'Ah, you notice it too—that saint-like look. I have wondered whether I fancied it.'

'My dear little Ally, neither you nor I are capable of imagining the expression which is in Constance's face. It requires a Fra Angelico to do that.'

“And a painter, if he drew her,
He would make her unaware,
With a halo round her hair.”’

‘Yes,’ said Ally, with a sigh. ‘I have become so accustomed to it now that I should miss it if she did not look so ; and then I have wondered whether she always *was* like this, or whether it has really come to her since her illness.’

‘Was Constance ill?’

‘Yes ; all of a sudden. She frightened us. No one had known she suffered so much. And then she fainted quite away ; and when at last she came to herself, she talked nonsense as if she were out of her mind. She had a nervous fever.’

‘Poor Constance ! She was never one to complain ; she would die in harness.’

‘Don’t talk of dying,’ said Silvia, with a shiver.

‘By the way,’ asked Geoffry ; ‘is Vaux in the country now?’

‘Oh yes; and comes here rather often; much oftener than he ever used to do.’

‘He is a man I dislike particularly,’ Silvia said, for the first time joining in the conversation.

‘Do you really?’ cried Ally, surprised. ‘I had no idea of it.’

‘Nobody ought to trust him; he would say anything.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Geoffry. ‘I think Vaux is to be trusted. He is cynical, and he does not always pick and choose his associates. He likes to see the world in all its phases; but I would trust him as a friend—he is true of heart.’

The words ‘true of heart’ struck Silvia like the blade of a dagger. She kept repeating them to herself, ‘True of heart—true of heart!’ with an unintelligible pain. What was there in them? Why were they so sharp and bitter? ‘True of heart!’

‘Oh, Geoffry!’ Ally said, leaning fondly

on him, 'it is good to have you at home again! It is something saved from the wreck.'

Poor Ally! She had lost more than a brother in the last few weeks, though she did not herself recognise that she had done so. She felt that her ship had gone to pieces in a manner that she had not done when her tears first flowed for Wilfred, and she still rested in the quiet haven of home, surrounded by all those she loved best—all, save one. Her heart, though torn and wounded, had not been empty; her ship was not wrecked. Geoffry looked with some anxiety at his little sister, as she thus spoke; and if on first seeing her he had beheld the saint in Constance's face, now with quite a shock of surprise he recognised the woman in Ally's.

What changes sorrow and trial had wrought—far greater than any brought about by time!

And Silvia, the chief mourner, the widow, what effect had these things had on her? He gazed at her fair exquisite beauty, and could not fancy it anything but what it was. Such he thought it must ever have been; nor could he read any deeper life in it than that of the untried girl. It was not many minutes since he had seen her in vehement agitation; but no trace of this had been left behind on that unruffled brow or in those limpid eyes. His were fascinated by her perfect beauty; he could not withdraw them, and suddenly they met hers.

Both smiled, and he spoke.

‘And how do you like England, Silvia?’ he said.

She reflected a moment before she answered him.

‘Everybody is kind.’

He stood reproved. How could she like the country she had come to on her

husband's death? She could feel the kindness of those who met her—that was all. How could a more perfect answer have been made to a heartless question?

‘No one could be anything but kind to you,’ he said warmly, and again Ally’s eyes were turned on him with surprise in them.

‘Had you a good passage?’ he asked. He desired to converse with her, to get to know her, to be a brother to her, but found it difficult to find anything to say. Small-talk seemed so senseless and vapid under the circumstances, yet anything beyond small-talk would tread on a sacred grief.

‘I was ill most of the time, I believe,’ she answered. Ally had never heard this before. ‘One does not think much when one is ill and unhappy.’

‘What was the name of the ship?’ That was a safe question, at any rate, and there

was a pleasure to this man in speaking to her, and watching for her replies.

The reply, however, did not come at once; she was silent for a moment.

‘I—I forget,’ she said at last.

‘Oh, Silvia! how curious that you should forget. It was the *Minotaur*,’ said Ally.

‘The *Minotaur*!’ cried he; ‘that is curious—I knew the captain of the *Minotaur* very well; he is an excellent fellow, and a gentleman.’

One of Silvia’s scarlet blushes passed over her face.

‘I—I don’t think it was the *Minotaur*,’ she said faintly.

‘Oh yes, indeed it was!’ urged Ally. ‘You may ask any of them; they will all remember.’

‘Captain Rolleston,’ said Geoffry; ‘that will settle the question. Was that the captain’s name?’

‘I dare say—yes, I think it was—but really, I did not pay much attention. I could not interest myself; I hardly know anything about it.’

It was not easy to keep up a conversation in this way, but Geoffry felt her ignorance and forgetfulness were not only natural, but to be approved. And how beautiful she looked when she expressed them!

‘Ally,’ the beautiful being he was watching said suddenly, ‘Lady Ross asked us to go there again; shall we not drive over with your brother to-morrow? Would not you like to call on her?’ Here she appealed to Geoffry. ‘You see, Per—Sir Percival does not know when you are coming home, and you could announce yourself.’

‘Geoffry can go,’ Ally said quickly, and blushing a bright pink, ‘but we had better not; it might be too much—too many for Lady Ross.’

‘You can stay at home then, dear,’ replied Silvia sweetly. ‘Will you let me go with you—brother?’

She seemed to take it for granted that his going was a settled thing, and that the only doubt was who should accompany him. Man-like, where a woman was concerned, he fell into the trap at once, accepting the position.

‘I will drive you over with the greatest pleasure,’ he said quite eagerly.

Ally felt defeated and unhappy.

‘Would you leave papa the first day?’ she asked him, in a low trembling voice.

‘This is the first day,’ he replied, smiling, ‘and we shall not take long about it.’

Silvia glanced gratefully at him. The necessity of seeing Sir Percival Ross pressed on her. She could not understand his silence and his absence. That he should neither answer her note nor come to her was inexplicable; and she

must somehow contrive to see him, and that without delay. She must go to him, if there were no other way. She must be for a few minutes alone with him. She must say one or two things to show that she considered herself engaged to him. She had no doubt that she could by her presence subdue him into receiving these expressions, and after that he could not escape her. Dishonest herself, she felt the most perfect confidence in his honour. Convince him that he had won her, and won her by special attentions, and he would consider himself bound to marry her; but to bring all this about a short personal interview, in which she could take the initiative, appeared to be absolutely necessary.

Ally felt bewildered and miserable. It seemed to her that Silvia, with some strange magical power, could do whatever she pleased with everybody, while Ally

alone stood by, the reluctant audience to the play, understanding her in a manner that none of the actors therein did.

Geoffry, she could see, was fascinated. This was very unusual with him ; but when Ally looked back, and remembered her own feelings of only a few weeks—nay, of only a few days—ago, she could not wonder. And now Silvia and Geoffry would go alone to Oakvale. She had voluntarily put herself out of the excursion—well, she did not mind *that!* She did not want to go. Why should she go? But with what a gnawing, aching pain in her heart she should wait at home during their absence! Ally knew this dreadful pain would be there, though she did not know why it would. Yes, she thought she did. It was horrible to think of Percival meeting Wilfred's widow, if it were true, if it could possibly be true, that he felt towards her as Silvia believed! And Ally shuddered

at the thought. If Percival had really allowed such a feeling to rise in his heart, and be expressed by his lips, the sunlight had left the earth for ever. It was shocking that Silvia should go to the house and wish to meet him, believing what she did! But somehow Ally cared less for Silvia's behaviour than for Percival's. This she thought was not unnatural, for though Silvia was her brother's widow, she had known her such a little time, while Percival she had known and loved all her life.

While thus reflecting she became aware that Silvia had been summoned into the house by Willy's nurse, and that she and Geoffry were *tête-à-tête* together; but poor Ally found herself very little disposed to conversation. She was miserably depressed, and her tears ready to rise to the surface at any moment; and she was inclined to accompany Silvia, when Geoffry detained her.

‘What perfect beauty and grace!’ he exclaimed, following the retreating sable figure with his eyes.

‘Yes,’ said Ally faintly; ‘she is very pretty.’

‘Very pretty! Is that all? My dear child, where will you find beauty if that is only prettiness?’

‘She is beautiful.’

‘Of course she is. But after all it is not so much her beauty that strikes one, as the perfect expression and the sweet manners. Ally, I need not tell you why, but I came here with an impression that was—well, that was not favourable to her.’

‘Did you?’

‘Yes. But I cannot believe, now I have seen her, that she is anything but what a woman should be. Do you think she and Wilfred were—happy together?’

‘I don’t know,’ wearily.

'It *cannot* have been her fault if they were not.'

'Oh, Geoff, can you believe it was his?'

'I don't know what to believe, Ally. I am thoroughly puzzled. She appears all innocence and goodness.'

Ally said nothing—her tears were gathering; she knew not why, but she felt if she spoke they would overflow. And why should she speak? What could she say? She did not like to contradict him, yet how could she agree with him? Did she think Silvia 'good' and 'innocent?' They were broad terms, comprehending merely, perhaps, the fact that she was not wicked; yet that was not what Geoffry meant, and if she agreed with him she would certainly express a different opinion of her sister-in-law from that which she really held.

'I should think she and Constance have taken to each other,' Geoffry continued.

That she could answer truthfully, and with no apparent ill-nature.

‘Yes, they have,’ she said; then paused suddenly, and found herself compelled to add, ‘At least, Constance admires her extremely; I don’t know whether Silvia has taken particularly to Constance.’

‘No!’ with momentary surprise. ‘Well, you know, a young widow so lately bereaved cannot be expected to take to strangers. It *must* be uphill work.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Ally slowly, ‘she does not seem to be in such grief. It is not easy to understand other people, or their way of feeling; but sometimes I should say that she had not loved Wilfred’—her voice faltered here—‘not as one would have expected Wilfred’s wife to love him.’ Now she broke down altogether, and the tears that had for long been struggling to be shed, poured forth in abundance; they relieved her, and she added, with restored

composure: 'And then every now and then she has a great burst of sorrow, almost like despair or——' '(remorse' was the word in Ally's mind, but she did not utter it), 'and I think I have mistaken her.'

'Ally,' said her brother, 'I may tell you this much—I have the key to all this. I quite understand it. It was not a happy marriage.'

'Oh, Geoff, Geoff! how could Wilfred's wife not be happy?'

Geoffry took a turn away from her on the grass, reflecting, as he did so, how much he should, or should not, tell to his little sister of the shameful story. When he returned, he said very gravely:

'Suppose Wilfred did not love his wife, Ally? Suppose he married her without loving her?'

'Oh, but he did—he did!' she cried eagerly; 'he did not. He was deeply in

love with her. He wrote to me long ago and described her, and said how deeply he was in love.'

'Wilfred did?'

'Oh yes; but I did not know they were married till after—because, you know, the letters were lost.'

'And he told you he loved her—was in love with her, and described her to you? It is all a mystery together. I suppose he persuaded himself it was so at first, and he would be scrupulously honourable about his wife—poor, poor Wilfred!'

'Well,' said Ally, 'I am beginning to think I don't pity those who die so much. The people to be pitied are those who don't; it is all so sad and so tiring,' with a deep sigh. 'I can fancy dying from only being tired—just going to sleep, you know, and never waking up again. Not that I want to die,' she added quickly, with a little shiver. 'I am horribly afraid; but if I

were not frightened I should not mind. When it is over, it must be best.'

'My dear little Ally!' cried her brother, putting his arm round her and kissing her; and Ally felt soothed and more willing to be content to live, for Geoffry's caresses, like all rare things, were very precious. 'You have been thoroughly overstrained and done up. We must do something for you, and get you out of this morbid vein.'

'Is it morbid?' she asked simply. 'I thought it was really the true view; only it is difficult to take it—in fact one can't take it; it comes of itself, or not at all.'

'The companionship of a new charming friend like Silvia ought to help dispel sad thoughts and draw you out of yourself.'

Ally shook her head at that, looked down, and answered nothing.



CHAPTER VI.

‘ From woman’s eyes this doctrine I derive.
They sparkle with the right Promethian fire ;
They are the books, the arts, the academies,
That show, contain, and nourish all the world.’



WHEN Percival Ross found, opened and read Silvia Lomax’s note, he felt utterly confounded. The world seemed to stand still with him, and then to spin round with miraculous force. To use his own phraseology, he was dead-beat—sold—caught in a trap.

What did she mean? Had he loved her? Had he proposed to her? To the last question he returned a most determined negative ; but had he said anything,

been drawn into saying anything--he used the expressions unconsciously, and without intending any censure to Silvia—that she could suppose was meant for an offer? He could not think that he had, and yet she did suppose it. Verily love-making, marriages, and offers of marriage must be very different things in the Colonies to what they are here! And now the question was, what was he to do? What did he wish to do? What ought he to do? One thing was certain—and he thrust his hands deep down into his pockets and stood upright and straightened himself up and broadened himself out, there in his room by himself, and assumed an air of most unmistakable masterhood—he was not going to be led into a clandestine engagement with Mrs. Silvia or any other mistress or miss under the sun. He was not going to have private meetings and private understandings, and to deceive all his old friends till the end of

the year, because he had wooed and won his friend's widow before it was decent to do so. This he would *not* do; but what was it that he *would* do?

Never in all his two-and-twenty years, in all his boyish and college scrapes, had Percival Ross felt so muddled, so entangled, so completely as if, again to use his own phraseology, he had put his foot in it. His mind was for the moment in utter bewilderment; he did not know what he wished or whom he loved. He had only one clear idea in it, that rose above the chaos to the surface of the troubled waters, and that was—not to do wrong.

He must first discover what was right to do, and then he must do it. At present he had no clear idea on the matter, except this: he must do nothing dishonourable, or that bordered on or approached near the dishonourable. Therefore, he must not accept Silvia's proposal of a private

engagement or understanding. He could not hold up his head among honest men and look them in the face if he did. Nor should his wife, the future Lady Ross, his mother's daughter, and one day—far distant he hoped in his manly warm young heart—to fill his mother's place, go through such a disreputable preface to marriage by his consent and connivance.

But it was this lady who proposed to be his wife, who herself suggested the course which he did not hesitate to call disreputable ; nor, having so called it involuntarily, would he retract the word. If he was determined to keep his father's name clean and pure—and he was so determined—how could he do so after he had placed it in Silvia's hands—given it into her keeping ? How could he be sure of doing so ?

Then came the questions, How did he wish to act ? Independent of right and wrong, what were his wishes ? Was he in

love with Silvia? Did he desire to marry her? Did he think life would be bright and happy with Silvia for his wife? Was hers the face that appeared to him glancing with tender smiles, to make the sunshine and moonlight of the years to come?

He thought of Silvia, and a sensation almost of repugnance came over him. He felt like one in a garish theatre, the air heavy with gas and other smells; near enough to the scenery to see how coarsely it was daubed, near enough to the performers to discover the rouge and pearl-powder on their faces. Then suddenly he was transported to a mountain-side and held a bunch of white heather in his hand, sparkling with the dews of heaven; but then Silvia had vanished from his mind, and he was thinking of Ally.

He paced the room impatiently, blushing, though alone; his heart beating fast; his eyes shining; his soul so moved—

touched—emotionized, that but for his manhood's sake it would have been a relief to shed tears, so boyish was he still in the warmth and simplicity of his feelings. At last, out of all the confusion of thought one resolution was born, and that was that he would do nothing that day. He must write to Silvia, of course—her note must be answered, but it should not be yet. He would take a night to think of it, or at least he would sleep on what had happened before he clinched or burst the chains that had been flung round him. Letter-writing was exceedingly difficult to him; he had not the pen of a ready writer. He was sure he should make a bungle and a mess of the note, let him do the very best he could; but it would be more bungled and more messed if he wrote it in a hurry, and before he had thought out the substance of it in every possible manner. When he had made this resolution, a little

of the heavy weight that rested on his spirit passed away, and the burden was easier to bear.

It was very unusual for Percival to be anything but light-hearted. He did not understand how to be anxious or unhappy, and after the first half-hour he kept forgetting the scrape he was in for a minute or two at a time, and then remembering it again with a very unpleasant shock. His thoughts went off to his horses or his dogs, or whatever he had to specially interest him, in their usual easy boyish way, and then suddenly returned to Silvia, and the possibility that he might have to marry her, as to something new and terrible. Possibility? yes, perhaps; but certainly not probability. Nay, how could it be possibility, even, when he felt in his heart that it was impossible? He marry Silvia! Wilfred's widow! He did not love her, and though he did not tell himself in those

words that he did not respect her—for the idea of respecting a girl would have appeared rather amusing to the young man—still it was the same thing, though he did not know it, when he thought of Ally's freshness, purity, and simplicity as indispensable to him in his wife, and angrily declared that Silvia had them not.

What a fool he had been, with his lessons in English and hers in French! What a lot of time he had wasted amusing himself with her! and now the result of it all was that she declared he had succeeded in winning her by his devoted attentions. He knew the attentions had been on Silvia's side, not on his; though he was too manly to recognise this knowledge for what it was worth even to himself. And he ended his reflections as he had begun them, by saying what a fool he had been!

And so the afternoon passed away; and in all his life before Percival Ross had

hardly thought as much as he did in those few hours—as much or to so little purpose, perhaps he would have said himself. But it was hardly to little purpose, when the beginning and the end of everything was that he would never rest till he had found out what was right to do, and then that he would do it. There can be no doubt that his mind was stronger and more manly three hours after he had read Silvia's note—though, perhaps, he had never spent three such disagreeable hours before—than it was when he opened the envelope, with no idea of what was to befall him.

At dinner a piece of news waited him. Lady Ross had inquired for him ; but it never occurred to anyone that during that fine afternoon he was in his own room, so she had inquired in vain. He had been sought in the stables, and the kennels, and the fields, and by the fish-ponds, but no one had dreamt of seeking him indoors.

‘I have had you looked for everywhere, my dear,’ the lady said, as she leant on his arm on their way to the dining-room; and, glancing up at his handsome, pleasant face, thought in her proud heart that no woman ever had such a son before.

‘What did you want with me, mother?’

‘I had a great piece of news for you.’

‘Well, I suppose you have it still. What is it?’

‘A messenger came over from Woodlands.’

‘Is it anything about Silvia?’ thought Percival Ross, blushing up to the very roots of his hair, and, by a sudden, impetuous movement of his elbow, knocking a glass off the table, which lay shattered in pieces on the carpet.

‘My dear boy, don’t be so awkward! Do have compassion on my nerves!’ his mother said, while the footman picked up the fragments.

‘ I really beg your pardon, mother. I wonder our elbows don’t do that sort of thing oftener, seeing that we have no eyes in them. Well, you were saying——’

‘ Yes, a messenger from Woodlands, with a note from Aunt Lydia. Geoffry has come home.’

‘ Geoff? you don’t say so! That’s jolly! At least, it would be; only I suppose he’ll be very much cut up, poor fellow, at seeing them all at first. But it will cheer them a bit; I am sure it will. I say, I wonder how he and Silvia will get on?’

‘ Why? what is there to prevent them getting on?’

‘ Oh, I am sure I don’t know,’ he replied, on his guard again, and speaking rather sheepishly; ‘ only Geoff is rather an odd chap sometimes, is not he?’

‘ Hardly, I think, Percy. I have a very good opinion of Geoffry Lomax. He has unusually correct ideas for a young officer

of the present day. I admire his high principles, his reserve, and his reticence. He would never do a thing on impulse, or be misled by his own wishes. He has a *leetle* obstinacy, and too much confidence in his own opinions—more than a man under thirty has a right to have; but then everyone has faults.'

'He is a very good fellow,' acquiesced Percival. 'And if that is his only failing, I suppose he will be perfect when he *is* thirty.'

'You will ride over in the morning and see him, of course?'

'I don't know, mother. Hardly so soon, perhaps. They may like a little longer to themselves, you know. It's not quite a common coming home.'

Then the dinner proceeded in silence—Percival in deep thought, and eating (for him) little. He was so quiet that his mother looked at him, and suddenly per-

ceived how little he was doing with his knife and fork—that he was pale, and his eyes haggard.

‘My dear boy, are you ill?’ she cried, a pang running through her heart as the thought was borne in upon her.

‘Ill, mother? what an idea! I am never ill, you know. What *can* make you ask such a question?’

He lifted his honest boyish eyes to meet hers as he spoke, for he was quite taken by surprise at the notion; but in them there was such an expression of melancholy and perplexity as bade fair to banish the boy-spirit that had lingered there so long.

‘You *look* ill.’ That was all she said; she would have added, ‘or unhappy—you are in some trouble,’ but the presence of the men-servants prevented her.

Percival, however, saw the new interrogation in her face, and guessed what the obstacle was that prevented her putting it

into words. Of all people, his mother was the last that he could tell of his present grief and difficulty. So he determined to leave the room with the guardian angels in drab and scarlet, whose presence were his protection.

‘ Poor mother ! ’ he said gloomily to himself ; ‘ what would she say if she knew the scrape I am in—confound it ! ’

Accordingly, he slipped away as the dessert was being put on the table, murmuring something about ‘ puppies ’ as he did so. The retreat was made so quickly, that the enemy, taken by surprise, did not even make a remonstrance, and Percival Ross felt himself safe for this time.

Yes ; but what should he do next time, and the time after that ? His mother’s suspicions once aroused, how was he to parry or escape them ? He began to think he had better go away for a while. If she asked him a direct question, he had never

told a lie since his boyhood, and he was not going to begin now.

Accordingly, he continued to be out till Lady Ross's time for going to her room came, which was at an early hour since her illness. He then returned to give her his arm upstairs, and had so much to tell her, between her taking it and the farewell kiss, of matters outside, that he left her not a moment to resume the question of his looks.

Percival Ross slept on it before he took any step towards answering Silvia Lomax's note ; and when he had slept on it, he took no steps either.

He rode half a dozen miles before his breakfast, an appetite-giving canter, and had no want of the best sauce, hunger, when he sat down to it. It is not easy for trouble to affect a man's appetite when he is only two-and-twenty years of age.

He was glad that his mother had not yet

resumed the practice of breakfasting downstairs, though he hoped she might have forgotten her momentary anxiety of the night before.

‘But I say,’ he said to himself, ‘this will never do. I can’t go on avoiding a *tête-à-tête* with the mother, or talking so fast when one comes that the poor dear has not time even to think of speaking. I should soon give in, and have to make a clean breast of it; and that is what I *can’t* do, whatever happens.’

So he only ran up to his mother to give her his morning kiss in her dressing-room, and found her busy, as she always was at that hour, with reading and answering letters.

‘Don’t expect me till you see me,’ he cried; ‘I’m off for some hours.’

‘Going to Woodlands?’ she asked, but not with interest, half her attention being taken up with the letter in her hand.

‘Not just yet. By-and-by. I’ve my hands full. Ta-ta! Take care of yourself, old lady;’ and he was gone.

‘Dear boy!’ she said softly to herself; ‘he never forgets me,’ and so returned to her correspondence.

The morning hours, as has just been said, were generally devoted by Lady Ross to this occupation, but it was a very unusual one for her son. It was very unusual for Sir Percival to go before eleven o’clock into the library, sit down at one of the writing-tables, open a portfolio, spread a fair sheet of note-paper on the blotting-board, and dip a pen in the ink. And yet this was what he did now; and after these operations he remained with knit brow, and troubled eyes staring blankly into the air.

At last he wrote the words ‘Dear Silvia,’ and then, with pen suspended, stared blankly forward again.

‘DEAR SILVIA,

‘You mistook me. I could not insult dear Wilfred’s memory by—by—what you think. I did not mean—’ (these four words he scratched out, and then proceeded). ‘How could either you or I go on to the end of the year deceiving our friends? Don’t think me rude for saying this. I daresay you wrote without thinking about it, but just fancy what an awful mess it would be! I’m glad to hear Geoff has come home. I’ll pay him a visit soon. I hope you won’t be vexed with me.

‘Yours sincerely,

‘P. R.’

He read this over three or four times after it was written. Once begun, he had dashed it off on the spur of the moment, rather to his own surprise.

‘That is the only way of taking a header,’ he said. ‘If you shilly-shally at a jump, you’re sure to baulk it.’

Then he folded it, put it in an envelope, and so into his pocket.

‘I shan’t send it yet,’ he told himself. ‘Perhaps when I read it by-and-by, I’ll find it won’t do. I say, it’s a great pity I can’t write it with Silvia herself; we’ve been so in the habit of putting our heads together about things, that I feel as if she’d tell me exactly what I ought to say. But it’s horrid— isn’t it?—to see how women forget men, and such a fellow as Wilfred, too! That his widow should be wanting to marry *me*, when he’s only been gone a few months, poor fellow! it’s sickening—that’s what it is! I’d never speak again to *my* widow if she treated me so. But some girls have it in their faces that they couldn’t. There’s Ally, now—her eyes are enough to show what she is. Bless her! By Jove, what a fool I *have* been! Suppose I should lose Ally by this!’

And in the newly awakened fear of

losing Ally, Percival Ross suddenly found out how precious and indispensable she was to him.

He rattled through luncheon ; and all the time he was talking, he was debating the point of what he should do with his note. Should he send it without reading it again ? If he read it over he would be sure not to like it ; and ten to one, if he tried his hand at another, he would make a still greater mess of it. And if he sent it without reading it over, how should he send it ? By post, when she would not get it till to-morrow, and might consider the delay as ungentlemanly on his part ? or by a special messenger ? or should he be his own courier, and ride over to Geoff with the missive in his pocket, and so find or make an opportunity of giving it to Silvia ? He was inclined to this last plan. It seemed somehow less desperate than putting the thing altogether out of his reach, and beyond

any power of recall, by sending it off by either post or private hand. And as he made this resolution, and had just interrupted something else he was saying with the sudden remark, 'Well, mother, I think I'll go and call on old Geoff by-and-by,' he saw through the window he faced, an open carriage driving up the approach. He recognised first the Woodland bays, and then Geoffry Lomax driving a lady, whose deep mourning and graceful figure at once told him was Silvia. Involuntarily his hand sought his pocket and fingered the note, and he gave a deep sigh when he found it there ready. 'Wretched little thing,' he thought viciously, 'what business is it of yours?' and then he said aloud, 'Hullo, here they are !'

'Who?' asked his mother innocently.

'Talk of a certain person,' said he; 'Geoffry, to be sure—coming to see you, mother.'

‘That is like him,’ she answered, pleased. ‘Though his manner is a little cold, he has a warm heart. Is he riding?’

‘No, he is not riding; he is driving—Silvia.’

‘Silvia!’ replied Lady Ross, quite surprised; ‘that is rather odd, is not it? I should have thought Constance would have come, as I have not seen her yet, and Geoffry is a stranger to Silvia. It is early days for her to be out driving about the country this way, except for some special reason.’

Percival’s clear, bright face was all over a fine scarlet colour by this time, but his mother did not happen to be looking at him.

‘Is nobody with them?’ she persisted.

He went to the window as if he were not sure, for he was glad enough to hide his blushes, by turning his back on his mother.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I see no third figure; only Geoffry and Silvia. And, by Jove, she’s driving!—How well she handles the

reins, confound her ! Gently, gently—that's a sharp corner—take it easy !' Then, after a soft prolonged whistle, 'Well done, by Jove! I say, mother, I never did see a woman drive so well. And so quietly, too! The off-horse shied at something just as they were wheeling round, and, faith, I couldn't have brought her to her bearings better myself!'

'But I do not see any advantage in a lady, and a young lady, being a good coachman, Percy,' replied his mother, with marked disapproval. 'And I cannot understand what Aunt Lydia was thinking of to let Silvia go scampering over the country alone with a young officer she is hardly acquainted with, though he is her brother-in-law. It is very unlike Aunt Lydia—very unlike indeed.'

'Aunt Lyddy knew precious little about it, perhaps,' said Sir Percival Ross drily.

'And a widow—a young widow, who

ought to be sitting quietly at home with her child on her knee! Ah, Percy, it was not in that manner I spent my first year of widowhood, or my second either.'

'No, mother; but little Willy is not to Silvia what I was to you. Some women don't care for children. You'd think Willy was Constance's child, not Silvia's.'

'I don't approve of it at all. I am surprised at them all. And Geoffry, whom I always thought so very decorous and correct in his ideas! Well, here they are all at the hall-door. Go to them, my dear, and I will come down presently. I really feel too much ruffled just yet, as I don't wish to tell Mrs. Wilfred Lomax what I think.'

'Come soon, mother, do,' said Percival. 'I shall want to be taking Geoff out to the stables and things, and shan't know what to do with Silvia.'

'I dare say she would not object to

accompany you,' replied his mother, with fine satire; 'but of course,' she added heartily, 'that is *quite* out of the question. I will be down before you want to go out.'

'Make haste then, there's a dear!' and very slowly and reluctantly Percival Ross went downstairs.

The two young men shook hands with a warmth which was intensified and rendered pathetic by the remembrance of what had happened since they last did so.

The coolness of salutations among Englishmen has often been commented on, but I think there was more warmth of heart in a hand-clasp like this—and the glow in the men's eyes as they looked into each other's, and the 'Well, Percy!' and 'How are you, Geoff?'—than in any number of conventional kisses, on first one cheek and then the other, that a Frenchman can give and take.

It was quite a minute before Percival

had leisure or attention to bestow on Silvia, who stood by in the prettiest attitude of one waiting imaginable; and when he did turn, he looked straight into her eyes with such a full honest gaze, a gaze that spoke little and yielded nothing, that for once it was she who was out of countenance, blushing and faltering, and not he, as he himself had expected it would be.

Still she left her hand in his to be pressed, but it received no pressure. He gently shook and lightly dropped it, bestowing his attention again on his friend.

Silvia bit her lip and turned away. What could he mean? Had he not received her note? or, having received it, did he mean to repudiate it? Did he dare refuse to confirm what she had said? This boy—this country bumpkin! had she actually played her cards so badly that she had made him master of the situation?

She stood biting her lips, and knitting

her brows, her face turned from the two men, pretending to be looking at a picture ; and suddenly, whether she would or no, her thoughts escaped from her keeping, and flew back with cruel persistence—back to vanished days, to the clasp of a hand wherein hers had trembled, to the glance of an eye before which hers had fallen in shy delight, to a love-whisper for which her heart had beat responsive—back to her one dream of true love, her only Elysium. ‘ Oh, Wilfred, Wilfred !’ she almost cried aloud. ‘ Oh, my one love !’

Full little did Percival Ross imagine that her thoughts were loyal, while her words and acts were traitors to her dead lover. Full little did he guess that it was for Wilfred her heart was uttering its wild lament on the very day when she had come to him to bind him for life to her side. The ways of some women are wonderful, and past finding out.

The first greetings over, when Percival had no difficulty in fixing his attention on his friend, he made every effort to continue to do so—talking incoherently and asking many questions. He ignored Silvia's presence ; not that he wished to be rude to her, but that he did not know how to acknowledge it. He had been determined to meet her as honestly and frankly as he meant to act by her ; but this could not go on without an explanation—he would be liable to be misunderstood in a hundred ways, and she might give a hundred turns to what he said. Would his mother never come downstairs ? Was there ever such a dilatory old lady since time began ! and what should he do if she did not put in an appearance at all ? And while these thoughts distracted his brain, he kept asking Geoffry questions. What sort of a voyage had he had ? Much tossing in the Bay of Biscay ? How long could he stay

in England? How did he find his father? etc., etc.; and not one single word that Geoffry said in reply could his brain make meaning or get sense out of. Would his mother never appear?

At last Percival was obliged to speak again to Silvia. The innate courtesy of the gentleman, which he possessed notwithstanding all his boyishness, rendered it impossible for him to leave the one lady long unattended to. She must not feel herself neglected in his house, even though he might not share her wish to be one day mistress of it. Was she even now regarding the furniture in the room with a view as to how she would arrange it when it was hers?

‘My mother will be down directly,’ he said, with a little constraint of manner. ‘She knows you are here.’

After saying this, he turned back again to Geoffry, with the air of making Silvia

over to his mother, and considering Geoffry as his property—an arrangement that by no means met that young lady's wishes or intentions. One part of it, at least, she might defeat. She might not be able to make him leave Geoffry for her—more, however, because she did not choose to put forth her blandishments before Geoffry than because she imagined Percival capable of resisting them—but, at any rate, she need not, unless she chose, be victimized by Lady Ross. She shuddered at the idea of a long conversation with the dowager, in which she should inevitably betray herself, and say something that would for ever be remembered against her. The two men occupied with each other—perhaps even going out of doors together—and she left at home actually *tête-à-tête* with the old lady! This could not be. Besides the terrible bore of it, it might ruin all her schemes. Though

on her good behaviour, and doing her best, there would be sure to be some slip of the tongue, some profane word or modern thought, that would shock the notions of the last half century. Now was the moment of escape, and Silvia was not the woman to allow the tide in her affairs to ebb without being made the most of. She had always found herself ready for the occasion, and quick to say the right word at the right moment, and she was not going to fail and find herself wanting now.

Softly murmuring something in which the syllables 'not trouble' could faintly be distinguished, after which 'moss-roses,' she glided through the open window on to the lawn, where her graceful figure, in the deep mourning draperies, made an object full of melancholy interest to the beholders.

'It was a great surprise to me,' Geoffrey said gravely, as the eyes of both the young

men could not help following the slight girlish form. 'It was a great surprise to me to find my sister-in-law settled at home.'

'You did not know she was there—had you heard of the marriage?'

'Yes.'

Geoffry, of course, had no intention of telling Percival *what* he had heard. It was his brother's secret, and Silvia's; and though he had from a sense of duty told his father, no word of it should pass his lips to anyone else. This would have been his resolution, at all events; but now, feeling sure as he did that there was something unexplained, that Silvia's antecedents were not, and that she herself was very different from, what he had understood Wilfred to say, he should have felt that he was uttering calumny had he mentioned the impressions he had received of her before he saw her. The fault might be with him—he might have given a heightened colouring

to the letters; or Wilfred, poor fellow, might have been angry and written unjustly. The only thing he felt sure of was that Silvia was not the person to blame.

Then Percival felt a strong curiosity to learn Geoffry's opinion of Silvia. He must have seen a good deal of her, though only at home a day; and he must have heard her talk, at any rate, during their *tête-à-tête* drive. Everybody set store by Geoffry's judgment, though he was inclined to be a little cynical and severe. He was also very fastidious, especially about women. Poor Silvia! her brother-in-law would certainly see through her.

'She is very beautiful,' he said, an observation only spoken in order to lead Geoffry on to say something himself.

The bait was taken immediately.

'Yes, her beauty is perfect. And she seems as good as she is beautiful. It will

be a great advantage to the girls to have such a woman as their companion.'

Percival Ross stared in his face, not believing his ears; he appeared calling on his eyes to correct their evidence.

Was this Geoffry Lomax speaking, and speaking of Silvia? Why, even he—Percival Ross—had never thought *that*. He had admired Silvia. She had fascinated him to a certain extent, and for a time she had seduced him from old principles and allegiances; but as to considering her superior to Constance or Ally, *that* he had never done, and he would have been ashamed of himself if he had. His cheeks burned as he remembered how the thought had flashed across his mind that Ally was narrow. He would not, however, allow that it had been as much as that. It had only been a question, Was Ally, could Ally be narrow? And for that question only he bitterly repented. 'Dear, sweet Ally—

fresh, innocent, modest Ally! *be* narrow, if to be narrow is to be as thou art!

And while he thought thus, he stared silently at Geoffry; and then he said:

‘I don’t know about that.’

Geoffry caught the meaning of his manner: Percival did not think as well of Silvia as he did. Probably he knew little of her. She would not show herself to him as she had done to a man like himself—her brother, and one she would feel at once she could respect and trust. She would not give Percival a thought, and they would not have exchanged more than common-places; while, boy-like, he would think only of her beauty, and, boy-like, not connect extreme beauty with superiority in a woman. Such a combination—in a woman—was very rare, Geoffry admitted; but he also admitted that it might be met with.

‘Willy is a fine little fellow. I hope you

are pleased with your nephew,' Percival remarked, after a rather awkward silence.

'How could I be otherwise?' was the reply, given with more enthusiasm than was at all usual to Geoffry. 'He is a boy any man may be proud of. What a comfort and delight he will be to my father!'

'They are all so fond of him. Constance just lives for him, I think.'

'Only no one can come between him and his mother. She is just wrapped up in him. *She* lives for him, if you please. She only draws her breath for him,' replied Geoffry.

'What, Silvia?' Percival could not help saying; neither could he help bursting into a short hastily checked laugh as soon as he had said it.

'What do you mean?' asked Geoffry stiffly; 'why do you repeat her name? and why do you laugh?'

‘ I really beg your pardon,’ said Percival, blushing ; ‘ I didn’t mean anything. Only, you see, we none of us think Silvia such a very all-that-sort-of-thing, you know, mother. She is glad enough to leave Willy to the girls. She is not fond of children ; she does not even pretend to be.’

‘ Excuse me,’ said Geoffry, still more stiffly, ‘ she is devoted to Willy. It is absurd for you, Percival, to set yourself up as a judge of such things. She lives for her boy, and in her husband’s memory.’

‘ Oh, come, I say !’ cried Percival. He would have liked, if only for the fun of the thing, to show Geoffry Silvia’s note to himself. But it struck him as indescribably humorous that this sensible, severe man should be so taken in, while he, Percival, whom the other regarded as an impulsive boy, whose judgment would go for nothing, knew all about it. He plumed himself on his superior knowledge, though laughing

at himself while he did so. He would have liked to strut about the room and give himself airs, ridiculing his grave and satirical senior for being a dupe, and flourishing Silvia's love-letter in his face. He felt so old, and wise, and worldly compared with his friend, that there was no sort of absurd antic he did not feel inclined to play as a vent for his wisdom.

And then a heavy weight fell on his heart as he remembered that that love-letter was only a symbol of the scrape he was in, and as he asked himself what sort of an opinion Geoffry Lomax would have of him if he knew of that scrape, or read Silvia's note, which referred to his devoted attentions, and how his wooing had won her.

'Confound the "devoted attentions!"' he said to himself; 'what an ass I am!'

Then he became aware that Geoffry was thinking more of Silvia than of him, and that his eyes followed her about with a

look in them as if their owner would have liked to do the same. 'Has she got hold of him too?' thought Percival Ross. 'That does me no good; a man can't marry his brother's wife, otherwise Geoff would be a formidable rival.'

'I say, old fellow, come out and have a smoke, and look at the horses.'

'Yes,' Geoffry said hesitatingly—'if you please.'

And they passed out into the garden.

The way to the stable was not across the lawn where Silvia stood, and Percival strongly suspected that Geoffry would rather have moved in that direction; but he took him off mercilessly in another, and Silvia saw them go, and clenched her little white teeth together, showing them by a slight vicious curl of her beautiful lip. Then she gave a momentary grin like an angry cat, a look which passed over her lovely face so quickly, that you might

almost have sworn it had not been there at all.

‘He shall not escape me—a boy like that!’ she cried. ‘I may give up altogether if I cannot land that fish. I might just as well be as religious as Constance or as innocent as Ally.’

Then one of her new remorsees seized mercilessly hold of her. ‘Religious,’ ‘innocent’—yes, she gave different meanings to those words now from what she had once done. Ah, if she were religious—if she were innocent—if she were as other women—if she *could* be, and could banish these dreadful recollections out of her heart! She pressed her two hands against her sides, in an anguish acute as bodily pain.

‘There must be a hell!’ she cried aloud; ‘and it comes before death to some.’

She stood silent for a minute, trembling all over.

‘Why did I come to England?’ she moaned; ‘why did I ever come to England? I will run away; I will go back; I will hide; I will forget them all, and then I shall be as I was before. But oh, if there *is* a hell! and if it is like this, and *without escape!*’

She sank down on a bench, for she found that she could not stand, she had become suddenly so weak.

‘Am I going to be ill?’ she asked herself. ‘What has come over me? Is my strength failing? I used to be as strong as a man.’

It was by a mighty effort she recovered herself, as the two young men joined her from the stables. Geoffry had looked at his watch and said there was no time to spare. He had promised his father not to stay long—he had only driven over to see Lady Ross; and if Percival would find Silvia, and tell her they must be leaving,

he would go into the house and shake hands with his mother.

But this arrangement did not suit Percival Ross, and he determined by no means to adhere to it. However, he only said :

‘Come along, then, old fellow,’ and retraced his steps with his companion ; adding, ‘I’d better go in, you know, and see about my mother.’

But when they reached the lawn, and found Silvia sitting there, they both strolled up to her.

‘If it suits you, Silvia,’ Geoffry said, with his rather elaborate politeness, ‘we must be thinking of returning home as soon as we have seen Lady Ross.’

‘We will follow you into the house,’ she said quietly ; but seeing he looked a little surprised, she added, ‘I think Per—Sir Percival is going to get me two or three roses.’

‘Why, there are plenty at home,’ said Geoffry.

‘But not of that kind,’ she said with a composed manner, that seemed to Percival Ross something new in her, and which he thought became her greatly.

Geoffry walked towards the house, but Percival instantly rushed off in search of some roses, gathered them, and instead of rejoining Silvia, skirted the lawn, and reached the glass-door, whence he signed her to follow him. She signed to him to come to her, but he stood still, shook his head, and beckoned again; then, with some show, he took his note from his pocket, and held it so that she could see it.

Finding he would not stir, and understanding his pantomime, she very reluctantly rose and approached him; and when she was within arm’s-length, he once more drew attention by his action to the note,

then conspicuously wound it round the stalks of the roses, and handed the flowers to her.

She tried to catch his hand to detain him, but he evaded her grasp.

‘Percival!’ she said.

She had taken the flowers with their envelope, and he was content. So he merely put his finger on his lips, and with hasty steps entered the house.

She did not dare read the note, nor yet keep it round the flower-stems; so she put it in her pocket and followed him, angry with him, and discontented with herself.

The visit soon came to an end; Silvia was quiet and subdued, and Lady Ross could see nothing to disapprove in her, so they parted good friends; nor did the girl know the bad impression she had made by driving up to the house with such excellent coachmanship.

It was a great relief to Percival when

she was gone, with the note in her possession. He felt a weight lifted off his heart. After that, she could make no further step in advance. She must see that he had 'no intentions;' and yet he flattered himself he had managed the matter with a good deal of tact, and let her down easily.

It was a considerable blow, therefore, when the following morning's early post brought him another of Silvia's billets.

'What *can* she have got to say now?' he grumbled discontentedly as he opened it; and when he had read what she *had* got to say, his jaw fell, and he cried out very softly, 'Deuce take her!'

This was the note :

'I quite understand your directions, and will obey them implicitly, for I consider myself as much bound to do so as if I were already your wife. Till the year is over,

we will act as if we were not engaged. Only one thing I require—that you come to Woodlands every day, and that we resume those happy *tête-à-têtes* in which you won my heart.

‘S. L.’



CHAPTER VII.

‘How happy is he born and taught,
That scorneth not another’s will;
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill.’

SIR HENRY WOTTON.



HE sun rose the next morning as usual, and so did the inhabitants of Woodlands. No coming events cast their shadows before. There was no presentiment on any mind that this day would be marked by the extraordinary, more than another. Not one of that affectionate and sensitive family had any thrill of emotion, any glimpse of prophetic vision, to prepare them for the wonders

that the next few hours would contain. Not one dreamed that this day, beyond all the other days that had gone before or would come after, was big with fate.

Aunt Lydia dressed and prayed, and read her Bible, with many a thought to 'the days that are no more;' but at her age such thoughts were part of her accustomed self, and they were no more than usual. Ally's little mournful heart tried to turn and fix its affections on the brother that was left to her. She had lost two. But Wilfred, though dead, she could still love; while Percival, though alive, was indeed dead to her, as she could no longer think well of him. It was such a bitter pang not to think well of Percival that it almost caused her to cease to grieve for Wilfred, while she reproached herself as cold and unfeeling for not caring more for Geoff's, dear Geoff's, return home.

Silvia and Geoffry were busy together

in the garden, talking and cementing the affection that had sprung up between them, and Constance was, if anything, more languid and out of spirits than usual.

The sun shone, light clouds floated in the sky, soft shadows lay on the grass, flowers bloomed, birds sang—all was just as usual. Nature was neither gayer nor sadder than before, and the same might be said of the beating hearts and busy brains that made up the living human family at Woodlands.

Only Constance did feel her heart very heavy; and after she had taught and petted her boy, and he had gone out and Ally had left her too, and the warm hours of the summer day passed on till morning melted into afternoon, and the others had dispersed, some walking, some driving, she lay alone on the sofa in her sitting-room with close eyelids, through which a big

tear would now and again force itself ; and as she so lay, she fell asleep.

She fell asleep and dreamed of Wilfred. He was with her, talking and laughing. She had a strange knowledge (dream-like) that he was dead, and yet he was alive and with her, and just like himself. There was the little mole under the left eye that she remembered so well, and she thought, 'I am glad he has that mole still, though he is dead.' She was happy in a quiet old-world way, with a happiness that she knew never could be hers ; only she was sorry that he would not look at his boy. He said it was not that he did not care for him, but he did not want to look at him ; and he added, 'Why should I ?'

Then there was a little noise like a door shutting, and she opened her eyes and looked across the room, and there was Wilfred standing just before the door staring at her. He was not like what he had been

just now, but that did not surprise her ; because she knew it was a dream, and in dreams people and things do change in that way. He had a beard and long sweeping moustaches that nearly concealed the lower part of his face, but there was no mistaking him : there were Wilfred's beautiful eyes, full of that sweetness that she had never seen in any others ; and his noble forehead and handsome nose ; and his hair in clustering curls, but a little worn on the temples, more than it had been. And there was the mole ; and again she was glad that even in a dream the mole was there, though she was ready to laugh at herself for thinking so much of a mole. Strange, she thought, that while he changes dream-like, and one minute has a beard, though the minute before he had none, yet the mole should not change, but should for ever be there.

So she lay looking at him, and he stood

looking at her, and they neither of them spoke. Then he began to walk up to her, and she felt frightened. She had not felt in the least frightened before. She knew he was dead, and she knew she was asleep and dreaming; but when Wilfred approached her she was frightened, and cried out, 'It is his ghost!'

The dream-Wilfred smiled at that, and the smile of this Wilfred, who was not only dead, but a dream-creation, was so like that of the live Wilfred, the Wilfred made up of body and soul, who had been the idol of her life, that Constance could not bear it. She hid her eyes with her hands and moaned piteously, though no tears sprang forth.

'Don't!' she said faintly; 'it looks so real.'

'But it is real, Conny,' the figure cried; 'do you not know me? Did you not expect me? Have I frightened you? Oh,

Constance, where are they all? How is my father?’

She was quite bewildered. Her heart beat fast, her breath came quick. What a dream this was—if it *was* a dream! That ‘if’ for the first time stole in. *Was* it a dream, or could it be possible that she was awake, and that the spirit of her beloved had appeared to her? Oh, if so, he would only stay a short time; they never did stay long! Oh, she must make the most of the precious fleeting minutes!

‘Expect you?’ she said, though she hardly knew that she was speaking, in the utter confusion of her mind. ‘I was always expecting you. You are always with me. Why should I be frightened?’

He was close to her by this time. He sat down by her, and put his arm round her waist, and her head rested on his shoulder. She felt an ineffable happiness, and wished she could die as she felt it.

Death coming now would be sweet indeed, compared with the bitterness of going back to life without him.

‘Dear Constance,’ he said, ‘do not they expect me? Have they not got my telegram?’

A ghost sending a telegram! Was this possible? The recognition of the incongruity made Constance again ask herself if she were awake, for had she been asleep and dreaming, it would have been no incongruity at all; or at least she would have taken it as quite a matter of course that a ghost should send a telegram, if her dream-ghost had mentioned that he had.

This idea that she might be awake sent a wild throb of delight that was actual pain up into her brain. Then she rose to her feet, stamped on the ground, pinched her arms, and holding out her hands to him cried, ‘Hurt me—hurt me! Am I awake or asleep?’

‘My dear, you are awake,’ he answered her, soothingly taking the little white hands in his and kissing them, and then drawing her towards him and kissing her cheek also. ‘Why should I hurt you? You are awake, dear Constance, and I am Wilfred—Wilfred come home at last.’

She looked in his face, handsome as ever—paler, more manly, with a little worn look about it of one who has suffered, but Wilfred still; that intense sweetness in eyes and mouth, that Constance felt and knew she had never seen in any human countenance but his.

‘You are alive?’ she said timidly, and getting up she stroked his cheek. ‘Do you know that we have wept for your death many months?’ But though she said this, and though she touched him, she did not realize that it was Wilfred, and alive.

‘I heard it. I did not know what to do. I was afraid of being too sudden, and so I

wrote to Vaux, and followed up my letter with a telegram. He was to break it to you, and you ought to have heard yesterday that I was all right, and to-day that I was coming.'

Constance could not take in the explanations. She just sat staring at him in a stupid surprised way. The belief that she was dreaming had somehow helped to break it to her, and bring her more gradually to the knowledge of the miraculous joy ; yet still the shock—the strain—was too much. She could not understand, she could not believe. It could not really be Wilfred ; she was not looking at him—he was not speaking to her. This must be madness ! She was going mad ! Then suddenly—all in a moment—floods of tears came to her rescue, and perhaps saved her brain from in reality breaking down. She gave way utterly, falling back on the sofa, weeping as she had never wept before, and crying

out incoherent words of 'Glory to God, and peace—goodwill towards men!'

It was not in Constance's nature to yield herself to a paroxysm of passionate agitation for long; but, happily for her, one had seized hold of her now, or the consequences of the miracle of delight might have proved fatal to life or reason. In a few minutes she was calm again—raised herself, looked round her, and smiled.

'I am sadly selfish,' she said; 'I must prepare them. I am afraid they are all out; but they must soon be back. Oh, how shall we ever prepare them!'

And even as she spoke the door opened, and Silvia, in all her wonderful beauty, robed in her deep mourning garments for a living man, entered the room.

Constance sprang to her feet, and would have thrown herself between them. She dreaded the effect on Silvia. Might she not die before their eyes, from the very in-

tenseness of joy—the sudden change from widowhood to wifedom? Who could stand such utter blessedness unprepared? But Wilfred rose too, and put her back; while his eyes, fixed on Silvia, expressed an astonishment at least equal to any she could experience at seeing him.

‘You here?’ he questioned, in a strange stern voice.

As to Silvia, she believed in him at once. After the first moment of incredulous amaze when she became deadly pale, a lovely blush spread over her face, love and delight leapt into her eyes. She held out her arms.

‘Wilfred! Wilfred! Wilfred!’ she cried, and, springing forward, lost herself in his embrace—or in her own rather, as she hung on his neck and clasped him to her heart.

She had no thought of dreaming or delusions; she neither questioned the past

nor doubted the present. It was Wilfred, and that was enough.

Constance noiselessly left the room.

'Oh, my love! oh, my love! you are not dead!' the voice of Silvia murmured into his breast.

But Wilfred made no responsive movement, and spoke no kind word. Gently, but very decidedly, he put her from him.

'You here!' he said. 'How is this?'

She sank down on the ground; she lay at his feet.

'Forgive me!' she said; 'do not kill me with your anger. He is dead! I am free! Love me a little, as you used to do.'

'Your husband is dead?'

'He died months ago. He never returned—I have not seen him. Love me a little, Wilfred—love me a little!'

'Do not lie there!' he cried, shrinking back as if her attitude repelled him; 'get

up, and do not speak to me in this way. Have you forgotten my wife ?'

'She is dead too—Silvia is dead. We are both free.'

'Silvia is dead!' he repeated, as one stunned. 'Silvia is dead!'

He walked about the room, taking commune with himself. There were emotion and deep gravity in his face, but there was no grief.

'Is it possible?' he repeated. 'Silvia is dead! I am free! Is it possible?'

Then he stood before her, and questioned her.

'How do you know it? when did it happen? *Is* Silvia dead?'

'We came home together. She died on board; she lies beneath the waters of the Atlantic. She will never trouble you more.'

'Silvia is dead!' he repeated, and resumed his walk about the room.

‘Yes!’ she cried passionately; ‘but *I* am living.’

He turned upon her abruptly.

‘How did you come here? What do you do here?’ he cried.

‘Ah, Wilfred, Wilfred!’—how exquisitely beautiful she looked, as she stood there before him, her face full of love and passionate pleading—‘it was for you I did it! I love you so, I would rather be your widow than the wife of any man breathing. I could not live except in your memory : pity me—forgive me—love me!’

She held out her arms towards him with a little cry, and then continued to speak.

‘She was ill before we sailed—she never left her cabin. They mistook us on board, and called *me* Mrs. Lomax. I could not refuse the dear name—I could not. And then she died, and they still believed me to be Mrs. Lomax; and *that* put it into my head. I was the most miserable creature

on earth since you gave me up ; and when I heard you were dead, I believe I went mad. I don't know, but I think I did. And then, to be your widow ; to have a right to you dead, if I had none living ; to be with your people, to live in your memory among those you loved best in your own home, believed by them to be your dearest — oh, the sweetness of it, Wilfred ! It seemed the only life I *could* lead ; in any other I should have gone mad again ! The temptation was too strong ; I yielded, and I have been here ever since, a daughter to your father, a sister to yours. Oh, Wilfred, do not betray me—pity me—love me !

Again she knelt at his feet, looking up at him with those splendid eyes of hers. How beautiful she looked, and how angelic her extreme fairness ! the halo of golden hair crowned her head, her small almost childlike features and parted rosy lips ex-

pressed nothing but innocence and purity. If an angel's soul ever dwelt in human form, surely it now inhabited that of the woman who knelt a suppliant at his feet !

And once he had loved her, or thought he did. For a few happy passionate weeks he had been her slave, he had regarded her as his future wife, the companion of all his years to come, the darling of his heart. Then he discovered that she had deceived him, that she would have led him into misery and shame. A mere girl, she had contracted a most unhappy marriage ; her husband had ill-used and deserted her, but he still lived. She was not the youthful widow she had represented herself to him, and he left her in grief at her loss and wrath at her falsehood.

Now, as he stood there 'severe in youthful beauty,' and she knelt at his feet, the memory of the old days and the old love rushed over his soul like a wild destructive

flood, breaking down every barrier of principle or feeling that he had raised against them. She was so beautiful—he had loved her so—and how she loved him still! Surely a man might make anything of a creature like this, whose whole being vibrated to love, and love for him! Surely this was the stuff out of which heroines are made! Need any man look for more than this to begin with—such beauty and such love? He softened palpably as he looked down at her.

‘You have been living here as my wife—my widow?’ he said.

He did not yet understand the position—he had not taken in the exact meaning of it all. The old love and the old days, the thought of her and her beauty, had led his mind from the actual facts except one—except the fact of her undying love, which seemed enough in itself for all else.

She caught hope from his manner, from his voice, even from his eyes.

‘Forgive me—forgive me! I have—I could not help it. And oh, Wilfred! I am growing good, with nothing but goodness round me. I have felt as I never felt before—as I never even believed in. Do not cast me back to perdition—do not betray me! Accept me as your wife. Don’t let them know I am an impostor. Go away on business; I will follow you, and we can be married quietly somewhere. I will love you as never woman loved, and obey you as never wife obeyed.’

He sat down and hid his face in his hands. He began to understand—to think—to know. There was something beyond the fact that she knelt to him there in her beauty and her love; and while her white arms clasped his knees, and her voice, softly subdued, murmured, ‘Have mercy—have mercy!’ the *Truth* appeared like a

living existence before his eyes—the *Truth* and the *Falsehood*.

He rose hastily, and bade her rise too.

‘False through all!’ he cried; ‘false to me, living and dead. You would have married me through a lie, and you have mourned me by another!’

She sprang to her feet.

‘What is truth?’ she replied almost proudly; ‘it is subject to the mind—it is not a reality. Anyone can be true; but who can love as I can? You can make me anything—everything—through that love. I can be true as easily as I can be false. You can save me here and hereafter! You can save me from hell! for I have lately begun to believe in *that*! You can save me from it, or you can cast me into it!’

She shuddered—she turned pale—she held out her arms to him.

‘Save me!’ she cried; ‘save me!’

He turned pale also as he looked at her—almost irresolute—with a great noble pity in his heart.

‘I cannot!’ he said; ‘I dare not! When I left you I loved you; but I loved honour more. God help me! Can I turn from God now? Could I ask His blessing on such a marriage as ours? And I do not love you now. I feel your power and your beauty, and could yield to them, and imagine I loved for a while; but after I left you, love died in my heart. I know it *is* dead, and that it is not love that I feel, though for rapid moments it takes its colouring from love. Marry you now? You, who have lived a lie for months? How could I look my honest father in the face, or take a kiss from Ally’s pure lips, or turn to my God for help when help was needed? No, Phœbe! go, and sin no more—go and repent! I will do anything else, but I cannot lie for your sake! I cannot turn my

life into a lie, as I should do if I married you now.'

His face became almost inspired as he spoke. There was no preaching or teaching in his manner. The nobility of his manhood asserted itself in the most extreme simplicity. What she asked was impossible—that was all. There might be temptation—he did not deny it; but to yield to that temptation was impossible. God existed, and man was made in His likeness, and to that likeness he must rise; therefore it could not be.

She stood quiet, the pride gone out of her bearing. She hid her face and cowered before him, giving two or three little piteous moans.

'Go,' he said, very gently; 'you tear my heart and your own. What use is it? Phœbe, go!'

'Where am I to go?' she cried, with a sob.

What was he to say ? He did not know where she could go. She was so young, so helpless, so entirely in his power, or so at the instant it seemed to him. And in that instant the temptation became overwhelming ; not till then, perhaps, had he been in danger. Now the danger was imminent. He even made a step towards her.

But prayer saved him. Not the prayer to resist her, but the simple petition that he might do right, whatever that might be. That he might stand, and not fall. And as he prayed the door opened, and his father and Ally ran in. Constance had told them as gently and tenderly as she could ; but how can any language describe what the feelings are of those who have mourned their beloved as dead, and find they are ' alive again '—an earthly resurrection, not a heavenly one ?

They hung about him, they could not speak ; great joy and great sorrow are

equally above words. The meeting was as silent as if they met over a closed, not an open, grave ; as if grief, not delight, tied their tongues.

Silvia stood by and saw it. Was she indeed outside the gate of Paradise? was there no admission to the enchanted ground within those walls for her? Were the old man and the insipid girl to dwell therein with him, and she with all her passionate love to be an outcast? She would not give in yet; she would not own defeat and run away. Perhaps in this last, this supreme moment he would yield, if she did not. How could he disown her, if she claimed him as her husband? How could he, as a man and a gentleman, proclaim her as an impostor before them all?

Mr. Lomax did not leave her long to stand alone, looking with hungry eyes at the embraces exchanged. He held out his hand to her.

‘ My dear daughter !’ he said, and they were the first words he had spoken.

A sort of triumph came into her heart as she approached him. She placed her hand in his; she was one of the group. She believed some of the others had entered the room, but there was a sort of dizziness in her head, an overstrained attention, that prevented her quite understanding anything.

Then she heard Wilfred speak in a low pained voice :

‘ She is not your daughter,’ he said.

She felt the little start the elder man gave, felt it in her hand which rested in his.

‘ My boy !’ he said, and the kind gentle tones brought peace to her heart; ‘ let bygones be bygones. I know that your marriage was not a happy one—forget it, both of you. With this resurrection from the dead, begin life again.’

He put her hand into Wilfred's as he spoke, and held them together, even as the priest at God's altar joins the hands of husband and wife.

The man and the woman looked into each other's faces.

The moment was the most painful in Wilfred's life.

'She is not my wife,' he said, almost in a whisper.

'Do not say so,' came the low persuasive voice of his father. 'Forgive, as you would be forgiven. Take her again from the hands of your father.'

'She loves you so, Wilfred,' said Aunt Lydia; 'and for the dear boy's sake——'

For Aunt Lydia was in the room too, and had kissed Wilfred while this scene was being enacted.

Only Ally kept her eyes on the ground — only Ally felt that the reconciliation

would be a hollow one, and believed that Silvia did not love her husband.

But Ally was wrong. Silvia loved Wilfred after her kind—loved him as she had never loved any other man. Every word that she had spoken in her passionate pleading had sprung from love, which in his restored presence had flamed up again in her soul. Believing him to be dead, she would have married Percival Ross, though she did not care for him, and done the best for herself that she could. But Wilfred alive—of Wilfred only she thought; and with a love which, at any rate at this moment, would have given up the world and all worldly advantages for his sake.

Wilfred put the hand that did not hold Silvia's to his brow; he did not attend to Aunt Lydia's words so as to understand them. He felt nothing but pain and shame.

To accuse Silvia was intolerable to him ; to accept her was worse.

‘Will you not leave us?’ he said entreatingly ; ‘will you not enable me to explain?’

‘Forgive me, Wilfred!’ was all she said.

His father looked at her, and her angelic beauty, with the woman’s love pleading through those angel-eyes, stirred his heart to its inmost depth.

‘Yes, my boy, forgive her ; take her back. You will never repent it.’

‘Never but once—and that for ever,’ he replied, in a low firm voice. ‘Dear father, she is not my wife. My wife is dead.’

‘Do not say so!’ cried his father. ‘Remember her as the girl you wooed, the young bride you carried home with you. Forget the wife whom you consider dead to you. As you have been restored to us from the dead, so let her be to you. Let

this reconciliation be our thank-offering to God.'

'Forgive me, Wilfred!' said Silvia again.

'Are you more or less than man?' cried Geoffry—Geoffry, the calm and reserved, now blazing up into a rage, for they were all there. 'Are you more or less than man, that you can resist this angel?'

Wilfred turned to him, dropped Silvia's hand, and wrung his heartily.

'Dear old Geoff,' he said, 'you don't know how it is. I am a man—faulty and weak enough, God knows! But I am honest, and I cannot do this thing. Ah, Phœbe! why will you force me to speak? Why will you not go, and spare yourself and me this shame and this pain? Go, dear Phœbe—I will call you so—and I will thank you, and pity you, and forgive you, if you will only go.'

She faltered, she hesitated, she seemed uncertain what to do.

‘Do not go,’ said Geoffry with authority, and he drew her arm through his. ‘I am your brother, and I will protect you if your husband casts you off.’

‘Dear Geoffry, you are all wrong,’ said Wilfred very sadly. ‘I am not her husband. I loved her once, but—we could not be married; and I married that Silvia Lee of whom I wrote to you. This is Phœbe Cochrane, her cousin. My wife died on board ship as the two cousins were coming home together; and—and—cannot you see what followed? Phœbe came here as my widow.’

‘She is not your widow!’ cried his father, in amazement.

Geoffry dropped her arm. They all stood looking at her, appalled.

‘Spare her as much as you can,’ continued Wilfred; ‘if only she would have let me spare her! Phœbe, forgive me; you have forced me to say it!’

'She is not your widow!' they said, one and all; and not one of them, in the confusion of feeling, saw the absurdity of talking to the living Wilfred about his widow.

'No,' he said, himself accepting the phrase; 'she is not my widow; but I wish to help her—to do what I can for her. Father, you will judge her gently; you will be kind to her.'

'Have you deceived us all?' cried Geoffry, sternly addressing her.

'I meant no harm,' she said.

'Oh, Silvia!' cried Ally. 'Poor Percival!'

Constance said no word. She had remained loyal through all. She looked at her now in sorrowful silence. She was not Wilfred's widow. It was the baseless fabric of a dream which she had worshipped in her soft enthusiasm as Wilfred's dearest and best. She looked at her in sorrowful

silence, and out of that gaze and that silence a new thought was developed.

‘Who is little Willy?’ she said.

The words fell among them like a shell, and they all began to speak hurriedly.

‘The boy!’ ‘The darling!’ ‘My little nephew!’ ‘Willy!’ came incoherently from one and the other.

Then Geoffry spoke.

‘He is Wilfred’s boy, of course; you know he *was* married.’

‘There is no child!’ said Wilfred, bewildered.

‘He is *mine*,’ replied Silvia, with astonishing calmness. ‘Do you not remember little John?’

Then she said to the others:

‘I *am* a widow, you know, though not Wilfred’s, and the boy is mine; give him to me; and we will go away together.’

‘You cannot go away—you must have

some one to take care of you,' said Aunt Lydia.

'What, I?' cried Silvia loudly—'an adventuress—an impostor? Ah, Aunt Lyddy,' she added, with extreme bitterness, 'if I had ever had anyone to take care of me I should not be what I am now.'

'Have you means of living—what do you propose to do?' questioned Mr. Lomax.

'I have nothing except what you gave me, you kind man!' she replied; 'but what is that to you? My cousin married your son against his will. That is the only tie between us, and what's that? Do you know that I have been on the stage? That my brother was a billiard-marker—got into some scrape, and shot himself? That a bad man married, ill-used, and deserted me—and that I tried to marry your son there while he was still alive? Ah, and if he would have let me I should have been saved, for I loved him with my whole heart

—and he is good! My brain is on fire!’ she added with sudden fierceness, and put her hand to her forehead. ‘I will go and be quiet for a bit. Please let me be alone. Alas!’ looking at Wilfred, ‘why has he come back—why am not I his widow?’

She left the room hastily, and a dead silence fell on the family group. It was interrupted by the entrance of Percival Ross. He came in among them heated, excited, agitated. Looking hastily round, evidently searching for some one, his eyes met Wilfred's, and he sprang forward with almost a shout.

‘It *is* true, then!’ he cried, tears welling up into his kind eyes; ‘you are alive!’

He held Wilfred by the shoulders, gazing eagerly into his face; and then his arm went round him with a kind of embrace.

There was much to say when speech became possible, and it was in answer to Percival's eager questions that Wilfred first

began to explain his history for the last few months, and how the mistake had arisen which caused the belief of his death, and how illness had detained him bound hand and foot, and a hundred other things that explained everything, but which it is by no means necessary to put down here.

The day was so fine, the garden so fair and sweet, that the inhabitants of the drawing-room trooped out there with one accord. Mr. Lomax took possession of Wilfred, and while the others were scattered about the lawn and shrubberies, Percival Ross found himself alone with Ally. But Ally's manner was cold and constrained. She was not at her ease, and he thought she wished to avoid and get away from him.

'Dear Ally,' he said at last, 'are you displeased with me about anything?'

She looked at him, blushed rosy pink, but said not a word.

'Look here, Ally,' he cried; 'we have known and—and *loved* each other always—haven't we now? Let everything be above-board between us, then. What is the matter, Ally?'

'I think you must know, Percival.'

'Upon my honour I don't.'

Still she remained silent. How could she tell him?

'Be frank with me, Ally,' he urged.

'Silvia told me,' she said, in a very low voice.

'Told you—what?'

'That you wished to marry her—and it grieved me, when we believed she was Wilfred's widow. I thought you loved Wilfred.'

A fine blush spread all over Percival Ross's face; but he smiled, and kept his honest eyes fixed in a straightforward way on Ally's.

'Did you ever know me tell a lie, Ally?'

‘ No, Percival—you could not.’

‘ Very well. It was a mistake of Silvia’s. I cannot explain it, dear Ally. I never can to anyone but my wife. But this much I may say, I never wished to marry Silvia, and I never said anything to her that ought to have made her think so. But I do think she made me—I suppose it was *flirt* with her, and that was my fault, and I am sorry ; but, indeed, it was from love of Wilfred. I wanted to be kind to his widow.’

Ally thought Percival had never looked so charming or handsome as he did at that moment ; so frank and honest, so youthful and innocent, and with such a manly humility about him, as he stood there before her blushing, but with his eyes never flinching for an instant from their straightforward gaze down into hers. She felt she could trust him for ever ; and with her old trust, happiness rushed back into her heart. She

held out both her hands to him, tears sprang into her eyes ; but the eyes smiled through them, and her mouth broke into dimples.

To Percival she looked like a fair little lily shining through the dews of heaven. He longed to gather the sweet flower, and keep it in his breast for ever.

Clasping her hands, he drew her towards him.

‘Ally, dear Ally!’ he said, very softly ; ‘do not you know that I love you ? Will you not be my wife ?’

The idea had never flashed across her brain or entered her mind before ; and yet it did not strike her, as he spoke, as a novelty. It came rather as the natural blissful fulfilment of her life. Her hands remained in his ; her face, all smiles, tears, and blushes, was raised towards him. He stooped over her, and their lips met in the first lover’s kiss either had ever known.

From that moment the two happy young hearts were pledged to each other for time and eternity. They knew what they had been waiting for, and that now there was not a want unfulfilled.

Constance and Wilfred in Ally's bower were about equally happy, though not acknowledged lovers. To Constance the secret of her heart had long been known, and Wilfred now regarded her matured and spiritual beauty, with new eyes drinking new thought into them. Before he left home, she had been to him like a dear sister; but absence does much, and after his adventures abroad, his unhappy love, and yet more unhappy marriage, to sit with Constance, feeling the light of her pure eyes on him and listening to her gentle voice, was a haven of rest.

It was not difficult to see how matters would end between them, or that Constance's true heroic love, that had accepted

and worshipped wife and child for his sake, would meet with the reward that does not always crown purity and heroism here below.

Perhaps the only unsatisfied member of the family group was Geoffry. There was a strange conflict in his heart now that Silvia was not his sister ; and as he thought of her crimes he thought also of her repentance with pity. She attained a painful height in his heart, mixed with a wild admiration of which he was himself ashamed.

Then he began to condemn the others, whom he thought wanting in charity, unchristian in their view of her character and conduct. A woman with such powers of love and repentance as hers, might be made anything of in the hands of a sensible man.

By-and-by, he spoke apart to Aunt Lydia. Where were that unhappy young

lady and her child? What was to be done for them? Some arrangement must be made—they could not be left alone for ever.

Aunt Lydia, always kind and forgiving, went in search of them; but little John's voice was not heard through the house. The nursery was deserted, and his mother's room was empty also.

Silvia was gone!

THE END.





