The Prodigals and Their Inheritance

by Margaret Oliphant

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T H E P R O D I G A L S

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THE PRODIGALS AND THEIR INHERITANCE

BY MRS. OLIPHANT AUTHOR OF “CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD” “THE WIZARD’S SON” ETC. ETC. Complete Methuen & Co. 36 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C. 1894

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T H E P R O D I G A L S

CHAPTER I

“IS it to-night he is coming, Winnie?”

“Yes, father. I have sent the dog-cart to the station.”

“It was unnecessary, quite unnecessary. What has he to do with dog-carts or any luxury? He should have been left to find his way as best he could. It is not many dog-carts he will find waiting at his beck and call. That sort of indulgence, it is only putting nonsense in his head, and making him think I don’t mean what I say.”

“But, father”—

“Don’t father me. Why don’t you speak like other girls in your position? You have always been brought up to be a lady; you ought to use the same words that ladies use. And mind you, Winifred, don’t make any mistake, I mean what I say. Tom can talk, none better, but he will not get over me; I have washed my hands of him. So long as I thought these boys were going to do me credit I spared nothing on them; but now that I know better—Don’t let him try to get over me, for it is no use.”

“Oh, papa, he is still so young; he has done nothing very bad, only foolishness, only what you used to say all young men did.”

“Things are come to a pretty pass,” said the father, “when girls like you, who call

themselves modest girls, take up the defence of a blackguard like Tom."

"He is not a blackguard," cried the girl colouring to her hair.

"You are an authority on the subject, I suppose? But perhaps I know a little better. He and his brother have taken me in—me, a man that never was taken in in my life before! but now I wash my hands of them both. There's the money for his journey and the letter to Stafford. No—on second thoughts I'll not give him the money for his journey; he'd stay in London and spend it, and then think there was more where that came from. Write down the office of the Cable Line in Liverpool—he'll get his ticket there."

"But you'll see him, papa?"

"Why should I see him? I know what would happen—you and he together would fling yourselves at my feet, or some of that nonsense. Yes, you're right—on the whole, I think I will see him, and then you'll know once for all how little is to be looked for from me."

"Oh, papa! you do yourself injustice; your heart is kinder than you think," cried Winifred, with tears.

Mr. Chester got up and walked from one end to the other of the long room. It was lighted up as if for a great entertainment, though the father and daughter were alone in it. He drew aside the curtains at the farther end and looked out into the night.

"Raining," he said. "He would have liked a fly from the station much better than the dog-cart. These puppies with their spoiled constitutions, they can't support a shower. I am kinder than I think, am I? Don't let Tom presume on that. If I'm better than I think myself, I'm a deal worse than you think me. And he's cut me to the heart, he's cut me to the heart!" This was said with a little vehemence which looked like feeling. He resumed, a few minutes after: "What a fine thing it seemed for a man like me, that began in a small way, to have two sons to be educated with the best, just as good as dukes, that would know how to make a figure in the world and do me

credit. Credit! two broken-down young profligates, two cads that have never held up their heads, never made friends, never done anything but spend money all their lives! What have I done that this should happen to me? Your mother was but a poor creature, and her family no great things; but that my boys, my sons, should take after the Robinsons and not after me! Hold your tongue and let me speak. It should be a warning to you whom you marry; for, mind you, it's not only your husband he'll be, but the father of your children, taking after him, perhaps, to wring your heart." He had been walking about the room all this time, growing more and more vehement. Now he flung himself heavily into his chair. "Yes," he said, "it will be better that I should see him. He'll know then, once for all, how much he has to expect from me."

"Papa," cried Winifred, drying her eyes, "if my mother had lived"—

"If she had lived!" he said, with a tone in which it was difficult to distinguish whether regret or contempt most predominated. Perhaps it was because he was taken by surprise that there was any conflict of feeling. "We should have had some fine scenes in that case," he added, with a laugh. "She would have stuck to the boys through thick and thin; and perhaps you would have been more on my side, Winnie; they say the girls go with their father. True enough, you are the only one that takes after me."

"Oh, papa! George is the image of you."

He got up again from his chair as if stung by some intolerable touch.

"Hold your tongue, child!" he said hoarsely; then, seating himself with a forced laugh, "Kin in face, sworn enemies in everything else," he said.

The room in which this conversation went on was large but not lofty, occupying the whole width of the house, which was an old country house of the composite character, so usual in England, where generation after generation adds and remodels to its fancy. It had been two rooms according to the natural construction of the house, and the separation between the two was marked by two pillars, one at either

side, of marble, which had been brought from some ruinous Italian palace, and were as much out of place as could be conceived in their present situation. The room, in general, bore the same contradictory character; florid ornament and gilt work of the most baroque character alternating with articles of the latest fashion, and with pieces of antiquity such as have become the test of taste in recent years. Mr. Chester preferred cost above all other qualifications in the decoration of his house, and his magnificence was bought dearly at the expense not only of much money, but of every rule of harmony. He did not himself mind this. It need scarcely be added that he was not the natural proprietor of the manor-house which he had thus made gorgeous. He was a man of great ambition who had made his fortune in trade, and whom the desire, so universal and often so tragically foolish, though so natural, of founding a family, had seized in a somewhat unusual way. His two sons had received “the best education”; that is, they had been sent to a public school and afterwards to Oxford in the most approved way. They had not been used to much literature nor to a very refined atmosphere at home, and it is possible that the very ordinary blood of the Robinsons, their mother’s family, had more influence in their constitutions than that fluid which their father thought of so much more excellent quality, which came to them from the Chester fountain.

The Chesters had been pushing men for at least two generations. From the fact that their name was the same as that of their native place, it was uncharitably reported that Mr. Chester’s grandfather had been a foundling picked up in the streets. But as he figured in the pedigree which hung in the hall as George Chester, Esq., of the Cloisters, Chester, strangers at least had no right to lend an ear to any such tale, nor to inquire whether, as report said, it was as a lay clerk that he had found a place in that venerable locality. William Chester, the link between this mythical personage and Mr. Chester of Bedloe Manor, had begun the family fortunes in Liverpool half a century before, and his son, whose education was that of a choir boy in Chester Cathedral, as his father’s had been, established upon that foundation a solid and,

indeed, large fortune, which he had fondly hoped by means of George and Tom to hand down to a whole prosperous family of Chesters, transformed into landowners, great proprietors, perhaps—who could tell?—Lord Chancellors and Prime Ministers. The disappointment which comes upon such a man when his children, instead of doing him honour, turn out the proverbial spendthrifts and consumers of the newly-made fortune, does not meet with any great degree of sympathy in the world. A tacit "serve him right" is in the minds of most people. Much righteous indignation has been expended upon a very different matter, upon the ambition even of such a man as Scott to found a family: the moralist has been almost glad that it came to nothing, that the children of the great man were nobodies, that his hope was a mere dream. And how much more when the man had, like George Chester, nothing but his money and a certain strenuous determination and force of character to recommend him!

But the disappointment was not less bitter to the new man than if he had been a monarch mourning over a degenerate son. Neither George nor Tom did anything but get into scrapes at the University. They had no heads for books, and they had the habit of rash expenditure, of self-indulgence, of considering themselves masters of everything that could be bought. Mr. Chester would have taken their extravagance in perfectly good part, he would have winked at their peccadilloes and forgiven everything had they done him credit as he said: nor was he very particular as to the nature of the credit; had either manifested any capacity for taking university prizes, or a good degree, that, though he would have understood it little, would have delighted him. Had they rowed in the eight or played in the eleven, he would have been doubly proud of the distinction. Failing those legitimate paths to honour, had they brought a rabble of the young aristocracy to Bedloe, had they gone visiting to great houses, had they found a place even among the train of any young duke or conspicuous person, he was so easily pleased that he would have been content. But they did none of these things. George, with the beautiful voice, of which his father

was not proud, since it awakened memories of hereditary talent which he did not wish to keep before men's minds, had not used this gift as a way of making entrance into select circles, but roared it out in undergraduate parties made up of clergymen's sons, of young schoolmasters, of people, as he said bitterly, no better, nay, not so good as himself; and made friends with the lower class of the musical people, the lay clerks at the Cathedral, the people who gave local concerts. He was quite ready to join them, to sing with them, to take his pleasure among them, with a return to all the old habits of the singing men at Chester, which was bitterness to the father's soul. It scarcely made it any worse that George fell into ways of dissipation and went wrong as well. That his father, perhaps, might have forgiven him had it been done in better company; but as it was, the sin was unpardonable. When news came to Bedloe that George was about to marry a poor organist's daughter, the proceedings Mr. Chester took were very summary; he stopped his son's allowance instantly, provided him with a clerkship at Sydney, and sent him off to the end of the world, requesting only that he might see him no more.

Then Tom became his hope. Tom had aspirations higher than George's, but he went, if possible, more hopelessly astray. Tom had, or seemed to have, something more of fancy and imagination than belonged to the rest of his family. He was the clever one, bound, or so at least his father hoped, to make a figure in the world; but he was idle, he was sarcastic and hot-tempered, he quarrelled with everybody whom he ought to have conciliated, and supported the company only of those who flattered and agreed with him, and helped him to gratify his various tastes and inclinations, which were not virtuous. If George had fallen among the lower class of professionals, Tom's company was, his father declared, composed of the out-scourings of the earth. And when the inevitable moment came in which Tom was plucked (or ploughed, as the word varies), his father's bitter disappointment and disgust came to the same result as in his brother's case. The civil letter in which his tutor lamented Tom's foolishness exasperated Mr. Chester almost to madness. No doubt he had bragged in

his day of his two boys who were to carry all before them, and his humiliation was all the more hard to bear. He was uncompromising and remorseless in the revenge he took. According to his code, he who failed was the most criminal of mankind. Whatever a man might do, so long as he attained something, if it were no more than notoriety, there were hopes of him; but failure was insupportable to the man of business—the self-made, and self-sustaining.

It was with a pang that he gave up the idea of all possibility as regarded his sons; but he did so with the same decision and promptitude with which he would have rejected a bad investment. He had still a child, who was, indeed, one of the inferior sex, a mere girl, not for a moment to be considered in the same light as a son, had the sons been worthy, but something to fall back upon when they failed. Winifred, so long as the boys were in the foreground of their father's life, had cost him little trouble. She had been so fortunate as to be provided with a good governess when her mother died; and, unnoticed, unthought of, had grown up into fair and graceful womanhood—in mind and manners the child of the poor gentlewoman who had trained her, and who still remained in the house as her companion and friend. Insensibly it had become apparent to Mr. Chester that Winnie was the one member of his family who was not a failure. The society around, the people whom he reverenced as county people, but despised as not so rich as himself, received her with genuine regard and friendship, even when they received himself with but formal civility. As for George and Tom, not even their prospective wealth during their time of favour had commended them to the county neighbours, whose pride Mr. Chester cursed, yet regarded with superstitious admiration. Winifred had broken through the stiffness of these exclusive circles, but no one else; and even while he fumed over the downfall of Tom, he had begun to console himself with the success of Winnie. At the recent county ball she had been, if not the beauty, at least the favourite of the evening. Lord Eden himself had complimented her father upon her looks. He had tasted the sweetness of social success for the first time by her means.

All was not then lost. He condemned Tom, as he had condemned George, by attainder and confiscation of all his rights; and Winifred was elected to the post of heir and representative of the Chesters. Perhaps the decision gave the father himself a pang. It was coming down in the world. A man with his sons about him has something of which to be glorious—but a mere girl! At the best it was a humiliation. But in default of anything better it was still a mode of triumph, after all. It secured his revenge upon the worthless boys who had done nothing for his name, and a place among those who recognised in Winnie, if not in any other member of the family, their equal in one way, their superior in another.

He was a man of rapid conclusions, and he had made up his mind on this point on the evening of the day on which he had heard of Tom's disgrace—for disgrace he had felt it to be, accepting no consolation from the fact that many young men not thereafter to be despised met with the same fate. He would not allow his son to return home, but had his fate intimated to him at once by the solicitor whom Mr. Chester chose to employ in business of this sort. It was to New Zealand this time that the unfortunate was to be sent. His passage-money and fifty pounds, and a desk in an office when he reached his destination—this was the fate of the unhappy youth, fresh from all indulgences and follies. No hope even was held out to him of ever retrieving his lost position; and Tom knew with what remorseless decision George had already been cut off. Perhaps he had not lamented as he might have done his brother's punishment, which left such admirable prospects to himself, but it left no doubt on his mind as to his own fate. He had asked, what George had not had the courage to ask, that he might come home and take farewell of his sister, at least. And this had been granted to him. If any forlorn hope was in his mind of being able to touch the heart of his father, it was a very forlorn hope indeed, and one which he scarcely ventured to whisper even to himself.

He had arrived at the country station which was nearest Bedloe while his father and sister were talking of him, and had been received by the groom with that somewhat

ostentatious sympathy and regard for his comfort with which servants are wont to show a consciousness of the situation. The groom was very anxious that Mr. Tom should be protected from the rain, the soft, continuous drizzle of a spring night. “I’ve brought your waterproof, sir; the roads is heavy, and we’ll be a long time getting home”—

“Never mind the waterproof,” said Tom; “I like the rain.”

“It’s cooling, sir; but after a while, when you’re soaked through—if you get a chill, sir?”

“It don’t matter much,” said Tom. “How are they all at home?”

“Pretty nicely,” said the man, “though Mrs. Pierce do say that she don’t like master’s looks, and Miss Winifred is that pale except when she flushes up”—

“How’s Bayleaf?” This was Tom’s hunter which he never mounted, yet felt a certain property in all the same.

“Nothing to brag of, sir. That poor animal, he’s like a Christian. He knows as well when there’s something up”—

“You had better drive on,” said Tom. “How dark it is!”

“It’s all the rain, sir, like as if the skies themselves—But we’re glad as the equinoctials is over, and you’ll have a good season for your voyage. Shall you see Mr. George, sir, where you are going?”

At this Tom laughed, with a most unmirthful outburst. “No,” he said; “that’s the fun of the thing—he in one country and I in another. It’s all very nicely settled for us.”

“Let’s hope, sir,” said the man, “that when things get a little more civilised there will be a railway or something. We should all like to send our respects and duty to Mr. George.”

To this Tom made no reply. He was not in a very cheerful mood, nor did this conversation tend to elevate his spirits. There was nothing adventurous in his

disposition. The distant voyage, the new world, the banishment from all those haunts in which he could find his favourite enjoyments, with an occasional compunction, indeed, but nothing strong enough to disturb the tenor of his way, were terrible anticipations to him. Some lurking hope there was still in his mind that his fate was impossible; that such a catastrophe could not really be about to happen; that his father would relent at the sight of him or at Winnie's prayers. It did not enter into Tom's thoughts that Winnie would ever forsake him. The thought of her own advantage would not move her. He was aware that, in the question of George, it had more or less moved himself, and that he had not, perhaps, thrown all that energy into his intercession for his brother which he hoped and believed Winnie would employ for himself. But then he had feared to irritate his father, who would bear more from Winnie than from any one. At this moment, while he drove shivering through the rain,—shivering with nervous depression rather than with cold, for the evening was mild enough,—he had no doubt that she was doing her best for him. And was it possible that his father could hold out, that he could see the last of his sons go away to the ends of the earth without emotion? The very groom was sorry for him, Bayleaf was drooping in sympathy, the skies themselves weeping over his fate. When the fate is our own, it is wonderful how natural it seems that heaven and earth should be moved for us. In George's case he had seen the other side of the question. In his own the pity of it was far the most powerful. His mind was almost overwhelmed by the prospect before him, but as he drove along in the rain, with the groom's compassionate voice by his side in the dark, expressing now and then a respectful and veiled sympathy, there flickered before Tom's eyes a faint little light of hope. Surely, surely, this, though it had happened to his brother, could not happen to him? Surely the father's heart was not hard enough, or fate terrible enough, to inflict such a punishment upon him? Others, perhaps, might deserve it, might be able to bear it; but he—how could he bear it? Tom said to himself that in his case it was impossible, and could not be.

CHAPTER II

IN family troubles such as that which we have indicated, it is generally a woman who is the chief sufferer. She stands between the conflicting parties, and, whether she is mother or sister, suffers for both, unable to soften judgment on one hand, or to reduce rebellion on the other; or else securing a ground of reconciliation by entreaties and tears which she would not use on her own behalf, and often by the sacrifice of her own reason and power of judging, and conscious humiliation to all the imbecilities of peace-making. A woman in such circumstances has to pledge herself for reformations in which, alas! her heart has but little faith. She has to persuade the angry father that his son has erred less than appears, to invent a thousand excuses, to exhaust herself in palliation of offences which are far more offensive and terrible to her than to him whose wrath she deprecates; and she has to convince the impatient and resentful son that his father is acting rather in love than in anger, and that his sins have wounded as much as they have exasperated. Those women who have no judgment of their own to exercise, and who can believe everything, are the happiest in this ever-returning necessity: and indeed in many complications of life it is much better for all parties that the woman should be without judgment, the soft and boneless angel of conventional romance. Winifred Chester was not of this kind. She was a just and tender-hearted woman, full of affection and compassion, to whom nature gave the hard task of mediating between two parties whose conflicting errors she was, alas! but too well able to estimate—the father, whose indignation and rage were in fact sufficiently just, yet so little righteous, and her brothers, of whom she knew that they neither felt any real compunction nor intended any amendment. There is, let us hope, some special indulgence for those luckless advocates of erring men who have to promise amendment which they can put no faith in, and plead excuses which to their own minds have no validity.

After the conversation which had been held in the great drawing-room, when Mr. Chester settled himself to a study of the evening papers which had just been brought in, Winifred left the room softly, and stole upstairs to the window of her brother's room, which commanded the avenue, and from which she could see his approach. The room was faintly lit with firelight and full of all the luxurious contrivances for comfort to which a rich man's sons are accustomed. Poor Tom! what would he do without them all, without the means of procuring them? Poor George! what was he doing, he who now had some years' experience of work and poverty? She stole behind the drawn curtains and looked out upon the darkness and the falling rain. There was little light in the wild landscape, and no sound but that of the rain pattering upon the thick ivy which clothed the older part of the house, and streaming silently down upon the trees, which were still bare, though swelling at every point with the sap of spring. The air was soft and warm; the rain and the darkness full of a wild sense of fertility and growth. Winifred's imagination depicted to her only too clearly the state of half-despair, yet unconviction, in which her brother's mind would be. He would not believe it was possible, and yet he would know. He was very well aware that his father was remorseless, yet he would not be able to understand how ruin could overtake him. The circumstances brought back before her vividly the other occasion on which she had implored in vain the reversal of the sentence on her elder brother. George, too, had been taken by surprise. He had not believed it, and when at last he was convinced, had burst forth into wild defiance and consuming wrath. But Tom would probably be less simple, and not manly at all: he would never believe that all was over, that it was not possible to make another and another appeal.

Winifred stood and watched for his coming, feeling that if by any will of hers she could bring about an accident, either to delay her brother's arrival, or even to bring him into the house in a condition which would compel a prolonged stay, she would have done it. Tom would have arrived, it is to be feared, with a broken leg, or the

beginnings of a fever, could his sister have procured it or he would not have come at all. Railway accidents occur in many cases when they do harm without doing any good, but a railway accident which should awake some natural movement in her father's mind, which should perhaps make him anxious, which would force him to exert himself on Tom's behalf—what an advantage that would be! Alas! such things do not come when people wish for them. A broken arm or leg, what a small price to pay for the moral advantages of reawakened interest, anxiety, the softening charm of an illness and convalescence! No father could turn out of his house the wounded boy who was brought home to be cured.

But Winifred's wishes, it need not be said, were quite unavailing. By and by she heard the steady tread of the horse, the roll of the wheels over those little heaps of gravel with which the avenue was being mended. Evidently Tom was coming, without any interposition of Providence, to his fate. She ran softly down the stairs to meet him and prevent any unnecessary sound or attempt to usher the returning prodigal into his father's presence. The door was open, the waterproof of the groom glistening in the light, and Tom scrambling down from the dog-cart with that drenched and dejected look which is the result of a long drive through steady and persistent rain. He scarcely looked at the butler as he stepped past, saying, "Is my father in?" in a voice as despondent as his appearance, and not pausing to listen as the man began to explain—

"Master is at home, sir, but"—

"Tom! Oh, how wet you are! You must run upstairs and change first of all."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. I suppose there is a fire somewhere," said Tom. "Where are you sitting? in the dining-room? No supper for me. I don't want any supper. To arrive like this is calculated to give a fellow an appetite, don't you think?"

Winifred put her arm through her brother's, wet though he was. She whispered,

“Don’t say anything before the servants,” as she led him towards the open door of the room in which the table was laid for him before the shining fire. Tom was mollified by the second glance at its comfort and brightness.

“It looks warm here,” he said, suffering her to guide him. “Though why I should mind warm or cold I don’t know. Look here, Winnie. There is this interview with the governor; I’d better get it over, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Tom, come in and get warmed and eat something.”

“Is it going to be very bad, then?” the young man said.

“I think,” said Winifred anxiously, “you had much better change those wet clothes; your room is ready.”

“Look here!” he cried; “all that about New Zealand, that’s all nonsense, of course?” He watched the changes of her countenance as he spoke.

Winifred shook her head. “Oh, Tom, I told you long ago you must never take what my father says as nonsense. He is not that sort of man. Come to the fire, then, if you will not change your clothes. And here is Hopkins coming with the tray. Don’t say anything before Hopkins, Tom.”

“Why shouldn’t I? If he means that, they’ll know soon enough. I don’t believe he means it. The governor—the governor”—Tom’s voice died away in his throat, partly because it trembled, partly because of Hopkins’ presence. “Yes, yes, that’ll do,” he said fretfully, as the butler placed a chair for him, and stood waiting. “I don’t want anything to eat, thank you. I’ll have a drink if you like. The governor,” he resumed, with a sort of laugh, as Hopkins, knowing the nature of the drink required, went off to fetch it, “would never repeat himself, Winnie. He is not such a duffer as that. All very well once perhaps; but to send George to Sydney and me to New Zealand—oh, that’s too much of a good thing! I can’t believe he means it. Thank you, that’s more to the purpose,” he added, as he took a large fizzing glass out of Hopkins’ hand.

"You need not wait. We have everything my brother will want," said Winifred. "Oh, Tom, what can I say to you? You know how my father had set his heart on your success—success anyhow, he did not mind what kind."

"Well, well," said Tom sulkily; "you women are always harping on what is past. I know very well I have been an ass. But there is no such dreadful harm done after all. I'm not fifty, if you come to that, and this time I'll work, I really will, and get through."

Winifred said no more for the moment. She persuaded him to seat himself at the table, to fortify himself with food. "We can talk it all over when you have had your supper. There is plenty of time; and what a wretched journey you must have had, Tom!"

"Wretched enough, but nothing so bad as the drive from the station, with the rain pouring down upon one, and that fellow Short pitying one all the way. Talk of not speaking before the servants—he knew as well as I did I was in disgrace with the governor, and was sorry for me—my own groom! Why didn't you let me get a fly from the station? It would have been twenty times more comfortable."

"That is what my father said," said Winifred, with a smile.

"Oh, he thought of that, did he? The governor has a great deal of sense," said Tom, brightening a little. "He understands a fellow better than you can. I don't say anything against you, Win; you are always as good as you know how."

Winifred looked at her brother with a tremulous smile of wonder and pity. Nothing could be more forlorn than his appearance; the steam rising from his wet coat, his hair limp on his forehead, his colourless face more eloquent of anxiety and suspense than his words were. He swallowed with difficulty the dainty food, the dish he specially liked, and pushed his chair from the table with relief.

"Am I to see him to-night?" he said. "If it's got to be, the sooner the better. It will be a thing well over."

"Tom,"—Winifred's voice faltered, she could hardly say what she had to say,—"I am afraid it is all a great deal worse than you think. He did not want to see you at all, and if he has consented at last, it is chiefly because he thinks you will then be convinced how little you have to expect."

Tom's countenance fell, and then he made an effort to recover himself, and laughed. "Nobody ever was so hard as the governor looks," he said; "he wants to frighten me, I know that."

He looked anxiously in her eyes, and Winifred's eyes were not encouraging. Her brother broke out again with a stifled oath. "You can't mean me to suppose that that about New Zealand is true, Winnie? You don't mean that?"

"Dear Tom!" Winifred said, with tears in her eyes.

"Don't dear Tom me! That's not natural, you don't mean it. Good heavens! I'd sooner you were taking your fun out of me, if it was a moment for that. I won't go! I'm not a child to be ordered about like that. I tell you I won't go!"

"Oh, Tom! if you could but do anything at home; if you would but let him see that you could manage for yourself! That might be of some use, if you could do it, Tom."

"I won't go," he repeated hoarsely, "to the other end of the world, away from everything I care for! There is a limit to everything. You can tell him I won't do that. And all for what? For having been unlucky about my books, as half the men in the university have been one time or the other. What does it matter being ploughed? It happens every day. Winnie, I swear to you I'll work like—like a navvy, if I can only have another chance."

"Oh, Tom, I have said everything, I have tried every way. I think if you were to do as you said just now, say to him that you won't go to New Zealand, that you can manage for yourself at home, that would be your best chance. Show him that you can maintain yourself, do something, write something, it does not matter what it is"—

“Maintain myself?” said Tom. He had left his seat, and was standing in front of the fire, his pale face and dishevelled, damp hair showing against the black marble of the mantelpiece; his eyes had a bewildered and discomfited look. “Do something? It is so easy to talk. What am I to do? Write? I am not one of the fellows that can write. I have never been used to that sort of thing. I say, Winnie, for God’s sake speak to my father! I can’t, I can’t go to that dreadful place.”

“Oh, Tom!” she cried, turning her head away.

To see him standing there, helpless, feeble, sure only of one thing, and that that he himself was good for nothing, was like a sword in this young woman’s heart. It is the most horrible of all the tortures that women have to bear, to see the men belonging to them, whom they would so fain look up to, breaking down into ruinous failure. He gave her a distracted look, and when she withdrew her eyes, went and plucked her by the sleeve. “Winnie, for Heaven’s sake tell my father! It’s all dreadful to me: I can’t work in an office; I can’t go a long voyage. I hate the sea, I am not strong, not a man that can rough it and knock about. George was different, he was always that sort of fellow; and then he’s married. Winnie, speak for me. You can do it if you like.”

“I have done nothing else ever since he told me, Tom, and I dare not say any more. He will not listen, he says he will send me away too. I shouldn’t care for that if I could help you, but I can’t—I can’t. It is almost worse for me, for I can do nothing—nothing!”

“Oh no,” said Tom; “don’t make believe, Winnie. Worse for you?—Why, what does it matter to you? While I am out at sea, perhaps in danger of my life, you’ll be snug at home, with everything that heart can desire. And who is he going to leave his money to, if he casts me off? You? Oh, I see it all now! Why should you speak for me? It’s against your own interests. I see it all now.”

She could only look at him with an appeal for pity in her eyes. She could not protest

that her own interests were little in her mind. There are some things which it is impossible to say, as it ought to be needless to say them. Tom for his part worked himself up to an outburst of miserable, artificial rage which it is to be supposed was a relief to his excitement.

“Oh, it is you that are to be his heir?” he cried. “A girl! I might have known. No wonder you don’t speak up for me, when it’s all in your own favour. I’m to be cut off, and George is to be cut off, all for you! Oh, I might have known! A girl is always at home, wriggling and wriggling into favour, cutting out the lawful heirs. And what does he think he’s going to make of you, that haven’t even a name of your own, that are no more good for the family than a stranger? George wasn’t enough, I might have had the sense to see that—there was me that had to be got rid of too, and now you’ve done it; now you have succeeded. Yes, yes! and this is Winnie!” he cried in a burst of despairing rage. “Winnie! I thought Winnie was my friend whoever failed me; and all this time you were plotting to get rid of me too!”

Tom had been advancing towards her, gesticulating with fury, his hand raised, his blood-shot eyes gleaming, when the door opened suddenly. In a moment he fell back, his hand dropped by his side, the look as of a beaten hound came into his eyes. Mr. Chester had come in, and set his back against the door.

CHAPTER III

THEY were little, and he was tall; they were slight of form, and he was massive and big—a vigorous man with a great “wind of going” about him, like one who could push through every difficulty, and make his way. He stood against the door, and looked at them; a man who felt more life in him than was in both put together, to whom they were nobodies, insignificant creatures whom he could make or unmake at his pleasure. He looked at his son with contempt unmixed with pity. He was not touched by Tom’s miserable looks, his air of hopeless dejection, or furtive,

trembling hope. And for the moment Winifred's want of size and importance struck him more than the fact which had been forced upon him, that she had done him credit. He despised them both, the products of a smaller race than his own, taking after their mother, like the Robinsons. The Chesters were a better race in point of thews and sinews, though nobody knew very well from what illegitimate source these sinews came.

"Look here!" he said; "I don't permit you to bully your sister. What's she done to you? She has always stood up for you a deal more than you deserve. If I let you come here at all, it was because she insisted upon it. I never could see what was the use of it, for my part."

Tom's rage had been subdued in a moment. He was supposed to be a being of small will, unable to restrain himself; but he was capable of an effort of the will when it was necessary, as most people are. He looked at his father with a piteous desire to conciliate and touch his heart. "I thought," he said, "papa,—I hope you'll forgive me,—that I had a right to come here."

"Don't call me papa, sir. I like her to do it, since others do it; but when do you ever find a man with such a word in his mouth? Not that I have to learn for the first time to-day that you are no man, and nothing manlike is to be expected from you. No, I don't see what right you have here. If it had been your great-grandfather's house, as many people think, you might have had a certain right; but it's my house, bought with my money—and I have washed my hands of you." He had been a little vehement at first, but now was perfectly calm, delivering his sentences with his hands in his pockets, looking down contemptuously upon his son.

"I know, sir, that you have a right to be angry"—Tom began.

"I am not angry. I don't care enough about it. So long as there was some hope of you, I might be angry, but now that you've gone and made a fool of me—the rich man that tried to make a gentleman of his son!—I might as well have tried to make a

gentleman of Winnie. As soon as I understand it, that's enough, and I've learned my lesson, thank you. You are no good, and I have washed my hands of you."

"Father, I know I have been an ass. You can't say more to me than I have said to myself. And I've learned my lesson too. Give me another chance, and I'll do all you wish," he cried, holding up his hands, almost falling on his knees.

"Come, I'm not going to have a scene out of the theatre," said Mr. Chester roughly. "I've given you all you have a right to ask of me—a start in the world. When I was your age, fifty pounds in my pocket would have seemed a fortune to me. And if you like,—there's no better field for a young man than New Zealand,—you may come home in twenty years with as many thousands as you have pounds to take with you, or hundreds of thousands if you have luck. The only thing is to exert yourself. You'd thank me for the chance if you had any spirit. That's all, I think, there is to say. Winnie will tell you the rest. Cable Line, Liverpool—I've taken you a first-class cabin, though on principle I should have sent you in the steerage. Good luck to you, my boy! Work and you'll do well. Winnie will tell you the rest."

"Father, you are not going to throw me overboard like this?" cried the miserable young man, rushing forward as Mr. Chester turned round to open the door.

"You are going to the bottom as fast as you can, and I throw you into the lifeboat, which is a very different matter. You'll find a decent salary and an honest way of getting your living on the other side. Only don't think any more of Bedloe and that sort of thing. Good-bye. If you do well, you can send Winnie word; if not"—He gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Farewell to you, once for all: don't think I am either to be coaxed or bullied. What's done is done, and I make no new beginnings. Get him up in time once in his life, and let him leave to-morrow by the first train, Winnie. I shall have to speak to Hopkins if I cannot trust you."

"Let him stay to-morrow. Oh, papa! don't you see how ill he is looking—how miserable he is? Let him stay to-morrow; let him get used to the idea, papa."

“I must speak to Hopkins, I see,” Mr. Chester said. “Hopkins, Mr. Tom is going off to-morrow by the first train—see that he is not late. If he misses that, he will lose his ship; and if you let him miss it, it will be the worse for you. That’s enough, I hope. Tom, good-bye.”

“I can’t—I can’t get ready at a day’s notice. I have got no outfit—I have nothing”—

“All that’s been thought of,” said Mr. Chester, waving his hand. “Winnie will tell you. Good-bye!”

He left the brother and sister alone with a light step and a hard heart. They could hear him whistling to himself as he went away. When Mr. Chester whistled, the household trembled. The sound convinced Tom more than anything that had been said. He threw himself down in the great easy-chair by the fire, and covered his face with his hands. What the sounds were that misery brought from his convulsed bosom we need not pause to describe. Sobs or curses, what does it matter? He was in the lowest deep of wretchedness—wretchedness which he had never believed in, which had seemed to him impossible. He could not say that it was impossible any longer, but still it seemed incredible, beyond all powers of belief. His sister flew to him to comfort him, and wept over him, notwithstanding the insult he had offered her; and he himself forgot, which was more wonderful, and clung to her as to his only consolation. Misery of this kind which has no nobleness in it, but only weakness, cowardice—compunction in which is no repentance—are of all things in the world the most terrible to witness. And Winnie loved her brother, and felt everything that was unworthy in him to the bottom of her heart.

Next morning he went away with red eyes and a pallid face and quivering lips. It was all he could do to keep up the ordinary forms of composure as he crossed the threshold of his father’s house. He was sorry for himself with an acute and miserable anguish, broken down, without any higher thought to support him. He never believed it would have come to this. He could not believe it now, though it had

come. He feared the voyage, the unknown world, the unaccustomed confinement, every thing that was before him; that he should be no longer the young master, but a mere clerk; that he should have to work for his living; that all his little false importance was gone; that he should be presently, he who could not endure the sea, sick and miserable on a long voyage. All these details drifted across his mind in the midst of the current of miserable consciousness that all was over with him, and the impulse of frenzied resistance that now and then rose in his mind, resistance that meant nothing, that could make no stand against inexorable fact.

Winifred stood at the door as long as he was in sight; but the horse was fresh and went fast, which was a relief. She stood there still with the fresh damp morning air in her face, after the wheels had ceased to sound in the avenue. It was a dull morning after the rain, but the air was full of the sensation of spring, the grass growing visibly, the buds loosening from their brown husks on the trees, the birds twittering multitudinous, all full of hope in the outside world, all dismal in that which was within. Many people envied Winifred Chester—and if her father carried out his intention, and made her the heir of all his wealth, many more would envy and many court the young mistress of Bedloe; but Winnie felt there was scarcely any woman she knew with whom she might not profitably change places at this moment of her life. There was old Miss Farrell, sitting serenely among her wools and silks, anxious about nothing but a new pattern, amusing herself with the recollections of the past which she recounted to her favourite and best pupil, day after day, as they sat together. Winifred knew them all, yet was never tired of these chapters in life. Though Miss Farrell was sixty and Winnie only twenty-three, she thought she would gladly change places with her companion—or with the woman at the lodge who had sick children for whom to work and mend. No one in the world, she thought, had at that moment a burden so heavy as her own. She was called in after a while to Mr. Chester's room, which was a large and well-filled library, though its books were little touched except by herself. He was seated there as usual surrounded by local

papers,—attending the moment when the Times should arrive with its more authoritative views,—with many letters and telegrams on his table; for though he went seldom to business, he still kept the threads in his hand. He demanded from her an account of Tom's departure, listening with an appearance of enjoyment.

"It is the best thing that could happen to him," he said, "if there is anything in him at all. If there isn't, of course he will go to the wall—but so he would do anyhow."

"Oh, papa! He is your son."

"And what of that? He's no more like me than Hopkins is. You are the only one that is like me. I have sent for Babington to make another will."

"I do not want your money, papa."

"Softly, young woman; nobody is offering it to you. I don't mean to be like King Lear. Indeed, for anything I know, I may marry, and put all your noses out of joint. But in the meantime"—

"I will never supplant my brother," said Winifred. "I will never take what does not belong to me. I wish you would dispose of it otherwise, father. It is yours to do what you like with it; but I have a will of my own too."

"That you have," he said with a smile; "that's one of the things I like in you. Not like that cur, that could do nothing but shiver and cringe and cry."

"Tom did not cry," she exclaimed indignantly. "He did not think you could have the heart. And how could you have the heart? Your own son! I ask myself sometimes whether you have any heart at all."

"Ask away; you are at liberty to form your own opinion," he said good-humouredly. "If that fellow had faced me as you do, now—but mind you, Winnie, if you go against me, I am not so partial to you but that I shall take means to have my own way. What I have, nobody in this world has any right to but myself. I have made it every penny, and I shall dispose of it as I please. If you think you will be able to do

what you like with it after I am gone, you're mistaken; take care—there are ways in which you can displease me now, as much as Tom has done. So you had better think a little of your own affairs."

She looked at him with startled eyes.

"I don't wish to displease you, papa—I don't know"—

"Not what I mean perhaps? Remember that the sort of match which might be good enough for Winnie with two brothers over her head, might not be fit for Miss Chester of Bedloe. I don't want to say any more."

This silenced Winifred, whatever it might mean. She said no more, but withdrew hastily, with a paleness and discomfiture which was little like the grief and indignation with which she entered the room. Her father looked after her with a chuckle.

"That has settled her, I hope," he said to himself.

CHAPTER IV

MISS FARRELL came home next day from her visit. She was a little old lady of the period when people became old early, and assumed the dress and the habits of age before it was at all necessary. She was about sixty, but she had been distinctly an old lady for ten years. She wore a cap coming close round her face, and tied under her chin. Whenever she had the least excuse for doing so, she wore a shawl, an article the putting on of which she considered to afford one of many proofs whether or not the wearer was "a lady," which was to Miss Farrell something more than a mere question of birth. She was very neat, very small, very light-hearted, seeing the best in everything. Even Mr. Chester, though she saw as little of him as possible, she was able to talk about as "your dear father" to her pupil; for, to be sure, whatever might be the opinion of other people, every father ought to be dear to his own child. Miss Farrell had gone on living at Bedloe since Winifred's education was finished, for no

particular reason,—at least, for no reason but love. She was a person full of prejudices in favour of aristocracy and against persons of low birth, but she was sufficiently natural to be quite inconsistent, and contradict herself whenever it pleased her—for, as a matter of fact, she preferred Winifred Chester, who was of no family at all, to several young ladies of the caste of Vere de Vere, whom she had formerly had under her care. How she had managed to “get on” with Mr. Chester was a problem to many people, and why she could choose to stay in the house of an individual so little congenial. As a matter of fact, it was not so difficult as people supposed. She was a woman who systematically put the best interpretation upon everything, moved thereto not only by natural inclination, but by profound policy; for it did not consist with Miss Farrell’s dignity ever to suppose, or to allow any one to suppose, that it was possible for her to be slighted. She would permit no possibility of offence to herself. It occasionally happened that people had bad manners, which was so very much worse for themselves than for any one else. Miss Farrell had made up her mind from the beginning of her career never to accept a slight, nor to look upon herself as a dependant. If offence was so thrust upon her that she could not refuse to be aware of it, she left the house at once; but on less serious occasions presented a serene obtuseness, apologising to others for the peculiarities which were “such a pity,” or the “want of tact” which was so unfortunate. In this way she had overawed persons more confident in their own savoir faire than Mr. Chester. She had always been admirable in her own sphere, and the alarm of an anxious mother who had obtained such a treasure, lest the peace of the house should be endangered by the sudden departure of the governess, may be supposed. Once it had occurred to her in her life to be compelled to take this strong step. She never required to do it again. As for Winifred, it was long since the relation of pupil and teacher had been over between them; but the motherless girl of the parvenu, to whom she went with reluctance, and chiefly out of compassion, had entirely gained the heart of the proud and tender little woman. She did not hesitate to say that

Winifred was beyond all rules.

“It does not matter who her father was—I have always thought the mother must have been a lady,” Miss Farrell said, with a conception of the case very different from that of the master of the house. “But at all events Winifred is—born. I never said I insisted upon a number of quarterings. I don’t care who was her great-grandfather—nothing could be worse than the father, if you come to that; but she is a lady—as good as the Queen.”

“You have made her so,” said the wife of the Rector, who was her confidante.

“No one can make a lady, except the Almighty. It is a thing that has to be born,” was the prompt reply.

But, notwithstanding, Miss Farrell was able to speak to Winifred about “your dear father,” and to look upon all the proceedings of the boys with an indulgence which sometimes almost exasperated their sister, yet was an unspeakable consolation and support to her in the troubles of the past years. For to have some one who will not believe any evil, who will never appear conscious of the existence of anything that needs concealing, who will know exactly how not to ask too many questions, yet not to refrain from questions altogether, is, in the midst of family trouble, a help and comfort unspeakable. Winifred’s mind was full to overflowing when her friend came back. She had felt that it was almost impossible to exist without speaking to some one, delivering herself of the burden that weighed upon her. It had been a relief to have Miss Farrell away at the moment of Tom’s visit, and to feel that no eye but her own had looked upon her brother’s discomfiture, but it was a relief now to meet her frank look and unhesitating question—

“Well, my dear, and how about poor Tom?”

“He is gone,” Winifred said, the tears coming to her eyes. “He is to sail from Liverpool to-day.”

“My dear,” said Miss Farrell, “it is very natural for you to feel it, but do you know it

is the very best thing that could have happened for him? It will no doubt be the making of him. He has never had any need to rely on himself, he has always felt his father behind him. Now that he is sent into the world on his own account, it will rouse all his strength. Yes, cry, my dear, it will do you good. But I approve, for my part. Your dear father has been very wise. He has done what was the best for Tom."

"Do you think so? Perhaps if that were all—But it does not seem to have been the best thing for George, and how can we tell if it will answer with Tom?"

"George, you see, has married, which brings in a new element—a great deal more comfortable for him, but still what the gentlemen call a new factor, you know, that we are not acquainted with. Besides, he is a different kind of boy. But Tom wants to be thrown on his own resources. Depend upon it, my dear, it is the very best thing for him. I should have thought that you would have seen that with your good sense."

"Oh, Miss Farrell, if that were all!"

"And is there something more? Don't tell me unless you like; but you know you take a darker view than I do."

"There is but one view to take," Winifred said. "It makes me miserable. My father—I hope he does not intend it to be known, but I cannot tell—anyhow you must know everything. My father says he has made up his mind to cut off both the boys, and to leave everything to me."

Miss Farrell grew a little pale. She was old-fashioned and strong upon the rights of sons and the inferior importance of girls. She paused before she spoke, and then said, with a little catching of her breath, "If it is because you are the most worthy, my dear, I can't say but he is right. A girl of your age is always more worthy than the boys. You have never been exposed to any temptation."

"But that is no virtue of mine. Think what it is for me—the boys that were brought up to think everything was theirs—and now cast away, one after another, and everything fixed upon me."

“My dear,” said Miss Farrell, recovering her courage, “you must not disturb yourself too soon. Your father will live to change the disposition of his property a hundred times. It is a sort of thing that only wants a beginning.”

“But don’t you see,” said Winifred, with great seriousness, “that is poor comfort; for he may be displeased with me next, and leave it all to some stranger. And then, who would care for George and Tom?”

“I see what you mean—you are going to share with them, Winnie. My dear, you may take my word for it, that will be better for them, far better than if they got your father’s immense fortune into their hands.”

“But injustice can never be best,” she said.

They were in Miss Farrell’s pretty sitting-room, seated together upon the sofa, and here Winifred, losing courage altogether, threw her arms round her old friend, and put her head down upon the breast that had always sympathy for her in all her troubles.

“I am very unhappy,” she said. “I do not see any end to it. My brothers both gone and I alone left, and nothing but difficulty before me wherever I move. How can I tell how my father’s mind may change in other ways, now that he has made up his mind to put me in this changed position—and how can I tell—even if that were not so”—

These broken expressions would have conveyed little enlightenment to any stranger, but Miss Farrell understood them well enough. She pressed Winifred in her arms, and kissed the cheek which was so near her own.

“Has anything been said about Edward?” she asked in a low tone.

“Nothing yet; but how can I tell? Oh yes! there was something. I can’t remember exactly what—only a sort of hint; but enough to show—Miss Farrell, you always think the best of every one. What can make him do it? He must love us—a little—I suppose?”

The doubt in her tone was full of pathos and wondering bewilderment. Winnie, though she had already many experiences, had not reached the length of understanding that love itself can sometimes torture.

“Love you, my dear? why, of course he loves you! Whom has he else to love? You must not let such foolish thoughts get into your mind. Thank Heaven, since you were a child you have never had any doubt that I loved you, Winnie, and yet I often made you do things you didn’t like, and refused to let you do things you did like. Don’t you remember? Oh, I could tell you a hundred instances. A man like your dear father, who has been a great deal in the world, naturally forms his own ideas. And I can tell you, Winnie, it is very, very difficult when one has the power, and when one sees that young people are silly, not to take matters into one’s own hand, and do for them what one knows to be best. But, unfortunately, one never can get the young people to see it—they prefer their own way. If they went according to the ideas of their fathers and mothers, perhaps there would be less trouble in the world.”

“You don’t really think so,” cried Winnie, indignant. “You would never have one go against one’s own heart.”

“I say perhaps, my dear,” said Miss Farrell mildly,—“only perhaps. It is a thing no one can be arbitrary about. To have one’s own way is the most satisfactory thing, so long as it lasts, but often ‘thereof comes in the end perplexity and madness.’ Then one thinks, if one had but taken the other turn! Nobody knows, till time shows, which is for the best.”

“Is that a proverb?” asked Winnie, with some youthful scorn.

“It sounds a little like it,” said the cheerful old lady, with a little laugh, “but, the rhyme was quite unintentional; and, as a matter of fact, we know that whatever happens to us in God’s providence is for the best.”

“Is my father’s hardheartedness God’s providence?” said Winifred, her face becoming almost severe in youthful gravity.

It was not a question easy to answer. She scarcely listened to the little lecture Miss Farrell gave, as to the wickedness of condemning her father, or calling that hardheartedness which probably was the highest exercise of watchful tenderness. “I don’t know that I should have had the strength of mind to carry it out; but, my dear,” she said, “I have not the very slightest doubt that this is by far the best thing for Tom. He will come home a better man; he will have found out that life is different from what he thinks. It may be the making of him. Your dear father, who is stronger-minded than we are, does it, you may be sure, for the best.”

“And if I am ordered to give up everything I care for, perhaps you will think that for the best too,” said the girl, withdrawing, half sorrowful, half indignant. The elder woman gave her a look full of love and sorrow. Behind the smiling of her cheerful little countenance there was that consciousness which belongs to experience, that teaching of a long life which at her age throws confusing lights upon much that is plain and simple to the uninstructed. Miss Farrell in her heart answered this last indignant question in a manner which would have confounded Winifred; but she said nothing. “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

CHAPTER V

WINIFRED, it will be divined, was not without affairs of her own, which were indeed kept in the background by the more urgent complications of her family life, but yet were always there; and in every moment of repose came in to fill up with sweetness mingled with pain all the intervals of her thoughts. A few years before, when Mr. Chester had retired from business and had come to live permanently at Bedloe, he had begun his life of ease by a long illness, an illness at once dangerous and tedious, which he had been “pulled through” by a young doctor, still quite unknown to fame, who had devoted himself to the case of his patient with an absorbing attention such as elderly gentlemen of mercantile connections rarely call

forth. Mr. Chester was a man who was always sensible of services rendered personally to himself, and as young Dr. Langton gave up both time and ease to him, watched by his bedside at the crisis of the disease, and never grudged to be called out of bed or disturbed at any moment of the day or night, it was natural that a grateful patient should form the highest idea of the man who had saved his life.

It did not detract from the merits of the young doctor that he belonged, though remotely, to a county family, the ancient owners of Bedloe, and that he held a higher place in the general estimation than the new millionaire himself, whose advent had not been received with enthusiasm. Dr. Langton, indeed, was of considerable use to the new-established household. He decided several important people to call who had no immediate intention of calling, and described with so much fervour the sweetness and good manners of the young lady of the house, that the way had thus been smoothed for that universal acceptance of Winifred which had opened her father's eyes to the fact that she alone of all the family did him credit. Unfortunately, Dr. Langton went a little farther than this. He was young, and Winifred was but just taking upon her the independent position of mistress of her father's house. They saw each other every day, watched together at the sick-bed, and met in the most unrestrained intimacy—and the natural result followed. Had Winifred been poor, all his friends would have protested that she was a very bad match for Edward Langton, who was believed to have what is called a fine career before him; but as she was, instead, the daughter of a very rich man, it was permissible that on her side of the question Edward Langton should be supposed a very poor match for Winifred. It had been accordingly with very doubtful feelings and a great screwing up of his courage that the young doctor had presented himself before the rich man and asked him for his daughter. The reception he received was less terrible than he feared, but more embarrassing. Mr. Chester had received the proposal as a joke, a strange but extremely amusing pleasantry. "Marry Winnie?" he had said; "you must wait till she is out of long clothes—or of short frocks, is it?" And this had been the utmost that

could be extracted from him. But, at the same time, he had taken no steps to discourage or separate the lovers. They had gone on seeing each other constantly, and had been sufficiently confident that no serious obstacle was to be placed in their way—but never had been able to extract a more definite decision or anything that could be called consent. For some time, in the freshness of their mutual enchantment, the two young people had gone on very gaily with this imperfect sanction; but there had then come a time when Edward, impatient, yet not venturing to risk a definite negative by using pressure upon the father, had filled Winifred's life with agitation, urging upon her the claims of his faithful love, and even now and then proposing to carry her off, and trust to the chance of pardon afterwards, rather than bear that tantalising, unnecessary delay. Winifred, with mingled happiness and distress, had spent many an hour in curbing this impetuosity, and it was strange to her, a relief, but yet a surprise and wonder, when he suddenly ceased all instances of the kind, and assumed the aspect of a man quite satisfied with the present state of affairs, though very watchful of all that happened, and curious to know the details of everything. The change in him filled her with surprise, and at first with a vague uneasiness. But there was no appearance of any failure in his devotion to herself, and it was in many respects less embarrassing than the constant entreaties which she had found it so difficult to resist. Still she would wonder sometimes, accepting, as women so often accept, the unexplained decision of the men who are most near to them, with that silent despair of ever understanding the motives of the other half of humanity which men too so often feel in respect to women.

As for Miss Farrell, who had seen so much both of men and women, she divined, or thought she divined, what Dr. Langton meant. But she said not a word to her pupil of her divinations. She said, "What a good thing that Edward has made up his mind to it. You never would have given in to him, Winnie?"

"Oh, never!" said the girl, with a silent, unexpressed sense that perhaps it might have been better if she could.

“No, you never would have done it; it is against your nature, and it would have been the worst policy. Your dear father is a man of very strong principles, and he never would have forgiven you. It would have been quite past all hoping for. It is such a good thing Edward perceives that at last.”

Winifred did not receive this explanation with all the satisfaction that her friend hoped. She felt uneasily the existence of some other with which she was not acquainted; but so long as there was no doubt of Edward’s love, what did it matter? And she was not herself impatient. She saw him every day; she knew (or supposed she knew) all his thoughts; she had his confidence, his full trust, his unbroken devotion; what more can a woman want? It is sometimes aggravating in the highest degree to a man that she should want no more, that she should be content with relations which stop so far short of his wishes, and Edward had often expressed this fond exasperation. But now he took it quietly enough, seeing possibilities which Winifred had not begun to see.

Now, however, the calm of this unexpected content was interrupted from the other side. Tom was scarcely gone, shaking off the dust from his shoes as he crossed for the last time the threshold of his father’s house, when Winifred learned all that was involved in the disastrous promotion which had already made her so miserable—not only to supplant her brothers (which yet it might be possible to turn to their advantage), but to expose herself to risks which were worse than theirs, to fall perhaps in her turn and make herself incapable of helping them, or for their sake to resign all that was to herself best in life. Winifred had retired from her father’s presence with this sword in her heart. And Miss Farrell’s consolations, though they soothed her for the moment, did not draw it out. She felt the pang and quivering anguish through all her being. It was now her turn: she was about to be called upon to act the heroic part which is so admirable to hear about, so terrible to perform: to give up love and life for the sake of family affection lightly returned, or not returned at all, rewarded with suspicions and unkindness by those for whom she sacrificed

everything. To give up her love, her husband, for her brothers! She did what those who are disturbed in mind instinctively learn to do. She went out by herself into the park, and took a long solitary walk, communing with herself. She had looked forward to Miss Farrell's return as to something which would help and strengthen her. And for the moment that new event, and all the gentle philosophies that had come from her old friend's lips, had helped her a little. But at the end every one must bear his own burden. She went out into the park, which, though the sun had come out, was still wet and sodden with last night's rain. The half-opened leaves were all sparkling with wet, the sky had that clear and keen sweetness of light which is like the serenity which comes into a human face after many tears. The sod was soft and spongy under her feet; but Winifred was not in a mood to observe anything. She walked fast and far, carrying her thoughts with her, passing everything in review with the simplicity and frankness which is impossible when we have to clothe our thoughts in words. She would not have said, even to herself, that George and Tom would never understand her motives, never believe in her affection; but she knew it very well, just as she knew that the grass was damp and that she was wetting her feet, a consciousness that neither in one case nor the other meant any blame. She knew, too, that her feelings and her happiness would matter little more to her father than did to herself the feelings, if they had any, of the thorns which she put out of her way. To put these consciousnesses into words is to condemn; but in one's thoughts one takes such known facts for granted without any opinion.

To leap into the midst of such complications all at once is very hard for a young soul. Ordinarily, the girl to whom it suddenly becomes apparent that she may be called upon to give up her love, has at least something to rest upon in the way of compensation; when it is in fiction, she has to save her father from ruin, and often it happens in real life that the delight of all her friends, the approbation of her parents, the satisfaction of all who love her, is the reward for her sacrifice. But poor Winifred was without any such consolation. If she gave up her happiness for the sake of

retaining and restoring their inheritance to her brothers, they would revile her in the meantime, and take it as the mere restitution of something stolen from them, in the future. Or she might find that the inheritance came to her under restrictions which made her sacrifice useless, and her desire to do justice impossible. What was she then to do? There came into her mind a sudden wish that Edward was still as he was six months ago, vehement, impatient, almost desperate. Oh, if he would but take the matter into his own hands, risk everything, carry her away, make it impossible once for all that she should be the one who had to set all right! She said to herself that she ought to have consented when he had urged this upon her. Why should she have hesitated? They had been held in suspense for two years, a long time in which to exercise patience, to linger on the threshold of life. And it was not as if her father wanted her love, or would feel his house vacant and miserable without her. He who could cut off his sons without a compunction had never shown any particular love for his daughter. His thoughts were concentrated upon himself. She was not so necessary to him as old Hopkins was, who understood all his tastes.

When Winifred suffered herself for a moment to think of herself, to leap in imagination from Bedloe, with all its luxuries, from the sombre life at home, undisturbed now by any joyous expectation of the boys, with no hope even of family letters that would afford anything but pain—to the doctor's little house full of sunshine and pleasantness, the life of two which is the perfection of individual existence—her heart, too, seemed to leap out of her bosom towards that other world. Oh, if she could but be liberated without any action of her own, carried away, transported from her own dim life to that of him to whom above all others she belonged! This flight of fancy lifted her up in a momentary exaltation above all her troubles. Then she tumbled down, down to the dust. She knew very well it would not be. He could not, even if he wished it, which now it seemed he did not, carry her away without consulting her, without her consent. And she could never give that consent. She could not abandon her home, her duties, the possibility of serving her

brothers, the necessity of serving her father. One must act according to one's nature, however clearly one may see a happier way, however certain one may be of the inefficiency of self-denial. Sometimes even duty becomes a kind of immorality, a servile consent to the tyranny of others; but still to the dutiful it is a bond which cannot be broken. Winifred felt herself look on like a spectator, and sadly assent to the possible destruction of her own life and all her hopes. It might be delayed, it might not come at all, but still it was impending over her, and she did not know how she was to escape, even in that one impossible way.

She had reached the edge of the park without knowing it in the fulness of her preoccupation, when the sound of a dog-cart coming along the road awoke her attention. It was no wonderful thing that Edward should be passing at that moment, though she had not thought of it. Neither was it extraordinary that he should throw the reins to his servant and join her. "I have just time to walk back with you," he said.

CHAPTER VI

IT was scarcely in nature that the appearance of her betrothed, coming so suddenly in the midst of her thoughts, should be disagreeable to Winifred, but it was an embarrassment to her, and rather added to than lessened the trouble on her mind. He led her back into the park, which she had been coming out of, scarcely knowing where she wandered. As was his way when they were beyond the reach of curious eyes, he took her arm instead of offering her his. There was something more caressing, more close in this manner of contact. When they were safe beyond all interruption, he bent over her tenderly.

"Something is the matter," he said.

"Nothing new, Edward."

"Only the trouble of yesterday, Tom's going away?"

“It is not the trouble of yesterday. It is a trouble which lasts, which is going on, which may never come to an end. I don’t think you can say of any trouble that it is only of yesterday.”

“That is very true; still, you and I are not given to philosophising, Winnie, and I thought there might be some new incident. I suppose he sails to-day?”

“Yes, he sails to-day: and when will he come back again? Will he ever come back? The two of them? Oh, Edward, life is very hard, very different from what one thought.”

“At your age people are seldom so much mixed up in it. But there is the good as well as the bad.”

“Perhaps,” said the girl, faltering, “I am looking through spectacles, not rose-coloured, all the other way. I don’t see very much of the good.”

He pressed her arm close to his side.

“Am not I a little bit of good; is not our life all good if it were only once begun?”

“But what if it never begins?”

“Winnie!” he cried, startled, standing still and drawing her suddenly in front of him so that he could look into her face.

“Oh, Edward, don’t add to my troubles; I don’t see how it is ever to begin. My father means to put me in Tom’s place, as he put Tom in George’s place, and already he has said”—

“What has he said?”

“Perhaps it means nothing,” she went on after a pause; “I should have kept it to myself.”

“Winnie, that is worse than anything he can have said. What he says I can bear, but not that you should keep anything to yourself.”

“It was not much. It was a sort of a threat. He said the match that was good enough

for Winnie might not be good enough for"—

"His heiress. He is right enough," young Langton said.

At this, Winifred, who had been anticipating in her own mind all that was involved, trembled as if it had never occurred to her before, and turned upon him with an air, and indeed with the most real sentiment of grieved surprise.

"Right?" she said, with wonder and reproach in her voice.

"A country doctor," said the young man, "a fellow with nothing, is not a match for the heiress of Bedloe. He is right enough. We cannot contradict him. You ought to make an alliance like a princess with some one like yourself."

"I did not think," said Winnie, raising her head with a flush of anger, "that you would have been the one to make it all worse."

He smiled upon her, still holding her closely by the arm. "Did you think I had not thought of that before now? Of course, from his point of view, and, of course, from all points of view except our own, Winnie"—

"I am glad you make that exception."

"It is very magnanimous of me to do so, and you will have to be all the more good to me. I am not blind, and I have seen it all coming, from the moment of Tom's failure. Why was he so silly as to fail, when a hundred boobies get through every year?"

"Poor Tom!" she said, with a little gush of tears.

"Yes; poor Tom! I suppose he never for a moment thought—But, for my part, I have seen it coming. I have seen for a long time what way the tide was turning. At first there was not much thought of you; you were only the little girl in the house. If it had not been so, I should have run away, I should not have run my head into the net, and exposed myself to certain contempt and rejection. But I saw that nobody knew there was in the house an angel unawares."

"Edward, you make me ashamed! You know how far I am"—

“From being an angel? I hope so, Winnie. If I saw the wings budding, I should get out my instruments and clip them: it would be a novel sort of an operation. I thought their ignorance was my opportunity.”

She was partly mollified, partly alarmed. “You did not think all this before you let yourself—care for me, Edward?”

“I did before I allowed myself to tell you that I—cared for you, as you say. One does not do such a thing without thinking. There was a time when I thought that I must give up the splendid practice of Bedloe, with Shippington into the bargain; the rich appointment of parish doctor, the fat fees of the Union”—

“You can laugh at it,” she said, “but it is very, very serious to me.”

“And so it is very, very serious to me. So much so that six months ago I wanted to throw everything up, if you would only have consented to come with me, and seek our fortune, I did not mind where”—

“Ah!” she said. There was in the exclamation a world of wistful meaning. What an escape it would have been from all after peril! Winifred said this with the slight shiver of one who sees the means of safety which she could never have taken advantage of.

“But now,” he said, “it is too late for that.”

His tone of conviction went to Winifred’s heart like a stone. She would never have consented to it; but yet why did he say it was too late? She gave him a wistful glance, but asked no question. To do so would have been contrary to her pride and every feeling. They went on for a few minutes in silence, she more cast down than she could explain—he adding nothing to what he had said. Why did he add nothing? Things could not be left now as they were, without mutual explanation and decision what they were to do. Too late? She felt in her heart, on the contrary, that now was the only moment in which it could have been done, in which she could have wound herself up to the possibility—if it were not for other possibilities, which, alas! would

thrust themselves into the way.

“I have something to tell you,” he said, “something which you will think makes everything worse. I might have kept you in ignorance of it, as I have been doing; but the knowledge must come some time, and it will explain what I have said”—

She withdrew a little from him, and drew herself up to all the height she possessed, which was not very much. There went to her heart a quick dart like the stab of a knife. She thought he was about to tell her that his own mind had changed, or that her coming wealth and importance had made it incompatible with his pride to continue their engagement. Something of this kind it seemed certain that it must be. In the sudden conviction of the moment it did not occur to Winifred that such a new thing could scarcely be told while he held her so closely to him, and clasped her hand and arm so firmly. But it was not a moment for the exercise of reason. She did not look up, but she raised her head instinctively and made an effort to loosen her hand from his clasp. But of these half-involuntary movements he took no note, being fully occupied with what was in his mind.

“Winnie,” he said in a serious voice, “your father talks at his ease of making wills and changing the disposition of his property. I don’t suppose he thinks for a moment how near he may be—how soon these changes may come into effect.”

A little start, a little tremor ran through her frame. Her attitude of preparation for a blow relaxed. She did not understand what he meant in the relief of perceiving that it was not what she thought.

“My father? I don’t understand you, Edward.”

“No, I scarcely expected you would. He looks what people call the picture of health.”

She started now violently and drew her arm out of his in the shock of the first suggestion. “My father!” she stammered—“the picture of health—you do not mean, you cannot mean”—

“I have been cruel,” he said, drawing tenderly her arm into his. “I have given you a great shock. My darling, it had to be done sooner or later. Your father, though he looks so well, is not well, Winnie. I never was satisfied that he got over that illness as he thought he did. But even I was not alarmed for a long time. Now for several months I have been watching him closely. If he does not make this new will at once, he may never do it. If he does, it will not be long before you are called on to assume your place.”

“Edward! you do not mean that my father—You don’t mean that there is absolute danger—to his life—soon—now? Edward! you do not think”—

“Dear, you must show no alarm. You must learn to be quite calm. You must not betray your knowledge. It may be at any moment—to-day, to-morrow, no one can tell. It is not certain—nothing is certain—he may go on for a year.”

The light seemed to fail in Winifred’s eyes. She leant against her lover with a rush and whirl of hurrying thoughts that seemed to carry away her very life. It was not the awful sensation of a calamity from which there is no escape, such as often overwhelms the tender soul when first brought face to face with death; but rather a horrible sense of what that doom would be to him, the cutting off of everything in which, so far as she knew, he took any pleasure or ever thought of. The idea of a spiritual life beyond would not come into any accordance with her consciousness of him. Mr. Chester was one of those men whom it is impossible to think of as entering into rest, or attaining immediate felicity by the sudden step of death. There are some people whom the imagination refuses to connect with any surroundings but those of prosaic humanity. They must die, too, like the most spiritually-minded; but there comes upon the soul a sensation of moral vertigo when we think of them as entering the life of an unseen world. This, though it may seem unnatural to say so, was the first sensation of Winifred, a sense of horror and alarm, an immediate realisation of the terrible inappropriateness of such a removal. What would become of him when

removed from earth, the only state of existence with which he had any affinities? It sent a shiver over her, a chill sense of the unknown and unimaginable which seemed to freeze the blood in her veins. It was only when she recovered from this that natural feeling gained utterance. She had leant against her lover in that first giddiness, with her head swimming, her strength giving way. She came slowly back to herself, feeling his arm which supported her with a curious beatific sense that everything was explained between him and her, mingled with the sensation of natural grief and dismay.

"I do not feel as if it could be possible," she said faintly. Then, with trembling lips, "My father?" and melted into tears.

"My dearest, it is right you should know. It is for this reason I have tried to persuade you not to go against him in anything. The more tranquillity he has, the better are his chances for life. Let him do as he threatens. Perhaps if you withdraw all opposition he will delay the making of another will, as almost all men do—for there seems time enough for such an operation, and nothing to hurry for. Get him into this state of mind if you can, Winnie. Don't oppose him; let it be believed that you see the justice of his intention, that you are willing to do what he pleases."

"Even"—she said, and looked up at him, pausing, unable to say more.

He took both her hands in his, and looked at her, smiling. "Even," he said, "to the length of allowing him to believe that you have given up a man that was never half good enough for you; but who believes in you all the same like heaven."

"Believes in me—when I pretend to give up what I don't give up, and pretend to accept what I don't accept? Is that the kind of woman you believe in?" she cried, drawing away her hands. "How can I do so? How can I consent to cheat my father, and he perhaps—perhaps"—

She stood faltering, trembling, crying, but detaching herself with nervous force from his support, in a passion of indignation and trouble and dismay.

He answered her with a line in which is the climax of heart-rending tragedy, holding out to her the hands from which she had escaped—

“Faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.”

“That may do for poetry,” she said; “but for me, I am not great enough or grand enough to—to—to be able to brave it. Edward, do not ask me. I must tell the truth. If I tried to do anything else, my face, my looks would betray me. Oh, don’t be so hard on me. Ask me something less than this, ask me now to”—

She stopped terror-stricken, not knowing what she had said; but he only looked at her tenderly, shaking his head. “If I had ever persuaded you to that,” he said, “I should have been a cad and a rascal, for it would have broken your heart. But now I should be worse—I might be a murderer. Winnie, you must yield for his sake. You must let him live as long as God permits.”

“And deceive him?” she said, almost inaudibly. “Oh, you don’t know what you are asking of me! You are asking too much cleverness, too much power. I can only say one thing or another. I cannot be falsely true.”

“You can do everything that is necessary, whatever it may be, for those you love,” he said.

She stood faltering before him for a moment, turning her eyes from one side to the other, as if in search of help. But there was nothing that could give her any aid. The heavens seemed to close in above her, and the earth to disappear from under her feet. If she had ever consented to an untruth in her life, it had been to shield and excuse her brothers, for whom there were always apologies to be made. And how to deceive she knew not.

They went on together across the park, not noticing the wetness of the grass or the threatening of the sky, upon which clouds were once more blowing up for rain, so much absorbed in their consultation that they were close to the house before they were aware, and started like guilty things surprised when Mr. Chester came sharply

upon them round a corner, buttoned up to the chin, and with an umbrella in his hand.

CHAPTER VII

“WHY don’t you come to the house and have your talk out? She has got her feet wet, and if she does not look sharp, we shall all be caught in the rain—a doctor should know better than to expose a young lady to bronchitis. Besides, her life is more important than it ever was before.”

“We forgot how the skies were looking. You should not be out of doors either; it is worse for you than for her. I told you this morning you had a cold.”

“You are always telling me I have a cold. I shan’t live a day the less for that,” said Mr. Chester, with a jauntiness which made Winifred’s heart sick.

“I hope not, but we must take care,” said young Langton. “Come back now—don’t go any farther. I hope you were coming only to bring Miss Chester back.”

“I was coming to bring Miss Chester back—and for other things,” said her father significantly. He put a little emphasis on the name, and Winifred had already been painfully affected by hearing her name pronounced so formally by her lover. He had never addressed her familiarly in her father’s presence, but now there seemed a meaning in everything, and as her father repeated it, there seemed in it a whole new world and new disposition of affairs. “But as it is going to be a wet night,” he added, “and we shall have a dull time of it, nothing but myself and two females at dinner, you had better come and dine with us, doctor, if you have nothing better to do.”

“I will come with pleasure,” Langton said. He had perfect command of himself, and yet he could not refrain from a momentary glance at Winifred, which said much.

She, too, divined, with a sinking of her heart, that it was not merely for dinner, or to relieve himself from the society of “two females,” that her father gave the invitation. He was unusually gracious and smiling.

“You know you’re always welcome,” he said. “The ladies spoil you. A young doctor is something like a curate, he is always spoiled by the ladies; but they shan’t have so much of your company as they expect, for I have got several things to talk to you about.”

“As many as you like,” said Langton, “but let me entreat you to go in now.”

“You see how anxious our friend is about my health, Winnie; he does not care half so much for yours, and you are a deal more liable to take cold than ever I was. You take that from your mother, who was always a feeble creature. The stamina is on the Chester side. Very well, doctor, very well. I don’t like the wet any more than you do. I’m going in, don’t be afraid. Dinner at seven, sharp, and don’t keep us waiting.”

Mr. Chester’s laugh seemed to the young pair to mean much; the very wave of his hand as he turned away, his insistance upon the hour of dinner, all breathed of fate. The two young people exchanged one look as they shook hands; on his side it was a look at once of encouragement and entreaty—on hers of terror and wistfulness. She was afraid and yet anxious to be left alone with her father. It seemed to Winifred that she could bear what he said to herself, however painful it might be, but that an insulting dismissal of Edward was more than she could bear. She could not linger, however, nor say a word to him beyond what ordinary civility required. Even the momentary pause did not pass without remark.

“Some last words?” Mr. Chester said; “one would think you had seen enough of each other. You should make your appointments a little earlier in the day.”

“It was no appointment, papa. I was walking, and Dr. Langton came up in his dog-cart.”

“Oh, very likely; these things fall in so pat, don’t they? I suppose I am past the age for encountering people in dog-carts just when I want them. But you must not calculate too much on that,” he said with a laugh. “There’s no reason why I shouldn’t marry and provide myself with another family, that might be more to my

mind than you."

To this Winnie made no reply. The threat had offended her on other occasions; now it affected her with that dreadful sense of the intolerable to which words can give no expression; it brought the blood in a rush to her face, and she looked at him in spite of herself with eyes in which pity and horror were mingled. He met her look with a laugh.

"You are horrified, are you? That's all very well for you; but let me tell you, many an older man than I, and less pleasing, perhaps, has got a pretty young wife before now. It has to be paid for, like every other luxury; but women are plenty, my dear, though you mayn't think so."

"Papa, do you think this is a subject to discuss with me?"

"Why not? You are the only one except myself that would be much affected by it. It might interfere with your comforts, and it would interfere very much with your importance, I can tell you, Miss Winnie."

"Then, father," the girl said, "for Heaven's sake do it, and don't talk of it any more. Rather that a thousand times than to be forced to agree to what I abhor, than to be put in another's place, than to have to give up"—

He turned round and looked at her somewhat sternly. "What do you expect to be obliged to give up?" he said.

Between her fear of doing harm to him, whose tranquillity she had been charged to preserve, and her fear of precipitating matters and bringing upon herself at once the prohibition she feared—and that natural nervous desire to forestall a catastrophe which was entirely contradictory of the other sentiments, Winifred paused and replied to him with troubled looks rather than with speech. When she found her voice, she answered, faltering—

"What you said to me yesterday, meant giving up the truth and all I have ever cared for in my life. I have always wanted, desired, more than my life, to be of use to—the

boys—and to be made to appear as if I were against them”—

Her voice was interrupted with sobs. Ah, but was not this the beginning of treachery? It was the truth, but not the whole truth; the boys were much, but there was something which was still more. Already in the first outset and beginning she was but falsely true.

“This is all about the boys, is it?” he said coldly—“as you call them. I should say the men—who have taken their own way, and had their own will, and like it, I hope. If it comes to a bargain between you and me, Winnie, there must be something more than that.”

“There can be no bargain between you and me,” said Winifred. In the meantime, looking at him, she had thought his colour varied, and that a slight stumble he made over a stone was a sign of weakness; and her heart sank with sudden compunction. “Oh, no bargain, papa! It is yours to tell me what to do, and mine to—to obey you.” Her voice weakened and grew low as she said these words. She felt as if it were a solemn promise she was making, instead of the most ordinary of dutiful speeches. He nodded his head repeatedly as she spoke.

“That’s as it should be, Winnie,—that’s as it should be; continue like that, my dear, and you shall hear no more of the new wife. So long as you are reasonable, I am quite content with my daughter, who does me credit. It is your duty to do me credit. I am going to do a great deal for you, and I have more claim than just the ordinary claim. Go in now, the rain’s coming. As for me, for all that young fellow says, I don’t believe it matters. I feel as fit as ever I did in my life. Still, bronchitis is a nuisance,” he added, coughing a little, as he followed her indoors.

Winifred did not appear again till the hour of dinner. She was, like every one who hears a sentence of death for the first time, apprehensive that the event which seemed at one moment incredible might happen the next, and she stole along the corridor at least half a dozen times, to make sure that her father was in the room

called the library, in which he read his newspapers. If any sound was heard in the silence of the house, she conjured up terrible visions of a sudden fall and catastrophe.

How was it possible to oppose him in anything? If he told her to abandon Edward, she would have to reply—as if he had asked her to go out for a walk, or drive with him in his carriage—"Yes, papa." It would not matter what he asked, she must make the same answer, conventional, meaning as little as if it had been a request for a cup of tea. And about his will the same assent would have to be necessary. She must appear to him and to the world to be very willing to supplant her brothers; she must appear to give up her lover because now she was too great and too rich to marry a poor man. This was the charge her lover himself had laid upon her. She must consent to everything. The true feelings of her mind, and all her intentions and hopes, must be laid aside, and she must appear as if she were another woman, a creature influenced by the will of others without any of her own.

Even that was a possible position. A girl might give up all natural will and impulse. She might be a passive instrument in other people's hands. She might take passively what was given to her, and passively allow something else to be taken away: that might be weak, miserable, and unworthy—but it need not be false. What was required of her was more than this. It was required of her that she should pretend to be all this till her father should die, and then turn round and deceive him in his grave. The thought made Winifred shiver with a chill which penetrated her very heart. After, could she undo all she had done, baulk him after he was dead, proclaim to all the world that she had deceived him? Was that what Edward meant by being falsely true? She said to herself that she could not do it, that it would be impossible. In the case of her brothers, perhaps, where only renunciation was necessary, she might do it; but to gain happiness for herself she could not do it. "I cannot, I cannot!" she cried to herself under her breath; and then lower still, with an anguish of resolution and determination, "I will not!" If she gave him up, it should be for

ever. She would not play a part, and pretend submission, and deceive.

But, to the astonishment of both these young people, Mr. Chester that evening did not say a word on the subject. During dinner he was more agreeable than usual; but when the ladies went out of the room, young Langton, as he met the eyes of his betrothed, gave her a look which told that he knew what was coming. He was so nervous when he was left behind that for the first few minutes he hardly knew what was being said to him; but when he calmed down and came to himself, an astonished sense that nothing was being said took the place of his dread, and bewildered him altogether. All that Mr. Chester had to say was to ask for some information about a small estate which was to be sold in another part of the country which was better known to the doctor than to himself. He asked his advice, indeed, as to whether he should or should not become its purchaser, in a way which made young Langton's head go round, for it was the manner of a man who was consulting one of those who were concerned, an intimate friend, perhaps a son-in-law. He said to himself, after a moment, when this subject was exhausted, that now it must be coming. But, on the contrary, there was not a word.

When the two gentlemen went into the drawing-room, Winifred asked him with her eyes a question which was full of the anguish of suspense. He managed behind the cover of a book to say to her, "Nothing has been said;" but this was so wonderful that the relief was too much, and neither could she believe in that. They both felt that the pause, though almost miraculous, could not be real, and that the coming storm was all the more certain because of this delay.

Late that night Mr. Chester felt unwell, and sent into the village for the doctor just as he was going to bed. Langton put on his coat, and jumped into the dog-cart which had been sent for him, with a sudden quickening of all his pulses, and the sense of a miraculous escape more distinctly in his mind than solicitude for his patient. Winifred met him at the door with wild anxiety and terror, and followed him to her

father's room, with all her nerves strung for the great and terrible event of which she had been warned. She thought nothing less than that the hour of calamity had come, and the whole house was moved with a vague horror of anticipation, although no one knew that there was anything to fear. The doctor's practised eye, however, saw in a moment that it was a false alarm, and it was with a pang almost of disappointment that he reassured her. He could only appear glad, but there was no doubt in his own mind that it was a distinct mistake of Providence. Had Mr. Chester died then, he would have left the world with one or two sins the less on his conscience, and a great deal of human misery would have been spared.

"You think I should not have roused you out of your comfortable bed without the excuse of dying, or at least something more in it?" the patient said; "but you will find I am a tough customer, and likely to give you more trouble before you are done with me."

"It is no trouble," the doctor said, with a grave face; "but you must learn to be careful."

"Pshaw!" said the rich man. "I tell you I am a tough customer. It is not a bit of an evening walk that will free you of me."

"We will do our best to fortify you for evening walks; but you must be careful," Langton said.

Upon which his patient gave a chuckle, and turned round in his bed and went to sleep like a two-years child.

CHAPTER VIII

A THREATENED life is said to last long. Winifred Chester lived in great alarm and misery for a week or two, watching every movement and every look of her father, expecting almost to see him fall and die before her very eyes. The horror of a catastrophe which she could not avert, which nothing could be done to stave off,

intensified the natural feeling which makes the prospect of another's death, even of an indifferent person, overawing and terrible. And though it was impossible to believe that a man like Mr. Chester could inspire his daughter with that impassioned filial love which many daughters bear to their parents, yet he was her father, and all the habits of her life were associated with him: so that the idea of his sudden removal conveyed almost as great a shock to her mind as if the warmest bonds of love, instead of a natural affection much fretted by involuntary judgments given in her heart against him, had been the bond between them.

And there can be nothing in the world more dreadful to the mind than to watch the life and actions of a human creature whom we know to be on the brink of the grave, but who neither suspects nor anticipates any danger, and lives every day as though he were to live for ever. To hear him say what he was going to do in the time to come, the changes he meant to make, the improvements, the new furnishings, the plantings, all that was to be done during the next ten years, filled Winifred with a thrill of misery which was not unmingled with compunction. Could she say nothing to him, give him no hint, whisper in his ear no intimation that his days were numbered? She shrank within herself at the thought of presuming to do so; and yet to be with him and walk by him, and listen to all his anticipations, and never do it, seemed horrible. All his thoughts were of the world in which he had, as he did not know, so precarious a footing. He was a man who wanted no other, whose horizon was bounded by the actual, whose aspirations did not exceed what human life could give him. He had met with disappointments and probably had felt them as bitterly as other men, but his active spirit had never been arrested, he had turned to something else in which he expected compensation. The something else at present was Winifred; she had done him credit, and might do so still in a higher degree than had been possible to her brothers. She might marry anybody. As for the doctor, when the moment came, Mr. Chester knew very well how to make short work of the doctor. And Winnie, of whom there could be no doubt that she was a lady, should marry a

lord and satisfy her father's pride, and make up for everything.

His mind had taken refuge in this with an elasticity which minds of higher tone and better inspirations do not always possess; and those plans which to her were so frightful, those arrangements of years which he should never see, were all with a view to this satisfaction which he had promised himself. He was going to preserve the game strictly, a duty which he had not much thought of hitherto: he was going to enlarge the house—to build a new wing for my lord, as he began within himself to name his unknown son-in-law. In these arrangements he forgot his own sons, putting them aside altogether, as if they had never existed, and forgot also, or at least never took into consideration, any uncertainty in life, any thought of consolations less positive.

To see a man so terribly off his guard is always a spectacle very terrible and surprising when the mind of the spectator is roused to it, just as the sight of any indifferent passer-by going lightly along a road on which death awaits him round the next corner, is almost more appalling than the sight of death itself, especially if we cannot warn him or do anything to save. And how could he die? A man who cared for nothing that was not in the life he knew, how was he to adapt himself to another, to anything so different? Winifred's brain swam, the light faded before her as she sat watching him, unable to take her eyes from him, full of terror, compassion, pity.

"What are you staring at so?" he asked on more than one occasion.

"Nothing, papa," Winifred replied incoherently, consciousness suddenly coming back to her as his voice broke the giddiness and throng of intolerable thoughts.

"One would think you saw a ghost behind me," he said, with a laugh. "That's the new æsthetic fashion of absent-mindedness, I suppose;" and this explanation satisfied and even pleased him, for he wished Winnie to be of the latest fashion and "up to everything" with the best.

Miss Farrell, on the other hand, scolded her pupil, as much as she could scold any

one, for this sudden alarm which had seized her. “It is just a fad,” the old lady said. “Edward has his fads like other people: doctors have; they are fond of a discovery that leads to nothing. I never saw your dear father look better in his life.”

“He does not look ill,” Winifred allowed, with a faint movement of relief.

“Ill? he looks strong, younger than he did five years ago, and such a colour, and an excellent appetite. But I am glad to hear that is what Edward thinks, for it explains everything.”

“Glad?” it was Winifred’s turn to exclaim.

“My dear, when you are my age you will know that one is sometimes glad of an explanation of things that have puzzled one, even though the explanation itself is not cheerful. I think this fright of Edward’s is a piece of folly, but yet it explains many things. As for your dear father, if he were a little unwell from time to time, that would be nothing to wonder at. Gout, for instance—one is always prepared for gout in a man of his age. But he is up early and late, he has the complexion of a ploughboy, and can eat everything without even a thought of his digestion. I envy him,” she said, with fervour. Then, giving Winifred a kiss as she leant over her, “You are seeing everything en noir, my dear, and Edward is giving in to you. Don’t think any more about it for three days; in the meantime I will watch him; give me three days, and promise me to be happy in the meantime.”

This time Winifred did not repeat the inappropriate expression, but only looked at her old friend with tears in her eyes. “I don’t think I have very much to be happy about,” she said.

“You have life before you, and youth and hope; and you have Edward; and your dear father, so far as I can see, in perfect health; and the others—in the hands of Providence Winnie.”

“Are we not all in the hands of Providence,” said the girl; “those who live and those who die, those who do well and those who do ill? and it does not seem to make any

difference."

"That is because we see such a little way, such a little way—never what to-morrow is going to bring forth," Miss Farrell said.

But this conversation did not do very much to reassure Winifred, and at the end of the three days the old lady said nothing. Her experienced eyes saw, after a close investigation, certain trifles which brought her to the young doctor's opinion, or at least made her acknowledge to herself that he might possibly be right. It is to be feared that Miss Farrell did not look upon this possibility with horror. She was calmer, not so much interested, and less full of that instinctive horror and awe of death which is most strong in the young. She had seen a great many people die; perhaps she was not for that more reconciled to the idea of it in her own person than others; but she had come to look upon it with composure where others were concerned. She thought it likely enough that Edward might be right; and she thought that, perhaps, this was not the conclusion which would be most regrettable. It would leave Winifred free. If he did not alter his will, it would restore the boys to their rights; and if he did alter his will, Winifred would restore them to their rights. On making a balance of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, no doubt it would be for the best that Mr. Chester should end his career.

After these three days, at the end of which Winifred asked no explanation from her friend, many other days followed, with nothing happening. The force of the impression was softened in her mind, and though the appearance of Mr. Chester's man of business on two or three several occasions gave her a renewed thrill of terror, yet her father said nothing on the subject of his will, and she was glad on her side to ignore it, feeling that nothing she could say or do would have any effect upon his resolution. On the last evening, when Mr. Babington, after a long afternoon with Mr. Chester in the library, stayed to dinner, the cheerfulness and satisfaction of the master of the house were visible to everybody. He had the best wine in his cellar out

for his old friend, and talked to him all the evening of “old days,” as he said, days when he himself had little expectation of ever being the Squire of Bedloe.

“But many things have changed since that time,” he added, “and the last is first and the first last, eh, Babington, in more senses than one.”

“Yes, in more senses than one,” the lawyer said gravely, sipping the old port which had been disinterred for him with an aspect not half so jovial as that of his patron, though it was wine such as seldom appears at any table in these degenerate days.

“In more senses than one,” Mr. Chester repeated. “Fill your glass again, old Bab; and, Miss Farrell, stay a moment, and let me give you a little wine, for I am going to propose a toast.”

“I am not in the habit of drinking toasts,” said Miss Farrell, who had risen from her chair; “but as I am sure it is one which a lady need not hesitate about, since you propose it”—

“No lady need hesitate,” said Mr. Chester, “for it is to one that is a true lady, as good a lady as if she had royal blood in her veins. You would not better her, I can tell you, if you were to search far and wide; and as you have had some share in making her what she is, Miss Farrell, it stands to reason you should have a share in her advancement. I have a great mind to call in all the servants and make them drink it too.”

“Don’t,” said the lawyer hurriedly; “a thing is well enough among friends that is not fit for strangers, or servants either. For my part, I wish everything that is good to Miss Winifred; but yet”—

“Hold your tongue, Babington; it is none of your business. Here’s the very good health of the heiress of Bedloe, and good luck to her, and a fine title and a handsome husband, and everything that heart can desire.”

The two ladies had risen, and still stood, Miss Farrell with the glass of wine which Mr. Chester had given her in her hand, Winifred standing very straight by the table,

and white as the dress she wore. Miss Farrell grew pale too, gazing from one to the other of the two gentlemen, who drank their wine, one with a flushed and triumphant countenance, the other in little thoughtful gulps. “I can’t refuse to drink the health of Winifred, however it is put,” she said tremulously. “But if this is what you mean, Mr. Chester”—

“Yes, my old girl,” cried Mr. Chester, “this is what I mean; and I don’t know what anybody can have to say against it—you, in particular, that have brought her up, and done your duty by her, I must say. She has always been a good friend to you, and always will be, I can answer for her, and you shall never want a home as long as she has one. But if you have anything to say against my arrangements, or what I mean to do for her”—

Miss Farrell put down the wine with a hand that trembled slightly. She towered into tremulous height, or so it seemed to the lookers-on. “I say nothing about the term which you have permitted yourself to apply to me, Mr. Chester,” she said. “I can make allowance for bad breeding; but if you think you can prevent me from forming an opinion, and expressing it”—

“Be quiet, Chester,” cried the lawyer, kicking him under the table; but in the height of his triumph he was not to be kept down.

“You may form your opinions as you please, and express them too; but, by George! if you express anything about my affairs, or take it upon you to criticise, it will have to be in some one else’s house.”

“That is quite enough,” said the old lady. “I am not in the habit of receiving affronts. This day is the last I shall spend in your house. I bid you good evening, Mr. Babington.” She waved her hand majestically as she went away. As for Winnie, who had endeavoured to stop him with an indignant cry of “Father!” she turned upon Mr. Chester a pair of eyes, large and full of woe, which blazed out of her pale face in passionate protestation as she hurried after her friend. The exit of the ladies was so

sudden after this swift and hot interchange of hostilities that it left the two men confounded. Mr. Chester gave vent to an exclamation or two, and turned to his supporter on the other side.

“What did I say?” he cried. “I haven’t said anything, have I, to make a tragedy about?”

“It would have been a great deal better to say nothing at all,” was all the comfort Babington gave him. The lawyer went on with the port, which was very good. He thought quarrels were always a nuisance, but that Chester did indeed—there could be no doubt of it—want some one to take him down a peg or two.

“If your daughter does not much like it herself, as seems to be the case, it’s a pity to set the old lady on to make her worse. And Miss Winifred wants a lady with her,” he said between the gulps.

He gave no support to the angry man, hot with excitement and triumph, to whom this sudden check had come in the midst of his outburst of angry satisfaction.

Mr. Chester’s countenance fell.

“You don’t mean,” he cried, “that she will be such a fool as to go away? Pshaw! she’s not such a fool as that. She knows on what side her bread’s buttered. She’s lived at Bedloe these dozen years.”

“Everybody knows Miss Farrell,” said the lawyer. “She’s as proud as Lucifer, and as fiery, if she is set ablaze.”

“Pooh!” said the other; “it is nothing but a breeze; we’ll be all right again to-morrow. She knows me, and I know her. She is not such a fool as to throw away a comfortable home, because I called her old girl. Are you determined, after all, that you won’t stay the night?”

“I must get home—I must indeed. To-morrow early I have half a dozen appointments.”

"Then, if you will go," said Mr. Chester,—"which I take unkind of you, for, of course, the appointments could stand, if you chose;—but if you must go, it's time for your train."

"Thank you for telling me," said Mr. Babington. He jumped up with a slight resentment, though he had been quite determined about going away that night; but then he had not known that there would be this quarrel, which he should have liked to see the end of, or that the port would be so good.

CHAPTER IX

THE sound of the brougham rolling along down the avenue, and of the closing of the great door upon the departing guest, came to Winifred, as she sat alone, with a dreary sound. Mr. Babington was no particular ally of hers, and yet it felt like the going away of a friend. Presently her father came into the room, talking over his shoulder to old Hopkins about the hot water and lemons which were to be placed in the library ready for him. "Ten o'clock will do," he said. It was only about nine, and Winifred felt, not with transport, that she was to have her father's society for the next hour. It was by this time too warm to have a fire in the evening, but yet they sat habitually, when the lamp was lighted, near the fireplace. Mr. Chester came up to this central spot, and drew a chair near to his daughter and sat down. He brought a smell of wine with him, and a sensation of heat and excitement. "Why are you sitting by yourself," he said, "like a sparrow on the housetop? It seems to me you are always alone."

"I shall have to be alone in future, papa. Miss Farrell"—Winifred could not say any more for the sob in her throat.

"Oh, this is too much!" said Mr. Chester. "Couldn't she or any one see that I was a little excited? She must know I don't mean any harm. That is all nonsense, Winnie. You shall say something pretty to her from me, and make an end of it. Why, what's

all this fuss about a hasty word? She is an old girl if you come to that—But I don't want any botheration now. I want everything to be straight and pleasant. We are going to have company, people staying in the house, and you can't do without her, that is clear."

"Oh, papa," said Winifred, "I wish you would not have any one staying in the house. I don't know what you meant to-night, but if it is anything about me, I—I don't feel able for company. It is so short a time since poor Tom"—

"You had better let poor Tom alone. I want to hear nothing more of him," said the father. "Mind what I say. I mean to make a lady of you, Winnie; but if you turn upon me like the rest, I am just as fit to do the same to you."

"I would rather you did than have what should be theirs," said Winifred. Her heart was beating wildly in her breast with apprehension and dismay, and she could not be prudent as she had been bidden to be, nor consent to be what was so odious to her; but even in the warmth of her protest Edward's words occurred to her, and she faltered and stopped, with an alarmed look at her father. He was flushed, and his eyes were fiery and red.

"You are going a little too fast," he said. "It is neither theirs nor yours, but mine; and I should like to know who has any right to take it from me. Now that we've begun on this subject, we'll have it out, Winnie. You've been having your own way more than was good for you. Perhaps, after all, Miss Farrell, who has let you do as you pleased, can go, and somebody else be got who knows better what is suitable to a young lady like you. I can have no more flirtations with doctors, or curates, or that sort. You are old enough to be married, and I want no more nonsense. That sort of thing, though it means nothing, is bad for a girl settling in life."

Winifred had turned from white to red, sitting gazing at him, yet shrinking from his eyes. "Papa," she said, "I don't know what you mean," in a voice so low and troubled that he curved his hand over his ear, half in pretence, half in sincerity, to

hear what she had to say.

“What I mean?—oh, that is very easy—you are not a child any longer, and you must throw aside childish things. I have asked a few people for the week after next. It’s too early for the country, but I know some that are soon tired of town; and there is a young fellow among them who—well, who is very well disposed towards you, and well worth your catching were you twenty times an heiress. So I hope you’ll mind what you’re about, and play your cards well, and make me father-in-law to an earl. That’s all that I require of you, my dear; and it’s more for your own advantage than mine, when all is said.”

He was very much flushed, she thought, and his eyes almost starting from his head. Terror seized her, as though some dreadful catastrophe might happen before her eyes. “Papa,” she said, with an effort, “this is all very new, and there is so much to think of. Please let it be for to-morrow. There has been so much to-night—my head is quite confused, and I don’t seem to understand what you say.”

“You shall understand what I say, and it is better to be clear about it once for all. Here is the young Earl coming, as I tell you. He would suit me very well, and I mean him to suit you, so let us have no nonsense. If Miss Farrell thinks fit to leave you just when you want her, she is an ungrateful old— But we’ll find another woman. I mean everything to be on a right footing when these people turn up.”

“Papa, of course I shall do all I can to—please your friends.”

“Well, that’s the first step,” he said. “And it’s very much for your own advantage. You would not be my daughter if you did not think of that.”

She made no reply. If this was all, she was pledging herself to nothing, she thought, with natural inconsistency. But Mr. Chester was not satisfied. He drew his chair close, so that the odour of his wine and the excitement in his mind seemed to make a haze in the air around.

“And look here, Winnie. It doesn’t suit me to send Edward Langton away. He’s

been a fool in respect to you, and you've been a fool, and so have I, for not putting a stop to it at once. But the fellow knows what's what better than most. And he knows my constitution. I am not going to part with him as a doctor because he's been a presuming prig, and thought himself good enough for my daughter. It's for you to let him see that that's all over. Come, a word is as good as a wink."

"Father," Winnie said: she looked at him piteously, clasping her hands with the unconscious gesture of anguish—"oh, don't take everything from me in a moment!" she cried.

"What am I taking from you? I am giving you a fortune, a title probably, a husband far above anything you could have looked for."

"I want no one, papa, but you. Let me take care of you. I will ask for nothing but only to stay at home quietly and make you comfortable."

Mr. Chester pushed back his chair noisily with a loud exclamation. "Do you take me for a fool?" he said. "Have I ever asked you to stay at home and make me comfortable? I can make myself comfortable, thank you. What I want is that you should do me credit. Your confounded humility and domesticity, and all that, may be very fine in a woman's novel. Taking care of her old father, the sweet girl! a ministering angel, and so forth. Do you think I go in for that sort of rubbish? I can make myself a deuced deal more comfortable than you could ever make me. Come, Winnie, no more of this folly. You can make me father-in-law to a British peer, and that is the sort of comfort I want."

His eyes were red with heat and excitement, the blood boiling in his veins. The girl's spirit was cowed as she looked at him, not by his violence, but by the signs of physical disturbance, which took all power from her.

"Oh, papa," she said, "don't say anything more to-night! I am very unhappy. I will do anything rather than make you angry, rather than—disturb you. Have a little pity upon me, papa, and let me off for to-night."

“To-night?” he said; “to-night ought to be the proudest day of your life. Who could ever have expected that you would be the heiress of Bedloe, a little chit of a girl? Most fathers would have married you off to the first comer that would take you and your little bit of fortune. But I have behaved very different. I have made you as good as an eldest son—not that I can’t take it all away again, as easily as I gave it, if you don’t do your best for me.”

He swayed forward a little as he spoke, in his excitement, and Winifred, whose terrified eyes were quite prepared to see him fall down at her feet, rose up hastily, with a little cry. She put out her hands unconsciously to support him.

“Oh, papa, I will do whatever you please!” she cried.

Mr. Chester pushed the outstretched hands away. “You think, perhaps, I want something to steady me,” he said. “That’s a delusion. I am as steady as you are, and more so, and know quite as well what I am saying. However, as long as you have come to your senses and obey me, that’s all I care for. Look here, Winnie!” he said, again sitting down suddenly and pushing her back into her chair; “I don’t want to be hard upon you. If old Farrell wants an apology I’ll make it—to a certain extent. I meant no offence. She’s very useful in her way. She’s a lady, I always said so; and she’s made you a lady, and I am grateful to her—more or less. You can say whatever’s pretty on my part; or I’ll even say a word myself, if you insist upon it. To have her go now would be deuced awkward. Tell her I meant no offence. I was a little elevated, if you like. You may take away my character, if that will please her,” he added, with a laugh. “Say what you like, I can bear it. Getting everything done as I wished had gone to my head.”

“Oh, papa, if you had but wished something else! I am not—good enough. I am not—strong enough.”

“Hold your tongue. I hope I’m the best judge of my own affairs,” her father said. Then he yawned largely in her face. “I think I’ll go and have my whisky and water.

It is getting near bedtime, and I've had an exciting day, what with old Bab, and old Farrell, and you. I've been on the go from morning to night. But you've all got to knock under at the last," he added, nodding his head, "and the sooner the better, you'll find, my dear, if you have any sense."

Winifred sat and listened to his heavy step as he went across the hall to the library and down the long corridor. It seemed to be irregular and heavier than its wont, and it was an effort of self-restraint not to follow him, to see that all was safe. When the door of his room closed behind him, which it did with a louder clang than usual, rousing all the echoes in the silent house, another terror seized her. Shut into that library, with no one near him, what might happen? He might fall and die without any one being the wiser; he might call with no one within hearing. She started to her feet, then sat down again trembling, not knowing what to do. She dared say nothing to him of the terror in her mind. She dared not set the servants to watch over him or take them into her confidence—even Hopkins, what could she say to him? But she could not go to her own room, which would be entirely out of the way of either sight or hearing. Sometimes Mr. Chester would sit up late, after even Hopkins had gone to bed. The terror in her mind was so great that Winifred watched half the night, leaving the door of the drawing-room ajar, and sometimes starting out into the darkness of the hall, at one end of which a feeble light was kept burning. The hours went by very slowly while she thus watched and waited, trembling at all the creakings and rustlings of the night. She forgot the pledge she had given, the new life that was opening upon her in the midst of these terrors. Visions flitted before her mind, things which she had read in books of dead men sitting motionless, with the morning light coming in upon their pallid faces, or lying where they had fallen till some unthinking servant stumbled in the morning over the ghastly figure. It was long past midnight when the library door opened, and, shrinking back into the darkness, she saw her father come out with his candle. He had probably fallen asleep in his chair, and the light glowing upon his face showed it pallid and wan after the

flush and heat of the evening. He came slowly, she thought unsteadily, along the passages, and climbed the stairs towards his room with an effort. It seemed to her excited imagination almost a miracle when the door of his bedroom closed upon him, and the pale blueness of dawn stealing through the high staircase window proved to her that this night of watching was almost past. But what might the morning bring forth?

The morning brought nothing except the ordinary routine of household life at Bedloe. Mr. Chester got up at his usual hour, in his usual health. He sent for the doctor, however, in the course of the day, partly because he wanted him, partly to see how Winnie would behave.

“I have the stomach of an ostrich,” he said, “but still that port was a little too much. To drink port with impunity, one should drink it every day.”

“It is a great deal better never to drink it at all,” said the doctor; but Mr. Chester patted him on the back, and assured him that good port was a very good thing, and much better worth drinking than thin claret.

“I believe it is that sour French stuff that takes all the spirit out of you young fellows,” he said.

Winifred was compelled to be present during this interview. She heard her father give an account to Edward of the expected guests.

“You shall come up and dine one evening,” he said. “You must make acquaintance with the Earl, who may be of use to you. I shouldn’t wonder if we had him often about here.”

To Winifred, looking on, saying nothing, but vividly alive to her father’s offensive tone of patronage, and to the significance of this intimation, there was torture in every word. But Edward looked at her with an unclouded countenance, and laughingly assured her father that he had known the Earl all his life.

“He is a very good fellow; but he is not very bright,” he said.

“He may not be very bright, but he is a peer of the realm, and that is the sort of society that is going to be cultivated at Bedloe. I have had enough of the little people,” Mr. Chester replied.

Edward Langton laughed, with the slightest, but only the very slightest, tinge of colouring in his face. “The little people must take the hint, and disappear,” he said.

“But, of course, present company is always excepted. That has nothing to do with you. You’re professional; you’re indispensable.”

Young Langton gave Winifred a look. It was swift as lightning, but it told her more than a volume could have done. The indignation and forbearance and pity that were in it made a whole drama in themselves. “I hope I shall prove myself worthy of the exception in my favour,” was all he said.

“I have no doubt you will; you were always one that knew your own place,” said Mr. Chester.

“Father!” cried Winnie, crimson with shame and indignation.

“Hold your tongue!” he cried. “The doctor knows what I mean, and I know what he means; we want no interference from you.”

It was the first trial of the new state of affairs. She had to shake hands with him in her father’s presence, with nothing but a look to express all the trouble in her mind. But Edward on his part was entirely calm, with a shade of additional colour, but no more. He played his part more thoroughly than she did—upon which, with the usual self-torture of women, a cold thought arose in her that perhaps it was not entirely an assumed part. From every side she had much to bear.

CHAPTER X

MISS FARRELL did not add to her pupil’s trouble. When she heard the state of affairs, she gave up with noble magnanimity her intention of going away. “You must

not ask me to meet any one—till the visitors come," she said. "I shall remain to give you what help I can; but you know my rule. When I am treated with rudeness, I make no complaint, I take no offence, but I go away."

"You would not have the heart to desert me," Winifred said.

"No, that is just how it is—I have not the heart; but I will take my meals in my room, my dear. Your dear father"—habit was too strong in Miss Farrell's mind even for resentment—"no doubt his meaning was quite innocent; but we can't meet again—at all events for the present," she added, with much dignity.

"So long as you do not forsake me," cried Winnie, and Miss Farrell, touched, declared "I will never forsake you!" with fervour.

This added an element which was tragi-comic to Winifred's distress. With all the grave and terrible things that surrounded her, the misery of her new position, the sense of falsehood in her tacit acceptance of all her father was doing, her fears for him, the chill of alarm of another kind with which Edward's composure filled her—there was something ludicrous in having to provide for Miss Farrell's retirement into her own rooms, and the two different spheres thus established in the house. Perhaps it gave her a little relief in the more serious miseries that were always so near. It threw a slight aspect of the fictitious into the sombre air of the house, which seemed charged with trouble.

But in the meantime the preparations went on for the expected guests. Mr. Chester meant that they should be received magnificently. Some of the rooms were entirely refurnished with a luxury and wealth of upholstering enough to fill even a millionaire with envy. Nothing so fine existed in the county as the two rooms which were being ornamented for the use of the very active-minded and energetic woman who was the young Earl's mother. To describe the sensation with which Winifred saw all this is well-nigh impossible. She had been made to consent in consequence of the arguments used by the very man whose interests were assailed. But for

Edward she would have refused to be any party to the proposed arrangement—and now she asked herself how far it was to go? Was she to be forced to consent if a further proposal were made to her? Was she to be driven to the very church door, in order to avert an evil which began, to her, every day to appear more visionary? Could it be that Edward—Edward himself, who had always been the soul of honour in her eyes—had lent himself to the conspiracy against her? Her heart cried out so against the coil of falsehood in which her feet seemed to be caught that life truly became a misery to her—false to her brothers, false to her father, false to herself. She could not say false to Edward, since it was Edward himself who exacted this extraordinary proof of devotion. Every principle in her being rose up against it as it went on from day to day. She asked herself whether it was doing a less wrong to her father thus to deceive him by pretended submission than to tell him the truth even at the risk of an illness. And he had not to her the least air of being ill. He was a strong man, stronger than almost any other man of his age, more ruddy, more active. Her head swam with the multitude of her thoughts. Winifred's mind was too simple and straightforward to accept that idea of faith unfaithful. It became like a yoke of iron upon her shoulders. Mr. Chester grew stronger and more active, and louder and gayer every day; while she faded and shrank visibly, unable to make any head against that sea of troubles that carried her soul away.

The eve of the appointed visit had arrived, and all the preparations were complete. Mr. Chester insisted that his daughter should go with him over all the redecorated rooms to see the effect. "You think perhaps that this is all for my lady's gratification," he said; "that's a mistake. It's for the gratification of Winifred, the new Countess, when she comes home."

"If you mean me, papa"—

"Oh no, of course not! how could I mean you?" cried her father, rubbing his hands. "I mean Miss Chester, who is going to marry the Earl. Perhaps you don't know that

young lady? She will bring her husband a pretty estate and a pretty bit of money in her apron, and please her father down to the ground."

"But, papa— Oh, I cannot, I cannot deceive you! It is deceiving you even to seem to—even to pretend to"—

"You had better hold your tongue, Winnie," he said sternly. "You had better not go any farther or you may be sorry for it. You should know very well by this time what I'm capable of when I'm crossed. But I don't mean to be crossed this time, I can tell you. It would be hard if a man couldn't do what he likes with his own daughter. Go along with you, and don't speak back to me."

"But, papa"—

"Go, I tell you, before you put me in a passion," her father cried. And Winifred was terrified by the glare in his eyes, and the quick recurring fear that she might harm him took all power from her. She hurried away, leaving him to admire his upholstery by himself. And that afternoon and evening her distress reached its climax. She would not consult Miss Farrell. She would not see Edward. Things had gone too far indeed to be talked of, or submitted to any other decision than that of her own heart. Once or twice, nay a hundred times, the desire of the coward, to run away, occurred to her. But how could she, to think of nothing more, leave her father in the lurch, and expose him to all the comments of the recent unfriendly acquaintances whom he thought friends? Winifred was one of those to whom the abandonment of a post was impossible; but such was the confusion of her misery, that flight, now or at another moment,—flight alone, hopeless, without leaving any trace behind her,—seemed to be the only way of escape. At dinner her father seemed to have forgotten her attempt at rebellion. He talked incessantly of the guests, rolling their titles with an enjoyment which was half ludicrous, half pitiful. "You must try and persuade old Farrell to show," he said. "She's very well thought of by all these grandees, and she can talk to them of people they know—besides, there's her music, Winnie, that's

first rate. I'll come and apologise if she pleases, but we must take care my lady's not dull of an evening, and she must show." He was in such good spirits that after dinner, with much clearing of his throat, and something like a blush, he made her sit down to the piano and accompany him in one of the old songs for which he had been famous before he began to fear the memory of the singing man at Chester Cathedral. He had the remains of a beautiful voice, and still sang well in the old-fashioned style which he had learned when a boy. To hear him carolling forth a love-song of that period when Moore was monarch, was to Winnie a wonder and portent which took away her very breath. She trembled so in her part of the performance that the piano became inaudible in competition with the fine roll of Mr. Chester's grace-notes. "Why, I thought you could play at least," he said roughly. "I'll have old Farrell—she knows what she's about—to-morrow night."

"Well, my dear," Miss Farrell said, when this conversation was reported to her, "you know what my feelings are; but I am not dull to the credit of the family. It being fully understood what my motive is, I shall certainly appear to-morrow evening, and do my very best to make things go off well. I will play your dear father's accompaniment with the greatest pleasure. He has the remains of a very fine voice, and he has science, too, though it is old-fashioned. So has your brother George a beautiful voice; I always wished him to cultivate it. We must do everything, Winnie, both you and I, to make things go off well. You are not in good spirits, it is true,—neither am I,—but we must forget all that for the credit of the house. And how do you think he is himself?" she added after a pause.

"He looks very well," said Winnie. "I see no signs of illness. Edward"—she paused a little with a faint smile,—"I think I should say Dr. Langton, for I never see him"—

"Oh, my dear, don't judge him unjustly!—he thinks that is necessary."

"You all think it is necessary," cried Winnie, with a little outburst of feeling, "to make me as unhappy as possible. I mean to say that I think—I hope he is mistaken.

Even doctors," she said, with a smile, "have been mistaken before now."

"That is very true," said Miss Farrell gravely, and then she rose and kissed the pale face opposite to her. "Anyhow, my dear, you and I will do our best for him as long as there are strangers in the house."

Winifred was worn out by the strain of these troubled days, and by the self-controversy that had been going on within her. She fell asleep early in profound exhaustion, the dead sleep of forces overstrained and heart stupefied with trouble. She woke suddenly in the early dawn of the morning, while as yet everything was indistinct. What had woke her, or if it was any external incident at all that had done so, she could not tell at first; there seemed a tingle and vibration in the pale air. Was it the early twittering which had begun faintly among the thick foliage outside? She listened, rising up in her bed, with an intensity for which there seemed no reason, for no definite alarm occurred to her mind. Everything was still, not a sound audible but those first faint chirpings, interrogative, tentative, from the trees. She was about to compose herself to rest again, when suddenly there sounded tingling through the silence the sound of a bell, a little angry, impatient jingle repeated, tearing the stillness. Winifred was too much startled and confused to realise what it was, but she got up hastily, and, throwing her dressing-gown round her, opened her door to hear better. The thought that came first to her mind was, that the summons was at the door, and that it meant one of the boys coming home. Her heart leaped to her throat with excitement. The boys had come home at all sorts of hours in the time which was past, but now, what could this summons be? It came again while she stood trembling, wondering; and then, with a cry, Winifred flew along the corridor. Mr. Chester's room was in the wing, at some distance from the other sleeping-rooms of the house. Everything was silent, an atmosphere of profound sleep, calm tranquillity in the dim air, through which the night-lamp in the hall below burned with a weird glimmer. The blueness of the dawn in its faint pervasion seemed more ghostly than the night.

As Winifred hurried along, another door opened with a hasty sound, and old Hopkins stumbled forth. “What is it, Miss Winifred?”

She had no breath to reply. She put him before her, trembling as they reached Mr. Chester’s door. She was terrified by the thoughts of what she might see. But there was nothing that was terrible to see. A voice came out of the curtains, querulous, with an outburst of abuse at old Hopkins, who never could be made to hear.

“Send for Langton,” Mr. Chester said.

“It’s the middle of the night, please sir,” old Hopkins replied.

“Send for Langton,” repeated the voice. It had a curious stammer in it; a sibilant sound. “S—s—send for Langton,” with another torrent of exclamations.

The old butler hurried out of the room, muttering to himself, “It will be half an hour before I can wake one of those grooms, and he’ll take the skin off me before that. Miss Winifred, oh, it’s only the doctor he wants; it’s nothing out of the common!”

“I will go,” she said.

“You? But it’s the middle of the night, and not a soul awake.”

“Is he very ill? Tell me the truth. I will go quicker than any one else.”

“Miss Winifred, you’ve no call to be frightened. He’s been the same fifty times. He don’t want the doctor no more than I do. Oh, goodness, there he is at it again!”

Then the bell sent a wild, irritated peal into the air, which evidently ended abruptly in the breaking of the bell-rope.

“I will go!” Winifred said, and the old man, relieved, hurried back to his master. She put on quickly a long ulster, which covered her from head to foot, and hurried out into the strange coolness and freshness of the unawakened world. There was no need, she said to herself, but it was a relief and almost pleasure to do something. The great stillness, the feeling of the dawn, the faint blue-tinted atmosphere, a something which came before the light, all breathed peace about her. It was like a disembodied

world, another state of existence in which nothing real or tangible was. She flew along, the only creature moving save those too early, questioning birds, and felt in herself a curious elevation above mortal boundaries, as if she too was disembodied and could move like a spirit. The strange abstractedness of the atmosphere, the keen yet soft coolness, the unimaginable solitude possessed her like a vision. She felt no sensation of anxiety or fear, but seemed carried along upon her errand like a creature of the air, unfamiliar with the emotions of the world. As it happened, Langton's groom was already preparing his master's horse for some early visit. He stared at Winifred as if she had dropped from the skies, but made no remark, except that his master would be ready instantly; and she turned back through the sleeping village, still wrapped in the same abstraction, walking along as in a dream. One labourer, setting out to work at distant fields, passed, and stared dumb and awe-stricken at her, as if she had been a ghost. His was the only figure save her own that was visible. When she was half-way home, Edward galloped past, waving his hand to her as he hastened on. For her part, Winifred felt that there was no longer any need to hurry. She wandered on under the trees, where now all the birds were awake, chatting to each other—forming their little plans for the endless August day, the age of sunshine and sweet air before them, now that night once more was over—before they began to sing. She was unspeakably eased, consoled, rested by that universal tranquillity. The dew fell upon her very heart. She lingered to look at a hundred things which she had seen every day all her life, which she had never noticed before. It was not sunrise as yet; the world was still a land of dreams, waiting the revelation of the reality to come. Thus it was some time before she reached the house, and yet she was surprised when she reached it, having got so far away from that centre of human life with all its throbbings, into the great quiet of the morning world.

Something, an indefinable disturbance, a change of a kind which made itself felt, was in the place. The door stood wide open, a scared groom was walking Langton's horse up and down, the windows were still closed, except one, at which two or three

indistinct figures seemed looking out. There arose a flutter, she could not tell why, in Winifred's breast. She almost smiled at herself for the involuntary sensation which marked her return from a world of visions to that of real life. Then Edward Langton appeared coming out, as if to meet her in the open door.

CHAPTER XI

EDWARD came out to meet her, and took her hand and drew it through his arm. He led her in tenderly, holding that hand in his, without a vestige of the reserve and restraint in which they had been living of late. Winifred was greatly surprised. She drew away her hand, half-angry, half-astonished. "Why is this?" she said. "Is it because it is so early that you forget"—

"It is because there is no longer any need of precaution," he said very gravely, pressing her arm close to his side.

She gazed at him with an incapacity to understand, which would have been incredible did it not happen so often at the great crises of life. "I don't know what you mean; nothing is changed," she said. "But you have not come to talk of you and me. Edward, how is my father?" She asked the question with scarcely a fear. Then suddenly looked in his face, flung his support from her, and flew upstairs without a word.

The door of her father's room was closed; she rushed at it breathless. It was half-opened after a little interval by old Hopkins, who barred the entrance.

"You can't come in yet, Miss Winifred, not yet," he said, shaking his head. Hopkins was full of the solemn importance and excitement of one who has suddenly become an actor in a great event. He closed the door upon her as he spoke, and there she stood, gazing at it blankly, her brain swimming, her heart beating. That door had closed not only upon her father dead, but upon a completed chapter of her own life.

Edward had hurried upstairs after her, and was now close by to console her. But she

would not give him her hand, which he sought. She walked before him to the door of her own sitting-room, which stood wide open, with an early glow of the newly-risen sun showing from the open windows. Then she sat down and motioned him to a chair, but not beside her. A more woeful countenance never lamented the most beloved of fathers. Her dark outer garment was wet with dew, and clung closely about her; her hair had a few drops of the same dew glimmering upon it; her face was entirely destitute of colour.

“Tell me how it was,” she said.

“It was as I told you it would be. We must be thankful that no act of ours, no contention of ours, quickened the catastrophe. He was in perfectly good spirits last night, I hear. By the time I arrived, all was over. Winifred”—

“Oh, do not touch me!” she said. “We deceived him, we lied to him! if not in words, yet in deeds. And now you are glad that he is dead.”

“Not glad,” said the young man.

“Not glad! and I?” she cried, with an exclamation of despair.

“Winnie, do not make yourself more miserable than you need be; you are not glad. And you will reproach yourself and be wretched for many a day, without reason. I declare before Heaven without reason, Winnie! All that you have done has been for his sake. And there is nothing for which you can justly blame yourself. All that has been done has been sacrifice on your part.” He came to her side and put his arm round her to console her. But his touch was more than she could bear. She put out her hand and put his away. He looked at her for a moment without saying anything, and then asked, with a little bitterness, “Do you mean to cast me off then, Winnie, because I denied myself for his sake?”

“Oh, Edward!” she said, giving him her hand; “don’t say a word of you and me. I cannot tell you what I mean, or what I feel, not now. To be as strangers while he lived, and the moment—the very moment he is gone”—

She rose up and began to walk about the room in a feverish misery which was more like personal despair than the grief of a child for a father; angry, miserable even because of the very sense of deliverance which mingled with the anguish. The painful interview was broken by the rush into the room of Miss Farrell, her white locks all disordered about her pretty old head, stumbling over her long dressing-gown, and throwing herself with tears and caresses upon Winifred's shoulder.

"Oh, my darling, your dear father! Oh, my child, come to me and let me comfort you!" she said.

Edward Langton withdrew without a word. There were a thousand ways in which he could serve Winifred without insisting upon the office of consoler, which indeed he gave up with a pang, yet heroically. A man, when he makes a sacrifice, perhaps does it more entirely, more silently than a woman. He made no stand for his rights, but gave up without a word, and went forth to the external matters which there was no one but he to manage. Mr. Chester had died as his young physician had known he would do. He had forgotten the rules of life which had been prescribed to him in his triumph and satisfaction on the previous night. He had said to himself, "Soul, take thine ease," and the catastrophe had been as prompt as that of the parable. The alarmed and startled household was all up and about by this time, the maids huddled in a corner discussing the dreadful event, and comparing notes, now all was over, as to their respective apprehensions and judgment of master's looks. The men wandered about, sometimes paying a fitful attention to their ordinary work, but most frequently going up and downstairs to see if Mr. Hopkins wanted anything, or if something new to report could be gleaned anywhere. Dr. Langton took command of the household with instant authority, awakening at once a new interest in the bosoms of the little eager crowd. He was the new master, they all felt, some with a desire to oppose, and some to conciliate. He sent off telegrams with a sort of savage pleasure to the Dowager Countess and the other expected guests, and he summoned Mr.

Babington, who was the official authority, under whose directions all immediate steps had to be taken. But Langton had no idea of abnegation in respect to his own rights, any more than he had any sense of guilt in respect to the dead man, out of consideration for whom he had temporarily ignored them. He had made a great sacrifice to preserve Mr. Chester's health and life, but now that this life was over, without any blame to any one, he did not deny that the relief was great. Alas! even to Winifred, whose sensations of self-reproach were so poignant, the smart was intensified while it was relieved, by a sense of deliverance too.

When she came a little to herself, she insisted that her brothers should be telegraphed for instantly. This was before Mr. Babington's arrival, and it is possible that Edward would have objected had he been able to do so. He was not entirely above consideration of his own interests, and he had believed that Mr. Chester from his point of view had not behaved unwisely, nor even perhaps unkindly, in sending his sons away. That Winifred should relinquish all the advantages which her father's will had secured cost him perhaps a pang. It would not have been unpleasant to Edward Langton to find himself master of Bedloe. He knew he would have filled the post better than either of the two thoughtless and unintelligent young men whom their father himself had sent off, and who probably would have sold it before the year was out. For his own part, he should have liked to compromise, to give to each of them a sufficient compensation and keep the estate, and replace in Bedloe the old name that had been associated with it so long. That he should have had this dazzling possibility before him, and yet have obeyed her wishes and sent off these telegrams, said much for Edward's self-denial. He knew that Mr. Babington when he came would probably have objected strongly to such a proceeding, and with reason. The doctor saw all the danger of it as he rode into the little town to carry out Winifred's instructions. The two brothers would hurry home, each with the conviction that he was the heir, and rage and disappointment would follow. Nevertheless, it seemed to him that the very objections that rose in his own mind pledged him all the more to

carry out Winifred's wishes. He was not disinterested as she was. He did not feel any tie of affection to her brothers. He thought them much more supportable at the other side of the world than he had ever found them near. And there were few things he would not have done, in honour, to secure Bedloe. All these arguments, however, made it more necessary that he should do without hesitation or delay what she wished. This was his part in the meantime, whether he entirely approved or not. Afterwards, when they were man and wife, he might have a more authoritative word to say. He telegraphed not only to George and Tom, but through the banker, that money should be provided for their return; and having done so, went back again with a mind full of anxiety, the sense of deliverance of which his heart had been full clouding over with this sudden return of the complications and embarrassments of life.

Mr. Babington did not arrive till next day. And he looked very grave when he heard what had been done.

"Of what use is it?" he said; "the poor young fellows will find themselves out of it altogether. They will come thinking that the inheritance is theirs, and there is not a penny for them. Why did not you wait till I came?"

"I should have preferred to do so," said Langton; "but at such a moment Miss Chester's wish was above all."

"Miss Chester's wish?" said the lawyer, with a doubtful glance. "Perhaps you think Miss Chester can do what she pleases? Poor thing, it is very natural she should wish to do something for her brothers. But what if she were making a mistake?"

"If you mean that after all the money is not to be hers"—said Langton, with a slight change of colour.

"Before we go farther I ought to know—perhaps her father's death has brought about some change—between her and you?"

"No change at all. We were pledged to each other two years ago without any

opposition from him. I cannot say that he ever gave his formal consent."

"But it was all broken off—I heard as much from him—by mutual consent."

"It was never broken off. I saw what was coming, and I remained perfectly quiet on the subject, and advised Miss Chester to do the same."

"Ah! and he was taken in!" the lawyer said.

This brought the colour to Langton's face.

"I am not aware that there was any taking in in the case. I knew that agitation was dangerous for him. It was better for us to wait, at our age, than to have the self-reproach afterwards." This was all true, yet it was embarrassing to say.

"I see," said Mr. Babington; "a waiting game doesn't always recommend itself to the lookers-on, Dr. Langton. It might have lasted for years."

"I did not think," said Langton hastily, "that it could have lasted for weeks. He has lived longer than I expected."

"And you were there at one side of him, and his daughter at the other, waiting. I think I'd rather not have my daughter engaged to a doctor, meaning no disrespect to you."

"It sounds like something more than disrespect," said Langton, with offence. "If you think I did not do my duty by my patient"—

"Oh no, I don't think that; but I think you will be disappointed, Dr. Langton. I don't quite see why you have sent for the boys. If the one was for your interest, the other was dead against it. It is a disagreeable business altogether. If they were to set up a plea against you of undue influence"—

"I think," said Langton, "that this is not a subject to be discussed between us. You know very well that my influence with Mr. Chester was"—

"About the same as every other man's, and that was nothing at all," said the lawyer, with a laugh. It is unseemly to laugh in a house all draped and shrouded in

mourning, and the sound seemed to produce a little stir of horror in the silent place, all the more that Winifred came in at the moment, as white as a spectre, in her black dress. Her look of astonished reproach made the lawyer in his turn change countenance.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Winifred, I beg you a thousand pardons. It was not any jest, I assure you, it was in very sober earnest. My dear young lady, I need not say how shocked I was and distressed”—

The sudden change of aspect, the gloom which came over Mr. Babington’s cheerful countenance, would have been more comical than melancholy to an unconcerned spectator; but Winifred accepted it without criticism. She said, “Did you know how ill he was?” with tears in her eyes.

“I—well, I cannot say that I thought he was strong; but a stroke like this is always unexpected. In the midst of life”—said Mr. Babington solemnly. But here he caught Langton’s eye and was silenced. “I hear you have sent for your brothers.”

“Oh, at once! What could I do else? I am sure now that he would have wished me to do it.”

Mr. Babington shook his head. “I don’t think he would have wished it, Miss Winifred. I don’t think they would care to come if they knew the property is all left away from them.”

“He said it was left to me. But what could that be for? only to be given back to them,” said Winifred, with a faint smile. “My father knew very well what I should do. He will know now, and I know that he will approve,” she said, with that exaltation which the wearied body and excited soul attain to by times, a kind of ecstasy. “Even,” she cried, “if he did not see what was best in this life, he will see it now.”

Mr. Babington looked on with a blank countenance. He did not realise easily this instant conversion of the man he knew so well to higher views. He could not indeed

conceive of Mr. Chester at all except in the most ordinary human conditions; but he knew that it was right to speak and think in an exalted manner of those whom death had removed.

“We will hope so,” he said; “but in the meantime, my dear young lady, you will find he has made it very difficult for you, as he had not then attained to these enlightened views. Couldn’t you send another telegram? They’re expensive, but in the circumstances”—

“We have made up our minds,” said Winifred, with a certain solemnity; “do you know what we had to do, Mr. Babington? We had to deceive him, to pretend that I would do as he wished. Oh, Edward, I cannot bear to think of it. I never said it in so many words. I did not exactly tell a lie, but I let him suppose—I wonder—do you think he hears what I say? surely he knows;” and here, worn out as she was, the tears which had been so near her eyes burst forth.

Langton brought her a chair, and made her sit down and soothed her; but his face was blank like that of the lawyer, who was altogether taken aback by this sudden spiritualising of his old friend.

“I daresay it will all come right,” Mr. Babington said.

CHAPTER XII

MR. BABINGTON remained in the house, or at least returned to it constantly, passing most of his time there till the funeral was over; after which he read the will to the little company, consisting only of Winifred, Edward, and Miss Farrell, who remained in the house. It was a will which excited much agitation and distress, and awoke very different sentiments in the minds of the two who were chiefly concerned. Winifred received its stipulations like so many blows, while in the mind of her lover they raised a sort of involuntary elation, an ambition and eagerness of which he had not been hitherto sensible. The condition under which Winifred

inherited her father's fortune was, that she was not to divide or share it with her brothers; that Mr. Chester had meant to add many other bonds and directions which would have left her without any freedom of individual action at all, mattered little; but this one stipulation had been appended at once to the will, and was not to be avoided or ignored. In case she attempted to divide or share her inheritance, or alienate any part of it, she was to forfeit the whole. No latitude was allowed to her, no power of compromise. This information crushed Winifred's courage and spirits altogether. It made the gloom of the moment tenfold darker, and subdued in her the rising tide of life. That tide had begun to rise involuntarily even in the first week, while the windows were still shrouded and the house full of crape and darkness. She had shed those few natural tears, which are all that in many cases the best parents have to look for, and, though moved by times with a compunction equally natural, was yet prepared to dry them and go on to the sunshine that awaited her, and the setting of all things right which had seemed to her the chief object in life. But when she saw this great barrier standing up before her, and knew that her brothers were both on their way, hoping great things, to be met on their arrival only by this impossibility, her heart failed her altogether. She had no courage to meet the situation. She felt ill, worn out by the agitations of the previous period and the blank despair of this, and for a time turned away from the light, and would not be comforted.

Upon Edward Langton a very different effect was produced; while Winifred's heart sank in her bosom, his rose with a boundless exhilaration and hope. What he saw before him was something so entirely unhoped for, so unthought of, that it was no wonder if it turned his head, as the vulgar say. Mr. Chester, who had acquired the property of his ancestors in their moment of need, unrighteously as he believed, trading upon their necessities, seemed to him now, with all the force of a dead hand, to thrust compensation upon him. It was not to Winifred but to him that the fortune seemed to be given. That this was the reverse of the testator's intention, that he had

meant something totally different, did not affect Langton's mind. It gave him even an additional grim satisfaction, as the jewels of gold and of silver borrowed from his Egyptian master might have satisfied the mind of a fierce Hebrew, defrauded for a lifetime of the recompense of his toil. The millionaire's plunder, his gain which had been extracted from the sweat of other men, was to return into the hands of one of the families at least of which he had taken advantage. For once the revenges of time were fully just and satisfactory. He went about his parish work and visited his poor patients with this elation in his mind, instinctively making notes as to things which he would have done and improvements made. Mr. Chester, who had the practical instincts of a man whose first thought has always been to make money, had, indeed, done a great deal for the estate; but he had spent nothing, neither thought nor money, upon the condition of the poor, for whom he cared much less than for their cattle. Langton's interests were strong in the other way. He thought of sanitary miracles to be performed, of disease to be extirpated, of wholesome houses and wholesome faces in the little clusters of human habitation that were dotted here and there round the enclosure of the park. Different minds take their pleasures in different ways. He was not dull to the delights of a well-preserved cover; but with a more lively impulse he anticipated a grand battue of smells and miasmas, draining of stagnant ponds, and destruction to the agues and fevers which haunted the surrounding country. This idea blended with the intense subdued pleasure of anticipation with which he thought of the estate returning to the old name, and himself to the house of his fathers: there was nothing ignoble in the elation that filled his mind. Perhaps, according to the sentiment of romance, it would have been a more lofty position had he endured tortures from the idea of owing this elevation to his marriage; or even had he refused, at the cost of her happiness and his own, to accept so much from his wife; but Langton was of a robust kind, and not easily affected by those prejudices, which after all are not very respectful to women. He would have married Winifred with nothing. Why should he withdraw from her when she had much? So far as this

went, he accepted the good fortune which she seemed about to bring him without a question, with a satisfaction which filled his whole being. Bedloe had not been the better of the Chesters hitherto, but it should be the better for him.

And if there came over him a little chill occasionally when he thought of the two helpless prodigals whom he despised, coming over the sea, each from his different quarter, full of hopes which were never to be realised, Langton found it possible to push them aside out of his mind, as it is always possible to put aside an unpleasant subject. Sometimes there would come over him a chill less momentary when the thought that Winifred might hold by her decision on this subject crossed his mind. But she was very gentle, very easily influenced, not the sort of woman to assert herself. She had yielded to him in respect to her father, even when the course of conduct he recommended had been odious to her. That she should have felt so strongly on the subject had seemed somewhat ridiculous to him at the time, but, notwithstanding, she had yielded to his better judgment and had followed the directions he had given her. And there did not seem any reason to believe that she would not do the same again. She was of a very tender nature, poor Winnie! She could not bear to hurt any one. It was not to be expected, probably it was not even to be desired, that the real advantages of this arrangement should strike her as they did himself. She had a natural clinging to her brothers. She declined to see them in their true light. It was terrible to her to profit by their ruin. But Langton, though acknowledging all this, could not conceive the possibility that Winnie would actually resist his guidance, and follow her own conclusions. She could not do it. She would do as he indicated, though it might cost her some tears, and perhaps a struggle with herself, tears which Langton was fully in the mind to repay by such love and care when she was his wife as would banish henceforward all other tears from her eyes. Like so many other clever persons, he shut his own in the meantime. He was aware that the position in which she was placed, the thought of the future, lay at the bottom of her illness, and even that until the constant irritation thus caused

was withdrawn or neutralised, her mind would not recover its tone. At least he would have been fully aware of this had his patient been any other than Winifred. She was suffering, no doubt, he allowed, but by and by she would get over it, the disturbing influence would work itself out, and all would be well.

And in the meantime there were moments of sweetness for both in the interval that followed. As Winifred recovered slowly, the subduing influence of bodily weakness hushed her cares. For the moment she could do nothing, and, anxious as she was, it was so soothing to have the company, and sympathy, and care of her lover, that she too pushed aside all disturbing influences, and almost succeeded while he was with her in forgetting. Instinctively she was aware that on this point his mind and hers would not be in accord—on every other point they were one, and she listened to the suggestions he made as to improvements and alterations with that sensation of pleasure ineffable which arises in a woman's mind when the man whom she loves shows himself at his best. He had too much discretion and good feeling to do more than suggest these beneficial changes, and above all he never betrayed the elation in his own views and intention in his own mind to carry them out himself. But from her sofa, or from the terrace, where presently she was able to walk with the support of his arm, Winifred listened to his description of all that could be done, and looked at the little sketches he would make of improved houses, and new ways of effectual succour to the poor, with a pleasure which was more near what we may suppose to be angelic satisfaction than any other on earth. When he went away, a cloud would come over the landscape. She would say to herself that George would be little likely to carry out these plans, and again with a keener pang would be conscious that Edward was as yet unconvinced of her determination on the subject. But when he came back to her, all that could possibly come between them was by common instinctive accord put away, and there was a happiness in those days of waiting almost like the pathetic happiness which softens the ebbing out of life. Miss Farrell, who was more than ever like a mother to the poor girl who had so much need of her,

looked forward, as a mother so often does, with almost as much happiness as the chief actors in that lovers' meeting to Edward's coming. Every evening, when his work was over, the two ladies would listen for his quick step, or the sound of his horse's hoofs over the fallen leaves in the avenue. He came in, bringing the fresh air with him, and the movement and stir of life, with such news as was to be had in that rural quiet, with stories of his humble patients, and all the humours of the countryside. It was something to expect all day long and make the slow hours go by as on noiseless wings. There is perhaps nothing which makes life so sweet. This is half the charm of marriage to women; and before marriage there is a delicacy, a possibility of interruption, a voluntary and spontaneous character in the intercourse which makes it even more delightful. In the moonlight evenings, when the yellow harvest moon was resplendent over all the country, and Winifred was well enough for the exertion, the two would stray out together, leaving the gentle old spectator of their happiness almost more happy than they, in the tranquillity of her age, to prepare the tea for them, or with Hopkins's assistance (given with a little contemptuous toleration of her interference) the "cup" which Langton had the bad taste to prefer to tea.

This lasted for several weeks, even months, and it was not till October, when the woods were all russet and yellow, and a little chill had come into the air, that the tranquillity was disturbed by a telegram which announced the arrival of Tom. It was dated from Plymouth, and even in the concise style demanded by the telegraph there was a ring of satisfaction and triumph to Winifred's sensitive ear. She trembled as she read—"Shall lose no time expect me by earliest train to-morrow." This intimation came tingling like a shot into the calm atmosphere, sending vibrations everywhere. In the first moment it fell like a death-blow on Winifred, severing her life in two, cutting her off from all the past, even, it was possible, from Edward and his love. When he came in the evening she said nothing until they were alone upon the terrace in the moonlight, taking the little stroll which had become so delightful to

her. It was the last time, perhaps, that, free from all interruption, they would spend the tranquil evening so. She walked about for some time leaning upon him, letting him talk to her, answering little or nothing. Then suddenly, in the midst of something he was saying, without sequence or reason, she said suddenly, “Edward, I have had a telegram from Tom.”

He started and stopped short with a quick exclamation—“From Tom!”

“He is coming to-morrow,” Winifred said; and then there fell a silence over them, over the air, in which the very light seemed to be affected by the shock. She felt it in the arm which supported her, in the voice which responded with a sudden emotion in it, and in the silence which ensued, which neither of them seemed able to break.

“I fear,” said Edward at last, “that it will be very agitating and distressing for you, my darling. I wish I could do it for you. I wish I could put it off till you were stronger.”

She shook her head. “I must do it myself,” she said, “not even you. We have been very quiet for a long time—and happy.”

“We shall be happy still, I hope,” he said,—“happier, since the time is coming when we are always to be together, Winnie.”

She did not make any reply at first, but then said drearily, “I don’t feel as if I could see anything beyond to-night. Life will go on again, I suppose, but between this and that there seems to me, as in the parable, a gulf fixed.”

“Not one that cannot be passed over,” he said.

But he did not ask her what she meant to say to her brother, nor had she ever told him. Perhaps he took it for granted that only one thing could be said, and that to be told what their father’s will was, would be enough for the young men; or perhaps, for that was scarcely credible, he supposed that Mr. Babington would be called upon to explain everything, and the burden thus taken off her shoulders. Only when she was bidding him good-night he ventured upon a word.

“You must husband your strength,” he said, “and not wear yourself out more than you can help. Remember there is George to come.”

“I will have to say what there is to say at once, Edward. Oh, how could I keep them in suspense?”

“But you must think a little, for my sake, of yourself, dear.”

She shook her head, and looked at him wistfully. “It is not I that have to be thought of, it is the boys that I have to think of. Oh, poor boys! how am I to tell them?” she cried.

And he went away with no further explanation. He could not ask in so many words, What do you intend to say to them? And yet he had made up his mind so completely what ought to be said. He said to himself as he went down the avenue that he had been a fool, that it was false delicacy on his part not to have had a full explanation of her intentions. But, on the other hand, how could he suggest a mode of action to her? There was but one way—they must understand that she could not sacrifice herself for their sakes.

CHAPTER XIII

WINIFRED scarcely slept all that night. She had enough to think of. Her entire life hung in the balance. And, indeed, that was not all, for there remained the doubtful possibility that she might deprive herself of everything without doing any good by her sacrifice. The necessity to be falsely true seemed, once having been taken up, to pursue her everywhere. Unless she could find some way of accomplishing it deceitfully, and frustrating her father’s will, while she seemed to be executing it, she would be incapable of doing anything for her brothers, and would either be compelled to accept an unjust advantage over them, or give up everything that was in her own favour without advantaging them. She lay still in the darkness and thought and thought over this great problem, but came no nearer to any solution.

And she was separated even from her usual counsellors in this great emergency. In respect to Edward, she divined his wishes with a pang unspeakable, yet excused him to herself with a hundred tender apologies. It was not that he was capable of wronging any one, but he felt—who could help feeling it?—that all would go better in his hands. She, too, felt it. She said to herself, it would be better for Bedloe, better for the people, that he, through her, should reign, instead of George or Tom, who, if they did well at all, would do well for themselves only, and who, up to this time, even in that had failed. To give it over to two bad or indifferent masters, careless of everything, save what it produced; or to place it under the care of a wise and thoughtful master, who would consider the true advantage of all concerned: who, she asked herself, could hesitate as to which was best? But though it would be best, it would be founded on wrong, and would be impossible. Impossible! that was the only word. She was in no position to abolish the ordinary laws of nature, and act upon her own judgment of what was best. It was impossible, whatever good might result from it, that she should build her own happiness upon the ruin of her brothers. Even Miss Farrell did not take the same view of the subject. She had wept over the dethronement of the brothers, but she could not consent to Winifred's renunciation of all things for their sake. "You can always make it up to them," she had said, reiterating the words, without explaining how this was to be done. How was it to be done? Winifred tried very hard through all to respect her father. She tried to think that he had only exposed her to a severe trial to prove her strength. She thought that now at least, even if never before, he must be enlightened, he must watch her with those "larger, other eyes than ours," with which natural piety endows all who have passed away, whether bad or good. Even if he had not intended well at the time, he must know better now. But how was she to do it? How succeed in thwarting yet obeying him? The problem was beyond her powers, and the hours would not stop to give her time to consider it. They flowed on, slow, yet following each other in a ceaseless current; and the morning broke which was to bring her perplexities to

some sort of issue, though what she did not know.

Tom arrived by the early morning train. He also had not slept much in the night, and his eyes were red, and his face pale. He was tremulous with excitement, not unmingled with anxiety; but an air of triumph over all, and elation scarcely controlled, gave a certain wildness to his aspect, almost like intoxication. It was an intoxication of the spirit, however, and not anything else, though, as he leapt out of the dog-cart and made a rush up the steps, Winifred, standing there to meet him, almost shrank from the careless embrace he gave her. “Well, Win, and so here we are back again,” he said. He had no great reason, perhaps, to be touched by his father’s death. It brought him back from unwilling work, it gave him back (he thought) the wealth and luxury which he loved, it restored him to all that had been taken from him. Why should he be sorry? And yet, at the moment of returning to his father’s house, it seemed to his sister that some natural thought of the father, who had not always been harsh, should have touched his heart. But Tom did not show any consciousness of what nature and good feeling required, which was, after all, as Winifred reflected next moment, better, perhaps, as being more true than any pretence at fictitious feeling. He gave nods of acknowledgment, half boisterous, half condescending, to the servants as he passed through the hall to the dining-room, which stood open, with the table prepared for breakfast. He laughed at the sight, and pointed to his sister. “It was supper you had waiting for me the last time I was here,” he said, with a laugh, and went in before her, and threw himself down in the large easy chair, which was the seat Mr. Chester had always occupied. Probably Tom forgot, and meant nothing; but old Hopkins hastened to thrust another close to the table, indicating it with a wave of his hand.

“Here, sir, this is your place, sir,” the old butler said.

“I am very comfortable where I am,” cried Tom. “That’s enough, Hopkins; bring the breakfast.” Hopkins explained to the other servants when he left the room that Mr.

Tom was excited. “And no wonder, considering all that’s happened,” he said.

“Well,” repeated Tom, when he and his sister were left alone, “so here we are again. You thought it was for good when I went away, Winnie.”

“I thought it would be—for a longer time, Tom.”

“You thought it was for good; but you might have known better. The poor old governor thought better of it at the last?”

“I don’t think that he changed—his opinion,” Winifred said, hesitating, afraid to carry on the deception, afraid to undeceive him, tired and excited as he was.

“Well,” said Tom, addressing himself to the good things on the breakfast table, “whatever his opinion was, it don’t matter much now, for here I am, at all events, and that horrible episode of New Zealand over. It didn’t last very long, thank Heaven!”

It was, perhaps, only because the conversation was so difficult that she asked him then suddenly whether, perhaps, on the way he had seen anything of George.

“Of George?” Tom put down his knife and fork and stared at her. “How, in the name of Heaven, could I see anything of George—on my way home?”

“I—don’t know, Tom. I am not clear about the geography. I thought perhaps you might have come by the same ship.”

“By the same ship?” It was only by degrees that he took in what she meant. Then he thrust back his chair from the table and exclaimed, “What! is George coming too?” in a tone full of disgust and dismay.

“I sent for him at the same time,” she replied, in spite of herself, in a tone of apology. “How could I leave him out?”

“You sent for him?” said Tom, with evident relief. “Then I think you did a very silly thing, Winnie. Why should he come here, such an expensive journey, stopping his work and everything? Some one told me he was getting on very well out there.”

“I thought it indispensable that he should come back, that we should all meet to arrange everything.”

“To arrange everything?” There was a sort of compassionate impatience in Tom’s tone. “I suppose that is how women judge,” he said. “What can there be to arrange? You may be sure the governor had it all set down clear enough in black and white. And now you will have disturbed the poor beggar’s mind all for nothing; for he is sure to build upon it, and think there’s something for him. I hope, at least, you made that point clear.”

“Tom, if you would but listen to me! There is no point clear. I felt that I must see you both, and talk it all over, and that we must decide among us”—

“You take a great deal upon you, Winnie,” said Tom. “You have got spoilt, I think. What is there to decide about? The thing that vexes me is for George’s own sake. That you might like to see him, and give him a little holiday, that’s no harm; and I suppose you mean to make it up to him out of your own little money, though I should think Langton would have a word to say on that subject. But how do you know what ridiculous ideas you may put into the poor beggar’s head? He may think that the governor has altered his will again. He is sure to think something that’s absurd. If it’s not too late, it would be charity to telegraph again and tell him it was not worth his while.”

“Tom,” said Winifred, faltering, “he is our brother, and he is the eldest. Whatever my father’s will was, do you think it would be right to leave him out?”

“Oh, that is what you are after!” said Tom. “To work upon me, and get me to do something for him! You may as well understand once for all that I’ll be no party to changing the governor’s will—I’ll not have him cheated, poor old gentleman! in his grave.”

He had risen up from the table full of angry decision, pushing his chair away, while Winifred sat weak and helpless, more bewildered at every word, gazing at him, not

knowing how to reply.

“He was a man of great sense, was the governor,” said Tom. “He was a better judge of character than either you or I. To be sure, he made a little mistake that time about me; but it hasn’t done me any harm, and I wouldn’t be the one to bring it up against him. And I’ll be no party to changing his will. If you bring George here, it is upon your own responsibility. He need not look for anything from me.”

“Tom, I don’t ask anything from you; but don’t you think—oh, is not your heart softer now that you know what it is to suffer hardship yourself?”

“That’s all sentimental nonsense,” said Tom hastily. He went to the fireplace and warmed himself, for there is always a certain chill in excitement. Then he returned to the table to finish his breakfast. He had a feverish appetite, and the meal served to keep in check the fire of expectation and restlessness in his veins. After a few minutes’ silence he looked up with a hurried question. “Babington has been sent for to meet me, I suppose?”

“He is coming on Monday. We did not think you could arrive before Monday, and George perhaps by that time”—

“Always George!” he said, with an angry laugh.

“Always both of you, Tom. We are only three in the world, and to whom can I turn but to my brothers to advise me? Oh, listen a little! I want you to know everything, to judge everything, and then to tell me”—

It was natural enough, perhaps, that Tom should think of her personal concerns. “Oh, I see,” he said; “you and Langton don’t hit it off, Winnie? That’s a different question. Well, he is not much of a match for you. No doubt you could do much better for yourself; but that’s not enough to call George for, from the Antipodes. I’ll advise you to the best of my ability. If you mean to trust for advice to George”—

“It is not about myself,” said Winifred. “Oh, Tom, how am I to tell you? I cannot find the words—my father—oh, listen to me for a little—don’t go away!”

“If you say anything—to make me think badly of the governor, I will never forgive you, Winnie!” he said. His face grew pale and then almost black with gloom and excitement. “I’ve been travelling all night,” he added. “I want a bath, and to make myself comfortable. It’s too soon to begin about your business. Where have you put me? In the old room, I suppose?”

“All your things have been put there,” replied Winifred. It was a relief to escape from the explanation, and yet a disappointment. He turned away without looking at her.

“Oh, all right! there is plenty of time to change when I have made up my mind which I like best,” he said.

CHAPTER XIV

GEORGE arrived by the next mail. He did not travel all night, but came in the evening, driving up the avenue with a good deal of noise and commotion, with two flys from the station carrying him and the two children and the luggage they brought, in addition to the brougham which had been sent out of respect to the lady. She occupied it by herself, for it was a small carriage, and she was a large woman, and thus was the first to arrive, stumbling out with a large cage in her hand containing a pair of unhappy birds with drooping feathers and melancholy heads. She would not allow any one to take them from her hand, but stumbled up the steps with them and thrust them upon Winnie, who had come out to the door to receive her brother, but who did not at first realise who this was.

“Here, take ’em,” said Mrs. George; “they’re for you, and they’ve been that troublesome! I’ve done nothing but look after them all the voyage. I suppose you’re Winnie,” she added, pausing with a momentary doubt.

“I hope you are not very tired,” Winifred said, with that imbecility which extreme surprise and confusion gives. She took the cage, which was heavy, and set it on a

table. “And George—where is George?” she said.

“Oh, George is coming fast enough; he’s in the first fly with the children. But you don’t look at what I’ve brought you. They’re the true love-birds, the prettiest things in the world. I brought them all the way myself. I trusted them to nobody. George said you would think a deal of them.”

“So I shall—when I have time to think. It was very kind,” said Winnie. “Oh, George!” She ran down to meet him as he stepped out with a child on his arm.

George was not fat, like his wife, but careworn and spare.

“How do you do, Winnie?” he said, taking her outstretched hand. “Would you mind taking the baby till I get Georgie and the things out of the fly?”

The baby was a fat baby, and like his mother. He gazed at her with a placid aspect, and did not cry. There was something ludicrous in the situation, which Winifred faintly perceived, though everything was so serious. George was not like the long-lost brother of romance. He had shaken hands with her as if he had parted from her yesterday. He scarcely cast a glance at the house to which he was coming back, but turned quickly to the fly, and lifted out first a little fat boy of three, then parcel after parcel, with a slightly anxious but quite business-like demeanour.

“The maid and the boxes can go round to the other door,” he said, paying serious attention to every detail. “I suppose I can leave these things to be brought upstairs, Winnie? Now, Georgie, come along. There’s mamma waiting.” He did not offer to take the baby, which was a serious weight upon Winifred’s slight shoulder, but looked with a certain grave gratification at his progeny. “He is quite good with you,” he said, with pleased surprise. There was nothing in the fact of his return home that affected George so much. “Look at baby, how good he is with Winnie! I told you the children would take to her directly.”

“Well, I suppose it’s natural your sister should look to you first,” said the wife; “but I’ve taken a great deal of trouble bringing the birds to her, and she hasn’t given them

hardly a glance."

"It was very kind," said Winnie; "but the children must come first. This is the way; don't you remember, George? Bring your wife here."

"I don't believe she knows my name, or perhaps she's proud, and won't call me by it, George?"

"Winnie proud? Look how good baby is with her!" said George.

They discussed Winifred thus, walking on either side of her, while she tottered under the weight of the big baby, from which neither dreamt of relieving her. Winifred began to feel a nervous necessity to laugh, which she could not control. She drew a chair near the fire for her sister-in-law, and put down the good-humoured baby, in whose contact there seemed something consolatory, though he was very heavy, on the rug. "I should like to give the other one a kiss," she said—"is he George too?—before I give you some tea."

"Yes, I should like my tea," said Mrs. George; "I'm ready for it after that long journey. Have you seen after Eliza and the boxes, George? We've had a good passage upon the whole; but I should never make a good sailor if I were to make the voyage every year. Some people can never get over it. Don't you think, Miss Winnie, that you could tell that old gentleman to bring the birds in here?"

"Is it old Hopkins?" said George. "How do you do, Hopkins? There is a cage with some birds"—

"I hope I see you well, sir?" said the old butler. "I'm glad as I've lived to see you come home. And them two little gentlemen, sir, they're the first little grandsons? and wouldn't master have been pleased to see them!" Hopkins had been growing feeble ever since his master's death, and showed a proclivity to tears, which he had never dared to indulge before.

"Well, I think he might have been," said George, with a dubious tone. But his mind was not open to sentiment. "They might have a little bread and butter, don't you

think?—it wouldn't hurt them,—and a cup of milk."

"No, George," said his wife; "it would spoil their tea."

"Do you think it would spoil their tea? I am sure Winnie would not mind them having their tea here with us, the first evening, and then Eliza might put them to bed."

"Eliza has got my things to look to," said Mrs. George; "besides being put out a little with a new place, and all that houseful of servants. I shouldn't keep up half of them, when once we have settled down and see how we are going to fit in."

"Some one must put the children to bed," said George, with an anxious countenance. This conversation was carried on without any apparent consciousness of Winnie's presence, who, what with pouring out tea and making friends with the children, did her best to occupy the place of spectator with becoming unconsciousness. Here, however, she was suddenly called into the discussion. "Oh, Winnie," said her brother, "no doubt you've got a maid, or some one who knows a little about children, who could put them to bed?"

"He is an old coddle about the children," said his wife; "the children will take no harm. Eliza must see to me first, if I'm to come down to dinner as you'd wish me to. But George is the greatest old coddle."

She ran into a little ripple of laughter as she spoke, which was fat and pleasant. Her form was soft and round, and prettily coloured, though her features, if she had ever possessed any, were much blunted and rounded into indistinctness. A sister is, perhaps, a severe judge under such circumstances; yet Winifred was relieved and softened by the new arrival. She made haste to offer the services of her maid, or even her own, if need were. The house was turned entirely upside down by this arrival. The two babies sent a thrill of excitement through all the female part of the household, from Miss Farrell downwards, and old Hopkins was known to have wept in the pantry over the two little grandsons, whom master would have been so proud

to see. Winifred alone felt her task grow heavier and heavier. The very innocence and helplessness of the party whom she had thus taken in hand, and whom, after all, she was likely to have so little power to help, went to her heart. She was not fitted to play the part of Providence. And certain looks exchanged between George and his wife, and a few chance words, had made her heart sick. They had pointed out to each other how this and that could be changed. “The rooms in the wing would be best for the nurseries,” George had said and “There’s just the place for you to practise your violin,” his wife had added. They looked about them with a serene and satisfied consciousness (though George was always anxious) that they were taking possession of their own house. Winifred felt as she came back into the hall, where Mrs. George’s present was still standing, the cage with the two miserable birds, laying their drooping heads together, that this simplicity was more hard to deal with than even Tom’s discontent and sullen anger. She felt that she had collected elements of mischief together with which she was quite unable to deal, and stood in the midst of them discouraged, miserable, feeling herself disapproved and unsupported. Not even Edward stood by her. Edward, least of all, whose want of sympathy she felt to her soul, though it had never been put into words. And Miss Farrell’s attempts to make the best were almost worse than disapproval. She was entirely alone with those contending elements, and what was she to do?

Tom had chosen to be absent when his brother arrived; he did not appear even at dinner, to which Mrs. George descended, to the surprise of the ladies, decked in smiles and in an elaborate evening dress, which (had they but known) she had spent all the spare time on the voyage in preparing out of the one black silk which had been the pride of her heart. She had shoulders and arms which were worth showing had they not been a trifle too fat, so white and rosy, so round and dimpled. She made a little apology to Winifred for the absence of crape. “It was such a hurry,” she said, “to get away at once. George would not lose a day, and I wouldn’t let him go without me, and such things as that are not to be got on a ship,” she added, with a

laugh. Mrs. George's aspect, indeed, did not suggest crape or gloom in any way.

"No, I wouldn't let him come without me," she continued, while they sat at dinner. "I couldn't take the charge of the children without him to help me, and then I thought he might be put upon if he came to take possession all alone. I didn't know that Miss Winnie was as nice as she is, and would stand his friend."

"She is very nice," said Miss Farrell, to whom this remark was addressed, looking across the table at her pupil with eyes that glistened, though there was laughter in them. The sight of this pair, and especially of the wife with her innocence and good-humour, had been very consoling to the old lady. And she was anxious to awaken in Winifred a sense of the humour of the situation to relieve her more serious thoughts.

"But then I had never seen her," said Mrs. George; "and it's so natural to think your husband's sister will be nasty when she thinks herself a cut above the like of you. I thought she might brew up a peck of troubles for George, and make things twice as hard."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so much," her husband said under his breath.

"Why shouldn't I talk? I'm only saying what's agreeable. I am saying I never thought she would be so nice. I thought she might stand in George's way. I am sure it might make any one nasty that was likely to marry and have children of her own, to see everything going past her to a brother that had behaved like George has done and taken his own way."

This innocent conversation went on till Winifred felt her part become more and more intolerable. Her paleness, her hesitating replies, and anxious air at last caught George's attention, though he had little to spare for his sister. "Have you been ill, Winnie?" he said abruptly, as he followed them into the drawing-room when dinner was over.

"Yes, George," she put her hand on his arm timidly; "and I am ill now with anxiety

and trouble. I have something to say to you."

George was always ready to take alarm. He grew a little more depressed as he looked at her. "Is it anything about the property?" he said.

"I never thought to deceive you," she cried, losing command of herself. "I did not know. I thought it would be all simple, George—oh, if you will hear me to the end! and let us all consult together and see what will be best."

George did not make her any reply. He looked across at his wife, and said, "I told you there would be something," with lips that quivered a little. Mrs. George got up instantly and came and stood beside him, all her full-blown softness reddening over with quick passion. "What is it? Have I spoke too fast? Is there some scheme against us after all?" she cried.

"George," said Winifred, "you know I am in no scheme against you. I want to give you your rights—but it seems I cannot. I want you to know everything, to help me to think. Tom will not hear me, he will not believe me; but you, George!"

"Tom?" George cried. The news seemed so unexpected that his astonishment and dismay were undisguised. "Is Tom here?"

"I sent for you both on the same day," said Winifred, bowing her head as if it were a confession of guilt.

"Oh," he said; he did not show excitement in its usual form, he grew quieter and more subdued, standing in a sort of grey insignificance against the flushed fulness of his astonished wife. "If it is Tom," he said, "you might as well have let us stay where we were. He never held up a finger for me when my father sent me away. You did your best, Winnie; oh, I am not unjust to you. Whatever it is, it's not your fault. But Tom—if Tom has got it! though I thought he had been sent about his business too."

"But, George, George!" cried his wife, almost inarticulate with eagerness to speak. "George, you're the eldest son. I want to know if you're the eldest son, yes or no?

And after that, who—who has any right? I'm in my own house and I'll stay. It's my own house, and nobody shall put me out," she cried, with a hysterical laugh, followed by a burst of tears.

"Stop that," said George, with dull quiet, but authoritatively. "I don't mean to say it isn't an awful disappointment, Winnie; but if it's Tom, why did you go and send for me?"

Winifred stood between the two, the wife sobbing wildly behind her, her brother looking at her in a sort of dull despair, and stretched out her hands to them with an appeal for which she could find no words. But at that moment the door opened harshly and Tom came in, appearing at the end of the room, with a pale and gloomy countenance, made only more gloomy by wine and fatigue, for he had ridden far and wildly, dashing about the country to exhaust his rage and disappointment. All that he had done had been to increase both. "Oh, you have got here," he said, with an angry nod to his brother. "It is a nice home-coming ain't it, for you and me? Shake hands; we're in the same boat now, whatever we once were. And there stands the supplanter, the hypocrite that has got everything!" cried the excited young man, the foam flying from his mouth. And thereupon came a shriek from Mrs. George, which went through poor Winifred like a knife. For some minutes she heard no more.

CHAPTER XV

WINIFRED had never fainted before in her life, and it made a great commotion in the house. Hopkins, without a word to any one, sent off for Dr. Langton, and half the maids in the house poured into the room eagerly to help, bringing water, eau de Cologne, everything they could think of. Mrs. George's hysterics fled before the alarming sight, the insensibility, and pallor, which for a moment she took for death, and with a cry of horror and pity, and the tears still standing upon her flushed cheeks, she flung herself on her knees on the floor by Winifred's side. The two

brothers stood and looked on, feeling very uncomfortable, gazing with a half-guilty aspect upon the fallen figure. Would any one perhaps say that it was their fault? They stood near each other, though without exchanging a word, while the sudden irruption of women poured in. Winifred, however, was not long of coming to her senses. She woke to find herself lying on the floor, to her great astonishment, in the midst of a little crowd, and then struggled back into full consciousness again with a head that ached and throbbed, and something singing in her ears. She got to her feet with an effort and begged their pardon faintly. “What has happened?” she said; “have I done any thing strange? what have I done?”

“You have only fainted,” said Miss Farrell, “that is all. Miss Chester is better now. She has no more need of you, you may all go. Yes, my dear, you have fainted, that is all. Some girls are always doing it; but it never happened to you before, and it ought to be a proof to you, Winnie, that you are only mortal after all, and can’t do more than you can.”

Winifred smiled as best she could in the face of her old friend. “I did not know I could be so foolish,” she said; “but it is all over now. Dear Miss Farrell, leave me with them. There is something I must say.”

“Oh, put it off till to-morrow,” said Mrs. George; “whether you’ve been our enemy or not, you are only a bit of a girl; and it can’t hurt to wait till to-morrow. I know what nerves are myself, I’ve always been a dreadful sufferer. A dead faint like that, it is very frightening to other people. Don’t send the old lady away.”

“I am going to stay with you, Winnie—unless you will be advised by me, and by Mrs. George, who has a kind heart, I am sure she has—and go to bed.”

Winifred placed herself in a deep easy-chair which gave her at least a physical support. She gave her hand to Miss Farrell, who stood by her, and turned to the brothers, who were still looking on uneasily, half-conscious that it was their fault, half-defiant of her and all that she could say. She lifted her eyes to them, in that

moment of weakness and uncertainty before the world settled back into its place. Even their faces for a little while were but part of a phantasmagoria that moved and trembled in the air around her. She felt herself as in a dream, seeing not only what was before her, but many a visionary scene behind. She had been the youngest, she had always yielded to the boys; and as they stood before her thus, though with so few features of the young playfellows and tyrants to whom all her life she had been more or less subject, it became more and more impossible to her to assume the different part which an ill fate had laid upon her. As she looked at them, so many scenes came back. They had been fond of her and good to her in their way, when she was a child. She suddenly remembered how George used to carry her up and down-stairs when she was recovering from the fever which was the great event in her childish life, and in how many rides and rows she had been Tom's companion, grateful above measure for his notice. These facts, with a hundred trivial incidents which she had forgotten, rushed back upon her mind. "Boys," she said, and then paused, her eyes growing clearer and clearer, but tears getting into her voice.

"Come, Winnie," said George, "Tom and I are a little too old for that."

"You will never be too old for that to me," she said. "Oh, if you would but look a little kind, as you used to do! It was against my will and my prayers that it was left to me. I said that I would not accept it, that I would never, never, take what was yours. I never deceived him in that. Oh, boys! do you think it is not terrible for me to be put into your place, even for a moment? And that is not the worst. I thought when I sent for you that I could give it you back, that it would all be easy; but there is more to tell you."

They looked at her, each in his different way. Tom sullenly from under his eyebrows, George with his careworn look, anxious to get to an end of it, to consult with his wife what they were to do; but neither said a word.

"After," she said with difficulty, struggling against the rising in her throat, "after—it

was found that I could not give it you back. If I did so, I too was to lose everything. Oh, wait, wait, till I have done! What am I to do? I put it in your hands. If I try to give you any part, it is lost to us all three. What am I to do? I can take no advice from any but you. What I wish is to restore everything to you; but if I attempt to do so, all is lost. What am I to do? What am I to do?"

"Winnie, what you will do is to make yourself ill in the meantime."

"What does it matter?" she cried wildly; "if I were to die, I suppose it would go to them as my heirs."

The blank faces round her had no pity in them for Winnie. They were for the moment too deeply engrossed with the news which they had just heard. Miss Farrell alone stooped over her, and stood by her, holding her hand. Mrs. George, who had been listening, bewildered, unable to divine what all this could mean, broke the silence with a cry.

"She don't say a word of Georgie. Is there nothing for Georgie? I don't know what you mean, all about giving and not giving—it's our right. George, ain't it our right?"

"There are no rights in our family," said George; "but I don't know what it means any more than you."

Here Tom stepped forward into the midst of the group, lifting his sullen eyebrows. "I know what it means," he said. "It is easy enough to tell what it means. If she takes you in, she can't take me in. I saw how things were going long ago. First one was got out of the house and then another, but she was always there, saying what she pleased, getting over the old man. Do you think if he had been in his right senses, he would have driven away his sons, and put a girl over our heads? I'll tell you what," he cried with passion, "I am not going to stand it if you are. She was there always at one side of him, and the doctor at the other. The daughter and the doctor and nobody else. Every one knows how a doctor can work upon your nerves; and a woman that is always nursing you, making herself sweet. If there ever was undue influence,

there it is. And I don't mean to stand it for one."

George was not enraged like his brother: he looked from one to another with his anxious eyes. "If you don't stand it, what can you do?" he said.

"I mean to bring it to a trial. I mean to take it into court. There isn't a jury in England but would give it in our favour," said Tom. "I know a little about the law. It is the blackest case I ever knew. The doctor, Langton, he is engaged to Winnie. He has put her up to it; I don't blame her so much. He has stood behind her making a cat's-paw of her. Oh, I've found out all about it. He belongs to the old family that used to own Bedloe, and he has had his eye on this ever since we came here. The governor was very sharp," said Tom, "he was not one to be beaten in the common way. But the doctor, that was always handy, that came night and day, that cured him—the first time," he added significantly.

Tom, in his fury, had not observed, nor had any of his agitated hearers, the opening of the door behind, the quiet entry into the room of a new-comer, who, arrested by the words he heard, had stood there listening to what Tom said. At this moment he advanced quickly up the long room. "You think perhaps that I killed him—the second time?" he said, confronting the previous speaker.

Winifred rose from her chair with a low cry, and came to his side, putting her arm through his.

"Edward! Edward! he does not know what he is saying," she cried.

The other pair had stood bewildered during all this, Mrs. George gasping with her pretty red lips apart, her husband, always careworn, looking anxiously from one face to another. When she saw Winnie's sudden movement, Mrs. George copied it in her way. She was cowed by the appearance of the doctor, who was so evidently a gentleman, one of those superior beings for whom she retained the awe and admiration of her youth.

"Oh, George, come to bed! don't mix yourself up with none of them—don't get

yourself into trouble!" she cried, doing what she could to drag him away.

"Let alone, Alice," he said, disengaging himself. "I suppose you are Dr. Langton. My brother couldn't mean that; but if things are as he says, it's rather a bad case."

A fever of excitement, restrained by the habit of self-command, and making little appearance, had risen in Langton's veins. "Winifred," he cried, with the calm of passion, "you have been breaking your heart to find out a way of serving your brothers. You see how they receive it. Retire now, you are not able to deal with them, and leave it to me."

She was clinging to him with both hands, clasping his arm, very weak, shaken both in body and mind, longing for quietness and rest; but she shook her head, looking up with a pathetic smile in his face.

"No, Edward," she said.

"No?" he looked at her, not believing his ears. She had never resisted him before, even when his counsels were most repugnant to her. A sudden passionate offence took possession of him. "In that case," he said, "perhaps it is I that ought to withdraw, and allow your brother to accuse me of every crime at his ease."

"Oh, Edward, don't make it harder! It is hard upon us all, both them and me. It is desperate, the position we are in. I cannot endure it, and they cannot endure it. What are we to do?"

"Nor can I endure it," he said. "Let them contest the will. It is the best way; but in that case they cannot remain under your roof."

"Who gave you the right to dictate what we are to do?" cried Tom, who was beside himself with passion. "This is my father's house, not yours. It is my sister's, if you like, but not yours. Winnie, let that fellow go; what has he got to do between us? Let him go away; he has got nothing to do here."

"You are of that opinion too?" Langton said, turning to her with a pale smile. "Be it

so. I came to look after Miss Chester's health, not to disturb a family party."

"Edward!" Winifred cried. The name he gave her went to her heart. He had detached himself from her hold; he would not see the hand which she held out to him. His ear was deaf to her voice. She had deserted him, he said to himself. She had brought insult upon him, and an atrocious accusation, and she had not resented it, showed no indignation, rejected his help, prepared to smooth over and conciliate the miserable cad who had permitted himself to do this thing. Beneath all this blaze of passion, there was no doubt also the bitterness of disappointment with which he saw the destruction of those hopes which he had been foolishly entertaining, allowing himself to cherish, although he knew all the difficulties in the way. He saw and felt that, right or wrong, she would give all away, that Bedloe was farther from him than ever it had been. He loved Winifred, it was not for Bedloe he had sought her; but everything surged up together at this moment in a passion of mortification, resentment, and shame. She had not maintained his cause, she had refused his intervention, she had allowed these intruders to regard him as taking more upon him than she would permit, claiming an authority she would not grant. He neither looked at her, nor listened to the call which she repeated with a cry that might have moved a savage. A man humiliated, hurt in his pride, is worse than a savage.

"Take care of her," he said, wringing Miss Farrell's hand as he passed her, and without another look or word went away.

Winifred, standing, following with her eyes, with consternation unspeakable, his departing figure, felt the strength ebb out of her as he disappeared. But yet there was relief in his departure, too. A woman has often many pangs to bear between her husband and her family. She has to endure and maintain often the authority which she does not acknowledge, which in her right he assumes over them, which is a still greater offence to her than to them; and an instinctive sense that her lover should not have any power over her brothers was strong in her notwithstanding her love. Her

agitated heart returned after a moment's pause to the problem which was no nearer solution than before. She said softly—

"All that I can do for your sake I will do, whatever I may suffer. There is one thing I will not do, and that is, defend myself or him. If you do not know that neither I nor he have done anything against you, it is not for me to say it. It is hard, very hard for us all. If you will advise with me like friends what to do, I shall be very, very thankful; but if not, you must do what you will, and I will do what I can, and there is no more to say."

The interruption, though it had been hard to bear, had done her good. She went back to her chair, and leant back, letting her head rest on good Miss Farrell's faithful shoulder. A kind of desperation had come to her. She had sent her lover away, and nothing remained for her, but only this forlorn duty.

"Edward will not come back," she said in Miss Farrell's ear.

"To-morrow, my darling, to-morrow," the old lady said, with tears in her eyes.

Winifred shook her head. No one could deceive her any more. She seemed to have come to that farthest edge of life on which everything becomes plain. After a while she withdrew, leaving the others to their consultation; they had been excited by Edward's coming, but they were cowed by his going away. It seemed to bring to all a strange realisation, such as people so often reach through the eyes of others, of the real state of their affairs.

CHAPTER XVI

ENOUGH had been done and said that night. They remained together for some time in the drawing-room, having the outside aspect of a family party, but separated, as indeed family parties often are. Winifred, very pale, with the feeling of exhaustion both bodily and mental, sat for a time in her chair, Miss Farrell close to her, holding her hand. They said nothing to each other, but from time to time the old lady would

bend over her pupil with a kiss of consolation, or press between her own the thin hand she held. She said nothing, and Winifred, indeed, was incapable of intercourse more articulate. On the other side of the fireplace George and his wife sat together, whispering and consulting. She was very eager, he careworn and doubtful, as was his nature. Sometimes he would shake his head, saying, "No, Alice," or "It is not possible." Sometimes her eager whispering came to an articulate word. Their anxious discussion, the close union of two beings whose interests were one, the life and expectation and anxiety in their looks, made a curious contrast to the exhaustion of Winnie lying back in her chair, and the sullen loneliness of Tom, who sat in the centre in front of the fire, receiving its full blaze upon him in a sort of ostentatious resentment and sullenness, though his hand over his eyes concealed the thought in his face. The only sound was the whispering of Mrs. George, and the occasional low word with which her husband replied. Further, no communication passed between the different members of this strange party. They separated after a time with faint good-nights, Mrs. George eager, indeed, to maintain the forms of civility, but the brothers each in his way withdrawing with little show of friendship. After this, Winifred too went upstairs. Her heart was very full.

"Did you ever," she said to her companion "feel a temptation to run away, to bear no more?"

"Yes, I have felt it; but no one can run away. Where could we go that our duty would not follow us? It is shorter to do it anyhow at first hand."

"Is it so?" said Winifred, with a forlorn look from the window into the night where the stars were shining, and the late moon rising. "'Oh that I had the wings of a dove!'—I don't think I ever understood before what that meant."

"And what does it mean, Winnie? The dove flies home, not into the wilds, which is what you are thinking of."

"That is true," said the girl, "and I have no home, except with you. I have still

you”—

“He will come back to-morrow,” Miss Farrell said.

“No, he will not come back. They insulted him, and I—did not want him. That is true. I did not want him. I wanted none of his advice. I preferred to be left to do what I had to do myself. It is true, Miss Farrell. Can a man ever forgive that? It would have been natural that he should have done everything for me, and instead of that—Are not these all great mysteries?” said Winifred after a pause. “A woman should not be able to do so. She should put herself into the hands of her husband. Am I unwomanly?—you used to frighten me with the word; but I could not do it. I did not want him. My heart rose against his interference. If I knew that he felt so to me, I—I should be wounded to death. And yet—it was so—it is quite true. I think he will never forgive me.”

“It is a mystery, Winnie. I don’t know how it is. When you are married everything changes, or so people say. But love forgives everything, dear.”

“Not that,” Winifred said.

She sat by her fire, when her friend left her, in a state of mind which it is impossible to describe in words. It was despair. Despair is generally tragical and exalted; and perhaps that passion is more easy to bear with the excitement that belongs to it than the quiet consciousness that one has come to a dead pause in one’s life, and that neither on one side or the other is there any outlet. Winifred was perfectly calm and still. She sat amid all the comfort of her chamber, gazing dimly into the cheerful fire. She was rich. She was highly esteemed. She had many friends. And yet she had come to a pass when everything failed her. Her brothers stood hostile about her, feeling her with justice to be their supplanter, to stand in their way. Her lover had left her, feeling with justice that she wronged his love and rejected his aid. With justice—that was the sting. To be misunderstood is terrible, yet it is a thing that can be surmounted; but to be guilty, whether by any fault of yours, whether by terrible

complication of events, whether by the constitution of your mind, which is the worst of all, this is despair. And there was no way of deliverance. She could not make over her undesired wealth to her brothers, which had at first seemed to be so easy a way; and also, far worse, far deeper, far more terrible, she could not make Edward see how she could put him away from her, yet love him. She felt herself to sit alone, as if upon a pinnacle of solitude, regarding all around and seeing no point from which there could come any help. It is seldom that the soul is thus overwhelmed on all sides. When one hope fails, another dawns upon the horizon; rarely, rarely is there no aid near. But to Winifred it seemed that everything was gone from her. Her lover and friends stood aloof. Her life was cut off. To liberate every one and turn evil into good, the thing best to be done seemed that she should die. But she knew that of all aspirations in the world that is the most futile. Death does not come to the call of misery. Those who would die, live on: those who would live are stricken in the midst of their happiness. Perhaps to a more cheerful and buoyant nature the crisis would have been less terrible; but to her it seemed that everything was over, and life come to a standstill. She was baffled and foiled in all that she wished, and that which she did not desire was forced upon her. There seemed no strength left in her to fight against all the adverse forces around. Her heart failed altogether, and she felt in herself no power even to meet them, to begin again the discussion, to hear again, perhaps, the baseless threat which had driven Edward away. Ah, it was not that which had driven him away. It was she herself who had been the cause; she who had not wanted him, who even now, in the bitterness of the loss, which seemed to her as if it must be for ever, still felt a faint relief in the thought that at least no conflict between his will and hers would embitter the crisis, and that she should be left undisturbed to do for her brothers all that could be done, alone.

Next day she was so shaken and worn out with the experiences of that terrible evening, that she kept her room and saw no one, save Miss Farrell. Edward made no appearance; he did not even inquire for her, and till the evening, when Mr.

Babington arrived, Winifred saw no one. The state of the house, in which George and his family held a sort of encampment on one side, and Tom a hostile position on the other, was a very strange one. There was a certain forlorn yet tragi-comic separation between them. Even in the dining-room, where they sat at table together, Mrs. George kept nervously at one end, as far apart as she could place herself from her brother-in-law. The few words that were interchanged between the brothers she did everything in her power to interrupt or stop. She kept George by her side, occupied him with the children, watched over him with a sort of unquiet care. Tom had assumed his father's place at the foot of the table before the others perceived what that meant. They established themselves at the head, George and his wife together, talking to each other in low voices, while there was no one with whom Tom could make up a faction. The servants walked with strange looks from the one end to the other, serving the two groups who were separated by the white stretch of flower-decorated table. Old Hopkins groaned, yet so reported the matter that the company in the housekeeper's room shook their sides with mirth. "It was for all the world like one of them big hotels as I've been to many a time with master. Two lots, with a scoff and a scowl for everything that each other did." Notwithstanding this disunion, however, the two brothers had several conferences in the course of the day. They had a common interest, though they thus pitted themselves against each other. It was Tom who was the chief spokesman in these almost stealthy interviews. Tom was so sore and resentful against his sister, that he was willing to make common cause with George against her.

"If it is as she says," he said, "there's no jury in England but would find undue influence, and perhaps incapacity for managing his own affairs. We have the strongest case I ever heard of."

"I don't believe you'll get a jury against Winnie," said George, shaking his head.

"Why shouldn't we get a jury against Winnie? She has stolen into my place and

your place, and set the governor against us."

"Perhaps she has," said George; "but you won't get a jury against her."

"Why not? There is no man in the world that would say otherwise than that ours was a hard case."

"Oh yes, it is a very hard case; but you would not get a jury against Winnie," George repeated, with that admirable force of passive resistance and blunted understanding which is beyond all argument.

This was what they talked of when they walked up and down the conservatory together in the afternoon. Tom was eager, George doubtful; but yet they were more or less of accord on this subject. It was a hard case—no one would say otherwise; and though George could not in his heart get himself to believe that any argument would secure a verdict against Winnie, yet it was a case, it was evident, in which something ought to be done, and he began to yield to Tom's certainty. When Mr. Babington arrived, they both met him with a certain expectation.

"We can't stand this, you know," said Tom. "It is not in nature to suppose that we could stand it."

"Oh, can't you?" Mr. Babington said.

"Tom thinks," his brother explained in his slow way, "that there has been undue influence."

"The poor old governor must have been going off his head. It is as clear as daylight: he never could have made such a will if he hadn't been off his head; and Winnie and this doctor one on each side of him. Such a will can never stand," said Tom.

"But I say he'll never get a jury against Winnie," said George, with his anxious eyes fixed on Mr. Babington's face.

The lawyer listened to this till they had done, and then he said, "Oh, that is what you think!" and burst into a peal of laughter. "Your father was the sort of person, don't

you think, to be made to do what he didn't want to do? I don't think I should give much for your chance if that is what you build upon."

This laugh, more than all the reasoning in the world, took the courage out of Tom, and George had never had any courage. They listened with countenances much cast down to Mr. Babington's narrative of their father's proceedings, and of how Winnie was bound, and how Mr. Chester had intended to bind her. They neither of them were clever enough to remark that there were some points upon which he gave them no information, though he seemed so certain and explicit. But they were both completely lowered and subdued after an hour of his society, recognising for the first time the desperate condition of affairs.

That evening, when Winnie, weary of her day's seclusion, sick at heart to feel her own predictions coming true, and to realise that Edward had let the day pass without a word, was sitting sadly in her dressing-gown before her fire, there came a knock softly at her door, late in the evening, when the household in general had gone to bed. She turned round with a little start and exclamation, and her surprise was not lessened when she perceived that her visitor was Tom. He came in with scarcely a word, and drew a chair near her, and sat down in front of the fire.

CHAPTER XVII

THERE is, among the members of many families, a frank familiarity which dispenses with all those forms which keep life on a level of courtesy with persons not related to each other. Tom did not think it necessary to ask his sister how she was, or to show any anxiety about her health. He drew his chair forward and seated himself near her, without any formulas.

"You know how to make yourself comfortable," he said, with a glance round the room, which indeed was very luxuriously furnished, like the rest of the house, and with some taste, which was Winifred's own. The tone in which he spoke conveyed a

subtle intimation that Winifred made herself comfortable at his expense, but he did not say so in words. He stretched out his feet towards the fire. Perhaps he found it a little difficult to come to the point.

“I am sorry,” said Winifred, “to have been shut up here. If I had been stronger—but you must remember I have had an illness, Tom; and to feel that you were both against me”—

“Oh, it doesn’t matter about that,” said Tom, with a wave of his hand. Then, after a pause, “In that you’re mistaken, Winnie. I’m not against you. A fellow could not but be disappointed to find what a different position he was in, after the telegram and all. But when one comes to hear all about it, I’m not against you: I’m rather—though perhaps you won’t believe me—on your side.”

“Oh, Tom!” cried Winifred, laying her hand upon his arm; “I am too glad to believe you. If you will only stand by me, Tom”—

“Oh yes,” he said, “I’ll stand by you. I’ve been thinking it over since last night. You want some one to be on your side, Winnie. When I saw the airs of—But never mind, I have been thinking it all over, and I am on your side.”

“If that is so, I shall be able to bear almost anything,” said Winifred faintly.

“You will have George to bear and his wife. They say women never can put up with other women. And, good heavens, to think that for a creature like that he should have stood out and lost his chances with the governor! I never was a fool in that way, Winnie. If I went wrong, it was for nobody else’s sake, but to please myself. I should never have let a girl stand in my way—not even pretty, except in a poor sort of style, and fat at that age.” Here Tom made a brief pause. “But of course you know I shall want something to live on,” he said.

“I know that you shall have everything that I can give you,” Winifred cried.

“Ah! but that’s easier said than done. We must not run against the will, that is clear. I’ve been thinking it over, as I tell you, and my idea is, that after a little time, when

you have taken possession and got out of Mr. Babington's hands and all that, you might make me a present, as it were. Of course your sense of justice will make it a handsome present, Winnie."

"You shall have half, Tom. I have always meant you should have half."

"Half?" he said. "It's rather poor, you'll allow, to have to come down to that after fully making up one's mind that one was to have everything!"

"But, Tom, you would not have left George out—you would not have had the heart!"

"Oh, the heart!" said Tom. "I shouldn't have stood upon ceremony, Winnie; and besides, I always had more respect for the poor old governor than any of you. It suits my book that you should go against him, but I shouldn't have done it, had it been me. Well, half! I suppose that's fair enough. You couldn't be expected to do more. But you must be very cautious how you do it, you know. It's awfully unbusiness-like, and would have made the governor mad to think of. You must just get the actual money, sell out, or realise, or whatever they call it, and give it to me. Nothing that requires any papers or settlements or anything. You will have to get the actual money and give it me. You had better do it at different times, so many thousand now, and so many thousand then. It will feel awfully queer getting so much money actually in one's hand—but nice," Tom added, with a little laugh. He got up and stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon her. "Nice in its way, if one could forget that it ought to have been so much more."

"Tom, you will be careful and not spend too much—you will not throw it all away?"

"Catch me!" he said. "I'll tell you what I mean to do, Winnie. I'll go on the Stock Exchange. The governor's old friends will lend me a hand, thinking mine a hard case, as it is. And then it's easy to make them believe I've been lucky, or inherit (as I believe I do) the governor's head for business. It would be droll if some of us hadn't got that, and I am sure it's neither George nor you. Well, then, that's settled,

Winnie. It will be easy to find out from Babington what the half is: a precious big figure, I don't doubt," he added, with a triumph which for the moment he forgot to disguise. Then he added after a moment, in a more indifferent tone, "There is no telling what may happen when a man is once launched. If you give me your share to work the markets with, you can do anything on the Stock Exchange with a lot of money. I'll double your money for you in a year or two, which will be as good as giving it all back."

"I don't know anything about the Stock Exchange, Tom; only don't lose your money speculating."

"Oh, trust me for that!" he said. "I tell you I am the one that has got the governor's head." Then it seemed to strike him for the first time that it would not be amiss to show some regard for his sister. He brought his hand down somewhat heavily on her shoulder, which made her start violently.

"Come," he said, "you must not be down-hearted, Win. If I was a little nasty at first, can't you understand that? And now I've made up my mind to it, there's nothing to look so grave about. I'll stand by you whatever happens."

"Thank you, Tom," she said faintly.

"You needn't thank me; it's I that ought to thank you, I suppose. I might have known you would behave well, for you always did behave well, Winnie. And look here, you must not make yourself unhappy about everybody as you do. George, for instance: I would be very careful of what I gave him, if I were you. Let them go out to their own place again, they will be far better there than here. And don't give them too much money: enough to buy a bit of land is quite enough for them; and when the boys are big enough to help him to work it, he'll do very well." This prudent advice Tom delivered as he strolled, pausing now and then at the end of a sentence, towards the door. He was, perhaps, not very sure that it was advice that would commend itself to Winnie, or that it came with any force from his mouth; nevertheless he had a

sort of conviction, which was not without reason, that it was sensible advice. “By the bye,” he added, turning short round and standing in the half dark in the part of the room which was not illuminated by the lamp—“by the bye, I suppose you will have to sell Bedloe, before you can settle with me?”

“Sell Bedloe!” Winifred was startled out of the quiescence with which she had received Tom’s other proposals. “Why should there be any occasion to do that, Tom?”

“My dear,” he said, with a sort of amiable impatience, “how ignorant you are of business! Don’t you see that before you halve everything with me as you promise, all the property must be realised? I mean to say, if you don’t understand the word, sold. That is the very first step.”

“Sell Bedloe?” she repeated. “Dear Tom, that is the very last thing my father would have consented to do. Oh no, I cannot sell Bedloe. He hoped it was to descend to his children, and his name remain in the county; he intended”—

“Do you think he intended to preserve the name of the Langtons in the county, Winnie? You can’t be such a fool as that. And, as I suppose your children, when you have them, will be Langtons, not Chesters”—

She interrupted him eagerly, her face covered with a painful flush. “I am going to carry out my father’s will against his will, Tom; and, oh, I feel sure where he is now he will forgive me. He has heirs of his own name— I mean them to have Bedloe. Where he is he knows better,” she said, with emotion; “he will understand, he will not be angry. Bedloe must be for George.”

Tom came forward close to her, within the light of the lamp, with his lowering face. “I always knew you were a fool, but not such a fool as that, Winnie. Bedloe for George! a fellow that has disgraced his family, marrying a woman that—why, even Hopkins is better than she is; they wouldn’t have her at table in the housekeeper’s room. I thought you were a lady yourself, I thought you knew—why, Bedloe,

Winnie!" he seized her by the arm; "if you do this you will show yourself an utter idiot, without any common sense, not to be trusted. If you don't sell Bedloe, how are you to pay me?" he cried, with an honest conviction that in saying this righteous indignation had reached its climax, and there was nothing more to add.

"Tom," said Winifred, "leave me for to-night. I am not capable of anything more to-night. Don't you feel some pity for me," she cried, "left alone with no one to help me?"

But how was he to understand this cry which escaped from her without any will of hers?

"To help you? whom do you want to help you? I should have helped you if you had shown any sense. Bedloe to George! Then it is the half of the money only that is to be for me? Oh, thank you for nothing, Miss Winnie, if you think I am to be put off with that. Look here! I came to you thinking you meant well, to show you a way out of it. But I've got a true respect for the governor's will, if no one else has. Don't you know that for years and years he had cut George out of it altogether, and that it was just Bedloe—Bedloe above everything—that he was not to have?"

Winifred shrank and trembled as if it were she who was the criminal. "Yes," she said almost under her breath, "I know; but, Tom, think. He is the eldest, he has children who have done no wrong."

"I don't think anything about it," said Tom. "The governor cut him out; and what reason have you got for giving him what was taken from him? What can you say for yourself? that's what I want to know."

"Tom," said Winifred, trembling, with tears in her eyes, "there are the children: little George, who is called after my father, who is the real heir. His heart would have melted, I am sure it would, if he had seen the children."

"Oh, the children! that woman's children, and the image of her! Can't you find a better reason than that?"

“Tom,” said Winifred again, “my father is dead, he can see things now in a different light. Oh, what is everything on the earth, poor bits of property and pride, in comparison with right and justice? Do you think they don’t know better and wish if they could to remedy what has been wrong here?”

“I don’t know what you mean by they,” said Tom sullenly. “If you mean the governor, we don’t know anything about him; whether—whether it’s all right, you know, or if”—Here he paused for an appropriate word, but, not finding one, cried out, as with an intention of cutting short the subject, “That’s all rubbish! I’ll tell you what I’ll do. If you go on with this folly, to drag the governor’s name through the mud, by Jove! I’ll tell Babington. I’ll put him up to what you’re after. Against my own interest? What do I care? I’ll tell Babington, by Jove! to spite you if nothing more!”

“I think you will kill me!” cried Winifred, at the end of her patience; “and that would be the easiest of all, for you would be my heirs, George and you.”

He stared at her for a moment as if weighing the suggestion, then, saying resentfully, “Always George,” turned and left her, shutting the door violently behind him. The noise echoed through the house, which was all silent and asleep, and Winifred, very lonely, deserted on all sides, leaned back in her chair and cried to herself silently, in prostration of misery and weakness. What was she to do? to whom was she to turn? She had nobody to stand by her. There was nothing but a blank and silence on every side wherever she could turn.

CHAPTER XVIII

THIS interview did not calm the nerves of the agitated girl or bring her soothing or sleep. It was almost morning before the calm of exhaustion came, hushing the thoughts in her troubled brain and the pulses in her tired body. She slept without comfort, almost without unconsciousness, carrying her cares along with her, and

when she awoke suddenly to an unusual sound by her bedside, could scarcely make up her mind that she had been asleep at all, and believed at first that the little babbling voice close to her ear was part of a feverish dream. She started up in her bed, and saw on the carpet close to her the little three-year-old boy, a small, square figure with very large wide-open blue eyes, who was altogether new to her experiences, and whom she only identified after a moment's astonished consideration as little George, her brother's child. The first clear idea that flashed across her mind was that, as Tom said, he was "the image of his mother," not a Chester at all, or like any of her family, but the picture, in little, of the very overblown beauty of George's wife. This sensation checked in Winifred's mind, mechanically, without any will of hers, the natural impulse of tenderness towards the child, who, staring at her with his round eyes, had been making ineffectual pulls at the counterpane, and calling at intervals, "Auntie Winnie!" in a frightened and reluctant tone. Little George had "got on" very well with his newly-found relative on the night of his arrival, but to see an unknown lady in bed, with long hair framing her pale face, and that look of sleep which simulates death, had much disturbed the little boy. He fulfilled his consigne with much faltering bravery, but he did not like it; and when the white lady with the brown hair started up suddenly, he recoiled with a cry which was very nearly a wail. She recovered and came to herself sooner than he did, and, smiling, held out a hand to him.

"Little George, is it you? Come, then, and tell me what it is," she said.

Here the baby recoiled a step farther, and stared with still larger eyes, his mouth open ready to cry again, the tears rising, his little person drawn together with that instinctive dread of some attack which seems natural to the helpless. Winnie stretched out her arm to him with a smile of invitation.

"Come to me, little man, come to me," she cried. Tears came to her eyes too, and a softening to her heart. The little creature belonged to her after a fashion; he was her

own flesh and blood; he was innocent, not struggling for gain. She did not ask how he came there, nor notice the straying of his eyes to something behind, which inspired yet terrified him. She was too glad to feel the unaccustomed sensation of pleasure loosen her bonds. “It is true I am your Aunt Winnie. Come, Georgie, don’t be afraid of me. Come, for I love you,” she said.

Half attracted, half forced by the influence behind, which was to Winnie invisible, the child made a shy step towards the bed. “Oo send Georgie away,” he stammered. “Oo send Georgie back to big ship. Mamma ky. Georgie no like big ship.”

“Come and tell me, Georgie.” She leant towards him, holding out arms in which the child saw a refuge from the imperative signs which were being addressed to him from behind the bed. He came forward slowly with his little tottering steps, his big eyes full of inquiry, wonder, and suspicion.

“Oo take care of Georgie?” he said, with a little whimper that went to Winifred’s heart; then suffered himself to be drawn into her arms. The touch of the infant was like balm to her.

“Yes, dear,” she cried, with tears in her eyes; “as far as I can, and with all my heart I will take care of Georgie.” It was a vow made, not to the infant, who had no comprehension, but to Heaven and her own heart.

But there was some one else who heard and understood after her fashion. As Winifred said these words with a fervour beyond description, a sudden running fire of sobs broke forth behind the head of her bed. Then with a rush and sweep something heavy and soft fell down by her side, almost crushing Georgie, who began to cry with fright and wonder.

“Oh, Miss Winnie! God bless you! I knew that was what you would say,” cried Mrs. George, clasping Winifred’s arm with both her hands, and laying down her wet, soft cheek upon it. “He thought not; he said we should have to go back again in that dreadful ship; but oh, bless you! I knew you weren’t one of that kind!”

"Is it you, Mrs. George?" said Winifred faintly. The sudden apparition of the mother gave her a shock; and she began to perceive that the little scene was melodramatic, got up to excite her feelings. She drew back a little coldly; but the baby gazing at her between his bursts of crying, and pressing closer and closer to her shoulder, frightened by his mother's onslaught, was no actor. She began to feel after a moment that the mother herself, crying volubly like a schoolgirl, and clutching her arm as if it were that of a giant, was, if an actor so very simple an actor, with devices so transparent and an object so little concealed, that moral indignation was completely misplaced against her artless wiles, and that nature was far stronger in her than guile. In the first revulsion she spoke coldly; but after a moment, with a truer insight, "Stand up," she said. "Don't cry so. Get a chair and come and sit by me. You must not go on your knees to me."

"Oh, but that I will," cried Mrs. George, "as if you were the Queen, Miss Winnie; for you have got our lives in your hands. Look at that poor little fellow, who is your own flesh and blood. Oh, will you listen to what worldly folks say, and send him away to be brought up as if he was nobody, and him your own nephew and just heir?—oh, I don't mean that! It appears he's got no rights, though I always thought—the eldest son's eldest son! But no; I don't say that. George pleased himself marrying me, and if he lost his place for that, ain't it more than ever my duty to do what I can for him? And I don't make no claim. I don't talk about rights. You've got the right, Miss Winnie, and there's an end of it. Whoever opposes, it will never be George and me. But oh," cried the young woman, rising from her knees, and addressing to Winifred all the simple eloquence of her soft face, her blue eyes blurred with tears, which flowed in half a dozen channels over the rosy undefined outline of her cheeks,—"oh, if you only knew what life was in foreign parts! It don't suit George. He was brought up a gentleman, and he can't abear common ways. And the children!—oh, Miss Winnie, the little boys! Would you stand by and see them brought up to hold horses and to run errands—them that are your own flesh and

blood?”

Little Georgie had ceased to whimper. The sight of his mother’s crying overawed the baby. He was too safe and secure in Winifred’s arms to move at once—but, reflecting in his infant soul, with his big eyes turned to his mother all the while she spoke, was at last touched beyond his childish capacity of endurance, forsook the haven in which he had found shelter, and, flinging his arms about her knees, cried out, “Mamma, don’t ky, mamma, me love you!” burying his face in the folds of her dress. Mrs. George stooped down and gathered him up in her arms with a sleight of hand natural to mothers, and then, child and all, precipitated herself once more on the carpet at the bedside.

Winifred, too, was carried out of herself by this little scene. She dried the fast-flowing tears from the soft face so near to her as if the young mother had been no more serious an agent than Georgie. “You shall not go back. You shall want nothing that I can do for you,” she cried, soothing them. It was some time before the tumult calmed; but when at last the fit of crying was over, Mrs. George began at once to smile again, with an easy turn from despair to satisfaction. She held her child for Winifred to kiss, her own lips trembling between joy and trouble.

“I don’t ask you to kiss me, for I’m not good enough for you to kiss; but Georgie—he is your own flesh and blood.”

“Do not say so,” said Winifred, kissing mother and child. “And now sit beside me and talk to me, and do not call me miss, for I am your sister. I am sure you have been a good wife to George.”

“I should be that and more: since he lost his fortune, and his ’ome, and all, for me,” she cried.

The scene which ensued was the most unexpected of all. Mrs. George placed the child upon Winifred’s bed and began, without further ado, a baby game of peeps and transparent hidings, her excitement turning to laughter, as it had turned to tears.

Winifred, too, though her heart was heavy enough, found herself drawn into that sudden revulsion. They played with little Georgie for half an hour in the middle of all the care and pain that surrounded them, the one woman with her heart breaking, the other feeling, as far as she could feel anything, that the very life of her family hung in the balance—moving the child to peals of laughter, in which they shared after their fashion, as women only can, interposing this episode of play into the gravest crisis. It was only when Georgie's laughter began to show signs of that over-excitement that leads to tears, that Winifred suddenly said, almost to herself, "But how am I to do it? how am I to do it?" with an accent of weary effort which almost reached the length of despair.

"Oh dear! you that are so good and kind," cried Mrs. George, changing also in a moment, "just let us stay with you, dear Winnie—it's a liberty to call you Winnie; but oh dear, dear! why can't we just live all together? That would do nobody any harm. That would go against no one's will. It wasn't said you were not to give me and George and the children an 'ome. Oh, only think! it's such a big, big house! If you didn't like the noise of the children,—but you aren't one of that sort, not to like the noise of the children, and so I told George,—they could have their nursery where you would never hear a sound. And George would be a deal of use to you in managing the estate, and I would do the housekeeping, and welcome, and save you any trouble. And why, why—oh, why shouldn't we just settle down all together, and be, oh, so comfortable, Miss Winnie, dear?"

This suggestion, it need scarcely be said, struck Winifred with dismay. The face, no longer weeping, no longer elevated by the passionate earnestness of the first appeal, dropping to calculations which, perhaps, were more congenial to its nature, gave her a chill of repulsion while still her heart was soft. She seemed to see, with a curious second sight, the scene of family life, of family tragedy, which might ensue were this impossible plan attempted. It was with difficulty that she stopped Mrs. George, who, in the heat of success, would have settled all the details at once, and it was only

the entrance of Miss Farrell, tenderly anxious about her pupil's health, and astounded to find Mrs. George and her child established in her room, that finally delivered poor Winnie.

"You would have no need of strangers eating you up if you had us," her sister-in-law said, as she stooped to kiss her ostentatiously, and held the child up to repeat the salute ere she went away.

Winifred had kissed the young mother almost with emotion in the midst of her pleading; but somehow this return of the embrace gave a slight shock both to her delicacy and pride. She laughed a little and coloured when Miss Farrell, after the door closed, looked at her astonished. "You think I have grown into wonderful intimacy with Mrs. George?" she said.

"I do indeed, Winnie. My dear, I would not interfere, but you must not let your kind heart carry you too far."

"Oh, my kind heart!" cried the girl, feeling a desperate irony in the words. "She suggests that they should live with me," she added, turning her head away.

"Live with you? Winnie! my dear!" Miss Farrell gasped, with a sharp break between each word.

"She thinks it will arrange itself so, quite simply—oh, it is quite simple! Dear Miss Farrell, don't say anything. I have been pushing it off. I have been pretending to be ill because I was miserable. Let me get up now—and don't say anything," she added after a moment, with lips that trembled in spite of herself. "There are no—letters; no one—has been here?"

"Nothing, Winnie." Her friend did not look at her; she dared not betray her too profound sympathy, her personal anguish, even by a kiss.

When Winifred came downstairs she found Mr. Babington waiting for her. He was a very old acquaintance, whom she had not been used to think of as a friend; but trouble makes strange changes in the aspect of things around us, turning sometimes

those whom we have loved most into strangers, and lighting up faces that have been indifferent to us with new lights of compassion and sympathy. Mr. Babington's formal manner, his well-known features, so composed and commonplace, his grey, keen eyes under their bushy eyebrows, suddenly took a new appearance to Winifred. They seemed to shine upon her with the warmth of ancient friendship. She had known him all her life, yet, it seemed, had never known him till to-day. He came to meet her, holding out his hand, with some kind, ordinary questions about her health, but all the while a light put out, as it were, at the windows of his soul, to help her, another poor soul stumbling along in the darkness. It was not anything that he said, nor that she said. She did not ask for any help, nor he offer it; and yet in a moment Winifred felt herself, in her mind, clinging to him with the sense that here was an old, old friend, somebody, above all doubt and uncertainty, in whom she could trust.

"Miss Winifred," he said, "I am afraid, though you don't seem much like it, that we must talk of business."

"Yes; I wish it, Mr. Babington. I am only foolish and troubled—not ill at all."

"I am not so sure about that; but still— Your brother Tom has been warning me, Miss Winifred— I hope to save you from a false step; that you are thinking of—going against your father's will"—

"Did Tom tell you so, Mr. Babington?"

"He did. I confess that I was not surprised. I have expected you to do so all along; but so fine a fortune as you have got is not to be lightly parted with, my dear young lady. Think of all the power it gives you, power to do good, to increase the happiness, or at least the comfort, perhaps of hundreds of people. If it was in your brothers' hands, do you think it would be used as well? We must think of that, Miss Winifred, we must think of that."

"If it was in my power," she said, looking at him wistfully, "I should think rather of what is just. Can anything be good that is founded upon injustice? Oh, Mr.

Babington, put yourself in my place! Could you bear to take away from your brother, from any one, what was his by nature—to put yourself in his seat, to take it from him, to rob him?"

"Hush, hush, my dear girl! I am afraid I have not a conscience so delicate as yours. I could bear a great deal which does not seem bearable to you. And you must remember it is no doing of yours. Your father thought, and I agree with him, that you would make a better use of his money, and do more credit to his name, than either of your brothers. It throws a fearful responsibility upon you, we may allow; but still, my dear Miss Winifred"—

"Mr. Babington," she cried, interrupting him, "you are my oldest friend—oh yes, my oldest friend! You know, if I am forced to do this, it will only be deceiving from beginning to end. I will only pretend to obey. I will be trying all the time, as I am now, to find out ways of defeating all his purposes, and doing—what he said I was not to do!"

Her eyes shone almost wildly through the tears that stood in them. She changed colour from pale to red, from red to pale; her weakness gave her the guise of impassioned strength.

"Miss Winifred," said the lawyer very gravely, "do you know that you are guilty of the last imprudence in saying this, of all people in the world, to me?"

"Oh," she cried, "you are my friend, my old friend! I never remember the time when I did not know you. It is not imprudent, it is my only hope. Think a little of me first, whom you knew long before this will was made. Tell me how I can get out of the bondage of it. Teach me, teach me how to cheat everybody, for that is all that is left to me! how to keep it from them so as best to give it to them. Teach me! for there is no one I can ask but you."

The lawyer looked at her with a very serious face. Her great emotion, her trembling earnestness, the very force of her appeal, as of one consulting her only oracle, hurt

the good man with a sympathetic pain. “My dear,” he said, “God forbid I should refuse you my advice, or misunderstand you, you who are far too good for any of them. But, Miss Winifred, think again, my dear. Are you altogether a free agent? Is there not some one else who has a right to be consulted before you take a step—which may change the whole course of your life?”

Winifred grew so pale that he thought she was going to faint, and got up hurriedly to ring the bell. She stopped him with a movement of her hand. Then she said firmly, “There is no one; no one can come between me and my duty. I will consult nobody—but you.”

“My dear young lady, excuse me if I speak too plainly; but want of confidence between two people that are in the position of”—

“You mean,” she said faintly yet steadily, “Dr. Langton? Mr. Babington, he has no duty towards George and Tom. I love them—how can I help it? they are my brothers; but he—why should he love them? I don’t expect it—I can’t expect it. I must settle this by myself.”

“And yet he will be the one to suffer,” said the lawyer reflectively in a parenthesis. “My dear Miss Winifred, take a little time to think it over, there is no cause for hurry; take a week, take another day. Think a little”—

“I have done nothing but think,” she said, “since you told me first. Thinking kills me, I cannot go on with it; and you can’t tell—oh, you can’t tell how it harms them, what it makes them do and say! Tom”—(here her voice was stifled by the rising sob in her throat) “and all of them,” she cried hastily. “Oh, tell me how to be done with it, to settle it so that there shall be no more thinking, no more struggling!” She clasped her hands with a pathetic entreaty, and looked imploringly at him. And she bore in her face the signs of the struggle which she pleaded to be freed from. Her face had the parched and feverish look of anxiety, its young, soft outline had grown pinched and hollow, and all the cheerful glow of health had faded. The lawyer

looked at her with genuine tenderness and pity.

“My poor child,” he said, “one can very well see that this great fortune, which your poor father believed was to make you happy, has brought anything but happiness to you.”

She gave him a little pathetic smile, and shook her head; but she was not able to speak.

“Then, Miss Winifred,” he said cheerfully, “since you are certain that you don’t want it, and won’t have it, and have made up your mind to do nothing but scheme and plot to frustrate the will, even when you are seeming to obey it,—I think I know a better way. Write down what you mean to do with the property, and leave the rest to me.”

She looked at him, roused by his words, with an awakening thrill of wonder. “Write down—what I mean to do? But that will make me helpless to do it; that will risk everything; or so you said.”

“I said true. Nevertheless, if you are sure you wish, at the bottom of your heart, to sacrifice yourself to your brothers”—

She shook her head half angrily, with a gesture of impatience. “To give them back their rights.”

“That means the same thing in your phraseology. If that is what you really wish, do what I say, and leave the rest to me.”

She looked at him for a moment, bewildered, then rose up hastily and flew to the writing-table. How easy it was to do it! how blessed if only it were possible to throw this weight once for all off her shoulders, and be free!

CHAPTER XIX

THIS was in the morning, and nothing further happened until the afternoon.

Winifred, though she was tremulous with weakness, had her pony carriage brought round, and went out, taking Miss Farrell with her. They went sometimes slowly, sometimes like the wind, as their conversation flagged or came to a point of interest. They had much to say to each other, and argued over and over again the same question. They went round and round the park, and along a bit of road between the Brentwood gate and the one that was called the Hollyport. Winifred's ponies seemed to take that way without any will of hers. Was it without her will? But, if not, it was quite ineffectual. The long road stretched white on either side, disappearing here and there round the corner of the woods; but there was no one visible, one way or the other—no one whom the ladies wished to see. Once, indeed, as they approached the farthest gate on their return, some one riding quickly, at a pace only habitual to one person they knew, appeared on the brow of the Brentwood hill coming towards them. The reins shook in Winifred's hands. She let her ponies fall into a walk, not so much of set purpose as because her wrists had lost all power; and the reins lay on the necks of the little pair, who, like other pampered servants, did no more work than they were obliged to do. The horseman came steadily down the hill, and disappeared in the hollow, from which he would naturally reappear again and meet them before many minutes. But he did not reappear. The ladies lingered, the ponies took advantage of the moment of weakness to draw aside to the edge of the road and munch grass, as if they were uncertain of their daily corn. But no one came by that way. They had not said anything to each other, nor had either said a word to show that she was aware of any meaning in this pause. When, however, there was no disguising that it was futile, Winifred said, almost under her breath, "He must have gone round by the other way."

"I heard there was some one ill at the Manor Farm," said Miss Farrell, with a quick catching of her breath.

"That will be the reason," Winifred said, with a dreary calm, and she said no more, nor was any name mentioned between them as they drove quietly home. Old

Hopkins came out to the steps as she gave the groom the reins.

“If you please, Miss Winifred, Mr. Babington has been asking for you. He said, would you please step into the library as soon as you came back. The gentlemen,” Hopkins added after a pause, with much gravity, “is both there.”

“Will you come, Miss Farrell?” Winifred said.

“If I could be of any use to you, my darling; but I could not, and you would rather that no one was there.”

“Perhaps,” said Winifred, with a sigh. Yet it was forlorn to see her in her deep mourning, walking slowly in her weakness, alone and deserted, though with so much depending on her. She went into the library without even taking off her hat. Mr. Babington was seated there at what had been her father’s writing-table, and Tom and George were both with him. Tom stood before the fire, with that air of assumption which he had never put off—the rightful-heir aspect, determined to stand upon his rights. George had his wife with him as usual, and sat with her whispering and consulting at the other end of the room. Mr. Babington had been writing; he had a number of papers before him, but evidently, from the silence, only broken by the undertones of George and his wife, which prevailed, had put off all explanations until Winifred was present. Neither of the brothers stirred when she entered. George had forgotten, in the composure of a husband whose wife requires none of the delicacies of politeness from him, those civilities which men in other circumstances instinctively pay to women, and Tom was too much out of temper and too deeply opposed to his sister to show her any attention. Mr. Babington rose and gave her a chair.

“Sit here, Miss Winifred. I shall want to place various things very clearly before you,” he said. “Now, will you all give me your attention?” His voice subdued Mrs. George, who had sprung up to go to her sister-in-law with a beaming smile of familiarity. She fell back with a little alarm into her chair at her husband’s side.

"You are all aware of the state of affairs up to this point," Mr. Babington said. "Your father's large fortune, left in succession, first to one and then to the other of his sons, to be withdrawn from both as they in turn displeased him, has been finally left to Miss Winifred, whom he thought the most likely of his three children to do him credit and spend his money fitly. Exception may be taken to what he did, but none, in my opinion, to the reason. He thought of that more than anything else, and he chose what seemed to him the best means to have what he wanted."

"He must have been off his head; I shall never believe anything else, though there may not be enough evidence," Tom said.

"I daresay my father was right," said George in his despondent voice.

"I think, from his point of view, your father was quite right; but there are many things that men, when they make their wills, don't take into consideration. They think, for one thing, that their heirs will feel as they do, and that they have an absolute power to make themselves obeyed. This, unfortunately, they very often fail to do. Miss Winifred becomes heir under a condition with which she refuses to comply."

"Mr. Babington!" Winifred said, putting her hand on his arm.

"You may trust to me, my dear. The condition is, that she is not, under any circumstances, to share the property with her brothers, or to interfere in any way with the testator's arrangements for them. This she refuses to do."

"Don't be a fool, Winnie!" cried Tom. "Pass over that, please. We all know what you mean, and that she's to pose as our benefactor, and to receive our eternal gratitude, and so forth."

"I think it would be a great pity if Winnie took any rash step," George said.

Mr. Babington looked round upon them with a smile. "She wishes," he said, "to give the landed property, Bedloe, to her brother George, and to make up an equivalent to it in money for Mr. Tom there. These are the arrangements she proposes to me—the

sole executor, you will observe, charged to carry your father's will into effect." He took up one of the papers as he spoke, and with a smile, caught in his own the hand which she once more tremulously put forth to interrupt him. "Here is the proposal written in her own hand," he said. "Miss Winifred, you must trust to me; I am acting for the best. Naturally this puts an end to her, as her father's heir."

Here there arose a confused tumult round the little group in the middle of the room. Mrs. George was the first to make herself heard. She burst forth into sobs and tears.

"Oh! after all she's promised to do for us! after all she's said for the children! Oh, George! go and do something, stand up for your sister. Don't let it be robbed away from her, after all she's promised. Oh, George! Oh, Miss Winnie! remember what you've promised!—and what is to become of Georgie?" the young mother cried.

"Mr. Babington," said George, "I don't think it's right to take advantage of my sister because she's foolish and generous. Who is it to go to if you take it from her? Let one of us at least have the good of it. I don't want her to give me Bedloe. She could be of use to us without that."

Tom had burst into a violent laugh of despite and despair. "If that's what it's to come to," he said, "we'll go to law all of us. Winnie too, by Jove! No one can say we're not a united family now."

Winifred sat with her eyes fixed on the old lawyer's face. She said nothing, and if there was a tremor in her heart too, did not express it, though already there began to arise dull whispers—Ought she to have done it? Was it her duty? Was this in reality the way to serve them best?

"The law is open to whoever seeks its aid—when they have plenty of money," said Mr. Babington quickly. "You ask a very pertinent question, Mr. George. It is one which never has been put to me before by any of the persons most concerned."

This statement fell among them with a thrill like an electric shock. It silenced Tom's nervous laughter and Mrs. George's sobs. They instinctively drew near with a

bewildering expectation, although they knew not what their expectation was.

“Mr. Chester,” said the lawyer, “like most men, thought he had plenty of time before him, and he did not understand much about the law. I am bound to add that in this particular he got little information from me; and the consequence was that he forgot, in God’s providence, to assign any heirs, failing Miss Winifred. It was a disgrace to my office to let such a document go out of it,” he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, “but so it was. He thought perhaps that he would live for ever, or that at least he’d see his daughter’s children, or that she would do implicitly what he told her, or something else as silly—begging your pardon; all men are foolish where wills are concerned.”

There was another pause. Mr. Babington leant back in his chair, so much at his ease and leisure, that he looked like a benevolent grandfather discoursing to his children round him. They surrounded him, a group of silent and anxious faces. Tom was the one who thought he knew the most. He asked, with a voice which sounded parched in his throat, moistening his lips to get the words out, “Who gets the property, then?” bringing out the question with a rush.

Mr. Babington turned his back upon Tom. He addressed himself to George, whose face had no prevision in it, but was only dully, quietly anxious, as was habitual to him. George knew little about the law. He was not in the way of expecting much. Whatever new thing might come, it was in all likelihood a little worse than the old. He was vexed and grieved that Winnie, who certainly would have been kind to him and his children, was not to have the money; but he had not an idea in his mind as to what, failing her, its destination would be.

“Mr. George Chester,” he said, “you are the eldest son; your father, I suppose, had his reasons for cutting you out, but those reasons I hope don’t exist now. As your sister refuses to accept the condition under which the property comes to her, and as your father made no provision for such a contingency, it follows that the will is not

worth the paper it is written on, and that Mr. Chester as good as died intestate, if you know what that means."

Tom, who had been listening intently over Mr. Babington's shoulder, threw up his clenched hands with a loud exclamation. Into George's blank face there crept a tremor as of light coming. Winifred and Mrs. George sat unmoved except by curiosity and wonder, unenlightened, trying to read, as women do, the meaning in the face of the speaker, but uninformed by the words.

"If I know what that means? Intestate? I don't think I do know what it means."

"You fool!" his brother cried.

"It means," said Mr. Babington, "a kind of natural justice more or less, at least in the present circumstances. When a man dies intestate, his landed property (I'll spare you law terms) goes without question to his eldest son—which you are—and natural representative. The personalty, that is the money, you know, is divided. Do you understand now what I mean? The personal property is far more than the real in this case, so it will make a very just and equal division. And now, Miss Winnie, tell me if I have not managed well for you? Are you satisfied now to have trusted yourself to your old friend?"

"George, George! I don't understand. What's to be divided? What do we get?" cried Mrs. George, standing up, the tears only half dried in her eyes, her rose tints coming back to her face.

George was so startled and overwhelmed by information which entered but slowly into an intelligence confused by ill-fortune, that for the moment he made his wife no reply; but Tom did, who had already fully savoured all the sweets and bitters of this astounding change of affairs.

"Mrs. Chester," he said, with an ironical bow, "you get Bedloe, my father's place, that he never would have let you set foot in, if he could have helped it, poor old governor. And the rest of us get—our due; oh yes, we get our due. I know I was a

fool and didn't keep his favour when I had got it; and you, Winnie, you traitor, oh, you traitor! There isn't a female for the word, is there? it should be female altogether. You that he put his last trust in, poor old governor! you've served him out the best of any of us," said Tom, with a burst of violent laughter, "and there's an end of him and all his schemes!" he cried.

Winifred rose up tremulous. There was perhaps in her heart too an echo of Tom's rage and sense of wrong. This woman, the reverse of all that her father's ambition (vulgar ambition, yet so strong) had hoped for, to be the mistress of the house! And Bedloe, which Winnie loved, to pass away to a family which had rubbed off and forgotten even the little gloss of artificial polish which Mr. Chester had procured for his sons. She would have given it to them had the power been in her hands, she had always intended it, never from the first moment meant anything else. And yet when all was thus arranged according to her wish, above her hopes, Winifred felt, to the bottom of her heart, that to give up her home to Mrs. George was a thing not to be accomplished without a thrill of indignation, a sense of wrong. And the very relief which filled her soul brought back to her those individual miseries which this blessed decision (for it was a blessed decision though cruel) could not take away. She made Tom no reply. She scarcely returned the pressure of Mr. Babington's kind hand. She said not a word to the agitated, triumphant, yet astonished pair, who could not yet understand what good fortune had happened to them. She went straight out of the library to Miss Farrell's room. She still wore her hat and outdoor dress. She took her old friend's hand, and drew her out of the chair in which she had been seated, watching for every opening of the door. "Come," she said, "come away."

"What has happened, Winnie? What has happened?"

"Everything that is best. George has got Bedloe. It is all right, all right, better than any one could have hoped. And I shall not sleep another night under this roof. Dear Miss Farrell, if you love me, come away, come away!"

CHAPTER XX

EDWARD LANGTON had never meant to forsake his love. He intended no more to give her up because she did not agree with him, because he thought her mistaken, or even because she had rejected his guidance and wounded his pride, than he meant to give up his life. But he had been very deeply wounded by her acceptance of his withdrawal at that critical moment. She had not chosen to put him, her natural defender, between her brothers and herself. She had refused, so his thoughts went on to say, his intervention. She had preferred to keep her interests separate from his, to give him no share in what might be the most important act of her life. He would not believe it possible when he left her. As he crossed the hall and hurried down the avenue, he thought every moment that he heard some one, a messenger hastening after him to bring him back. But there was no such messenger. He expected next morning a letter of explanation, of apology, at least of invitation imploring him not to forsake her—but there was none. While Winifred's heart sank lower and lower at the absence of any communication from him, he was waiting with a mingled sense of dismay, astonishment, and indignation for something from her. It seemed incredible to him that she should not write to soothe away his offence, to explain herself. His first sensation indeed had been that the offence given to him was deadly and not to be explained, and that she who would not have him to help her in her trouble, could not want him in her life; but before the next morning came he had reasoned himself into a certainty that he should have as full an explanation as it was possible to make, that she would excuse herself by means of a hundred arguments which his own reason suggested to him, and call him to her with every persuasion of love. But nothing of the kind took place— Winifred, sick and miserable, awaited on her side the letter, the inquiry which never came, and felt herself forsaken at the moment when every generous heart, she thought, must have felt how much she needed support and sympathy. She did not want his interference; she had been able

to manage her family business—to do without him; he had been de trop between her brothers and herself. Then let it be so! he said at last to himself, and plunged into his work, riding hither and thither, visiting even patients who needed him no longer, to prove to himself that he was too much and too seriously offended to care. To be sure, he was not the man to stand cap in hand and plead for her favour.

He went over all the district in those three days, dashing along the roads, hurrying from one hamlet to another. It was not the life he had been so foolish as to imagine to himself, the life—he felt himself blush hotly at the recollection—of the master of Bedloe, restoring the prestige of the old name, changing the aspect of the district, ameliorating everything as only (he thought) a man who was born the friend and master of the place could do. It had been an ideal life which he had imagined for himself, not one of selfishness. He had meant to brighten the very face of the country, to mend everything that needed mending, to do good to the poor people, who were his own people. He remembered now that there were those who thought it humiliating and base for a man to be enriched by his wife, and the subtle contempt of women embodied in that popular prejudice rose up in hot and painful shame to his heart and his face. A man is never so sure that women are inferior, as when a woman has neglected or played him false. Edward Langton's heart was very sore, but he began to say to himself that it served him right for his meanness in depending on a woman, and that a man ought to be indebted to his own exertions and not look for advancement in so humiliating a way. These thoughts grew more and more bitter as the days went on. He flung himself into his work: an epidemic would have pleased him better than the mild little ailments or lingering chronic diseases which were the only visitations known among those healthy country folk; but such as they were he made the most of them, frightening the sick people by the unnecessary energy of his attendance, and saying to himself that this, and not a fiction of the imagination or anything so degrading as a wife's fortune, was his true life. That he flew about the country without many a lingering unwilling look towards Bedloe, it

would be false to say. His way wherever he went led him past the park gates, which he found always closed, silent, giving no sign. On the one occasion when Winifred perceived him descending the hill, by one of those hazards which continually arise to confuse human affairs, he, for the moment half-happy in the entrancement of a case which presented dangerous complications, did not see or recognise the little pony carriage lingering under the russet trees, and thus missed the only chance of a meeting and explanation; but he did meet, when that chance was over, next day, in the afternoon, Mr. Babington driving his heavy old phaeton from the gates of Bedloe. Langton's heart gave a leap even at this means of hearing something of Winnie; but perhaps his pride would still have prevented any clearing up, had not the old lawyer taken it into his own hands. He stopped his horse and waited till Edward, who was walking home from the house of a patient in the village, came up.

"I want to speak to you," Mr. Babington said. "Will you jump up and come with me along the road, or will you offer me your hospitality and a bit of dinner? There is full moon to-night and I don't mind being late. Oh, if it's not convenient, never mind."

Edward's pride had made him hesitate—his good breeding came to his aid, showing it to be inevitable that he should obey the hungry longing of his heart.

"Certainly it is convenient, and I am too glad—drive on to my house, and I shall be with you in a moment."

Though he had felt it to be his only salvation to hold fast by his profession and present tenor of existence, Langton's heart beat loud as he hurried on. Now, he said to himself, he should know what it meant, now he should have some light thrown upon the position at least which Winifred had assumed.

Mr. Babington, however, ate his dinner, which was simple and not over-abundant, having been prepared for the doctor alone, with steady composure, and it was only when the meal was over that he opened out. Langton had apologised, as was inevitable, for the simple fare.

“Don’t say a word,” said the lawyer, with a wave of his hand. “It was all excellent, and I’m glad to see you’ve such a good cook. You don’t know what a comfort it is to come out of a confused house like that, with lengthy fine dinners that nobody understands, to a comfortable chop which a man can enjoy and which it is a pleasure to see.”

“Bedloe was not a confused house in former days,” said Langton, with a feeling that Winifred’s credit was somehow assailed.

“Ah, nothing is as it was in former days,” said Mr. Babington, shaking his head; “everything is topsy-turvy now. I suppose you know all about the last turn the affair has taken. I wonder you were not there, though, to support poor Miss Winifred, poor thing, who has had a great deal to go through.”

“You will be surprised,” said Langton, forcing a somewhat pale smile, “if I tell you that I don’t know anything about it. Miss Chester preferred that the question between her brothers and herself should be settled among themselves. And perhaps she was right.”

“My dear Langton,” said Mr. Babington, laying his hand on the young man’s arm, “I hope there’s no coolness on this account between that poor girl and you?”

“I see no reason why she should be called a poor girl,” Langton said quickly.

“Ah, well, you have not seen her then during the last two or three days. Poor thing! between making the best of these fellows, and struggling to keep up a show of following her father’s directions—between acting false and meaning true”—

“Mr. Babington,” said Langton, with a dryness in his throat, “unhappily, as you say, there has been—no coolness, thank Heaven—but a little—a momentary silence between Miss Chester and me. Perhaps I have been to blame. I thought she— Tell me what has happened, and how everything is settled, for pity’s sake!”

“Yes,” said the old lawyer, “I haven’t the slightest doubt, my young friend, that you have been to blame. That is why the poor child looked so white and pathetic when

she said to me that she had no one to consult. When you come to have girls of your own," Mr. Babington said somewhat severely, "you'll know how it feels to see a little young creature you are fond of look like that."

Heaven and earth! as if all the old fogeys in the world, if they had a thousand daughters, could feel half what a young lover feels! The blood rose to young Langton's temples, but he did not trust himself to reply.

"Well," Mr. Babington continued, "it's all comfortably settled at the last. I had my eye on this solution all along. I may say it was my doing all along, for I carefully refrained from pointing out to him what of course, in an ordinary way, it would have been my duty to point out—that in case of Miss Winifred's refusal there was no after settlement. You don't understand our law terms, perhaps? Well, it was just this, that if she refused to accept, there was no provision for what was to follow. I knew all along she would never accept to cut out her brothers—so here we come to a dead stop. He had not prepared for that contingency. I don't believe he ever thought of it. She had obeyed him all her life, and he thought she would obey him after he was dead. She refused the condition, and here we are in face of a totally different state of affairs. The other wills were destroyed, and this was as good as destroyed by her refusal. What is to be done then but to return to the primitive condition of the matter? He dies intestate, the property is divided, and everybody, with the exception of that scamp Tom, is content."

"I don't understand," Langton said: it was true so far, that the words were like an incoherent murmur in his ears—but even while he spoke, the meaning came to his mind like a flash of light. He had put aside all such (as he said to himself) degrading imaginations, and had made up his mind that his work was his life, and that a country doctor he was, and should remain; but, all the same, the sensation of knowing that Bedloe had become unattainable in fact and certainty, not only by the temporary alienation of a misunderstanding, went through his heart like a sudden

knife.

“I can make you understand in a moment,” said Mr. Babington. “Miss Winifred made the will void by refusing to fulfil its condition, and no provision had been made for that emergency; therefore, in fact, it is as if poor Chester had never made a will at all: in which case the landed property goes to the eldest son. The personalty is divided. They will all be very well off,” the lawyer added. “There is nothing to complain of, though Tom is wild that he is not the heir, and Miss Winifred, poor girl—she was very anxious to do justice, but when it came to giving over her house to that pink-and-white creature, much too solid for her age, George’s wife—Well, it was her own doing; but she could not bear it, you know. Her going off like that left them all very much confused and bewildered, but I think on the whole it was the wisest thing she could do.”

“How going off?” cried Langton, starting to his feet.

“My dear fellow, didn’t you know? Come now, come now,” said the old lawyer, patting him on the arm, “this is carrying things too far. You should not have left her when she wanted all the support that was possible. And she should not have gone away without letting you know—but poor thing, poor thing! I don’t think she knew whether she was on her head or her heels. She couldn’t bear it. She just turned and fled and took no time to think.”

“Turned and fled? Do you mean to say—do you mean to tell me”— The young man, though he was no weakling, changed colour like a girl: his sunburnt, manly countenance showed a sudden pallor under the brown, something rose in his throat. He took a turn about the room in his sudden excitement, then came back, mastering himself as best he could. “I beg your pardon; this news is so unexpected, and everything is so strange. Of course,” he added, forcing himself into composure, “I shall hear.”

“Yes, of course you’ll hear; but if I were you, I should not wait to hear, I should

insist on knowing, my young friend. Don't let pride spoil your whole existence, as I've seen some things do with boys and girls. She is well enough off, to be sure. I wish my girls had the half or quarter of what she will have; but still it's a come-down from Bedloe. And to give it up to Mrs. George, that was harder than she thought. She thought only of her brothers, you know, till she saw the wife. What the wife did to disgust her, I can't tell, but I've always noticed that when there are two women in a case like this, they always feel themselves pitted against each other, and the men count for nothing with them. As soon as the thing was done, Miss Winnie forgot her brother: she saw only Mrs. George, and to give up to her was a bitter pill. She is a good girl, and meant everything that was good, but Mrs. George is a bitter pill: when it came to that, she felt that she could not put up with it. And you were not there, excuse me for reminding you. And she took it into her head that everything was against her, as girls do—and fled. That is the worst of girls, they are so hasty. You will know when you have daughters of your own."

Thus the good man went on maundering, quite unconscious that his companion could have risen and slain him every time that he mentioned those daughters of his own. What had his daughters to do with Winnie? Mr. Babington talked a great deal more on that and every branch of the subject, until it seemed to him that it was time "to be driving on," as he said. And then Edward had leisure for the first time to contemplate the situation in which he found himself. Self-reproach, anger, disappointment, coursed through his veins. He was wroth with the woman he loved, wroth with himself: one moment attributing to her a desire to cast him off, a want of confidence in him which it was unendurable to think of; the next, bitterly blaming his own selfish pride, which had driven him from her at the moment of her need. The high tide of conflicting sentiments was so hot within him that he went out to walk off his excitement, returning, to the consternation of his household, an hour or more after midnight, the most unhallowed of all promenadings in the opinion of the country folk. When he got back again to his dim little surgery and study, returning,

as it seemed, to a dull life deprived of her and of all things, and to the overmastering consciousness that she was gone from him, perhaps by his own fault, the young doctor had a moment of despair: then he rose up and struck his hand upon the table, and laughed aloud at himself. “Bah!” he said to himself; “nobody disappears at this time of day. What a fool one is! as if these were the middle ages! Wherever she has gone, she must have left an address!” He laughed loud and long, though his laugh was not mirthful, at this bringing down of his despair to the easy possibilities of modern life. That makes all the difference between tragedy, which is mediæval, and comedy, which is of our days: though the comedy of common living involves a great many tragedies in every age, and even in our own.

CHAPTER XXI

AN address is not everything: there must be the will and the power to write, there must be the letter produced, and the address obtained. The very first step was hard. To go up to Bedloe and ascertain from the brother, who was “that cad” to Langton, where Winifred had gone, and thus betray his ignorance and the separation between them—the idea of this was such a mortification and annoyance to him as it is difficult to describe. He could not bear to expose himself to their remarks, to perhaps their laughter, perhaps, worse still, their pity. A few days elapsed before he could screw up his courage to this point, and when at last he did so, his brief and cold note was answered by George in person, whose dejected aspect bore none of the signs of triumph which Langton had expected.

“I was coming to ask you,” George said. “My sister went off in such a hurry she left no address. She left her maid to pack up her things. I did not even know she was going. It was a great disappointment to my wife and me. We should have been very glad to have had her to stay with us until—well, until her own affairs were settled. She would have been of great use to Alice,” George continued, with an unconscious

gravity of egotism which was almost too simple to be called by that harsh name. “She could have put my wife up to a great many things: for we haven’t just been used, you know, to this sort of life, and it is very difficult to get into all the ways. And then the children were so good with Winnie, they took to her in a moment. Speaking of that, I wish you would just come up and look at Georgie. My wife thinks he is quite well, but I don’t quite like the little fellow’s look,” the anxious father said.

Langton was not mollified by this unexpected invitation. The idea of becoming medical attendant to George Chester’s children and at the beck and call of the new household at Bedloe filled him indeed with an unreasonable exasperation. He explained as coldly as he could that he did not “go in for” children’s ailments, and recommended Mr. Marlitt, of Brentwood, who was specially qualified to advise anxious parents. He was indeed so moved by the sight of the new master of Bedloe, that the purpose for which George had come was momentarily driven out of his head. Why it should be a grievance to him that George Chester was master of Bedloe he could not of course have explained to any one. He had not been exasperated by George’s father. Disappointment, and the sharper self-shame with which he could not help remembering his own imaginations on the matter, joined with the sense of angry scorn with which he beheld the place which he had meant to fill so well, filled so badly by another. George thanked him warmly for recommending Dr. Marlitt, “though I am very sorry, and so will my wife be, that you don’t pay attention to that branch. Isn’t it a pity? for surely if anything is important, it’s the children,” he said in all good faith.

It was only after he was gone that Edward reflected that he had obtained no information. It soothed him a little to think that she had not let her brother know where she was going. It had been, then, a sudden impulse of disgust, a hasty step taken in a moment when she felt herself abandoned. Edward did not forgive her, but yet he was soothed a little, even though excited and distressed beyond measure by

his failure to know where she was. A day or two passed in the lethargy of this disappointment and perplexity as to what to do next. Then he thought of Mr. Babington. He wrote immediately to the old lawyer, begging him to find out at once where Winifred was. “I don’t ask if you can, for I know you must be able to do it. People don’t disappear in these days.”

But Mr. Babington, with a somewhat peevish question whether he knew how many people did disappear, in the Thames or otherwise, and were never heard of, in these famous days of ours, informed him that he knew nothing about Winifred’s whereabouts. She had gone abroad, and with Miss Farrell, that was all he knew. By this time Edward Langton had become very anxious and unhappy, ready almost to advertise in the Times or take any other wild step. He resolved to lose no further time, not to delay by writing, but to go off at once and find her as soon as he had the smallest clue. This clue was found at last through the bankers (for Langton was quite right in his certainty that people with a banking account who draw money never do really disappear in these days), who did not refuse to tell where the last remittances had been sent. He was so anxious by this time that he went up to London himself to make these inquiries, and came back again with the fullest determination to start at once in search of Winifred. He sent to Mr. Marlitt, of Brentwood, who was a young doctor, but recently established and much in want of patients, to ask whether he could take charge of the few sick folk at Bedloe, and made all his preparations to go. It was November by this time, and all the fields were heaped with fallen leaves. He had settled everything easily on the Saturday, and on Sunday night was going up to town in time to catch the Continental mail next day.

Then—according to the usual perversity of human affairs—the epidemic came all at once, which he had invoked some time before. It broke out on the very Saturday when all his arrangements were made—two cases in one house, one in the house next door. He perceived in a moment that this was no time to leave his duty. Next day there were three more cases in the village, and in the evening, just at the

moment when he should have been starting, the brougham from Bedloe drew up at his door, with an air of agitation about the very horses, which had flecks of foam on their shoulders, and every indication of having been hard driven. George Chester entered precipitately, as pale as death.

“Oh, Langton,” he cried, “look here! don’t stand on ceremony. I never did anything against you. You attend the children in the village; why don’t you attend mine? Little Georgie’s got it!” the poor man cried out, with quivering lips.

It is not for a moment to be supposed that Edward could resist such an appeal. He went with the distracted father, and fought night and day for two or three weeks for little Georgie’s life, as well as for the lives of several other little Georgies as dear in their way. Here he had what he wanted, but not when he wanted it. When he woke up in the morning from the interrupted sleep, which was all his anxieties allowed him, he would remember in anguish that even the clue given by the bankers would serve no longer. But during the day, as he went from one bedside to another, he had too much to remember, and so the dark winter days wore away.

Winifred had taken refuge in the universal expedient of going “abroad.” It is difficult to tell all that this means to simple minds. It means a sort of cancelling of time and space, a flying on the wings of a dove, an abstraction of one’s self and one’s affairs from the burden of circumstances, from the questions of the importunate, from all that holds us to a local habitation. Winifred was sick at heart of her habitual place, and all the surroundings to which she had been accustomed. It was not possible for her, she thought, to explain the position, to answer all the demands, to make it apparent to the meanest capacity how and why it was that her own heirship was at an end. She fled from this, and from the unnatural (she said) prejudice against her brother and his wife which seized her as soon as it became apparent that Bedloe was in their hands—and she fled, but not so much from Edward, as from what she thought his desertion of her. What she thought—for after

a while she too, like Edward himself, began to feel uncertain as to whether he had deserted her—to ask herself whether she had been blameless, to say to herself that it could not be, that it was impossible they could part like this. What was it that had parted them? It had been done in a moment, it had been her brother's foolish accusation—ah, no, not that, but her own tacit refusal of his counsel and aid. When Winifred began to come to herself, to disentangle her thoughts, to see everything in perspective, it became gradually and by slow degrees apparent to her that if Edward was in the wrong, he was yet not altogether or alone in the wrong. Her mind worked more slowly than did Langton's, partly because it had been far more strained and worn, and because the complications were all on her side. She had to disengage her mind from all that had troubled and disturbed her life for weeks and months before, and to recover from the agitation of so many shocks and changes before she could think calmly, or at least without the burning at her heart of wounded feeling, hurt pride, and neglected love, of all that concerned her lover. It was some time even before she spoke to Miss Farrell of the subject that soon occupied all her thoughts. Miss Farrell had felt Edward's silence on her pupil's account with almost more bitterness than Winifred herself had felt it. She had put away his name from her lips, and had concluded him unworthy. She avoided talking of him even when Winifred began tentatively to approach the subject. "My darling, don't let us speak of him," she had said. "I have not command of myself: I might say things which I should be sorry for afterwards."

"But why should he have changed so?" Winifred said; "what reason was there? He was always kind and true."

"I don't know about true, Winnie."

Then Winifred faltered a little, remembering how he had advised her to humour her father. She made a little pause of reflection, and then abandoned the subject for the moment; but only to return to it a hundred and a hundred times. She was not one of

those that prolong a misunderstanding through a lifetime. She pondered and pondered, and it was her instinct to think herself in the wrong. She had been hasty, she had been self-absorbed. And had he not a right to be offended when she so distinctly, of her own will, by no one's suggestion, put him aside from her counsels, and let him know that she must deal with her brothers alone? It made her shiver to think what a thing it was she had thus done. She would have done it again, it was a necessity of the position in which she found herself. But yet when you reflect, to put your betrothed husband away from you in a great crisis of fate, to reject his aid, to bid him—for it was as good as bidding him—leave her to arrange matters in her own way, what an outrage was that! She could not think how she could have done it, and yet she would have done it over again. To get Miss Farrell to see this was difficult, but she succeeded at last; and then they both trembled and grew pale together to think of what had been done. Poor Edward! and all those days when Winifred had sat miserable in her room, feeling that her last hope and prop had failed her, and that she was left alone in the world, what had he been thinking on his side? That she had thrown him off, that she would have none of him? In their consultations these ladies made great use of the man's wounded pride. They allowed to each other that it was the wrong of all others which he would be least likely to bear. It was not only a wrong, it was an insult. How could they ever have thought otherwise? It was he who was forsaken, and that without a word, without a reason given.

They had settled themselves, after some wanderings, in one of those villages of the Riviera, which fashion and the pursuit of health have taken out of the hands of their peasant inhabitants. It was not a great place, full of life and commotion; but a little picturesque cluster of houses, small and great, with an old campanile rising out of the midst of them, and a soft background of mild olive-trees behind. They had thought they would stay there till the winter was over, till England had begun to grow green again, and the east winds were gone; but already, though it was not yet

Christmas, they were beginning to reconsider the matter, to feel home calling them over the misty seas. Christmas! but what a Christmas! with roses blooming, and all the landscape green and soft, the sea warm enough to bathe in, the sunshine too hot at noon. Winifred had begun to weary of the eternal greenness, of the skies which were always clear, of the air which caressed and never smote her cheek, before they had long been established in the little paradise which Miss Farrell, even with all her desire to see her child happy, could not pretend not to be pleased with.

"I cannot believe it is Christmas," Winifred said discontentedly. "No frost, no cold, even flowers!" as if this were a kind of insult. "Everything," she cried, "is out of season. I don't see how we can spend Christmas here."

"It is not like Christmas weather," said Miss Farrell; "but still, my dear, neither was it in the Holy Land, I should suppose, not like what we call Christmas," she added, faltering a little; "but it is very nice, Winnie, don't you think, dear?"

"No, I don't think it is nice: it is enervating, it is unmeaning, it has no character in it. It might be May," cried Winnie; and then she added with a sudden outburst of passion, "I don't think I can bear it any longer. I cannot bear it any longer. Oh, Miss Farrell, Edward! what can he be thinking of me, if he has not given up thinking of me altogether?"

"No, dear, not that," Miss Farrell said, soothing her.

"What, then? he must be beginning to hate me. I cannot let Christmas pass and this go on. Think of him alone amongst the frost and the snow, nothing but his sick people, no one to cheer him, called out perhaps in the middle of the night, riding miles and miles to comfort some poor creature, and no one, no one to comfort him!"

"My dear child!" Miss Farrell cried, taking Winifred into her kind arms.

At this moment there was a tinkle at the queer little bell outside—or rather it had tinkled at the moment when Winifred spoke of the frost and snow. When Miss Farrell rose and hastened to her, to raise her downcast head and dry her tears, the old

lady gave a start and cry, displacing suddenly that head which she had drawn to her own breast. Winifred, too, looked up in the sudden shock; and there, opposite to her in the doorway, a cold freshness as of the larger atmosphere outside coming in with him, stood Edward Langton, pale and eager, asking, “May I come in?” with a voice that was unsteady, between deadly anxiety and certain happiness.

They said a great deal to each other, enough to fill volumes; but so far as the present history is concerned, there need be no more to say.

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