Uncle Peter

Elizabeth Gaskell

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"I was saying, sir, that I had passed the day at Elsmore."

"Yes, I heard you, and if anything could add to the pain which your continual visits there give me, Charles, it would be the necessity that we should talk about them together."

A long silence succeeded; Mr. Peter Merton looked into the fire with contracted brows, his nephew's cheek flushed for a moment; he moved nervously and uneasily upon his chair; and eventually subsided into the same occupation which engrossed his uncle.

It was a small room in a very large house in which they sat; the evening was chilly and damp though it was yet but August, and the blazing fire upon the hearth, and the bright decanters upon the table, were the only genial−looking objects in the apartment; the chairs (there were but three of them) looked uneasy enough; the walls, covered with a faded paper, were bare and unadorned; there was scarcely any carpet, and very little furniture in the room. A large old−fashioned clock ticked with a loud and monotonous sound in the corner, filling up but not relieving the pause in the conversation.

"I saw you speaking to Thompson at the lodge to−day; what does he say about the birds this season?" said the elder of the two gentlemen at length, with a kindly voice, as if he wished the discourse to flow easily into its ordinary channels.

Now, there is nothing more troublesome and disconcerting when you have something on your mind which must be spoken, and have determined to speak it, and brought round the conversation to the point at which it might naturally be spoken, than for your companion to decline all communication upon the one to you absorbing subject, and to diverge into the commonplace interests of daily life.

Captain Merton was precisely in this uncomfortable and perplexing position; his task was made the more difficult undoubtedly from the way in which his last observation had been received, but it must be performed notwithstanding, and no amount of delay would make it much easier than it was that moment.

"I don't know anything about the game," he replied therefore, "it was about something else, dear uncle, I wished to speak to you." He paused, and his voice faltered slightly, and his colour came, though his brow grew fixed and determined as he went on, — "it was about Elsmore."

His uncle's face darkened visibly again, but he did not speak.

"It was about Elsmore, sir," the young man proceeded, "that i wished to speak to you, and about one of its inhabitants; had I seen one shadow of reason for the unaccountable prejudice which you entertain against the family, I could never have continued an intimacy with it, which, as you know, was commenced involuntarily; on the contrary, however, each succeeding day has shown me in it some fresh trait of simplicity and goodness, and such true nobility as had you, dear uncle, accepted Lord Elsmore's overtures to your acquaintance, you would long since yourself have been the first to acknowledge."

"To what is all this long preamble leading, Charles; has your young friend, Lord Bertrand, condescended to borrow a cool hundred or two, and cannot you transact the business without your rich uncle's intervention," said the old man, with a bitter smile, "for this," he added, is the common end and object of such intimaces as yours and his, the son of a London merchant with the son of an English earl."

"My mother's family was as noble as his own," exclaimed the young man.

Uncle Peter trembled and turned pale, and grasped rigidly the arms of his cushionless chair. Captain Merton saw at once the impropriety of an exclamation addressed to his paternal uncle; but it was no moment for apologies, his tale must be told, and it was not even, as he had hoped it would have been, guessed in part ere he told it.

"It was not about Lord Bertrand that I wished to speak," he continued, "but about his sister, Lady Helena."

He paused. His uncle might surely now have relieved him from any further disclosures; there is but one cause

which commonly induces a young man like Captain Merton to speak thus formally to an elderly uncle and his guardian, about a young lady of his acquaintance; but Uncle Peter sat pale and motionless; nothing could be more discouraging than that grim expression which came over and settled upon his countenance, from which even the red gleam of the firelight which fell upon it could not remove its present white unusual hue.

"About Lady Helena, for whose hand I wish to make proposals to Lord Elsmore, but before I do so, wish for your advice and approval of the step."

"Advice and approval! Me advise you to marry, or approve of your marrying any Lady Helena in the land," broke out the old man at length; "no, Charles; come to me, and tell me you wish to marry the daughter of my gamekeeper, my bailiff, the poorest cottager on my estates, anything but a daughter of that proud false class to which Lady Helena belongs. But no," he continued, after an interval, during which he had risen from his chair, and paced the room in an agitated manner; "no, no, all this excitement is unnecessary; make your proposals, my boy, and see if your high friends will listen to them when you tell them that by making them you forfeit the countenance of your rich uncle, and lose all hope of becoming his heir."

"I will tell them so," exclaimed the young man, "and by their receiving such proposals shall they be judged."

He stood up as he spoke in the grace of his tall firm figure, his head thrown back, a deep settled resolution stamped upon every line of his handsome, high−bred features; but a gentleness stole over them as he gazed upon the aged trembling figure that confronted him; there came back such memories of ancient kindness, and anxious tender care for him since his childhood; there passed before him the vision of such a dreary desolate old age for himself should the consummation which the old man threatened really take place, that he could make but one effort to induce him to relent.

"Uncle," he said, you know me, and you know that I have not, that I never had one mercenary thought about your wealth; you know that my fault is to look forward too little in such matters rather than too much, and therefore I dare beg you to reconsider the words which you have uttered; it was idle I know to ask your advice and approval when my own determination was already made. I felt that it would be thus, or I should have consulted you before, as now it is impossible for me to draw back."

"Impossible to draw back! You have not surely proposed, sir, and been accepted on the strength of expectations which you have no right to entertain."

"I have said no word to Lord Elsmore, but I have said to his daughter that which a man cannot unsay. Oh, uncle, could you but see her, so good, so gentle, so beautiful, so true; go to the cottages on their estates, and see if she is that which you conceive the women of her class to be."

The old man walked slowly to an old bureau, which stood between the two windows of the room; he unlocked it, extracted from it a large flat case of purple morocco; he touched a spring, the lid flew open; he did not glance at what it contained himself, but offered it at arm's length to his nephew.

"Is she as beautiful as that?" he said.

Captain Merton received the case: there was within it the miniature of a most lovely woman. It was a full length figure of exquisite proportions; the dress was of dark velvet, on which sparkled diamonds, which were seen too in the rich masses of her deep brown hair; a young child played at her feet, but seemed out of keeping with the principal figure, whose excess of beauty, eastern, regal, and voluptuous, suggested no one association of the calm joy of domestic affections and maternal love; the lady's eye glanced not downwards on the tiny figure beside her, but full upon you, with a certain tremulous passion which the painter had well depicted in its dark depths.

Charles Merton gazed upon it, fascinated as he gazed; was it a real or a fancied reminiscence which seemed to associate that proud brow and glowing cheek with some faint far off distance in his own life?

"Who is she?" he asked at length,tell me, uncle, who is this?"

"I will tell you what, and then tell you who. She, too, was an earl's daughter — the daughter of a poor, proud, English nobleman; she married a rich commoner, one sprung from the people; she married him for his fortune — it was princely; she spent it, or most of it, and then left him, choosing for the partner of her guilt one of that class of "true nobility," as you called it, from which she had condescended to descend. It was your mother, Charles. Go to Lord Elsmore now with your proposal, but beware of the misery and the sorrow which spring from such missorted marriages."

Captain Merton gazed still upon the picture.

"Where is she now?" he asked, faintly, at length.

"She is dead," replied his uncle, briefly.

The young man still kept his eyes fastened on the lovely face; it seemed, as he looked, that the brightness faded from the tints, that the face grew pale and sorrowful, and the eyes dim; his own indeed were wet with tears. It was a history for which he was already in some degree prepared by the half hints and half concealments with which all mention of his mother's name had been always surrounded.

There came back fully now the memory of that face; it was the same which once, long years ago, had bent over his little bed, and when he raised his own to meet it, had left a tear instead of a kiss upon his infant cheek.

When Captain Merton found himself in his own apartment that night, he contemplated his position should his uncle persist in his lately avowed intentions; but the contemplation made no difference in the decision which he had already come to. He would make proposals on the day following to Lord Elsmore for his daughter's hand; he had nearly two thousand a year of his own, the income resulting from the remains of his father's once enormous fortune, carefully nursed during his minority, which had but lately expired, by the careful hand of his uncle; he had his commission, too, and he thought still that Lord Elsmore would not be unfavorable to his suit; as for Lady Helena, he never dreamed for one moment that any change of worldly prospect would alter the feeling which she had owned herself as entertaining towards him, when he parted from her the preceding day upon the terraces of Elsmore. The room in which the young man indulged in such reflections was vast and well lighted, and furnished with all the appliances of modern luxury, amidst which his valet moved noiselessly as he made such arrangements as were necessary before leaving his master for the night.

But there was another chamber, rude, scarcely furnished at all,in a corner of that vast mansion, into which the gilded visions entered not which soon filled the brain of the young man. Dark shadows hung over the spirit of Peter Merton that night, shadows which never had been quite absent from his life, but which came to him now deepened and intensified as they had not been for years. The words which his nephew had uttered had seemed to shut out all light from that future to which he had seldom been prone to look for any very great accession of enjoyment. And the past rose before him; scenes never forgotten, morbidly brooded over in his solitary life, once more were spread before his eye. Charles Merton had been his only brother, and he had loved him with more than fraternal affection — an affection the almost passion of which manhood and succeeding years had only deepened; it had withstood the jeering remarks of his fellow−schoolboys (no light test) in early days, and in later ones, the hard, cold, separating influences of that business life in which many of his own succeeding years had passed. When Charles Merton married the high−born and beautiful Lady Augusta Trevor there came indeed a break in the intercourse which had subsisted between the brothers, but in the breast of one of them at all events the old feeling was never eradicated or diminished. Surrounded by a gay and dissipated circle of the then fashionable society of the day, Lady Augusta discouraged indeed the frequent visits of Mr. Peter Merton as far as lay in her power, and her husband, weak in character, and acting entirely under her own influence, made no effort to draw his brother into a phase of society which he saw plainly was repugnant to his tastes and uncongenial to his habits. There, however, in the drawing−room of his sister−in−law, during his brief visits, had Peter Merton imbibed those prejudices against the class to which Lady Augusta belonged, from conduct which might well have justified him in disapproving of certain individuals who composed it. He had seen his brother laughed at behind his back, and himself to his face, by individuals inferior to them in both in everything but the mere accident of birth. All this might have been forgotten, but the events which succeeded, Lady Augusta's reckless extravagance, her flight with Lord Marchdale, his brother's blighted life, which was not protracted long after the occurrence, the bitter sense of his own errors which had led to so dreadful a result that haunted Charles Merton at the last, his almost dying request that his son might, if possible, be spared such a career as his own, had confirmed every prejudice in his mind, and made him determine that the young child left to his charge should be shielded from all contact with that class of society which had wrought his family such grevious wrong and misery. He kept aloof from all the noble families in his neighbourhood, and brought up the boy in the strictest seclusion — a seclusion which was made vain and useless, however, by the ardent and unceasing wish conceived in early boyhood, and confirmed by advancing years in the young Charles for a military life. In vain had his uncle attempted to dissuade; a life of idleness was distasteful to him, and no other profession but that of arms tolerable. At last a sort of compromise was effected; his name was put down for a commission, but he consented meanwhile to go to college, his uncle hoping that the new associations of the place would succeed in diverting him from his boyish purpose. But it was not so; he passed creditably through Oxford indeed, took his degree there, and then claimed the fulfilment of his

uncle's promise; that if his desire after that continued unchanged it should be gratified.

A commission was without difficulty procured, and all the care with which his uncle had kept himself and the boy seculded from the neighbouring nobility of the county was made futile by the circumstance of Lord Bertrand, the eldest son of Lord Elsmore, being in the same regiment with Charles Merton, and soon becoming his most intimate friend.

All this the old man reviewed in his rude and lonesome chamber, and he too came to his determination — that should this marriage which was in his neqhew's thought take place, it should close all interest or interference on his part in his concerns.

Captain Merton was seldom down in time for his uncle's early breakfast, which was invariably succeeded by a walk across the park, where the old man might be seen in the early morning treading the short grass in his stout shoes, and dealing destruction to the thistles, if any such could be found, with "the spud," which he invariably carried — the only formidable implement he had been ever known to wield.

Uncle Peter was not a man to be put out of the mechanical exactitude of his life by a sleepless night and an unforseen emotion; he took his usual walk, therefore, on the morning following the conversation we have related, confirming himself, with each step he took, in the decision at which he had arrived. As he approached the house on his return he saw Captain Merton's dog cart and servant at the door, and entering the hall found his nephew pulling on his gloves preparatory to issuing forth from the house.

"Good morning, uncle."

"Good morning, Charles. May I ask where you are going so early?"

"To Lord Elsmore's, sir; I wish to find him at home; and am most certain to do so by going at this time."

"Can you let me say one word with you before you go?"

"As many as you please, sir; but I fear they will not alter my purpose."

They walked together into the room in which they had sat the preceding evening; both were perfectly calm with the calmness of a settled determination which the words of neither should alter.

"Charles," said the old man, you will tell Lord Elsmore simply and truthfully what your own fortune is, I am sure; and you will tell him that after taking this step you have nothing to hope for from me; but you are bound to tell him more, I think — the nature of the last engagements which I satisfied for you before attaining your majority."

The young man's brow grew crimson.

"I shall say, sir, all that is necessary for a man of honour to tell him who aspires to his daughter's hand — no less, no more."

They parted; the light wheels of the young man's carriage glided swiftly over the smooth road that led towards Elsmore, but his heart yet more swiftly traversed the distance, and had acted and reacted the interview which awaited him long ere he arrived at the gates of the old mansion.

And the old man — he sat all the morning long in that small, bare study, bowing beneath the burthen of that desolate existence which henceforth he felt awaited him to his grave. Did his purpose falter? No, it gained strength by the very misery which he foresaw would attend its execution.

Lord Elsmore received the young man kindly, and his suit not unfavorably. He had, indeed, perceived for some time the affection which had grown up between Charles Merton and Lady Helena; and had he felt that their union was undesirable, or impossible, he would have long ere this put an end to their intimacy. The change in the young man's prospects was related to him. Lord Elsmore looked grave, for he was not a rich man, and having a large family, could give little to his daughters; but it was too late, he felt, to commence an opposition to what, if opposed at all, should have been opposed long since; and his consent was finally obtained. Captain Merton, it was arranged, should still continue in the army, exchanging only into the household troops to avoid the chance of foreign service. And did he make the disclosure to Lord Elsmore that his uncle had so seriously urged him to make? No; he thought it useless and unnecessary. He thought, as he drove along through the clear air, that it was as superfluous as it would be undesirable to confess to Lord Elsmore every foible of his boyhood, from which he felt that he had now emerged and emancipated himself for ever. Had he known how deep a shade the offences of the past throw over the present, he might not have felt so light and careless as he did; or had he reflected how entirely the circumstances of temptation amongst which he had before fallen had been removed from his path, he might have doubted whether he were himself so changed that, should he again be placed amidst such, he might

not fall again precisely as before. But he felt and reflected not thus that day: the present was enough. He had no regret for the past — no misgiving for the future. The hours flew on rapidly and unmarked, as he sat by the side of his betrothed in the stately saloons of Elsmore, or roamed with Lady Helena through the park and woods, which had not yet lost one tint of their summer beauty.

And she, with her quiet grace and beauty, and more than all, with the freshness of her almost girlish love, had you seen her, you would not have marvelled that in her presence he forgot all beside.

The evening came, and he returned to Hursleigh, the abode of his uncle. It was late when he arrived, and his uncle had retired to rest.

On the following day he was to rejoin his regiment. He rose early, and met his uncle at the breakfast table. After which, he briefly communicated to him the result of his visit to Elsmore on the preceding day. The communication was received in silence; and, unsolicited to protract or repeat his visit, he left Hursleigh early in the day for the county town, in which his regiment was quartered. His heart was full of such a bounding sense of happiness, that he could scarcely appreciate as it deserved the change that had just taken place in his prospects, nor feel the sorrow at parting thus with his uncle, and what had hitherto been his home, which under other circumstances he would have doubtless felt. The unreasonableness of the prejudices against Lady Helena so aggravated him that he could not feel much regret at bidding his uncle farewell. There was, too, such a golden cloud of hope floating over the future in his mind, that he felt his uncle's objections must eventually give way, and the only obstacle to his happiness be in time, at all events, removed. But chiefly, there was a certain careless facility of putting from him troublesome thoughts about Charles Merton, which made any sorrow, especially such a one as this, sit more easily on him than on another.

"Are there any letters, Thomas?" asked Mr. Peter Merton, as he returned from an abnormal walk at an unusual pace, in which he had indulged immediately after the departure of his nephew.

"There are two, sir. They are in the study," was the answer.

Uncle Peter hurried thither at once. He was not usually very excited about his correspondence; but this morning he wished for business of some sort, and the receiving and answering letters was the chief one of his present life.

The two letters lay upon the study table. He knew the handwriting of one of them, and that he laid aside; the other proved to be an application for a subscription to some charity. He had many such, and answered then nobly. This however, was an unfortunate moment for such an application to arrive. He was flinging it aside impatiently without entering into the merits of the case, when he seemed to reconsider the matter, refolded it, and put it in the breast pocket of his coat, from whence he would probably take it out as he walked about the grounds, and weigh carefully its claims.

He now turned his attention to the first letter, which he did not seem to regard with much interest. It was written in a clear, large, bold Italian hand, and consisted of three sheets of "superfine cream−laid." The first was filled with inquiries about his own health, and flowing sentences of affectionate solicitude about himself and "dear Hursleigh;" the second, with an abbreviated account of the yearly history of the lady's family and herself; the third congratulated him on his nephew's approaching nuptuals with Lady Helena, and concluded with the intimation, that certain jars of wine sours, the preserving of which had been superintended by the dear girls themselves, would follow this letter, which the lady begged that he would accept, and hoped that he would like.

The writer was a Mrs. Howard, a cousin, of whom Mr. Peter Merton had seen little, but sufficient to suspect that she was in every way antipathetic to himself. Their brief intercourse seemed to have produced a diametrically opposite impression on the lady, who overpowered him with presents of hams, turkeys, preserves, and letters expressive of the highest esteem and most affectionate regard. The presents were handed over to the housekeeper; and the letters were answered in a hard, curt style, which contrasted singularly with their own. Mrs. Howard was a widow, with two daughters. Her husband had been a physician, and had left her in affluent circumstances. But she lived in the county town, where it was the main object of the lives of many persons, unfortunately without any other occupation, to be esteemed of greater consideration than their neighbours. She had, accordingly, been endeavouring continually, but hitherto ineffectually, to lessen the distance between Hursleigh and Laurel Lodge, and convince the little world around her of the reality of her relationship to the rich but eccentric Mr. Merton; a fact which, from the little intercourse subsisting between them, persons less skilled in genealogy, than were the inhabitants of B — — might have reasonably doubted.

Peter Merton read the letter to the end. A grim smile passed over his face at times as he perused it; but he still held it in his hand after reading it; and the thoughts which passed through his mind as he sat thus were certainly less unfavourable to Mrs Howard than any which had succeeded the perusal of any of her former letters.

Yes, they might be interested and venal, all those expressions of solicitude and regard; but they somehow did not look at that moment so fulsome or so contemptible as they used to look. There is a silence and solitude of the heart in which we weigh not too nicely the truth or falsehood of those tones which break upon its dreariness and gloom. He sat down at once and answered the letter. He had generally left such letters for many days without reply; but now he wanted employment, and his heart was softened towards the writer. His reply was so different from all which she had hitherto received from him, that Mrs. Howard made a point of reading it aloud to all her morning visitors for the succeeding fortnight; and, as she altered all the positive into the superlative degrees throughout, as she read, and made one or two other extempore alterations, or rather exaggerations, with considerable address, it really did sound as cousinly and affectionate as could be desired, and much more so than could be expected.

Captain Merton saw little more of his uncle before his marriage; and after it, nothing. He was so happy in that early married life of his, that all which had preceded it seemed like some dark dream, from which he had emerged. His marriage with Lady Helena introduced him at once into a new and large circle of acquaintance; and he entered eagerly into the attractive pleasures of London society, of which he had before seen little. His house was small; but exquisitely appointed. His establishment was pronounced faultless, and his wife also, by a large circle of admirers, whose admiration he perhaps esteemed and courted more than it was worth. Every one protested that he was a lucky fellow; and there is nothing which more effectually convinces a man that he is a lucky fellow than the circumstance that he is pronounced so by everybody.

Two years flowed on — years of unanxious happiness to them both; of which there is nothing to tell, but that they were happy. And then came little clouds, darkening faintly the edge of the horizon, gathering slowly in the blackness and volume till they hung over their heads; and the storm fell, of which one of them had long forseen the approach, but for which the other was totally unprepared.

It is to the close of the third year of their married life that we must transport our readers. The London season was at its height, and though the evening was drawing to a close, Captain Merton and Lady Helena were in their own drawing−room, and alone — a circumstance unusual at such a time.

It was a lovely room, hung with exquisite drawings by the first artists of the day. One or two statues of white marble rose between the windows, which were all open; but not a breath of air stirred the curtains of delicate lace with which they were shadowed. The day had been intolerably hot, and now there was an oppression in the air which was almost overpowering. Captain Merton was lying upon a sofa; Lady Helena was at the piano. She was an admirable musician; but now, as her hands glided over the keys, they were calling forth from the instrument those old simple airs, which come over the heart sometimes like dreams of the far past with a power and tenderness often less felt in more elaborate compositions. She lent them, as she played, something of the charm which the human voice is alone able completely to impart; the clear notes rang out distinct and articulate. One who knew the words of what she played would have said that they had never been felt by him more vividly than now, as she played the air only. A sudden vivid flash of blue and forked lightning illuminated the apartment. Lady Helena rose from the instrument, and sat down upon a low seat beside the sofa where her husband lay.

He had been tossing uneasily about for some time among the cushions, not exactly listening to her music, for his thoughts were far away; but it soothed him; and whenever she had paused before, and seemed about to cease playing, he had said "Go on;" and she had gone on accordingly, bringing out air after air, long unplayed and unheard, some only remembered from her childhood, but all fraught with the same tender melancholy which gathers about such music.

When the lightning came, he did not ask her to continue playing any more, and she came and sat beside him, leaning her brow for a moment upon his hand, that hung over one of the cushions. He did not speak nor did she; and flash after flash succeeded of the blue lightning, and the pealing thunder crashed over their heads almost without intermission. A servant entered with candles; but they ordered them to be taken out again, and sat thus watching the storm together. At last it subsided; and the clear blue summer evening sky appeared, marked here and there by a silver star; and the sweet smell of the flowers in the balcony, freshened by the rain, was wafted into the room.

Lady Helena had sat rapt in intense awe and admiration, absorbed in the sight before her. She had forgotten all else. Not so Captain Merton. No change in the aspect of the external world could give him then even a moment's entire intermission from the anxiety which at that moment, and for long, had been struggling in his breast.

And yet, softened by the influence of the scene and hour, he did look up into the sky; and as the last dark confused masses of cloud were hurrying out of sight, he did long that some such favouring breeze as then passed over the world of nature would pass over that of his own life, bearing before it those clouds of trouble and desolation which seemed to weigh so heavy on his head.

He was not given to entertain such thoughts, much less to express them; but at this moment he did both. His tone was fretful and complaining; it was that, indeed, of a man who was endeavouring to blame circumstances where he was himself alone to blame, and who looked to circumstances for that relief for which he could only look safely to himself.

"There is no trouble," said Lady Helena, calmly, "so hard to bear one's self, or which I feel, dear Charles, so hard, as that which is indefinite; or if there be a worse trouble, it is to see another, whom one loves, bearing such indefinite sorrow, in which one is not permitted to participate."

"There is a worse trial," replied Captain Merton, bitterly: "to have to conceal from the being that one loves what it would be only misery to know."

"And this we have both been bearing and doing," said Lady Helena, in her soft, low voice.

And again they were silent; and she looked forth into the clear, calm heavens, and into the shining stars; and her spirit gathered strength, and she said at last —

"Charles, I can bear anything you have to tell — anything but to hear," she added, gently, "that your silence has been because you loved me too little to let me sympathize with your grief; and that," she added, "I feel that I shall not hear."

"It is idle," he said, to call it "my grief," or "my sorrow." It is your grief — your sorrow, Helena. It is my shame!"

Lady Helena grew pale; but she answered, and at once —

"Then it is mine."

The footman entered again with candles, which he placed upon the tables. He drew together the dark folds of the satin curtains, and disappeared. It was, as we have said, a lovely room. Cabinets were there inlaid with the costliest sevres; tables of marquetrie, of malachite, of Florentine mosaic; tall pier glasses, soft carpets, rich hangings, and more than all, gems of modern art — each dear, as such things grow to be, to those who, with a refined taste, have gathered them together, and grown to love them day by day.

Captain Merton rose from the sofa, and walked up and down the apartment.

"This is a beautiful room!" he said, at length. It is a beautiful house!" he said. "Could you leave it, Helena?"

"Yes," she said. I could leave it. I could give up all, everything, if we were only to be, Charles, what we were to one another, and not to live on with this dark secret horror ever rising up between us, and separating us from each other. Only tell me all. Let us consult together, and, if it must be, suffer together. It will be lighter to us both."

And he went to her and threw himself on a low cushion at her feet. He told her all, as a penitent before his confessor. He went back into the first beginnings of his sin. He laid bare his own motives to himself and her. He told her why, before his marriage, he had not made this confession: because he had then thought himself free for ever from the vice of his almost boyhood. How again, in the society in which he had been thrown in London, the old temptation had recurred, and he had sunk beneath it. He did not dwell on the fascinations of gambling, and say that it had been impossible to resist them; for he knew that this would have been a lie. He knew and recollected that there had been a point at which he could have resisted: that he did not, and was lost.

"And yet, I almost fancy sometimes that I could have stayed in my headlong career had it not been for my love for you, dear Helena. I could have stayed when half was lost, I think, but for the agony of submitting you to anything like privation; and so, in the hope of winning all back, I risked all and lost all. Oh Helena," he went on, "It is now all for you I suffer. For me, what poverty, what degradation were not too good? But for you and our child! It seems to me now, sometimes, that I could wish you to go back to your father — that I would rather lose you from my sight than see you suffer."

"You shall not see it," she said. "How could think, Charles, such a thought — that even you could make me

leave you at such a time, when by my presence I could aid — perhaps save you, now I know your danger? But what is to be done? That we must consider. Have we absolutely nothing?"

She had that clear, practical mind which is sometimes, though rarely, met with in persons of extreme sensibility. She could meet any trouble, if she only saw it; and she had the strength to wrestle with it when seen. She had, too, that almost unlimited capacity for suffering which exists in the heart of some women.

"I have lost all I could lose," he replied; I have nothing. You have what your father gave you; I should have lost that also if I could have staked it," he added, bitterly.

"And our child?" she asked.

"Has a provision from my property which I could not touch."

"We shall have, then, three hundred a−year, Charles; we are not ruined at all," she said, smiling. "We can live on that."

"How? — where?" he asked, bitterly.

"Oh, in numberless ways, and numberless places," she answered. "There are lovely spots by the English coast, where we might have some cottage, and live happy and retired. We shall not want to see the gay world again; I am wearied of it already, and have been ever since I can remember it. We can part with all these things," she said, looking round the room, with a light heart. "They have not brought us peace."

"No," he answered, thoughtfully. If it be possible for us, for you, to live on the sum, Helena, it is not possible to live on it here in England; we must go abroad."

"We will go abroad," she answered, gaily; we will go into some cheap Belgian town, with its broad market−places, and gabled houses, and splendid churches, and quaint costumes. I shall be sketching all day long, Charles; we shall be very happy wherever we go — is it not so?" she said, "if we go together.

"Helena, you are an angel — you are my angel," he murmured; "my good angel." And he looked into her face, the banded soft brown hair,the calm, holy quiet of her beauty, the sorrow, and the tenderness, and the love seemed so little like this earth, that a strange thought shot with a pang across his heart, that he should lose her, that she had so little of this world about her that she could not rest upon it long. It was a morbid thought, but it was some moments ere he could shake it from him. At last he mastered it, and turned again to review their situation.

"And your father," he said next, what will he think — what will he say, Helena? I have deceived him cruelly, as well as you."

"I will write to him," she answered, calmly; he is at Florence, you know, with Alicia, by this time, so you will not see him, if that would be painful, just at present."

It was all arranged that night; his commission was to be sold, everything they had was to be sold, his engagements were all to be cleared off, and they were to go into Belgium, that refuge for poverty like his, which shrinks from the hard eye that falls on it in England.

There was only one resource which had presented itself to him again and again in his difficulties, and had been again and again rejected, and that was, to write to his uncle Peter, and tell him all, and ask for his assistance. His pride revolted from the task, the more so as he had made no overtures to a reconciliation before; but that night, after his wife left him, he felt that he ought to shrink from no personal humiliation, if it were yet possible, to shield her from the future which he feared she would find so far more bitter than in her inexperience of the world she expected that it would be. He sat down, therefore, and wrote a letter, which he had a strong hopeful conviction would soften the old man's heart towards them; his uncle had no other relations but himself, he knew, for whom he cared, and it seemed to him impossible but that he would come forward in some way to assist him in his distress. The letter was sent by the first post; he carried it himself; and all arrangements were postponed until a reply to it could arrive.

We must go back for a few moments to Hursleigh. It was a bright summer evening, the air had been fraught with a delicious coolness from the storm of the preceding night. The climax of Mrs. Howard's desires, the end of her long−drawn hopes was now accomplished. She was sitting as a guest in the house of her cousin, sitting in a large old−fashioned chair, drawn to one of the windows of the grand saloon, which had been uncovered and furbished up, as well as antique furniture and faded hangings admitted, for her reception.

'Julia,' she said, with that especial benignity of manner which had characterized her since her admission thus to Hursleight, 'your uncle is fond of music; let us have a song.'

Why she called Mr. Peter Merton uncle to her daughter I do not know, as she was herself only his cousin; but

she said that 'uncle Peter' cam so naturally, that they could and would address him by no other title.

It was quite true that Mr. Peter Merton was fond of music; he had an admirable ear, and considerable natural taste, but yet he winced considerably under the proposal; he had heard already more than one of Miss Julia's songs, and ever since the first had been devising with himself some course by which he might silence the young lady's singing without wounding her feelings. There was no escape, however, at least no immediate escape, so he leaned back resigned, and the young lady sat down, and running her hand over the keys, was about to commence her performance, when Mrs. Howard rose from her chair, advanced to the piano, and laid her hand on her daughter's shoulder.

"A moment, my dear; you have not asked your dear uncle what he would like. What style of music do you prefer, sir? my daughter sings all — French, German, Italian, Scotch, Irish, or English; which shall it be?"

Mrs. Howard was not often mistaken in her knowledge of people's tastes; she confidently expected, when she gave this imposing announcement, that Mr. Peter Merton's choice would be for an English ballad, and she was prepared to exclaim on the superiority of English ballads to every other style of music; but she was disappointed — he said, shortly, "German, then, if you please."

Miss Julia Howard blushed, and looked from one end of the book of songs to another, and then back again. "I fear I have not a German song for you, uncle," she said.

"Not got a German song!" said Mrs. Howard, with the slightest approach to acrimony in her benignant tones. "Where are all your German songs?"

"I never had but one, you know, mamma," said Miss Julia, simply — "the one, you know, that I learned from my singing master."

"Surprising!" muttered Mrs. Howard. She was endeavouring to represent her daughter at Hursleigh as a highly accomplished young lady, which Miss Julia had neither the good fortune to be, nor the deception to pretend to be. "Sing whatever you have, then, my dear," she said.

Miss Howard commenced "Annie Laurie," which she sang throughout a semitone too low. Mr Peter Merton rose at the conclusion; he had letters to write, and was going to his study. A servant entered as he was leaving the room, with letters by the second post.

"Any letters for me, Thomas?" he said.

"No, sir; I think they are all for Mrs. Howard."

Mr. Peter Merton left the room. Mrs. Howard took the letters; there were three. She was indefatigable in writing and receiving letters. She laid these aside for one moment, while she gave a short, sharp reprimand to her daughter, for what she called "the disgraceful exposure she had just made of her ignorance." Miss Julia left the room to digest the maternal reproof. Mrs. Howard was left alone — alone with her letters; no, not her letters — there was one of the three directed, not to herself but to Peter Merton, Esq. She was about to ring the bell, and tell a servant to take it to Mr. Merton's study, when her eye was arrested by the handwriting; it was the same, a very remarkable one, which she had noticed in a manuscript book the day before, and been told that it was Captain Merton's. Her hand was half−way to the bell−rope, but she arrested it, and gathering up the three letters, retired to her own room.

Her first proceeding, when she found herself there, was to lock the door; her next, to sit down and examine the exterior of the letter; but, thanks to the patent adhesive envelope, its contents were impenetrable even to her skilful manipulation. She felt an intuitive conviction that they must be important: Peter Merton had confided to her much of what the reader already knows; she knew that no communication had taken place between them since his marriage, and it by no means suited the plans now maturing in her brain that any should now be commenced. But it was a dangerous thing to withold a letter, and it might not, after all, be worth incurring the risk; it might be perfectly innocuous. "What did it contain?" if she only knew that, she might give it or withold it. She sat some moments in profound thought, and then rang the bell.

It was answered by her maid.

"Hannah, will you bring me a jug of hot water?" was her order. "I want it very hot, for I have a headache, and wish to take some salvolatile."

The mandate was soon obeyed.

"Shall I mix it for you, ma'am?" asked Hannah, standing in the middle of the apartment.

"No, thank you, Hannah," said Mrs. Howard, blandly; "if you will only give me the bottle from my

dressing−case there, that will do."

Hannah again departed, and the door was again locked. Mrs. Howard took the letter in her hands, and laid it upon the narrow aperture of the jug, over the boiling water. In a few moments the cement upon the envelope gave way, and she was able to extract the contents without fear of detection, should she deem it desirable to replace them, and present the letter to uncle Peter.

She read it throughout: the touching description of his own misery and his wife's heroism, the affectionate appeal to his uncle's kindness, the full, unextenuated confession of his own guilt and folly; not a word of it was lost; Mrs. Howard read it all. She refolded it, and then laid it in the bottom drawer of her dressing−case, which she locked carefully. She ran through her other letters, and descended to the saloon to make tea for Mr. Peter Merton, with a calm face and her usual imperturbable smile; she was a little more loquacious than was her wont, but that was all; Mr Peter Merton thought, as the day closed that with all her little faults, some of which he saw with singular penetration, she was a very agreeable, well disposed sort of woman.

We must again pass onward some years in our story; four have elapsed since the events last related; each year Mrs. Howard has paid a longer visit than the last to Hursleigh, and yet, strange to say, much as the above fact may militate against the assertion, she has not grown upon the affections of Peter Merton. Deception never answers in the long run; it may succeed on any one particular occasion, as at the time did the suppression of Captain Merton's letter; but the daily, hourly, little falsehoods and concealments of a woman like Mrs. Howard must destroy every feeling of regard and respect in an honest, truthful mind like that of uncle Peter.

She erred, too, in protracting her visits to such a length as she did; she was more fitted to stay a week than a month in a house; for one week you might have been charmed with her, in a month you were disgusted. Why, then, did Mr. Merton invite her? Because he was a lonely man, and needed, he felt, as he grew older, kindness of some sort to make life more supportable. He saw the worth of hers, but he thought bought kindness better than none at all; and the vast echoing rooms of the old mansion, untenanted the whole year through, had become dreary and distressing to him in the extreme.

Mrs. Howard has been now nearly three months at Hursleigh, and shows the symptoms of an intention of taking up her quarters there altogether. Mr. Merton has become intensely weary this year of her society, and is vainly seeking for a pretext for getting rid of his visitor, who, on her part, is occupied in seeking for one to remain in her present quarters. It is somewhat odd that they should each choose the same pretext for such various designs.

The health of Mr. Peter Merton had been visibly declining; he looked much older than he really was, for in truth he could scarcely yet in years be called an old man; he was nervous and irritable; he had neither sleep nor appetite; indeed he was becoming anything but an agreeable host for visitors less pertinacious than Mrs. Howard and her daughters. How could they leave him — "the dear old man" — in such a state? It was impossible. They had many engagements for the summer, but all must give way to the paramount duty of remaining at Hursleigh. This Mrs. Howard was continually saying or implying. Uncle Peter, on his part, was the last man to turn people violently out of his house who were bent on staying in it. At last he hit upon an expedient. He was really growing unwell — worse and worse; he was wearied, not only of Mrs. Howard and the Misses Howard, but of Hursleigh — of life altogether. There was something decidedly wrong somewhere. Mrs. Howard begged him to see Mr. Evans, the medical man of the neighbourhood, but he had no confidence in Mr. Evans, and would not see him. He determined at last to go to town, and consult Dr. A — — , whose advice he had found of great use in an earlier period of his life.

Mr. Merton had not been in London for years; it must have been a strong motive power that could move him from Hursleigh. Soon after breakfast, however, one morning, to Mrs. Howard's astonishment, the carriage drove round to the door. Mr. Merton had not signified his intentions to her, lest she should insist upon accompanying him. The carriage had not waited many moments when he appeared in the morning room, equipped for his journey.

"Well, ladies," he said, you will be able to amuse yourselves, I hope, for a day or two without your host. I am going to town, Mrs Howard, to consult Dr A — — . I have long thought of it, and determined upon it at last."

"To town, sir, and alone!" exclaimed Mrs. Howard. "Julia, Eleanor, my dears, we must not permit it; we will go with you, my dear sir — one or all of us. If you had given us notice of your intention, we should have been ready at this moment."

"And now it is too late. Dear me!" — looking at his watch, he exclaimed, "I shall but just have time to save

the train, if that. Goodbye, Mrs. Howard; goodbye, girls." And he hurried away before it was possible to arrest him, to promise an impossible promptitude in getting ready to accompany him, or to suggest waiting for the next train, or anything of the sort. Mrs. Howard saw the carriage wheel round and sweep along the avenue, with a dark anticipation of some impending calamity, from this singular exception to all the ordinary habits of his life.

The train proceeded on rapid wings to London; it was almost the first Mr. Merton had travelled by, and the clear morning and the rapid motion already made him forget for an hour that there was anything the matter with him. He was soon in London, and a cab conveyed him from the station to the house of Dr. A — — , with whom he had made an appointment.

Dr. A — — received him with courtesy; they were old friends, and he expressed much regret at seeing him look so thin and ill. After hearing all the symptoms of his case, he promised to write a prescription for him. "But," he said, what I should chiefly recommend to you is to get as soon as possible change of air, change of scene, change of society, change of everything."

"That is precisely what I wish to get," said Uncle Peter, "and find impossible to procure."

"Impossible! — my dear sir, to whom is it possible, if not to you?"

A sudden accession of communicativeness came over Uncle Peter, and he related his present situation to the kind physician.

It is extraordinary what singular communications physicians do receive from their patients. Dr. A — — received more than most others. He had an immense practice, and unlimited sympathies. This did not surprise him at all. He smiled, and paused for a few moments.

"If you will take my advice, my dear friend, you will not go back to Hursleigh at all; you will sit down, and write from here to say that I wish to have you for a few days under my eye, after which it is probable that you will go to some watering−place for a few weeks for change of air. If you will be guided by me, you will go on the continent; to Spa, in Belgium, for instance, the air and waters of which would, I am sure, set you up in no time."

Mr Merton sat transfixed; he could scarcely take in the notion of leavying Hursleigh, and going on the continent; but Dr. A — — made light of all difficulties. There were but two hours of sea passage; he knew that he was a good sailor, and that he talked French; everything now was so easy to the traveller, that he would be as comfortable, he assured him, as at an English watering place; while he would have a change of life more complete than he could procure in England, and enjoy the advantage of the iron waters, from which Dr. A — — anticipated much benefit in his case.

"I am going out myself," said Dr. A — — , "but I leave you all implements of letter−writing, and you will find Mrs A — — above, in the drawing−room. Where is your carpet bag?"

"My servant has taken it to the Clarendon."

"I will call there as I pass," said Dr. A — — in a decisive tone which admitted of no denial, "and send him here with it."

He was out of his room and into his carriage before Uncle Peter had well time, if he had been disposed to do so, to object to the arrangement.

It was an awkward letter to write; but Uncle Peter did write it, and sent it to Hursleigh by his servant, with orders to pack up and get all in readiness for an absence of some weeks.

When the letter was written, he sat in Dr. A — — 's study with a continental Bradshaw in his hand, over and over again following with his eye the line of the Belgian railways: he could not make out that Brussels was exactly in the necessary route to Spa, but he had never seen Brussels, and he wished to see it, and by a very slight detour he might see it. But then Captain Merton and Lady Helena were residing there, and he did not wish to see them; no, certainly he did not wish to see them; they had shown no great wish for his society — why should he manifest any for theirs? No, he certainly would not see them, but he might see Brussels notwithstanding; everybody went to Brussels — why not he?

He had heard from public rumour something of his nephew's history since his marriage; but public rumour had not got quite hold of the right story; there was the patent fact that Captain Merton was done up, that he had sold his commission, and his furniture, and pictures, and gone to economise abroad. So far the world could see, but the world is never content with seeing such simple, straightforward results, without knowing, or pretending to know, the cause or causes which led to them. Now it had seen in this case the expensive elegance of Lady Helena Merton's furniture, carriages, dresses, jewels, and entertainments — all certainty above their means; and the

current account of poor Merton's misfortunes was mixed up for the most part with blame of the extravagance of Lady Helena. The world judged from what it saw; how could it see or know that it was Captain Merton who was thoughtless and extravagant; that his wife had been ever shrinking from a display which his less refined taste was continually forcing upon her? Mrs Howard, from certain information which she possessed, might have corrected the history which came to the ears of Uncle Peter of his nephew's disasters; but, for obvious reasons, she forebore to do so, and exaggerated, on the contrary, the slight floating reports she had heard against the worldly prudence of Lady Helena.

"The first act is over," Uncle Peter had been continually saying to himself since the news reached him. He had made up his mind from the first that Charles Merton would run precisely the same career as his father had done, and he had determined that if ever, with blighted hopes and ruined fortune, as his father, he should seek his assistance and society, Hursleigh should then be his home. His own experience of society had been very limited, and his obstinate prepossessions against a class had so blinded him to what might be the varying character of the individuals which composed it, that he was considerably astonished that Lady Helena, after ruining his nephew, had not proceeded at once to leave him.

But years now had passed on since "the first act" of the drama Uncle Peter had long since played out in his own mind had terminated, and there seemed no prospect of the second being accomplished. He heard that the Mertons were living at Brussels, that they had one child, and that they were not very well off, and that was all. He had been all along disappointed that his nephew had not applied to him for assistance; he did not think that he should have helped him, but he should have liked to have been asked to do so. And now he felt a sort of curiosity, blended, doubtless, with more of lingering affection than he chose to acknowledge to himself to take advantage of the coincidence of having been himself ordered to Belgium, and his nephew's residing there, to reconnoitre their proceedings without introducing himself to them, and judging somewhat more by his own observation than by the reports of others.

Great was the consternation at Hursleigh when Mr. Merton's note arrived. Mrs. Howard read it and re−read it, but she could extract no comfort from it; it was very kind and very polite — it begged her, indeed, not to hurry her departure, but gave it, at the same time, no encouragement for that indefinite prologation of her visit which she had contemplated, still less did it give her a clue to Mr. Merton's destination, or a pretext for offering to accompany him on his travels.

As Mrs Howard had, in point of fact, no engagements at all, and as she had intimated to all her correspondents of the town where she resided, that it would be probably some considerable time before she should be able to return to her "sweet home," and relinquish "the dear but arduous duty which she had undertaken," she thought it best, to save appearances, to take her daughters for a month to the seaside, after which she could return to Laurel Lodge with tolerable propriety. This she accordingly did; and explaining to her friends that this change in her plans had been caused by her own health having broken down by under the charge which she had too rashly undertaken, she recived the due commiseration which such an announcement was calculated to produce.

Late one summer evening, when the darkness had begun to descend upon the town, and the lights long since to appear in the shops, an elderly gentleman might have been seen walking about in a purposeless kind of way in the streets of Brussels; whilst the daylight lasted, he had confined his perambulations chiefly to the neighbourhood of the church of St. Gudule; he had walked round and round it, and wandered for some time inside it, and yet the peculiar beauty of its exterior and interior had been much lost upon him, for his mind was full the while of other thoughts, from which the new scenes wherein he now found himself could not at that time divert it. At last, when it grew darker, he walked slowly to quite another quarter of the town, and might have been seen for some time pacing backwards and forwards before a row of tall white houses on the opposite side of the street. He looked anxiously into the upper windows of one of these, but no light appeared in them, nor any sign of human habitation in the house, except in the lower part of it, which was fitted up as a shop.

At last, having gazed earnestly upwards, as he walked, for some time, he seemed to come to a sudden determination, stopped short, crossed the road, and entered the shop.

When he had done this, he stood transfixed for a few moments in the presence of a tall, elegantly dressed−woman, who looked at him, without rising, from the opposite side of the counter.

The lady evidently imagined that his silence and confusion resulted from inability to express his wants in a language which she would understand. She therefore, with a good−natured smile, but very indifferent English,

made a suggestion about "gloves," which were the usual purchase made in her shop by her male customers.

Peter Merton recollected himself and his French in a moment, "Yes, he wished for some gloves certainly, the choice of which he protracted for some time, and then asked casually, if there were not an English gentleman and lady lodging in the house."

Her face brightened as she replied — "Yes, there had been certain such persons in the house; did Monsieur wish to see them? Ah, how unfortunate! what a loss! they had left Brussels but the day before, with their charming little girl, who was not very well, for the change of air." She grew more and more voluble, having evidently embarked on a congenial strain. "Ah, how sorry they would be to miss seeing their friend — they had so few friends — would he leave his card, his name, that she might tell them what they had lost?"

No, he would not.

The lady was not at all disconcerted; she proceeded to expatiate on the beauty of Miladi and on that of Monsieur; on all the various agreeable qualities which she had discovered in them since they had been lodgers in her house; they seemed to have all the virtues under the sun, but, added the lady, when she had exhausted her panegyric, "Alas, they were poor, very poor."

"And how does Miladi bear that?" inquired Uncle Peter.

The shopwoman looked surprised at his question, but proceeded at once to answer it. "Ah, it was not Miladi who had borne it worst, it was Monsieur; when they had first come, she had been quite saddened to see the extent of Madame's self−denial that Monsieur might enjoy little luxuries which she had denied herself; but Madame was so good, so religious, she had not thought before that a Protestant could be so religious as she was."

Mr. Merton was somewhat astonished and a good deal disappointed at what he heard; he took off his hat and bade the lady good bye, and sallied out again into the streets; he regained his hotel, went to his bedroom, where he lay awake, revolving many things, until the next morning, at an early hour of which he set off by the first train that would conduct him on his way to Spa.

It was a rainy day, and the country through which he passed was very uninteresting. His spirits were much depressed — he kept asking himself now, again and again, why he had left Hursleigh? or if he must have left Hursleigh to leave Mrs. Howard, why he had left England? The rain had ceased, but it was still damp and uncomfortable, when he found himself ensconced in the coupe of great awkward diligence, that was to convey him from the railway station to his destination, which lay some distance from it.

He might have observed ere this that the character of the scenery had much changed; that instead of the, flat, uninteresting country through which his journey lay at first, wild wooded hills, and streams, and chateaux, and cottages, lying pleasingly interspersed amongst them, had now succeeded on all sides. But he had sat back in his carriage absorbed in his own melancholy reflections, and quite unheedful of the aspect of the external world. now, at length, as the vast, slow old machine rumbled uncomfortably along, he looked through its shaky windows, and with every disposition to find fault, could not but be struck and pleased by the very picturesque road through which they drove. In spite of the rain that had fallen, there seemed here a strange lightness in the air, through which, as the shades of night began to fall, he saw tiny fireflies floating in all directions beneath the woods that skirted the roadside.

A foreign watering−place is somewhat dull to a solitary Englishman, particularly if he be not inclined to enter into the amusements of the place, as was the case with Uncle Peter. He did not play billiards, nor rouge−et−noir, nor cricket — facilites for all of which he might have found there; he saw no one that he knew, and therefore was not invited to join any of the picnics, riding, and other parties got up by his countrymen whom the search after health or amusement had congregated on the same spot. And yet he was not dull exactly; though he avoided all the usual places of public resort, he spent his days pleasantly enough, going long distances into the beautiful surrounding neighbourhood upon the back of one of the stout ponies of the Ardennes, or short ones upon his own legs(which, to say the truth, he preferred). The table−d'hotes amused him, with all the ever−varying food which they present, not only to the bodily but the mental appetite of one so observing as himself. He had the English papers, too, which took up here, as at Hursleigh, no inconsiderable portion of his time. He fell, in a few days, into a sort of routine, which, if it were not enjoyment, was certainly more like it than the life he had been leading lately at Hursleigh with Mrs. Howard for his guest.

One morning of peculiar beauty he had walked out of a mile or so into the country, following a route which he had not before taken; it conducted him, through wild and winding paths, along the brink of a mountain−stream

which chafed and whitened beneath his feet. The scene was somewhat artificial — the hand of art had evidently assisted there the hand of nature; but it was pleasant enough, in the heavy heat of the noonday, to find yourself sheltered by tall, graceful beech−trees that rose on either side of you, and listen to the fall of running water. Uncle Peter found it so; he had brought a book out with him, and an umbrella, which, when abroad, invariably replaced the spud which was his ordinary companion at Hursleigh. He sat down upon a picturesque fragment of brown rock on which he first carefully laid his pocket−handkerchief. He opened his book, but did not read much; he fell into a reverie, more agreeable by far than any he had for a long time past indulged in. The hard frost, that years of solitude and prejudice had gathered about his heart, melted away before the genial influences of the scene and hour. His thoughts went back to his earlier days, the days of his boyhood, which were the only ones that had been brightened by anything like a strong affection in his life. No shadow of bitterness or brooding melancholy lay upon his heart; all was sunshine around him and within. I think, had his nephew — nay, even his niece — stood before him at that moment, he would not have hesitated to forgive every error of the former and forego every prejudice against the latter.

But the two figures which at last did disturb him from the agreeable state of mental serenity were not his nephew nor his niece, but a young, bright−looking Belgian servant−girl, in a buff sort of jacket, a black petticoat, no bonnet, but the cleanest of white caps over her rosy features, and soft, braided, brown hair, by the side of whom walked a little girl of singular beauty, and no less remarkable intelligence and liveliness of manner. Her ringing laugh and voice had resounded through the pathway long before they came in sight; now that they had turned the corner formed by a mass of rock covered with underwood and wild flowers, he could hear distinctly what they said.

"Here is the old place," said the little girl; let us sit down; I will give you another lesson in English."

The nursemaid laughed, looked round, and the eyes of both fell on Uncle Peter, who was sitting close beside them, his figure at first concealed by the rocks and overhanging branches of the trees.

He rose at once, took up his umbrella, and walked abruptly onward in an opposite direction; not annoyed by having his solitary musings interrupted exactly — he was in too genial a mood for that just then — but anxious rather to leave them in possession of a spot which for some reason they preferred.

He walked on some little way, and again sat down, where he was quite out of reach of their voices, nor was in any danger of interrupting them. He had not sat many moments, however, when the two figures he had before seen crossed the wooden bridge which hung high over the stream that he had just traversed himself, and advanced straight towards him, the little girl holding in her hand a pocket−handkerchief that he had left behind him in his somewhat precipitate retreat.

She came forward with a certain childlike grace and innate politeness, so different from the grace and politeness of a French child, that he at once discovered she was English, although it was in French that she addressed him, as she explained that she had found his pocket−handkerchief upon the rock upon which he had been sitting.

"Thank you," he said to her in English, with a more thorough smile than had illuminated his face for years.

The child's face brightened — it was bright enough before, but the ray of unexpected delight which broke over it now added strangely to its lustre and its beauty.

"You are English," she said; mamma is English, too, and papa; but I have never been in England; never, at least, since I can remember. I was in England once, but that was years ago. Will you tell me all about it? — how long is it since you were there?"

Uncle Peter had been said by those who knew him best not to be fond of children; the assertion was untrue; he liked them, and often wished to get on with them, but could not do so; he had been, over and over again, so mortified by the ill success of his rough overtures to them, that he had for years ceased to make any. But here was a child who seemed to take to him at once; there was not a dash of forwardness in her manner, but she was not afraid of a certain hardness in him which had deterred other children; perhaps it was that he had so much less of it this morning than usual; however this might have been, she sat down at his side without hesitation, and talked to him with an ease and grace which captivated him at once, and apparently the Belgian nursemaid too, who stood by gazing from time to time admiringly upon her young charge.

"I think papa and mamma would like you," said the little girl, musingly, after she had conversed with him for some time; "they do not see many persons, scarcely any English; but I think they would like you. Will you tell me

your name, that I may tell them all about you?"

"My name is Merton," said Uncle Peter.

"That is very strange; it is their name and mine," said the little girl; "I am called Merton, Helena Merton."

Uncle Peter started, and looked fixedly upon his young companion; the truth flashed upon him at once; there was no great resemblance of feature to his nephew, but there were tones in her voice which had already reminded him of something, he knew not what, which he had heard before. The voice was like Charles Merton's but still more it seemed to him like his brother's.

"Can you tell me your father's Christian name," he said, quietly, "my little girl?"

"Yes; it is Charles."

He sat for some moments in silence and indecision as to what should be his future movements. If his nephew and his niece were at Spa, he must certainly leave it, was his first thought. Need he do so? was his second — need he doom himself again by prejudices, the folly of which he was beginning to see more clearly, to a desolate old age, cheered only by the venal society of a woman like Mrs. Howard? Why not be reconciled to his nephew at once, and, with this child, whom he already felt that he could love, go back and fill the old house at Hursleigh with gaiety and delight? But how be reconciled? Who was to make the first overtures? Not he; and would his nephew? If he had not made them before, was it likely that he would now? And then, again, the thought of Lady Helena recurred, whom he had so long been accustomed to picture to himself as haughty, disdainful, and extravagant, that even the different picture conveyed of her character by their landlady at Brussels had not succeeded in conveying a thoroughly different impression of her to his mind.

"Charles is papa's Christian name," repeated the little girl, "and now will you tell me yours?"

"It is of no consequence," said Uncle Peter gravely. Another silence succeeded, broken again by the little girl.

"It is raining," she said; look what large drops!"

They were large indeed — the first of a heavy shower: they lay black and broad upon the stones beside them. Thicker and faster they came, till the trees became no shelter, and at length the best thing seemed, to be reconciled to a thorough wetting, and reach home as soon as possible.

"We do not live far from here," said the little girl, "and there are trees the whole way."

They gained the high road, shaded by a long avenue of limes — they hurried rapidly along, Uncle Peter protecting his little friend with his large umbrella, but deriving little benefit from it himself, until they came to a small white house, separated from the road, with a garden in front of it.

"This is our house," said the little girl, wont you come in?"

"No, thank you," said Uncle Peter. He saw her safely sheltered from the shower in the projecting porch of the old house, and hastened quickly away.

He was almost sorry that he had done so afterwards: it seeded like declining to avail himself, on his part, of any opportunity for a reconciliation that might occur. He never doubted that the little girl would tell her story, and that it would at once be discovered who he was; and every footstep that he heard for the rest of the day, about the door of his apartment, he imagined to be his nephew's.

But Charles Merton was at Liege that day on business, and Lady Helena was too much engrossed with anxiety about the little girl having been out in the rain, to understand more from her story than that an old gentleman, an English man, had given her the protection of his umbrella.

"Was it not odd, mamma; his name was Merton?" persisted the little Helena.

"Very," said Lady Helena. But I trust, my dear child, you may not take cold; you have been so much better since you came to this place, that it would be sad indeed if this wetting were to throw you back."

The rain continued all that day, and the greater part of the next; but in the evening, Uncle Peter considered it sufficiently dry for him to venture forth from his rooms, to which he had been imprisoned for the most part during the rain.

He took a short walk in the very opposite direction to his nephew's house; he then went for a short time to the Redoute, where he had been accustomed to go and look at the papers in an evening; but this night, when he got hold of the Times, he could not command his attention sufficiently to understand it; he felt nervous and uncomfortable; he cast his eyes continually upon the group of persons similarly occupied with himself, to see if any addition, and what, had been made to their number; he looked up at every fresh entrance into the room, but he saw none but the faces — with many of which he had now become familiar — that were wont to frequent the

place. At last he threw down the paper, and walked to the gaming tables; he looked round them both. There were old, hard faces there, and young eager ones; but they did not interest him to−night. There was a fashionably dressed young Englishman carelessly losing a low mountain of little gold pieces, and a sharp−featured woman of the bourgeois class accumulating with wolf−like rapacity a high mountain of large silver ones. But his eye wandered over all, and rested upon none; then he gave a sigh of relief, perhaps because he did not find what he so strangely wished and as strangely dreaded to behold there; and then he took up his hat and stick, and descended the stairs.

In the dark archway which leads into the street, two persons were talking; he stopped involuntarily, arrested by the tones of one of the two voices.

"I think I shall go in, and have a shy at the tables," said one voice.

"No, you won't," said the other; you will come and have some tea with my wife."

"I never take tea," said the first voice, hesitatingly.

"At all events, you wont go in there; or if you do, you wont play. My own experience has been so fearful" (the voice here, which he had recognised, grew low, but was perfectly distinct in its intense earnestness) "that you will not deny me such benefit as I may derive from it, in the right it gives me to advise another."

"How seriously you take the loss of a five−franc piece."

"Yes; because a fortune may follow it. Come along."

"Well, you must promise me a song from Lady Helena to make up for my self−denial."

They walked out. It was moonlight; but the pavement was shadowed by the tall white houses, and neither of the two perceived the short figure of the old man, which followed them at some distance.

Uncle Peter saw them both enter the house where he had parted with his young companion. The upper windows were open, and voices, and occasionally a light laugh, could be heard by him as he stood outside And then, after a while, for he remained there long, came the sound of a piano and of a woman's voice, deep, and rich, and clear. It seemed of unusual compass and considerable cultivation. First, he heard an elaborate piece of foreign music. Then a few chords were struck, and some simpler English songs were sung He could hear the words of them as he stood outside. One there was that he knew well, and had been very fond of in days gone by; but he had not heard it for long, and it came over him now with a power which brought the tears to his eyes. It was one of the Irish melodies — "Oft in the stilly night." The words of the last stanza rang in his ears. He could not shake them from him. He walked up and down, repeating them. It seemed that they must have been written for himself, to describe the situation in which he had been so long.

At last, the front door opened, and the visitor departed. They were now alone — Charles Merton and his wife. An irresistible impulse came over the old man: he walked up to the door, and rung the bell.

It was opened by an old servant of Captain Merton who had remained with them through all their reverses, and who recognised him at once. He ushered him at once up stairs He had nerved himself for a scene — the thing, of all others, he most dreaded; but, as is not uncommonly the case in such circumstances, no scene was enacted. They were glad to see him, and of course surprised. Charles Merton introduced him to his wife; a glance at whom dispossessed Uncle Peter at once of the last of his prejudices, if any yet remained in her disfavour.

All seemed to be natural, and in the common course of things; if he had spent every evening with them for months he could not have felt more at home.

They talked of ordinary subjects; wished to order tea for him, which he declined; and then, when he rose to depart, Charles Merton said, in his old frank tones —

"You will let us see you again, uncle; I have not yet introduced you to one of my family — the little Helena."

"I will breakfast with you tomorrow," said Uncle Peter, if you will permit me, taking you on my way back from my spring; but I need not an introduction to Helena — we are already friends;" and he explained their previous meeting, and Lady Helena was surprised of course that she had not at once detected who the child's companion had been.

He came the next morning to breakfast, and afterwards proposed a walk to his nephew, in the course of which, by a series of blunt questions, he ascertained the whole history of his affairs.

"And why did you not let me know all this before?" said Uncle Peter, when he had learned everything.

"I wrote to you before we left England, and told you much of what you have asked me about now; when I received no answer to my letter, it can scarcely surprise you, I think, from your knowledge of my character, that I

did not write again."

"Wrote to me before you left England? I never got your letter. I have never heard from you since your marriage."

"It is surprising that you did not receive my letter; I carried it to the post myself, too anxious at the time about its result not to take every pains that it should reach its destination. I did not tell my wife then that I had written it; she knew all, end was reconciled to the worst. I longed indeed that that worst might not come, but I would not destroy her heroic fortitude by suggesting a hope of assistance in our difficulties, which might be, as indeed it proved, delusion. And yet," he said, thoughtfully, "I am glad, dear uncle, you never got my letter. Had I got easily out of my troubles, I should never perhaps have learned, as now I have, to overcome so completely the habits which had led to them. I should never have known my wife, too; never seen such strength and gentleness of character in her as I did not believe existed upon earth. And more, I should never have known myself, my selfishness and sin. I have learned much intellectually in these last few years, for I have studied hard with a hope to turn my labours to account in some way so as to improve our position. But I am chiefly of all thankful to the moral lessons which I have received from her, and which I feel to be the most valuable and the most indelible of all."

Uncle Peter was as sadly perplexed about the missing letter; too long an interval hall elapsed since it had been written for him to entertain any chance of discovering what had become of it; it was therefore with very little hope of obtaining any information on the subject that he said to his servant, when he came into his room that evening —

"Thompson, I have learned this morning that a letter sent to me by my nephew four years ago, ono of great importance, miscarried, and never reached me. "

"I always said, sir, you never got it," exclaimed the old servant, quickly and indignantly.

Uncle Peter prosecuted his inquiries, and learned that the letter had in due course arrived at Hursleigh, that it had made a considerable sensation in the servants' hall, where Charles Merton had ever been held "in high consideration," and where his estrangement from his uncle and Hursleigh had been unceasingly deplored. Thompson remembered the letter coming; he remembered the expectations which had been formed about it among the old servants; he remembered its being taken into the saloon by a new footman recently engaged, who had not been present at the discussion among them about the letter, and who knew nothing of the Captain. He remembered himself asking Thomas how his master looked when he received the letter, and Thomas saying that he did not know there was a letter for Mr. Merton; that he had given all three to Mrs. Howard. He always had his suspicions that his master never got that letter; and he was plunging into a history of the very unfavourable prepossessions entertained from various little circumstances against Mrs. Howard in the servants' hall, but was checked decisively by his master, who did not suffer the familiarity of an old servant to go so far as to listen to reflections from him upon a relation and a guest of his own.

But the case certainly did look awkward against Mrs. Howard; he thought long how it would be right to act concerning it; the footman, Thomas, had long since left his service, having been discovered to be too impracticably stupid to remain. He felt that to charge Mrs. Howard with the suspected act would be only to meet with the most calm denial of all knowledge of it; nor did he see any means of bringing it home to her, even if he did not shrink, as he did, from the publicity which must attend any attempt to do so.

Hursleigh is now a happier mansion than it has been for many years; it has been just refurnished, and music, and flowers, and the merry voice of childhood, adorn its once deserted apartments. It is not a place, even now, where much entertainment of the neighbourhood goes on; but Lord Elsmore and his family are ever welcome guests, and sometimes some of the neighbouring families are invited to meet them. Mrs. Howard is never seen there, nor her daughters; it is said that she received one day a letter in the cramped hand of Uncle Peter, which arrived when she was in the midst of a select circle of morning callers; that she read tho early part of it aloud,which described the entire restoration of the health of her "dear relative," and of his purpose of speedily returning to Hursleigh; but suddenly it was noticed that she stopped short, started, read on rapidly to herself, . turned pale, rose from her chair, and with a hurried apology left the room and her visitors. A bell was speedily rung, and it is said that the small jug of very hot water which Hannah then carried upstairs in answer to it, was really used for the purpose for which it was demanded — to dilute a very considerable dose of salvolatile.