Miss Brown, Vol. 1

Vernon Lee

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TO HENRY JAMES, I DEDICATE, FOR GOOD LUCK, MY FIRST ATTEMPT AT A NOVEL.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

IT was melancholy to admit that Italy also had ceased to interest him, thought Hamlin, as he smoked his cigarette on the hillside above the Villa Arnolfini; melancholy, although, in truth, he had suspected as much throughout the journey, and, indeed, before starting. Pale, milky morning sky, deepening into luminous blue opposite the fast−rising sun; misty blue−green valley bounded by unsubstantial Apennine peaks and Carrara crags; yellow shimmer of vines and of maize, green sparkle of pine and fir branches, glitter of vermilion sand crumbling under his feet among the sear grass and the brown cistus tufts, all these things seemed to have lost for him their emotional colour, their imaginative luminousness. He tried to realise the time when all these things had given him a thrill, had gone to his head, nay, when the mere sense of being in Italy had done so; but now the very words "thrill" and "intoxication" seemed false, disgusting, and vulgar. Formerly, at least, such things had soaked into him, dyed his mind with colour, saturated it with light; instead of remaining, as now, so separate from him, so terribly external, that to perceive them required almost an effort. He and the world had been becoming paler in the last three years; it was melancholy, but that seemed quite natural and in keeping; and besides, a washed−out world, a man with worn−out feelings, have quite as much psychologic interest for a poet as the reverse.

Walter Hamlin had never been your splash−of−scarlet and dash−of−orange−and−skyblue, lust−and−terror kind of lyrist; but he had begun his poetical career with a quiet concentra− tion of colour, physical and moral, which had made his earliest verses affect one like so many old church windows, deep flecks of jewel lustre set in quaint stiff little frames, with a great deal of lead between, and supreme indifference to anatomy and perspective. And as a painter (perhaps just because, despite his own contrary opinion) he certainly had less original genius as painter than as poet he had continued in this habit of gemlike harmonies of colour; but in his poetry, and in his reality as a man, it struck him that he had little by little got paler and paler, colours turning gradually to tints, and tints to shadows; pleasure, pain, hope, despair, all reduced gradually to a delicate penumbra, a diaphanous intellectual pallor, of which this utter listlessness, this indifference even to having grown indifferent, was, as it were, the faint key−note. The world was a pale and prismatic mist, full of vague, formless ghosts, in which it was possible to see only as far as to−day; and, indeed, why wish to see that paler to−day called to−morrow? Perhaps there was a little depression added to Hamlin's usual listlessness. It had given him a kind of little shock to see Melton Perry again, after those twelve or thirteen years; bringing back to him the time when he had been the most brilliant and eccentric of that little knot of æsthetic undergraduates, at whose strange doings as Greek gods, and Provençal poets, and Norse heroes, Oxford had murmured in those philistine days, and which had welcomed young Hamlin, with his girlish beauty and pre−Raphaelite verses, as a sort of mixture of Apollo and Eros, sitting at the head of the supper−table dressed in green silk, with rose garlands on his head, while Perry led a chorus of praise, dressed in indigo velveteen, with peacocks' feathers in his button−hole, and silver−gilt grasshoppers in his hair. Poor old Perry! Absurd days those were, thought Hamlin, as he walked slowly towards the house, through the grass and hemlock bending with dew, pushing aside the fig branches and vine trails along the narrow path between the terraced olives; absurd days those, and at which he could now, having grown grave and listless, only faintly smile. Still the sight of Perry had brought back to him that recurring sense that all those absurd lads of long−gone days, turned humdrum dons, and parsons, and squires for the most part, had had a something, a spontaneity, an aristocratic fibre, a sort of free−bornness, which he missed among the clique−and−shop shoddy æstheticism with which he now associated, and which sang his praises as those boys had sung them so many years before. Professional poetry! professional art! faugh! thought Hamlin; it was that feeling which had been making London odious to him of late, and sent him abroad, he knew not whither. He was a poet himself, and a painter also, to be sure; but somehow he liked to feel (and yet it oppressed him) that he was not of the same stock as his fellow−workers that he had his coats made by less romantic tailors, and cut his hair and beard in less pictorial style. The sense of his difference from all those pen− and−pencil−driving men of genius, those reviewer−poets and clerk−poets, those once−a−week−studio−receiving painters; the sense of the dust and smoke, as it were, of the æsthetic factory, had been choking him of late: he would rather go and associate only with well−dressed

numskulls, go and flirt with empty−headed Faubourg St Germain ladies, or emptier−headed Monte Carlo ladies he would not touch pen or brush for years. It had been silly to accept Perry's invitation to spend September at the Villa Arnolfini; he had accepted, thinking of Perry as he had been, a wild, roistering, half−French creature, brought up at Louis−le−Grand, and telling wicked French stories. Good heavens! what a change! When the wretched, thin, wasted, depressed−looking creature, fit for a medieval picture of mansuetude, had greeted him by night at the nearest station, and had driven him in the gig, he had been quite unable to realise that this was indeed Melton Perry. But he had understood all, all, when, in the bleak drawing−room, in the glare of an ill− trimmed lamp, that lank, limp, lantern−jawed leering creature with a Sapphic profile had come forward and seized him by both hands, and kissed them, crying

"Dear Mr Hamlin, I must kiss the hands that have opened the paradise of body and soul to so many of us."

She, and her speech, and the damp dab on his hands, had passed before him like a nightmare; he felt that he would never be able to disassociate Mrs Melton Perry from that horrible smell of ill−trimmed, flickering oil−lamp. It seemed to him dreadful a sort of hideous, harpy−like proceeding that his old friend should have thus been metamorphosed.

"You see," Perry had said, "I must paint things well not the sort of things I exactly admire, because, you see, there's Mrs Perry and the children five girls, and last year's baby."

Perry's depressed voice had remained in Hamlin's ears. This was the end of a bright, original fellow married for love, too! And six children! Hamlin had already made up his mind that he could not possibly hold out long at the Villa Arnolfini. That Mrs Perry, with her leering Sapphic profile, her almost amorous admiration, the limp gown, the five girls, and last year's baby, the all−pervading smell of oil−lamp, were too much for him. In three days, he calculated, he might decently, on some pretext, slip off to Florence. And then why, from Florence he might go to America. He thought all those big hotels, with the fifteen hundred inmates and thirteen brass bands, all that tremendous strain, telegraph−telephone vulgarity, might be refreshing.

Hamlin had got to the bottom of the hill, and in front of him, nestled among the olives and the vines, rose the Villa Arnolfini, a time− and weather−stained Tuscan country−house, with its rose−hedges gone wild among the beans and artichokes, its grotesque ivy−draped terra−cotta statues, its belvedere towers, from whose crannied sides and yellow lichened tiles the pigeons swept down on to the lawn of overgrown grass, thick with dew in the blue morning shadow. It had a sort of half−romantic, half−idyllic charm, which Hamlin could not help recognising: it certainly was better than an American hotel, with ten lifts, thirteen brass bands, and fifteen hundred inmates. But, like everything else, it was a snare; for behind those sleepy−looking green shutters were the pink and blue chromo−lithograph pot−boilers of Melton Perry, were the five girls and the last year's baby, nay, were the Sapphic leer and limp dresses of Mrs Melton Perry herself.

Making these reflections, Hamlin pushed open the green and blistered house−door and entered the wide hall, with rickety eighteenth−century chairs and tables marshalled round the walls. There was one good thing about his hosts, he thought, and that was, that they had no common breakfast, but invited their guests to do whatsoever they pleased in the early morning. The hall was very silent, and Ham− lin wondered how he should get any breakfast. It struck him that he had better go and ring the bell in his bedroom. But on going upstairs he found there was no sign of a bell either in it or in the vast scantily furnished drawing−room, where a thick layer of dust reposed on tables and mirrors, and the smell of last night's oil−lamp still lingered. He saw the open door of Perry's studio; it was empty, and so was the adjoining dressing−room, where boots and canvases littered the floor. But on the mirror was a paper, on which was written in the largest characters: "I am gone to sketch at the Lake of Massaciuccoli; shan't be back till lunch; please look after Hamlin."

"Confound it!" thought Hamlin, "am I to be left in *tête−à−tête* with Mrs Perry all the morning?" But since Melton Perry thought nothing of leaving his guest alone all the morning, he too the guest might surely be permitted to

slip away after breakfast from the effusive æstheticism of his hostess. Hav− ing found no sign of life on the first floor, Hamlin went down−stairs once more, and proceeded to ramble about in search of breakfast, or, at least, of some servant. The ground−floor seemed to consist entirely of servants' rooms, offices, and strange garners, where sacks of potatoes, garden−tools, silkworm−mats, and various kinds of pods were gathered together. They were all empty; and empty likewise was the kitchen, its brass saucepans and huge spits left invitingly for any one who might care to step through the open garden−door. But next to the kitchen was a sort of nursery, at least so he judged from the children's chairs and battered dolls lying about and here a table was spread with cups and saucers and jugs, and a cut loaf and a plate of figs. "This looks more like it," thought Hamlin, wondering what had become of the inmates of this mysterious abode of sleep. Suddenly he heard children talking in a room at the end of the passage, and a sort of subdued, deep, melancholy chant, like some church song. He went to the door whence came the sounds, and knocked gently. The childish chattering did not stop, nor the fitful gusts of chant deep, nasal, but harmonious and weird, with curious, sudden, metallic falsetto notes, less like the voice of a woman than of a youth. Hamlin knocked again, and receiving no notice, boldly opened the door and stood on the threshold. He was struck by the sight which met him. The room was low and vaulted, with walls entirely frescoed with dark−blue skies sprinkled with birds, mountains like cheeses, rivers, box−like houses, people fishing, and plentiful ducks and parrots on perches; a faint green shimmer of leaves came through the open windows; three or four little yellow−headed children were scrambling on the floor, struggling violently over the funeral of a doll in a biscuit−tin. In the middle of the room was a large deal table, covered with singed flannel, on the corner of which stood a brasier with some flat−irons, and a heap of crumpled pink pinafores; and behind this table, her tall and powerful figure, in a close−fitting white vest and white skirt, standing out against the dark−blue painted wall and the green shimmer from outside, was a young woman bending over a frock which she was ironing, her bare brown arms going up and down along the board; her massive and yet girlish body bending with the movement, and singing that strange chant which Hamlin had heard from outside.

"I beg your pardon," said Hamlin, in Italian, as he stood in the doorway. The children looked round, tittered, and made remarks in shrill whispers; the girl stopped her work, stood erect, putting her iron on the brasier, and stared full at Hamlin with large wide−opened eyes of strange dark−greyish blue, beneath heavy masses of dark lustreless hair, crimped naturally like so much delicate black iron wire, on her narrow white brow.

"I beg your pardon," said Hamlin again; "but can you tell me how I may get some breakfast?"

He could not help smiling in proffering this innocent request, so serious and almost tragic was the face of the girl.

"It's Mr Hamlin," tittered the children, rolling under the table, and hanging to the table−cloth.

The young woman eyed Hamlin for a second in no very gracious manner; then answered, with a certain contemptuous listlessness in her slightly hollowed pale cheeks and beautifully curled but somewhat prominent lips

"I don't know anything about your breakfast, sir." She spoke, to his surprise, in perfect English, with only the faintest guttural Italian accent. "Mr Perry went to sketch at Massaciuccoli early this morning, and took the boy with him; Mrs Perry may never be disturbed till nine; and the cook is gone to Lucca for provisions."

"That's very sad," remarked Hamlin, laughing, and looking at this curious and picturesque being.

The girl seemed annoyed at being discovered in that guise, for she pulled down her white sleeves quickly.

"I suppose the cook has orders about your breakfast," she said, in a tone which seemed to put an end to the conversation; and she took up her iron once more. "Mrs Perry did not think you would want anything so early; the cook will be back about nine."

But Hamlin would not be shaken off; the fact was, he enjoyed watching this beautiful sullen creature much as he might have enjoyed watching a cat whom he had disturbed in its sleep.

"Nine o'clock!" he said; "that's a long time to wait. Couldn't you give me something to eat? I saw a table spread in the next room."

The girl put down her iron with a sort of subdued irritation of manner.

"It's the children's breakfast, sir," she answered; "we have neither tea nor coffee."

"We have milk," said the eldest of the little girls pertly, "and figs."

"Milk and figs!" exclaimed Hamlin; "why, that's a breakfast for the gods! and won't you," he went on rather appealingly "won't you share a little of it with me?"

"You are Mrs Perry's guest," said the girl more sullenly than ever, "and of course you are welcome to anything you choose."

Hamlin felt rather taken aback.

"Indeed!" he said. "I don't wish to do anything against the habits of the house, or disagreeable to you."

"It is not against any rules," she answered. "If you will excuse me, I will see whether the milk is heated. The children will show you the way."

CHAPTER II.

HAMLIN felt rather contrite and humiliated as he sat down at the square table, with the two eldest children, pert little rosy and flaxen things, on either side of him, and the three little ones staring at him, and then suddenly making convulsive dives under the table−cloth and behind each other's shoulders opposite. He was the furthest possible removed from the kind of young man who persecutes pretty housemaids. Whatever vagaries he might have had in his life, they were not of that sort; and now, although he had merely intended to ask for some breakfast, he found himself somehow in the position of pushing his presence upon a servant girl. He was vexed with himself, and became very grave, scarce− ly answering the chatter of the children by his side.

"And you know," said the eldest child, a pretty little minx of eleven, fully conscious of her charms, "mamma told us you were the great poet, and she read us a poem of yours about Sir Troilus. Mamma always reads poetry to us and we liked it so much, and I liked all about where he kisses the lady so much, and her purple dress with the golden roses, and then about Love, where he comes and takes her by the throat, and chokes her, and makes her feel like a furnace. Mamma says it's just like love. Mr Thaddeus Smith was in love with the gardener's girl when he came here last year, mamma says."

"Good heavens!" thought Hamlin, "what a mamma and what children!"

"And mamma told us to get some myrtles and put them in your room," blurted out a smaller one.

"Hush, Winnie! You know you shouldn't tell," said the eldest.

"And you know," insisted the younger, in her little, impertinent lisp, "mamma said we should put the myrtles, because you made poems about myrtles; and we were to have had on our best frocks, and met you in the hall, and "

"Hush, Winnie!"

"And thrown roses on the floor before you; only then papa got a telegram saying you were coming by the late train, and we had to go to bed "

Miss Winnie's revelations and her sister's expostulations were interrupted by the entry of the nurse, or governess, or whatever else she might be, carrying a large jug of milk. She had slipped on a skirt and loose jacket of striped peasant cotton, which at a distance looked like a dull, rich purple. She sat down at the head of the table, and began silently helping the hot milk.

"May I cut the bread for you?" asked Hamlin, feeling quite shy from her silence.

"I don't think you will know how to do it," she answered. "We have only yesterday's bread at this hour, until the cook returns from market." When the milk was helped and the bread cut, she said, rather sharply

"Now, children, say your prayer."

The children immediately set up a shrill chorus; the elder, who wished to show off, slowly the little ones, who were hungry, quicker; an absurdly pseudo−poetical thanksgiving, which reminded Hamlin of the sort of poetry presented to rich foreigners by needy Italians on creamy, embossed, and illuminated paper. He was struck by the fact that the girl did not join, but waited passively through this religio−poetical ceremony; doubtless, he thought, because she was a Catholic.

"That's mamma's Tuesday hymn," said Winnie; "she makes a different one for each day of the week."

Whereupon the children fell vigorously to their breakfast of bread and milk. Heaven knows when Hamlin had eaten bread and milk last probably, he thought, not since he had been out of frocks; but it seemed to him pleasant and pastoral. He would have enjoyed this improvised breakfast had the children chattered less incessantly (Hamlin did not care for children), and had he not continued to feel rather as if he had been courting a nursemaid. The young woman had as much as she could do in pouring out more milk, giving out more figs, and cutting more slices of bread and butter for the children; and her conversation was entirely engrossed in admonitions to them not to spill their milk, not to jump on their chairs, not to talk with their mouths full, and so forth. She seemed determined, in her sullen indifferent way, to make Hamlin understand that he might intrude his person at that breakfast−table, but that he had no chance of intruding his personality upon her notice. But her very indifference afforded Hamlin an opportunity, and, as it were, a right, to examine her appearance: one may surely look at a person who obstinately refuses to notice one. She was very beautiful, and even more than beautiful strange. She seemed very young, certainly, thought Hamlin not more than nineteen at most; but her face, though of perfectly smooth complexion, without furrow or faintest wrinkle, was wholly unyouthful; the look was not of age, for you could not imagine her ever growing old, but of a perfect negation of youth. Hamlin tried to think what she might have been as a child, looking round on the childish faces about him, but in vain. The complexion was of a uniform opaque pallor, more like certain old marble than ivory; indeed you might almost imagine, as she sat motionless at the head of the table, that this was no living creature, but some sort of strange statue cheek and chin and forehead of Parian marble, scarcely stained a dull red in the lips, and hair of dull wrought−iron, and eyes of some mysterious greyish−blue, slate−tinted onyx: a beautiful and sombre idol of the heathen. And the features were stranger and more monumental even than the substance in which they seemed carved by some sharp chisel, delighting in gradual hollowing of cheek and eye, in sudden cutting of bold groove and cavity of nostril and lip. The forehead was high and narrow, the nose massive, heavy, with a slight droop that reminded Hamlin of the

head of Antinous; the lips thick, and of curiously bold projection and curl; the faintly hollowed cheek subsided gradually into a neck round and erect like a tower, but set into the massive chest as some strong supple branch into a tree−trunk. He wondered as he looked at her; and wondered whether this strange type, neither Latin nor Greek, but with something of Jewish and something of Ethiopian subdued into a statuesque but most un−Hellenic beauty, had met him before. The nearest approach seemed to be certain mournful and sullen heads of Michaelangelo, the type was so monumental, and at the same time so picturesque; and as he looked at the girl, it seemed, despite its strangeness, as if, at some dim distant time, he had seen and known it well before.

He looked at her with the curiosity of an artist examining a model, or a poet trying to solve a riddle; there was, he felt conscious, nothing insolent or offensive in his stare. Yet he felt he must break the silence; so, with real indifference, he suddenly asked

" How is it that you speak English so marvellously well? No one would ever guess that you were not English."

"I am English," answered the girl.

English nationality had explained many otherwise unaccountable mixed types to Hamlin; but this took him by surprise, and left him utterly incredulous. This girl certainly was no Englishwoman a Jewess, perhaps. No, never; no Jewess was ever so pure and statuesque of outline: some Eastern, dashed with Hindoo or Negro; they were much coarser, more common, of far more obvious, less subtle beauty.

"You mean English by adoption," he suggested, "surely not by blood?"

"My mother was an Italian. I think her family came from Sicily or Sardinia, or somewhere,where there are Spaniards and Moors," she answered; "but my father was Scotch. He came from Aberdeen."

"Have you ever been in Scotland?" he asked, just by way of saying something to mitigate the personalness of his previous questions.

"No," she answered, and her lips closed as with a spring; then she added, as if to close all further conversation, "I was born in Italy; my father was employed at Spezia in the docks."

The eldest Miss Perry raised her pretty little sentimental head pertly.

"Annina's father was one of those who make the big men−of−war at Spezia."

"Oh, you know, we once went with papa, and saw a man−of−war, and all the boilers and big, big cannons," interrupted a smaller one.

"And he was a bad, bad man," went on the eldest, composedly. "He used to drink quantities of *acquavite*; and one day when he had drunk so much *acquavite*, do you know what he did? He tried to throw Annina's mother out of the window, and then shot himself with a revolver."

Hamlin listened as the cruel words dribbled out, and stared at the childish face. He had never taken any interest in children; but he had never thought that a child could be so deliberately (as it seemed to him) malignant. The words made his ears burn, and he felt indignant, confused, and humiliated, as if he were a party to them. He did not look at the girl; but he somehow saw, or felt, the sullen, suppressed bitterness of shame in her tragic face.

"And is it true," interrupted Winnie, "that you are going to do our picture? Mamma said you would want to paint us angels or fairies. All the painters paint us, because, mamma says, we are the most beautiful children in Florence. They always give us chocolate and *marrons glacés* to keep us quiet."

CHAPTER III.

WHEN breakfast was over, and she had made the children fold up their napkins, the nurse took what remained of figs, bread, and milk to lock up in the kitchen. Mildred, the eldest of the little Perrys, sidled up to Hamlin, as he stood on the doorstep leading into the vineyard, lighting a cigarette, and asked whether he would not like to see her garden.

Hamlin looked down upon the innocent−looking little fiend with a sort of disgust and contempt. "Thank you," he said; "gardens aren't much in my line."

The little thing scowled at this rebuff of her fascinations. But a sudden thought struck Hamlin. "Yes, by the way," he said, "I do take an interest in gardens sometimes. Come and show me yours."

Mildred slipped her arm through his a long−legged, fair−haired, pre−Raphaelite child, in much−darned stockings and patched pinafore Winnie, the second, a rounder, more comfortable, cherubic beauty, seized his hand. He let himself be led along, among the prattle of the little one and the assumed shyness of the elder, through the vineyard, where the tall, red−tipped sorghum brooms stood among the trailing pumpkins and the tufts of fennel, to a small grove behind the house, in whose shade were four little raked−up spaces, with drooping marigolds and zinnias stuck into the earth, and small box sprigs.

"This is my garden!" cried Winnie, dragging him along, and pointing to the melancholy little patch. "I have marigolds, and sunflowers, and red beans and potatoes."

"And this is mine," said Mildred, raising her big blue eyes. "I call it the garden of Acrasia; because mamma told us once about Sir Guyon "

"Won't you give us anything to buy seeds with; we want tomato seeds," clamoured Winnie.

"Hush, Winnie! I wonder you're not ashamed!" cried Mildred.

"They are very good sort of gardens," said Hamlin, fishing in his waistcoat for loose silver, while the children looked at him with beaming eyes; "here I hope your tomatoes may prosper and prove eatable."

Then he suddenly turned to Mildred. "Come here," he ordered, "I want to speak to you ;" and he sat down on a stone bench under a plane−tree, in which the cicala was sawing away with all his might.

Mildred stood in front of him, wondering, half hoping for the usual request that she should sit for an angel or a fairy.

"Look here," said Hamlin, quietly; "I want to know how you would feel if your papa had been in the habit of drinking too much *acquavite*, and had shot himself after trying to murder your mamma, and some nasty little girl blurted it all out at breakfast to a perfect stranger?"

The child flushed with surprise and anger; she looked as if she would have scratched Hamlin's eyes out. But he looked steadily in her face, and he was a stranger, a gentleman, a man, and not her papa; circumstances which entirely overawed her. She recovered her composure marvellously, and answered after a moment's reflection, "My papa is a gentleman, and Annina's papa was a common man a *mascalzone* ," with considerable triumph at her

dignified argument.

"Your papa ***is*** a gentleman," replied Hamlin, sternly; "I have known him long before you were born. But remember, if you say cruel things which hurt people's feelings, whether they be gentle people or servants, however much your papa may be a gentleman, ***you*** won't be a lady."

And Hamlin left the little Perrys to muse upon this moral truth. He felt quite excited; and when the excitement had subsided, he felt quite astonished at himself. He could scarcely realise that he himself had actually been meddling in other people's affairs, had been reading a lesson to other people's children, all about a little girl saying offensive things to her nurse. It was so strange that it quite humiliated him: he had first pushed his company on to a nursemaid, and then, unasked, fought the nursemaid's battle. This confounded Perry household! Was it going to turn him also into a ridiculous caricature? He went up−stairs and wrote some business letters, and corrected a lot of proof of his new book. Then he thought it would be pleasanter to correct the remainder in the garden; so he brought down his writing−case, and established himself on the grass behind the house. The first−floor balcony and the roof projected a deep shade; and on the high grass flickered shadows of plane−trees and laurels, as through their branches there flickered the pale−blue sky. The swifts flew round the eaves with sharp noise, the cicalas sawed in the trees; all was profoundly peaceable. But suddenly, from the first−floor windows came a vague sound of childish sobbing, a confused murmur as if of consolation. Then a pause, after which a well−known voice arose shrill in glib Italian.

"Annina, how dare you distress the signorina Mildred? How dare you say cruel things to my poor, poor sensitive child?"

"I have said nothing cruel to the signorina Mildred," answered a deep, quiet voice; "the signorina Mildred went to show her garden to Mr Hamlin, and then came back crying. I asked her what had happened, but she refused to tell me. I have nothing to do with her tears."

"How dare you tell such an untruth?" shrieked Mrs Perry. "The signorina Mildred said something about your father at breakfast, and you, like a little viper, turned round upon the poor little darling. She is nearly in hysterics! You little serpent!"

"It is one of Miss Mildred's usual lies," answered the other voice calmly "una delle solite bugíe."

Hamlin had been admitted too much into confidence. He took up his writing things hastily, and removed to the furthest end of the garden, out of reach of the dispute.

This was the pretty result of his interference! He had merely got this poor devil of a nursemaid into a scrape. It was the fit punishment for his folly in going out of his way to meddle with other folk. He was very much annoyed; he had been dragged into a sordid woman's squabble; Mrs Perry's scolding had seemed addressed to him. At the same time, he did feel indignant that the girl should be treated in this fashion: such a splendid, queenly creature slanged by a sentimental, æsthetic fishwife, as he defined his hostess to himself.

The return of Melton Perry interrupted his reflections. Perry was quite astonished to find him up, and extremely distressed at his having had no regular breakfast.

"You see," he said, "Mrs Perry is very delicate in short, scarcely fit for any kind of household bother, so that "

"Oh," answered Hamlin, "I had a capital breakfast with your children."

Then they fell to talking of old times; and little by little there emerged from out of the overworked, henpecked Melton Perry of the present, the resemblance of the proud and brilliant Melton Perry of the past.

"Of course," said Perry, as they sat smoking in the sheltered studio "of course I'm very happy, and that sort of thing. My wife well, she's a little impetuous, and I don't always agree about her way of bringing up the children but there's no saying that she isn't an immensely superior kind of woman. I don't always agree with her, mind you; but she has the true poetic temperament, and" here he made an evident effort "she keeps me up to the mark with my work. I was always a lazy hound, you know, and all that. In short, I know I'm quite a singularly fortunate man. Nevertheless, well, I tell you my frank opinion about matrimony: never do it; the odds are too great. My own belief is, that, especially for an artist, it's a fellow's ruin. Mine, you see, is an exceptional position. But if you take my advice, old man, never marry."

"I don't think there is the faintest chance," answered Hamlin. "Women have got to bore me long ago: all that in my poems is mere recollections of the past descriptions of a myself which has long come to an end."

"I'm glad of it," replied Perry. "It is a foolish thing to get tied to a woman."

"Foolish indeed!" thought Hamlin, looking from his shabby, depressed old comrade, to the blazing sunsets and green moonlights on the easels about them.

CHAPTER IV.

DURING luncheon, no mention was made of the nursemaid into whose concerns Hamlin had that morning intruded; but at dinner, Hamlin's sense of the question being a sore one, and of being himself mixed up in it, gave way before his curiosity to solve the riddle of the strange−type which had taken him so by surprise.

"That is a very strange−looking girl you have in your service," he remarked to his hostess, over their grapes and thin wine.

"The cook?" cried Mrs Perry. "Isn't she a divine creature? I call her Monna Lisa's younger sister."

"I don't know your cook by sight," he answered. "I mean the other young woman they call Annina "

Mrs Perry's brow darkened.

"The nurse or governess, I don't know exactly how to describe her, of your little girls."

"My children's maid," answered Mrs Perry, with considerable emphasis. "Thank heaven, my children have never had and shall never have any other nurse or any other governess than their own mother."

"Well, now, Julia," remonstrated her husband, "I think, you know, that's pushing it a little too far."

"My children shall never learn anything from a menial," insisted Mrs Perry, "neither to walk bodily, nor morally, nor intellectually, as long as I am alive."

"Good heavens!" thought Hamlin, "what a bandy−legged family they are likely to turn out!"

"I suppose you mean Annie," said Perry. "Yes, she's a good girl, and a good−looking girl."

"You are mad, Melton," cried Mrs Perry, "with your idea of goodness and good looks!"

"I think her extraordinarily good−looking," put in Hamlin, enjoying the authority of his own verdict.

"I always told you so," replied Perry.

"When I say good−looking," corrected Hamlin, "I don't mean it at all in the ordinary sense. There are dozens of Italian girls five times as pretty as that girl, and I daresay most people don't think her at all attractive."

"Yes," burst out Mrs Perry, "vulgar minds and eyes never appreciate the higher beauty. They see only the body."

"This is exactly a question of the body," went on Hamlin. "That girl is one of the most singular types I have ever come across. She is like some of Michaelangelo's women, but even stranger a superb creature."

The revelation of her maid's beauty by so great an authority as Hamlin quite dazzled and delighted Mrs Perry.

"All our servants are handsome," she said; "the cook's the finest Leonardo da Vinci type when you see her you will want to do her picture, Mr Hamlin, as Venus Mystica," and Mrs Melton Perry set her meagre features and wide−opening mouth into a mystic smile, intimating that she knew a great deal about Venus Mystica, and her guest doubtless likewise.

"And the footman" . . . she went on.

"Errand−boy," corrected Mr Perry, suddenly, emboldened by his friend's presence.

"The footman is quite a type of manly beauty a young Hercules, such a neck and shoulders and arms and a head like a cameo. I always make it a rule to engage only handsome servants, because it spiritualises the minds of our children to be brought up constantly surrounded by beautiful human forms."

"I see," answered Hamlin drily, entirely neglecting his opportunity of making the usual reply to this remark namely, that the young Perrys were so abundantly provided with beautiful human form in the person of their mother that any other was superfluous.

"That girl you noticed has rather a curious history," said Perry.

"Indeed!" answered Hamlin;"she looks as if she ought to have some sort of tragic past a kind of Brynhilt or Amazon."

"It's tragic enough if you like, but it's unfortunately not at all poetical," replied Perry.

"There is poetry in all suffering, Melton," corrected his wife gravely.

"Well, this girl is the daughter of a Scotch mechanic, a very clever fellow, I believe, who fell in love with the Italian maid of some old friends of ours, and followed her to Italy. He got a very good position in the docks at Spezia, but then the other chaps caballed against him, and made him lose his place. They had to live from hand to mouth for a long while, doing odd jobs for the railway company; he squandered his money also on inventions, so, little by little, he and his wife and children got into great distress. Then he took to drinking, poor devil! (I'm sure I should have done so long before;) and one day that he had again been done out of a place by some Italian scoun−drel, he tried to throw his wife out of the window, and then shot himself. It was a dreadful business."

"He was a great republican, poor dear," added Mrs Perry. "I'm a republican too, a socialist quite a dreadful creature, Mr Hamlin."

"What became of the wife and children ?" asked Hamlin.

"The children had all died by this time, except Annie; and the poor wife was quite broken in health. There was a nephew of the husband's, a Scotch lad, quite a boy, who was awfully plucky and worked for them for some time. Then the widow died; and an old friend of ours, old Miss Curzon, the famous singer that had been perhaps you may have heard of her took Annie into her house."

"Darling Miss Curzon!" exclaimed Mrs Perry. "She was the noblest woman that ever lived. How she loved me! I always say that I lost my voice I had a lovely voice before my marriage when dear darling Miss Curzon died."

"Miss Curzon ***was*** an excellent old woman," went on Perry: "she took Annie when she was eleven, and kept her in her house and educated her till her own death two years ago;" and Perry sighed, as he peeled a hard white peach.

"Then I said to my husband, 'Perry, this child is a legacy to us from our dearest friend,'" went on Mrs Perry, solemnly; "'we are not rich, but Heaven will send us enough for our children and this child; and if it don't, why, we must do without.'"

"So she has been with you ever since?"

"Yes," answered Perry, sharply; "and I should like her to remain for the children's sake, only that I feel the girl ought to look out for some better place." And he turned rather gloomily to his wife.

Mrs Perry answered his look with one of sweet and ineffable astonishment. She naturally viewed all her property, servants, children, husband, &c., as emanations from herself that is to say, from perfection, and consequently as more perfect than other folk's property, servants, children, husbands, although occasionally falling short of this ineffable origin; and she accepted, with alacrity and pleasure, the belief in the transcendent beauty of the nursemaid whom she had shrieked at only a few hours before. She was quite reconciled to her, evidently.

"And what is this girl's name?" asked Hamlin.

"Anne," answered Perry " Anne Brown."

CHAPTER V.

THUS it came about that Walter Hamlin, of Wotton Hall, pre−Raphaelite poet and painter, made acquaintance with Anne Brown, nurse, or as Mrs Perry defined it, children's maid at the Villa Arnolfini.

The whole of the two following days, Hamlin neither saw nor particularly remembered the strange girl whose champion he had constituted himself against the little Perrys. An old chaise, with an older pony, was produced from the neighbouring farmhouse, and Mr and Mrs Melton Perry took it by turns to drive their guest along the dusty roads to the old town of Lucca, to various villas, and other sights of the neighbourhood. In the evening Perry led his friend out for a stroll among the vineyards and the olives, and across the low hills covered with bright green pines and dark cypresses. At the end of the third day, Hamlin, while smoking after dinner with his host, insinuated to Perry that he really thought he must be pushing on to Florence. A look of blank terror overspread poor Perry's face.

"Nonsense!" he cried "don't say that; don't leave me in the lurch yet."

"You see," said Hamlin, hypocritically, "I intend going to America; and I really think I ought to do a little work before leaving Italy."

"What sort of work?"

"Why, I suppose I think I ought to take this opportunity of working a little at one of my pictures for the next Grosvenor."

"Which picture?" asked Perry, eagerly.

"I really scarcely know. I suppose I ought to be making some studies for Circe and the child Comus."

"Child Comus!" exclaimed Perry. "Why, I've the very thing you want here at hand. Such a Comus for you! There's not a model in all Florence will suit you so well; it's the farmer's son. Such legs, and such a chest!"

"I don't intend doing him naked," answered Hamlin, whose strong point was not anatomy.

"Naked or not, he's what you want. The head, since you don't care for legs and chest. You shall have him to−morrow; and you can work much better here than in that swelter at Florence "

"In short," burst out poor Perry, "don't leave me yet, old fellow. You don't know what it is for me to have you here I feel quite another man. It seems to me as if I were ten years younger. The fact is, don't you know, a man's never the same when once married; it's a weight round his neck. Don't go away yet, dear old Watty, for the sake of auld lang syne."

Hamlin could not help being touched by the way in which his old friend threw himself on his compassion. Poor old Perry! How dreadfully dreary and broken−spirited he must be when all alone with that awful wife of his!

"Well, I'm willing enough to stay, if you'll keep me," answered Hamlin.

"That's right!" cried Perry, squeezing his hand. "Keep me from growing into a turnip for a little longer, for goodness' sake."

So the next morning the farmer's boy was sent for, and Hamlin began, in a desultory way, to make some studies for his picture. The fact was, he was so utterly indifferent as to all his own movements, that it was an absolute relief to be pinned down to one place by his old friend. Accordingly he unpacked his things, and prepared to stay at the Villa Arnolfini until the Perrys should themselves return to Florence in October.

Little by little he got to arrange his day so as to avoid as far as possible the dreaded *tête−à−tête* with Mrs Perry; spending the morning lying on the sear grass or the fallen fir−needles under Melton Perry's sketching umbrella; and locking himself up during the afternoon with the pretext of his picture. Locking himself up, and sometimes unlocking the door and letting the lank and limp lady come and sit in his improvised studio, entertaining him with her views on life, poetry, art, love; and invariably representing herself as the devoted slave of a kind of fierce and gloomy lover−husband of the Othello description. During this first week of his stay at the Villa Arnolfini, Hamlin did not lose sight of the Perrys' strange nursemaid. The girl's exotic, and, so to speak, tragic style of beauty, had made a great impression upon him, but a sort of impression such as only a temper entirely artistic could receive. He was interested in Anne Brown, but not in the whole of Anne Brown. He wished to see more of her, but to see more only of her superb physical appearance, and of that sullen, silent, almost haughty manner which accompanied it. As to anything there might be, intellectual or moral, behind this beautiful and dramatic creature, he did not care in the least, and would much rather have seen nothing of it. So far, she was striking, admirable, picturesque, consistent; further details might merely spoil the effect. Hence it was that, although he made several

sketches of her head from memory, and although he rhymed the first half of a sonnet upon the strange fate which had, to put it in plain prose, given the beauty of an Amazon to a nursemaid, he instinctively abstained from seeking in any way to renew the acquaintance which he had made that first morning. The picturesque and imaginative figure was just in the right light and at the right distance, a single movement, and all the picturesqueness and strangeness might vanish. Walter Hamlin had had but too many instances of the melancholy results of trying to approach and become familiar with creatures who had caught his æsthetic and poetic fancy. He often saw her hurrying (if she might ever be said to hurry, for there was something wonderfully measured about her) to and fro, filling up, it would seem, the gaps in Mrs Perry's rather theoretical housekeeping; and sometimes, passing through the ground−floor passage, he would also see her ironing, like that first time, or laboriously presiding over the little Perrys' lessons; for it appeared that Mrs Perry's intellectual guidance of her children consisted in telling them the plots of novels and repeating choice poetry, leaving such mechanical matters as reading and writing to what she called a menial. And even more frequently Hamlin would meet her taking the children for a walk, or sitting in the vineyard sewing or reading, while they built houses of leaves and sticks, and cooked dinners of maize−grains and unripe figs. Hamlin scarcely ever spoke to her; and if the children forced him to remain and examine their houses or their dinners, he would watch the girl, but without the slightest desire of entering into conversation. He wished to know only as much as he could see of her. But this much which he saw inspired him with a kind of respect, a respect not for Anne Brown, nursemaid or nursery−governess of Mrs Melton Perry, but respect for a beautiful and solemn kind of Valkyr or Amazon; for there is no doubt that to certain temperaments not given to respect for social distinctions or religious institutions, or even the kind of moral characteristics held to be worthy of respect by ordinary folk, there is something actually venerable in some kinds of beauty: the man respects the unknown woman as a goddess, and respects himself for having discovered her divinity. So that, habitually and instinctively, Hamlin displayed towards the young woman a degree of courtesy which astonished the little Perrys, who had seen young men flirt with various of their mother's carefully selected beautiful servants, but never treat them, as Miss Mildred expressed it, as if they were funerals passing. All of which distant respect Anne Brown received coldly, as if it were a matter of course; showing astonishment only on one occasion, when Hamlin answered, being requested to lift little Winnie into the branches of an olive−tree "You must first ask permission of Miss Brown."

The girl looked up from her work, and fixed her great greyish−blue eyes upon him in wonder. No one had ever called her Miss Brown before.

Thus things might have continued, and Hamlin have left the Villa Arnolfini with only a few lines of a sonnet on the fly−leaf of his 'Vita Nuova' a few scratched−out sketches of a face with strange, curling full lips, and masses of wiry hair, in his sketchbook and a daily fainter remembrance of Mrs Perry's nurse; when one day he took it into his head to construct a kind of medieval costume for his peasant−boy model, and accordingly went to Mrs Perry for assistance in sewing together the various shreds of old brocade and satin which he had bought at Lucca, the various bits of weather−stained cotton which he had obtained by barter from the peasants. Mrs Perry, lying languidly on a sofa in her dusty boudoir, littered over with books and reviews, afforded him a variety of valuable pieces of information upon harmonies of colours and the magic of folds; but when it came to practical tailoring, she smiled with reproachful gentleness, and, clapping her hands, called out for Annie. Annie that is to say, Anne Brown emerged from an adjacent room, silent and sullen as usual; but when she understood that the job was for Hamlin, she seemed suddenly to develop a certain interest in it. The pieces of stuff were spread out on the drawing−room table, and Hamlin proceeded to explain what manner of garment he wanted, Mrs Perry joining in from the next room with various bewildering instructions. The girl immediately understood; but the piece of work was complicated and tiresome. The stuff had several times to be sewn together, tried on to the live model, and then taken down−stairs to be altered.

"Won't you sit down and do it here, Miss Brown?" Hamlin at length suggested.

The girl hesitated for a moment, and then settled herself to sew at the table of the empty drawing−room. Hamlin went into the studio next door, and tried to draw a little; but he felt himself attracted to go and watch the girl as

she leaned over the table, or sat with her beautiful head bending over her sewing. Every now and then she looked up to ask him some question: a regal, tragic, out−of−our−world, almost weird face, the contrast of which with her prosiac questions about seams and tucks was almost comic.

Hamlin looked at her as he might have looked at a beautiful cathedral front; and he began to feel that kind of anticipated regret at the thought of losing sight of something beautiful and rare, that almost painful desire to keep at least some durable likeness of it, which, in former years, had often tormented him in the midst of the enjoyment of lovely things. He did not see his way to introducing Anne Brown into any picture; nay, he perhaps did not even think of his work; but he determined that he must have a likeness of her to take away with him. Accordingly, that same evening, as he was seated with the Perrys in front of the villa, watching the stars gradually lighting themselves in the bright metallic blue sky, Hamlin suddenly turned to his hostess, and asked her whether she thought it would be possible for him to make a sketch of Anne Brown.

"I may want her for a picture some day," he added, half hypocritically.

Mrs Perry's enthusiasm was immediately kindled.

"Oh !" she exclaimed, "paint a picture of her as the Witch of Atlas, with a red cloak and red roses all about her, and a background of cactuses and aloes all twisting and writhing, and looking as if they gibbered. Do paint her like that, dear Mr Hamlin and Mildred and Winnie will do for attendant spirits. Begin to−morrow you shall have her to sit to you all day; and she has such lovely arms and shoulders, you ***must*** paint her in some kind of dress that will show them."

"I think it's rather cool of you to promise Annie as a sitter in that way," put in Melton Perry "especially with so few clothes on, Julia."

"Why not?" asked Mrs Perry, in astonishment. "If she is beautiful she must be painted. She shall begin sitting to−morrow morning."

"She shan't do anything of the kind!" exclaimed Perry, suddenly. "I don't see at all what right we have to dispose of her. We pay her wages as a servant for our children, not as a model for our visitors."

"I never dreamed of Miss Brown being in any way compelled to sit," remonstrated Hamlin, rather indignantly. "I only wanted your assistance in asking whether she would."

"Of course she will," insisted Mrs Perry. "Why, I wonder what great hardship there is in sitting for one's likeness? Haven't I done it hundreds of times? When a woman is beautiful, it's her duty; that's what I was always told."

"It may be the duty of a lady, Julia," an− swered Mr Perry, gloomily, "and it may be yours; but it isn't the duty of a servant girl the difference lies in that."

"Well," retorted Mrs Perry, angrily, "I think you don't show much appreciation of the honour of having one of the greatest of living painters in our house, Perry. I do, and I shall see to his having the proper model."

"Please, I entreat you, dear Mrs Perry," cried Hamlin," do let the matter go it really is of no consequence; and, indeed, it would be in the last degree distasteful to me to have an unwilling sitter."

"You shall have a willing one, Mr Hamlin;" and Mrs Perry walked off with dignity.

Melton Perry suddenly shook off his languor, and started after his wife.

"Julia," he cried, "do leave it to me I'll speak to Annie only ***do*** leave it to me."

"I see no reason for this," she answered.

"Then I shall speak to Annie at once," replied Perry.

"There's been far too much of this turning of servants into models in this house," he said, turning to Hamlin. "Mrs Perry can't be got to see that it isn't at all the right sort of thing. I don't mind so much with the others, for I suppose they're a parcel of sluts; but Annie is another matter. I don't mind it's being you, you know, old fellow; but I object to the principle. Annie! Annie! I want to speak to you a moment," and Mr Perry went into the house.

After a moment he returned.

"I've spoken to her, Hamlin," he said. "I told her that she was just what you wanted for the Lady Guenevere or the Lady of the Lake, or some lady or other all a lie; but you see I didn't wish her to know it was merely because she's handsome. I told her she was like a portrait of one of these persons. Please don't tell her she's not. I really expected she'd refuse; and I said to her, 'Annie, mind you don't let the mistress force you into sitting; don't do it to please anybody.' I'm really quite surprised, for she's such a very reserved girl always; but then she is an obliging creature too, and I think she'll do more to please me than perhaps my wife, because I always let her understand that this isn't a good place at all, and that she ought to try for another. Well, she says she'll sit; but not till after the ironing is done in the morning. I proposed half−past nine will that do?"

"Thank you," answered Hamlin, putting his hand on Perry's shoulder; "you're a good old creature, Perry."

CHAPTER VI.

HAMLIN did not succeed in doing much that first sitting. He had thought that Anne Brown's head would be an easy one to sketch; but it proved just the reverse. Those salient and outlandish features, which he had thought he could catch in half an hour, were turned into caricature by the slightest exaggeration, and exaggeration was almost inevitable. He made several beginnings, and scratched them all out; and at the end of a couple of hours he felt that he positively could not go on; he had become quite fidgety over his work.

"I have bungled everything," he said at last, rising, "and kept you here for nothing, Miss Brown. The fact is, that you are far more difficult to draw than I expected."

He felt very humiliated at having, as it were, to confess himself a bad artist before such a model.

"Try again," suggested Perry. "I daresay Annie will sit for you again won't you, Annie?"

"If Mr Hamlin wishes me to sit, certainly," answered the girl simply.

"She ***is*** confoundedly difficult to draw," said Hamlin, when she had turned her back.

"She's difficult because she's a kind of mystery," explained Perry. "I've felt it ever since we have had her. One thinks there must be something behind that face, and yet it seems to be a mere blank. My belief is, that people of this condition of life often have very little character at least none in particular developed. Because, after all, it's talking and jawing about things which don't matter a pin that develops our character. The people who have no

opportunity for that remain quite without character, until some day they are forced to choose whether they'll be self−sacrificing creatures or mean pigs."

"There's something in that," answered Hamlin, tearing up his abortive sketches in a huff; "but it ***is*** hard that a man should be unable to copy the shape of a handsome face as he would copy the shape of a handsome vase, without wondering what there may be inside."

The fact was, that the utter silence of his model, and his own utter silence, except when begging her to turn a little more in this direction or that, made Hamlin nervous. He had, of course, sketched and painted scores of people who had sat as utterly silent as Anne Brown, but then Anne Brown was not a model of that kind. Indifferent as he felt towards the hidden reality of this girl, he was, nevertheless, fully conscious that she was a personality, something much more than a mere form; or rather, the form itself was suggestive of something more. It would be an easy thing to have to sketch Michaelangelo's Dawn, or his Delphic Sibyl become living flesh, in utter silence with those eyes fixed upon one. If only he could speak to her, or make her speak, he was persuaded it would be much easier; but for some unaccountable reason it seemed impossible to set up a conversation. One morning accident came to Hamlin's assistance. Strolling about after breakfast, he found in a corner of the vineyard, where the trampled grass revealed the recent presence of the little Perrys, a couple of books carefully buried under a heap of dead leaves just where he chanced to walk. The children had evidently hidden them out of mischief. One was a cheap copy of Dante, with notes the other an Italian grammar. Turning to the fly−leaf he found, written in a curious hand, a stiff imitation of English tradesmen's writing, the name "Anne Brown." He wiped the books, for they were wet with dew, and deposited them upon the window−sill of the nursery. At half−past nine the girl came to the studio. She had been sitting a little while, when Hamlin, bending over his work, suddenly broke the silence

"I find we have a common friend, Miss Brown," he said.

The girl, without stirring, opened her large eyes.

"A common friend?" she asked, with a scarcely perceptible agitation in her quiet manner; then added, "I suppose you mean Mr Perry; I haven't many friends now anywhere."

"Oh! this is the friend of a great many people thousands besides ourselves, so you need not feel jealous; his name is Dante."

"Indeed!" answered Anne Brown, and relapsed into silence.

But silence did not suit Hamlin. "I found two books belonging to you in the vineyard early this morning," he continued; "and I put them on the nursery window−sill."

"Thank you," replied Miss Brown, in her taciturn manner; "I missed them last night."

"I was indiscreet enough to wonder whether you and I cared for the same things in Dante," pursued Hamlin; "so I ventured to open the book. I found you had marked the passage about Provenzano."

"Yes," said Miss Brown.

"How is it that you marked Provenzano, and did not mark Ugolino, I wonder?"

"I don't care about Ugolino. He was a traitor."

"Do you consider that traitors ought to be starved to death?" asked Hamlin, with a smile.

"I don't think any one ought to be starved to death," she answered very seriously; "it is too dreadful. But I don't care about Ugolino, because he was a traitor; and the Archbishop was a traitor too. There is no one to be glad or sorry about."

"And Francesca da Rimini? Do you find there is nothing to care for or be sorry about in her?"

A faint redness welled up under the uniform brown pallor of Anne Brown's face.

"The husband was quite right," she said, after a pause.

"You are very severe," remarked Hamlin "much more severe than Dante. He was sorry for them."

"They were quite happy," she answered. "They did not mind being killed; they did not mind being driven about in the wind, of course" then she stopped short suddenly.

"Why of course?" and Hamlin went on scraping at his pencil.

"Because I don't think one would mind, if people cared for one, being driven about in the wind like that. Lots of people have been driven about in revolutions, and put into dungeons together, and so on. If they had put papa in prison, I should have wanted to go in with him," for once she spoke with a certain amount of vehemence.

Hamlin looked up from his pencil−cutting. The expression which he suddenly met in her face made him feel that at last he had what he wanted. It was a curious mixture, possible only in those strange features, of a kind of passionate effort with dogged determination: the head a little lifted, cheeks and lips firmly set; but in the eyes, and even in the curl of the close−set lips, a sort of strain, as of a person trying to inhale a larger amount of air, or to take in a larger sight. In a second it was gone.

"That is what I want!" thought Hamlin; "the Amazon or Valkyr as I thought."

"Tell me why you care for Provenzano," he went on, now much more interested in his work again.

"Because he was so proud, and did not like to do humble things," she answered; "and yet he begged in the streets for a ransom for his friend."

She showed no desire to say more, and Hamlin was now engrossed in his work. They exchanged but a few trivial remarks during the rest of the sitting. The girl seemed to have contracted a habit of silence, to break through which required a positive effort. When the sitting had come to an end, Hamlin asked whether she could possibly give him another.

She hesitated. "If Mrs Perry wishes it, of course," she answered.

"Excuse me," corrected Hamlin. "Mrs Perry's consent may be necessary for you; but for me, the sitting depends upon your wishes, Miss Brown."

"I don't care one way or another," she answered hurriedly.

Mrs Perry of course gave her consent.

She had carefully collected and pieced the scattered remnants of yesterday's abortive sketches, and Hamlin found her pasting them on to cardboard.

"Do let me keep them, dear Mr Hamlin," cried Mrs Perry; "they are the most precious things I possess."

"They are horrible rubbish;" and Hamlin rudely tore them to shreds. "If you want something of mine, I will make you a sketch of little Winnie only please don't keep these fearful things."

"Thank you, thank you ***so*** much!" she exclaimed "but oh, mayn't I keep this? it is such a lovely head!"

"It's the head of Miss Brown," he answered angrily. "You don't care for it much on her shoulders, why should you care for it on my paper an abominable caricature? Really, I must be permitted to tear it up" and he tore it into a heap of little pieces.

The next day but one he had another sitting from Anne Brown; and he was so pleased with his drawing, that he begged for permission to finish it in colours. During these additional sittings there was not much conversation. The Dante topic was perfectly worn to shreds, till at last it seemed as if it could be made to go no further. In despair, Hamlin remembered the Italian grammar which he had picked up together with the Dante.

"What do you want with an Italian grammer?" he asked. "You surely don't require to study it yourself, Miss Brown?"

"I want to teach some day," she answered.

"Do you mean to teach the Perry children?"

"Oh no to teach, to be a daily governess, what we call a *parlatrice* here. It is not difficult. The lessons are all conversation. Many English ladies want those sort of lessons. I know a girl, the daughter of Mrs Perry's dressmaker, who gives ten lessons every day, and and gets two francs a lesson."

"Ten lessons a−day! But that's fearful. What awful slavery! Surely you don't want to do that?"

"I wish I could. I should be so happy."

"Then you want to leave the Perrys?"

"I want to give up being a servant."

Hamlin paused, and looked at this superb and regal creature. He did not know what to say.

"You don't care for children?" he asked at random.

"I don't know. I don't care for these children," she answered bluntly.

"I thought women always liked children."

She smiled bitterly.

"Oh," she said, "children are worse sometimes than grown people; and then one can't resent it, or answer bad words, or strike them, just because they are children."

"Then you think you would prefer being a teacher of Italian?"

"Oh yes, I must become that some day; I study when I have a little time. A teacher talks with ladies, and talks about all sorts of things."

"How do you mean about all sorts of things?"

"About things which are not things to eat, or mend, or clean, about books, and places, and people."

Hamlin could not help smiling. "Is that such a rare pleasure?" he asked, thinking not of the girl with whom he was talking, but of those weary æsthetic discussions which he had left behind him in London.

"Miss Curzon used to talk about books to me and about music, sometimes," said the girl. "She made me read Shakespeare with her. That is long, long ago."

"And since then. Do you never talk about such things?"

"Never."

"Never?"

Anne Brown raised her eyes quietly. "Never, except with you, sir."

Hamlin did not answer.

Towards the end of the sitting, he suddenly looked up.

"Have you ever read the 'Vita Nuova,' Miss Brown?" he asked.

"What's the 'Vita Nuova'?"

"It is a little book by Dante, in prose and verse, telling how he met Beatrice, and then how she died. It is much more beautiful than the 'Divina Commedia.'"

She looked incredulous.

"Is it more beautiful than Bertran del Bornio, where he carried his head like a lantern? Or Bocca degli Abati, where they all change into snakes? Or Cacciaguida when he prophesies about Dante's exile?"

"It is quite different all about beautiful things, and love."

"I don't care for that."

"You must read it some day, though."

Miss Brown was silent, and relapsed into her usual sullen appearance.

"I say, Hamlin, old fellow," said Perry, as they walked up and down in the garden that evening, "do you care to see the festival at Lucca to−morrow? I'm going to take the children in for a treat, and I shall take Annie too for she never gets any amusement, poor girl. I've hired a waggonette will you be of the party?"

"Will you let me think about it, Perry? I don't much go in for festivals."

"This is a picturesque affair really worth seeing."

"By the way," asked Hamlin, "I have nearly finished my sketch of Miss Brown, and I should like I suppose I ought to make her some little present."

"I wouldn't," answered Melton Perry sharply; "she's an odd girl, and you might just hurt her feelings. You see her father was a republican, and that sort of thing, so she's got all sorts of notions about equality and so forth. Awful bosh, of course, but still I think it's as well she should have them as not."

"I didn't mean any money," said Hamlin, feeling himself grow red at the mere thought.

"Then, if you will run the risk, give her some school−books. You know she wants to set up as a teacher. Grammars that sort of thing."

Hamlin made a gesture of disgust.

"Horrible! to give her grammars!"

"It's what she wants."

"Why, it would seem well it would be like encouraging her to become a daily governess."

"That's just what I wish to do."

Hamlin did not answer. The idea of Anne Brown giving lessons at two francs the hour jarred upon him.

CHAPTER VII.

EARLY the following morning Hamlin was awakened by the wheels of the waggonette and the bells of the horses. Then came the excited voices of children; the sound of slammed doors and precipitate steps on the stairs; and finally the rattle and jingle of departure. He had declined being one of the boisterous expedition to Lucca, for he detested children in general, and the little Perrys in particular; and a day in the empty house (for Mrs Perry was going to see some friends at a neighbouring villa) had seemed to him delightful. He opened his shutters and saw, in the crisp pale−blue morning, the carriage sweeping round the corner of a narrow lane, the children's hats, Anne Brown's red shawl, the coachman's grey coat, brush rapidly along a tall box hedge. If there was a thing Hamlin hated more than another, it was a holiday, a crowd, a lot of people on a jaunt.

After breakfast he went to the studio and sat down before his sketches of Miss Brown. They were unsatisfactory, but they were as good as he could hope to make them. He had fancied that a coloured sketch of her head would be all that he could possibly want; but he now recognised that, after all, the head, beautiful and singular as it was, was yet the least part of the matter. It was the girl's gait, her way of carrying her head and neck, her movements when at work, her postures when in repose a number of things of which that head gave no indication, and which, indeed, it was difficult to render in painting, since it was all movement. He had scribbled a few lines just fragmentary metaphors and scraps of description suggested to him by Anne Brown, and wondered what use he would make of them; indeed, what use he could make of Anne Brown altogether. Here was a splendid model, a splendid heroine, but he was in the mood neither for painting nor for poetry writing. He put a background of dark bay trees to one of his sketches, and then regretted having put it in at all. He no longer felt inclined to work; and,

all of a sudden, an unaccountable fancy struck him to follow the holiday−makers to go quietly into town to see them, without, perhaps, letting himself be seen.

The sun was already high as he walked, or rather waded, along the dusty road, with its garlands of dust−engrained vines hanging from tree to tree on either side; its dust−stifled marsh−flowers in the ditch; its white farmhouses, and white stone heaps, white upon white, brilliant, relentlessly white, under the deep blue autumn sky. Before him the bullock−carts, with sleepy drivers prostrate on their back, moved in a white cloud; a whirlwind of dust was raised by every cariole, heavily laden with singing and yelling peasants, which dashed past. Within sight of the rampart trees, like a pleasant oasis of leafage in the treeless green desert of the town, the crowd of vehicles of all sorts began. Under the red brick gate, with its statue of Justice and motto "Libertas," there was a perfect block of carts, gigs, bullocks, horses, and screaming country folk. Hamlin wriggled through, and slipped along in the scant shade of the narrower streets empty and desolate on that holiday ribbons of brilliant light cut into, bordered by the black shadows of overhanging roofs and balconies. A great buzz of voices came from the square of the cathedral; peasants and townsfolk elbowing about, people at booths yelling their wares, boys screeching on whistles and trumpets, cathedral bell tolling, and all the neighbouring church bells clattering and jangling. From the windows of the blackened palaces fluttered strips of crimson and yellow brocade; across the street, from balcony to balcony, and from twisted iron torchholder to twisted iron bridle−ring, were slung garlands of coloured lamps for the evening's illumination; and in the midst of all rose the cathedral front, its tiers and tiers of twisted and sculptured pillarets, with the massive grey belfry soaring by its side into the high blue sky. Hamlin pushed his way in at one of the side gates; a rolling of organs, and quavering of choir voices, and clash of brass instruments; a hot mouthful of heavy, incense−laden atmosphere; a compact moving human mass beneath the Gothic arches; beams of light flickering among clouds of dust, and incense and taper smoke high in the arched nave; constellations of lights on altar, and organ−loft, and chandelier, yellow specks in the mid−day twilight of the cathedral; something tawdry, hushed, unbreathable, and yet impressive and beautiful.

Hamlin gradually made his way to the side of the altar−steps. This part of the cathedral was full of women provincial great ladies, and shopkeepers' wives and daughters in their Sunday clothes, brilliant caricatures of last year's Paris fashions close packed together on reserved seats, enjoying the incense, the lights, the music, the holiness of the ceremony, the clothes of their neighbours, the appealing glances of the young men in elaborate silk and alpaca summer coats, with artistically combed−up heads of hair, sucking their canes all about the altar. Hamlin's entry, however quiet, was soon perceived, and the eyes of all this womankind were fixed upon the sight, rare in that country town, of an Englishman; and white silk bonnets, and black lace veils, and big red fans, and fuzzy yellow and smooth black heads, leant towards each other, while questions went round in a whisper, who was the *forestiere* the handsome *forestiere* small, slight, meagre, white, with the light hair and moustache, and that melancholy face like a woman's? Hamlin was quickly bored by all this magnificence; jostled to pieces, stifled by the heat, and incense, and heavy smell of the crowd. He was going out, when, as his eyes wandered from the silver and lights of the altar, and the shining mitres and stoles of the priests, to that sea of heads and bonnets and hats in the nave, they were suddenly and unexpectedly arrested on the side steps of the high altar just opposite to him. There, among a lot of heads, but high above them, was a head half covered with coarse black lace and crisp dark hair half turned away from him; a majestic sweep of cheek and jaw, a solemn bend of neck. A moment later the bell tinkled for the elevation of the Host, the organ burst forth into a rapid jig, and the church was a sea of bent heads, of kneeling and stooping men and women. As the people suddenly sank like a wave about the steps, there remained, stranded as it were, and rising conspicuous, the tall and massive figure of Miss Brown. She was standing on the altar−steps, whose orange−red baize cloth threw up faint yellowish tints on to her long dress of some kind of soft white wool, while the crimson brocade on wall and column formed a sort of dull red background. In the mixed light of the yellow tapers and the grey incense−laden sunbeams, her face acquired a diaphanous pallor, as if of a halo surrounding it, as she stood, her hands hanging loosely clasped, looking calmly upon the bowed−down crowd below. One minute, and the bell tinkling again, the people rose with a muffled, shuffling noise, and hid her from Hamlin. The organ and bells were pealing, the voices and violins rising shrill, the incense curling up in grey spirals into the sunbeams among the crimson hangings. The sonnet of Guido Cavalcanti, about the Madonna picture, enshrined at Or San Michele behind the

blazing tapers, and in which he recognised his lady, came into Hamlin's mind, with the sound of the music and the fumes of the incense; and together with it, a remembrance, a sort of picture, hopelessly jumbled, of Laura in the church at Avignon that Good Friday, and Beatrice among the blazing lights of the Heavenly Rose. The Mass was over, and people began to stir and leave the cathedral. Why had she remained standing while all the others had knelt? Perhaps from some Scotch puritanism; it was incongruous, thought Hamlin. But at the same time he felt that, while incongruous in one way for she ought certainly to have knelt like the others it had in another respect completed an effect; this disbelieving girl had herself become, as it were, the Madonna of the place. He stood aside and let the crowd slowly pass out. Suddenly he saw, among the moving sea of heads, the flaxen curls of the little Perrys the reddish beard of Melton Perry the head, half covered with black lace and towering above the others, of Miss Brown. She was leading the two smaller children, and looked anxious in that great crowd. Up went one of the little yellow heads; she had taken the child in her arms. All of a sudden her eyes caught those of Hamlin standing close by, and yet separated from him by an impassable gulf of people. Her own lit up, and with them her whole face, in a smile, which he had never seen before. At last, near the church door, the crowd bore his friends straight towards him.

"What! here after all!" cried Perry. "Up to some mischief, you cunning dog!"

"Up to the mischief of watching these good people's devotion," answered Hamlin.

"Why did you come?" asked the children eagerly.

"I suppose because I thought I should like to amuse myself after all," answered Hamlin.

They were out on the cathedral steps, in the full glare of the blue sky. Outside a fountain was playing, penny whistles and trumpets shrilled on all sides, and the people at the stalls shrieked and bellowed out their wares to the motley crowd pouring out of the church. The children cast eyes of longing upon the booths, decorated with tricolour flags and sprigs of green, full of gaudy dolls, and squeaking wooden dogs, and tin trumpets, and drums; upon the tables, covered with bottles shaped like pyramids, and china men, and Garibaldi busts, full of red and yellow and green stuff, and with piles of cakes with little pictures of saints stuck in the middle of them.

"Buy us something," cried the little ones to their father and Hamlin; and they squeezed through the crowd, and began to hesitate before the varied splendours of the fair.

"You look very happy, Miss Brown," said Hamlin, as they were waiting while the children made their choice. For really the girl looked quite radiant, an expression of unwonted happiness, of freedom and amusement, shone through her quiet, almost solemn, face, like sunshine through a thin film of mist, all the richer for being half suppressed.

"It is all so beautiful," she answered, looking round at the square surrounded by high black palaces draped with crimson brocade, and terraces covered with green, and at the cathedral, carved like a precious casket, beneath the blue sky.

"Not more beautiful than at the Villa Arnolfini, surely?"

She paused.

"No, not more beautiful; but more I don't know what."

"More cheerful?"

She shook her head. "Yes; but not so much that; more free more I don't know how to call it."

The children were laden with lollipops and sixpenny toys.

"Come," said Perry suddenly, very cheerful, in his unaccustomed freedom from his better half, "you must choose a fairing, Annie. What will you have? a doll? a beautiful yellow 'kerchief with purple flowers, warranted the very worst colours in creation? some gingerbread? a penny whistle? No, I'm sure you're dying for some literature" and he turned to a stone bench under a palace, where twopenny books were piled up, and quantities of leaflets of ballads, and lives of saints, and romantic histories, were strung to the wall.

"Oh!" he said, "there's nothing for Annie here she hates saints and knights and poetry; we must get her a book on the 'Rights of Man,' or a 'History of the French Revolution,' at the bookseller's in Via Fillungo. But this is just what suits Hamlin" and throwing down a heap of coppers, he filled his hands with printed leaflets. "The tremendous adventures of the Giant Ferracciù," he read; "the lamentable history of Lucia of Lamermoor; the loves of Irminda and Astolfo; the complaint of the beautiful Fair−haired One, these are the things for a poet," and he stuffed them into Hamlin's pockets.

"Don't be ridiculous, Melton," cried Hamlin.

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Perry. "Who talks of things being ridiculous? I'm in good earnest" and as they went along he began declaiming, with appropriate gestures, a ballad composed by some printer's prentice from the libretto of an old opera.

The children shrieked with laughter at papa's voice and faces; and Anne Brown burst into a curious subdued laugh, which, although scarcely audible, was extremely childish.

As they walked along the narrow crowded streets towards the inn where they were to have dinner, Perry kept on ahead with the two elder children, and Hamlin hung back with Miss Brown and the two younger.

"Did you like the ceremony in the cathedral, Miss Brown?" he asked, irresistibly drawn on to understand why she had not knelt like the others.

"It was very beautiful," she said; "and such beautiful vestments! Did you see the white and gold embroidery of the bishop? and the purple dresses of the canons? oh, it was lovely! But it makes me angry to see such things."

"Why so?"

"Because it is dreadful don't you think? to see all those people kneeling down and believing in all that nonsense."

"How do you know it is nonsense? It seems to me very beautiful and consoling."

She turned her big grey−blue eyes upon him. "You don't mean that you believe in all that mummery?" she asked, searchingly and reproachfully "you who have studied so much; you don't believe that they can make God come down with their mutterings and kneelings?"

"I don't believe it," answered Hamlin, with some embarrassment; "but I think it is very beautiful, and those who do believe in it are very happy."

"But you don't think it is right that people should believe in falsehoods, and be the slaves of wicked priests?"

"How rabid you are!" laughed Hamlin. "No, I don't believe; but I like to see others believing."

"I don't;" and after a minute she added, "Don't you believe in anything at all?"

"Perhaps I do," he said, fixing his eyes upon her. "I believe in beauty I believe that is the one true thing in life."

"I don't know what you mean," she answered; "but it seems to me dreadful that people should believe in priests and kings, and all sorts of lies."

They relapsed into silence. As they walked along, Hamlin stole glances at his companion, walking stately and serious like a saint or a sibyl by his side. He wondered what this girl would have been had she lived three or four centuries back. All this common modern radicalism distressed him in her it had no colour and no perfume. Yet, after all, it was but the modern accessory instead of the medieval. This was the way in which beauty and romance were wasted nowadays wasted, he thought, half consciously, yet not perhaps entirely, since it went to make up a characteristic whole.

Melton Perry took them to the chief inn of the place for dinner. He let each of the children choose whatever she preferred, ordered several bottles of *Asti spumante*, and gave it them to drink in champagne−glasses. The one or two furtive English spinsters who were sipping their tea and reading their "Murray" at the other tables of the huge dining−room, profusely ornamented with casts from the antique, and with cut−paper fiy−floppers, looked up with surprise at the festive party headed by Perry. After dinner the two little ones began to hang their heads in the hot room, and gave signs of going to sleep.

"Good gracious!" said Perry, in a consternation, "what are we to do with these wretched infants? They'll just prevent our taking a stroll in the town before returning home."

"I think the best thing will be for them to sleep a little, sir," suggested Anne Brown. "I will tuck them up on the sofa, and stay with them here while you and Mr Hamlin take Miss Mildred and Miss Winnie for a walk."

"But I can't think of leaving you behind, Annie," cried Perry., "I know how much you would like to see the town."

"I saw part of it this morning," she swered; "and I really would just as soon stay with the children here." There was no gainsaying her; so the two men sallied forth with the two elder children on a walk through the crowded and bannered streets; while Anne Brown remained sitting in the stuffy inn dining−room by the side of the torpid little ones. When they were out an idea suddenly struck Hamlin: this was the opportunity of getting a present for Anne Brown. He left Perry regaling the children on ices at a *café* opposite the Church of St Michael, which rose like a great marble bride−cake into the bright blue sky, and made his way to a bookstall which he had noticed in the morning. He asked for the 'Vita Nuova.' The old bookseller looked over a number of little schedules in his desk, and produced several copies, new and second−hand. They did not please Hamlin. At last he displayed a tiny Giunti volume, just delicately yellowed by age, and bound in vellum. Hamlin bought it, and secreted it in his pocket, and then joined Perry.

They went to the stable, where all the carioles from the country put up, and ordered the waggonette to be at the inn door in an hour. But as they were slowly mounting the wide stone staircase, with the eternal plaster dancing nymphs tripping it on each landing, Perry's eye fell upon a large bill pasted upon the opposite wall, the playbill of the Teatro del Giglio, on which, among the names of singers, fiddlers, chorus−directors, scene−painters, theatre tailors, and hairdressers, streamed, in scarlet letters, the title "Semiramide."

"*Tò*!" cried Milton Perry, with the Tuscan expression for a sudden bright thought; "what do you two young minxes say to going to hear an opera for the first time in your lives?"

"Oh, papa!" shrilled Mildred.

"Oh, papa!" echoed Winnie, catching hold of his knees

"Not so quick!" exclaimed Perry; "I'm by no means so sure of it. What's to become of the two sleepy little worms?"

"Send them home with Annie," suggested Mildred, promptly; "and you'll take us home later."

"Nothing of the kind, my young woman," he answered sternly. "If any one goes to the opera it shall be Annie. Make up your mind for that."

The dining−room was deserted. On a sofa near the open window lay the two tiny girls, propped up with cushions; Anne Brown, surly, flopping away the flies which buzzed about them, and reading a newspaper. She was resting the paper on her knees, and supporting her head with one hand, while the other moved slowly with the cut−paper flopper; and in this position the young nursemaid struck Hamlin as a resuscitation, but more beautiful and even stranger, of one of Michaelangelo's prophetic women.

"I say, Annie,"' cried Perry, "what do you say to taking these two brats to the opera this evening?"

Anne Brown started up.

"To the opera, sir?" she cried, flushing with pleasure.

"Yes; these creatures have never been. They're giving 'Semiramide' to−night. I think it's a good opera for children to begin with; because it will teach them betimes the unhappy complications which are apt to result from murdering one's husband, and trying to marry one's son unawares. I'll take the little ones back to the villa in half an hour, and quiet Mrs Perry's feelings. Mr Hamlin will be delighted to accompany you and mesdemoiselles my daughters, to the theatre, and then bring you home. It won't last late."

"But," exclaimed Anne Brown, " oh, how good of you, sir! but are you sure you would not like to stay for the opera yourself? I could take the little ones home."

"No, thank you, Annie. The fact is, I ***never*** have approved of Rossini's music. Ever since my earliest infancy I have been shocked by its want of earnestness; what I like is a symphony in P minor, with plenty of chords of the diminished seventeenth. That's the right sort of thing, isn't it, Hamlin?"

A few minutes later Perry went away with the two little girls, leaving Mildred and Winhie with Anne Brown. Hamlin accompanied them down−stairs to the waggonette.

"I will go to the theatre and secure a box," he said, "and order a trap to take us back."

"All right!" cried Perry, as the waggonette rolled off. "Mind you don't let those children bore you or worry poor Annie too much; and don't leave them alone the whole afternoon."

But, for some unaccountable reason, Hamlin did leave them alone the whole afternoon. After he had secured the box and ordered the carriage, he felt a sort of unwillingness to go back to the inn, perhaps unconsciously, to sit opposite the Perrys' nursemaid; so he walked about the town till tea−time, not troubling himself to inquire whether Anne Brown and the children might not prefer a stroll on the ramparts to the monotony of sitting for two mortal hours in the inn dining−room.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT dusk they hurriedly drank some of the thin yellow hotel−tea; and then hastened to the theatre across the twilit street and square, where the garlands of Venetian lanterns were beginning to shine like jewels against the pale−blue evening sky. Hamlin offered Anne Brown his arm, but she asked him to give it to Winnie Perry.

"Mildred shall take mine," she said "that's the best way in case of a crowd."

A crowd, alas! there was not; the liveried theatre servants (doubtless the same, in yellow striped waistcoats and drab gaiters, who carried out Semiramis's throne, when the drop−scene fell) made profuse bows to the little party, and handed them at least half−a−dozen play− bills, each as large as an ordinary flag. The children had never been in a theatre before, and were in a high state of delight at the lights, the gilding, the red plush, the scraping of fiddles; especially at being in a box, although the box on this occasion cost only about half as much as would a single seat in an English playhouse. Gradually the theatre filled; the boxes with people of quality from surrounding villas, gentlemen displaying an ampleness of shirt−front, and ladies an ampleness of bosom conceivable only by the provincial mind; the pit with townsfolk and officers: the whole company staring with eyes and opera−glasses, talking, singing, rapping with sticks and sabres till the overture began to roll out, when the audience immediately set up a kind of confused hum, supposed to be the melody of the piece, and which half drowned the meagre orchestra.

Then the opera began an opera such as only the misery and genius of Italy could produce. There was a triumphal procession of six ragamuffins in cotton trousers and with brass kettle−covers on their heads, marching round and round the stage, bearing trophies of paper altar−flowers and coffee−biggins; there was a row of loathsome females, bloated or fleshless, in draggled robes too short or too long, shrieking out of tune in the queen's chamber and four rapscallions in nightgowns and Tam−o'Shanters, and beards which would not stick on, standing round the little spirit−lamp burning in front of Baal's statue; there was the little black leathern portmanteau containing the Babylonian regalia, which a nigger with a black−crape face carried after the Prince Arsaces; and there was the "magnificent apartment in the palace of Nineveh, disclosing a delicious view of the famous hanging gardens," as described by the libretto, and furnished solely with a rush−bottomed chair and a deal table, the table−cloth of which was so short that Semiramis was obliged to lean her arm on it to prevent its slipping off, which, however, it finally did. Moreover, an incal− culable amount of singing out of tune and pummelling one's chest in moments of passion. No training, no dresses, no scenery, no orchestra. Still in this miserable performance there was an element of beauty and dignity, a something in harmony with the grand situation and glorious music: a splendidly made Semiramis, quite regal in her tawdry robes, who showered out volleys of *roulades* as a bird might shower out its trills; another young woman, plain, tall, and slight, playing the prince in corselet and helmet, with quite magnificent attitudes of defiance and command, with bare extended arm and supple wrist. The two girls who played the principal parts were sisters, and although they had certainly never sung much with a teacher, they must have sung a great deal together; and their voices and style melted into each other quite as if it were all a spontaneous effusion on their part. All the realities which money can get, dress, voice, training, accessories, scenery, utterly wanting; but instead, in the midst of pauperism, something which money cannot always get, a certain ideal beauty and charm. Anne Brown was intensely interested in the performance; indeed, quite as much so, though in another way, as the children. During the intervals between the acts, she could speak of nothing but the story of Semiramis, and wonder what would happen next. Hamlin could scarcely help laughing at the concern which she manifested each time that the hero Arsace was bullied by the wicked Assur; but he could not laugh at the tragic way in which she conceived the whole situation. To him all that florid music of Rossini would already have destroyed any seriousness there might have been in the matter; but to Anne Brown it seemed as if all these splendid vocalisations took the place of the visible pomp and magnificence of Assyrian royalty: for her the heroes and heroines, the magi and satraps, were clad, not in the calico and tinsel of the theatre tailor, but in the musical splendours of Rossini. Hamlin, to say the truth, found the performance very wearisome; he had been bored by Semiramide too often with Tietiens and Trebelli, to find it particularly

interesting at the Teatro del Giglio of Lucca. He sat looking on listlessly, not so much at the stage as at the girl who was leaning out of the box before him, watching each movement of her hand and neck, as she devoured the performance with eyes and ears. But when at last there came the grand scene between Semiramis and her son, whatsoever was good in the performance suddenly burst forth; the two young women sang with a sort of spontaneous passion, a delight in the music and their own voices and themselves; and when, Semiramis having let down her back hair (as distressed heroines always do) from utter despair, Prince Arsaces, not to be outdone, pulled off his helmet, letting down his or her back hair also, and the two sank into each other's arms and began the great duet, even Hamlin felt in a kind of way that this was passionate, and tragic, and grand. Anne Brown was seated sidewise in the front of the box, resting her mass of iron−black hair on her hand, her other hand lying loosely on her knees. Her chest heaved under her lace mantilla, and her parted lips quivered. It seemed to Hamlin as if this were the real Semiramis, the real mysterious king−woman of antiquity as if the music belonged in some sort of ideal way to her. When the curtain had fallen amid the yells of applause, she remained silent, letting Hamlin help her on with her shawl without turning her eyes from the stage. The lights were rapidly put out.

"We must go, Miss Brown," cried Hamlin, "otherwise we shall be left in the dark."

She turned, took little Winnie by the hand, and followed him, who led the elder Perry child, prattling loudly, to the stairs. There was a great crowd going down, whistling and humming tunes from the opera. From the force of habit Hamlin again offered Anne Brown his arm. But instead of accepting it, she, so to speak, rapidly plucked little Winnie from the ground, and raised her in her arms as if she were a feather.

"Please let me carry that child," cried Hamlin.

"Oh no," she answered quietly. "I don't mind carrying her at all; but she's too heavy for you, sir."

Out in the square the carriage was awaiting them in the bright starlight, where the red and green lamps were already dying out among the plane−trees. In a minute they were rattling through the narrow streets, and out of the town by the dark tree−masses of the bastions. The bells of the horses jingled as they went; the melancholy shrilling of insects rose from the fields all round; the vine−garlands creaked in the wind. The two children were speedily asleep one with her head on Hamlin's shoulder, the other wrapped in her nurse's shawl. Anne Brown bent over the side of the waggonette, a dark outline, the damp night breeze catching her hair. Neither spoke. Hamlin felt a sense of guilt stealing over him; of guilt for nothing very definite; of guilt towards no one else, but towards himself. The drive passed like a dream. Suddenly the wheels grated on the gravel of the villa garden; dogs barked; lights appeared; the children were lifted out of the carriage asleep; and the voice of Perry whispered to Hamlin

"I caught it nicely when I came home I don't know why, upon my soul! I'm sure I wish I had remained and amused myself with you."

"I wish you had," said Hamlin quite seriously, always with the sense of vague guilt towards himself; then added,

"By the way, old man, I fear I really must go on to Florence to−morrow afternoon."

CHAPTER IX.

PERRY could not at first understand his friend's sudden decision, and violently combated it. But after a little while he said to himself that it must have been fearfully dull for Hamlin at the Villa Arnolfini, and that to have

stayed so long was already much more than a miserable being like himself could expect. So that when his wife nearly went into hysterics at the notion of Hamlin their poet−painter, as she called him suddenly departing, he represented to her, with more emphasis than was his wont, that Hamlin had bored himself to death, and must be bored no longer.

"And where are you going?" asked the limp and Sapphic lady, as they sat at lunch.

"I have no notion," answered Hamlin. "I know nothing beyond Florence for three days. I may go on to Rome, Naples, Egypt, America, Japan, or return to Hammersmith. I have no notion."

"Ah, these poets!" cried Mrs Perry; "they never can tell whither their soul may waft their body."

When they had finished, Hamlin asked whether he might say good−bye to Anne Brown. "I have a little farewell gift to make her," he explained.

Anne Brown was summoned into the studio; she evidently had only just heard the news.

"Are you going away, sir, really?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Hamlin, drily; "I expect the gig must be waiting for me already."

"And are you not going to return, Mr Hamlin?"

"Oh no; I think I shall go to America this winter."

She was silent, and stood by the table in the attitude of a servant waiting for further orders.

"Before I go away," said Hamlin, "I want to thank you, Miss Brown, for your kindness and patience, which have enabled me to make a sketch which will be very valuable for one of my next pictures, and," he added, as she merely nodded her head, "I want to beg you to accept a little gift in remembrance of all the trouble I have given you."

Anne Brown flushed, and her face suddenly changed, as if a whip−cord had passed across it.

Hamlin took the little vellum−bound volume from his pocket.

"You told me you had never read the 'Vita Nuova,' Miss Brown," he said, "so I venture to ask you to accept this copy of it. I don't know whether you like old books; I think them much prettier to look at. Good−bye."

The girl's face cleared into a kind of radiance.

"Thank you so much," she said; "I will read it often."

"And think of me sometimes and the trouble I gave you?"

"It was my duty, since Mrs Perry wished it, sir. Good−bye a good journey to you."

"Good−bye, Miss Brown."

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

WALTER HAMLIN did not go to America. On leaving the Villa Arnolfini, he met at Florence some artist friends, who, in his condition of utter absence of plans, easily drew him on with them to Siena and Perugia, thence into the smaller Umbrian cities, and finally into a wholly unexplored region between the Abruzzo and the Adriatic. By the time that their sketching and article−writing expedition was at an end, the winter had come round, and more than three months had elapsed since Hamlin had parted with the Perrys. Would Hamlin return with his friends to England? He had often said that he had had enough of Italy that he would go home and shut him− self up in his studio at Hammersmith, among smoke and river−fogs, seeing not a living creature, learning Persian and studying Sufi poets until next spring, when he would set off for the East, never more to return to Europe, except for the Grosvenor private view. But when the moment for return north approached, Hamlin began to hesitate; and the very day before his friends' departure, he informed them that he had come to the conclusion that there was still some work for him to do in Italy.

"I shall be in England at the end of two months at latest," he said.

And on their remonstrating at his fickleness, he merely answered

"I have a notion for a new picture, and I think I have found my model for it."

"'The Queen of Night' in your portfolio," suggested one of his friends.

They had noticed and generally admired that strange head, the like of which none of them had ever seen before, and they had given the drawing, which Hamlin described merely as "a girl near Lucca," the nickname of "The Queen of Night."

"Yes," answered Hamlin, "that's the one I'm thinking about."

So the rest of the party set sail from Civita Vecchia; and one drizzly, foggy morning, Hamlin got into the train to carry him northward to Florence.

During those three months, he could scarcely himself have explained when or how, strange notions had come into Hamlin's head, and a still stranger plan had finally matured in it. He had been haunted by the remembrance of the Perrys' nursemaid at the Villa Arnolfini, and gradually taken to brooding and day−dreaming about her. He had made up his mind that Anne Brown was the most beautiful girl, in the strangest style, whom he had ever met. What was to be her future? Of two possibilities one must be realised. Either this magnificent blossom was to be untimely nipped, this beautiful and strange girl was to fritter away her life, unnoticed, wasted, to little by little lose her beauty, her dignity, her grandeur, her whole imaginative aroma; or the rare plant of beauty was to be cherished, nursed into perfection, till it burst out in maturity of splendour, a thing of delight for the present and of wonder for the future. Either Anne Brown must turn into a sordid nursery−governess, or into the avowedly most beautiful woman in England that is to say, in the particular pre−Raphaelite society which constituted England to him.

Yet not necessarily; there was still a middle course she might marry some small shopkeeper or teacher of languages at Florence; or, perhaps, some artist might notice her, make her his mistress, perhaps his wife. This last thought of Anne Brown as the possible wife of some other Melton Perry (for they were all Melton Perrys at

Florence) filled Hamlin with a vague disgust and irritation. Much better that she should end her life as a nursery−maid, or a daily governess at a franc the hour. Still, it was dreadful to think that something so unique should be lost, wasted for ever. "Such things must be," said Hamlin to himself; "it is sad, but it can't be helped." And he wrote two sonnets, "Lost Loveliness," and "Stillborn Joy," which were extremely beautiful, and quite among the finest he ever wrote. But this did not despatch the subject. The sense of having made the most of the fact that this loveliness was to be wasted, this joy of beauty to be stillborn, did not make up for the consciousness that the waste, the abortion, had not actually taken place, might yet be prevented, and were dreadful in themselves. Was he, Hamlin, to marry Anne Brown? He shrank in terror from so Quixotic, and at the same time so commonplace, so school−girlish a thought. But if he did not marry her no other man could; at least, no other man who was to prevent the act of wastefulness to be consummated. She might marry a clerk, a shopkeeper, even a servant, or even some miserable little Anglo−Florentine artist; but if she married a man above that, a man to appreciate and make the most of her, that man must evidently be himself. It is difficult to follow the logic of this notion; but certain it is that Hamlin never doubted for a second that either Anne Brown must bloom for him and by him, must be his most precious possession and his most precious loan to the world or that Anne Brown must be simply and deliberately buried under a bushel. Such arguments are matters of character, I suppose; be it as it may, the argument was absolutely cogent.

When Hamlin had got thus far he stopped for a long time, revolving the matter in his mind in a purely abstract way, without attempting to realise how things might be settled. He was not a man of action or of resolves, and would usually let things slip on and look at them slipping; and during this ruminating condition, he did not once seriously ask himself whether he intended marrying the Perrys' nursemaid. But suddenly, the very day before his friends were to carry him back to England, a new notion came into his head. His life seemed suddenly filled with romance. The matter was settled in a minute. Anne Brown was to be filched triumphantly from oblivion: he telegraphed Perry to hire him rooms in Florence. As the meeting of certain chemical substances will sometimes produce a new and undreamt−of something of wholly unprecedented properties, so ideas had come in collision in Hamlin's mind, and out of a mere perplexity had arisen a stranger scheme out of the question what should be the fate of Anne Brown, had originated the decision what was to be the future of Walter Hamlin. The situations seemed changed: instead of his being a mere possible, but by no means probable, instrument of a change in her life, she was the predestined instrument for the consummation of his life. Anne Brown should live for the world and for fame; and Walter Hamlin's life should be crowned by gradually endowing with vitality, and then wooing, awakening the love of this beautiful Galatea whose soul he had moulded, even as Pygmalion had moulded the limbs of the image which he had made to live and to love. The idea, once present to Hamlin's mind, had been accepted at once; and in another hour he had worked out all the details of the real romance in which he was embarking; he had determined exactly where he would send Anne Brown to school, where he would go during her stay there, what settlements he would make to ensure her complete freedom of choice when she should choose him, in what part of London he would buy a house for her, which of his female relations should have charge of her, by whom she should be introduced into artistic society; he began to imagine all the details of his long courtship. Beyond the courtship, into their actual married life, his fancy did not carry him; it was that year, or two or three years of gradually growing devotion, upon which he cared to dwell. Whether such a scheme was wise or right it never occurred to him to question. He had determined on educating, wooing, and marrying a woman like what Anne Brown seemed to be, as a man might determine to buy a house in a particular fishing or hunting district the only thing is to make sure whether the particular house is the suitable house. The only further concern of Hamlin was to make sure that Anne Brown was really all that she seemed to him to be; and Hamlin looked forward as to a kind of preliminary romance to the strange inspection, this minute examination of a creature who should never guess the extraordinary metamorphosis which might, or might not, be in store for her.

CHAPTER II.

A WEEK later Hamlin was painting Anne Brown in a studio which he had hired for three months. She had manifested some pleasure when, unexpectedly, Mrs Perry had told her of his return, and of his desire to have her once more for a model; but the manifestation thereof was so calm, or rather so mingled with her usual haughty indifference, that her romantic and passionate mistress had forthwith made up her mind that Anne Brown was a mere soulless body, and communicated that fact to her husband.

"I don't see why Annie should be particularly delighted at the prospect of sitting for two hours, twice a−week, with her head raised and her throat outstretched, in a beastly cold studio," answered Perry, affecting, as he frequently did, from a curious kind of coyness, not to understand his wife's underlying meaning.

"She is a mere soulless body," repeated Mrs Perry "as indifferent to Hamlin as a handsome cow would be."

"Do you expect her to throw herself into Hamlin's arms?" cried Perry, angrily.

"I expect her," answered Mrs Perry, with a kind of haughty mystery and sadness, "to be a woman."

"And I expect you to attend to her remaining what she is an honest girl," retorted Perry.

"Melton!" said his wife solemnly; and immediately poor Perry's principles drooped like a furled sail.

Melton Perry had always an uncomfortable feeling of responsibility regarding Anne Brown; a sort of sense that, as poor old Miss Curzon had been grievously mistaken in intrusting a girl like Anne Brown to a lady so mystical and romantic as his wife, he, on his part, hardened sinner, social wreck as he doubtless was, was in duty bound to make up for the good old woman's want of discernment. If it had been any one except Hamlin, he repeated to himself, he would never have permitted a single sitting; but Hamlin was a Sir Galahad at least with regard to servant girls and suchlike who had always struck Perry dumb with wonder; and in this instance in particular, Hamlin seemed really to consider Anne Brown much in the light of a picture by an old master. Yet even thus, it had taken him by surprise, and relieved his mind of a heavy weight, when, the day before the first sitting in the studio, Ham]in had asked Mrs Perry to tell him of some elderly woman some former housekeeper or nurse in an English family who could come to his studio and keep it in order two or three times a−week.

"I can recommend you a most delightful young laundress," exclaimed Mrs Perry with fervour "quite a Palma Vecchio."

"Thank you," answered Hamlin, drily; "I particularly want an elderly woman who can take charge of my things, and who can be there when I mean, who can take Miss Brown's bonnet and shawl when she comes to sit to me."

Mrs Perry confessed to no knowledge of such a person, but sat down to write to the German deaconesses, "such real saints," in quest of the desired piece of elderly respectability. But when she had gone to her writing−table, Melton Perry kicked Hamlin's foot under the table, and said in an undertone

"You are a damned moral dog, certainly, Wat. Thank you so much, old fellow."

So the old housekeeper was hired to go three times a−week to Hamlin's studio, and twice a−week she opened the studio door to Anne Brown, and took the girl's poke−bonnet and grey shawl in the little anteroom, crammed full of dwarf orange−trees, which opened into the pillared balcony circling round the topmost floor of the old palace, and from which you looked into the lichened court, and saw the steel−like sheen of the water in the well. Hamlin had determined to embody one of his usual mystical fancies in his new picture. His pictures came to him first as

poems, and he had written a sonnet descriptive of his intended work before he had painted a stroke of it. It was called Venus Victrix; and the strangeness, the mysteriousness which gave a charm to his beautiful church−window−like pictures, and made one forget for a minute the uncertainty of drawing and the weakness of flesh−painting this essential quality of the pictorial riddle depended very much upon the fact that his Venus Victrix was entirely unlike any other Venus Victrix which the mind of man could conceive. Instead of the naked goddess triumphing over the apple of Paris, whom such a name would lead you to expect, Hamlin made a sketch of a lady in a dress of sad−coloured green and gold brocade, seated in a melancholy landscape of distant barren peaks, suffused with the grey and yellow tints of a late sunset; behind her was a bower of sear−coloured palms, knotting their boughs into a kind of canopy for her head, and in her hand she held, dragged despondingly on the ground, a broken palm−branch. The expression of the goddess of Love, since such she was, was one of intense melancholy. It was one of those pictures which go to the head with a perfectly unintelligible mystery, and which absolutely preclude all possibility of inquiring into their exact meaning. A picture which might have been one of Hamlin's best, only that it was never finished.

For, it must be remembered, the picture, or rather the painting of it, was merely an excuse invented by Hamlin for an opportunity of seeing, of examining, the creature whose future was in his hands. He wished to assure himself that Anne Brown was really the Anne Brown of his fancy; and as he stared at that strange and beautiful face, it was not in reality with the object of transferring it on to his canvas, but to make sure whether it was really as strange as it seemed to him. It was also to gauge whatever mystery there might be hidden in that singular nature. Whether he ever did gauge it, it is impossible to tell. There was, he felt, something strange there something which corresponded with the magnificent and mysterious outside, a possibility of thought and emotion enclosed like the bud in its case of young leaves a potential passion, good or bad, of some sort. At Anne Brown's actual character it was difficult to get; or rather, perhaps, there was as yet but little actual character to get at. He became more and more persuaded, as he sat opposite to her, painting and talking or, interrupting the sitting, playing to her strange songs which he had picked up in his travels, and fragments of forgotten operas which it was his mania to collect that Anne Brown was in reality much younger than her years; that beneath those solemn features there was a still immature soul wrapped up in mere conventional ideas of right and wrong, a few inherited republican formulæ, and a natural pride which had grown, as does any protecting skin, physical or moral, where surroundings are for ever chafing and wearing. A soul, above all, which had never yet sought for an ideal had never loved; and this knowledge was to Hamlin a source of infinite satisfaction.

It was a satisfaction, also, to notice how, little by little, whatever ideals seemed to bud in Anne Brown's mind, were connected with him, or at least with the things which he presented to her imagination. Nay, with himself, as a person not at all, but yet with the books, the music, the pictures about which he talked to her. This studio, so unlike the bleak and tobacco−reeking workshop of Melton Perry, with its curious carved furniture, its Japanese screens, its bits of brocade and tapestry (rubbish which Hamlin would have blushed at in London), its shelves of books and chipped majolica and glass, its quantity of flowers, was evidently a sort of earthly paradise to the girl. And the handsome, pale, serious young man, with womanishly regular feature and world−worn look, who treated her with a sort of protecting deference, who instructed her in what she ought to like and dislike, and at the same time asked with real earnestness for her opinion, was evidently its affable archangel. This Hamlin perceived to his pleasure; but, nevertheless, he perceived also that all feeling, all ideas, were in Anne Brown vague, immature, or merely potential unless, indeed, this tragic−looking creature repressed and drowned in the darkness of her consciousness anything more definite and developed.

They did not talk very much, for they were both of them rather taciturn; but what they said acquired therefrom more than doubled importance. And of this talking Hamlin did by far the greater share. Anne Brown had indeed little to say a nursery−maid of nineteen has not much to tell a fashionable poet−painter of thirty−one: slight descriptions of places she had been to, villas, or bathing−places, and one or two excursions from them; vague reminiscences of old Miss Curzon, of the books which she had made the girl read, the music she had heard, the anecdotes of Landor and Rossini and Malibran which the old lady had narrated; a few allusions, short and passionate, to her father; a few more, sullen and dreary, to her own future life; that was all that poor Anne Brown

could say.

For when he told her the plots of novels, and repeated scraps of poems to her, she scarcely ventured to give him her opinion. She was so earnest that she felt that only something worth saying should be said; and what things worth saying could she say to him?

"By the way," said Hamlin one day, as she stood, tying her bonnet, and looking out over the sea of shingly roofs, the sudden gaps showing shady gardens far below, open *loggias*, between whose columns fluttered linen, and irregular rows of windows with herbs in broken ewers on their sills "by the way, you have never told me how you liked the 'Vita Nuova,' Miss Brown." He had talked of so many books, making her wonder and sometimes laugh at his account of them, but never about that, nor about his own.

"It is very beautiful," she said, still looking out of the window "but do you think it is true?"

"Why not?" he said.

"I don't know I don't think there are men like that;" then she suddenly added, with a sort of melancholy humorous laugh, which was frequent with her, "I will make my pupils read it when I am a *parlatrice*. Those ladies will tell me their opinion."

Hamlin was looking at her, as she still turned her massive head, with its waves of iron−black hair, away from him, towards the light.

"Good−bye," she said, with her hand on the door−latch.

"Stop a minute," said Hamlin; and going to a book−shelf, he got down a little green−bound volume.

"I don't know why," he said, "but I should like you to read these. It is idiotic trash after the 'Vita Nuova' but it is mine."

"Thank you," she said. "I will bring it you back next sitting. I will cover the binding."

"I want you to keep it. Won't you do me that favour?"

She reddened all over her pale face.

"Thank you," she said. "'It is very good of you."

CHAPTER III.

IT so happened that as Anne Brown was walking quickly home she was overtaken by Melton Perry.

"What's that book, Annie?" he inquired, as they walked side by side.

"Mr Hamlin gave it me it's his poems."

"Let me see." Perry was more peremptory than usual.

He turned over the leaves as they went along, and then returned it to her.

"You may read that," he said "it's sad trash, but you may read it. All poetry isn't fit for women to read," he added, by way of explanation.

The gift of this book somehow disturbed Perry's equanimity.

"What made him give you that book?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir. We were talking about the 'Vita Nuova.'"

"A lot of confounded medieval twaddle," cried Perry. "Why don't you read 'Lady Audley's Secret' or 'The Heir of Redclyffe'? that's the right sort of thing."

She seemed hurt, and they were silent. Suddenly Perry said, with some roughness

"I'm sorry to inconvenience Hamlin, but this will be the last of the sittings. I am going to send you to the sea−side with the children in a day or two. Little May needs change of air. When you return, Mr Hamlin will be leaving Florence."

"Yes, sir," answered Anne Brown; and a kind of suppressed spasm passed across her face.

Perry saw it.

"It's high time," he said to himself.

Melton Perry could not screw up his courage till he and his wife and Hamlin had already finished dinner that evening.

"I say, Hamlin," he began, lighting his pipe, while Mrs Perry artistically twisted a cigarette in her long brown fingers "d'you think you could finish off that picture with only one more sitting? I'm sure Mrs Perry thinks it is time for the children to go down to the sea−side only, of course, she doesn't like disturbing you in your work."

"Go down to the sea−side!" exclaimed Mrs Perry, not at all mollified by her husband's deference; "who talks of going to the seaside? and what has that to do with his work?"

"You forget, my dear, that you said this morning that May requires change of air and, of course, Annie will be required to take the children down to Viareggio. I am extremely sorry for you, old fellow, but I fear you must finish that picture at least so far as Annie is concerned by the beginning of next week."

"I see," answered Hamlin, briefly. For the first time in his life almost, he felt angry with his old friend; an unspeakable resentment at this interference with what he considered already as his.

"***I*** see nothing of the sort," burst out Mrs Perry; "I will never, never permit dear Hamlin's masterpiece to be spoilt. I would rather take the children to the sea−side myself oh yes. I would rather they did not go at all. My children are the dearest things I possess, but I have no right selfishly to prefer their welfare to the completion of such a picture. I should never forgive myself. That unfinished picture, that strange, terrible Venus, would haunt me in my dreams, and I should hear the whole world asking me, 'What have you done with a thing meant for our joy?'"

"Bosh!" cried Perry, stretching out his legs and puffing at his pipe "rubbish! A fine thing if May gets low fever again: much you'll think of Hamlin's masterpiece then."

"May shall not have fever," answered Mrs Perry, haughtily; "and Hamlin's masterpiece, which you choose to sneer at "

"Oh, please, don't bother about my masterpieces!" interposed Hamlin.

" Shall not be sacrificed. You shall take the children to the sea−side, Melton; and Annie shall continue to give him as many sittings as he may wish." And then, passing over her husband's nauseous existence, she began a mellifluous and irrelevant conversation with Hamlin across him.

But after two or three minutes Perry could stand it no longer.

"Damn your sea−side!" he suddenly burst out.

"Melton!" shrieked Mrs Perry, falling back on her chair.

"Damn your sea−side!" repeated Perry. "Haven't you eyes in your head to understand that the sea−side has nothing to do with the matter? The children no more require to go to Viareggio than I require to be made Khan of Tartary. What is required is that an honest girl, who was intrusted to us by an old friend, should not get to be talked of as a "

"This loathsome coarseness is too much for me. Adieu, Mr Hamlin!" and Mrs Perry flounced out of the room.

"Lord deliver us from womankind!" exclaimed Perry, as the door shut upon his wife, and he fell back in his chair. "What a nice breakfast I shall have to−morrow!"

Hamlin did not answer, but merely lit another cigarette, and looked into the smouldering fire.

"Hamlin, old boy," resumed Perry, "don't be down upon me. I really am confoundedly sorry to bother you indeed I am; but you see about this girl "

"I understand," answered Hamlin, shortly; "don't let's talk about it."

"But please don't be in a rage with me, Watty," cried Perry, appealingly; "really I don't know what to do. You see, it's not as if she were an ordinary girl or an ordinary servant; then I should say hang it, please yourself!"

"Sweet morals!" sneered Hamlin.

"But with her it's different; I'm sure you must recognise that yourself. Now I don't mean to say you are in the least to blame, or that the girl cares the least scrap about you; but still, this sort of thing won't do. I know you're the last man to do a dirty thing indeed you're the only man whom I would have permitted to go on so long. But then, quite without meaning anything, all that sitting, and talking, and discussing poetry and 'Vita Nuova' together without knowing it, it puts ideas into a girl's head, makes her dissatisfied, that sort of thing, and the result is that she goes to the bad. And then, here in Florence especially, a girl's none the better looked at for having sat, if even only to one man. People begin to talk (at the villa it was another matter), stories go round, and it becomes difficult for her to get a respectable situation."

"You needn't say any more," cried Hamlin, with almost feminine impatience. All this gave him a sense of moral nausea.

"You understand, old fellow, I don't mean it about you in particular," persisted Perry; "indeed you've behaved like Sir Bors, Sir Percival, and Sir Galahad all rolled into one. But it's the fatality of the circumstances, the beastly

world about us. You're not angry, are you, with me?"

"Not a bit," answered Hamlin, quietly, minutely examining one of the pictures on the wall, which was not worth looking at, and had been thoroughly looked at by him already; "not a bit, my dear Perry. I suppose you have no objection to Miss Brown giving me one more morning?"

"Not the least two, or even three, for the matter of that. I was only anxious not to spin out things indefinitely."

"One more sitting will be more than enough," answered Hamlin. "By the way, before I go, I want to do a drawing of little Mildred."

CHAPTER IV.

IT was a cold and drizzling February morning that last sitting which Anne Brown was to give to Walter Hamlin. As the girl slowly mounted the well−like stairs of the old tower palace, and saw the distant snow−covered hills through the dim windows on the landings, she thought with sadness that this was the last time she should toil up to Hamlin's studio. A lethargy weighed upon her, making her feel that everything was dreary and unreal, such as she had experienced only once or twice before, when one of the few holidays of her childhood had drawn to a close. The cheerless, colourless, eventless, joyless routine of ordinary life was about to close over, to engulf, her little island of brightness. She was longer than usual taking off her bonnet and cloak in the anteroom filled with orange−trees, for she felt as if she must look at everything well one last time at the bits of brocade and the photographs on the wall, the plaster−casts on the shelf, the scarlet and purple anemones in the cracked china bow], the brass synagogue lamp hanging in the window.

"It is bad weather," said Hamlin's old housekeeper.

"Horrible," answered Anne, looking vacantly through the window at the grey sky and wet roofs.

The old woman opened the studio door and drew the curtains. Hamlin, who was at a table writing, rose and came to meet his model.

"It is very good of you to come in such horrible weather, Miss Brown," he said.

"It is the last sitting I thought I ought not to miss it," and she sat down at once in the arm−chair of faded green velvet opposite Hamlin's easel.

"Won't you warm yourself a little?" he asked.

"No, thank you; I am not cold."

Hamlin began to prepare his paints.

"You are going to Viareggio, Miss Brown," he remarked.

"Yes; I believe I am."

"You will enjoy the change of air. The sea you told me you liked the sea one day," and he went on squeezing the

paints on to his palette.

"I suppose so." She said no more.

Hamlin was seated before his easel, looking now at his work and now at her, and making minute alterations with a small brush. They did not talk much. He seemed bent upon his work. He had told her that she need not keep her head in position, as he was merely finishing some unimportant details. Her eyes wandered round the room at the books, the sketches on the wall, the rugs under foot. On the chimney−piece was stuck a photograph of Melton Perry. If only she might have a photo− graph of Hamlin! . . . For less than a second she thought she might beg for one; then it seemed to her impossible, and the wish beat itself painfully against that cold, dead impossibility, like a bird against its cage−bars.

Hamlin called the old woman

"Take that letter to the post−office at the Uffizi," he said, pointing to his writing−table, "and mind you get it registered."

It was the first time that Hamlin had sent the old woman on an errand during one of Anne Brown's sittings, when she was wont to go in and out of the studio noiselessly, like a watchful duenna.

The heavy stairs door banged behind her. Anne listened to it dully, vacantly, as one listens to things when deeply preoccupied. For a few minutes Hamlin worked on in silence, then suddenly, without looking up, he said

"Do you remember my finding your 'Dante' in the vineyard at the Villa Arnolfini, Miss Brown?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And you told me that you wished to fit yourself to be a teacher?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well," went on Hamlin, "I have been thinking about that; and I think it would be a pity I mean I hope you won't think it horribly rude of me to say so I think it would be better if you went to school for a little while yourself."

Anne stared at this speech, and at the close of it her surprise turned to resentment.

"Of course it would be better," she said, bitterly; "of course I shall always be very ignorant; but I have no wish to set up for what I am not. I am not going to teach people anything only to correct their pronunciation and a few mistakes. One does not require to study much for that, and I shall be competent to do it."

In her quiet, subdued way she looked very angry.

Hamlin rose from his easel.

"You misunderstand me," he said; "and indeed what I have to say is so strange and perhaps so unjustifiable, that you have every right to do so. Listen," and he drew a chair near hers.

"Please do not think me very bold, and forgive the horrid way in which I am forced to put things, when I tell you, dear Miss Brown, that I am very much interested in you, and, indeed will you forgive a comparative stranger saying so? that I have never felt so much attracted by any one as I do by you."

Anne Brown did not answer; she seemed literally petrified by sheer astonishment.

"The time has come when our acquaintance must come to an end," went on Hamlin, rapidly; "but I cannot let this happen without making an effort to prolong it. I have no brothers or sisters no one, at least, living with me, except distant relations. I have never taken much interest in anybody. But now I want to know would you, instead of our parting company altogether would you let me be− come your guardian for the next few years, and as such, would you let me take charge of your education and send you to school? It seems a very ridiculous thing to suggest. But still you must not be angry with me for doing so."

Anne's big onyx eyes had opened wider and wider. She flushed purple in the middle of his speech, then turned ashy−white, while she picked convulsively at the fringe of the armchair. Then suddenly a sort of convulsion came across her face, and, as if from sheer unbearable tension of feeling, she burst into tears.

She gave way only one second, immediately trying to stop herself, but in vain. Hamlin felt that he was making a horrible mess of it. He came close up to the chair where the poor girl was thrown back, shaken with sobs.

"Miss Brown," he cried, taking her hand "Anne oh, don't be unhappy! I did not mean to offend you. Don't you understand my meaning? I wish you to be what you have a right to be. I wish you to be in such a position that of all the men in the world you may choose the one who deserves you most. Anne, I love you and I hope that perhaps some day you may love me; but I want you to be able to love whoever may best deserve you, and merely to do my best that you should care for me. I want you to have a future independent of me to possess the education and the fortune which shall enable you to marry whomsoever you will, or not to marry at all. Will you let me, for the time being, be your guardian, your father, your brother; let me provide for you, take care of your money, see to your education? I do not ask you to love me, but merely to give me a chance of trying to make you prefer me."

Anne did not cease sobbing; and every convulsive heaving of her body made Hamlin feel a sort of sickening terror. He slid down on his knees and kissed her hand.

This action seemed suddenly to awaken her. She started up, and making a tremendous effort, stopped her crying.

He stood aside while she went to the mirror and looked at her swollen eyes and convulsed face.

"May I have a glass of water?" she asked; then, stopping Hamlin, "never mind," she said "never mind I must go;" and she pulled her blue veil hurriedly over her eyes and huddled on her cloak.

"Miss Brown," cried Hamlin, "why don't you answer me?" and he laid hold of her arm as she was about to open the door.

"Because you do not deserve it," she answered, trying to loosen his grasp. "Let me go, please."

"I cannot let you go," answered Hamlin calmly, standing before the door, "until you have listened to me. Will you let me provide for your future, send you to school, and then place you in the care of my aunt? Will you let me act as if I were your guardian for the next three years, and at the end of them you shall have enough to live and marry as befits a lady, and be as free as air, or become my wife whichever you shall choose? Answer me, for I am serious."

Anne Brown paused.

"Don't ask me for an answer now," she said; "I am not sure that you are in earnest."

"I am indeed I am!" cried Hamlin; "I have intended asking you this ever since my return to Florence. I returned merely in order to ask you. I am in earnest; cannot you give me a serious answer?"

"Not now I can't think about anything; I must ask; I don't know what is right to do."

He opened the door, and Anne Brown walked out rapidly, through the anteroom and downstairs.

CHAPTER V.

FOR a long time Anne Brown remained as it were dazed, as if she had received a blow on the head. When she got back to the Perrys' house, she felt broken in all her limbs, and slipped up−stairs and threw herself on her bed. But it was no use: all that day, while attending on the children and doing her usual work, she felt as if some one else were doing it all; while she remained conscious only of something very sudden and strange, of a confused buzzing in her brain, through which she heard the voice of Hamlin repeating his words in the studio; words which somehow made her indignant, angry, and at the same time filled her with a sense of having done something which she should not. This feeling increased at night, and she lay awake while the clocks struck hour after hour, hot, red, half deafened by her own blood, fevered and vaguely indignant. It was as if Hamlin had struck her; she felt insulted, outraged, by this strange interference with her fate, this wonderful intrusion of excitement into her dull and sombre life. It was dawn when she awoke: a chill greyness in the sky, reddened by the pale winter sun. She knew that something had happened, that something was changed. She was almost surprised to find herself in her usual room, with the children's tea−sets on the chest of drawers, the coloured pictures from the 'Illustrated' and the 'Graphic' pinned on the walls, the dolls' houses in the corner, and little May asleep by her side in her crib. Then she remembered it all, and sat up in her bed thinking about it. Things appeared to her in quite a new light. She had been an ungrateful beast to feel as she had towards Hamlin; and a great wave of gratitude and awe, and love and joy, welled up in her heart. It was as if she were sitting in the sunshine: an indefinable kind of happiness. How noble and generous and good he had been; and how doubly so, being so great, and she being a mere nothing in the world! Whether he loved her or she him, she did not ask herself; it seemed a thing to die of for sheer happiness, that any one should care for her and her future. And just in proportion to her usual pride, and sullenness, and joylessness, she felt happy in the idea of deserving nothing and receiving everything, from his kindness: and Hamlin, with whom she had spoken not twenty−four hours earlier, whom she would see again that day, appeared to her as a distant, dim, ineffable creature, lighting and warming her like the sun, but equally unapproachable. But on thinking it over, things came round to commonplace actuality. What was she to do? Would he ask her again? or even, had he asked her at all? It all seemed a dream, and she did not venture to examine into its reality. She determined to tell it all to Perry, and ask his advice; but she felt as if she never could. She met Perry several times in the course of the morning, but she could not succeed in screwing up her courage. What if it should all prove to be an illusion? She took the children out for their accustomed walk, during which she was even more silent than usual. On returning home she saw Hamlin in the street, close to the door. The blood all rushed up to her head. Hamlin saluted her as if nothing had happened, and accompanied her up−stairs. When they were at the landing he suddenly turned to her

"Have you thought over our conversation in the studio yesterday, Miss Brown?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Anne, inaudibly, as he stood with his hand on the bell; "I have."

"Well, then," went on Hamlin, "with regard to the plan which I submitted to you, what is your answer? Do you consent or not?"

Anne Brown raised her head.

"I consent," she answered quietly, looking full at him, as if to make sure that she was not talking in a dream. He had never seen her so beautiful and majestic before; and she had a look with dilated eyes, and rapid, oppressed breath like the one which he had noticed once when she talked of her father, and of which he had felt at once, "this is what I want."

"Thank you," he answered gravely, and rang the bell. For a moment they stood in silence, till the door was opened.

CHAPTER VI.

HAMLIN sat for some time in the dusty attic called a studio, while Perry cut acrobats and devils out of black paper, and stuck them on the dirty window−panes.

"That's my vocation," said Perry, "and not painting damned landscape spinach and soapsud seas. Look! aren't they jolly old fiends?" and he held up a group of black clowns, standing on each other's hands and shoulders.

"Capital!" answered Hamlin. "But look here; I came to tell you something. I want the address of Miss Brown's guardian, you told me there was one, because I am going to have Miss Brown educated, with a view, if she do not change her mind, to her becoming my wife."

Perry let his scissors fall on the floor.

"Damnation!" he cried.

Hamlin picked up the scissors and put them quietly on the table.

"So that's it!" burst out Perry. "While I was bothering my brains with trying to take care of Anne, you were being inveigled by that cursed hypocritical slut."

"I shall be obliged to you to speak in rather different language, Perry," said Hamlin, in a tone of voice and with a manner which his friend was not accustomed to.

"Oh, beast! brute! seven−times−distilled and most−kickable jackass that I have been," moaned Perry, "that I should have let this happen to you! that I should have let you be entrapped under my very nose! But it mustn't be, old fellow; I won't stand it."

"You will have to," answered Hamlin, contemptuously; "and so, let's say no more about it. Only one word: Miss Brown has not inveigled me."

Perry gave a sort of moan of disgust. "No woman ever does inveigle a man!"

"Miss Brown has not inveigled me. I conceived the desire of educating her, and giving myself a chance of marrying her if she would have me, long ago, before I returned to Florence. And, as a favour, I beg you will respect Miss Brown so long as she remains in your house, as you would respect the woman who is at present my ward, and may possibly become my wife."

"Ward! wife! fiddlesticks!" cried Perry. "For God's sake, my dearest old Watty, don't go and do such a damnable thing! don't be such an idiot as to suppose you must do it. That was my confounded folly: let myself be led on, and then thought it was my own choice, my resolution, all sorts of fine things. No man ever really wants to tie himself up; it's the woman who does it, and makes him believe it's himself. All this is bosh, mere bosh; you'll think better of it."

"I tell you again, Perry, that there is no inveigling about the matter. I made up my mind to this step while I was away from Florence. Besides, I am not going to marry Miss Brown straight off; I am going to give her the education which such a woman deserves, to enable her to marry me should she care to do so."

"Education, forsooth!" groaned Perry; "you will get yourself married before you have time to say Jack Robinson: and to think that I have brought it all upon you! to think that I have driven you to do it!"

Hamlin could not help smiling at his friend's distress.

"Really, you need not feel under any responsibility. I alone am responsible in the business I and good fortune, which has brought me into the presence of the most marvelIous woman that ever was "

"But what do you do it for? You're not in love with Annie, I do believe," cried poor Perry.

"I do it because she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," answered Hamlin, deliberately; "and the woman who, properly educated, is of all others the one whom I should most wish to love because, in short, I cannot see her wasted."

Perry flung his arms over his head with a gesture of grotesque despair. At that moment the door opened, and Mrs Perry entered the studio.

"What is the matter? what has happened?" she asked with a dramatic gesture, and a not less dramatic accent; and she remained standing on the threshold, raising the door−curtain with much dignity.

"Hamlin wants to bring up and marry Anne Brown," yelled Perry.

Mrs Perry tottered, let the curtain go, held her hand to her head for a moment.

"Anne Brown do you hear that? He wants to marry her! to educate her! He has already proposed!" repeated Perry.

Mrs Perry came forward solemnly, and stretched out her hand to Hamlin.

"Dear friend," she said softly, "my heart told me that this would be."

"Fudge!" exclaimed Perry; "if it did, why the deuce didn't you interfere?"

"My heart told me this would be. I congratulate you, dearest friend, that you have at last found the embodiment of your mysterious dreams of beauty. And I thank you, on my part, for giving me the happiness of seeing that glorious dethroned goddess reinstated in her rights, and also," and Mrs Perry's long mouth smiled formidable like an alligator's, "for giving me the happiness of witnessing a union of mystic perfection;" whereupon, to Hamlin's horror, the tall and bony lady deposited a damp kiss on his forehead.

"Oh but thank you so much!" exclaimed Hamlin "I have not asked Miss Brown to marry me; I have only asked her to let me educate her. I wish her to choose whatever husband may deserve her."

"And that will be yourself your noble, darling self," beamed Mrs Perry.

"I am happy that you approve of my decision," said Hamlin, quickly; "and since you do, will you kindly tell me the address of Miss Brown's Miss Brown's guardian?"

"Julia, I forbid you," moaned Perry feebly.

"His address" answered Mrs Perry blandly, and taking no notice of her husband "is Richard Brown, care of Gillespie Brothers, New Cross. He is foreman at a cannon−foundry, or a place where they make torpedoes. I know it's something murderous and dreadful."

"Richard Brown, Gillespie Brothers, New Cross," wrote Hamlin in his note−book. "Thank you so much; I shall write to him at once."

"Oh, idiotic beast that I was!" groaned Perry, "to think that it should all be my fault."

"Come into my boudoir," said Mrs Perry; "you shall write to him without a moment's delay. Denrest Mr Hamlin, it is so noble, so lovely on your part; and dear Anne how beautiful she will become!"

Perry paced up and down the room in violent despair, kicking at all the chairs and easels on his way, and hurling a tin of black paint against the ceiling, whence, having deposited its oozy contents, it slowly descended. After this, feeling that his despair was not yet vented, he stalked off to the German beer−cellar, in the Via Lambertesca, and gloomily consumed a *bock* a proceeding to which he invariably resorted whenever his wife had inspired him with a more than usually strong wish to drown himself.

Suddenly an idea struck him, and he rushed to the nearest telegraph−office. There he spent upwards of an hour, and consumed many pieces of paper in concocting a missive which should, within the compass of twenty words, convey to Mr Richard Brown, care of Gillespie Brothers, New Cross, that the proposal being made to Anne Brown by a certain person must be immediately rejected, as its acceptance would bring ruin, dishonour, and misery on all parties. "Proposal disastrous snare," wound up Perry at last in triumph; and then discovered that, in his zeal for Hamlin's good, he had expressed disapprobation to the extent of exactly twenty francs of Italian money.

"Nothing but pipes loathsome, smelly, filthy pipes; never a cigar for the next two months," meditated Perry, as he paid his money and received the clerk's receipt; "but a fellow must save his friend after all."

CHAPTER VII.

NO arrangements could be come to until Hamlin should hear from Anne Brown's guardian, and this, even by return of post, was impossible under a week. And during that week, Hamlin determined to keep away from the Perrys' house: the objurgations of Melton Perry, the congratulations of his wife, the very tittering of the children, all this vulgar prose had best be kept aloof from his romance; besides, he was in the ridiculous position that Anne was, and was not his; that she could no longer be considered the Perrys' servant, and could not yet be considered as his ward. Accordingly, he betook himself for three days to Siena, deeming it impossible that any answer could come so soon.

But when Hamlin returned to his lodging in Florence, on the fourth day after his proposal to Anne Brown it

seemed to him as if he had proposed to her months ago, nay, as if he had never existed at all before that proposal he was told that a gentleman had called that morning, and had left word that he would return again later on in the day.

"Some confounded painter or poetaster of my acquaintance," thought Hamlin, annoyed that any one should call upon him at this point of his adventure.

A little later a card was brought in to him. The name upon it made him start a large shopman's card, on which was printed, "Richard Brown, New Cross."

"Ask him to come in," cried Hamlin.

The visitor stalked in: a tall, burly man, with bushy black hair and beard.

"An insolent cad," said Hamlin to himself.

"Mr Walter Hamlin?" asked the newcomer, bowing very slightly, and looking down upon Hamlin from his big, bent shoulders.

"Precisely and you, I believe, are Miss Anne Brown's cousin?" answered Hamlin, stiffening at the other's free−and−easy manner. The very look of this man rubbed him the wrong way. "Pray, sit down," he added, doing his best to be courteous. But the other had already sat down.

"I have come here," said Richard Brown, in a deep, Scotch voice, which made a certain abruptness of manner even more offensive to his host, "in consequence of a telegram which I received from your friend Mr Melton Perry."

Hamlin turned pale with anger.

"Perry telegraphed behind my back," he exclaimed "however, I had written to you the same day. I presume you know the contents of my letter?"

"I have received no letter from you I suppose I started before it arrived," answered Richard Brown. "Mr Perry mentioned no letter from you in his telegram, and as I understood from it that there were plans afoot which concerned my cousin and ward, I thought I had best come at once and inquire into them."

He stopped a moment, and looked Hamlin in the face, as if to find out what sort of man he might be. He himself might be any age between thirty and forty, of the darkest possible Scotch type, sun−burnt like a bargee, snub of feature, with a huge, overhanging forehead; he was a man such as Hamlin had never dealt with a type which he recognised as having seen among workmen and Dissenting preachers: ugly, intellectual, contemptuous the incarnation of what, to the descendants of Cavaliers and Jamaica planters, seemed the aggressive lower classes.

"I see," said Hamlin, coldly. "I am greatly obliged to you for the trouble you have taken. Your presence here will make it much easier for us to settle all necessary matters."

"Mr Perry," went on the visitor, "has given me rather a confused account of the proposal which I understand you to have made to my cousin; and I thought it wiser to see you before speaking to her. I must therefore beg you to tell me whether Mr Perry's account of your proposal is correct, and also whether you are in earnest in making it."

"Had you waited for my letter, I think you could have had no further doubts," answered Hamlin, with some irritation. "To recapitulate, then. I proposed to Miss Brown that she should permit me to take charge of her

education for the next two years, and, on her becoming of age and deeming her studies complete, to place at her disposal the capital of an income which should enable her to live in a manner corresponding with the education she had received, and to make a suitable marriage."

While Hamlin was speaking a sneer came over his listener's face.

"I am to understand, therefore," he said, "that I was misinformed as to this being a proposal of marriage."

"Pardon me," corrected Hamlin, gently. "I told your cousin that I hoped that perhaps, at the end of those two years, or more, she might feel inclined to accept me as her husband; but that my particular object was that Miss Brown should, on coming of age, find herself in possession of a fortune corresponding to her education, and which should leave her free to contract whatever marriage she pleased, or to continue single."

Richard Brown flushed.

"In short," he said, with a strange irony in his voice, "you offer to provide my cousin with a competence whereon to live, or get married, after she shall have remained for two years in your charge. I fully appreciate the intention of your proposal; and I therefore beg to refuse it."

The blood rushed to Hamlin's head. That such an interpretation should be put upon his words had never entered his mind. It was as if a whip had whizzed about his ears and cut into his face. His first impulse was to knock the other down. But the sense of his misunderstood superiority, superiority unintelligible to his visitor, restrained him.

"I quite understand your refusal, Mr Brown," he answered, "as a result of your interpretation of the case; and I suppose I have no right to ask you to see my proposal, except as you would mean it were you to make it yourself."

Richard Brown turned pale; but he too mastered his feelings.

"If your intention is to marry my cousin, why not marry her at once?" he asked, with something in his look which expressed that he felt himself not to be outwitted by a vicious fool.

Hamlin hesitated. He felt that he could never make this man understand his dreams, his plans of turning Anne Brown into a realised ideal, of wooing and winning the creature of his own making.

"Because because," he hesitated.

"Because," interrupted Richard Brown, "a man in your position of life cannot marry a girl like my cousin before she has been turned into a lady; and because, even if this be granted, he cannot bind himself to marry her until he see whether schooling has succeeded in making a lady of her. I perfectly follow your reasons; but you also can follow mine when I say that my cousin cannot be subjected to the ups and downs of your appreciation."

In this man there was a hatred of Hamlin, not merely as a fine gentleman, an idler, but as an æsthete; a hatred not merely of class, but of temperament.

"You misunderstand my motives," answered Hamlin, losing patience. "My reason for not marrying your cousin at once is, that I would not marry a woman who cannot possibly love me as yet; and my reason against a formal engagement between us is, that I cannot consent to bind Miss Brown to marry me when she has no opportunity as yet of choosing a man more to her taste. It seems to me," added Hamlin, feeling the advantage on his side, "that to take your cousin in marriage now, or to bind her to marry me in the future, would be buying her in exchange for the education and the money which she will re− ceive from me. That education and that money are intended to secure her freedom, to secure her choice of a man whom she may love, not to make her into the chattel of a man

whom she could only despise."

Hamlin's tone and these sentiments, which seemed to belong to a world west of the sun and east of the moon, evidently impressed Anne's guardian. He remained silent for a moment, unable to realise Hamlin's state of mind, while no longer able to disbelieve in it. But the temptation to disbelieve in the sincerity of this handsome, effeminate, æsthetic aristocrat was too strong.

"All this is very noble and chivalric," he said, "and I doubt not quite natural in a poet like you, Mr Hamlin; but for us practical people, I fear it won't do. I am fully persuaded of the desirability of giving my cousin some further schooling, and fully persuaded also of the undesirability of leaving her any longer in the care of Mr Perry. So I shall take her back to England with me."

Hamlin turned pale with anger. It sickened him to see his plans dragged in the mire of this fellow's suspicions, and at the same time he felt unable ever to make him understand, utterly helpless in defending himself. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"I see," said Hamlin, rising and leaning against the fireplace, while his guest remained coolly seated "I see that, in plain words, you suppose that I project settling some money upon your cousin, with a view of making her my mistress for two years that is it, is it not, Mr Brown?"

The brutal frankness staggered Brown; it was impossible to make any more insinuations now. And he began to feel ashamed of those which he had already made. His own imagination, then, was less clean than the intentions of this womanish fine gentleman?

Perhaps for this very reason he answered calmly, but turning very red

"Yes, sir; that is exactly the state of the case."

Hamlin felt a sort of triumph at this humiliation of his visitor.

"In that case," he said, "I think I can devise a plan which shall satisfy you which will relieve your apprehensiveness. I offer not merely to settle upon Miss Brown the capital of five hundred a−year, to be administered by you until her majority; but also to give you my word of honour to marry Miss Brown at any time that she may summon me to do so."

Richard Brown was taken aback; all this romance, which he had believed to be but a vicious snare, was then real.

"I don't understand you," he said. "I don't understand what you want to do with my cousin."

"It seems difficult to explain it to you, Mr Brown," said Hamlin; "still, I may repeat it. I wish Miss Brown to receive all the advantages of education and money which a woman gifted like her has a right to, and which will enable her to freely marry a man worthy of her myself, or any other in the world. I will not hear of binding Miss Brown to me at present, either by marriage or by promise of marriage; she is to remain absolutely independent. But I offer once more to pledge myself to marry her whenever she may wish it."

Brown did not answer for a moment.

"Are you ready to sign a document to that effect?" he asked.

"I will give Miss Brown my word," answered Hamlin, contemptuously; "and I will give you, Mr Brown, as many signed documents as may be equivalent thereto in your eyes."

Brown felt the insult, but he knew he had drawn it upon himself. For a moment he hesitated; his aversion to Hamlin and Hamlin's plan fighting painfully with his sense of the worldly interests of his ward. At last he said

"On these conditions I can no longer make any opposition; and it rests with my cousin to accept or refuse your offer. I can only warn her and you and to do so is my duty, I think that, in my opinion, such an arrangement is utterly undesirable for both parties, and that my strong advice is not to enter upon it."

"I take your warning to heart," answered Hamlin, contemptuously; "but I cannot agree with it. May I beg you to meet me at the English Consulate to−morrow morning, to witness the document which you proposed I should draw out; the matter of her money settlement I shall leave in the hands of my lawyers. What hour will suit you? and may I have the pleasure of receiving you to breakfast with me and Mr Perry, who will doubtless be my witness?"

Richard Brown bowed.

"Thank you," he said briefly; "I think I should prefer breakfasting at my inn. With regard to the document, I shall be happy to meet you at the Consulate any time convenient to yourself. But," and his face became as threatening as his voice was studiously courteous, "we must first hear whether, on second thoughts, my cousin accepts your proposal. Good afternoon, Mr Hamlin."

"Good afternoon," answered Hamlin.

Richard Brown's visit had left a nauseous taste in his soul.

CHAPTER VIII.

LATER in the afternoon Richard Brown called at the Perrys' and asked to see his cousin. He was received with effusiveness by Mrs Perry.

"So you have seen our noble, darling Hamlin," she cried; "and you have felt your heart go out to meet him as we have felt ours."

"I have seen Mr Hamlin," answered Brown roughly, not at all appreciating the lady's winning manners; "and I should like to speak to my cousin, please."

"Anne my beautiful Anne" cried Mrs Perry, opening the door of the next room.

"Poor child!" she added, "how she has been trembling in her heart all day!"

Anne entered. She was paler even than usual, and was more than usually self−possessed. She had seen her guardian for a minute early that morning, and she knew that this visit would seal her fate.

"Good afternoon, Richard," she said briefly.

Brown looked round at Mrs Perry, waiting for her to withdraw. But such was by no means her intention.

"Don't be unhappy, darling," she said to Anne; "I know how one woman always longs for another woman in these

moments. I will stay with you while your cousin tells you the result of his visit."

"It is very kind of you, madam," said Brown gruffly, "but I think this matter had better be settled solely between my cousin and myself. Would you permit her to take me into some other room?"

"Oh, I don't wish to intrude," sighed Mrs Perry, "I only wished to support this poor child with my presence. But after all, a woman who loves requires support from no one." Saying which she swept out of the room.

There was a moment's silence.

"I have been to Mr Hamlin's, Anne," said Brown briefly, seating himself by the fire.

"Well?"

The tone of voice was so resolute and even triumphant that he raised his head and looked up at her where she was standing by the table, a piece of needlework still in her hands.

"Well," answered Brown quietly, and watching the effect of each of his words on the pale, melancholy, but dispassionate face of the girl, "I have spoken to Mr Hamlin; and I find that you were correct in your judgment, and that I was mistaken in mine. He is in earnest in his proposal, and honest in it."

"I knew that;" and Anne Brown wondered whether this could be the same cousin Dick who was a big boy, almost a man, when she was a tiny mite at Spezia; who took care of her when her mother was ill and her father was drunk; who used to shoulder his uncle and drag him off to bed when, in a fit of intoxication, he would come in and threaten to throw the babies out of the window. She recognised the small features, the dark skin and hair, the heavy intellectual brow; but he seemed to have changed in expression, to have grown hard, and arrogant, and coarse.

"I knew that," she repeated, "though you would not believe it. So," she added, with a certain hardness in her manner, "I suppose I am left free to decide, and that you are ready to let Mr Hamlin do what he chooses."

"You are free to decide," he answered. "Mr Hamlin, as I have said, is serious and honest, and willing to make every provision which can bind him and leave you free, legally. I cannot, as your guardian, say no. But," and his voice assumed a threatening tone, "as your kinsman, and as the representative of your father, I most earnestly dissuade you from accepting this proposal."

Anne reddened. "But you can no longer oppose it," she said quickly.

"I have told you before that you are free, Anne. And because you are free," continued Brown, a sort of despair coming over him at the sight of the girl's indifference "because you are free, I want you to listen to me. This proposal is one which, in the eyes of the world, will change your life for the better: you will be educated, get the manners of a lady, be rich yourself, and marry a rich man. But will you stand higher in your own opinion? Would you stand as high as you should in that of your father, if he were alive? You, having bartered your freedom, having accepted all from this one man?"

Anne did not answer.

"Of course," went on Richard Brown eagerly, "you will have every worldly advantage. But will you be happy taken out of your own sphere of life, knowing yourself to be bound in gratitude to this man, who will always continue to feel your superior, to look down upon you as a beggar whom he has fed, or a chattel which he has bought? This man is, for his class and ideas, honourable: he wishes to leave you free to marry him only if you

please; he wishes to marry you really and truly. But in reality he is making you his slave; for how can you refuse him the only thing which you, my poor Nan, can give him in return for his money? And in reality he is making you his mistress; for what sort of marriage is it which is a marriage merely before the world where the one buys and the other is bought?"

Anne flushed still deeper, and trembled from head to foot as she leaned against the table. A dull pain clawed her at the heart, a lump rose up to her throat. But she did not speak.

Richard Brown misunderstood her silence. He rose and approached the table, and tried to put his arm paternally on her shoulder. She shrank back, but let his heavy hand rest on her shoulder. What did his touch matter when there were his words?

"Annie, dear," said Brown more gently, "you know I am a rough man, and don't know how to mince matters and say things to women; but you know that I am fond of you. Don't you recollect when you were a wee lassie, and I used to carry you about on my back, and go into the water to get you the sea−weeds and the little nautiluses. I suppose you don't any longer. But still, you know I would not for the world hurt my poor little Nan."

Anne held on to the table, and as she recognised that familiar intonation, hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Her whole childhood seemed to return to her.

"Don't cry don't cry!" exclaimed Brown, taking her hand. "Poor child! I know it must be very hard for you who are so young; I know what it must be to be tempted with a lady's education, and money, and a fine gentleman, who's in love with one, for a husband. But remember what your poor dad used to tell us, that we common folk must make our own way make the others feel that we're as good as they, and not accept anything from them. D'you remember how he used to say to me, 'Work and be proud'? Well, and I have worked and have been proud, and it's that that has enabled me to rest a little. And you, too, must be proud, and work, my little Annie."

"Look here," he went on, "you must not think you are never to be anything but a servant. I feel I've been to blame, and neglected you too long. You see, I've had to work hard for my life, out in England; but now I am quite safely off indeed much better off than I ever anticipated: my employer is going to take me into partnership next year. Well, since you wish to go to school, I will send you there. You shall come back with me to England, and I will send you to the very best school to be found: you shall be as good as any lady, and you shall owe nothing to any one. Annie, do say yes."

He spoke, this rough man, almost as one might to a sick child; and as he spoke, he tried to pass his arm round the girl's waist. But Anne shuddered, and freed herself from his grasp. There was something in this big dark man, with his bushy hair and beard, which made her shrink physically, although she felt no suspicion of him morally. The thought of Hamlin passed across her mind Hamlin, who was everything which Richard Brown was not.

"You are very good, Dick," she said, feeling ashamed of her ingratitude; "but but oh no, no, I can't, I can't!" and she hid her tears with her hands.

"Can't what?" exclaimed Brown, and his voice and face changed; "can't what? Can't accept my offer; can't owe anything to me, to your cousin, to the man to whom your father confided you? No! you won't be under such an obligation, eh? Nay, don't humbug me. You can't give up the money, the land, the house, the fine name all the things which he can give you and I can't; for I can only give you an education, and I was such a fool as to think that you wanted that!" and Brown laughed a loud, bitter laugh.

"You want to marry that man," he went on brutally; "well, do so. But remember what marriage means. You are a girl of the people, who has had to take care of herself not a fine young lady, as yet, thank God, with all the fine names which fine folk have for nasty things. You know what marriage means. It means being a man's chattel,

more than his beast of burden, his plaything, the toy of his caprice and sensuality. It means, also, that you must smother all love for a worthier man, or degrade yourself in your own eyes. Will you be this, sell yourself thus ?"

"Mr Hamlin does not wish me to degrade myself," cried the girl. "He respects me, yes, he does; and you you don't!"

"He respects you!" sneered Brown. "And he does not want to degrade you. Of course, he's a respectable, highly moral man. But, upon my soul, I would rather you had been seduced by a man you loved, than that you should have sold yourself coldly in this way."

Anne felt herself choking. For a moment she could not utter a word. Then suddenly, with a strange look in her eyes, she cried, in a tone which smote her cousin on the mouth

"I love him!"

Brown turned and looked her in the face. She was very flushed, and her slate−grey eyes gleamed feverishly. But her face was calm, and she returned his taunting gaze, which sought for the proof that she lied, with a look of irrepressible contempt.

"I love him!" she repeated.

Brown took his hat.

"Good−bye," he said, stretching out his hand; "I left the choice in your hands, and you have chosen. To−morrow morning I shall settle everything with Mr Hamlin the papers, I mean which shall make him henceforth your sole protector. Then I shall go. Goodbye. I wish you joy of your choice" he paused "you mercenary thing!"

Anne did not move.

Richard Brown had already turned the handle of the door when he stopped. "One thing more," he said, "which I desire you to know. You have taken care of yourself hitherto, and you are prudent enough in all conscience, and world−wise enough, and heartless enough, to do so in future; so this piece of information may be of use to you. To−morrow he will sign a paper, which I shall keep till you come of age, declaring that, although he leaves you complete freedom in the choice of a husband, he binds himself to marry you whenever you may call upon him to do so. You will doubtless know how to turn this to profit. Good−bye."

Anne sank into a chair, excited, exhausted, all her blood in movement, she scarcely knew why insulted, maligned, and yet with a great sense of joyfulness in her heart.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

A MONTH later, the little Perrys were being taken for their walk in the Boboli Gardens by a Swiss *bonne* in a quilted cap; and Anne Brown was unpacking her things in a room overlooking the yellowish−green Rhine, with its oscillating bridge of boats, and facing the rocks and bastions of Ehrenbreitstein.

When Richard Brown had returned to England with the signed documents in his pocket, Hamlin had immediately written two letters, one to his lawyers, instructing them to settle the capital of five hundred a−year, that is to say, one quarter of his property, on Anne Brown; the other, narrating the history of his engagement (if engagement it might be called), to the widow of his former tutor, and asking her to admit the young lady in whom he was interested into her school at Coblenz. It was the Easter holidays, and Mrs Simson had taken advantage of the fact to come to Florence in order to take back her pupil herself.

There was still a fortnight before the school would reopen, so Hamlin suggested that they should slowly travel north, and it was settled that he should accompany the schoolmistress and his ward. The greater part of that fortnight was spent at Venice, where Anne Brown had never been, and Hamlin parted company from them to return to England, only at Munich.

Mrs Simson was of that particular type of Englishwoman which, however much it may marry, always seems to remain an old maid; but an old maid whose old−maidishness is an incapacity of feeling any difference of age between herself and her youngers, of maintaining any stateliness of superior age and experience: a hopeful, believing, shrewd, happy−go−lucky, enthusiastic creature, invariably making one think of a remarkably good−natured old grey mare. Youth was the greatest attraction in the world to her, and she identified herself completely with the young women that came under her influence. Hamlin had known her in his boyish days, and lately, passing along the Rhine, had stayed with her for a day or two in her old−fashioned house by the confluence of the Rhine and the Mosel. The impression that this school was so utterly unlike any of the girls' schools he had read of in novels; the impression that a young woman might develop there into whatever pleasant thing nature intended, had been so strong, that from the moment of his first contemplating a possible marriage with the Perrys' servant, Mrs Simson and her school at Coblenz had formed an essential part of his plans. The lady, on the other hand, was exactly the kind of woman to whom a situation like this would appeal: Hamlin, whom she had entertained on buns and ginger−beer, and then, in later years, raved over after the first sonnet which he sent to the 'Athenæum,' had always been her especial object of adoration; and his adoption of a beautiful and strange young woman, his preparation of a bride for himself, was for her the finishing touch to his perfection. She would indeed have preferred had Anne Brown been small and fair, and garrulous and impish, and shown a love for mathematics and flirtation; but, nevertheless, Anne Brown, inasmuch as she was the elect of Walter Hamlin, and inasmuch as she was a beautiful young creature, immediately won the facile but not fickle heart of Mrs Simson. The whole business seemed to her as natural as possible; and it was she who proposed that Hamlin should accompany her and his ward part of their way northwards.

What was Anne's own condition? During those hours in the train, when Hamlin was for ever jumping out and overwhelming them with coffee and stale cakes and newspapers at every station; during those days at Venice, when they stayed at the same hotel (the headwaiter quite spontaneously wrote "Mrs Sim− son and niece" in the strangers' book), and spent their days in picture−galleries and churches and gondolas, and their evenings at theatres, during all that journey Anne was as cold, and silent, and melancholy as she had been when first they had met at the Villa Arnolfini; indeed any man but Hamlin, and any woman except Mrs Simson, would probably have been disheartened and disgusted by this apparent stolidity of behaviour. But Mrs Simson had already made up her character of Anne Brown, and fallen in love with it quite independent of realities; and Hamlin was rather pleased that the creature whom he was going to teach how to think and how to feel, did not manifest any particular mode of thinking and feeling of her own. So they were both extremely assiduous to Anne Brown, and in reality thought much more about what she was going to be than about what she actually was.

The fact was that the poor girl was in a dazed condition that all this journey seemed to her unreal, and all the things around her unsubstantial. Her head felt hollow, she seemed to be informed about her feelings rather than to experience them, her own words sounded as if through a whispering−gallery. A couple of weeks ago she had had so strong a consciousness of identity and existence, of her own desires and hopes; now she could not well understand how she came to be where she was. Sometimes, while mechanically talking with her companions or walking in their company, she used to ask herself how it had all come about, and then she could see no reason for

it all; it seemed accidental, inexplicable, causeless, and almost incredible. Whenever, on the other hand, she awakened to the reality of things, she was depressed by a sense of transition; she was afraid of speaking, and almost of feeling. As long as she had been the Perrys' servant, she had experienced no shyness with Hamlin; as far as her taciturn nature would allow, she had spoken out whatever she had thought or felt, without considering whether or not it might surprise, annoy, or amuse him. Now, on the contrary, she gradually became conscious of a fear lest Hamlin should have cheated himself in choosing her. Unable to tell any one of this feeling, she let it overshadow her. One evening at Munich, two or three days before they parted company with Hamlin, Mrs Simson, coming into Anne's room, found the girl seated with her head in the pillows of her bed, sobbing.

The excellent and somewhat romantic heart of the schoolmistress immediately melted at this sight.

"My dear child," she cried, looking more than ever like a friendly grey old mare, "what is the matter with you?"

But Anne merely buried her head deeper in the pillows, and sobbed harder than before.

"What is the matter?" repeated Mrs Sireson, laying her hand on Anne's shoulder.

"Oh, leave me, leave me!" moaned the girl.

Mrs Simpson gently passed her arm under the prostrate girl's breast, and lifted her up from the bed.

"What is the matter with you, my dear?" she asked.

"Nothing nothing," sobbed Anne, trying to hide her cried−out eyes with her hands.

"Nonsense; nothing!" said Mrs Simson, briskly. "You are unhappy about something, you poor little thing."

Girls, and especially girls in distress, invariably appeared little to Mrs Simson, even when, like Anne Brown, they overtopped her by a good head.

"Something is the matter with you," she insisted. "Now just let us see together what it may be;" and she made the reluctant girl sit down by her side on the sofa. "Are you homesick? do you feel very strange, poor dearie, with strange people? are you frightened a little by the sudden change in your life? it's very natural, my dear little girl, but you'll get over it soon."

Anne shook her head. But the impossibil− ity of making Mrs Simson understand what depressed her, sent the sobs once more into her voice.

"No, no," she said; "oh no, no you can't understand. I don't feel lonely I don't feel unhappy but it's only because Mr Hamlin "

"Because Mr Hamlin is going away, my dear?" Mrs Simson smiled as she kissed Anne on the crisp iron−black hair, for the girl would not loosen her hands from her face "Because he is going away? That's very natural too; but it won't be for long, dearest."

Anne broke loose from her embrace. "It's not that! it's not that!" she sobbed; "please go away you can't understand it's not that! Oh no, I shall be glad when he be gone away!"

Mrs Simson rose. At first she felt pained, disgusted; but her frigidness melted with the speedy reflection that girls don't know what the matter is with them in such cases.

"Good−bye, dear," she said; "I shall send you up some tea in a few minutes; that will set you all right. But don't fret because Mr Hamlin is going. You will see him soon again."

"I shall be glad when he is gone!" repeated Anne, in a paroxysm of grief.

It was not a mere foolish, hysterical falsehood. It was a real relief when, one morning at Frankfurt, Hamlin was standing on the platform of the station, speaking to them at the door of their carriage. The guard came to slam the door.

"Good−bye, Mrs Simson," said Hamlin. "Good−bye, Miss Brown."

"Good−bye, sir," she answered, extending her hand.

He kissed it hurriedly. The door was slammed. The train moved on slowly, and Hamlin walked along its side. Gradually it went quicker and quicker, and Anne Brown saw Hamlin for a minute on the platform; he was pale, but radiant. He waved his hand.

"*A rivederci* !" he cried, waving his hat.

A pillar of the station hid him. Anne turned away from the window and opened a book which he had given her. She read so assiduously all that day, that poor Mrs Simson, who was a sociable woman, resorted, in sheer despair, to talking with the other travellers, who stared in puzzled surprise at the tall girl with the melancholy pale face and masses of crimp black hair who sat opposite her.

When they had got out of the train, rattled over the round stones of Coblenz, and were finally following the obstreperously welcoming cook and housemaid up the stairs of Mrs Simson's house, Anne felt relieved. And when she had been left alone in her room, she felt a weight off her. When she had taken some things out of her box, she went to the window. The last flare of sunset was on the marblelike brownish−green swirls of the Rhine; and filaments of reddish gold streaked the sky above Ehrenbreitstein, whose windows gleamed crimson. A steamer was puffing and whistling by the wharf; the trumpets of the *rappel* shrieked through the streets and were reechoed from the opposite shore. From inside the house rose the sound of a piano; some one was playing Bach's "Mein gläubiges Herz."

It was the beginning of a new life. Anne Brown left the window, hung her clothes in the wardrobe, folded her linen in the drawers. Then she took from her trunk a framed photograph of Hamlin, and stuck it on her dressing−table; he was very handsome, with his straight, keen−featured, almost beardless Norman face and waves of light hair: she looked at it long. Then she dived to the bottom of her trunk and brought out two little books; the "Petrarch" he had given her at Lucca, and the volume of his own poems. She sat down by the open window and began reading them, and glancing at the redness dying away from river and sky. She felt very solemn and happy.

"I must become worthy of him," she thought.

CHAPTER II.

LIFE was monotonous enough at Mrs Simson's at Coblenz; but it was a kind of monotony which to Anne Brown was positively exciting. It was for her a process of absorption into another class of life; and as such, represented a daily influx of new ideas and habits, a daily surprise, effort, and adjustment. By virtue of her half−Italian nature,

Anne required but little to make her, in education and manners, a lady. With her wide−open but rather empty mind, her seriousness and dignity of person, extreme simpleness, as the reverse of complexity of character, it was wholly unnecessary that she should unlearn anything, or even that she should absorb anything absolutely new; the only thing was to fill up the magnificent design which already existed in her. No one ever required to say to Anne, "You must not do, or think, or say such or such a thing." She surprised people only by her timidity, her silence, her passiveness, and by a sort of haughtiness which accompanied them strangely enough; a certain solemn, and, at the same time, abrupt way of judging of things and treating people, and which was the mental counterpart of her look, gait, nay, even of the folds which her dresses took on her. Ignorant though she was, she seemed at her ease with the new culture with which she was presented, just as, for all her habits of waiting on instead of being served, she seemed at ease in her behaviour. But it was difficult for Anne to tune herself or get herself tuned to the pitch of the everyday feelings and life of her companions; she could not understand these young ladies. The girls at Mrs Simson's did not exceed half−a−dozen, and they were none of them schoolgirls in the ordinary sense. They were, like Anne, eccentrically placed young women; orphans, or girls whose parents were in the colonies, or girls who could not get on at home, girls, all of them, with a certain pretension to superiority, and a great habit of independence, which was fostered by the schoolmistress, whose theory was that women could not possibly be left too much to their own devices.

Mrs Simson was very fond of preaching this gospel of higher education, to the great scandal of the respectable German matrons whom she visited. "Narrow−minded, vicious creatures," she used to say, who shook their heads at the young ladies attending public lectures, walking about by themselves, and flirting in the most stalwart and open manner (quite unsentimental and unwomanly, said the Germans) with the Prussian officers. Of these girls two were orphans, and had been sent to Coblenz as a convenient riddance by their guardians; one had been deposited in Europe by her parents, to be called for when educated, and shipped off to New Zealand; one, a huge damsel approaching thirty, was studying eye− surgery with a famous Rhenish oculist; the fifth was going to Girton and was studying German; the sixth had found her home too much for her, and was perpetually complaining of the hardness of her fate and the viciousness of her own character, aspiring to impossible ideals of knowledge and usefulness and self−sacrifice, and spending her leisure making up frocks in which to disport herself at the garrison balls.

Each of them studied whatsoever she thought fit: Greek and Latin professors, piano and singing masters, German governesses, were perpetually going in and out of the house; the girls were continually running to lectures on botany or physiology or comparative philology, where the youth of the town eyed the *Schöne Engländerinnen* with rapture, sending them anonymous bouquets and verses, and bringing them serenades, and even, to poor Mrs Simson's horror, slipping love−letters of the most burning description into the door−hinges. Among these girls poor Anne would have felt utterly lost, had she not been accustomed for years to be her own sole company, letting her life brush by that of other folk, without ever mixing. It seemed to her quite natural to exchange one kind of isolation for another: to drudge on at improving her own mind as she had formerly drudged on at mending the clothes and making the beds of the little Perrys, interesting herself as little in, and awakening as little interest among, her companions as she had done among her fellow−servants in Italy. Mrs Simson had received full instructions from Hamlin as to all the things which she was and was not to teach or have taught to his ward; and Anne would have been perfectly satisfied with working for her French and German masters, preparing her lessons of geography and history, and reading such books as Hamlin would send her, but the other girls were not at all so minded.

Anne Brown's arrival created a tremendous sensation in Mrs Simson's establishment. Her strange kind of beauty, which did not strike the conventional spectator as being beauty at all, excluding, as it did, fairness, rosiness, youthfulness, daintiness, liveliness, voluptuousness, sentimentalness, or any of the orthodox ingredients of female charm, her wholly unlike−everyone−else appearance, her silence, sullenness, haughtiness, all took the girls by surprise. Her shyness, ignorance, newness in her position, was obvious from the very first day. The knowledge of what she had been and what she was going to be, all this romance was quickly wheedled out of Mrs Simson by the misunderstood little girl who wished to turn sister of mercy, and carried on a simultaneous flirtation with a

lieutenant, a Bonn student, a painter, and a piano−master; and bullied out of her by the bouncing amazon who talked about nothing but retinal impressions and optic nerves. From that moment Anne became a subject of intense interest at the school: most of the girls had heard of Hamlin in England, and all of them had heard of him from the enthusiastic schoolmistress. To possess in their midst his chosen one was a great privilege, although they sometimes made fun of Anne and him behind her back, drawing pictures of the solemn and tragic girl dressed in the most draggled æsthetic manner, surrounded by a circle of young æsthetes copied out of 'Punch' (Bunthome did not exist at that time) holding lilies and swinging censers as she went. They all thought Anne a strange, awe−inspiring, and, at the same time, somewhat ridiculous person; but they all got to like her, although the misunderstood High Church flirt could never be got to see why Anne should despise officers and garrison balls; and the scientific girl of twenty−eight thought æstheticism and æsthetic poets idiotic and immoral; and each of the others found some reservation to make about the Italian, as they called her. Yet, as I said, they did grow to like her; and Anne, who was unaccustomed to friendliness, was so touched by the familiarity and good−nature of her companions, that she gradually began to take a great and serious interest in their concerns. She became quite enthusiastic about ocular surgery, listening with scarcely any shudders to the narration of the most complicated operations; she let herself be overwhelmed with discourses about Middle High German and Gothic, and the connection with Sanskrit; she firmly believed in the mystical fervours, the desire of self−sacrifice, the wasted passion of the little fair−haired flirt, reasoning seriously about them, and trying to check what she believed to be a suicidal tendency; she was greatly touched by the home−sickness and family squabbles of the other girls. Not that Anne was a fool, or made to be a dupe; on the contrary, she saw well enough the funniness of the contrasts between her friends' words and their life; but Anne was so earnest, so simple, so homogeneous of nature, she was so fervent in all her feelings, that she always imagined that the serious things which people said or affected must be the reality; and, as in her own case, the levity, the frivolousness, the fickleness, must be the mere exterior clothing of social fictions. Thus she gave her sympathy wherever it was asked for, while asking for no sympathy herself. The girls used often to remark upon this, and complain that for all they did, Anne Brown remained surrounded by a sort of moral moat, alone, isolated, impregnable in a kind of moral fortress.

CHAPTER III.

AS Hamlin had fancied, while painting Anne's portrait, so the girls at Mrs Simson's used to fancy that there could not be much going on inside this taciturn and undemonstrative creature. But it was not so. While Anne looked so quiet, said so little (and least of all about herself) during those two years of school, a drama nay, a whole life−poem was incessantly going on within her. She worked indefatigably at her lessons, read every book she could lay hold of, was taken to concerts, lectures, burgher tea−parties and garrison balls, and on excursions up and down the Rhine and into the neighbouring hills; but all this was but as an exterior life surrounding an interior one, as the movement of the ship to the movement of the passengers on its deck.

The real life was not with these girls and these teachers, but with Hamlin; not in this Rhineland town, but in the distant places where he travelled. He wrote to her very often, from London, from Italy, from Greece and Egypt, and wherever he roamed about. At first she was surprised by the frequency of his letters; then she became accustomed to it as to a necessity of her existence, but a necessity to which she had no right. It seemed to her wonderful that he should write so often, and yet that the time which elapsed between his letters should be intolerable. In her great desire for them she used to have recourse to all manner of unconscious sophistications. She tried to train herself to disappointment, to chastise her own impatience and greediness, saying to herself, on the days when she thought that a letter might come, "It is impossible that there should be one to−day," although her heart fell when the prophecy sometimes came true; and she stayed up−stairs, her eyes pinned to her book, when she heard the postman's ring at the door, although that ring put her all into a tremble, and made her feel faint when she heard it. Thus with the letters from him. It was almost worse about her own answers. Often she could

stand it no longer, and would begin a letter to Hamlin only a few lines, which might be finished when his next letter should be received. The few lines turned to pages; yet the next day no letter would come, and she was unable to resist the temptation of writing even more; then, when the long−wished letter at last came, there came with it such a number of new things to say, that her previous epistle must needs be torn up. Also, on re−reading what she had written in answer to Hamlin, she was often filled with shame and fear. She had entertained him with such trifles, or been so pedantic, or put things in such a horrid way, she must needs tear it up and write once more. Then the length, the frequency of her letters frightened her: he would grow weary and impatient; she tried to write briefly, but failed; she tried to write rarely, making solemn resolutions to let two, three, or four days pass without answering him; but it was not of much use. She was dreadfully afraid lest Hamlin should think her a drag upon him, lest he should write one single letter more than he would naturally have done, from goodness to her. She never told him with what tremulous expectancy she waited for the post; with what heartburn she saw it come empty−handed; with what avidity she read his letters, re−read them furtively by snatches, carried them about in her pocket, made them last over days, till she knew them by heart, and, even then, how she was for ever doing up and undoing again the packet in which she kept them: if he knew that, he might feel obliged, being so kind, to write oftener; and that must not be.

Any one who had seen these letters which were her soul's food, would have been surprised how they could awaken such a longing, how they could produce such emotion and keep alive such passion. In accordance with his whole plan of proceedings, Hamlin never once wrote to Anne as if there were any question of her ever becoming his wife. "My dear Miss Brown," they all ceremoniously began, and ended off "Yours sincerely," or "Your sincere friend, Walter Hamlin." Affectionate they were, and even adoring, in the sense of looking up, or affecting to look up, at her as a sort of superhuman and wonderful creature, not quite conscious of its wonderfulness, perhaps, and certainly not responsible for it; the mental attitude of an artist before a beautiful model, of some Italian medieval poet before a Platonic mistress. There was not much perception of the reality of Anne Brown's personality, nor indeed of her having any personality at all, being a thing with feelings, thoughts, hopes, interests of her own. Sometimes even poor Anne felt, on reading his letters, as if a lump of ice had been laid on her heart, when she came upon certain sentences; she could scarcely tell you why, but those sentences made her feel numb and alone, like a wrecked sailor at the north pole, for days. Then a reaction came; a burning indignation with herself, a burning adoration of Hamlin. She felt as if she had done him some injury; and once or twice, amid tears of shame, she wrote that she had become unworthy of his friendship why, she could not well explain. But she tore it all up, or left only dim hints which Hamlin misunderstood, and became more respectful and adoring than ever, imagining that he must have said something to slight her. He really was adoring; it was such a lovely Madonna this, that it seemed to him that all the most beautiful and precious things of his mind, and other men's minds, must be heaped up before her, like offerings of flowers, and rich ointments, and jewels, and music. He copied out pages of poetry and prose in his letters, and wrote to her the most lovely descriptions of things he saw or things he felt. Whenever he recollected a fine poem, or saw a beautiful scene, or was struck by a beautiful thought or a happy expression, he hastened to offer it to Anne, as the kings of the East offered gold and frankincense and embroidered raiment to the little Christ. That this was the result of his love, she never thought; for she never ventured to think that he condescended, or even would ever condescend, to love her; but it was in her eyes the result of his greatness, his generosity, the *largesse*, as it were, of his sublimity. About himself Hamlin would also write a great, great deal. Of singularly delicate mental fibre, and somewhat weak will, he was for ever tormented (or pretending to himself to be tormented, for to be so was pretty well a matter of choice) by unattainable ideals, by conflicts in his own nature: mysterious temptations of unspeakable things, beckoning his nobler nature into the mud, which he never at all specified, but which moved Anne to agonies of grief and admiration. The poor girl, not understanding how such things will shoot up in the poetic mind as a result of mere reading, and be nurtured there for a day for the sake of their strange colour, would screw up all her might to help him, writing to him to be patient, to be strong and bold, to remember the nobility of his nature, strange passionately earnest entreaties written in tears, or in moods like those which send people to the stake; and which, in their ludicrous disproportionateness to their cause, would bring the tears to almost any one's eyes who should read them.

A strange correspondence; and of which Hamlin's half, although beautiful with all manner of artistic prettinesses, would have struck one as the less beautiful and interesting part: the suppressed passionateness, unconscious of itself, of the girl's letters, her mixture of prim literary daintiness, absorbed from her reading, and of homely, tragically−hurled−about imagery (Hamlin used, without revealing the author, to read out some of these metaphors of Anne's to his friends, pointing out their Elizabethan, Webster−like character), were much more really striking. But Anne thought that what she wrote was unworthy to be seen by Hamlin; his condescension was mere goodness.

Hamlin, indeed, was very good to her very gentle, courteous, generous, and assiduous. There was scarcely a book read by Anne Brown which was not of his selecting; and even in the midst of his journeys he used to elaborately select things for her reading, cutting out all but a very few pieces out of books of poetry, and copying and pasting into them all manner of extracts. "I should be grieved to think that anything save the very best should ever be read by you," he often wrote. Thus, in the most singular way, Anne, only a nursemaid a few months before, became more deeply versed in poetry and poetical and picturesque history than most girls; Greek lyrism, Oriental mysticism, French æstheticism, but above all, things medieval and pseudo−medieval; imbued with the imagery and sentiment of that strange eclectic school of our days which we still call pre−Raphaelite. And such an education, while putting her in complete harmony with Hamlin's aspirations and habits, also brought home to her the merit of Hamlin's own work. Of his pictures, she had, indeed, only vague recollections, besides the little sketches, wonderful jewel−coloured things, full of poetic suggestion, which he would send her at Christmas and on her birthday, to the amazement of the whole school. But he sent her a good deal of his poetry, and that only of the best. She did not always understand exactly the things to which he alluded, seeing only the beauty, the vague passionate wistfulness, the delicate sadness of what he wrote. His greatness perfectly confounded her. She found allusions to it in everything: in reading of dead poets, of Shelley, Keats, Goethe, a kind of passionate interest thrilled through her, for she seemed to be reading about Hamlin. And the same held good as to artists; they were all his kinsmen, of his blood nay, they all, in a mystic manner, foreshadowed him.

Of these matters she never spoke to any of the girls. But often, while walking with them, her pride would swell with the thought that she belonged to him that he had chosen her. And when the New Zealander, who was musical and had a fine voice, used sometimes to sing Schumann's song, "Er der herrlichste von allen," the words and the music sent a flood of love and pride to her heart; it was he, "he the most glorious of all," who was thus gracious and good to her.

CHAPTER IV.

THUS one year went by; and then, slowly, another, while Anne Brown was being transformed from a nursemaid into a lady. Hamlin saw her twice during that time. Once, while Mrs Simson and Anne were staying in Paris for he had begged that her holidays might be spent either in Switzerland, or in some place where she might see pictures and statues when he suddenly turned up for a day on his way from England to Greece; and once at Coblenz. Mrs Simson was giving a party: suddenly into the parlour, filled with German matrons and damsels, with a sprinkling of professors and soldiers, was introduced a slight, fair man, who looked very young till you saw him closely, and at whose sight that sombre, quiet, strange, half−Italian girl had suddenly turned crimson, and clutched a chair, as if afraid to fall, while the company stared and whispered. Hamlin left that same evening; and as the day in Paris had been spent in seeing and talking about pictures, so this afternoon passed in trifling conversation at Mrs Simson's table. Alone, Anne scarcely saw him for an instant. Only, when he left Coblenz, he seized her hand as he stood at the door, and kissed it fervently. It seemed to her, during the long months of absence, that she would give all her life to see him again, to be able to tell him how grateful she was to him. Yet, in reality, his presence passed like the picture of a magic−lantern on a wall; and she felt as if her lips were glued

together: it was a vision, and no more. But on that second visit Hamlin had been dazzled. He had recognised from the first the exotic beauty and strangeness of the Perrys' servant; he had seen in Paris that his judgment had been correct; but when, after eighteen months of schooling, he suddenly saw Anne again, it was as if he had never seen her before, a fresh revelation. A year and a half of a lady's life, without bodily fatigue or mental weariness, had developed to the full the girl's marvellous beauty: strange, mysterious, amazonian it was as ever; but it was as the regalness of a triumphant queen by the side of the queenliness of a deposed Amazon chief. The haughtiness which had struck him in the nursemaid of the little Perrys, was not diminished, but softened, by a kind of quiet graciousness and goodness. Hamlin remarked that she seemed, now that she was no longer humbled and cramped, to have a much kindlier spirit and a sense of humour which had at first seemed scarcely to exist, or to exist only in bitterness. But what struck him most of all was an indefinable change in Anne's expression: the soul, which had lain as a tiny germ at the bottom of her nature, had expanded and come to the surface. She was as beautiful and singular as ever, but more manifold and subtle: her mind had increased threefold. Hamlin went away, intending that Anne should remain at Coblenz another year. But he found that his patience, hitherto inexhaustible, had suddenly departed. He found the time intolerably heavy on his hands. He travelled about in out−of−the−way countries, having fragmentary love−affairs, in a dreamy, irresponsible way, with other women; and sending Anne more letters than usual, and presents of all manner of outlandish stuffs silver ornaments and so forth which used to create great excitement at the school; but he fretted with impatience. Impatience, be it well understood, not to marry Anne, for he always thought of marriage as the return from, the end of, a sort of spiritual honeymoon; but impatience to commence that long courtship which had, from the beginning, been the object of his desires. He grew tired of their correspondence, found that he had exhausted all the delights of unconsciously revealed love, love budding and developing with the girl's mind. It began to be mere repetition; and he scarcely knew what to write about now: the prologue had lasted long enough; the piece must begin.

One day, some two years or so after her arrival at Coblenz, Anne Brown received a letter in which Hamlin reminded her that she was twenty−one, and that his guardianship had consequently come to an end already some months before; and suggested that, as he heard that her education was now completed, at least in so far as Coblenz went, he thought that it might be wiser if she came to England, where she would have better opportunities of continuing any special studies. Moreover, that his aunt, Mrs Macgregor, a widow without any children, was coming to settle in London, and that he thought it might be a good arrangement that she and Anne should live together, as Anne could scarcely take a house by herself. What did Miss Brown think of this arrangement? And would she authorise him to settle everything for Mrs Macgregor and her? Faintly and vaguely Anne thanked him for his forethought, and acquiesced in everything which he might be kind enough to decide upon. She had never realised her situation, she was not the sort of mind which has clear conceptions of the future, and she had been far too much absorbed, these two years, in the unreal present. Besides, Anne felt a confused pain, a disappointment, which prevented her attending to anything else. Hamlin had said nothing about himself, not a word as to whether he also would settle in London, or whether he intended continuing his wandering life. And she had not the courage to ask him. She was conscious of a coldness and emptiness in her heart, of the disappointment of some vague, unspoken hope. But why feel disappointed? or did she really feel disappointed at all? She believed that she cared for Hamlin only as for a benefactor, a divinity, a creature who might bestow affection but could not be asked for it; and this being the case, and knowing herself to have been perfectly satisfied and happy hitherto, she persuaded herself that she really did not feel disappointed about anything, when Hamlin thus wrote about her education and her plans and nothing else.

But as the winter drew to a close, there came another letter from Hamlin (all the intermediate ones had been only the usual talk about himself, and about books and scenery) telling her that, with a view to her living with his aunt, he had, as her ex−guardian (he always spoke of himself as her guardian, completely ignoring Richard Brown) deemed it wise to employ part of her capital, which had been accumulating in his hands, in the purchase of the lease of a house at Hammersmith, which he was having prepared and furnished against her coming in May. "It is in a pretty neighbourhood, with the river in front and old houses and gardens all round," he wrote. "What determined my choice, as I am sure it would have determined yours also, is that the house is itself more than a century and a half old, and has some fine trees in the garden. Flowers seem to grow well, as it is pretty well

beyond reach of smoke. There are also some fine elms and poplars in front, all along the river−side, which is old−fashioned, and .not yet made into a modern embankment. It is rather far from the world; but the world is hideous, and the farther away from it the better, don't you think? My aunt is busy about the practical household properties; I am getting in some of the more useless furniture. If you should dislike the arrangement, it can all be easily undone. I hope you will not disapprove of this step; the house is pretty well unique, and I had to decide on taking it, unless some one else was to snap it up; otherwise I should certainly have consulted you first. I trust you will forgive me."

Anne put the letter down, and wondered whether she was dreaming. What was all this about buying and consulting her, employing her capital? What capital had she got? What right to be consulted? For a moment she felt quite bewildered; and then the full consciousness of Hamlin's goodness rushed out and overwhelmed her, and she let her head fall on her desk and cried for sheer happiness. Then she thought it must all be a dream, and snatched the letter where it lay all crumpled, and smoothed it out trembling. Yes, there it all was. And then, as postscript, came this sentence, which made her heart leap:

"There are two rooms additional on the garden, having a separate entrance from the embankment, and which I think you will not at present require for yourself. Would you perhaps let me rent them for a studio? My own lodgings are a long way from St John's House (that is its name, for it was a priory once); but if I had my workshop there, I might hope to see you almost every day, if you would let me."

The first dinner−bell rang, and Anne, having hastily washed her eyes and smoothed her hair, ran down−stairs, not knowing very well why the bell rang, or what it was all about. In the sitting−room she found the girl from New Zealand, a little nervous creature, whom she had nursed through a bad fever, in her cold, absent way, and who had conceived a shy, intense passion for this beautiful strange creature, who seemed to her an unapproachable being from another world.

"I am going away," cried Anne she felt she must say it "going away from school to London, next month."

The thin, nervous, anæmic little girl turned ashy−white.

"Oh, are you really going?" she exclaimed faintly, for with Anne disappeared all the poor child's sunshine and ideal from this dreary, worse than orphaned life, among girls who had too many occupations and interests to care for her.

"Are you really going, Annie? . . . Oh, I am so sorry!"

"Sorry?" cried Anne; "it is very nasty of you to be sorry I am glad; oh, so glad! so glad!"

The little New Zealander had gone to the window, and was looking through its panes at the rainy street; she gave a little suppressed sob.

Anne felt as if she had committed a murder. She ran to the window, and seized the struggling small creature in her powerful arms, and knelt down before her, clasping her round the waist.

"Oh, forgive me! forgive me!" cried Anne, as the consciousness of the girl's love, which she had never before perceived, came upon her, together with the shame and remorse at her heartlessness; "forgive me, forgive I am a brute a beast oh dear, oh dear, that happiness should make me so wicked!"

The New Zealander smiled and buried her thin yellow face in the masses of Anne's dark crisp hair.

"Will you remember me sometimes?" she asked; "I love you so much."

Anne kissed the poor, pale, tear−stained cheeks.

"Oh yes, I will always remember you," she said.

But she was already thinking of Hamlin.

CHAPTER V.

DURING that last month at school Anne was indefatigable: in the face of the vague future which was so rapidly approaching, she felt bound to clutch hold of the present, thinking that time which was employed in some way went less quickly. The fact was that she was in a state of great excitement half impatience and half terror; she wished the days to go by quicker, and she wished them to go by slower; she was at once dragged wearisomely, and hurried along. At length it became a question no longer of weeks but of days. And then came another letter from Hamlin. He remembered the desire she had once expressed to go down the Rhine, to be on the sea: he proposed that she should come through Belgium and cross from Antwerp to London. "I am sure you will enjoy it much more than the vile, vulgar, usual route," he wrote. But he did not tell her that he was unwilling she should get any impressions of England before meeting him, however slight they might be; that he preferred to meet her, in the evening, on the Thames wharf, to receiving his Amazon Queen, his mysterious and tragic Madonna, rather than in the shed at Victoria or Charing Cross. Anne did not care how she was to go: she was to go, to embark on a new life, to see him, to be seen by him. This thought, which had never struck her before, began to haunt her now: if he should be disgusted with her? if he should recognise that he had been mistaken in his choice?

The morning before her departure, Mrs Sireson handed Anne a letter at breakfast.

"Mr Hamlin has sent a girl to fetch you, dear," she said.

"To fetch me?" cried Anne, in astonishment.

Mrs Simson opened the door "Pray, come in," she said.

A young woman entered, whose immaculate smartness and cheerful alertness never would have let one guess that she had just been travelling twenty−four hours.

"This is Miss Brown," said Mrs Simson. The girl curtsied, and waited for Miss Brown to speak. But Anne could not utter a word.

"Mrs Macgregor, Mr Hamlin's aunt, engaged me as your travelling−maid, miss," said the young woman, handing a note to Anne.

It was from Hamlin, and ran briefly

"MY DEAR MISS BROWN, My aunt is unfortunately too delicate to admit of my asking her to fetch you from Coblenz; but she has engaged the bearer to be your maid, unless you have some previous. choice at Coblenz, in which case, please forgive our interference. She is highly recommended, and seems a good girl, and accustomed to travel. She will telegraph me how you are from Cologne and Ant− werp. I shall await you Thursday evening on the wharf. Till then, farewell. Your sincere and impatient friend,

"WALTER HAMLIN."

For some unaccountable reason Anne felt quite angry. She did not require any one to travel with her; she did not want a maid. The very word maid seemed to bring up her whole past.

"You had better go and rest yourself," she said to the girl coldly.

"How sweet and considerate!" said Mrs Simson, reading Hamlin's note.

"I don't want a maid!" cried Anne, angrily.

"A young lady of your age cannot travel alone, my dear," answered Mrs Simson, blandly. But Anne felt miserable, she knew not why, and hated the maid.

Presently she went up to her room to pack her trunk. On opening the door she discovered the maid her maid on her knees, emp− tying the chest of drawers, and folding thing after thing.

"Please don't do that!" cried Anne, turning purple. "I will do it myself, please."

The girl stared politely, and answered in a subdued, respectfully chiding tone

"I was only packing your trunk, miss."

"I will do it myself!" cried Anne, excitedly.

"As you wish, madam," was the maid's icy answer; and she rose.

"Can I do nothing for you?" she said, standing by the door, with a reproachful, prim little face.

Anne was ashamed.

"You can help me if you like," she answered, rather humbled; and she began folding her things. But the girl was much quicker than she, and Anne soon remained with nothing to do, looking on vacantly. She felt as if she would give worlds to get the girl away; she felt as if she ought to say to her, "Don't do that for me; I am not a real lady; I am no better than you; I am a servant, a maid, my− self," and as if every moment of silence were a kind of deceit. At last she could bear it no longer

"Please," she cried, "let me pack my things myself; I have always packed them myself; I should be so glad if you would let me."

The girl rose and retired.

"As you like, miss," she replied, fixing her eyes on Anne's strange excited face.

"She knows I am only a servant like herself, and she thinks me proud and ungrateful," thought Anne.

The next evening, among the lamentations of Mrs Simson's establishment, Anne Brown set off for Cologne. This first short scrap of journey moved her very much: when the train puffed out of the station, and the familiar faces were hidden by outhouses and locomotives, the sense of embarking on unknown waters rushed upon Anne; and when, that evening, her maid bade her good night at the hotel at Cologne, offering to brush her hair and help her to undress, she was seized with intolerable home− sickness for the school, the little room she had just left, and

she would have implored any one to take her back. But the next days she felt quite different: the excitement of novelty kept her up, and almost made it seem as if all these new things were quite habitual; for there is nothing stranger than the way in which excitement settles one in novel positions, and familiarises one with the unfamiliar. Seeing a lot of sights on the way, and knowing that a lot more remained to be seen, it was as if there were nothing beyond these three or four days as if the journey would have no end; that an end there must be, and what that end meant seemed a thing impossible to realise. She scarcely began to realise it when the ship began slowly to move from the wharf at Antwerp; when she walked up and down the deserted and darkened deck watching the widening river under the clear blue spring night, lit only by a ripple of moonlight, widening mysteriously out of sight, bounded only by the shore−lights, with here or there the white or blue or red light of some ship, and its long curl of smoke, making you suddenly conscious that close by was another huge moving thing, more human creatures in this solitude, till at last all was mere moonlight−permeated mist of sky and sea. And only as the next day as the boat cut slowly through the hazy, calm sea was drawing to its close, did Anne begin to feel at all excited. At first, as she sat on deck, the water, the smoke, the thrill of the boat, the people walking np and down, the children wandering about among the piles of rope, and leaning over the ship's sides all these things seemed the only reality. But later, as they got higher up in the Thames, and the unwonted English sunshine became dimmer, a strange excitement arose in Anne an excitement more physical than mental, which, with every movement of the boat, made her heart beat faster and faster, till it seemed as if it must burst, and a lot of smaller hearts to start up and throb all over her body, tighter and tighter, till she had to press her hand to her chest, and sit down gasping on a bench.

The afternoon was drawing to a close, and the river had narrowed; all around were rows of wharves and groups of ships; the men began to tug at the ropes. They were in the great city. The light grew fainter, and the starlight mingled with the dull smoke−grey of London; all about were the sad grey outlines of the old houses on the wharves, the water grey and the sky also, with only a faint storm−red where the sun had set. The rigging, interwoven against the sky, was grey also; the brownish sail of some nearer boat, the dull red sides of some steamer hard by, the only colour. The ship began to slacken speed and to turn, great puffs and pants of the engine running through its fibres; the sailors began to halloo, the people around to collect their luggage: they were getting alongside of the wharf. Anne felt the maid throw a shawl round her; heard her voice, as if from a great distance, saying, "There's Mr Hamlin, miss;" felt herself walk− ing along as if in a dream; and as if in a dream a figure come up and take her hand, and slip her arm through his, and she knew herself to be standing on the wharf, in the twilight, the breeze blowing in her face, all the people jostling and shouting around her. Then a voice said "I fear you must be very tired, Miss Brown." It was at once so familiar and so strange that it made her start; the dream seemed dispelled. She was in reality, and Hamlin was really by her side.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

IT is sad to think how little even the most fervently loving among us are able to reproduce, to keep within recollection, the reality of the absent beloved; certain as we seem to be, living as appears the phantom which we have cherished, we yet always find, on the day of meeting, that the loved person is different from the simulacrum which we have carried in our hearts. As Anne Brown sat in the carriage which was carrying her to her new home, the feeling which was strongest in her was, not joy to see Hamlin again, nor fear at entering on this new phase of existence, but a recurring shock of surprise at the voice which was speaking to her, the voice which she now recognised as that of the real Hamlin, but which was so undefinably different from the voice which had haunted her throughout those months of absence. Hamlin was seated by her side, the maid opposite. The carriage drove

quickly through a network of dark streets, and then, on, on, along miles of embankment. It was a beautiful spring night, and the mists and fogs which hung over river and town were soaked with moonlight, turned into a pale−blue luminous haze, starred with the yellow specks of gas, broken into, here and there, by the yellow sheen from some open hall−door or lit windows of a party−giving house: out of the faint blueness emerged the unsubstantial outlines of things bushes, and overhanging tree−branches, and distant spectral towers and belfries.

"You must be very tired," said Hamlin.

"Oh no," answered Anne, that repeated revelation of the real voice still startling her " not at all."

He asked her how she had left those at Coblenz, and about her journey; she had to tell him about every picture and church she had seen at Cologne, Brussels, Bruges, and Antwerp. It is strange how people whose hearts have seemed full to bursting with things they have so long been waiting to say, will talk, when they meet again, like persons introduced for the first time at a dinner−party. On they rolled, and on, through the pale moonlight mist by the river.

"I hope," said Hamlin, when they had done discussing Van Eyck, and Rubens, and Memling "I hope you will like the house and the way I have had it arranged; and," he added, "I hope you will like my aunt. She is rather misanthropic, but it is only on the surface."

His aunt! Anne had forgotten all about her; and her heart sank within her as the carriage at last drew up in front of some garden railings. The house door was thrown open, and a stream of yellow light flooded the strip of garden and the railings. Hamlin gave Anne his arm; the maid followed. A woman−servant was holding the door open, and raising a lamp above her. Anne bent her head, feeling that she was being scrutinised. She walked speechless, leaning on Hamlin's arm, and those steps seemed to her endless. It was all very strange and wonderful. Her step was muffled in thick, dark carpets; all about, the walls of the narrow passage were covered with tapestries, and here and there came a gleam of brass or a sheen of dim mirror under the subdued light of some sort of Eastern lamp, which hung, with yellow sheen of metal discs and tassels, from the ceiling. Thus up the narrow carpeted and tapestried stairs, and into a large dim room, with strange−looking things all about. Some red embers sent a crimson flicker over the carpet; by the tall fireplace was a table with a shaded lamp, and at it was seated a tall, slender woman, with the figure of a young girl, but whose face, when Anne saw it, was parched and hollowed out, and surrounded by grey hair.

"This is Miss Brown, Aunt Claudia," said Hamlin.

The old lady rose, advanced, and kissed Anne frigidly on both cheeks.

"I am glad to see you, my dear," she said, in a tone which was neither cold nor insincere, but simply and utterly indifferent.

Anne sat down. There was a moment's silence, and she felt the old lady's eyes upon her, and felt that Hamlin was looking at his aunt, as much as to say, "Well, what do you think of her?" and she shrank into herself.

"You have had a bad passage, doubtless," said Mrs Macgregor after a moment, vaguely and dreamily.

"Oh no," answered Anne, faintly, "not at all bad, thank you."

"So much the better," went on the old lady, absently. "Ring for some tea, Walter."

Hamlin rang. In a moment tea−things were brought. Hamlin handed a cup to Anne, and offered her some cake.

"It is a long drive," said Mrs Macgregor "a long drive all the way from Charing Cross."

"Miss Brown came by the Antwerp boat St Catherine's Wharf in the City, aunt," corrected Hamlin.

"Ah, yes, to be sure perhaps she would like some more milk in her tea. There is always such a delay at Charing Cross, isn't there, Walter?"

But while Mrs Macgregor's mind and words seemed to ramble vaguely about, her eyes were fixed upon Anne large, melancholy dark eyes.

"You are glad to be back in London, aren't you?" she asked.

"This is the first time I am in England," answered Anne, shyly; all this dim room, with its vague sense of beautiful things all round, this absent−minded lady, all seemed to harmonise with her own dreamlike sensations.

"Miss Brown was born in Italy," explained Hamlin, probably for the hundredth time.

"Oh yes, of course; how stupid I am! And, Walter, there are some letters for you on the hall table, and Mr Chough came while you were out, and a man from what's his name the upholsterer who writes poetry."

"All right," interrupted Hamlin.

"Won't you have another cup, Margaret?" asked Mrs Macgregor.

"Her name is Anne, auntie "

"Of course I don't know whether you take sugar in your tea or not, Rachel."

Thus they went on for another half−hour; Mrs Macgregor calling Anne by one wrong name after another, alluding to things which she could not possibly know anything about, and Hamlin trying to set matters right and induce Anne to talk.

"It is getting late," he said, "and I fear Miss Brown must be tired after her long journey. I think you had better not keep her up any longer, aunt."

"I am not tired," protested Anne.

"You will be tired to−morrow," said the old lady.

"Yes," added Hamlin, "and I must go. Good−bye, aunt. Good night, Miss Brown; I hope you will have good dreams to welcome you home to England. I shall come in for lunch to−morrow, Aunt Claudia. Good night. Good night, Miss Brown," and he kissed her hand. "Good night, *buon riposo e sogni felici*."

The few words of Italian almost brought the tears to Anne's eyes; she felt so strange here, so far from everything and yet what had she left behind? nothing, and no one who loved her, except that little girl from New Zealand. She felt terribly alone in the world.

Hamlin had evidently not trusted to his aunt to send Anne to bed, for the maid came in uncalled, and asked whether Miss Brown would not like to go up to her room.

"Of course," said Mrs Macgregor; and taking a heavy old−fashioned silver candlestick, she led Anne to her room. The poor girl was too weary and dazed to see what it was like. She sank on to a chair, and passively let the maid take off her hat and cloak.

"Shall I undress you, ma'am?" she asked.

Anne shook her head. "No, thanks."

The girl retired, but Mrs Macgregor remained standing by Anne's side, looking at the reflection in the glass of her pale, sad, tired face. "Undo your hair, Eliza dear," said Mrs Macgregor.

Anne mechanically pulled out the hair−pins, and the masses of iron−black crisp hair fell over her shoulders.

The old lady looked at her for a moment.

"You are a beautiful girl, Anne," she said, at last hitting the right name, "and," she added, with a curious compassionate look, as she kissed the girl's forehead, "are you really in love with Watty?"

Anne did not answer; but she felt herself redden.

"Marriage without love is a terrible thing," said the old lady, "and in so far love is a mitigation of evil; but at the best it is only delusion. People must marry, but it is the misfortune of their lives. Good night, my dear."

The words went on in Anne's head, but she was too worn out to understand them. She soon fell asleep, and dreamed that Melton Perry had painted a picture, and that in a storm the ship's crew said it must be used as a raft; and somehow it all took place at Florence, in the large pond in the Boboli Gardens.

CHAPTER II.

ANNE BROWN awoke with a vague sense of gladness, but no very clear notion of where she was. Then it came upon her that this was Hamlin's house, that she would actually see him again in a few hours; for it was as if she had not seen him at all the previous evening. The sun was streaming through the blinds, filling the room with a yellowish light; from without came a sound of leaves, of twittering birds, and the plash of the steamer−paddles in the river. Anne looked round her and wondered. She had never seen such a room as this in her life: the wails were all panelled white, except where the panelling was interrupted by expanses of pale−yellow chintz; the furniture also was of old−fashioned chintz; the mirror was like what she had seen in the illustrations to an old copy of 'Sir Charles Grandison' which had belonged to Miss Curzon; the tapered chairs and tables to match. There were blue−and−white jars and pots all about, and old−fashioned china things on the dressing−table: except for the fac−similes of drawings by Mantegna and Botticelli, and the coloured copies of famous Italian pictures which dotted the walls, the room might have been untouched since the days of the first Georges. She remembered that Hamlin had told her that the house was an old one; but she could not understand how everything came to look so very spick and span and new. She got up and went to the window. Below, in the little garden, was a lilac−tree bursting into flower, and a yellow laburnum. A milkman's cart was drawn up before the door. In front were the trees, in tender leaf, and the wooden parapet of the river−walk; then the Thames, still wide, but so different from what she had seen it the previous evening: a clear grey stream reflecting green banks and cloudy blue sky, with here and there a barge or boat moored by the shore. The sky was blue, but covered with moist clouds, and it seemed to Anne that she could almost see where it arose on the horizon, so low did it seem. There was a scent of

recent rain in the air, a shimmer of moisture on the leaves and grass. Was this London, which she had always fancied so noisy, and grimy, and vulgarly new?

Anne was already half dressed; but she spent some time wondering which of her frocks she should put on: they had been made expressly for London, and greatly admired by the girls at Coblenz, but now one looked more absurd and frumpish than the other. At last she put on a sort of greyish−blue tweed, such as were then worn on the Continent, and having looked at herself rather anxiously in the glass, she opened her door and hesitatingly went out into the passage. All was perfectly quiet as she went down the carpeted stairs, wondering at the tapestry and brazen wrought shields and plaster casts and curious weapons which covered its walls; she could hear only the ticking of the old clock, which stood in its tall inlaid case in the hall. After the bustle of girls and servants at the Coblenz school, and the hundred and one noises of screeching well−pulleys, whirring buckets, whistling starlings, singing and chattering servants, clattering crockery, which greet the early riser in an Italian house, this silence seemed to her almost eerie, and she wandered about over the noiseless floors like the knight in the palace of the sleeping beauty. She found her way into the drawing−room, where she had been received the previous evening; there was another next to it, and a kind of little library beyond. It was, indeed, an enchanted palace; the walls were all hung with pictures and drawings, and pieces of precious embroidery, and burnished oriental plates, and the floors spread with oriental carpets and matting, which gave out a faint, drowsy, sweet scent. The curious furniture was covered with old brocade and embroidery, and in all corners, on brackets and tables and in cabinets, were all manner of wonderful glass and china, and strange ivory and inlaid Japanese toys. There were flowers, also, about everywhere, and palms in the windows. In the library were more books than Anne had almost ever seen; and in the chief drawing−room a beautiful grand piano, not made like those of our days, but with slight straight legs and a yellow case painted with faded−looking flowers. Anne looked at everything with astonishment and awe: it was like the rooms in Walter Crane's fairy books, with their inlaid chests and brocade couches, and majolica vases full of peacocks' feathers.

It took her a long time to take it all in. She stole to the piano, opened it gently, and played the accompaniment of a song of Carissimi's, which Hamlin was fond of, but inaudibly, without letting her fingers press down the keys. Then she looked at everything once more. She was beginning to get familiarised with the pictures on the wall; the pale, delicate bits of landscape; the deep−coloured pictures of ladies in wonderful jewel−like robes, with mysterious landscapes behind them; the drawings of strange, beautiful, emaciated, cruel−looking creatures, men or women, with wicked lips and combed−out locks, all these things, which were like so many points of interrogation when the door opened and the maid appeared.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, miss," she said. "I thought, as you didn't answer when I knocked, that you must still be asleep, so I carried your tea down again. Mrs Macgregor is going to have breakfast now, and says, would you mind having it in her room with her, miss, as she never goes down till lunch?"

Anne followed the servant to Mrs Macgregor's room, where she found the old lady in her dressing−gown, before a table spread with eighteenth−century china, or what to Anne seemed such.

"What an hour you do get up at, Charlotte!" said Mrs Macgregor, kissing Anne on both cheeks. "We never think of getting up here before half−past nine. Walter never comes in till luncheon−time, because he has so far to come, and is up so late every night. Turn round; let me see what you look like this morning."

And Mrs Macgregor made Anne turn round slowly. She looked at her approvingly.

"You're a handsome girl, certainly," she said; "not the style that used to be admired in my time," and she smiled with the faint smile of an old belle, "girls had to be slight, and fair, and with little features then. But you're just what they like now. I'm thankful at least that Walter has not brought home a bag of bones like the other beauties of his set. ***Loveliness in decay***, that's what I call their style; but you look a good flesh−and−blood girl."

Anne did not know what to answer; she poured herself out a cup of tea in silence, and vaguely ate some bread and butter. The old lady was good−natured, garrulous, flighty; but yet, beneath the shiftiness of her exterior, there seemed to be something real, something sad and bitter, when you looked at her thin drawn mouth and melancholy eyes.

"That's a pretty frock you have on, my dear," she pursued, "and ***I*** think it very becoming. But you'll see that Watty won't like it. He's quite the what do you call it? medieval sort of thing, no stays, and no petticoats, and slashings, and tags and boot−laces in the sleeves, and a yard of draggled train that sort of thing. Oh, you'll find it a queer world, the world of Watty's friends. Do you ever see 'Punch'? That's the sort of thing. They're ***all*** great beauties and great painters and great poets, every man and woman of them. Wait till you see little Chough and young Posthlethwaite (I forget his real name). Ah, well, it's perhaps better, after all, this kind of fooling, and masquerading, and writing verses about things people would horsewhip a man for saying in prose; it's perhaps better, after all, for Watty, than the sort of life which we led when he was young" and Mrs Macgregor became suddenly very silent.

After breakfast Anne was free until luncheon−time, as Mrs Macgregor proceeded to lie down on her sofa and read Leigh Hunt's 'Religion of the Heart,' or Fox's 'Religious Ideas,' which Anne saw lying on her table. Hamlin's aunt had evidently been an *esprit fort* in her youth, and possessed in her bedroom a whole library of what were once deemed literary firebrands, but might nowadays be described as mild, old−fashioned free−thinking literature. Anne roamed about the drawing−room once more, looking again and again at the pictures, and opening the books, as people do in a strange house, before they can settle down. She timidly also opened the piano, but shut it again after a minute. Then she took a volume of Jean Paul out of a shelf, and carried it up into her room. Finding it too dull to read, and with an irritating sense that she ought to be doing something definite, she wrote a letter to Mrs Simson, and one to the little New Zealander. She felt so much like a fish out of water that Coblenz seemed more than her birthplace, and the people there more than mother and sisters. At last she heard one o'clock strike, and soon after there came a knock at the house−door, and running to the window she saw Hamlin standing on the doorstep. She withdrew her head quickly, and went down to meet him.

He was more respectful than ever, asked her how she had slept, and what she thought of the house.

"It's lovely," said Anne, "and it is so nice having everything old about one."

"Everything old?" asked Hamlin.

"Yes; all the hangings, and chairs, and tables, and mirrors, are of the time of the building of the house, aren't they?"

"Oh goodness, no," answered Hamlin, sadly; "I only wish they were. They're bran−new, every stick of them. Everybody has them now; nobody makes anything except imitation old−world things."

"Why don't they try and make something good and new something out of their own heads, as the old workmen did?" asked Anne, looking with wonder upon these new things which seemed so old.

"There is nothing to nourish art nowadays," said Hamlin, seating himself opposite her and looking her full in the face as he used to do long ago at the studio in Florence. "Art can't live where life is trivial and aimless and hideous. We can only pick up the broken fragments of the past and blunderingly set them together."

"But why should the life of to−day be trivial and aimless and hideous?" asked Anne, a vague remembrance of things which she had heard her father say years ago about progress and modern achievements returning to her mind as it had never done when, in the letters which he used to write to her at Coblenz, Hamlin had said before what he was saying now.

"I don't know why it should be," replied Hamlin, "but so it is."

"Can't we prevent it?" asked Anne, scarcely thinking of what she was saying; conscious only that she was really once more in his presence.

Hamlin shook his head sadly.

"Why cannot we revive those?" he said, pointing to a bunch of delicate pale−pink roses, which drooped withered in a Venetian glass. "What is dead is dead. The only thing that remains for us late comers to do is to pick up the faded petals and keep them, discoloured as they are, to scent our lives. The world is getting uglier and uglier outside us; we must, out of the materials bequeathed to us by former generations, and with the help of our own fancy, build for ourselves a little world within the world, a world of beauty, where we may live with our friends and keep alive whatever small sense of beauty and nobility still remains to us, that it may not get utterly lost, and those who come after us may not be in a wilderness of sordid sights and sordid feelings. Ours is not the mission of the poets and artists of former days; it is humbler, sadder, but equally necessary."

"Oh, but you must not say that!" cried Anne. "What you do will last, don't you know, like the things which people were able to do formerly."

Hamlin shook his head, and remained for some time with his beautiful greenish−blue eyes fixed on Anne, as she sat twisting and untwisting the fringe on the arm of her chair.

"There is one consolation, Miss Brown," said Hamlin, rising from his chair and leaning against the chimney−piece, all covered with Japanese cups and curious nick−nacks, and not taking his eyes off her, "and that is, that even now, Nature, which is so barren of painters and poets, can produce creatures as wonderful as those who inspired the painters and poets of former times a consolation, and at the same time a source of despair."

Hamlin spoke these lover−like words in a tone so cold, so sad, that Anne did not at first understand to whom he was alluding, and looked up rather in interrogation than in embarrassment.

A bell rang. "There's lunch," said Hamlin. "We must finish our discussion afterwards."

CHAPTER III.

"**WON'T** you take her out for a drive, Walter?" asked Mrs Macgregor, after lunch. "She must be curious to see something of London."

Hamlin looked at Anne, as much as to say, "Do you really wish to go?"

"I am sure Miss Brown is too tired from her journey, aunt," he said; "and what is there to take her to see in this beastly city?"

"I thought we might have a brougham and take her to see a few of your friends, Walter," suggested Mrs Macgregor.

Poor Anne felt a sort of horror go all down her.

"Oh, please don't!" she cried "not to−day; don't take me to see any one, please."

"It's much wiser to let her rest," said Hamlin, in a tone of annoyance.

"Won't you just take the poor girl to Mrs Argiropoulo's, Watty?" insisted his aunt. "It's a sin to keep her mewed up at Hammersmith all day; and you know Mrs Argiropoulo was so anxious to see her at once."

"Confound Mrs Argiropoulo!" exclaimed Hamlin. "I beg your pardon, Miss Brown, but do you feel inclined, after your long journey, to go and see a fat, fashionable lion−huntress, with a snob of a husband who sells currants?"

"Not at all," answered Anne, laughing. "I would much rather stay at home, really."

"Very well; then I will show you the garden and my studio, if you don't mind; and a great friend of mine, Cosmo Chough, I think I sent you some of his poems about music. . . ."

"Oh yes," cried Anne; "they are lovely "

"I think little Chough's poems perfectly indecent," interrupted Mrs Macgregor. "I would much sooner let a girl read 'Don Juan,' or even 'Candide,' any day."

Hamlin reddened, but laughed.

"Opinions differ; at any rate, Miss Brown knows only Chough's best things; and when he is at his best, Chough is really very good and pure and elevated."

"Ah, well," merely remarked Mrs Macgregor.

"Cosmo Chough said he would look in about four," went on Hamlin. "He is a strange creature, and sometimes says odd things."

"Very odd things," put in his aunt.

"But he is as pure−minded a man as I know, and a real poet," went on Hamlin "indeed quite one of the best; and he is a great musician, and a most entertaining fellow his only weakness is that he is a great republican and democrat, but would like to be thought the son of a duke."

"The son of a duke? " asked Anne, in surprise.

"Oh, the natural son, of course forgive me, my dear," said Mrs Macgregor. "People nowadays like anything illegitimate it's a distinction. It wasn't in my day, but things have changed; and Mr Cosmo Chough would dearly like to be thought a bastard, especially a duke's."

Hamlin smiled.

"Poor Chough! Some one told him he was like Richard Savage one day, and that's his pose. Would you like to come into the garden, Miss Brown?"

They went together into the strip of garden which lay behind the house. There were not many flowers out as yet, only a few peonies and lilacs, and a belated tulip or hyacinth, but there was green, daisied grass, and big grey−mossed apple−trees still in blossom; and across the low walls, covered with creepers, you saw big waving tree−branches, and old brick houses covered with ivy: the birds were singing, and some hens clucking next door.

It was very quiet and old−world. Hamlin showed her all the rose−buds which might soon come out, and the place where the lilies would be, and the espaliers for the sweet−peas. Then they went into the two ground−floor rooms which he was arranging for his studio: there were quantities of beautiful rare books and volumes of prints, and Persian and Japanese and old Italian metal−work,and pottery all about, and easels with unfinished pictures evcrywhere a great and beautiful confusion.

When he had showed her his properties, and she had reverently handled the things which had once belonged to Shelley and Keats, and the bundles of unpublished manuscripts, entrusted to Hamlin by living poets, they sat down in the studio and began to discuss various matters: Anne's school life, her readings and lessons, Hamlin's work, art, poetry, life, all sorts of things, a long and drowsy afternoon's talk, such as is possible only after a long correspondence between people become familiar without much personal intercourse, who, knowing each other's mind, are now beginning to know each other's face and ways and heart; and which has a charm quite peculiar to itself, like that of hearing for the first time, with full symphony of voices and instruments, some piece of music which we have learned to know and love merely from the dry score.

Anne had never felt so happy in all her life, and Hamlin not often happier in his, as they sat in the studio, talking over abstract questions, which seemed to acquire such a quite personal interest from those who were discussing them.

They were thus engaged when the servant announced Mr Cosmo Chough.

Anne's heart sank at the thought of confronting one of Hamlin's most intimate friends, and one of the poets who constituted the stars of his solar system. To Anne's surprise Mr Chough did not at all resemble either Shelley or Keats, as she imagined; he was a little wiry man, with fiercely brushed coal−black hair and whiskers, dressed within an inch of his life, but in a style of fashionableness, booted and cravated, which was quite peculiar to himself.

"Miss Brown," said Hamlin, "let me introduce my old friend, Cosmo Chough."

Mr Chough made a most fascinating bow, and swooped gracefully to the other end of the studio to fetch himself a chair near Anne's. He was quite touchingly concerned in Anne's journey and her sensations after it; and asked her whether she liked London, with a sort of expansive chivalry of manner, as of Sir Walter Raleigh spreading embroidered cloaks across puddles for Queen Elizabeth, which struck her as rather ridiculous, but very agreeable, as she had rather anticipated being scorned by Hamlin's poetical friends. Anne thought Mr. Chough decidedly nice, with his oriental style of politeness, and magnificent volubility, constantly quoting poetry in various languages in a shrill and chirpy voice; moreover, he seemed to adore Hamlin, and this was enough to put him in her good graces. Mr Chough rapidly informed her what the principal poets in London and Paris (for he spoke of French things with an affectation of throaty accent and allusions to his "real country" which greatly puzzled Anne) were writing; and Anne felt so completely taken into confidence that she ventured to ask him whether he was himself writing anything at present, as she had greatly admired some short pieces of his which Hamlin had sent her.

Mr Chough was as modest as he was polite. His eyes shone, and he clasped his small hands in ecstasy at the idea of anything of his having pleased Miss Brown. He then proceeded to tell her that he had an idea for a long poem a sort of masque or mystery−play to be called the Triumph of Womanhood.

"We were trying over some of Jomelli's music a night or two ago, at Isaac the great composer's," he explained; "magnificent music, which no one can sing nowadays, and we feebly crowed, when in the midst of the great burst of the "Gloria" I seemed to have revealed to me a vision of a mystic procession of women going in triumph; I understood, in a sort of flash, the mysterious and real regalness of Womanhood."

"It must have been very beautiful," said Anne, naively.

Mr Chough had opened the piano, and began playing, in a masterly way, a fragment of very intricate fugue.

"Do you notice that?" he asked: "that sudden modulation there ta ta ti, la la la from A minor to E major, that somehow mysteriously brought home to me one of the figures of that triumphal procession, and her I have tried to describe. If you like, I can repeat you the first few lines; it is called 'Imperia of Rome.'"

"How good of you," cried Anne.

"I think we had better put off hearing it till you have composed rather more of the poem," interrupted Hamlin.

Cosmo Chough looked mortified, and Anne wondered why Hamlin should silence his old friend.

"Tell me all about Imperia of Rome," she asked. "Who was she? had she anything to do with the Scipios, or Cato, or Tarquin?"

"Imperia was not an ancient Roman," explained Chough; "she lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and it is said that all the cardinals and poets and artists of Rome, nay, the Pope himself, accompanied her coffin when she died."

"Why, what had she done? was she a saint?"

"The inscription on her tomb is, I think, the most truly noble and Roman ever composed on any woman," proceeded Chough; "Imperia . . ."

"Miss Brown doesn't understand Latin, Cosmo," interrupted Hamlin, roughly, "and I am sure she would take no interest in Imperia or her epitaph. Supposing you let Miss Brown hear some of that beautiful Jomelli Mass you were speaking about. Chough is one of the finest musicians I know," he explained to Anne, "and he is quite famous for singing all sorts of forgotten old Italian masters."

Chough sat down and began to sing, in a warbling falsetto, but with the most marvellous old−world grace and finish.

Anne did not attend. She was wondering about Imperia of Rome. Why had Hamlin cut short Chough? What had Imperia done? The remarks of Mrs Macgregor came to her mind; and she felt indignant, and her indignation was all the greater, perhaps, because Chough's offence was vague and unknown how nobly and simply Hamlin had silenced him! She wondered whether he was very angry with Chough, and whether Chough's feelings had been much hurt. She felt rather sorry for the sharp way in which he had been treated, and terrified lest she should be a source of misunderstanding between Hamlin and his friends. She greatly praised Chough's singing.

"Will you sing?" cried the little poet, supplicatingly; "you must have a beauti− ful voice. I know it from your way of speaking."

Anne refused in terror.

"Do sing, Miss Brown," urged Hamlin. So she took her courage with both hands, as she expressed it, and sang an air by Scarlatti, Chough accompanying. She made several false starts, and sang the wrong words almost throughout, for she felt a lump in her chest. Anne had a deep, powerful, rather guttural voice, not improved by singing modern German songs at Coblenz; but the voice was fine, and she had caught something of the manner of her former protectress, Miss Curzon, who had been a great singer in her day.

Chough burst out into applause.

"A splendid voice!" he cried; "you ***must*** sing, Miss Brown you ***must*** study I will come and practise your accompaniments for you, if you will permit me."

Anne looked at Hamlin; such an offer, on so slight an acquaintance, surprised her.

"You will let Chough teach you, won't you, Miss Brown?" asked Hamlin, approvingly. He afterwards told her that Chough spent whatever leisure remained from an inferior Government offce, in which, together with a whole band of other poets, he was employed, in playing accompaniments for various young ladies whom he considered, each singly, the most divine types of womanhood whom he had ever met.

Chough was in high spirits, and proceeded to display to Anne two or three relics which he carried on his person. A fervent though not very orthodox Catholic, he was prone to religious mysticism: on his watch−chain hung a gold cross, containing a bit of wood from St Theresa's house, which a friend had brought him from Spain; by its side dangled a large locket, enclosing a wisp of yellow hair.

"It is a lock of Lucretia Borgia's," he said, displaying it with as much unction as he had manifested for St Theresa "a bit of the one which Byron possessed, the most precious thing I have in all the world."

"She was rather an insignificant character though, on the whole, wasn't she?" remarked Anne, not knowing what to say, "a sort of characterless villain, the Germans say."

Cosmo Chough was indignant.

"Insignificant!" he cried " a Borgia insignificant! Why, her blood ran with evil as the Pactolus does with gold. All women that have ever been, except Sappho and Vittoria Accoramboni, and perhaps Faustina, were lifeless shadows by her side . . ."

"I don't believe in those sort of women having been very remarkable," said Anne, in her frank, stolid way, "except for disreputableness."

"But that is just it, that which you call disreputableness, my dear Miss Brown," cried Chough, "therein is their greatness, in that fiery . . ."

Anne shook her head contemptuously.

"I daresay great women have often committed great crimes," she said; "but then they have had great plans and ambitions; they have not been mere wretched slaves of passion;" and she relapsed into silence.

She had had what Hamlin used to call her Amazon or Valkyr expression as she spoke; and he felt, as he had felt in Florence, the persuasion that this proud and sombre woman must have in her future some great decision, some great sacrifice of others or of herself.

While they were talking, the servant entered to tell Miss Brown that Mrs Argiropoulo was in the drawing−room with Mrs Macgregor.

"Confound Mrs Argiropoulo!" exclaimed Hamlin between his teeth, "to come intruding so soon."

"Is that the lion−hunting lady?" asked Anne.

"Yes; I suppose you must receive her, as she has called on you."

"Called on me?" repeated Anne in amazement; "you mean on Mrs Macgregor. Why, how should she have heard of me?"

"All London has heard of you, Miss Brown," exclaimed Chough enthusiastically, as he opened the door for her; "at least all that deserves to be called London. And Mrs Argiropoulo said last night at Wendell the R.A.'s, that she was determined to see you before any other creature in town. You see I have gained a march upon her."

Anne did not answer, but she grew purple. So every one was curious to see this nursery−maid whom the great Hamlin had cast his eyes on, and whom he had generously educated; for the first time her heart burst with indignation and ruffled pride. But after a moment, as she sat in the drawing−room, after frigidly returning the fat and fashionable lion−huntress's affectionate greeting, her conscience smote her: who was she, that she should feel thus? if she did depend entirely on Hamlin's generosity, ought she not to be grateful merely, and proud? and if his friends felt curious to see her, was it not natural, he being what he was; and had she a right to feel annoyed at their curiosity, at their knowing all about her? It had been mean and unworthy. Yet she could not help feeling a sort of vague anger at she knew not what, as the lady chattered away, in glib Greek−English, about poets, and studios, and dinner−parties; and she answered Mrs Argiropoulo only in monosyllables.

"You must let me take your ward into society a little, dear Mrs Macgregor," lisped the Greek lady, "for I know you hate going out of an evening. Miss Brown must meet some of the principal persons of our set."

She was very fat, very good−natured, and extremely vulgar−looking, her huge body encased in a medieval dress of flaming gold brocade. "What in the world can she have to do among artists and poets?" thought Anne.

"Her husband is in the currant−trade," whispered Chough "an awful old noodle, but he buys more pictures of our school than any one else. Their house is a perfect wonder."

"My aunt is going to ask a few friends to meet Miss Brown first here," answered Hamlin; "perhaps you will join them, Mrs Argiropoulo. There's plenty of time to think of party−going."

"Very good, very good," answered Mrs Argiropoulo; "meanwhile perhaps I may have the pleasure of taking Miss Brown out for a drive once or twice."

"I am sure she will be delighted," said Hamlin.

"I hate that woman!" exclaimed Hamlin, as he returned from escorting the wife of the currant−dealer to the door; "an odious, inquisitive, vulgar brute."

"She looks good−natured, I think," insinuated Anne.

"Oh, every one's good−natured!"

"In your set, Watty?" asked Mrs Macgregor, bitterly.

"Every one's good−natured!" continued Hamlin, throwing himself back in his chair; "and so's Mrs Argiropoulo. But a kind of grain that sets my nerves off. That's the misfortune of London, that a lot of vulgar creatures, merely because they buy our pictures and give dinners, have come and invaded our set, showing us, like so many wild beasts, to the fashionable world. Positively, I shall have to give up London. But you will find," he added, turning to Anne, "one or two houses still remaining where one meets only superior people the houses where artistic life really goes on."

"Upon whipped cream and Swiss champagne," said Mrs Macgregor "what one might call the real, genuine, four hundred a−year intellectual world. Ah, well, Walter! you needn't look reproachful; but it ***is*** droll what sort of people you have come to associate with clerks and penny−a−liners, each of them a great poet."

Hamlin merely smiled. "One must make a world for one's self," he said, and looked at Anne.

When Mr Cosmo Chough had taken his seat next to Mrs Argiropoulo, the portly lady deluged him with questions and replies as her landau rolled away.

"On the whole, I'm quite as well pleased not to take her out at once," she said. "I'm not at all so sure about her. She seems to me too big and lumpish and healthy−looking. I should like to have one or two opinions first one or two artists', and young Posthlethwaite's, and little O'Reilly's of course, they'll see her at old Smith's, or Mrs Saunders's, or some such house and all depends on ***their*** verdict."

"I know what ***mine*** is," cried little Chough, enthusiastically "that she is the divinest woman, in the cold, imperial style, with a latent and strange smouldering passion, that I ever set eyes on. And as to that flabby elephant Posthlethwaite, and that little hop, skip, and jump of an impudent jackanapes O'Reilly, I wonder how you can think ***their*** opinion worth having, or, indeed, their presence supportable."

At this grand winding up Mrs Argiropoulo laughed loudly.

"I know you don't like those young men," she said. "Posthlethwaite's your rival, they say; he writes even more improper things than you do; and you can't forgive Thaddy O'Reilly calling your poems the loves of the cannibals. Oh, I know you poets! Now, shall I drive you home? What's your address?"

This was an old joke, for Mr Cosmo Chough always surrounded his dwelling−place with mystery, and had his letters addressed to his office.

"Pray don't inconvenience yourself," he said in a stately way; "set me down at the corner of Park Lane. I shall walk home in less than a minute from there."

"To the corner of Park Lane," ordered Mrs Argiropoulo of her footman, who knew, as well as his mistress and every other creature in what they called London, that Mr Cosmo Chough lived in a secluded terrace in Canonbury.

CHAPTER IV.

ANNE BROWN found that Hamlin, or, as he studiously put it, Mrs Macgregor, had made several engagements for her before her arrival; and before she could thoroughly realise that the school, the journey from Coblenz, were things of the past, she found herself being led about, passively, half unconsciously, through the mazes of æsthetic London. It was all very hazy: Anne was informed that this and that person was coming to dinner or lunch at Hammersmith; that this or that person hoped she would come and dine or take tea somewhere or other; that such or such a lady was going to take her to see some one or other's studio, or to introduce her at some other person's house. She knew that they were all either distinguished poets, or critics, or painters, or musicians, or distinguished relations and friends of the above; that they all received her as if they had heard of her from their earliest infancy; that they pressed her to have tea, and strawberries, and claret−cup, and cakes, and asked her what she thought of this picture or that poem; that they lived in grim, smut−engrained houses in Bloomsbury, or rose−grown cottages

at Hampstead, with just the same sort of weird furniture, partly Japanese, partly Queen Anne, partly medieval; with blue−and−white china and embroidered chasubles stuck upon the walls if they were rich, and twopenny screens and ninepenny pots if they were poor, but with no further differences; and, finally, that they were all intimately acquainted, and spoke of each other as being, or just having missed being, the most brilliant or promising specimens of whatever they happened to be.

At first Anne felt very shy and puzzled; but after a few days the very vagueness which she felt about all these men and women, these artists, critics, poets, and relatives, who were perpetually reappearing as on a merry−go−round, nay, the very cloudiness as to the identity of these familiar faces the very confusion as to whether they were one, two, or three different individuals, produced in Miss Brown an indifference, an ease, almost a familiarity, like that which we may experience towards the vague, unindividual company met on a steamer or at a hotel.

And little by little, out of this crowd of people who seemed to look, and to dress, and to talk very much alike, venerable bearded men, who were the heads of great schools of painting, or poetry, or criticism, or were the papas of great offspring; elderly, quaintly dressed ladies, who were somebody's wife, or mother, or sister; youngish men, with manners at once exotically courteous, and curiously free and easy, in velveteen coats and mustard−coloured shooting−jackets or elegiac−looking dress−coats, all rising in poetry, or art, or criticism; young ladies, varying from sixteen to six−and−thirty, with hair cut like medieval pages, or tousled like moenads, or tucked away under caps like eighteenth−century housekeepers, habited in limp and stayless garments, picturesque and economical, with Japanese chintzes for brocade, and flannel instead of stamped velvets most of which young ladies appeared at one period, past, present, or future, to own a connection with the Slade school, and all of whom, when not poets or painters themselves, were the belongings of some such, or madly in love with the great sonneteer such a one, or the great colourist such another; out of all this confusion there began gradually to detach themselves and assume consistency in Anne's mind one or two personalities, some of whom attracted, and some of whom repelled her, as we shall see further on; but to all these people, vague or distinct, attractive or repulsive, Miss Brown felt a kind of gratitude something, in an infinitesimal degree, of the thankfulness for undeserved kindness and courtesy which constituted a large part of her love for Hamlin.

It was a curious state of things, thus to be introduced by a man whom she knew at once so much and so little, to this exclusive and esoteric sort of people; and whenever the thought would come upon her how completely and utterly she, the daughter of the dockyard workman of Spezia, the former servant of the little Perrys, was foreign to all this, it made her feel alone and giddy, like one standing on a rock and watching the waters below.

Such was the condition of things when one morning, about three weeks after Anne's arrival, Hamlin put upon the luncheon−table a note addressed to Miss Brown.

"It's an invitation to Mrs Argiropoulo's big party on the twenty−seventh," he said; "you must go, Miss Brown. She's an awful being herself; but you'll see all the most interesting people in London at her house. Edith Spencer or Miss Pringle can take you, if Aunt Claudia feel too tired."

"Aunt Claudia always feels too tired," answered Mrs Macgregor, in a bitter little tone. Anne could not quite understand this amiable and cynical old lady, who was at once devotedly attached to her nephew, and perpetually railing at his friends. A fear seized her lest, in her vague, almost somnambulic introduction into æsthetic society, she might have unconsciously neglected the woman who, proud of her birth as she was, requested this workman's daughter to address and consider her as her aunt.

"Oh, won't you go?" cried Anne; "won't you go, Mrs Macgregor?"

"The fact is," hesitated Hamlin, "that you see Mrs Argiropoulo invites comparatively few people, and "

"That she wants only celebrities, or great folk, or pretty girls," interrupted Aunt Claudia, with her friendly cynicism, "or, as she expresses it, that she wants no padding. So you must go with Mrs Spencer or Miss Pringle, my dear."

"But it is abominable; it is most rude of Mrs Argiropoulo; and I certainly won't go anywhere where Aunt Claudia has not been invited."

"Nonsense, Nan," silenced the old lady; "you're not up to this lion−hunting world yet. Where there are so many geniuses on the loose, and so many professed beauties, there are no chairs for old women, except countesses or school board managers."

"But since you think Mrs Argiropoulo hateful," persisted Anne, addressing Hamlin, "why should you wish me to go? You know I would much rather not; and I think, considering her rudeness to your aunt, you ought not to wish me to go."

"As you choose, Miss Brown," cried Hamlin, peevishly.

"Don't be absurd, Anne you must go," insisted Mrs Macgregor. "Listen: Watty has actually been addling his brains doing dressmaking; he has invented a dress for you to go to the party, so you will break his heart if you refuse."

Anne looked in amazement; and Hamlin reddened.

"I hope you will not deem it a liberty on my part, Miss Brown," he said; "but as I knew that this invitation was coming, I ventured to make a sketch of the sort of dress which I think would become you, and to give it to a woman who has made dresses from artists' directions; of course, if you don't think it pretty, you won't dream of putting it on. But I could not resist the temptation."

Miss Brown scarcely knew what to say or feel: there was in her a moment's humiliation at being so completely Hamlin's property as to warrant this; then she felt grateful and ashamed of her ingratitude.

"If you had shown me the sketch, I daresay I could have made up the dress myself," she said.

"I fear my sketch might not have been very intelligible to any one who had not experience of making such things."

"Perhaps not," answered Anne, thinking of all the dresses for Miss Curzon and the little Perrys which she had made in her day. "It was very good of you, Mr Hamlin."

"What an idiot I was to let the cat out of the bag!" exclaimed Mrs Macgregor when her nephew was out of hearing. "I've spoilt your pleasure in the frock; and there's Walter sulking because he thinks you won't like it."

"I am very ungrateful," said Anne, sighing as she stooped over her book, and feeling all the same that she wished Hamlin would let her make up her dresses herself.

A few days later the dressmaker came to try on the dress, or rather (perhaps because Hamlin did not wish Anne to see it before it was finished) its linings and a small amount of the Greek stuff of which it was made; but it was not till the very afternoon of Mrs Argiropoulo's party that the costume was brought home finished. Miss Brown was by this time tolerably accustomed to the eccentric garb of æsthetic circles, and she firmly believed that it was the only one which a self−respecting woman might wear; but when she saw the dress which Hamlin had designed for her, she could not help shrinking back in dismay. It was of that Cretan silk, not much thicker than muslin, which

is woven in minute wrinkles of palest yellowy white; it was made, it seemed to her, more like a night−gown than anything else, shapeless and yet clinging with large and small folds, and creases like those of damp sculptor's drapery, or the garments of Mantegna's women.

"I must get out a long petticoat," said Anne, appalled.

"Oh please, ma'am, no," cried the dressmaker. "On no account an additional petticoat it would ruin the whole effect. On the contrary, you ought to remove one of those you have on, because like this the dress can't cling properly."

"I won't have it cling," cried Miss Brown, resolutely. "I will let alone the extra petticoat, but that's as much as I will do."

"As you please, ma'am," answered the woman, and continued adjusting the limp garment with the maid's assistance.

Anne walked to the mirror. She was almost terrified at the figure which met her. That colossal woman, with wrinkled drapery clinging to her in half−antique, half−medieval guise, that great solemn, theatrical creature, could that be herself?

"I think," she said in despair, "that there's something very odd about it, Mrs Perkins. It looks somehow all wrong. Are you sure that something hasn't got unstitched?"

"No indeed, madam," answered the dressmaker, ruffled in her dignity. "I have exactly followed the design; and," she added, with crushing effect, "as it's I who execute the most difficult designs for the Lyceum, I think I may say that it could not be made differently."

The Lyceum! Anne felt half petrified. What! Hamlin was having her rigged out by a stage dressmaker!

"Mr Hamlin is down−stairs, Miss Brown," hesitated the maid, as Anne bade her help her out of this mass of limp stuff. "He said he would wait to see you after the dressmaker had left, if you had no objection."

"Watty wants to see you in your new frock, my dear," said Mrs Macgregor, putting her head in at the door. "Come along."

Anne followed down−stairs, gathering all that uncanny white crape about her. For the first time she felt a dull anger against Hamlin.

He met her in the dim drawing−room.

"My hair isn't done yet," was all Miss Brown could say, tousling it with her hands.

"Leave it like that oh, do leave it like that!" exclaimed Hamlin; "you can't think how" and he paused and looked at her, where she stood before him, stooping her massive head sullenly "you can't think how beautiful you look, Anne!"

It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name since that scene, long ago, in the studio at Florence.

"Forgive me, dear Miss Brown," he apolo− gised. "I knew how such a dress must suit you, and yet it has given me quite a shock to see you in it."

"It was very kind of you to have it made for me," said Anne, "and the stuff is very pretty also; and and I am so glad you like me in it."

Hamlin kissed her hand. He was more than usually handsome, and looked very happy.

"Thank you," he said; "I must now go home and dress for that stupid dinner−party. I will meet you at Mrs Argiropoulo's at half−past ten or eleven. I suppose Edith Spencer will call for you soon after dinner. Good−bye."

He looked at her with a kind of fervour, and left the room.

Anne sat down. Why did that dress make such a difference to him? Why did he care so much more for her because she had it on? Did he care for her only as a sort of live picture? she thought bitterly. But, after all, it was quite natural on his part to be pleased, since he had invented the dress. And it was very good of him to have thought of her at all. And thus, in a state of enjoyable repentance, she awaited the hour to go to Mrs Argiropoulo.

Mrs Spencer, a very lovable and laughable little woman, whose soul was divided between her babies and fierce rancours against all enemies of pre−Raphaelitism, hereditary, in virtue of her father, Andrew Saunders, in her family, came punctually, marvellously attired in grey cashmere medieval garments, a garland of parsley and gilt oak−leaves in her handsome red hair. On seeing Anne, who stood awaiting her by the fireplace, she could not repress an exclamation of admiration.

"Yes," answered Anne, unaccustomed to have her looks admired at Florence and at Coblenz; "it is a very wonderful costume, isn't it? Mr Hamlin designed it for me. I think it was so kind of him; don't you?"

"Kind? I see nothing kind about it. Walter" (she always spoke of him thus familiarly, because he had worked as a youth in her father's studio) "is simply head over ears in love with you, my dear."

Anne shook her head.

"Oh no," she answered, with a sort of reasoned conviction, "he is merely very good to me, that's all and perhaps he likes me also, of course. But that's all."

"You know nothing of the world, Annie; and still less of Walter. He has never in his life been fond of any one except when in love. I've not known him these fifteen years for nothing."

"I think you are mistaken," said Anne, quietly.

"I think you are not aware, my dear girl, that you are the most beautiful woman Walter has ever seen."