Miss Brown, Vol. 2

Vernon Lee

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BOOK IV. (Continued)

CHAPTER V.

MISS BROWN felt very excited as the brougham drew up at Mrs Argiropoulo's, and they entered her large house, blazing with lights and crammed with flowers. She followed Mrs Spencer timidly up−stairs; but the men who crowded the landing never guessed that this majestic and imperturbable creature could possibly be nervous. At the top of the stairs, receiving her guests, an occupation (called seeing a few friends) which excluded her from her own drawing−room the best part of the evening, was Mrs Argiropoulo, gorgeous in old lace and diamonds, and withal excessively vulgar.

"I am ***so*** glad to see you, dear Miss Brown," she exclaimed to Anne's astonishment, despatching the other comers with a mere frigid handshake. "I do think it is ***so*** good of you to come."

"I wanted to come."

"You are ***such*** a darling," went on the fat Greek lady. "Come along I have kept seats for you and Mrs Spencer for the recitation. Dear old Gosselin is going to recite for us he is staying with us. I beg your pardon" this last remark was addressed to a compact crowd of ladies and gentlemen on the threshold of the largest reception−room, into which the lady of the house summarily elbowed her way.

"Follow me," she whispered, as Anne, bewildered among the lights and noise, tried to pick her way over the trailing skirts, and every one turned to stare as she passed "Here, Euphrosyne" perceiving one of her big bouncing daughters in the crowd "I want to introduce you to Miss Brown. Do keep that chair to the left for the Duchess of Orkney mind."

The spacious drawing−room was filled, as for a theatrical performance, with rows of chairs, wellnigh occupied already. Into the very first of these Mrs Argiropoulo led Anne and Mrs Spencer.

"Sit down," she whispered. "I do hope you'll enjoy yourself, Miss Brown. You'll hear Gosselin beautifully here. Oh dear, there's the dear Marchioness of Epsom; goodbye" and she whirled off her portly person.

"Goodness!" whispered Mrs Spencer, "old Argey has actually put us into the best places!"

Anne looked round. In front was a vacant space, with an open piano, and some chairs in a corner facing the company. All round and behind were chairs, and only a little gangway remained leading to the piano, next to where Mrs Argiropoulo had placed Anne. She had never seen such a crowd of magnificently and oddly dressed people in her life. Old ladies in velvet and diamonds, young ones in Worth toilets, or weirdly attired in lank robes and draperies, with garlands of lilies or turbans, or strings of sequins in their disorderly locks.

"I scarcely know any one here," said Mrs Spencer, looking round like a rapid little bird, "except one or two artists there are three or four R.A.'s horrible creatures, to think the public is so wickedly infatuate as to buy their pictures! Will Englishmen ever have any poetic feeling in art? Papa would rather die than be an Academician. There's little Thaddy O'Reilly horrid little jackanapes in the door. That old flat−faced man is Lord Durrant, the critic. All the frumpy people with the diamonds must be peeresses, I'm sure. There's Cosmo Chough just come in, they're all looking about for somebody or other. There's Browning talking to old Argiropoulo. Oh, here's little Thaddy! How do you do, Mr O'Reilly?"

Mr O'Reilly, a callow critic who united æstheticism with frivolity, bowed, and cast curious glances at Anne. For a moment she felt horribly ungrateful about the dress. She was sure that little O'Reilly was thinking that it was a night−gown.

"Who's the lion to−night?" asked Mrs Spencer.

Mr O'Reilly fixed his eyes on Anne, and answered languidly, with a faint smile

"Why, how can you ask, Mrs Spencer? Have we not all been invited expressly to meet Monsieur Gosselin and his charming friends, the ladies from the French comedy? No one comes to see lions or lionesses here, it is much too intellectual for that."

"Do tell me who ***is*** the lion of to−night," asked Mrs Spencer, laughing.

"Haven't I told you that there never ***are*** lions here? only an occasional man of genius, shipped over fresh, between petroleum tins and sewing−machines, from America, may stray in in top−boots and a red flannel shirt or it so happens that a beautiful woman is first noticed here or Victor Hugo walks in quite casually to tea or the ghost of Byron mistakes this for Westminster Abbey. Oh, no lions, never. Besides, here ***is*** Monsieur Gosselin, and here is Mademoiselle Meringue and Madame Gauffre just come in. You see, Miss Brown, how perfectly true it is that we

are to meet them. They are taking their place behind the piano. Yes, that is Madame Gauffre with the diamond butterfly. You perceive how we are to have the pleasure of making their acquaintance. Do you remark the vacant space round the piano? Miss Euphrosyne Argiropoulo and her sister are alone privileged to enter it, and the waiters also, to talk to Monsieur Gosselin and his fair comrades, and offer them refreshments. It is what I call a moral *cordon sanitaire*, separating these *artistes* from the highly respectable company all round."

"How horrible!" said Anne; "and do they pay them to be insulted like that?"

"Pay them? oh, never. The Argiropoulos are far too delicate for that. Monsieur Gosselin and mesdames of the comedy are intimate friends of the house: they have been dining here, and they are so kind as to recite a piece or two to Mrs Argiropoulo's guests. Let me see what's he going to recite ah 'Un Beignet.' That will be delicious."

Gosselin had come forward, his opera−hat in his hand, and begun to recite. It was a very delightful performance, and Anne enjoyed it greatly. Besides, it was a great relief to find that this entertainment was a performance, and not as she had dreaded, a series of introductions and conversations with celebrities. There was a dead silence during Gosselin's recitation, except near the door, where people kept pressing in and out. When he had ceased, Anne looked round. She was surprised at the aspect of many of the company. They had evidently not been listening at all, but looking about, straining to see some one in the front rows. In a minute the little gangway leading to the piano was crowded.

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Posthlethwaite, whom she had met several times before, was elbowing his unwieldy person a Japanese lily bobbing out of the button−hole of his ancestral dress−coat towards her. He had scarcely begun a description of a picture which he had just seen, representing "Aphrodite tripping with pink little feet across the dimpled sea sands," when Mrs Argiropoulo came up with several gentlemen about her, whom she began rapidly to introduce to Anne: two of them were famous painters; one a well−known sculptor; another was an aristocratic drawing−room novelist; the fifth a man of fashion. They all stood in the gangway around Anne's chair, while Posthlethwaite, who was not the person to be ousted, propped his elephantine person against the end of the piano, and leaning down his flabby flat−cheeked face and mop of tow, continued conversing with Miss Brown, regardless of the new−comers, who exchanged smiles as they listened to him with much more amused attention than they had listened to Gosselin. Anne was very bewildered; and as she answered the remarks of the party surrounding her, she became aware that the people behind were all looking in her direction looking, doubtless, at Gosselin and his ladies behind the piano, or at Posthlethwaite. For a moment Anne turned round, wondering whether she should see Hamlin. But instead of Hamlin, her eyes met a face as familiar as his a dark, rather snub face, with bushy black beard and hair, which emerged high above the heads of a knot of literary and political celebrities. She started imperceptibly, but turned away, and looked towards the piano, where Madame Gauffre had begun to recite, her plump little black figure standing out against the moonlight flooding through the window, in strange contrast to the yellow light of the room, in which dimly loomed the tops of trees and the towers of Westminster. Could it be her cousin Dick? Anne rarely mistook people's faces, and least of all was it possible for her to mistake Richard Brown's, though she had not seen him since that morning in Florence. But what should Richard be doing here, in this fashionable party? It was evidently a mere accidental resemblance, but it brought up a painful train of thought. Anne had once or twice written to her cousin and guardian from school, in a formal cold way, and he had let her know that he had become a partner in the military foundry, and had changed his address. She had got a vague idea that he was now rich. But she had not yet let him know of her arrival in England, and she felt ungrateful and rather ashamed, for, after all, he had always wished her well, and had been her playfellow. If he should have thought that she was ashamed of him? Heaven knows that was not her feeling, but she felt against Richard Brown a vague, instinctive aversion, as to something insulting and degrading to herself. She determined, however, to write to him the very next day.

With a shrill exclamation and a pert curtsy, Madame Gauffre, who was reciting the part of a schoolgirl of fifteen, suddenly came to an end.

"How do you do, Annie?" said a voice behind her.

She turned round. It was Richard Brown.

"I saw you as soon as I came in," he said, calmly pushing aside the astonished Posthlethwaite, "but I have only now been able to make my way here. How do you like Madame Gauffre? don't you think she's delightful? or rather, I ought to ask, how do you like London?"

The voice was always that same deep one, which, when lowered to a whisper, had something curiously hot and passionate about it; but the accent and the easy worldly manner seemed as if they could not belong to Richard Brown.

"Who the deuce is that fellow?" asked Posthlethwaite angrily of Mrs Spencer.

"***I*** don't know I've never seen him. Do you know, Mr O'Reilly, who that big black man is, that has just come up to Miss Brown. Not one of ***our*** set, that's certain."

"Oh Lord, no!" answered the little journalist. "You don't read newspapers in your set, do you?"

"We always read the 'Athenæum,'" answered Mrs Spencer, seriously.

"Newspapers are Cimmerian inventions," said Posthlethwaite. "I'm a republican, red, incarnadine, a *démocrate* for Robespierre; but I never take up a paper, except to see which of my friends have left town."

Thaddy O'Reilly laughed. "Oh, well, you won't find Education Brown in the 'Athenæum,' Mrs Spencer a mere barbarian, Goth, Philistine, but well known in Philistia. He's a tremendous Radical, goes in for disestablishment, secular teaching; an awful fellow for obligatory education and paupers; he'll be in Parliament some day soon, for he's backed by all the black trade."

"Surely it is very easy to feed paupers, as people used to, don't you know, in Chaucer?" said Mrs Spencer, simply and seriously.

Young O'Reilly went into an inaudible but convulsive giggle.

"Anyhow, that's Brown 'Peace by Expensive Warfare Brown' we call him. Look at him; he's a force in his world, as your father is in yours."

"I wish he'd keep in his own coal−cinders," retorted Posthlethwaite. "What business has he to talk to "

"By Jove!" exclaimed O'Reilly, "it never struck me, Anne Brown Richard Brown, perhaps they're relations!"

"What do you think of her?" whispered Mrs Argiropoulo to the little knot of artists whom she had assembled.

Posthlethwaite, as usual, answered for the company.

"'Tis the body of a goddess; we must give it the soul of a woman."

"That's Hamlin's look−out," answered Paints, the R.A.

"Why, what's become of him?" they all asked. "Surely he was to be here."

"Oh, be sure he's lurking around here," answered O'Reilly; "of course he keeps in the background enjoys his triumph from afar. You don't sit in front of your own picture on the first Academy day, do you, Paints?"

"Mr Posthlethwaite, will you take Miss Brown in to supper?" cried Mrs Argiropoulo, who was working up and down the crowd.

Richard Brown had already given Anne his arm.

"That can't be," cried Mrs Argiropoulo. "Mr Posthlethwaite ***must*** take you in, dear. Dear Mr Brown, will you take in my daughter?"

"Good−bye, Annie," whispered Richard Brown. "I will come and see you to−morrow." And he let his cousin be borne away in triumph by Posthlethwaite.

"Of course, Mr Posthlethwaite must take in Miss Brown," explained Mrs Argiropoulo to Mrs Spencer; "he's the most conspicuous man, after all; and, as it were, it stamps her at once. By the way, two R.A.'s, Paints and Smeers, have already said that they would like to paint her."

"Walter Hamlin will never let her be painted by an R.A.," answered Mrs Spencer, fiercely; "and Annie has far too much artistic feeling to endure such a thing. Why, Mr Bones has been drawing her for the last week, and papa made a crayon of her."

As Anne passed through the crowd on Posthlethwaite's arm every one turned to look at her. And then it suddenly flashed upon her that she was the person people had been staring at, ***she*** was the lion of the evening she, the servant whom the great poet−painter had adopted. Every one was looking at her; she felt horribly alone, numb, unreal.

At that moment Hamlin came up.

"Have you amused yourself?" he asked. "Why, what's the matter? do you feel ill?"

"Only very tired. Oh, why didn't you turn up before?" Anne's voice was so wretched and supplicating that Hamlin felt quite terrified.

"Where's Mrs Spencer?" he asked. "It must be that hot room. Edith, do take Miss Brown home, she looks so awfully tired."

"Permit me to take you down−stairs," said the mellifluous fat voice of Posthlethwaite.

"I will take Miss Brown down myself, if you please, Posthlethwaite;" and Hamlin pushed the prince of æsthetes roughly aside.

"Why did you not show yourself the whole evening?" asked Anne feebly, while he was helping her on with her cloak.

"Why because I thought I had no right to monopolise you always," answered Hamlin in a whisper.

When the two women were alone in the brougham, Anne could stand it no longer; and leaning her head in the corner, she began to cry.

"Why, what's the matter, Annie?" cried Mrs Spencer, drawing her close to her. "What's the matter, my dear girl?"

"Nothing nothing," answered Anne, wiping her eyes. "I suppose it is because I am so worn−out so "

"It's that vile, ostentatious party," replied the little woman, half in consolation, half in pride "mere stupid crushes no real society, as ***we*** have it. And I do think it ***is*** so disgusting of Mrs Argiropoulo to make all the people stare at you as if you were a burlesque actress. Oh, I know that set of lion−hunting, purse−proud, would−be artistic people. They would have your photograph in all the shop−windows at once, and Royal Highnesses to meet you. Papa and I always wonder that Walter hasn't cut all those horrid sycophants before. You know that it's only artists and poets of our school who will ever appreciate you really, although the others would hawk you about as a sort of professional beauty."

CHAPTER VI.

THE sudden discovery that she was the standard beauty of the most prominent artistic set, and accepted as such by the rest of society, would have greatly disturbed almost any woman. But Anne Brown's nature was too completely homogeneous too completely without the innumerable strata, and abysses, and peaks, and winding ways of modern women's characters for her to experience any of the mixed feelings of pride, and disgust, and humiliation, and general uncomfortablehess which would have been the lot of a more complex nature. The atoms of her character were not easily shaken into new patterns: it was coherent, and, like most coherent things, difficult to upset, slow to move, and quick to settle down.

After the first shock of surprise, she resigned herself, without doubts, or diffidence, or elation, to her new place. That she was more beautiful than other women had indeed never occurred to her before; but once that it had been proved to her she accepted it as a fact, as she had accepted as a fact the still stranger news that Hamlin had singled her out to change her life and love her. She did not take it at all as a merit or any other exciting thing in herself: the only effect which it had upon her was to strengthen a curious feeling, constitutional in her, and resulting probably from the very coherence and weightiness of her character, that she was fated to be or do something different from other women a sort of sense of tragic passiveness, which always formed the background of her happiness. Moreover, the discovery which she had made at Mrs Argiropoulo's somehow made Anne's position more intelligible and simple to herself. She had heard of other men who had educated and married girls of the lower orders on account of their beauty. Hamlin's behaviour was now no longer a mystery to her; and the absence of mystery served merely, to Anne's quite unromantic, practically passionate, half−southern temper, to make Hamlin's nobleness and goodness more obvious to her. She had the curious Italian capacity for feeling an ideal passion a passion which was merely a sublimated form of friendship and admiration for a real personality; and her instinctive desire was merely to get nearer that real personality. But much as she tried, the reality of Hamlin seemed to escape and baffle her: he was a complex man, and she a homogeneous woman; and as she could not see Hamlin well in detail, she loved him in the very simple and broad outlines which she was able to comprehend.

Now that she had settled down in æsthetic society, and found her place, and got to understand the main points of things, she was quite ideally happy. Her life was very full, and was surrounded by a flood of love, on her side or on Hamlin's? She scarcely knew; but she knew that she was happy. By this time the round of sight−seeing, play−going, excursions, and introductions, was over; her life had subsided into the normal. Its object, she felt, as one feels a wholesome and agreeable desire for food or sleep, was to make herself as worthy as possible of Hamlin, or rather to let him find in her the best possible bargain. She worked very hard at all the things which the school had left incomplete, at what, living in that æsthetic society, seemed to her the solid requisites of life. She read history and biography and poetry, with the determination with which other girls, anticipating marriage, might

study manuals of domestic economy; and she worked at developing her taste in art and music as others might have practised cooking or dressmaking; for these were the things which would be requisite in Hamlin's spiritual household. The people around her, the men and women of Hamlin's set, seemed to her as necessary, as inevitable, as normal as the trees and houses all round. Some of them she liked, and some she disliked; but their ideas, though sometimes absurd caricatures, and their tempers, though often intolerable, seemed to Anne quite natural and proper in the main, though rendered ridiculous or disagreeable in individuals. Indeed she got rather to believe in imperfect individuals, being thus constantly either made cross by the touchiness, the morbidness, the disgusting fleshliness, the intolerance of the æsthetes around her, or made to laugh by their affectations, their vanity, their inconsistency, their grotesque manias of wickedness and mysticism while unable to judge or condemn the general, intellectual, and moral condition of which these individual excrescences were the result.

Some of the people were distinctly repulsive, or distinctly boring, or distinctly annoying to her; others, like Mrs Spencer and her father and mother and sisters, decidedly lovable; others, like little Chough, decidedly amusing and amiable: and she took them as they came, but with the indifference of con− centrated feeling; for what did it matter whether she cared for them, or they cared for her, as long as she was doing her best to deserve Hamlin?

Meanwhile Anne Brown read quantities of medieval and Elizabethan literature; went with Hamlin to see pictures and hear music; studied Dante and Shakespeare the algebra and arithmetic, so to speak, of the æsthetic set and even began, secretly, to work at a Greek grammar. Twice a−week Cosmo Chough came to practise her accompaniments with her; and twice a−week also, of an evening, friends dropped in at the house at Hammersmith, when Mrs Macgregor would leave her nephew and niece, as she called her, to entertain the guests. On other evenings Anne would usually go to the house of one of the set, where literature and art, and the faults of friends, and the wrong−headedness of the public, were largely discussed; music was made, young long−haired Germans on the loose performing; and poets, especially the inexhaustible Chough, would recite their compositions, perched on the arms of sofas, or stretched on the hearth−rug; while the ladies went to sleep, or pretended to do so, over the descriptions of the kisses of cruel, blossom−mouthed women, who sucked out their lovers' hearts, bit their lips, and strewed their apartments with coral−like drops of blood. Most of these poets, as Anne speedily discovered, were young men of harmless lives, and altogether unacquainted with the beautiful, baleful ladies they represented as sucking at their vitals; and none was more utterly harmless than Cosmo Chough. Instead of the terrible Faustinas, Messalinas, and Lucretia Borgias to whom his poems were addressed, the poor little man had in his miserable home in the north of London a wife older than himself, often bedridden and always half crazy, who turned the house in a sort of disorderly litter, neglected her children, and vented on her husband the most jealous and perverse temper; but the victim of Venus, as he styled himself, nursed her with absolute devotion, denied himself every gratification to allow her a servant and send his children to school, and made all new−comers believe that Mrs Cosmo Chough was the most angelic invalid that the world had ever seen. People in the set had got accustomed to this fact, and treated Chough merely as an amusing little caricature of genius; but when Anne understood the real state of the case, she was deeply touched, and possessed with a violent desire to help the little man. He could not, indeed, restrain his habit of alluding in pompous language to Phryne, Pasiphaë, La Belle Heaulmière, Madame du Barry, and all the most celebrated improprieties of all times and nations; nor from discussing the most striking literary obscenities, from Petronius to Walt Whitman. But although at first surprised (as every one was surprised and indeed shocked) by Anne's unblushing and quietly resolute "I think you had better leave that subject alone, Mr Chough" he became quite devoted to Anne. When he gave a set of lectures, in Mrs Spencer's house, on what was nominally Elizabethan drama, but virtually the unmentionable play of Ford, and the ladies dropped off one by one and merely laughed at poor Cosmo's eccentricities, Anne had the courage to sit out the performance, and to tell Chough openly that he ought to be ashamed of himself for holding forth on such subjects a proceeding which made Hamlin's friends blame Miss Brown for want of womanly feeling and prudishness alike; and which put Hamlin just a little out of temper, until she answered his unspoken censure by remarking, with a sort of Italian bluntness and seriousness, that a woman of her age had no business not to understand the real meaning of such things, and understanding them, not to let the poets know that she would not tolerate them.

"You see, it enters into their artistic effects," explained Mrs Spencer. "I don't like such things personally, but of course everything is legitimate in art."

"They may be legitimate in art," answered Anne, sceptically, "but they shan't be legitimate in my presence."

To return to Chough. Anne gradually became the confidant of the domestic difficulties, though not of the domestic shame, of the little poet; and to every one's great astonishment, she obtained Hamlin's permission to have one of Chough's little girls at Hammersmith every Saturday till Monday, and tried to instil into the miserable puny imps some notion of how to behave and how to amuse themselves.

"You are not going to take that child out in the carriage with you, surely?" asked Hamlin, the first Sunday that Maggy Chough spent at Hammersmith.

"Of course I am," answered Anne. "She's the daughter of your most intimate friend; surely you can't grudge the poor little thing some amusement. And I want you to go with us to the Zoo, Mr Hamlin. I'm sure it's much more fascinating than the Grosvenor or the Elgin rooms."

Hamlin smiled; and next day made a crayon drawing of Anne, one of the dozens in his studio, with Chough's child; but he managed to make Anne look mournfully mysterious, and the child haggard and wild, so that people thought it represented Medea and one of the children of Jason.

So far Anne's acquaintance were entirely limited to the æsthetic set; but there were two exceptions. One was a couple of sisters, Mary and Marjory Leigh, who existed as it were on the borderland Mary Leigh being a sort of amateur painter with strong literary proclivities; the other was Richard Brown, who, after the meeting at Mrs Argiropoulo's, called at Hammersmith, was politely received by Hamlin, with whom he appeared quite reconciled, and talked on a variety of indifferent subjects, as if Anne Brown had never been his ward. Hamlin had apparently never appeared to him in the light of a slave−buyer and seducer, and all parties had apparently never been in any save their present position. Anne asked her cousin to one or two of their evenings: he came, seemed to know one or two people slightly, and although professing profound ignorance of art, managed to interest one or two of the æsthetic brotherhood by developing his views on the necessity of extending artistic training to the lower classes.

"He isn't at all a stupid man, that cousin of yours," remarked little Mrs Spencer; "and I do think he is ***so*** right in wishing to give poor people a taste of beauty."

"I'm sure ***we*** are most of us poor people, and don't always get a taste of anything else, Edith," cried her father, the veteran painter in tempera, who was a fearful punster.

"Oh papa, you know what I mean; and I'm sure art will gain ever so much. It's only what Mr Ruskin has said over and over again, and Mr Morris is always talking about."

"Any one is free to give the lower classes that taste of beauty, as long as ***I*** am not required to see or speak to the noble workmen," said Hamlin. "I hate all that democratic bosh."

"Oh, I know, Watty; your ancestors kept negroes, and you would like to have negroes yourself," said Mrs Spencer, hotly.

"Heaven forbid! I only ask to be left alone, my dear Edith, especially by reformers."

At any rate, Richard Brown was permitted to show himself sometimes in æsthetic company. But Richard Brown did not avail himself much of the condescending permission to improve his mind; and neither at her own house

(for people always spoke of Miss Brown's house now) nor at the houses of any of her friends would Anne have had much opportunity of seeing her cousin, had he not, by a curious chance, been a frequent visitor at the house of the Leigh girls.

Mary Leigh was, as already said, a demi−semi−æsthete; she had studied art in an irregular, Irish sort of way, and she had a literary, romantic kind of imagination, which fitted her rather for an illustrator than a painter. She felt the incompleteness of her own endowment, in a gentle, half−humorous, half−sad way; and the incompleteness of her own life for her ideal of happiness was to travel about, to live in Italy, and this she had cheerfully sacrificed to please her sister, whose only interests in life were school boards, and depauperisation, and (it must be admitted) a mild amount of flirtation with young men of scientific and humanitarian tendencies. Between the sisters there was perfect love, but not perfect understanding; and Mary Leigh, who felt a little lonely, a little shut into herself by her younger sister, who was at once a philosopher and a baby in her eyes, vented her imaginative and artistic cravings in a passionate admiration for Hamlin's strange and beautiful ward or *fiancée*, a kind of intellectual fervour which Anne was as remarkable for inspiring as she seemed unable to inspire either ordinary liking or ordinary love: and as Mary Leigh likewise adored Hamlin, and Hamlin in return thought Mary Leigh a nice sort of girl, Anne Brown did what visiting and sight−seeing and shopping was left to her almost always in Mary Leigh's company. Now, if Anne was the idol of the æsthetic Mary, the humanitarian and practical younger sister, who, with the cut−and−dry decision of a philosopher of twenty−two, looked upon æsthetics and æsthetes as somewhat pestilent in nature, had her idol also in a very different person, and this was no other than Richard Brown, to be whose lieutenant in some of his philanthropical and educational schemes was Marjory's highest ambition. Richard Brown had, ever since meeting his cousin at Mrs Argiropoulo's in the character of an artistic beauty, made up his mind that Anne was no concern of his, and was luckily disposed of in the æsthetic set; and for some time he almost took a pleasure in making her understand, whenever he met her at the Leighs' house in Chelsea, that he did not in the least expect ***her*** to take an interest, or pretend to take an interest, in the plans which he discussed with Marjory Leigh. Anne on the other hand, imbued with Hamlin's and Chough's theory that all attempts at improving the world result merely in failure, and that the only wise occupation of a noble mind is to make for itself a paradise of beautiful thoughts and forms and emotions, was extremely sceptical of her cousin's and Marjory's schemes, and once or twice declared her disbelief with perfect openness.

Richard Brown was at first annoyed, then amused, then indignant; and then, seeing how completely Anne's ideas were borrowed from her set, and also how completely unsuitable they were to her downright, serious, and practical nature, he determined, not without vanity playing a part as well as conviction, to "let a little light," as he expressed it, into her mind.

There had been recently founded, by some friends of his, a kind of club where girls of the dressmaker's apprentice and shopwomen class might spend their leisure moments in reading and meeting each other; which club, besides a library and reading−room, offered to its members a certain number of classes or sets of lectures on various subjects, delivered at a nominal price, after work hours.

The lecturers or teachers were nearly all young ladies: Marjory Leigh had for some time lectured on sanitary arrangements (this being her especial hobby), and Mary Leigh was going to set up a drawing−class.

Anne Brown, practical by nature and æsthetically sceptical by training, had no very great belief in the famous club; she had been told so often that mankind is too stupid and degraded to be helped, that she had almost got to believe it. But she let herself be taken one evening to a lecture, at what she called Marjory's college. The lecture was just beginning as they entered the little, white−washed, bare room up innumerable stairs. Four or five young women, decently dressed, were seated at desks, copy−books and ink−stands before them; and a beautiful little girl, who had been pointed out to Anne in æsthetic circles as a rising poetess, was seated opposite them at the end of a table. The Leighs and Anne sat down silently near the door, and the lecture began. It was on modern history. The pupils listened with the greatest attention, their pens flying on their copy−books. The lecturer, a small, graceful, extremely frail little creature, began in a somewhat tremulous voice; then gradually, as she got more

excited, became more voluble, excited, and absolutely eloquent.

"She is too delicate for such work," whispered Marjory, "but she will do it."

Anne listened. But she did not follow the lecturer's argument very closely. She thought what these girls were, what the drudgery of their work, the temptations of their leisure, the hopeless narrowness of their horizon; and she thought also, the thought throbbing on almost like dull pain, what it would have been for her, when she also was alone in the world when she had drudgery on the one hand and temptation on the other when her whole nature had been parched and withered for want of a few words that should speak of higher and nobler things, had she been permitted, once a−week, to come to such a place, to hear about such subjects, to be spoken to by such an earnest and enthusiastic and exquisite creature as this. At the end of the lecture the girls crowded shyly round the lecturer, some to beg her to explain a point, others to ask for books on the subject, all of them to thank with pathetic earnestness. Then they went away, and the Leigh girls came forward to the lecturer. From where she sat she could not see the new−comers; and she was astonished, and in a way awe−stricken, on seeing Anne Brown, the exotic beauty of whom she had heard so much, whose portrait she had seen in so many studios, and to whom she had been introduced almost in fear and trembling, for Anne had a kind of awe−inspiring fascination for imaginative people. Anne, on the other hand, was silent and depressed, and the little poetess must have made up her mind that this magnificent and sombre creature was as sullen and lethargic and haughty as one of Michelangelo's goddesses. But in reality Miss Brown could have laid her head on one of the desks and cried like a child.

When, the following day, Mary Leigh came to take her out for a walk, Anne looked as if she had received bad news, or as if she had bad news to communicate. She answered only in monosyllables; until, as they were looking in at a shop window, she suddenly turned to her companion.

"Do you think," she said hesitatingly, "that I might perhaps teach something at Marjory's college?"

"Teach!" exclaimed Mary Leigh in astonishment; "you teach! Why, what would you teach, Anne dear?"

Anne was silent. She sighed. "That's just what I have been thinking all the morning I fear but you see I ***do*** so want to teach something. You see, that little poet−girl gives up her time to it, and she was born a lady, and doesn't know can't know all the good she is doing. While I "

Mary Leigh squeezed her hand.

"We will ask your cousin," she said.

"Oh no, not Dick don't mention it to Dick," answered Anne; "he is sure to make difficulties and laugh at me he thinks me a useless thing."

"***You*** a useless thing!" replied the enthusiastic Irish girl looking at her companion. "Why, then then all the Titians in the gallery, and the Elgin marbles, and all Keats, and all Shelley, and Beethoven, and Mozart, must be useless also."

Anne sighed. "All those things didn't make themselves," she answered. "It's the artists who were useful and whom we have to thank."

The other Miss Leigh was immensely astonished, and, with her youthful intolerance, rather indignant at Anne's suggestion.

"I think," said Anne, hesitatingly, "that I could, with a little work, manage medieval literature at least medieval lyrics."

Marjory shook her head. "There's too much of that sort of thing already," she said. "Every one wants to teach literature. Where's the use of telling them about a parcel of Provençal and old French and German and Italian people, when they don't yet know the difference between Voltaire and Molière, and Goethe and Frau von Hillern?"

"That's true," Anne said sadly.

Marjory was rather sorry for her rough practicalness, but at the same time she had a blind impulse to harass an æsthete.

"Political economy is what we want most," she said; and, as the door opened and Richard Brown entered, she went on

"Isn't it true that political economy is what we want most at the college, Mr Brown?"

"Yes," answered Richard. "How are you, Miss Leigh? how are you, Annie? What about it?"

"Oh, only that your cousin wants to teach at the college, and I tell her that literature is no use, and that political economy is what we want."

"You want to teach, Annie?" cried Brown, and his face assumed that look of somewhat brutal contempt hidden under suavity of manner, which Anne hated so much. "You want to teach? How dull æsthetic society must be getting, to be sure!"

"I am not dull, Dick," answered Anne, sternly; "but it struck me that, having been a poor girl without education myself until" (and she looked her cousin reproachfully in the face) "Mr Hamlin had me taught I have an obligation to help other girls like what I was, greater than the obligation of people who have always been educated. I daresay there may be nothing that I ***can*** teach; but there is no reason to laugh at me."

"Laugh at you!" cried Brown. "Oh, not in the least! I was only smiling at the cool way in which you absolve those who are born in fortunate circumstances from the obligation which you yourself feel."

"I don't think that's quite true, Dick," answered Anne, simply. "You think it's absurd on my part, and I knew you would, because you think me frivolous and artistic."

"Well," said Brown, evidently surprised at her manner, and looking searchingly in her pale, strange−featured face, "what do you think you might teach?" his voice was much gentler.

"At present" Anne's voice sank, for she felt the uselessness of her offer "I can think only of medieval literature" (Brown smiled); "but perhaps, if there were something else, I might get it up."

"I'm sure there won't be a vacancy for anything except political economy," interrupted Marjory Leigh, impatiently. "I'm quite positive, from what the secretary told me, all the rest is glutted."

"I fear it is the case," mused Brown. "There has been a talk of teaching singing, in which case, perhaps "

"I don't sing well enough," said Anne, haughtily. Why was she always having her æstheticism thrust in her face?

"Besides," added her cousin, "it's extremely improbable."

They fell to talking of other things. As Brown was leaving, Anne stopped him.

"Tell me," she said, "what are the best books to begin learning political economy?"

Brown smiled. "Why? Do you want to teach it?"

"Since it is such an important thing," answered Anne, gravely, "I think I should like to learn it."

"It's not amusing, Annie."

"It can't be duller than Minnesingers and nothing is dull when one is learning it. Can't you tell me of some books?"

Brown looked at her with a puzzled expression. "I have written a primer of it myself," he said "I will send it you; and if you get through that, you will find at the end a list of text−books, some of which I can lend you to take into "

"Thank you, Dick. I shall be much obliged to you."

"You shall have it this evening. Goodbye, Annie, and *felici studj*, as you Italians say." He laughed, and went away.

"You'll find it tough work," remarked Marjory, shaking her short mane of hair out before the glass; "but, of course, a primer is never ***very*** difficult."

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN Mrs Macgregor had gone up−stairs to rest before dinner on their arrival at Wotton Hall, Hamlin took Miss Brown round the huge, deserted−looking house, which his grandfather had built on returning from Jamaica. It was like an Italian villa, with vaulted rooms, gilded and stuccoed, marble floors, and terraced windows; the furniture was all of the Napoleonic period; nothing could be more dignified or sadder.

When Hamlin had shown her the large drawing−rooms, the library, the room which had been the play−room when he was a child, he took Anne into the large Palladian hall, and showed her the innumerable portraits of ladies and gentlemen in armour, and ruffs, and bobwigs, and powder, hanging all round his ancestors ever since his family had left England in the civil wars.

Anne looked at them shyly. They were mostly indifferently painted and vapid affected, like all old portraits by mediocre painters; but it seemed to her that in most of these gentlemen, with peaked beards on their Vandyck lace, or horse−hair wigs, or carefully powdered hair tied back in silk bags, she could recognise a resemblance to the man by her side the same delicate, handsome features, the same fair, almost beardless complexion, the same gentle, melancholy, slightly ironical expression: and never did the real meaning of Hamlin's marriage with her

come clearer before her mind than when, in that silent hall, surrounded by all those portraits of his ancestors, she suddenly saw herself and him reflected in one of the long dim mirrors; she, so tall and strong, so powerful of bone and muscle, with her strange, half−southern, half−Jewish, and almost half−Ethiopian beauty, by the side of that slight, fair, pale, aristocratic man, with features sharp like those of a high−bred race−horse, nervous and wistful and dreamy, as if he were tired of his family having lasted so long.

"They all married and intermarried for nearly a century," said Hamlin, "that's why they're all so like each other. I often wonder why it didn't end in insanity you see it has ended in a poet at last. My mother was the first woman married by a Hamlin for eighty years who was not at least a second cousin, in those islands there were very few decent people, you see. Don't they all look dapper and respectable? It appears they were not. That man in the corselet was killed in a duel about another man's wife. That one in the middle, the boy in the grey dress with the powdered hair, Sir Thomas Hamlin, they used to call the bad Sir Thomas, because he amused himself practising pistol−shooting on black people, whom he had put all round his yard; he was a very fine gentleman, they say, and would go out only in the evening on account of his complexion. The one who looks like a woman, with the open shirt−collar and the long hair, was my great−uncle, Mordaunt Hamlin, who supposed himself to be a poet, somewhere in the first years of this century; he was an opium−eater, and did some horribly disgraceful things, I don't exactly know what, and was poisoned, they say, by some low woman, because she was tired of him. My father had his portrait removed; but I used to see it in the lumber−room when I was a child, and thought him very handsome and eery; and when I came of age, I had it brought down, because I think he's far better−looking and more interesting than any of the respectable ones. Then he was a poet also, you see, and Cosmo Chough pretends I'm like him. Do you think so, Miss Brown?"

"No," said Anne, laughing, as she looked at Hamlin, at that noble and delicate face, which seemed to her the noblest and most beautiful in the world; and yet, when she looked at Mordaunt Hamlin again, with his morbid woman's face and his effeminate bare throat, she could not help feeling a certain disgust at the thought that perhaps perhaps Hamlin ***was*** just a little like him.

"That's my mother," said Hamlin, pointing to a faded crayon of a beautiful, gentle, pathetic−looking woman.

"***That*** is like you," cried Anne, delighted. "That is very like you like your expression. I was wondering where you got your expression from among all your Jamaica ancestors."

"I'm glad you think so. She was a very beautiful woman, and very brave and noble, and not very happy, poor mamma."

"Did you know her?"

"Only till I was about twelve; she died young. That is grandpapa; and that is my uncle Arnold, he died young too in fact, drank himself to death. Don't you think he is like Mordaunt Hamlin? That's papa;" and Hamlin stopped before the full−length of a handsome effeminate man.

"You wouldn't think that he was a very violent man, would you?" he said.

"No," answered Anne, looking at that weak, worn, rather blear face, and thinking how her father, too, had been a drunkard; but how different had been the drunkenness of the poor overworked mechanic, so industrious and gentle and high−spirited when he was sober, from the sort of emasculating vice of Mordaunt and Arnold Hamlin, of Walter Hamlin's bad−faced father!

"It's very curious," pursued Hamlin, with a sort of psychological interest in his own family, "how that Mordaunt, who, after all, was no ancestor of mine, tries everywhere to perpetuate himself. There's unfortunately no portrait of my great−grandfather, or perhaps we might understand it; but perhaps it came from the mother. It's curious I

have never felt any inclination to drink I mean, however moderately; but I can't take any wine at all it makes me drunk at once."

"I never have seen you take any wine, by the way," said Anne.

"I tried opium once; but Chough made me give it up. It's sad to be denied any sort of unreal pleasures, don't you think? That's my brother and I when we were boys."

Anne stopped to look at the picture.

It was very well painted, though a trifle old−fashioned. The two boys were represented in shooting−jackets, with guns and dogs. The shorter, slighter, and paler boy was evidently Walter Hamlin; the other was more robust, boyish, and ordinary−looking.

"Your brother died when he was a child, did he not?"

"Oh no," answered Hamlin, quickly. "Poor Arnold was very fond of shooting I hated it; but papa had the picture painted on his account; he was the favourite at first, being younger."

It seemed to Anne that Hamlin was going to say something different from what he had said. What had become of Arnold Hamlin? Mrs Macgregor's allusions to him, who had evidently been her favourite nephew, always seemed to point to a melancholy end.

"It's curious," said Hamlin, after a moment. "Arnold looked so jolly and strong when he was a child; and yet, later, he got such a look of our grand−uncle Mordaunt."

"I think you have your grand−uncle on the brain," said Anne, trying to break through Hamlin's strange mood.

They left the hall, and went to the window of the large drawing−room, and looked out on the reddening beeches and the grass, permitted to grow high and thick, in the yellow sunlight.

"I shall sell this place most likely soon," said Hamlin; "I've already had some offers for it. It's too large, and pompous, and characterless for me. I should like a real old country−house, two or three centuries old, with flower−gardens and panelled rooms, not this plaster and stucco and romantic gardening. Besides, I hate this place have hated it ever since I was a child."

Anne did not answer.

"I hate this place," went on Hamlin, leaning on the window−sill by Anne's side, "and that is the reason why I have brought you here. Before saying farewell to it for good and all, I wish to save it from being a mere hateful recollection in my life. I wish to be able to think of it in connection with you;" and he looked up at Anne, who was leaning against the tall French window.

"I don't know," went on Hamlin, again looking out at the vaporous yellow sunset horizon "I don't know what are destined to be the relations between our lives. You have seen too little of the world as yet to be able to know yourself and me; and I am more and more decided to abide by my original plan of giving ourselves time to understand each other, and to understand whether we are made for one another. . . ."

He looked at Anne; she had turned an ashy−white as she listened; she had thought that Hamlin loved her, and now . . . He noticed it, and understood, but pretended not to understand; he enjoyed playing upon a living soul, all the more upon a soul like this one, slow to respond to his touch, with low and long−sustained vibrations, like those of

some deep−toned instrument.

"Don't take what I say in bad part," he went on, conscious to himself that he was speaking the truth, and at the same time that he was acting, telling it at a moment and in a manner which made it untruthful; "and don't think that I mean anything horrid against you or against myself, when I say that you don't yet know me, and will not know me, perhaps, for some time. You see me through your own nature, your own enthusiasms, your own aspirations; you think I am strong where I am weak, and pure where I am impure."

Anne shook her head.

"I don't think so."

Hamlin smiled sadly.

"But I do. It's very sad to think that one must lose so much that is worth most in life, all one's illusions, before one can approach the reality of even one's best friends, that even one's best friends can be seen as they really are only when we have got disillusioned and disappointed, is it not?"

Hamlin had often said things like these in the letters which he used to write to her, and had hinted, much more clearly, at weaknesses and basenesses which she would some day recognise in him.

It could not occur to Anne, whose character was so completely of a piece, that there was any untruthfulness in this mode of speaking, any more than she could believe that Hamlin could be correct in thus speaking of himself. The sort of shimmer, as of the two tints in a shot stuff, of reality and unreality, of genuine and affected feeling, of moods which came spontaneously and of other moods, noticed, treasured up, reproduced in himself, which existed in Hamlin, would be perfectly unintelligible to Anne.

"I daresay," she answered gravely, "that you have faults, in which, at present, I cannot believe; but those faults are not the ones which you imagine. When a man knows himself to have a fault, he ceases to have it he cures it."

A sensation of a new experience passed through Hamlin's mind as Anne said this: it seemed so strange, pathetic, grand, to him who knew himself to be for ever mixing up the unrealities of his art with the realities of his life, to be continually experimenting upon himself the moods of his poetry that any one should seriously think thus, should not know that when a man recognises in himself a fault, he may, so far from eradicating, cherish it stealthily.

"You have asked me not to be angry with you for telling me that I am inexperienced and cannot yet know my own mind," said Anne; "don't be angry and don't laugh at me if I tell you that I think you don't always know yours. I have often observed how ima− ginative you are about yourself, how apt to fancy morbid things; I suppose it is because poets are always turned inwards, and because you have not perhaps been very happy sometimes, and because" and she looked at him half laughing, half with the tears in her eyes "you are very good. I daresay I don't know you thoroughly yet, but I know you I know I know you better sometimes than you do; because you fancy all sorts of horrid mysterious flaws in your character wherever there is a little inequality; and I know how good and noble you are, and how you are always thinking that you must be wicked."

Hamlin did not answer. He was deeply touched, touched all the more because he knew how little she guessed at the self−conscious unreality of so much of him.

"You are very comforting," he said sadly, then went on more cheerfully: "well, what I wanted to say, when we began to discuss which of us knew the other better, is this, that whatever we may be destined to be to one another in future and this I dare not decide even in surmise you will always have been to me, in these years that I have

known you, in the past and present, an infinite source of happiness and good; a something which to have possessed, as I possess your friendship, will always remain, even should all the reality come to an end and only the recollection remain, the most precious thing in my life." He had taken her hand, and playing with her strong shapely fingers, so much stronger and less delicate, though not less shapely than his own, looked with a kind of solemnity into her face. Anne could not answer, for if she did, she knew she must cry; she felt the tears, as it were, all through her nature; she seemed to see, she knew not why, but as a solemn certainty, that things could never go any further, that Hamlin was prophesying the inevitable future: and yet, in the midst of this quite inexplicable, unreasonable sense of loss and resignation, there was a deep happiness which she had never before felt, the happiness of the present; a something new to Anne, though all other lovers have felt the happiness of possession of one another, even at the moment of loss.

"It is getting chilly," said Hamlin, and shut the window. "You look very pale, Miss Brown; had you not better put on some warmer dress this evening?"

His voice seemed like the curtain dropping after a scene, or the chord at the end of a duet. It was a return to reality and prose.

"Perhaps I had better, and I ought to go and see after your aunt; good−bye for the present."

Hamlin strolled out into the terrace, and lit a cigarette; the past and present, his real and unreal self, Anne, his brother and father, his great−uncle Mordaunt all went cloudily through his brain. He was very happy. Love to him was not what it was to other men, not what he had tried it himself in former years. It was romance, but romance not of ladders and hairbreadth escapes, but of psychical conditions, of spiritual sensations. He had written fleshly poetry and passionate poetry, but no one could be less fleshly or less passionate than Hamlin: the 'Vita Nuova' if it could be made modern, and the parts altered and reversed unreal reality of love, had been his ideal, and he had got it.

They had many conversations like this one. Hamlin never so much as kissed Anne's hand, never told her that he loved her, spoke merely of himself, of her, of the future and the past, of what she would one day know, of what he would one day feel; and Anne listened seriously, trying to cure him of his despondency and morbidness, trying to persuade him of his own worth and of her clear−sightedness, while never a suspicion crossed her simple stern mind that all this earnest talk, which was so tragic and still so delightful, was the thing which she scornfully connected with whispers and kisses and nonsense, in one word, love−making.

CHAPTER II.

THEY remained about a fortnight completely solitary in the large house. Hamlin was finishing a poem and correcting the proofs of his next volume. Anne was continuing her usual literary studies, but now with the addition of some books and pamphlets on political economy, which had been incredulously lent her by Richard Brown. The two young people had never seen so much of one another, and they were, Hamlin in his dreamy manner, Anne in her serious, practical way, very happy. Mrs Macgregor went on reading her old−fashioned freethinking books, and giving out cynical remarks, which her amiable and utterly gullible character deprived of all weight. She was the elder and considerably older sister of Hamlin's mother, and had lived in the house for many years as a widow. She had been twice married, each time for love, and each time to men who, if one might trust her nephew, had been immediately reduced by her into the most devoted and timid slaves; yet she always spoke of marriage as if every misfortune of her existence was due to it. Imbued with the pseudo−scientific and somewhat anti−social philosophy of early deism (though herself a rigid stickler for decorum), Mrs Macgregor had

a way of talking of love and marriage which for some time had made poor Anne profoundly miserable: men and women, averred the old lady, were, whatever they might pretend to the contrary, entirely at the mercy of their animal passions, to suppose that any one successfully resisted them was sheer folly; marry people must, but marriage was the most unfortunate of all necessities, the beginning of all unhappiness, the end of all independence, self−respect, and pleasure in life; it was the long waking up from a dis− graceful delusion; yet this disgraceful delusion, this drunken condition called love, was (always according to Mrs Macgregor) the one beautiful and poetical thing in the world.

"I don't believe that all people are like that, Aunt Claudia," Anne would often exclaim indignantly. "I don't believe that all people marry from unworthy passion, just to wake up and find its unworthiness. I am sure that if love were such a vile thing, and marriage such a mistake, every man or woman with any self−respect and self−restraint would refuse both."

"Oh, my dear child," Mrs Macgregor would answer with a smile, "wait till you are a little older and see what a disgusting thing life is."

"If it is," answered Anne, feeling quite nauseated and terrified, and at the same time resolute in herself "if it is, Aunt Claudia, it is because men and women are mostly such wretched, weak, silly, base, puling creatures."

Then, when she saw Hamlin, and thought of the noble way in which he had acted towards her, of the calm and clear love and gratitude which she felt towards him, when she thought of the things which they talked about together, of the desire to become worthier with which his love had inspired her, of the greater trust in his own worthiness which she hoped her love was instilling into him, nay, when she looked at that thoughtful, delicate, almost diaphanous face of his, Anne's anger towards the old lady would turn into mere pity; she would merely, in her own certainty of worthiness, smile at what she now considered as the mere empty talk of a disgusting school of thought, or, at best, as the lamentable generalisations from a horribly exceptional family, such as she understood, vaguely, that of Hamlin's father to have been. And, for the rest, Anne believed that though people were very ridiculous, and affected, and mean in little matters (she was thinking of the Spencers, and the Saunders, and so many other of her æsthetic friends), and although they might also, like Cosmo Chough, make the mistake of thinking indecent things interesting and dramatic, the vast majority of mankind and womankind was really very pure, and generous, and loving at bottom. So, after a time, she listened to Mrs Macgregor's remarks with only a little habitual and instinctive annoyance, but without any kind of serious belief in them. And when Aunt Claudia would sometimes allude to the bad lives which had been led in this particular house to the vices (taking them quite as ordinary matters) of Hamlin's grandfather and father and uncles, of the neglect and violence which her sister, Hamlin's mother, had suffered from, hinting that, if one only knew, the self−same things were happening in every other family on earth, whenever there came any such allusions, Anne would carefully, as it were, close up these loopholes into a past, in which she scarcely believed and from which she shrank: the world seemed to her as good, and healthy, and strong, and easy to understand as herself. But while she did thus, Anne was so gentle and sympathising to Mrs Macgregor, that the old lady was never hurt by her contradictions; indeed she would sometimes say that, were she not persuaded that no law of nature can have any real exceptions, she would almost believe that Anne was quite different from any other woman that ever was.

It seemed somehow, here all alone in this ancestral home of Hamlin's, as if the fate which Hamlin had refused to forestall was working itself happily out; and as if, tacitly, the poet−painter and the girl whom he had educated were becoming affianced to each other. None of the outward ceremony was broken through; he was always Mr Hamlin, and she Miss Brown, and there was never an allusion permitted to any more intimate relations. But it seemed perfectly natural that he and she should go walks together; that Aunt Claudia should leave them alone at breakfast and luncheon; and that, when the old lady had retired to her room, they should remain, with brotherly and sisterly ease, though not brotherly and sisterly free−and−easiness, talking together of an evening. And as they talked, their plans seemed constantly to merge; that they should be separated never occurred to either (except when Hamlin was in one of his tragic moods), although not a word passed to settle their future together. The long

courtship, the long enjoyment of a ceremonious and unfettered love, was what Hamlin had wished for, and what he had; to a fixed future, a family and family affections, he was not the man to look forward; it would have to come, and he did not feel any dislike for it, but he gave it no thought. As to Anne, she had never made up her mind that she had a right to be Hamlin's wife; to have thought so for one moment would have seemed to her grasping ingratitude; and she was too happy in the present to think about the future. The thing to be thought of was to become worthy of him, that was all.

CHAPTER III.

BY the middle of the summer a perfect colony from æsthetic London had settled itself, to the amazed terror of the vicar and his parishioners, in Wotton Hall and the inn of the adjacent village. The Spencers came, with a perfect shipload of babies, and accompanied by Mrs Spencer's father and mother; Cosmo Chough came, bringing scarcely any luggage except MS. poems and old music; Thaddy O'Reilly came, and half−a−dozen young poets and painters, to name whom would be perfectly superfluous, and who were all the humble worshippers of Walter Hamlin. All these people had pictures to paint, poems to compose, articles to write; but the exciting question for the whole household was the approaching publication of Hamlin's new book.

Hamlin's acquaintance with Anne Brown had not been without a decided influence on his art. He had written a number of sonnets about her ever since the moment of their first meeting, recording various moods, real and fictitious, in connection with her, and of which he had sent or read her the greater number. Perhaps he would have written much the same sort of thing about any other woman; but Anne had influenced him at once more directly and more indirectly. The æsthetic school of poetry, of which Hamlin and Chough were the most brilliant exponents of the younger generation, was evidently running to seed. It was beginning to be obvious, to every one who was not an æsthete, that the reign of the mysterious evil passions, of the half−antique, half−medieval ladies of saturnine beauty and bloodthirsty voluptuousness of the demigods and heroes treated like the figures in a piece of tapestry, must be coming to a close; and that a return to nature must be preparing. Anne had felt it, and had vaguely determined that the man who was to revolutionise poetry was Hamlin. Indeed, who else could it be? The elder poets were safe in their ruts; the majority of the younger ones who had already come forward were mere imitators and caricaturists, not excepting the great Chough himself. Hamlin alone was a man of genius; he alone was capable of turning over a new leaf; and one or two new departures, attempts at a new way of describing things, if not actually an attempt at describing new things, persuaded Anne that the change was beginning. She did not like telling him that she perceived it coming; for she thought that Hamlin might, did he perceive it, consider it as an apostasy from his original school, and draw back. But she encouraged him by showing a marked preference for the pieces which savoured of this new style; and she even suggested to him to write a tale, in which he should substitute, for the conventional background copied by æsthetic poetry from the borders of missals, the pictures of old masters and of their French gods, Gautier and Baudelaire, the scenery of his own home, the wide commons, the beech−woods on the downs, the solemn horizons of the fenny country which spread from Wotton to the sea. He had written it, and read it to her during that fortnight of solitude; and Anne's heart had beat at the thought of the change which was to be wrought by Hamlin's new book of the unknown youths hitherto fumbling vainly for a new style, who were to recognise in Hamlin the leader of a new school, the prophet of a new art. When the colony of London æsthetes arrived at Wotton, the new poem was solemnly read to them. They were all seated in the old−fashioned library, the rows and rows of old novels and books of standard literature, the busts of ancient philosophers looking down upon them, a quaint little assembly of ladies in peacock−blue and dull sage and Japanese dragoned and medieval brocaded gowns, with slashed sleeves and limp tails of men got up to look like Frenchmen or Germans, or Renaissance creatures, in wondrous velvet− eens, colonred almost like the bindings of their own books. They listened with considerable attention, and obvious impatience to interrupt. The first who did so was Mrs Spencer.

"Why, Walter!" she exclaimed indignantly, "what possesses you? are you crazy? Why, you are going in for realism; do you know that?"

"I don't see any particular realism, Edith," answered Hamlin, testily.

"Come, now, it isn't Zola, my dear," said her father, a good−natured man, who never carried his belief in himself to the length which it was carried to by his family.

"No, it isn't Zola," cried Miss Spencer; "but it's worse than Zola. . . ."

("It's just the decentest thing I've heard for many a long year," murmured the old painter.)

"It's worse than Zola, because it's poetry and not prose, because it's English poetry, because it's poetry by Walter Hamlin, who has hitherto been an apostle of beauty, and is now basely turning apostate and going over to ugliness."

There was a slight laugh at Mrs Spencer's vehemence, in which Hamlin alone did not join.

"I don't think there's anything actually ugly in it," put in Chough, blandly. "Hamlin could never write anything ugly. But it is certain that there's a want of idealism in it, a want of that exotic perfume which constitutes the essence of poetry. I think it's an unfortunately chosen subject. . . ."

"I think it' s perfectly disgusting," gobbled out Dennistoun, the little rickety poet, who had to be carried up and down stairs, and who wrote, while slowly sinking inch by inch into the grave, about carrying off lovely girls, and throttling them in the fierceness of his love. "Did you notice about the heroine washing the children? I call that beastly, beastly. And then, I don't know how any man can write a poem about people who are in love and get married."

This seemed an unanswerable piece of criticism. Anne alone leaned across the table; she was very indignant. "I think," she said, "that there is much more poetry in people who love each other respectably, and respectably get married, than in all the nasty situations which modern poets write about."

Cosmo Chough looked at Dennistoun, and Dennistoun looked at Mrs Spencer's father.

"My dear young lady," cried the old painter in his broad Scotch, "d'ye ever know any of these gentlemen write a poem about people who did any single respectable thing?"

"I wonder you can talk like that, papa," silenced his daughter, whose zeal for him and his school included timely snubbings for himself.

"Well, my dear, I privately think with Miss Brown that there's nothing more poetic than a gude, bonnie lass of a wife, and I don't wonder a bit at Walter being of that opinion. But then, of course, I'm not a poet."

"It's that washing of the children which troubles me," reflected Chough, "and their being married. Don't you think, now, Hamlin, that you might just alter a little, and make it appear that they ***weren't*** married?"

"Only put a husband of the lady in the distance," suggested O'Reilly, laughing.

"Thank you," said Hamlin, affecting to laugh, "your suggestion is most happy, and most characteristic. You are always full of original ideas all of you," and he looked bitterly round. Chough felt the rebuke and was silent. But Dennistoun, who was gasping, propped up in his chair, was furious.

"It's not a question of an alteration here or there," he gobbled out; "it's the whole tone of the poem which is pestilent. It's Wordsworth pure and simple, that's what it is."

Hamlin rolled up his MS. He was very white. The others he did not mind, but this little rickety Dennistoun, whose poems were the most limited and the most hopelessly morbid of the whole set, annoyed him; for in Dennistoun, for all his limitations and repetitions, Hamlin recognised the most genuine poet of his circle, his most real rival. Those words, "It's Wordsworth, that's what it is," were like a blow. He could have knocked down Dennistoun, had he not been a cripple.

The conversation was changed; and soon the first dinner−bell dispersed the company. When Anne came down she heard some one stirring in the study next door. She went in. Hamlin was seated before the table, his head on his hands; the MS., all crumpled up, lay in front of him.

Anne came silently to his side. Her heart was bursting with indignation.

"What's the matter?" asked Hamlin, crossly.

"Nothing. I only came because I wanted to see you because I wanted to tell you how I despise those people and their disgusting, unmanly school of poetry how I hate their stupid criticism, how completely I believe in you and in your poem."

Anne had spoken with vehemence and almost anger. She took one of his hands, which was dog's−earing the MS.

"Oh, why," she asked, "why do you read them what you write? Don't you know them sufficiently to know what they will say?"

"I never thought " and Hamlin stopped. "I never thought that that fellow Dennistoun would ever dare to speak like that about a poem of mine." His tone was angry and tearful, like that of a punished child.

"Nor did I. I never thought any one would dare to speak like that. But what does it matter what can the words of such a man matter to you?"

He did not answer.

"Surely," went on Anne, "you can't mind what they say? You believe in your poem, as I believe in it?"

It seemed so impossible to her how any one could not believe in that poem, which seemed to her so strong, and noble, and beautiful.

"I know you believe in it," answered Hamlin, brusquely; "you made me write it so of course you must "

"And and are you sorry to have written it?"

"I don't know; I can't judge. There's O'Reilly outside."

"The disconsolate poet being consoled by his beautiful *fiancée* for having written about people who were united in legitimate wedlock," whispered O'Reilly to Mrs Spencer as they entered the room.

"Well, Hamlin, old fellow, do you repent you of that sinful marriage between your hero and heroine?" asked O'Reilly.

"I repent me of nothing at all, except of having read my poem to a parcel of damned meretricious rhymesters," answered Hamlin, angrily.

"Walter!" cried Mrs Spencer, "how can you talk like that!"

But, despite this bravado, Anne felt, and her spirit sank within her, that Hamlin had been disgusted with his poem. He was rather cantankerous throughout dinner; and Anne, watching him, felt a strange mixture of indignation towards his critics for their criticism, and towards Hamlin for minding it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE time has come for him to break with the old school, thought Anne; consoling herself for a certain childish petulance, perhaps not quite new to her, in Hamlin's manner.

But Anne proved mistaken. Whether the critics became less rabid on the following day, or whether Hamlin was suddenly smitten with the truth of their criticism, she could not say. He was very snappish at first towards Chough, and absolutely refused to speak to Dennistoun for nearly twenty−four hours. Chough, who loved Hamlin like the apple of his eye, would not, however, be spurned; he followed Hamlin about, he soothed him, he flattered him, he assured him that he was much the greatest poet of his generation; but he repeated, al− most with tears in his eyes, Dennistoun's criticism.

"Such a poem will ***never, never*** do," he cried; "it is impossible, intolerable, and it will just put some fellow like Dennistoun into your place."

"Thank you for your advice, Chough," answered Hamlin, angrily; "I think I told you before that I didn't want it."

Anne did not revive the subject of the unlucky poem. It was useless provoking quarrels between Hamlin and his friends; quarrels in which she was forced to own to herself that he showed himself too easily mortified and put out of temper. If he had been taught to mistrust their judgment, if he had been alienated from their school by their absurd criticism, why, so much the better. This business drew Anne's attention to the poetry of the school; she re−read a number of poems by Chough, Dennistoun, and several gods, demigods, and heroes of the movement. Whether it was that she had read them fragmentarily before, or that she had not understood their full meaning, or whether her attention was now called to their bad points rather than to their good ones, she scarcely knew; but it seemed to her that she had never before comprehended this style of poetry: its beauty had ceased to please her, it seemed to her false, emasculate, diseased. Hamlin alone had not gone to its worst lengths; he had sinned, but comparatively little. He was evidently intended for something better. And Anne thought with pride of that "Ballad of the Fens" which they had all fallen upon, and which was to be the signal for a new era in poetry. Soon it would be out; and she the only person to have appreciated it. It seemed to Anne that at last, in her humble way, she might be beginning to repay the debt of gratitude which she owed Hamlin (not that she wished that the debt should ever be less, God knows, or dreamed that it could be); but at last Hamlin might reap some advantage from his generosity. He had stooped to make her, to turn the Perrys' servant into a lady; in her turn, perhaps she, the woman of the lower classes, might encourage the delicately nurtured poet to attempt things bolder, simpler, and more healthy than he had done before.

The proof−sheets of the new volume began to come in. Anne had read nearly all its contents at one time or other, yet Hamlin, in his grave, ceremoniously adoring way, handed on the proofs to her. One day a fresh bundle came by post. After breakfast, Hamlin took Anne aside.

"I want you to read these sonnets," he said. "I don't think you have read them all. There are rather more than I care to print in this volume, so I should like you to select those which you think the best or the least bad: divide them into two packets, and tell me which you prefer."

Anne was quite taken aback for joy, and at the same time for fear.

"Don't say that," she said; "I could never, never take the responsibility of deciding about your poems. Let me read them, and let me tell you what I like best, but don't ask me to choose. What am I, that I should decide in such matters?"

"You are the person whom I trust and respect, and will you let me say so? whom I love most in all the world," said Hamlin, solemnly. "For whom should my poetry be written except for you? Whom else should I care to please? Are you not the best and worthiest thing in my life, and is it not my highest ambition to do anything worthy of you?"

Hamlin had never spoken so passionately and earnestly before.

Anne did not answer, but she squeezed his hand, and the gesture, and the look accompanying it, meant "I love you."

"Listen," said Hamlin, detaining her as she was leaving "I want to say one word more. These sonnets are not merely my verses; they are myself and many of them, you will see, are about you. Perhaps you would rather that some of these were not published; perhaps your permitting them to be published might mean more than you should wish. Tell me your opinion frankly, and put aside everything that you don't like."

"I will," answered Anne. "What you wish me to do, I must do."

She went up into her room, shut the door, and seating herself at the table, unrolled the little bundle of proof−sheets. But at first she could not read, or could read only the titles her heart beat so, and the blood boomed so in her temples. That he should love her so much, believe in her so much that it should really be he, just he and she, and not some one else; it seemed too strange to be true. She slowly began to read the sonnets. Some of them she knew already; others were expansions in verse of things which Hamlin had said or written to her; many were about herself, passionate, with a sort of delicate, subdued, respectful passion, played, like some exquisite instrument, in various keys and rhythms of subdued pain or gladness. She felt so proud and glad, and at the same time so moved and saddened, that she almost cried over them. There were a lot of other sonnets, descriptive of places and of moods. Some of these she did not at all relish. They were not fleshly nor exactly improper; but they contained allusions which Anne could not help following, allusions which she did not quite understand, but which she did not like. She felt half ashamed of herself, wondering whether all the impure poetry which she had lately been reading, whether her prejudice against the school to which these decidedly belonged, might not be making her imagine things which were not meant; and Anne blushed at the thought blushed at her knowing so many things, having learned so many things, in her half education as an Italian servant, in her culture as an æsthetic personage, which perhaps other girls of her age would not dream of. It was probably only her own morbid fancy. But then she came upon a set of sonnets no fewer than twelve connected together by similarity of title which put an end to her doubts. She felt giddy and sick as she read them; mysterious and mystical hankerings, mysterious half−longing repentance, and half−repentant longings after untold shameful things. Anne pushed aside the proof−sheets, and leaned her head on her hands. She seemed to be smothering for want of air; she went to the window, and leaned against its rails. It was raining a steady, clear fine rain. She looked at it mechanically as it filled the air like a thin veil, and crevassed the sand outside with yellow trickles of water. She did not for one instant believe that Hamlin had ever felt the things about which he was writing; but he had written about them. She knew, from an unerring instinct, as well as from her own deep love, that Hamlin was as pure a man as could be found; had he not been towards her was he not, at that very moment the very personification of chivalrous

and spiritual lovingness? Then she remembered the allusions which, without understanding them, used to frighten her in his letters the allusions to vague evil which beckoned to him, which surrounded him; and she remembered also his constant references in conversation to his being unlike what she imagined, to his baseness and unworthiness. Two years earlier she would have been seized with an agonising terror; a week before she might have been overcome with pitying admiration at his self−tormenting moral purity, taking umbrage at every thought of evil which passed across and seemed to soil his mind. But somehow, now, she did neither. She did not for one second believe that Hamlin was in any way a bad man. She repeated to herself that he was morbidly introspective, self−scrutinising, morbidly imaginative; but she could not realise that these hateful sonnets had been written in any great agony of imagined self−debasement; they were so artistic, so evidently written with enjoyment, so self−conscious; they were so clearly not the doubts of a troubled mind, but the work of a poet and, what was much worse, so clearly the work of a poet of a definite school, of the school of Chough and Dennistoun and all the others, whom she was beginning to loathe. Anne looked at them over and over again. There was no reality in them; mere revolting ***pose***. Gradually her mind settled about them. They were doubtless things written long ago, when, without knowing what it all meant, he had been carried away by the wave of imitation of one or two shameless or foolish writers. He had alluded to sonnets which he had expected her to dislike, he had insisted so on a certain number being put aside; if he had made her think that it was the sonnets about herself which provoked his doubts, that came from a sort of shame, an unwillingness to point out to her what she might perhaps overlook: it was not quite straightforward, but everybody, Anne had learned by this time, did not do right in a quite straightforward way. The only thing which perplexed her was, why he had submitted these poems to her at all? Why had he not torn them up? why shown them to her? A little she could not help, as a woman, resenting his having done so at all. But perhaps he had done so to show her the difference between what he had been and what he was going to be, perhaps perhaps he had got a little callous, living among poets of this school. Anyhow, they were things of the past, and Anne did not distress herself any longer about them, so foreign did they seem to Hamlin, so impossible was it to bring them into connection with the thought of him. She put the proofs into her pocket, and waited for an opportunity of giving them back. Before dinner, when the guests were safe out of the way, she called Hamlin into the library.

"Here are the proofs," she said, laying them on the table.

"Have you read them already?" cried Hamlin; "how sweet of you! Now tell me what you think about them."

He looked so cheerful, so utterly uncon− scious of the possibility of Anne's having anything to say disagreeable to himself and herself, that she began to feel nervous.

"I think they are most of them very beautiful," she answered slowly "indeed, quite some of the best things you have ever done and especially those about me; I am very grateful to you for them. But" she resumed, after a moment's silence "there are some which I dislike extremely, and which are utterly unworthy of you. I have put them into the smaller roll by themselves." She spoke rapidly, decidedly, but when she had done she felt that she was crimson.

Hamlin seemed quite speechless for astonishment. He quickly unrolled the smaller parcel, and glanced at its contents. A look of surprised ill−humour crossed his face.

"I am quite astonished at your choice," he said with affected coolness; "for these are the very sonnets which Chough and Dennistoun and all my other friends picked out as among my best."

So he had already provided himself with a stock of criticisms.

"I am no judge of their technical merits," answered Anne, trying to feel as if she had expected this news. "It seemed to me that they were very excellent in workmanship, and there is beautiful imagery in them. But I think the subject and tone of them horrible." she spoke resolutely and unflinchingly, because she saw Hamlin's eyes

fixed incredulously on her. "You asked me to give you my frank opinion; and even had you not asked me, I should have felt bound to tell you that I think those sonnets ought not to be published. Perhaps you think it strange of me to speak so openly; but, of course, I understand what those sonnets allude to, and, of course, so will every grown−up reader."

Hamlin bit his moustache.

"There is not a single word to which any one can take objection in these sonnets," and he turned over the proofs.

"What do the words matter? It is the meaning. I think," and Anne vainly tried to soften down her expressions, "I think that those sonnets are things you should be ashamed of."

Hamlin's eyes flashed, but he kept his temper.

"Everything is legitimate for the sake of an artistic effect," he said, echoing the worn−out aphorism of his school.

"Even to do a disgraceful thing?"

"I can see nothing disgraceful in a man attempting to describe what has passed through his mind."

Hamlin spoke sullenly and doggedly.

"You have shifted your position," cried Anne. "You intimated just now that a man may pretend to anything for the sake of an artistic effect. And now you are trying to make me believe that you really have felt and thought those horrible things. It is of no use. You have not "

"How do you know?" exclaimed Hamlin, angrily. "Do you think I tell you everything that I have ever done, or thought, or felt?"

Anne was silent for a moment: that he should prefer to make her believe in his own baseness! It was horrible, loathsome, and, at the same time, pitiable and childish.

"I know you have not," she repeated, "because I know you to be a gentleman. And I know that all that is affectation school affectation learned from creatures like Dennistoun and Chough; they have all done it, or something of the sort, and you have learned what comes naturally to their dirty minds. Oh, Mr Hamlin, do not commit this abomination this baseness of pretending to shameful things which you have not felt or thought; do not be so mean, so base, so lying, as to slander yourself for the sake of an artistic effect." Anne had seized his arm; he was shaken by her unexpected vehemence and passion; he had never thought that Anne could become so passionate about anything; he looked on, taken by surprise, not knowing what to think.

"Do not slander yourself," repeated Anne "do not blacken your real self, which does not belong to yourself alone, which belongs also to your friends, to your honour, which belongs in part to me. Do not lie to me about yourself!"

"As you choose," answered Hamlin; "perhaps you are right; though, heaven knows, I thought myself, when writing those sonnets, but too bitterly in earnest."

Anne's look a look of incredulous contempt smote him like a rod.

"I suppose I am apt to be morbid," he said, sadly; "that is the wretchedness of my life, that I never know where the truth about myself really lies it seems to me that I ought to speak out, and yet . . ."

"And yet it is mere nonsense."

Hamlin smiled a forced smile.

"Perhaps it is. Since you are determined, I suppose it must be."

"You won't publish those sonnets?" asked Anne, anxiously.

"I will not, since they offend you so much. But it is curious, that of all the people to whom I have shown them, you are the only one who has taken the slightest exception to them."

For a moment Hamlin had been overcome, had been delighted by this sudden burst of impetuosity, by this passionate belief in him and vindication of himself. But now, as he again glanced at the sonnets, he was once more annoyed and resentful.

"Such things must be judged from a purely artistic standpoint," he said with some irritation.

"I am willing to judge art from an artistic standpoint; but I cannot judge from an artistic standpoint an honourable man trying to defame himself."

Hamlin sighed.

"Well, after all, I bade you select, and the principal thing is that you should be satisfied. But it ***is*** a pity, because those were just the best sonnets in the book; and the book will be very small without the 'Ballad of the Fens.'"

"The 'Ballad of the Fens'? aren't you going to print that? What do you mean?"

Could Hamlin be merely worrying her, to vent his annoyance at the loss of the sonnets?

"The 'Ballad of the Fens' has been torn up," answered Hamlin, with a kind of dogged satisfaction.

"Oh, Mr Hamlin! How could you the finest thing you have ever written."

The ballad torn up!

"I know you thought it good, and so did I myself. But, on reflection, I saw that my friends were right, and that such a thing would not do."

He spoke sharply, brutally, as if to bring home to Anne the unreliableness of her judgment: she had induced him to write it; she had praised it; and she wanted him to tear up those sonnets.

"It is a bad plan to keep things about which one is doubtful," he went on; "so I tore it up. I think it was wiser; don't you?"

"No," said Anne, in a husky voice which burst out in a way that almost frightened him; "no, no it was . . ." but she said no more.

CHAPTER V.

ONE morning Hamlin received two unexpected letters at breakfast. From his looks, which he was at all times quite unable to control, it was clear that one of them brought good news, while the other must be about some disagreeable matter.

"Edmund Lewis is coming the day after to−morrow," announced Hamlin to his aunt, to Anne, and to his guests.

There was a chorus of exclamations of surprise, sprinkled with pleasure.

"Who is Edmund Lewis?" asked Anne. "He is an old friend of mine, a charming fellow whom I have not seen for some years. Some of the drawings in the drawing−room at Hammersmith are by him."

Anne remembered the name, and the strange, beautiful, cruel, mysterious, out−of−drawing heads in crayon, which had curiously impressed her the first morning after her arrival in England, rose before her eyes; since then she had seen so many similar things, had got to understand so completely that mysterious, beautiful faces, with combed−out hair, big weird eyes, and cruel lips, were so much school property, that she had become quite indifferent to them.

"I thought you told me that something strange had happened to him that he had left England for good," remarked Anne.

"Oh, it was nothing particularly strange," interrupted little O'Reilly "only a German lady whom he met one day, blond, fat, thirty−five, who was nothing but a soul you know the sort of thing with a husband who was a great deal besides a soul (a charming man, for the rest, and quite wildly in love with the Gnädige Frau). The excess of soul having induced acute neuralgia in the lady, poor Teddy Lewis, who is a tremendous magnetiser, was called in to soothe her agonies, during which process the lady discovered that the soul−sorrow and consequent neuralgia from which she suffered was due to the soullessness of her husband, and that only the brotherly affection of Ted could cure her. The difficulty was the husband, who loved the lady fervently, and she him, but not in a way which should satisfy her soul. Hence struggles, agonies, &c. you've read it all in the 'Wahlverwandschaften' finally ended by the husband being implored to sacrifice himself to the spiritual exigencies of his adored wife, which absolutely required that he should divorce her and let her marry Lewis. That's all."

"How can you talk in such a flippant way, Mr O'Reilly?" cried Mrs Spencer. "You have a way of making the most serious things seem ridiculous. Poor Mrs Lewis! she's dead now; you needn't make fun of her."

"Poor Mrs Lewis!" laughed O'Reilly; "well, you know you wouldn't receive her, Mrs Spencer, when she first came to England."

"I thought her a designing woman then; I didn't know all the circumstances."

"Come now, Edith," interrupted her father, in his broad Scotch; "I ***think*** the less ye knew those circumstances the better it was for all concerned."

"I don't see that at all, papa. I don't see why a woman's happiness should be sacrificed," and Mrs Spencer, who was the most devoted of wives and mothers, tossed her head rebelliously. "I don't see why the world should insist that a woman is to be satisfied with a husband who is good to her and her children. After all, she has a soul, and that requires response."

"Would you behave as Mrs Lewis did?" asked O'Reilly, "If well let me see Mr Spencer were suddenly to

develop an overpowering belief in the Royal Academy and in Zola?"

"Papa would never have let me marry a man who ***could*** ever develop such beliefs."

At this perfectly solemn answer there was a general laugh; even poor Mr Spencer, who was the most timid of æsthetical persons, joining.

"I think it was rather hard on poor Ted Lewis," remarked Hamlin, "to become necessary to the soul of a lady whether he liked it or no."

"Oh, Lewis liked it well enough, be sure of that," answered Chough, bitterly.

"Don't you think it was rather hard upon the husband," suggested Anne, "since he really cared for his wife? Fancy being abandoned like that, and his children left without a mother!"

"He was at liberty to marry again," replied Mrs Spencer sharply, still thinking of what she would do if by any chance Mr Spencer were to suddenly disbelieve in her father and his school.

"What would you have had Lewis, or rather the poor Baroness, do, Miss Brown?" asked O'Reilly.

"Why, I would have them never dream of each other; but if they had been so foolish, be ashamed as soon as possible, and each go his and her way, and attend to his and her proper concerns."

Dennistoun, who had sat silent at the other end of the table, propped up on his chair, suddenly stretched out his long neck, and gobbled out

"Love permits no man or woman to resist: it is imperious, irresistible, dragging us along to happiness, or misery, or shame, whether we will or not. Love is the extinction of the reason, the extinction of the will, or rather the merging of the whole individuality in one mysterious desire. Those who can talk of resistance have never experienced love. Woe to them! their hour is coming!" and he tried to fix his weak eyes on Anne.

"Well," she answered quickly, "I hope I may never make such a disgusting fool of my− self as you describe, Mr Dennistoun; but as I think that not everybody is liable to go mad, so also I think that not everybody is liable to falling in love in your sense of the word."

O'Reilly leaned over the back of her chair.

"It happens only to those who want to write about it, Miss Brown," he whispered.

"Anyhow," remarked Hamlin, "Lewis is a charming fellow, and I am sure you will appreciate him, Miss Brown. He is, moreover, the most backbitten man in creation," and Hamlin glanced round the table; "but you must never believe any harm of him."

Perhaps, thought Anne, Edmund Lewis was disliked by this set for the same reasons which, she could not help understanding, were beginning to make her vaguely unpopular. Still, she did not like the story of his marriage, she did not like the recollection of his morbidly beautiful drawings.

"It's good news about Lewis," said Hamlin to her after breakfast; "but unfortunately there's been rather a bothering letter also. Did I ever mention a cousin of mine, the daughter of papa's sister and of a horrible Russian creature called Polozoff? She was brought up with us as a child, and is connected with a great many painful circumstances. I have completely lost sight of her since she was about fifteen, and now I suddenly get a letter from her telling me

that her husband is dead, and that she is coming to England. I rather loathe the idea of her, and if you knew the part she played in this house fifteen years ago, you could understand it. But the worst is that Aunt Claudia perfectly abhorred her I will tell you the horrible, prosaic, tragic story some day and that I perfectly dread having to break the news to her. I do hate a scene so! There she is; I suppose I'd better tell her."

Mrs Macgregor was walking slowly up and down the gravel walk before the house.

"Do come and keep me in countenance. It really is no fault of mine, but I know my aunt will be furious."

"What's the matter?" cried Mrs Macgregor suspiciously, as if expecting to be told something disagreeable.

"I wanted to tell you, Aunt Claudia," said Hamlin, "that I had a letter this morning."

"Yes, I know, from your dear Lewis," interrupted Mrs Macgregor. "What's that to me?"

"I don't mean that one. I had a letter from guess from whom?" and Hamlin tried to smile "from Cousin Sacha."

Mrs Macgregor recoiled as if she had trodden on a toad.

"From whom?"

"From Cousin Sacha. Sacha Polozoff Madame Elaguine, I suppose I ought to call her."

For a moment there was a dead silence. The old lady's face, usually so vacant, was lit up into a terrific energy of anger.

" What business has ***she*** to write to ***you*** ?"

"Well, really, aunt, I don't see why she shouldn't," answered Hamlin. "After all, we are cousins, and we have never openly quarrelled.

"My aunt," he explained, turning to Anne, "has got a tremendous aversion a prejudice towards this one and only cousin of mine. She disliked her father, very reasonably, and I think she has let her dislike descend to the second generation rather unreasonably."

"Unreasonably!" exclaimed Mrs Macgregor; "***you*** know it was not unreasonable, Walter you know what that Cousin Sacha of yours was in this house."

"I know nothing of the sort," cried Hamlin, angrily. "I know that Sacha lived in this house as a child; I know she left it as a child; I know we all hated her and hers, and that perhaps they deserved it; but I know that we have no right to hate a woman of whom we know nothing, because she happened to have been a badly brought up child, years ago.

"At all events," went on Hamlin, "I insist upon her being properly treated as a lady, and a relation."

"Properly treated!" almost foamed out his aunt. "Do you mean to say that she is coming ***here***?"

"Not here; but to London. Her husband is dead; and she writes to me that she thinks she had better send her boy to an English school; and as the only person in England upon whom she has a claim "

"A pretty claim!" interrupted Mrs Macgregor.

"As her first cousin, she has written to me for information and assistance."

"And you are going to give it her, Walter?"

"Of course I am. And I hope, Aunt Claudia, that you will remember that I won't be disgraced towards a lady who has done us no harm. She will be in London, most likely, when we return at the beginning of winter."

Anne had heard many allusions to this Cousin Sacha, and they belonged to that class of cynical hints which always made her indignant with Mrs Macgregor. She instinctively took part with this unknown woman, and she admired Hamlin's decision and generosity. Why did he not always act like this?

"That child that Sacha," said Mrs Macgregor, when Hamlin had left them, "was the evil genius of his house. She was sent as if to embody all the bad tendencies of the family. It was a miserable house at best, my brother−in−law's, for he was a weak, vicious, violent man. But just when this wretched child was brought to us my sister had died, Mr Hamlin was very much shaken and repentant for the life he had led her, and I really believe that he had made up his mind to live decently for the sake of his children. The two boys were growing up, and there seemed some chance of things going quietly and happily. Then Mr Hamlin thought fit to invite home his sister, who was a widow; she had married a horrible Russian, a sort of indecent madman, with every possible vice under the sun. She was an odious woman herself, the regular slave−driving type of the Hamlins. Oh, you can't judge of them from Walter; he's like my sister, not like them. Well, she was violent, and overbearing, and tyrannical, and lazy, and hysterical, like a regular Jamaica woman. She was enough in the house; but then she had this child of hers, this Sacha, with her a wretched, neglected creature, brought up by French servants, who were her father's mistresses, and literally with no more idea of right and wrong than any of the little heathens whom they pick out of gutters in the East End and send to reformatories."

"Poor child!" said Anne. She shuddered at this glimpse into Hamlin's early life; it had a horrible attraction for her, and yet she felt that she would far rather know nothing about it. All this filth seemed to cling to her mind and soil it. "How horrible for her!"

"She was about twelve when she came to us," went on Mrs Macgregor meditatively, "and you couldn't believe that such a child could exist in Christendom. She could no more spell the simplest word than I can speak Arabic; she spoke an awful jargon of English and French and Russian and German, and she used to talk about things, and repeat stories which she had heard from her nurses, or her father, or her father's friends I don't know whom that were enough to make your hair stand on end. Mr Hamlin was in perfect despair; because, although he was a vicious sort of man himself, and quite did my poor sister to death with his bad conduct, he was awfully strict about all his kith and kin, and kept the boys as tight as if he had been a Puritan. What we all had to go through, you have no idea. At first I was quite ashamed to let any governess see such a little heathen as that child was, and we had to pay the governesses double wages to keep them on. Then, every time that they tried to break Sacha off some one of her disgusting ways, her mother, who was always moaning and groaning with imaginary maladies on her sofa, and no more thought of her daughter than of the man in the moon, would go into hysterics and throw things in their face, and have them turned away, and keep Sacha for a day in her room, kissing her and giving her sweets. Well, we thought we were little by little getting the better of her; and then, thank goodness, Madame Polozoff, that was Mr Hamlin's sister, died. Sacha learned a few things, and began to behave a little more like a Christian child; but it was only on the surface. She was utterly and thoroughly corrupt. When the boys returned from school (Arnold was sixteen, and Walter seventeen), the mischief began. That wretched Sacha fell madly in love with Walter, and began running after him; but Walter perfectly loathed the sight of her: he was always the cold, moral, irreproachable sort of creature that he is. Then she went after Arnold. Arnold was much the livelier of the two: he was a dear, warm− hearted, simple sort of boy, a perfect scapegrace, always in pickles, but we only liked him the better. But that wretched Sacha (he didn't care a rap about her either, for she was a horrid, lying, sickly, stunted little thing), in order to curry favour with him, put him up to all sorts of mischief, which I suppose she had learned from her precious father and his servants. What was poor Arnold to know? The nasty little fiend

used to get out of bed and unlock the house−door for him, so that he might go in and out at night and get into scrapes with the village girls, and drink at the pot−house; and she used to steal the wine and the brandy out of the cupboards for him, and teach him all sorts of ungentlemanly, knavish, lying ways; I believe she used even to give him money out of her savings, just for him to go to the pot−house. If ever a boy was ruined by a woman, poor Arnold was ruined by that miserable Sacha. Then, in return for her assistance and her lies and her money, he had to pretend to like her, to kiss her, and call her his darling little cousin, and promise to marry her, whom he abominated. Meanwhile Walter went dreaming on as he always has, avoiding Sacha like the plague, and not perceiving any of the pretty doings of his brother; and Mr Hamlin, who thought that his house, just because it was his house, must be the palace of virtue, and his son, because he was his son, must be the most obedient and austere boy in the world, took to liking Sacha and her pretty, foreign little ways, and to think her quite a nice little girl, just the wife for one of his sons. Then one day (I suppose Sacha thought that poor Arnold did not kiss her and ***darling little Sacha*** her enough, or got jealous or something) they had a great row, and Arnold called her a liar, and said that if she were not a girl he would thrash her well. So Sacha rushed off sobbing to Mr Hamlin, and told him that Arnold had called her a liar, and had threatened to beat her; and Mr Hamlin called Arnold, and struck him in the face till his nose bled, and called him a coward and a brute, and swore he would cut him off with a shilling. Then it all came out about Arnold's escapades, his nights at the pot−house, and so forth; and of course his father said that all he said about Sacha's putting him up to it was a pack of lies, and finally it ended with Mr Hamlin behaving in such a way that poor Arnold ran away to America. Then we had no news of him for about six months, and Mr Hamlin wanted to take Walter into his good graces, although he had never cared for him, and Sacha tried to make up to Walter. But Walter also ran away to his uncle, because he said he would not stay unless Arnold was recalled, or at least money were sent to him. So Mr Hamlin had to give in and send for Arnold; but meanwhile he had quarrelled with Sacha, and packed her off to her Russian relatives, who sent her to some German deaconesses on the Rhine a nice child to bring up! Walter returned, and began to prepare for the university; then Arnold was got back from America; but he had only got into worse and worse ways he was always drunk, and finally his mind began to give way. Poor Arnold! he was much, much nicer than Walter such a bright, good−humoured, manly fellow and now . . ."

"Now?" repeated Anne in astonishment; she had listened without saying a word to this horrible page of family history. "Now? Do you mean that Mr Hamlin's brother is alive?"

Mrs Macgregor looked at her with strange wide eyes. "Of course he is. We say he is dead; or if not dead, mad. Well, he might as soon be either, poor boy. He wanders about with a servant. Walter allows him some money. We never talk of him. Ah!" cried Mrs Macgregor, and it was a kind of suppressed cry of pain "and that it is all, all owing to Sacha Polozoff; and she has the insolence to write to Walter!"

Anne did not know what to say.

"But," she could not help saying after a minute, for it seemed to her as if the whole story were so unjust, so one−sided, as if there were so much too much laid at the door of the unhappy, neglected, corrupt child so much too little pity or indignation shown at her having been thus neglected and corrupted, "but, Aunt Claudia is it fair to put it all down to Sacha? After all, Arnold was sixteen, he was a man, he had been decently brought up and she, she was an ignorant child, brought up as you say without idea of right or wrong. Don't you think oh, don't you think, auntie dear, that it was mainly the fault of old Mr Hamlin, and his bad example, and his closing his eyes to his boy's behaviour?" It seemed to her so frightful that a girl, a child, a victim, just because she was a victim, should have such a weight of guilt thrown upon her.

"She was a woman, and he was a man," said Mrs Macgregor fiercely, her love for her lost nephew, and her strange theories of sexual influences mixing grotesquely and tragically "and a woman can always do what she will with a man; a woman can always, unless she be as weak as my poor sister, ruin or save a Hamlin, ever since Walter's great−uncle Mordaunt went to the bad, even worse than poor Arnold."

"Some of them," she said after a moment, "are good, and some are bad: my brother−in−law was bad Arnold was good, and Walter is good; but they are all as weak as water, these Hamlins weak in goodness or badness, every one of them."

Anne sighed. And as she walked through the big, stately rooms of Wotton House, she thought of the horrible scenes which had happened in there; of the waste of life by violence and vice and neglect which they had witnessed; especially of that wretched, vicious child, held so terribly responsible for the folly and wickedness of others. And the sense of the terrible power of circumstances, of the degradation into which others may lead one, or out of which others may raise one, which had been silently growing in her as she watched the world in her tragic way, came over her with a terrifying rush; and she felt, half in anxiety at scarcely escaped danger, half in joy at safety, a tumult of gratitude when she remembered how Walter Hamlin had raised her up, led her out of the way of all temptation and evil contact, and left her safe and strong as she knew herself to be.

CHAPTER VI.

As the summer changed into autumn, the guests at Wotton Hall were gradually renewed. Chough remained, and at Anne's particular desire sent for his two little girls, sad, strange, Cockney creatures, to whom the large house, the garden, the country walks and country sights, were as things of another world. But the Spencers, Dennistoun, and O'Reilly departed; and in their place arrived the two Leigh girls and Edmund Lewis. The last−named gentleman did not by any means strike Anne as a fascinating being. He was a stumpy, high−shouldered, thick−set little man, always very slackly dressed, with small, rather handsome features, and a profusion of curly reddish hair and beard, which made his face look even more like unbaked dough than it might otherwise have done. Some people considered him very handsome, and it was obvious that he himself felt as if he were tall; for he stumped and slouched in and out of rooms with his hands in his pockets, and dropped on to chairs and sofas with the heavy importance of gait of a Hercules. Nothing could be more comic than the contrast between this lumbering and solemn redhaired dwarf and Cosmo Chough, black, fierce, alert, courteous, and grandiloquent. Lewis was silent; but when he spoke he fixed his handsome eyes searchingly upon one, and either trailed his voice along with slow emphasis, or answered in monosyllables, which left in you an uncomfortable feeling of having made some inappropriate or impertinent remark. He had, moreover, lips of the colour of the very best sealing−wax; a peculiarity which, while decidedly adding to the pictorial value of a red−haired man, has a something quite particularly repulsive to certain people, among whom Anne Brown must be counted. However, she tried to like Mr Lewis. In some respects he was a more genuine personality than Chough, or Dennistoun, or almost any other of Hamlin's æsthetic friends. He did not make himself up manner, appearance, ideas, or words to look like anything which he was not, or at all events which he did not thoroughly believe himself to be; and he was, moreover, much more in the way of will and definite tendencies, and felt himself (however mistakenly) to be much more in the way of power, character, and importance, than any other man whom Anne had ever come across, except her cousin Richard, between whom and Edmund Lewis there existed, despite a thousand differences, a certain resemblance. And perhaps it was exactly this resemblance to Richard Brown, a man whom Anne did not exactly like, nay, who even occasionally repelled her a little, but of whose power and truthfulness and generosity Anne could not doubt, perhaps it was this resemblance, how− ever vague it might be, which made Anne for some time believe that Edmund Lewis, little as he pleased her, might be a remarkable sort of man, and treat Chough's insinuations against him as merely another instance of that childish unreasonableness of likings and dislikings, which, together with vanity and weakness of will, she had got to associate with a poetic endowment. Over Hamlin, at all events, Edmund Lewis had an undeniable influence; an influence which he himself avowedly attributed to his magnetic powers, which he would exert, or imagine that he exerted, sitting lazily opposite his friends or victims, staring vaguely at them and speaking in his slow, important voice. He was a painter, in an irregular sort of way, himself, and took much more interest in Hamlin's art than in his poetry; so that

Hamlin, who was sick of versifying for the moment, had a fit of painting once more, and spent hours locked up in his studio with Lewis, while poor Cosmo Chough was more and more thrown upon Anne and her friends. But the girls had got to understand Chough, and the fund of kindness and self−sacrificing gentleness which was hidden beneath the little man's poetical thin−skinnedness and the queer poetical veneer of mystic wickedness which he himself did not understand. He could not by any possibility be broken of his tendency to talk overmuch about Messalina, Lucretia Borgia, and La Belle Heaulmière; but by this time it was quite obvious that he had not the smallest experience of ladies of any such character, still less the faintest thought of giving offence by his allusions to them. To Anne he was utterly devoted: he was fascinated by her beauty, afraid of its tragic earnestness, afraid of her downright, quiet manner, afraid of her silent contemptuousness, of her uncompromising censoriousness; but if ever a person appreciated Anne's kindness, her energy, her imperious desire of helping others, it was Chough. Anne had often spoken to him about the neglected education of his little girls; not reproachfully, for she knew but too well on what it depended, but trying to stir him up to resist the sort of fatality which seemed to hang over his family concerns. And now she insisted on taking the children's education into her own hands, until Chough should be able to afford sending them to a proper school. Perhaps the thought of that neglected, unconsciously corrupted, terribly responsible little heathen girl, who had done so much mischief in Wotton Hall fifteen years before, had something to do with Anne's energetic behaviour towards the little Choughs to whom, every morning regularly, she gave a two hours' lesson in grammar and writing and history, as complete as if she had been a schoolmistress and they her pupils; until their father, astonished at their unexpected development of human faculties, took it in his head to turn them into first−rate musicians, and actually got up at six in the morning to teach them the piano, while Hamlin and Lewis were still asleep.

Marjory Leigh, who had considered Anne in the light of an irresponsible but decidedly objectionable æsthetic villain on her departure from London, looked on in puzzled amazement. She could not understand how any one so beautiful, so versed in useless literature and useless art, any one whom her foolish elder sister foolishly adored, could be anxious and able to make herself of use in the world. And even Mary Leigh, in her gentle, ironical way, was astonished at Anne's new vocation, and adored her all the more enthusiastically for it. Mrs Macgregor hinted, in her affectionate cynical manner, that Anne was mistaking for a desire to be useful to Chough's children the mere imperious necessity of caring for some one, which was the vicarious form of love; and prophesied archly that, once married, Anne would soon be satisfied with uselessness. Anne smiled contemptuously at Mrs Macgregor's theories. Yet she was as unaware as was Mrs Macgregor herself, that there was indeed an imperious necessity in her nature a necessity more personal, more selfish, and more terrible than her mere desire to be of use. In these four months Anne had gradually, and hitherto unconsciously, ceased to love Hamlin as she had formerly loved him. Like many of the most powerful and passionate natures, Anne had a fatal tendency to love ideally and love the ideal; not so much to invest with unreal qualities the object of her passion, but to conceive a passion for an impersonal creation of her own, an amalgamation of her own ardent and confused aspirations after an unknown excellence; and then to identify the object of this strange intellectual and moral passion with the first real person who struck her as excellent and noble and beautiful, or who appealed strongly to her sympathies and her gratitude. Of love in the ordinary sense, such a nature is wellnigh incapable; and the devotion due to real imperfect creatures, pity and sympathy with weakness, the devotion due to a sense of duty, although it may be intense and tender in such people, comes only on later, when the first splendid idol has been shattered, and whatever passion there is must be given, in humbleness or sorrow, to the unsatisfying realities of this world. With such a nature and such tendencies, Anne had been met, when young, ignorant, and friendless, by an indistinct yet real personality by Hamlin, who had done for her more than any other man had ever done for a woman; and in this vaguely seen Hamlin, known at first only as a servant knows the brilliant guest of the house, a model the painter to whom she is sitting and then known at a distance, in letters which were the unreal efflorescence of a poet's mind, in this vaguely seen Hamlin, to whom she owed her new life, and who was surrounded by all the beautiful things and ideas which that new life represented, Anne Brown had incarnated the ideal of good and beauty towards which her simple, self−unconscious, energetic soul so strenuously aspired. Such a love as this must be transformed into something less exalted, or must die out unsatisfied, whatever the person who feels it or the person with whom it is connected: the real, however excellent, can never satisfy the craving after the ideal; a living individual can never quiet desires which have no individual object, which are mere dumb and violent

activities of a too powerful soul. But Anne was not the kind of woman in whom simpler and less exacting instincts, in whom ordinary love, can gradually supplant such an ideal passion; and what was worse, Hamlin was not the man who could substitute for an impossible and unapproachable creature of the imagination, a less perfect, but more appealing, more attaching, more lovable creature of reality.

No man that ever breathed could have satisfied cravings which were in reality not after a man, but after a higher life, a more complete activity, a nobler aim; but Hamlin fell short not merely of Anne's ideal, but also, in many things, even of the reality of Anne herself, and of all she could understand and sympathise with. The ecstatic devotion had speedily given way in her to a more sober kind of admiration and affection; but now, little by little, that also was being invaded, transformed piecemeal here and there, by doubt, contempt, and disgust. Anne's eyes had gradually opened to the fact that Hamlin was vain, thin−skinned, professionally jealous, and afraid of the judgment, as he was avid of the praise, of his own inferiors; and that, in the negative line, he was without strong likings, enthusiasms, or aspirations; and the negative qualities affected her more than the positive ones: to her the coldness of Hamlin's sympathies was more painful than the weakness of his nature. Vaguely and gradually these things had dawned upon Anne; and she could no more deny their existence than she could persuade herself that a grey English autumn day was brilliant as an Italian summer morning. But of late things had happened, like that incident of the suppressed "Ballad of the Fens," and of the self−slandering sonnets which Hamlin looked upon with such complacency, which had given her glimpses into something worse than she could well believe in, worse than she had the heart to look into. These she cast behind her, thinking of them as little as possible, trying to consider them as hallucinations, or at all events, gross exaggerations of her own: she must have misunderstood; such things could not be. She tried to settle her love of Hamlin on a real and more solid basis. She fully admitted to herself that Hamlin had weaknesses, the weaknesses which she remarked in so many of the men around him, weaknesses going together with the fine qualities of the poet's nature, weaknesses which, Anne was beginning to suspect, every one had (forgetting that she had not), or at least something equivalent thereunto. She admitted to herself that Hamlin was weak; nay, to do so was a sort of relief. That Hamlin should come of a family infirm of will and often vicious, that he should have been brought up surrounded by vice and violence engendered by weakness; this notion, due partly to her own observations, and confirmed by Mrs Macgregor's confidences, explained so much away, and left room for so much: it explained all the wretched part of his nature, it left room for all the good, for the gentleness, the generosity, the chivalric spirit which had made Anne what she was; and it let her hope, every now and then, that better might be in store. For since the evil was merely negative and the good so thorough and so positive, surely the good would vanquish the evil. And, looking at the people who surrounded Hamlin, at these vain, weak, unreal poets and artists, at this whole school of people who, whatever their private life, affected to live only for selfish enjoyment of beauty and selfish interest in sin, Anne used often to think that Hamlin was in the position of a sort of Rinaldo, the noblest of all heroes, degraded into mean sloth by the Armida of æstheticism, but requiring only the shrill of the trumpet and the clash of arms from the real living world to be redeemed and to show himself in his real nobility. She would even exaggerate her aversion or contempt for Hamlin's companions and for his school; the worse they were, the more excuse for him; and she would often sit dreaming of the way in which he might be gradually got from under their influence, and brought in contact with those stronger, more healthy, or more terrible realities, which Anne's nature, by a kind of occult sympathy, felt in the world all round, as the birds and insects will feel the storm which is still invisible beyond the hills, but which is coming to purify, and shake, and revive.

And so Anne went on loving and hoping, and believing herself to be happy. But there began to be a strange restlessness about her; a desire to be useful, to be perpetually active in something, to be always trying to understand, and sympathise, and help an imperious necessity not to be left to her own thoughts (those thoughts which had once been like a paradise, in which solitude was the highest bliss). For, alone with her own thoughts, Anne was beginning to experience an intolerable sense of isolation, and intolerable sense of impotence.

CHAPTER VII.

IN this condition of mind Anne was violently impelled towards the two Leigh girls; and strongly induced to take an aversion to Edmund Lewis. For the Leighs represented every day more and more the influence which was strengthening her, the influence which might revive Hamlin; and Edmund Lewis seemed sent as an incarnation of those tendencies which, in her belief, had marred the nobility of Hamlin's nature.

Anne's unmistakable desire to know what was going on in the striving and suffering world outside the strongholds of æstheticism, to help in it to her utmost; to be, what the people believing only in beauty and passion could not conceive, responsible, all this intense striving got the better of Marjory Leigh's prejudices. She began to understand that she had found in Anne a zealous lieutenant; nay, after some time, the conscientious though somewhat pig−headed and conceited young philanthropist admitted to herself that Anne was a force for work and good which dragged even her along, making her, by the influence of her complete unselfishness, self−unconsciousness, and energy, more ready to examine into her own mode of doing things, to sift her vanity from her humanitarianism.

"Anne does make one less conceited," Marjory one day remarked to her sister, waking up from a long reverie "less conceited and less narrow, I do believe. It's such a revelation; and somehow it makes one feel just a little bit ashamed, to find such honesty and determination in an æsthete. After that, people don't seem to be so hopelessly lost do they? I fear I must have been a rather bigoted sort of brute formerly," and Marjory pushed her fingers through her short, lank yellow hair, and looked up at her sister with her childish, resolute, defiant face, not yet puzzled by the sad experience of the difficulty of doing good, and of the dangerousness of even the wisest theories. Mary Leigh smiled. She was proud of her little sister; and she was, in a sort of a way, in love with Anne Brown. Marjory thought her rather æsthetic and spiritless, she knew; and Anne was absorbed in her own thoughts; but Mary Leigh was one of those girls who can resign themselves cheerfully to being second best, as long as they are the best in their power to be happy in her devotion, even if it be unreciprocated; and she was happy, in a subdued way proud of Marjory and adoring Anne, and seeing that the two somewhat unresponsive objects of her love could now appreciate one another.

So much for the Leighs. But if their presence at Wotton was a support and a consolation to Anne, the presence of Edmund Lewis very soon grew to be a positive source of dis− gust. At first, in his egotistic, silently brow−beating way, he was an interesting visitor. He had travelled and read a good deal, and, in point of fact, knew much more about literature than about his own art. His imagination turned easily to the terrible; he considered Webster as greater than Shakespeare, and Ford as greater than Webster; he had personal experiences of more or less criminal persons, whose acquaintance, for the sake of morbid psychology, he had sought, and whose characteristics he had lovingly studied; while in reality mild and even milk−soppish in his habits, he seemed to experience a fascination from violence and bloodshed. For a week or so he was decidedly interesting, if not, to Anne and her two girl−friends, attractive. But hostility soon arose. He was a fervid spiritualist, and a great adept in mesmerising; his vanity made him see mediums, victims of his will−power, everywhere. He immediately discovered one in Anne, and begged to be permitted to try his tricks, as Marjory Leigh called them.

Now, if there was one thing which was more abhorrent to Anne than any other, it was spiritualism: averse to mysticism like every Italian; prosaic and common−sense, perhaps just in proportion to the idealism of passion and aspiration, she was impatient of the vulgar mysteriousness of modern magic; while at the same time her powerful personality, her austere will (which she always recognised as the most precious part of her nature), which took umbrage at Mrs Macgregor's theories of obedience to mere physical passions, was positively insulted by the notion of surrender to the perfectly unintellectual will of another. However, she let Lewis try. During his performance, as he fixed his green eyes upon her, and made passes with his flabby white fingers, Anne felt a loathing as if a slug were trailing over her, but she sat unaffected by Mr Lewis's will−power, and at last wearied out his patience.

"You resisted! I felt you resist!" cried Lewis angrily, at the end of the *séance*.

"There was nothing to resist against," answered Anne, bluntly; "but had there been, of course I should have resisted."

"Hamlin does not resist," replied Lewis, with a certain malignant pride. "I can do just whatever I choose with Hamlin."

"I enjoy it," explained Hamlin; "it's like the first effects of opium or haschisch. One feels one's self giving way, one's soul sinking deliciously."

"Going to sleep, in fact," corrected Anne.

From that moment Anne felt that Lewis hated her. Yet he was, in a way, fascinated by her exotic beauty; he could not make up his mind that so strange and splendid a woman could resist him. He never tried to magnetise her again; and he made many drawings of her, curiously distorting her expression, sullen, but frank and resolute, into a kind of sombre, morbid wistfulness.

"I hate those sketches he does of you," cried Marjory one day; "nasty things, which make you look I don't know to express it as if you were neither a man nor a woman, and were in love with ***him***."

Mary Leigh laughed. "The school is running to seed," she said: "the great men have done all that could be done in the way of beautiful suggestiveness the little ones can only do suggestiveness of all sorts of vague nastiness which they don't even understand. But there's a change coming on in painting; people are beginning to be satisfied with interpreting real nature; and don't you think Anne a similar change . . ."

Mary Leigh, who was the most absent−minded of Irish enthusiasts, suddenly stopped short. She had only just remembered that Hamlin was a poet and a painter of the school which she had just described. And a pained, darkened look had come over Anne. Mary Leigh could not understand that that look meant that Anne had often thought just the same thing, and that now there returned to her, with sickening bitterness, the double recollection of the "Ballad of the Fens," and of those twelve sonnets called "Desire."

Meanwhile Anne gradually got substantial reasons for her instinctive aversion to Edmund Lewis. The family of the vicar of Wotton sometimes visited at the Hall. There were two very young girls, scarcely more than children, for whom Anne and the Leighs had taken a fancy. One afternoon they came to tea, delicate pink−and−white creatures of fourteen or fifteen, impressionable, nervous, utterly ignorant of the world. Hamlin seemed to appreciate the charm of obvious purity and guilelessness which went with their ignorance of the world.

"I should like to make a picture of those two creatures," he whispered to Anne, as they sat at tea in the library, "or to write a poem about them they seem to do one good; for it is good, is it not, to see so much life which is so perfectly fresh, and unsullied, and untormented such a desire to know the world be− fore the evil in it is even guessed at don't you think?"

Even Chough could not make a single unintelligible allusion to the wife of Claudius or the daughter of Alexander VI., but sat with one of his children on his knee, looking at the young girls and gently humming a scrap of old minuet, fresh and simple like themselves. Anne could not help thinking that she had never been what these girls were. She had been shown the ugly things of life, taught to struggle with them since her childhood, and now believing equally in good, but believing sadly and bitterly. It was better to be a woman as she was, a woman who knew of good and evil, and was prepared to fight her way out of darkness; but still it was sad never, never to have been as these girls. Edmund Lewis was leaning forward on the table, his reddish−auburn head with its glittering eyes rising like that of a snake, as if silently trying to mesmerise the visitors.

"Suppose we show these young ladies some of our works of art?" he proposed, in a half− jocular way which he occasionally had. The girls had never seen any pictures scarcely, and having heard of Hamlin and Lewis as famous painters from London, were delighted. The whole party went up to Hamlin's studio. He showed the girls not the things for which he cared most, but what he thought would give them most pleasure magnificent tinted sketches of poetical legends, of the Sleeping Beauty, Cupid and Psyche, and so forth. Anne thought she had scarcely ever seen Hamlin so nice before as when he got the sketches out of the portfolio, and told the girls what they represented. When he had done, Edmund Lewis, with his slow, shuffling movements, placed his large sketch−book on an easel, and turned a page. It was covered with outline drawings of men and women, stark naked, in various listless attitudes.

Anne had seen these drawings time after time, and had thought them, accustomed as she was to studios and painters, merely clever nude studies, with the usual expression of bored depravity of all Lewis's work. She had criticised the drawing and anatomy, and had never before thought that any impropriety was connected with them. But now she could not help blushing and feeling vaguely indignant.

"That's not the sort of thing to show those children," whispered Mary Leigh, who, heaven knows, had seen nude studies enough in her life. Both she and Anne had caught the surprised, vacant expression of the two girls, had seen the flush in their face, and understood the silence, never asking what it all meant, as they stared at all this emaciated, flabby nakedness. And Anne caught also Edmund Lewis's expression, as he held the corner of the page, ready to turn over, with one hand, stroking his reddish−brown beard with the other, and looking, with slightly raised eyebrows and curious green eyes, towards Hamlin, as if to call his attention. Lewis turned another page, and another; always the same stark−naked people. Anne was very black. Heaven knows from what instinct, perhaps from a paternal recol− lection of his own little girls, Cosmo Chough understood Anne's look; and edging himself awkwardly into the corner, he banged against the easel, and made it and the sketch−hook come down with a crash.

"Confound your awkwardness!" cried Lewis, stooping to pick up his drawings, and slowly replacing the sketch−book.

"I don't think they care to see any more," said Anne; "you see, these young ladies haven't studied anatomy. Supposing you show them your Eastern sketches, Mr Lewis."

Lewis gave Anne a rapid, angry glance. "The Eastern sketches are up−stairs," he said snappishly; adding, in his drawling, mock courteous way, "I think these young ladies have seen the best I could show them."

"Then we had better go down−stairs, and Mr Chough will play an accompaniment, for I know they sing very nicely," said Anne, taking no notice of him.

Perhaps, thought Anne, she might have been prejudiced against Edmund Lewis. He did draw morbid−looking nudities; but so many other men did just the same, that it was quite possible he might have displayed that sketch−book from mere thoughtlessness. Yet she could not believe it; she had seen Lewis's look as he turned over the pages, and that look had disgusted her.

The next day but one the question was settled in her mind. It was a fine autumn morning, and Anne was seated on the terrace, waiting for the others to come down to breakfast. The air, just touched by the first cold, was exquisitely pure; and the sear bracken of the hillside opposite sparkled golden with the heavy dew. All round the swallows were whirring about, collecting for departure. The thought of the Villa Arnolfini of the place in the vineyard, among the yellowing vines, where she used to sit on the dry warm mint and fennel with the little Perrys, where, under the big mulberry−tree, they had buried her Dante in a heap of yellow leaves came home to Anne. How good Hamlin had been to her! the idea almost pained her. But this lovely morning seemed to have swept all evil away. If only, Anne said to herself, Hamlin's sympathies could be violently roused if only he could be

awakened suddenly, by some unexpected contact with the tragic realities of the world, by a sudden appeal to his generosity and indignation, out of this æsthetic day−dream with its enervating visions of impure beauty and forbidden things. If only this could be done, the horrid spell which kept him at a moral distance from her would be broken through. . . . And soon it must come, this awakening.

As she was thinking in this way, Edmund Lewis strolled up, his hands behind his back, to the table at which she was seated. He gave her a little unceremonious nod, and then, interrupting the tune which he was faintly whistling, pushed a paper−bound book across the table to her.

"Have you ever read this, Miss Brown?" he asked; "do you know that passage? I think it one of the loveliest things which have ever been written."

Anne's eye glanced at the page, pencil−marked all round, and then at the title on the margin. It was Gautier's 'Mademoiselle de Maupin.' She understood.

"I have never read it," she answered, "but I have often heard that it is a book which a man does not offer a woman except as an insult," and she quietly handed the volume back, looking up, her beautiful severe face flushed, her slate−grey eyes flashing, at Lewis.

The painter started.

"Upon my word," he answered quickly, with his usual self−possession, "I never thought that. I never thought that any book could possibly offend a pure woman nowadays. I regard this book merely as a noble hymn to beauty; others may regard it otherwise. I really had no thought of offending you, my dear Miss Brown" there was a tone of patronising insolence in his voice.

"So much the better," answered Anne, rising.

Oh how, how could Hamlin, with his chivalrous nature, endure the daily contact of such a man as this!

"Lewis ought not to have selected those particular drawings to show the vicar's girls," said Anne, later on. She could not allude to that scene of the book; but she felt she must say something. "A man ought not to show such things as those to mere children, brought up in the country, who don't know what they mean, and are merely shocked by such things don't you think so, Mary?"

"Certainly," answered Mary Leigh boldly, quite astonished at Anne's venturing to mention such a subject.

"It wasn't good taste, certainly," answered Hamlin. "Lewis is fearfully absent−minded. They are lovely designs. But still, it wasn't good taste, I quite agree."

"Good taste!" thought Anne, with a shudder. "Is there nothing higher than taste in the world?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE days later, Chough and Lewis returned to town, and Hamlin went with them. The weather had broken up, and it was time to settle for the winter. Aunt Claudia and Anne were to stay on another fortnight, in order to give Hamlin time to make some alterations in the house at Hammersmith. Such at least was the pretext; but Anne

knew that Madame Elaguine had arrived in London, and she guessed that Hamlin would wish to transact whatever business there might be, before exposing to Mrs Macgregor's wrath the Cousin Sacha of former days before, perhaps, refusing to let Anne Brown meet a woman whose past spoke little in her favour, and of whose present he knew absolutely nothing.

"How I dread seeing that woman!" he exclaimed the evening before his departure, as he walked up and down the hall with Anne, while the rest of the company was listening to Cosmo Chough, shrilly piping eighteenth century music in the drawing−room.

"Has Aunt Claudia ever told you anything of our life when Cousin Sacha was here with us, years ago?" he asked.

Anne nodded.

"Aunt Claudia told me the whole story."

"Then you can understand," cried Hamlin, almost convulsively, "how the mere thought of Sacha is loathsome to me; and yet, I must behave decently towards her don't you think?"

"Of course you must; and I can't help thinking that perhaps well, that your aunt and you may be a little unjust towards her I don't think that a child really could be so bad."

"Oh, a child may be as bad as a woman if she have evil blood in her! and just think, if Sacha was like that as a child, what must she not be as a woman?"

There was something odd in his tone; something not of indignation, but of a kind of clinging curiosity.

"I daresay," said Anne, "that as a woman she may be much better than as a child. Her eyes may have been opened to her own unworthiness, and she may have struggled out of the influence of bad examples. I am sure many, many people are much better as men and women than as children. To know, to feel responsible, means so much."

"That may be." There was some disappointment in Hamlin's tone.

Anne laughed.

"You want to find a fiend, a lamia, a vampire," she said "something hateful and picturesque. Fancy if your cousin should turn out a most prosaic and ultra−respectable woman, given up to her children, and coffee−taverns, and women's suffrage!"

Hamlin could not help laughing.

"I fear there's not much chance of that. Anyhow, I must see whether she is fit for you to receive, and whether Aunt Claudia can be mollified towards her, supposing she is the exemplary piece of prose which you imagine."

Anne had induced Cosmo Chough to leave his little girls in her charge; and the Leighs were to return to London with her and Aunt Claudia. The big house seemed very empty without Hamlin and his friends; but the quiet was pleasant. Somehow, when he was away, when she could no longer see him perpetually sitting and walking with Edmund Lewis, Anne's love for Hamlin became much stronger. In her recollection he existed only with reference to herself; she felt his goodness, she believed in his nobility, she felt sure that some day he would become more manly, healthy, and resolute. If only she could enter into his confidence, instead of men like Lewis and Dennistoun; if only she could make him see all that there was in the world besides mere art and poetry. Perhaps she was unworthy to do it. This thought spurred her on, redoubled Anne's restless desire to know, to sympathise,

and to help.

Marjory Leigh had, soon after her arrival at Wotton, made acquaintance with the wife of the vicar, a simple, energetic, rather narrow−minded but boundlessly unselfish woman, all whose thoughts were given to improving the condition of the neighbouring poor. To tell the whole truth, the vicar had a son, a young man entirely belying the usual saying about clergymen's sons, who had renounced a good living in the neighbourhood in order to become a curate in the East End of London.

Harry Collett had been at Oxford at the same time as Hamlin; he had even, for some time, belonged to the æsthetic set of which Hamlin and Melton Perry had been the heads: but he had soon become a religious enthusiast; and, his religious enthusiasm cooling down, he had remained an ardent philanthropist. Hamlin had a liking for Harry Collett. He was handsome, tall, and emaciated, like a St John the Baptist by Donatello; he was in his own style poetical; he was a dreamer and an enthusiast. Hamlin used to call him Francis of Assisi. He did several sketches of him, and asked him several times to Wotton Hall. Anne also liked and admired him; but there was something exaggerated, narrow−minded, in him, which shocked her Italian temperament. What she wanted was secular energy, not priestly devotion.

"He is a monk," she used to say; "he ought to have lived in the middle ages. What we want nowadays are disagreeable, rough−and−ready men like Cousin Dick men who don't merely feel sorry for vice, but who try to understand its scientific reason."

Marjory Leigh, who declared herself to belong to the most advanced of all advanced parties, and to whom Richard Brown was little less than a god, perfectly agreed in Anne's verdict. But being of a proselytising temper, and having a special love for proselytising among the young men of her acquaintance, she immedi− ately set about enlightening the rather High Church benevolence of Harry Collett, as soon as he came to spend at Wotton his summer holidays. Anne and Mary Leigh used often to laugh over the intensely serious flirtations which were carried on between Marjory and the East End curate flirtations of which both parties were perfectly unaware earnestly discussing charity reorganisation, ventilation, primary instruction, and so forth; but which was nevertheless destined to result, soon after the general return to town, in a long engagement between Marjory and Harry Collett. Harry was already back at his post in the East End; but Marjory, being unable to discuss philanthropy with him, went daily to help his mother in her work. Thus it was that Anne gradually became acquainted with the petty miseries of village life, its dull indifference, mistaken by poets for innocence, and beneath which lies so much possibility of stupid misery and stupid crime. "All that must be improved some day," Anne used to say; and she determined to ask Cousin Dick's advice, for she believed in radical measures rather than in the small palliations of the vicar's wife.

One afternoon they were within three or four days of return to London Marjory Leigh returned more than usually excited from a visit to the vicarage.

"What's the matter?" asked Anne, as the three girls sat alone in Hamlin's empty studio.

Marjory threw her hat on the floor. "Give me some tea," she said, "I feel quite sick; I never thought I should come across such horrors. Of course," she added quickly, before Anne or her sister had time to exclaim, and as if to reclaim her reputation for omniscience "of course I knew that such things existed oh dear, yes in big towns and so forth; but still," and poor Marjory fairly burst into tears, "I never, never thought that I should come so near them."

Finally, when she had had some tea, Marjory, all blushing and stammering, and in a hesitating, roundabout way, which curiously belied her usual affectation of cynical omniscience, proceeded to explain what had just happened. A girl with an illegitimate baby a very common occurrence in those parts had turned up for assistance at the vicarage, and, while deprecating the wretched creature's fault, the vicar's wife had revealed to Marjory Leigh a

jealously hidden stain in her parish; namely, that in the hamlet to which the girl belonged, a mishap, as she termed it, like hers was a trifle, and indeed could scarcely be considered a fault at all, compared with the condition of brutish sin in which rolled, cynically huddled together in cabins no better than sties, the whole small population of that foul little fen village.

"It appears it's been going on for generations," cried Marjory, "and that there's no hope of remedying things unless the miserable creatures be removed into more decent dwellings. It's useless trying to teach them to live decently as long as they live there, in those hovels in the fen, where half of them are ill of fever every autumn, and they herd together like cattle. Oh, it's sickening to think of Christian people being so sinful close by one!" and Marjory burst into hysterical sobs.

Mary Leigh had exclaimed in horror as soon as Marjory's meaning had become plain to her.

"Oh, don't cry, don't cry, Marjory darling!" she exclaimed, throwing herself on her knees and clasping her sister's waist. " ***You*** can't do anything, my love and you'll only make yourself ill if you let yourself brood on such things."

Anne had not exclaimed. She sat perfectly still, and said nothing. Most persons would have deemed her very callous, she looked so calm.

"Are you quite sure, Marjory," she asked, after a minute "are you quite sure you did not misunderstand, or that Mrs Collett did not exaggerate?"

"I couldn't misunderstand; and Mrs Collett gave me ever so many details such dreadful details;" and interrupted by her sobs, Marjory repeated scraps of what she had heard.

"Where is the place?" asked Anne, after another pause.

"It's that cluster of houses half−way to Eggleston, in the middle of the fen, by the river they call it Cold Fremley. Don't you remember our going down there once in the break, with the Spencers and Chough, and your saying you wished Hamlin would paint that sort of fiat green country, and Mrs Spencer saying it was unpoetical?"

Anne remembered. The recollection of that moment came like a vision; she saw the wide river, between its low sedgy banks of boggy green; the reddish storm sunset reflected in clotted flame−coloured masses in its thick grey waters; the moon rising, a spectral crescent on the blue evening sky; she heard the quail of the frogs, the cries of the water−fowl: the Spencers and Chough on ahead with the two Leighs and Harry Collett; and she and Hamlin lingering behind, watching the reddened stream and the cattle, dark outlines on the flat green banks opposite; Hamlin scrambling down the bank to get a tuft of willow herb growing half in the water. She was feeling so happy; Hamlin was so good and gentle and handsome, and she loved him so; and they two had stood by the river alone, until the little Spencer children had run back and taken her hand, and begun asking a hundred questions in their shrill baby lisp. It was so lovely and peaceful and good, this green country, this quiet evening, with Hamlin by her side and the children holding her hand. She had felt a painful longing to impress the place and the moment on her mind, to keep this happy present. "What is this called?" she had asked; and Hamlin had answered "Cold Fremley." Cold Fremley! Anne went on repeating to herself all that afternoon: the recollection of that beautiful scene, become hideous like a nightmare, haunted her. The huddled roofs dark in the distance, the curl of smoke that was the place. Anne felt dizzy. She had read enough about shame and sin, heaven knows; the poems of the poets of the set were full of allusions to such things. But she had never realised that they could be realities; they had been so many artistic dabs of horror, imaginary, or belonging vaguely to some distant, dim world, as unreal as the beautiful haunted woods and mysterious castles, the pale unsubstantial gods and heroes, and men and women of the pictures of Rossetti and Burne Jones, of the poems of Swinburne and Morris, and Hamlin and Chough. But that abominations like these should be here, close at hand, in sordid, filthy reality, reality under this

same sun, swept by this same wind, reality through which she had unconsciously walked; this seemed impossible. A strange thing happened: the thought of what she had heard haunted her so persistently, loomed before her in such ever−changing horror, that Anne at last felt like one drunk or half asleep, and began to doubt whether it was not all a horrible nightmare. Had Marjory really told her these things? Before a court of justice Anne would have been unable to say whether she had or not. It was so unreal to her that she could not accept it as a reality; the more she brooded, the more did it seem a hallucination.

"Marjory," said Anne the next day, suddenly, "is it true that you told me some dreadful things which you had heard from Mrs Collett about the people at Cold Fremley?"

Marjory looked up in astonishment.

"Of course it is," she had half forgotten it herself.

"I cannot get it out of my mind," said Anne, passing her hand over her eyes, as if to disperse some black mist; "it is too horrible. Everything in the world seems tarnished, don't you know, and a sort of horrible clamminess all round."

Marjory looked at Anne. She was very pale, and her big, greyish−blue, onyx−coloured eyes were wide with a fixed stare. She looked as if she did indeed see the tarnish on the world, and felt the clamminess; as if, like a person taken with some fever, she tasted copper on her tongue.

Marjory was a sensible girl. She had studied medicine, and knew an appalling amount about direction of the will, expectant attention, and other psychological and physiological matters. "Anne," she said, "you are making yourself ill about this matter. Of course you couldn't help being shocked; but you take it too much to heart. You are going to let these horrible things haunt you; it is a great temptation to do so. Take care; it won't do any good, and you will merely get quite unstrung. I warn you against it. You mustn't let such things get the better of your will: it's morbid, and dangerous, and unworthy," and Marjory completely forgot how she herself had entered the room in hysterics the previous day.

Anne took no notice of her speech. "You say nothing can be done until these people be given better dwellings?" she asked, after a pause.

Marjory nodded. "So Mrs Collett says, and I've read that repeatedly in books also for, of course, such things have happened elsewhere. At all events, the children might be brought up to live more decently, if they were not all huddled up together like that."

A thought seemed to flash across Anne's darkened mind. Her maid had just brought in the tea−things.

"Laura," she asked, "do you know to whom Cold Fremley those cottages by the river, half−way to Eggleston belongs?"

"I can ask Mr Hamlin's steward, miss he's just in the housekeeper's room," answered Laura.

"Run and ask," ordered Anne.

"Good heavens, Anne!" cried Mary Leigh, "what ***are*** you going to do! You surely aren't going to talk about such things and try to interfere! What can you do, when Mrs Collett has failed?"

"The houses must be rebuilt," answered Anne, quietly and firmly; "to whomsoever they belong, they must they shall be rebuilt."

"Nonsense!" cried practical Marjory; "how can you talk like that? Are you going to apply to the neighbouring squires and tell them about such matters?"

"They must rebuild the houses if once they understand," repeated Anne. "I don't care to whom they belong they shall be rebuilt. I will write and speak to every one and any one on the subject, until the thing has been done."

"It's all very well, but when it comes to the point, you wouldn't venture to mention such a thing to a man," cried Marjory, contemptuously "I wouldn't."

At this moment the maid entered.

"The steward says that Cold Fremley those houses by the river, leastways belong to Mr Hamlin, and as it's he that lets them out."

Marjory and her sister looked at each other and then at Anne, as much as to say, "Well, you see now what it would be." Anne flushed scarlet, but her face brightened.

"I will speak to Mr Hamlin," she said, as soon as the maid's back was turned. Her voice faltered a little; but it was from sudden surprise, not from hesitation.

"Oh, Annie, dear, you'll find that you can't!" exclaimed Mary Leigh; "you'll find it impossible."

"At all events, you'll have to put it through your aunt," suggested Marjory.

"Through Aunt Claudia?" cried Anne. "Do you think she will make him feel it? Why, she will answer that such things are going on all round us, and worse ones. No; I shall speak to Mr Hamlin himself: he is the proprietor of Fremley; and he is responsible."

"You'll never be able to do so," insisted Mary; "you think you will, but you can't. Fancy saying all that to a man and to a man who is in love with you!"

"What must be done, must be done," answered Anne. "It's not a question of liking or disliking. Mr Hamlin's a man, and I am a woman, and I daresay men and women don't talk about such things. But Mr Hamlin is the proprietor of Cold Fremley, and that's all I have to do with."

The Leighs looked at her with incredulous astonishment. It seemed so simple to her.

BOOK VI.

CHAPTER I.

IT was raining when they arrived in London a warmish, brown, clammy autumn day. The streets were a porridge of liquid mud, whose trail dragged along the wet asphalt; the houses were staring forth, a livid dirt−grey, in the thin rain; and the sky, the very rain, was befouled with grime. Only drays splashed through the mud, and carriages carrying hurried−looking people; children, still in their tattered summer cottons and battered straw hats, stared in at the shops, the broad sheen from whose brilliant windows was caught up by the wet pavement, and lingered out,

in broken reflections, in the brown ooze of the thoroughfare. Along the deserted suburban streets every second house seemed to be a gin−palace, with shining coloured globes, and stucco pinnacles soaked with rain, and ground−glass windows shining out like a leprosy of white. Mrs Macgregor closed her eyes in disgust. Even the maid looked depressed. But Anne stared out of the window of the carriage at all the hideous soppy sordidness, which seemed to soil and soak black into one's mind; and she felt glad. All this was reality: it was the world in which lay her redemption, and the redemption of Hamlin.

Anne found Hamlin full of his cousin Sacha, upon whom he had already called three times, and in whom, to his surprise, he had found not a trace of the child whom he had hated; but a respectable, unworldly young mother, devoted to her children, timid, and only deserving a little sympathy.

"She is a very curious woman," he said, "evidently excellent at bottom; but I don't know whether I quite like her. She has something very strange about her, handsome; and at the same time I don't know exactly what it is charming, but not quite reassuring. I am so anxious for you to see her."

"I am so awfully glad she's nice," exclaimed Anne. "Do you know, she weighed upon me like a nightmare after all Aunt Claudia had said. It seemed too horrible that such a creature should exist; and I felt sure it was all prejudice against the poor little thing."

"Don't be in such a hurry," laughed Hamlin; "perhaps you won't like her after all. There is something uncanny about her, decidedly."

"I'm sure that's all your imagination. You're always thinking that things are uncanny: it comes of writing too much about proud, pale, evil women, and that sort of nonsense."

Anne felt really glad. That the terrible Cousin Sacha, the fiend−child of Wotton Hall, should turn out a respectable, unworldly young woman, devoted to her children, seemed to her like the first breaking of the spell which hung over Hamlin. She felt no jealousy of Cousin Sacha; for, as Hamlin spoke of Madame Elaguine, it was obvious that if he was anxious to show her to Anne, he was equally impatient to display his beautiful ward to her, who had evidently been told a great deal about her already.

The next day Madame Elaguine was to call on Anne. Mrs Macgregor took the announcement in a spirit of sombre defiance. "She may come," she said, "but I will not see her. What o'clock is the creature coming?"

"Four," answered Hamlin.

"Very well; then I'll order the brougham for half−past three, and go and make some calls. Anne may stay behind if she likes."

Accordingly, at half−past three, Mrs Macgregor rolled off in the brougham to Mrs Argiropoulo's, and to various other people whom she declared she hated. At four o'clock Hamlin came up−stairs from his studio, and Anne gave him some tea. "She will be here in a minute," he said.

There was a noise of wheels; Anne felt her hand tremble as she poured out a second cup for Hamlin.

"There! I've gone and spilt it on your cuff! Isn't it idiotic of me to feel flurried about seeing your cousin?"

But the wheels passed on. More wheels, which also passed; rings and knocks; but no Madame Elaguine. Hamlin, at every false alarm, got up and looked at Anne a long, admiring look at her stately figure and her strange pale face, with the overhanging masses of crimp black hair; at the splendid postures, of which only Michelangelo seemed to have ever understood the magnificent weary weightiness into which she naturally fell.

"She is evidently not coming," he said with some irritation, as the clock struck five; "it's too bad, keeping one in for nothing, like this!"

"I didn't want to go out with Aunt Claudia; and I don't see how you could have gone on painting after dark."

"Still it is too annoying."

"I daresay it's not so easy to go paying visits at Hammersmith when one has children to attend to."

"Bother the children! she might leave them to a nurse."

At that moment a cab stopped, and there came a knock.

"That's she!" cried Hamlin, and he ran down−stairs.

Madame Elaguine entered; in the dusk Anne could scarcely see her face: she was rather below the average height, but so slender that she looked tall; there was something very shy about her, and Anne could understand her shyness.

"I am so glad you have come," she said; "we had almost given you up."

"I fear I am very late perhaps in your way," said Madame Elaguine; "the fact is, I had to take my little girl to choose a doll, and she took nearly an hour about it," and she laughed a little shy laugh. She had a beautiful voice, high and silvery, and yet warm and caressing, like a child's, which inevitably made you think of delicate green leaves, and fields whitened with budding clover, and all sorts of young and tender things. She was very thin, almost emaciated, and with a slight droop of the head: it was too dark for Anne to see her features distinctly, but she seemed pretty, and frail, and wasted. There was something in that childish voice which touched Anne; her strong, rebellious disbelief in the horrible Sacha of Mrs Macgregor came indignantly to her.

"It is very good of you to let me come and see you," said Madame Elaguine, after some trifling conversation, "and very good of my cousin to propose it; because," and her voice, in a sudden outburst of frankness, became just a little tremulous, "Walter must have a very painful recollection of me. It was a very unhappy time when we were last together, and I often think with shame of what I was then what a wretched, badly brought up, bad−hearted child I was."

"If you had been a bad−hearted child," cried Anne, "you could not be what you are now, you could not speak as you do now. I don't believe it."

Madame Elaguine sighed.

"At all events," she said, "the question now is no longer what I was or what I am, but what my children are to be. I am played out; I only hope I may live to see them on the road to being happier and more useful creatures than I have been."

There was something in that clear soft voice, with its just perceptible daintiness of Russian pronunciation, making the English words not less English, but more distinct and liquid, which made what from any one else might have seemed strange, quite natural and simple.

"You have come to settle in England?" asked Anne.

"Yes; at least if it is possible for me ever to settle anywhere. I have been a rolling stone so long, or rather such a feather carried hither and thither by the wind, that I can scarcely believe in settling anywhere; and then, perhaps, I may not be permitted to stay where I should be happy. But I want my boy to become an Englishman, and at the same time I haven't the heart to let him go away from me."

"Why should you not settle?" asked Anne; "surely you will be much happier near your child."

"Why may I never do what I wish?" exclaimed Madame Elaguine, with a curious wildness; "why may I not be left to live in peace like any other insignificant woman, whose life has been a failure? I am not my own mistress."

"Bring lights," ordered Hamlin, who had summoned the servants. He was impatient that the two women should see each other, impatient to display to his cousin the magnificent creature which belonged to him.

They had begun discussing various school−plans for Madame Elaguine's children when the lamps were brought in. Anne was surprised when she saw Hamlin's cousin distinctly; she had imagined her pretty and delicate in an ordinary way, but there was nothing commonplace about this woman. She was pale, and of almost ghastly thinness, and her features, despite her small size, were large, and perhaps a little gaunt. It struck Anne that she had seen a face like that before, and later she discovered that what Madame Elaguine made her think of was Sarah Bernhardt in one of her girlish parts, or as her face looked under the little cap of Coppée's page−boy. It was a charming, frank, worn, yet childish face, full of movement, a face which seemed to vibrate like a delicate instrument not exactly beautiful nor exactly lovable, but interesting and fascinating. It seemed to Anne that she could perfectly understand the past of this woman: a highly nervous, delicate nature, not earnest but passionate, easily turned into the very best or the very worst; and she felt more than ever indignant at the thought of the corruption in contact with which this mobile impressionable creature had come as a child, at the thought of all the unintentional shame which this woman must look back upon in her childhood.

While they were talking, Sacha Elaguine was equally busy looking at Anne; and Anne puzzled her.

"Either a volcano or an iceberg, or both," said the little Russian to herself, as she looked at Anne's solemn, unruffled, and yet tragic beauty.

At that moment a carriage stopped at the door. Hamlin went to the window. He looked rather pale and puzzled as he came back.

"Let me show you my studio, Sacha," he said hurriedly; "we can get there quickest by a little back−stair out of the library. Will you come?"

Anne understood. Mrs Macgregor, who had gone out expecting Madame Elaguine to come an hour earlier, had returned, and Hamlin dreaded a scene. But Madame Elaguine understood also.

"Your aunt has returned," she said; "yes, I'm sure she has that's why you want to hide me away; you are afraid of a scene . . ."

Hamlin hesitated; but Madame Elaguine seemed to pin him down with her rapid glance.

"Well, yes," he said; "what's the use of mincing matters? You know how unreasonable Aunt Claudia always was, and what a prejudice she had against you."

"And has still; I can believe it. But look here," and the little emaciated creature rapidly stopped Hamlin as he was raising the curtain into the next room "I am not going to be hid away. Your aunt has every reason to hate me, and to be angry at finding me here. But I am not coming into her house on the sly I won't be hidden away. Your aunt

may say what she likes to me, but she shall see me here."

"I think Madame Elaguine is quite right," said Anne, though she knew full well what sort of reception Mrs Macgregor was likely to give to the detested Sacha. "I quite understand her feeling."

"But you are not coming into Aunt Claudia's house on the sly," insisted Hamlin. "In the first place, this house is not Aunt Claudia's house, but Miss Brown's house. Aunt Claudia, like you and me, is merely Miss Brown's guest, and you have come to see Miss Brown. In the second place, my aunt knew you were coming, and went out expressly to avoid meeting you."

Madame Elaguine listened with a slight look of contempt.

"So much the better if I am not intruding behind her back. And it is very considerate of Mrs Macgregor to save me what she knows must be a painful scene. But besides Mrs Macgregor, I have myself to think of. I wish to see your aunt. I wish to have the satisfaction of telling her, that however much she may hate the remembrance of me, she cannot hate it more than I do."

There was something theatrical in this which took Hamlin by surprise; but it was the theatricalness of a quixotic and passionate temper, and Anne liked Madame Elaguine for it.

"I want to see Mrs Macgregor," repeated the Russian; "but I don't want to inflict it upon you, Miss Brown. Indeed I fear it is very ill−bred and very selfish of me to come to your house merely to make a disagreeable scene: still I can't resist the desire," and she shook her little head with its close pale−yellow curls and deep brown eyes, "only don't stay just tell your aunt that I am here, and that I want to see her."

"I will go and tell Aunt Claudia," said Anne.

But as she spoke, Mrs Macgregor entered. The old lady was short−sighted; and in that room, where the light, concentrated on a few spots, left all the more shadow all round, she did not at first notice the presence of a stranger.

"Well, is she gone?" she asked savagely.

"Madame Elaguine is here, Aunt Claudia," answered Anne, quietly.

"Here!" exclaimed Mrs Macgregor " still in this house!"

"And she has remained," went on Anne, with a weighty coldness which often put down the old lady's ebullitions, "because she wants to see you again."

Hamlin was standing by the piano. How he wished his cousin at the devil for inflicting such a scene upon him!

"The insolence!" muttered Mrs Macgregor.

But Madame Elaguine had come forward and stretched out her hand.

"I could not come here without seeing you, Aunt Claudia," she said, in her clear voice. "I want to tell you that, badly, as I behaved as a child, and cruelly unjust though you were towards me, I bear you no ill−will, and only wish to ask for your forgiveness."

She had sat down opposite to Mrs Macgregor. Hamlin's aunt scanned her from head to foot; she was taken by surprise, shaken throughout her nature, and at a loss how to answer.

"So you are Sacha Polozoff," said Mrs Macgregor at length, slowly. "I know all the fine trash which Anne talks about the woman not being the same as the child maybe; I hope so, for your sake. As to forgiveness, you have mine: but forgiveness is only an empty word; it does not cancel what has been done, neither from the memory of God nor of man. Here; ***I*** forgive you, and take it for what it is worth."

And she stretched out her hand with a bitter smile.

Madame Elaguine stooped down and kissed that shaking old hand.

"Whatever your forgiveness is worth, I take it joyfully; it cannot undo the past, and it cannot put an end to injustice and hatred, so far it is worthless. But to me it gives a new life, because I have been able at last to ask forgiveness, to admit all the mischief I have ever done, and to cast away the faults of my childhood from my own clean self," she spoke very low, and with tears in her voice, but with passion and pride.

"I am happy that you feel so comfortable," replied Mrs Macgregor, "and that I have been conducive thereto. I am happy also to make your acquaintance, Madame Elaguine, and I hope you will not deprive my nephew and niece of your society on my account."

Sacha bowed; the insult seemed to trickle off her. Anne half wondered, half admired. She could not in the least understand the kind of character which prompted such a useless and hollow ceremony as this; but as to Madame Elaguine, this solemn act of self−humiliation seemed necessary and just; she admired her for having the courage to carry out her intention.

"Good−bye," said Madame Elaguine, as Anne accompanied her into the anteroom. "I must beg your forgiveness a thousand, thousand times for having made a scene in your house. You see, I am a badly brought−up woman: I was never taught to do anything except what I liked; and I am what I am, and must say what I feel."

Her tone was very appealing.

"Will you forgive me, Madame Elaguine," said Anne, in her earnest, solemn way, "if I tell you, what it is perhaps a liberty to tell you, that I have always thought my aunt very unjust towards you?"

The little thin woman looked up in Anne's face.

"You are good," she said. "Will you give me a kiss?"

Anne stooped down and kissed her shyly on her wan cheek. But a sort of shudder passed through her as her own lips touched that hot face, and grazed the light hair, which seemed to give out some faint Eastern perfume. This woman was so unlike anything she had ever seen so unlike her own simple self.

"You will come and see me and see my children won't you?" asked Madame Elaguine. "I think it will do me good to know you." She was very excited, and she gasped as if her heart were beating like bursting.

"I will come with Mr Hamlin," said Anne.

"She is a strange creature," said Hamlin, as he followed Anne up−stairs from the door. "Didn't I tell you she was uncanny?"

"I don't see anything uncanny about her. She is very nervous and excitable very Russian, I should say and accustomed always to follow her impulses; but I think she is a brave little woman."

"I can't make her out. Did you notice her mouth? it looks as if it would bite: and she has strange eyes; one looks into them, and finds she has merely drawn out one's soul without showing her own."

Anne laughed. "Poor little woman! Fancy what her feelings would be if she ever knew all that! I wonder, by the way, whether you ever thought me strange, and told people that I had. a mouth which would bite, and eyes in which you get drowned?"

"I always thought," answered Hamlin, looking at Anne, and seeing her again in that close−fitting white bodice, with rolled−up sleeves, bending her magnificent head over the iron−board in the little nursery, with frescoes of blue skies, and blue seas, and ducks, and people in boats, at the Villa Arnolfini "I always thought that you had something strange in you, Miss Brown; some terrible thing to do or to suffer in the future; some great passion or action I don't know clearly what, but something heroic; and I think so now "

Anne smiled; but she took his words to heart, for somehow that same impression which he said he had received from her face she had had vaguely in her heart.

"I hope the strangeness may consist in being a tolerably well−behaved and useful young woman," she said, "and a tolerably grateful one."

CHAPTER II.

"**I WONDER** whether Anne Brown has really spoken about that Cold Fremley business to Mr Hamlin," remarked Marjory Leigh to her sister one day, soon after their return to town. "***I*** think she'll never do it, after all."

"I don't see how she can," answered Mary; "at least I can't conceive doing such a thing. But I don't think we must judge Anne by ourselves: when once she thinks something ought to be done, she is quite capable of forcing herself to do it. Anne is quite unlike any one else."

"Fiddlestick!" cried Marjory; "you don't know anything about women, Mary."

But despite her sister's superior knowledge of womankind and of everything else, Mary Leigh was in the right; perhaps in some cases enthusiastic admiration gives a better clue to action than mere common−sense. Anne really was made in such a way that when once she was persuaded that any course was the right one, no dislike which she might have to it, no thought of being considered queer, or improper, or quixotic, could restrain her from it. The thing became none the pleasanter to do; but it was done unflinchingly: indeed there was in Anne an almost destructive quality of will, a power of ruthlessly cutting through all obstacles, the passing consciousness of which, joined with the consciousness of the many disagreeable things which it might at any moment force her to go through, produced in her a curious kind of pessimism, which, while it recognised the evil of the world, made that very recognition an incitement to struggle for good. Anne had made up her mind that Hamlin must have the horrible condition of his Cold Fremley tenants explained to him. She fully appreciated the unseemliness, the pain− fulness, of such a revelation coming from her; but as there appeared to be no one else who could satisfactorily make it to him, it must be made by her. "It is very simple," she said to herself: and this was the most characteristic remark that Anne could ever make; for it is curious how very much simpler life does become to people who are in the habit of acting without regard for their own feelings.

But it was, though simple, difficult, not on her own account, but on Hamlin's. In the first few days after her return from Wotton, she had several times been on the point of broaching the subject, but she had desisted on noticing the absolute want of seriousness in Hamlin's manner, the æsthetic vagueness and fickleness of his thoughts. "He will do nothing practical in this mood," she said to herself; and as, time after time, she watched for a propitious moment without finding it, Anne became painfully aware, as one becomes aware of some deficiency in a valued piece of property only when it is pointed out, of Ham− lin's want of seriousness, of his utter want of any habit of asking himself about his responsibilities, or indeed of thinking about anything except himself and the beautiful and weird things which delighted him.

"Perhaps it is cowardice on my part," Anne suddenly thought; "perhaps I find that he is not fit to attend to the subject because I dislike mentioning it." So it must be done at once. Hamlin, she knew, was alone in his studio; he must have finished his afternoon's work, or very nearly, and there was no Chough, or Lewis, or Dennistoun on the horizon. So Anne closed the piano at which she had been practising some of Chough's favourite old music, and went down−stairs. She had made up her mind; but, as she went slowly to the studio, she felt her heart begin to flutter and to beat, and a cold perspiration to start out in her forehead. For all her familiarity with the æsthetic world, in whose apprehension, as Thaddy O'Reilly's Yankee friend had quietly remarked, "right or wrong don't exist," for all her habit of reading poems in which every unmentionable shamefulness was used as so much vermilion or pale−green or mysterious grey in a picturesque and suggestive composition, Anne had retained a constitutional loathing for touching some subjects, which was like the blind instinctive horror of certain animals for brackish water or mud. When Marjory Leigh had first taken her into her confidence, and told her of the pools of sin which stagnated among the starving, unwashed, and unlettered million, Anne had recoiled, and felt a sort of momentary horror for Marjory, a sort of resentment at this foulness thus obtruded on to her; and this feeling, which would sometimes still recur while talking with her philanthropic friend, was perhaps the thing in all her life of which Anne was the most profoundly ashamed. The æsthetes all round her would let all the world rot away in physical hideousness rather than have that physical hideousness put before their eyes; and she, was she not even worse, in her cowardly horror of seeing moral wounds and leprosies? So Anne argued with herself; and she would now face anything; but the feeling of moral sickness was there, however bravely she might look at evil, and try and help to remedy it.

"I am a base creature," Anne thought as she felt her heart fluttering as if it would break loose, as she stood and knocked at the studio door.

"Come in," cried Hamlin.

He thought it was the servant, for at first he did not turn round, but continued writing at a beautiful, fantastically inlaid desk in a corner.

"It's I," said Anne.

He started up to meet her.

"How sweet of you to come, Madonna Anna!" he said, beaming; "I was just wanting so much to see you I don't know why a sort of silly, nostalgic wish. It's ridiculous to be nostalgic about a person who is on the first floor, when I am on the ground floor, isn't it? and yet it is so. I was feeling quite an over− powering desire to see you. And you seem to have felt it, through the ceiling, carpets and all, don't you?"

Anne smiled faintly, but her heart sank.

"I also wanted you to see how I have been getting on with my Beatrice," he said, and rolled an easel into the middle of the room. Anne stood for a moment before the almost Giorgionesquely magnificent picture, looking vaguely at the well−known lady with those strange, half−classic, half−Semitic, and yet a little Ethiopian,

features, those wide grey eyes, that pent−roof of crisp, lustreless, black hair, those hollowed cheeks and tragic lips which had by this time become so familiar to the artistic world of London. It never seemed to her that this could have anything to do with her, this sombre, mystic, wistful woman of unreality. But she was not thinking of that; she stood at the picture, but almost without seeing it.

Hamlin was standing a little aside, looking from her to the picture, and from the picture to her, and humming the lines from Dante's sonnet, which Chough had set to music
"Ch'ogni lingua divien tremando muta,
Egli occhi non ardiscon di guardare." "Certainly," he said to himself, "Dante had not a better Beatrice than this."

"I want to speak to you, Mr Hamlin," said Anne, suddenly turning round.

Something in her voice took him by surprise.

"So much the better," he said, pulling forward a heavy arm−chair, covered with old−fashioned green brocade.

Anne sat down. How was she to begin? She had intended to prelude with some sort of apology for entering on such a subject; but, somehow, now she could not apologise.

"Do you remember a hamlet near Wotton, close by the river, called Cold Fremley?" asked Anne, slowly.

Hamlin had just caught a look which he wanted for his picture, and he had taken up his painting things.

"Yes," and he looked up from his palette in Anne's pale face, with the almost monochrome faint−red lips and the delicately hollowed cheeks. "What about it? I remember it quite well. Oh yes, a lovely spot; and we went there one evening together."

"Just so; well, it appears that this hamlet, or rather group of six or seven cabins, belongs to you is part of the Wotton property."

"Is it? I didn't know that. Fancy my being the unsuspecting proprietor of such a lovely place! I am so glad; I want to write a poem about it one day."

"And it appears," went on Anne, carefully steadying her voice, but keeping her eyes on the little cypress−trees and conventional anemones of the Persian rug under her feet "it appears that the condition of the people who live in those houses is very, very horrible; the cabins have barely more than one room, into which the whole family is piled."

"Loathsome!" cried Hamlin, with a shudder, "and in such a lovely spot. Do you remember the thick clotted masses of the river dragging between the meadow−sweet and willow−herb?"

"It ***is*** very loathsome," went on Anne, a coldness coming all over her. "'The people are very wretched, poor, always ill of fever, with no more sense of right and wrong than cattle."

"Very dreadful indeed," said Hamlin, mixing his paints. "Of course nothing can be done nothing ever can, you know "

"Something can and must be done!" cried Anne. "It appears that in consequence of this utter wretchedness and ignorance, and especially on account of the degrading effect of being all huddled together, men and women, boys and girls, all of them, in one room which is bedroom, kitchen, sitting−room, everything at the same time, it appears that these miserable creatures have gradually come to live worse than animals; they grow, and let their

children in turn grow up in horrible, shameful sin." The difficulty of saying it had vanished; Anne felt that, whether she would or would not, it must come out. Her voice had kept steady, but died out in terrible hoarseness; and her wide−opened eyes fixed themselves upon Hamlin.

Hamlin let his hand with the palette drop on his knee, and listened with deep attention. "How very strange!" he said; "how very strange how tragic!"

"It ***is*** tragic," cried Anne. "Oh, I think nothing in the wide world can be more tragic! What is the murder of the body to this? or what is any crime which one man can commit towards another, compared with men and women being pushed into wickedness by mere external circumstances, being condemned without knowing it, mere blind, indifferent creatures, to befoul their souls in this way?"

Anne had not the slightest thought of being eloquent, but she was, not only in her words, but in her face and look. Hamlin appreciated it; he was struck. Such a view of evil and of fate had never presented itself to him; he recognised how much newer and grander it was than the usual platitude about fatal passion in which he and his school had indulged.

"Are you quite sure of this?" he asked, with some interest.

"Mrs Collett gave one of the Leighs all the details of it. If you would go to her, she would tell you all about it; she has been afraid, ashamed of mentioning it to you, so I have done it. But if only you would speak to Mrs Collett now, she would explain to you exactly that ought to be done."

Hamlin did not seem to attend.

"It is awfully grand," he mused "all the grander for the utter unconsciousness, involuntariness. It would make a splendid subject for a poem. I always felt there must be something in that county which should correspond to the tragic look of everything. So much Dennistoun's notion that there isn't anything poetical or terrible in reality."

A sickening fear came over Anne. But she drove it from her: she tried to say to her− self that she had expected this; that Hamlin, being unaccustomed to any serious thought of the evil of others, and being a poet, would at first take things in this way.

"Mrs Collett says that there is hope of saving these miserable creatures by building better dwellings for them; trying to turn Cold Fremley into a village, and setting up a school. I have been thinking over it a great deal myself. Of course I'm very ignorant. But I've heard that the river ought to be valuable for water−power, because there is no other one near; so I thought the simplest would be to try and induce some one or do it yourself to set up a factory there. That would give the people work, and give them ideas of decent living, and then a school would have to be opened."

The word ***factory*** seemed to sear into Hamlin's nerves.

"A factory on that river? on my property? to befoul all that pure and exquisite country with smoke and machine refuse!" he cried indignantly.

"One single factory need not befoul anything," said Anne, sternly. "And all the smoke and machine refuse in the wide world could not make that neighbourhood one−hundredth part as foul as it is made by the sin of Cold Fremley. No, not one−thousandth part as foul as our own hearts, if we let such an evil exist under our eyes."

Hamlin seemed moved and puzzled.

"It ***is*** very dreadful," he mused. "I really had no notion that such things go on nowadays. One is apt to think the world much more commonplace than it is. I will go to Cold Fremley some day soon. I'll take Lewis with me, he'll be very much interested in it. I daresay," he added, "that there's a great deal of exaggeration about it. But as to the factory, I consider it would be against my conscience to permit such a thing: there is no greater pollution in England than factories; thank Heaven, there are as yet few in our county; and I would rather die than spoil that beautiful peaceful bit of ground."

Against this Anne felt it useless to struggle.

"Since you will not hear of the only plan which would easily improve the condition of those people," she went on, "let us leave the factory alone; it is not necessary: a few hundred pounds will amply pay for improving, enlarging the six or seven houses of which Cold Fremley consists. As to draining, every one says that were that county drained, it would amply repay the expense by the superior quality of the crops. All that is wanted for the present," invocated Anne in despair, "is that the people should have more room that they should not herd like cattle that the growing children, at least, should not be forced into contact with all that vice. And all that can be gained by merely enlarging the cottages."

"Such a thing as you suggest would besides being, in my opinion, perfectly useless involve a very heavy expense," answered Hamlin, coldly.

"Not more," cried Anne, blazing up "not more than you have been at in educating me, Mr Hamlin!"

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when she repented of them.

"Perhaps," she added sullenly, "that also has been a waste."

Hamlin did not answer; he was taken by surprise, embarrassed.

"The cases are wholly dissimilar. The left hand may not ask the right hand what it has or has not been able to do."

"What do you mean, Mr Hamlin? If you have been spending more than you can afford on me oh, don't think I'm not grateful but please, please, spend no more. This house might be sold. You don't live in it after all, and Aunt Claudia would be just as happy at Wotton. The house and furniture must be worth a good deal, and then there is the expense of housekeeping in London. Do think of it. I am sure you could raise money enough in that way."

"This house is not mine, Miss Brown," answered Hamlin, quietly; "it was bought out of your capital; and the expenses you mention are paid out of your income, not mine."

He had wasted all this on her, and the people on his estate lived in foul, sinful hovels! A strange gratitude, mixed with horror, overcame Anne; all the beautiful things about her, her beautiful fantastic dress, which Hamlin always designed for her, her knowledge and good−breeding, all that had been paid for with that money, became loathsome to her.

"It is not mine not mine; I am a mere beggar living off your charity," she exclaimed "living off what I have no right to, what ought to go to ***them*** to those poor sinful creatures at Cold Fremley. Oh, Mr Hamlin, sell this house, sell the furniture, all, all. Enough has been done for me; I don't want all these beautiful things in order to be happy; I could be happy anywhere, doing anything, if I knew that there was one evil the less in the world. If there did not remain enough to live upon, I could go out as a governess, or a schoolmistress. I have learned quite enough to do that indeed I am in earnest I should be perfectly happy gaining my bread as I used to. Only let something be done for those people don't let me feel that every lovely thing I look at, every beautiful thing I hear, every word you say, every pleasure I feel, is as sinful as those sinful lives!"

Hamlin smiled; he admired and disbelieved; but what a magnificent woman she was! what passion, what fervour under that cold exterior!

"There is no need for that," he said gently, looking at Anne with admiring and loving eyes. "I am not so poor as that, and I would starve rather than see you deprived of any single thing to which you have a right."

"Then you will go to Cold Fremley? You will see about it?" He was good and generous at bottom she knew it; and she could have fallen on her knees and cried like a child with her head upon his arm.

"I will go to Cold Fremley," he answered with alacrity. "I want to go there. I want to study the whole matter "

"What do you want to study it for?" asked Anne, suddenly and terribly; "to improve matters, or to write a poem?"

"I do wish to write a poem," answered Hamlin, who felt no shame for doing so, and resented being thus reproved. "Certainly I wish to write a poem. You made such a fuss about my tearing up that 'Ballad of the Fens' well, I now see my way to making use of all the best parts of it, and with a real tragic and passionate motive. As to improving matters, I will look about me. But I totally disbelieve in the utility of giving these people better dwellings. Of course," he went on gently, but with that tone of knowledge of the evil of the world which Anne so much hated "of course ***you***, who are pure and upright, who cannot conceive the reality of lust and the fascination of evil ***you*** can never understand the hold which evil has in this world; you cannot understand that the passion for sin may exist as there exists in you the passion for good; that most men receive in their father's blood, in their mother's milk, the haschisch of sinful desire, that the more they grow, the more it grows in them that it is their very life, and is perpetually seeking for aliment. Evil is; it cannot be stamped out."

Hamlin's eyes sparkled, and he spoke with a flush; but there was no excitement, no horror in his tone. Anne felt that he was reciting in prose what he would soon write in verse.

"In short," she said, "you think the sinfulness of the people of Cold Fremley fits very well into the landscape? You think it, as you said, very picturesque and grand?"

Hamlin was a man who could not easily keep at high moral tension.

"Well, yes," he answered; "of course it ***is*** very shocking, and if anything could be done, why, I should be glad. But I ***know*** nothing can be done; and although it is very much to be regretted, yet I don't think you can deny that there is something very grand and tragic in this sin flowering like evil grasses in that marsh."

"I see," said Anne, faintly everything seemed to be turning all round her; "good−bye."

"You mustn't be angry with me," said Hamlin, following her to the studio door. "You see I, unfortunately, have much more experience of life and evil than you will ever have. I know that fatality of sin; and that makes me take things in a different way from how you take them."

Hamlin's voice sounded faint and distant to Anne, hollow like an echo in a whispering chamber. She went mechanically up−stairs; she did not know how she felt, but everything seemed surrounded by thick, clammy horror; the world was going to pieces. When she had shut the door of her room behind her, she threw herself with her face on her bed, and burst into an agony of half−audible sobs. But when at length hours passed, and the maid came to ask whether she would come to tea, Anne felt no better; a black despair weighed upon her. On her dressing−table stood a Japanese jar, filled with delicate autumnal roses; they had the pallor, the diaphanous purity which the frost gives to flowers, as approaching death gives it sometimes to human creatures. Anne looked at them; and then, without passion or excitement, she took them out of the vase, and threw them into the fire. She watched the petals shrivel and fall to black dust on the flame, and the leaves and stalks turn slowly, with a hissing

noise, into glowing embers. Then she felt ashamed. The poor flowers were pure they at least were clean and she had destroyed them. And Anne buried her head in her hands, and began to sob once more.

CHAPTER III.

THE Leigh girls never discovered which of them was in the right; and as Anne never made any further allusion to Cold Fremley, they concluded that she had not spoken to Hamlin about it. Hamlin noticed no change in her, but then he never expected to see one: Anne became gradually more silent, more indifferent, more abrupt in her answers. Some people said, "She is getting spoilt by being made too much of;" and others, like Thaddy O'Reilly, hinted that the vagaries and splendours of æsthetic society, the poems and music and improprieties of Chough and Dennistoun, the nudities and Elizabethan dramatists of Lewis, were beginning to pall upon Miss Brown. "I'll bet anything," said Thaddy O'Reilly, "that as soon as they are married, the new Mrs Hamlin will abandon Mantegnesque costumes, will open a bill with Worth, and insist upon hiring a house in Belgravia for at least one season." So said Thaddy O'Reilly; but it must be added that he said it to Mrs Spencer, to alarm and anger whose hereditary high−art passions was the little journalist's great delight. Anne still went out into æsthetic society, she still listened to new poems and to literary discussions, she still sat to Hamlin and to half−a−dozen other painters; but when people at concerts or the play used to point out Miss Brown as the queen of æstheticism, they little guessed how far removed were the thoughts of this queen from her realm and her subjects. Ever since that memorable conversation about Cold Fremley, beautiful things, all the things poetry, painting, music, romance which had originally surrounded Hamlin with a sort of luminous emanation in Anne's eyes, had grown loathsome to her. She knew that it was unfair and absurd, but she could not resist the feeling that all the fair forms and sound patterns and imaginary passions of poetry nay, that the very beauty of nature, where any existed were foul; and her soul shrank from them as from contamination. She began to take a grim pleasure in that sordid ugliness which had, on her arrival in London, given her such a shock, and to which Hamlin and his friends were always shutting their eyes. The fog, the black ooze, the melancholy monotony of griminess, the hideousness of the men and women in the streets, jarred upon her much less than the beautiful pictures of Italian scenery which Hamlin hung up at Hammersmith, than the lovely, mysterious creatures in jewel−coloured robes, wandering in distant countries of bliss and romance, which Hamlin painted. The poetry of pure beauty sickened her; and she could not take up even the purest poems of that school, not even the mere charming pieces of decoration of Morris, without putting them down with disgust. She began to feel a vague nostalgic longing after her own past: faint recollections of her father's grimy, workshop at Spezia, of the poor little room where her mother had sat doing cheap dressmaking, returned to her. The life at Florence, the sordid life with the Perrys, the tattered furniture and ill−swept rooms, the dirty and noisy kitchen with the haunting smell of sink; the dull routine of washing and ironing and mending, of dressing and undressing the refractory children, of teaching them their letters and trying to keep them tidy; the ill−will, the muttered anger, the jeering scraps of song of the other servants, who resented Anne's superiority, all these recollections which had almost been effaced during her happy new life at Coblenz and in London, returned to her, vivid as reality, and filled her with unaccountable yearning. And yet, when she asked herself what this meant, she could not but confess that she was different from what she had then been; that she had absorbed too much of the new life ever to be happy in the old one nay, that that very indignation with the mere selfish worship of beauty which made all things seem black in her eyes, would never have been possible had she remained a mere servant. Hamlin had redeemed her soul; he had made her a thinking and feeling being but what for? She dared not admit to herself that it was merely in order that she should despise him.

But Anne pushed aside these thoughts. She felt that she had no right to indulge in them that she must give her mind to other things, her heart and her energy. Without exactly knowing what she could do, or even whether she could do anything at all, she felt that she must work work with all her might; for it seemed as if all the thoughts

which the people about her refused to think, all the sympathy which they refused to feel, all the work which they refused to do, and all the sacrifices which they refused to make, must all be taken upon herself as if she alone must bear this terrible weight of rejected responsibilities. So Anne worked. Her cousin Dick had said that no one could do any good in ignorance; and she felt herself shamefully ignorant of all but useless things. She got together a whole heap of books and pamphlets on every possible kind of grievance and evil in the world; she made Marjory Leigh tell her all the dreadful things which she knew, show her all the dreadful things which she had seen. Of such things Marjory and her young man, the East End curate, could tell her but too many; yet Anne was not satisfied. She sought the acquaintance of Marjory's colleagues in the work of helping the poor, and of Harry Collett's fellow−workers older men and women, whose account of the evil of the world, less exaggerated and poetical than Marjory's and Harry's, was still more grimly tragic. They were hopeful nevertheless; but Anne, returning home from her attendance on lectures, her ghastly rounds in the slums, home to the lovely house, with the Persian carpets, the 18th−century hangings and furniture, the old majolica and Japanese ware, the flowers and the books of music, returning home to the discussions on art and literature in Hamlin's studio and at her own dinner−table, Anne felt mere despair. For, it must be remembered, Anne had none of those consoling thoughts to fall back upon which religion, however conventional, affords. Her father, a Radical workman of the French school, had brought her up with a few elementary ideas of right and wrong, and the faith that all priests, like all kings, were the curse of the world. Miss Curzon, the kind−hearted old *prima donna* who had taken charge of her in her earliest girlhood, had given her examples of only the most frivolous Voltairianism; from the servants and the Italians who surrounded her at the Perrys, she had learned only a contempt for the conscienceless mummeries of the lowest Catholicism; from Mrs Perry only a contempt, as great in its way, for the heartless conventionalism of mere social Protestantism; and from Hamlin himself, and Hamlin's friends (for at Coblenz he had stip− ulated that Miss Brown was not to be ***bored with religion***), she had heard only of the religion of beauty. Of the men and women who used to come to Hammersmith and to Wotton, some, like Chough, professed Catholicism, and wrote mystical rhapsodies to the Virgin Mary; others, like Dennistoun, called the Virgin a prostitute, and God a highway murderer: some went in for imitating the *näiveté* of medieval Christianity; yet others filled their books with hymns to the gods, clean and foul, of paganism. There was a deal of vociferating on the subject; a deal of abusive language both of the religious and the irreligious; a deal of exhortation on the part of men like Hamlin not to have the bad taste to muddle religion with poetry; and on the whole, there was an atmosphere of absolute insincerity, in which, as in abstract politics (for certain æsthetes were extreme retrogrades, and loathed civilisation; while others would pour out by the hour revolutionary tirades of the most blood−thirsty description), it appeared that religion was a mere personal hobby or poetical fiction: the usual conclusion being simply that the world was too disgusting a place for a well−constituted soul; that the century was empty, and heartless, and emasculate; and that, as the people in the 'Decameron' fled from the plague, and told stories and sang songs in a pleasant villa all by themselves, so also must superior men and women fly from the sordidness, the uninterestingness, the mediocrity, and incapacity for passion of reality, and entertain one another with tales of romance and wonder in a fairy land, where the sole divinity was beauty, and where alone, among the lovely and noble things left by the past, noble natures could develop uncramped, according to the ideal of the Greeks, of medieval men, or of that most elevated genius, the late Théophile Gautier.

To meet the terrible realities which were now being revealed to her, to answer her own painful craving after usefulness, Anne had therefore only a vain negative belief the pessimism which is at the bottom of all æstheticism, the belief in the fatal supremacy of evil and ugliness. But in Anne this purely negative creed speedily became positive; pessimism produced not a desire to abandon the odious reality and take refuge in mere imaginary happiness, but a frightful moral tension, a constant battle of her aspirations with her belief, of her conscience with her reason, a strain of rebellion against the inevitable. So, to the weight of the knowledge of evil, to the weight of the consciousness of the deadness of soul which surrounded her, was added in Anne the terrible sense of the injustice and callousness of nature and of fate, of the groundlessness of those instincts of good which left her no peace.

But all this no one ever guessed. She despised indulging her own wretchedness. She went on, behaving as usual, goading herself to practical concerns silently, letting no one know of her misery, letting no thought of it waste a

moment of her time. Her longing was to break the hateful solidarity between herself and the school of æsthetic indifferentism; her instinct was, since she (dependent as she felt herself on a man's charity) could not practically help others, at least to understand and feel about all these subjects which Hamlin and his friends tabooed. And with this haunting desire, she turned not merely to Marjory Lee and Harry Collett, but instinctively also to her cousin Dick.

"I have read the books you lent me to take into the country," she said, giving him back the various primers and pamphlets on economical subjects. "Thank you so much for them, Dick."

They were sitting alone in the drawing−room at Hammersmith. Richard Brown had called only once before, ceremoniously and briefly, and he would not have come this time either, if Anne had not written expressly to beg him to fetch back the books. He looked at her in his incredulous, contemptuous way.

"Really," he said, "my shabby old books are very much flattered by having been per− mitted to sojourn so long among such an assemblage of lovely things;" and he looked round the room at the pieces of embroidery and the Eastern carpets, the pictures and drawings, the quantities of Japanese porcelain and lacquer all round. "How much out of place they do look, and how queer they must have felt among their companions! Let me see: two volumes on artistic furniture 'Ballads of Old France' 'Rossetti' 'Contes de Gautier.' I see "

"Those are Mr Hamlin's books," said Anne, quickly; "he must have taken them out of the library, or brought them up from the studio. I am not reading any of them."

"You are reading nothing but sociology and political economy; I understand," went on Brown, with his placid sneer, which seemed, in this frightfully masculine man, to condemn in Anne her mind, her person, her manner, her character, and even her sex. "Ah, well, I can understand that; it must be refreshing. Who is it Mr Pater, or some such great gun of yours who says that the object of the wise man is to make his life consist in as many moments of thrilling impressions as possible; that the very wise people get them out of art and song, and the less wise out of vice or out of philanthropy? You must know the passage better than I. Well, I suppose you have got as many impressions out of art and song as possible, and (being far too delicate in taste to try vice) you are seeing what can be got out of philanthropy. Is that it?"

Anne frowned.

"Of course," she said, "you think it very clever to snub me, Dick, and very manly; just to treat me as if I could not possibly have either heart or brains. Maybe; but it is a very cheap sort of sarcasm, and to make which a man like you is not at all required."

Richard Brown bit his black beard, and looked at Anne from beneath his beetle brows; he threw himself a little back on his chair, and with his head on one side, he said, with affected indifference

"You don't mean to tell me that you have read those books except as you would read what shall I say? the 'History of Furniture,' or the 'Contes de Gautier,' Anne?"

"Were you ever ignorant about important vital subjects, Richard ever conscious that it was your duty as a rational creature to know something about them, and then snubbed by a man who knew all about them, and to whom you had applied to help you?"

Brown was silent for a moment.

"I was a poor lad, working in a factory, and refusing myself food and coals in order to buy books and papers" he said crushingly "and I never had an opportunity of asking any one's assistance."

"I don't see why there should be salvation only for people who have gone through hardships, nor why only you and those who have acted like you should be treated sincerely and seriously. Do you think that because I am a woman who has been brought up among Persian rugs and Japanese pots and Burne Jones's pictures, because I have gone to dinner−par− ties three times a−week, and read Pater and Rossetti and Gautier, that I may not therefore be as honestly anxious to know about the serious things of the world as you were when you worked in a factory, and went without dinner and without coals?" and she fixed her eyes on her cousin's ugly and powerful face, in which, for all its ugliness, one might have fancied one saw something not wholly unlike that magnificent sibyl−like face which pre−Raphaelite artists had immortalised and caricatured. "Seriously, and in your heart," she went on, as Brown made no reply, "are you unable to understand that perhaps it may require more real determination to try and learn such things when one is brought up in luxury in an æsthetic house, than when one has to buy books at the price of food and fire?"

Richard Brown did not answer. He was a frank man, and he frankly faced Anne's look, and in return looked long and searchingly at her; and as the habitual look of bantering contempt had given way to a serious scrutiny, so now he gradually grew more gentle and earnest.

"Forgive me, Anne," he said, after a moment; "I think I may have been doing you injustice, and that I may, to some degree, have been disgracing myself. But, you see, I am a plain self−made man, and it is difficult for me to understand how . . ."

Brown rarely hesitated for the end of his sentence, but this time he did.

"To understand how there can be any conscience or seriousness in a woman who has been willing to owe everything to the generosity of an æsthete like Mr Hamlin" Anne finished his sentence bitterly. She went on "Well, I know you could not believe that an æsthete could be generous and noble and chivalrous; and now you cannot understand how a woman who has accepted his generosity can be anything better than than a piece artistic embroidery, or a Japanese cup, or a green tree," and Anne pulled the long pliable leaves of a palm passionately through her fingers.

Brown's suspiciousness had tried to return; but it was routed by Anne's firm look, by Anne's frank words.

"It is terrible to think how prejudiced, how inaccessible to truth, one allows one's self to become," answered Brown, "even though, Heaven knows, one tries to be fair. What you say is true. I couldn't understand your not being a mere frivolous girl, Anne; and I can't well understand it yet. But what you tell me I will believe."

"Thank you, Dick," said Anne, stretching out her hand. "I don't think we are made to like each other much: you are too prejudiced, and haughty, and contemptuous; and I am too proud and too stiff−necked. But we are both honest, so we might as well deal honestly and openly with each other, and try and understand each other's good points."

"I am not accustomed to deal with semi−professional beauties, to do the Petrarch to æsthetic *Madonna mias*," said Brown that sneer of conscious masculinity and conscious self−madeness coming over him again; "you must excuse my manner, Anne." But he met Anne's glance, and his tone changed once more.

"I will bring you some more books when I return," he said. "By the way, have you ever read any psychology?"

"What is psychology? Is it metaphysics? I have read Hegel " Anne stopped short, and then boldly added

" But it was only Hegel's æsthetics, you know."

Brown smiled. "Hegel's æsthetics are not well not Posthlethwaite's æsthetics," he said; "this is not much more difficult. It is Spencer's sociology. I will bring it you. Good−bye."

After that visit, Anne began to see more of her cousin. He came sometimes to Hammersmith, and he met her frequently at the Leighs. Anne did not feel that she completely liked him. He was pure−minded, certainly, and generous, a man devoted to progress even in its humblest forms; he had a powerful intellect and a more powerful will. But, somehow, there was in him an indefinable coarseness of fibre, a want of appreciation, of sympathy with other people's ideals, a tendency to despise all those around him, and to see meanness in all those who were not in the same position, or who had not the same views and aims as himself; above all, an unconscious desire to domineer a brutal, almost animal wish for supremacy, which his knowledge of his own purity and rectitude and self−sacrificing power made him accept and cherish as if it were a kind of holy spirit dwelling within himself, and not merely the product of a brutal temperament, which a noble intellect and a generous heart had severed from all brutish interests, but which remained brutal none the less. Anne's pride, her consciousness of finer fibre than her cousin's, made her shrink from seeking in Richard Brown for assistance in her arduous task of freeing her spirit from the slough of æsthetic selfishness; his suspiciousness of her motives, his sarcasms, his blindness to her purity of impulse, all this galled her; but she submitted to be galled. She wished her soul at least to be free, though her body might remain, as it were, in bondage, and Richard stood at the door of that world of nobler endeavour which she longed to enter; moreover, her stern spirit made her take a sort of pleasure in the very bitterness which she had to taste. If Richard had been sympathising, if he had met her half−way and tried to help her on, she would have felt that she was bound to him, that she was battering her liberty once more; and vaguely Anne knew that she must never be bound to any one save Hamlin that little as he could understand her, she was obliged, for ever, to try and understand him. And sometimes even, though the sense of Hamlin's baseness, of his selfish æstheticism and his untruthful morbidness, weighed more upon her day by day, Anne would elaborately go over all that he had been to her nay, all that, to the best of his power, he still was: she would sit for hours reading and re−reading those treasured−up letters whose arrival had made her so strangely happy at Coblenz; (how long, long ago it seemed, and how little that schoolgirl seemed to share of her identity!) and Anne, reading over those letters, carefully collecting together all the stances of Hamlin's generosity and delicacy and gentleness which she could remember nay, mere looks and tones which had brought home formerly her love for him made up out of them a simulacrum of Hamlin, and persuaded herself that she loved it, and that it was Hamlin's real reality, the reality which had become spoilt by the horrible moral atmosphere, distorted, warped, but a reality nevertheless. Nay, sometimes the sense of Hamlin's weakness would come home to her, and with a pang make her feel how much she was bound to suffer, how much she was bound to do for him.

CHAPTER IV.

HAMLIN had forgotten all about the business of Cold Fremley, except that he had stopped the printing of his book, and set to work remodelling the "Ballad of the Fens," to the immense admiration of Chough and Dennistoun, who were quite reconciled to realism now that it was allied with horrid sin. But that Anne was at all alienated from him, never once entered his mind. He noticed, indeed, that Anne had grown much more serious of late, that she seemed less happy than some months before; but for that he had his explanation. He believed that her character was suddenly maturing (for he never guessed that Anne's nature was one of those which mature rapidly, and whose maturity means responsibility), and that there was brewing beneath that sombre exterior a storm of passion of which he was the object. That such a storm would come had been his persuasion from the very beginning of his acquaintance with Anne; he had guessed in her some strange latent force, and to see it develop had been his wish. That long courtship, that purely Platonic familiarity, giving scope to so much poetic devotion, poetic gratitude, was always to end, in Hamlin's expectation, with a sudden burst of passion, which should envelop him, give his cold nature the exquisite sensation of being fired, carried off by a more powerful

temperament than his own. Hamlin had had many love−affairs in his day, more or less pure or base; he had, once or twice, been mastered by the stronger nature of a woman, but that had been mere brute passion, and what he desired was to rouse a passion terrifically overwhelming, but pure, intellectual, and with all the fearful violence of merely intellectual passions: a passion like that, which he always admired more than any other in literature, of Heathcliff for Catharine in 'Wuthering Heights,' a passion such as some men have felt for a dead woman. This he had always hoped from Anne, and in the expectation of this he had been confirmed by every new revelation of her character. Sometimes, when Anne sat listless in the midst of their guests, her mind for away, her tragic face more sombre for the blackness that was in the world around her and in her own soul, Hamlin would watch her, and feel, with a pang of satisfaction, that he had not been mistaken in her.

"She is not a woman, she is a mere splendid statue!" Lewis had once exclaimed angrily, as he felt how utterly all that kind of occult sensual fascination, which his pale mysterious face, his vermilion lips, his cat−like green eyes, his low droning voice, his sultan−like freedom of manner, his sense of omniscience and omnipotence, his own nature, strangely compounded of the beast and of the dreamer, indubitably exercised over many women, how utterly it trickled off Anne

"She is not a woman, Hamlin, she has an intellect and a will, but she has no soul; and one day you will discover it."

"She is not a woman in the sense in which you conceive a woman," answered Hamlin, contemptuously; "and she is as incapable of what you and most of us call passion, as is a statue. She has not one fibre of what you could call womanhood in her not one shred of the beast which lies at the bottom of all our natures has entered into hers; she is a woman of mere stone and ice and snow for men like you. But just for that reason has she got a capacity for passion for a passion which you can never understand such as no other woman ever had. What are all those precious women Cleopatras and Mary Stuarts call them whatever you like, whom we think so poetical? Mere common harlots, decked out in poetical gewgaws, at bottom nothing better than a Madame Bovary, not so much as a Manon Les− caut. Mere filthy clay shaped into something comely. What is it to be loved by one of them? You might as well be loved by a barmaid."

Edmund Lewis's lip curled.

"Certainly Miss Brown suits you in your present mood, Walter; I don't say not. But you will find out later what it is to be in love with a woman who is stone and ice and snow for men like me. Madonna Laura and Beatrice are all very fine; but your ideal lady, I repeat it, is no woman at all, but a mere sexless creature, something like Victor Hugo's handsome Enjolras in petticoats. Passion for humanity, for fame, for abstract excellence−oh, as much of that as you like; but passion for so humble a thing as a living man! Never!"

"Please leave the subject alone, Lewis," said Hamlin. "I don't care to have slugs creeping, even only in imagination, over my lilies. Talk about ***your*** women, other men's women, as much as you choose, but spare me your remarks about Miss Brown."

Chough had been listening. The excitable little poet of womanhood detested Lewis, whose arrogance grated upon him, and whose impurity of nature unconsciously offended the real innocence which underlay all his grandiloquently improper verses. And Chough adored Anne; she was, he often said, a quite new revelation of womanhood; and he believed that, as passion was the one noble thing in the world, and as Miss Brown was the noblest woman that had ever lived, that there must be a deal of passion in Anne.

"There is passion of all sorts," said Chough, pulling his long black whiskers; "the passion of the pure animal, the passion of the mere human creature, and the passion of divine essences: the first is like a lush tropical country; the second is like the manifold sea; the third is like the high Alps, the highest strata of air, the purest light. The passion of divine essences is more terrible than any other, exactly because of its external nature: it is tragic. Miss

Brown has that sort of passion "

"Idiot," muttered Hamlin ; and yet he felt pleased at Chough's mystical corroboration of his ideas.

Meanwhile there was one subject upon which Anne sympathised warmly with Hamlin, and that was his cousin Sacha. For all her evident theatricalness, Anne warmed towards Madame Elaguine. She saw in her something frank and fearless which appealed to her, and a pathetic helpless desire, as of a child which has been naughty but wants to learn how to be good, to retrieve her own wasted life, to save her children from what she had undergone herself; above all, a wish to be in earnest without well knowing how to, a strain to be a serious woman in the midst of the habits of a spoilt child and of a flirt. For a spoilt child, unaccustomed to self−control, impatient of small sacrifices, avid of excitement and novelty, avid of constant attention and admiration, Madame Elaguine certainly was; and a flirt as certainly also. She flirted with every one, with Hamlin, with as many of his friends Chough, Lewis, and Dennistoun as he took to her; with Anne, with the Leigh girls, with the solemn schoolmasters and schoolmistresses, whom she interviewed for the benefit of her children; she flirted you saw it by her smile and her little childish laugh of recognition with the very housemaid who opened the door; she flirted with every man, woman, and child, with every dog or cat that she came across.

"What a flirt that woman is, to be sure!" cried Hamlin, as he saw every one of his and Anne's friends subjugated in an hour's visit by Madame Elaguine. And to be a flirt was no recommendation to Hamlin; he wanted to absorb all admiration, he wanted to inspire love; flirts were his particular aversion.

"What harm does her flirting do?" answered Anne; "it merely makes her and those about her a little happier."

"I thought you cared only for serious, for intense people, Miss Brown you who are so serious and intense yourself."

"Perhaps I am too serious" and poor Anne felt at the moment that she certainly was too serious to be very happy; "but, however that may be, that is no reason why your cousin should not be a flirt. As long as a person can feel strongly and seriously on serious subjects, why quarrel with him or her for being childish about childish matters?"

For experience had taught Anne the bitter truth that people could be serious heaven knows how serious! like the odious Lewis and like Hamlin himself, and yet have no fibre of sympathy or indignation; and her experience of flippant little Chough, with his tenderly cared for wife of flirtatious Marjory Leigh and her humanitarian labours had made her hope most from the very people whose light nature she, so earnest and tragic, could understand least. And to this category she added Madame Elaguine.

"Your cousin has strong sides to her nature, I am quite persuaded," she said.

Hamlin shrugged his shoulders; but never− theless, though he highly resented Madame Elaguine's all−round flirtatiousness, he was forced to admit to himself that the little woman had, when you were in her presence, a sort of magnetic fascination.

What moved Anne was Madame Elaguine's vehement passion for her children, the long schemes which, to Hamlin's *ennui,* she would enthusiastically dilate upon for their future; and somehow, from words which she used to drop, it would seem that she had been in danger of losing those children that she was still exposed to having them taken from her, or to being in some way separated from them. Anne did not absolutely formulate to herself a hope of helping Madame Elaguine; but she felt vaguely that perhaps she, with her seriousness and determination, might help the excitable and decidedly vague−minded little woman to persist in and carry out her ideas; that here she had at last a chance of being useful. The first thing, Anne felt, was to bridge over the gulf of past animosity which still separated Hamlin from his cousin to take away from Sacha Elaguine the demoralising sense of being an only half−forgiven intruder. The great difficulty was Mrs Macgregor. The old lady could not abate one tittle of

her hatred for the Sacha of former days.

"I tell you she is a bad woman, and you will find it out some day to your cost," she would answer Anne. "The woman is contained in the child: or rather the woman is only the child altered and trimmed up to pass muster *dressirt*, as my friend Schopenhauer says."

"But, Auntie Claudia," persisted Anne, "if a person can alter sufficiently to pass muster, why should that person not alter also in obedience to her awakened reason and conscience? Why should one not be able to shed the bad qualities of one's childhood, for quite new and good ones?"

"Because one cannot, Anne; because the fox remains a fox, and the cat remains a cat, and the swine remains a swine." And Mrs Macgregor looked with cynical compassion at Anne.

"I might have remained a mere soulless servant, had every one gone on your theory," answered Anne. "No, I cannot agree with you, Aunt Claudia. I think it is terrible to condemn a woman because she was a good−for−nothing child; I think it is terrible to shut her out from sympathy which might be a comfort and an encouragement to her if she be still in need of any."

"Ah, well, that is how you young people of to−day always talk. You would object to sending criminals to the docks, because it is shutting them out of improving society."

"I don't see that the cases are parallel. I merely ask that a person be not condemned where she could not be responsible. If I thought that any one were really and hopelessly vicious, a mere source of evil, I think I should do my best to crush them out, to trample upon them."

"That is how you are, Anne, willing to be a moral sick−nurse or a moral executioner. In a world where every one has some horrid moral disease or is some horrid moral nuisance, you will soon find that such a line as that leaves no time to live. However, as to Sacha Polozoff Madame Elaguine, I suppose I ought to call her do whatever you please. You are your own mistress, and free to choose your own friends. See as much of the woman as you please, as long as you don't expect me to sympathise with you in your admiration, love, and awe of her."

"I don't feel any admiration or love or awe for Madame Elaguine. But I think that she is a comparatively young woman, very impulsive and rather injudicious, all alone here in London; and I think she ought not to be shut out from the only house which she has, as Mr Hamlin's cousin, a sort of right to enter."

"As you choose, Anne. Invite her, give up the house to her; do what you please. But remember, when you have burnt your fingers, that I told you you were playing with fire."

So Anne had her way. And Madame Elaguine came often to Hammersmith. Hamlin and Anne did their best to prevent her meeting Mrs Macgregor; Madame Elaguine was received mainly in the studio, where, little by little, and at first seemingly casually, Hamlin's friends would drop in to meet her. She was a curiously fascinating little woman. Education, in any regular sense, she seemed never to have had; she was grotesquely ignorant about a great many things, and laughed at it herself.

"I am teaching myself arithmetic in order to teach my boy a little before he goes to school," she would say or spelling, or grammar, or something similar. On the other hand, she had a lot of superficial accomplishments, like most Russians: she spoke four or five languages with tolerable correctness and extraordinary fluency; she had, in some mysterious manner, acquired Greek. She read little, and that little mainly novels and poetry; but, with her Russian rapidity to adapt herself to a new position, she had scarcely realised that she had been accidentally drafted into æsthetical society, before she had got æsthetic literature, æsthetic gossip, and æsthetic modes of feeling at her finger−ends. She immediately understood the relative positions of Hamlin, of Chough, of Dennistoun, of Lewis,

and of all the others; and was able to talk to each as he best liked to be talked to. She began with a passion for Alfred de Musset, for Gautier, for Catulle Mendès, and she rapidly became an enthusiast for Swinburne, for Rossetti, for Chough, and, above all, "for that genius, *Monsieur mon cousin* ." She let herself be talked to about æsthetic dresses, gravely listening (with only a little side−look of amusement at Hamlin or Anne) to Mrs Spencer's strictures on modern costumes, on stays, and heels, and tight waists and full skirts; and she immediately set to work untrimming her frocks and making them up into wondrous garments, not at all like what any æsthetic woman had ever worn in her life, but queer, fantastic, delightful, neither Greek nor medieval, but individual and quaint and fascinating.

"Dressmaking, as long as only pins are required, is my one talent, my one accomplishment," she would say, when any one admired the capricious garments, in which she looked sometimes like a schoolgirl, and sometimes like a page in woman's clothes, and sometimes almost like a little nun. But this was not the case. Without ever having learned, she sang with wonderful charm: a small, childish, high voice, which trilled out Russian and Spanish and French folk−songs, and which had a strange, hot, passionate power of singing those German songs which poor Anne, for all her fine voice (which Chough used distressingly to compare with that of various equivocal singers of former days) and her conscientious learning, could never succeed in rendering. But the fact was that Madame Elaguine's personality was surrounded by a vague halo and shimmer of talents: she had never learned to do anything, yet she could somehow do everything; she could write fearfully misspelt but fascinating letters and bits of verse and prose; she could mimic and act.

"She is a first−rate actress," was one of the first things which Edmund Lewis, who seemed at once singularly attracted and puzzled by her, found to say about Madame Elaguine.

"You think that because she sometimes looks a little like Sarah Bernhardt," answered Hamlin, who never cared much to hear his cousin praised, since everything which was praised in her seemed to point to a deficiency in Anne.

"I think she is an actress because I see it," answered Lewis, in his positive way. "For my part, I don't think any of you half appreciate all that there is in Madame Elaguine."

"A nice little kittenish, intelligent flirt; just the same as a hundred Russian women one has known," said Hamlin.

Lewis shook his head.

"That woman is not a mere ordinary flirt. She has an almost unique temperament: she is a first−rate medium; I feel it."

"You have felt so many people to be first−rate mediums, Mr Lewis," said Anne, scornfully. "Do you remember, you thought once that I was one."

"So I did. But this time I'm not mistaken;" and he gave Anne one of those looks of fierce aversion which, loathing him as she did, she rather liked from the little painter.

However, Lewis proved right this time. Madame Elaguine had scarcely ever heard about spiritualism, but she threw herself into it with all her Russian ardour, and in a very short time, under Lewis's guidance, became a great adept. Lewis declared that he had never met so gifted a medium in his life; and, indeed, Madame Elaguine showed a perfectly marvellous power of going off into trances, reading thoughts, and otherwise communicating with spirit−land.

A young doctor, one of Marjory Leigh's hygienic demigods, whom she brought to call on Anne, once met Madame Elaguine at Hammersmith. Anne noticed the way in which he watched her face and manner; she seemed

somehow to interest him as a problem.

"Why were you staring so at Mr Hamlin's cousin?" asked Marjory Leigh when the Russian had left.

"Staring at her?" answered the Professor, vaguely.

"She is a very pretty woman, and very charming," said Anne; "I think that is sufficient explanation."

"Well," said the young doctor, a rough, brusque creature, "that wasn't exactly the reason. I was thinking how very well, to put it plainly how very hysterical a subject that lady looks."

"What do you mean by hysterical?" said Anne, quickly. "She is very nervous, but she doesn't seem to me to be at all subject to any kind of fits."

"That's not what ***we*** mean by hysteria," exclaimed the doctor. "Hysteria isn't a fit of hysterics; it is a condition of morbid nervous excitability, usually accompanied by a certain loss of will−power. Hysterical subjects are a kind of milder mad men and women; their characters undergo curious modifications; they haven't the same responsibilities as others. I wonder whether that lady is not a spiritualist, she looks like it."

"She has let Mr Lewis, who has gone in a good deal for that sort of thing, mesmerise her once or twice," answered Anne. "I don't believe in that rubbish myself."

"Nor do I. But there is this much of truth in it, that some sorts of temperaments are naturally inclined to it, and that it reacts upon them. And I should think it would be the case with that lady."

"But surely," hesitated Anne, "people who are in good health who have never had any kind of nervous illness or shock don't get into that state."

"Oh yes, they do. It is often hereditary; one or two, or even sometimes only one, depraved ancestor will do it for you."

The recollection of all she had heard of Sacha's horrible profligate old Russian father, of her violent and weak and constantly ailing mother, flashed across Anne. And then came also the remembrance of those portraits at Wotton Hall of those generations of weak and depraved planters, who had been the grandfathers and granduncles of Sacha as well as of Hamlin.

And any remaining ill−will which Mrs Macgregor's stories had left was swept away. Anne did not like Madame Elaguine, in the same way that she liked the Leighs or even Mrs Spencer; but she felt a sudden strong compassion for her. Perhaps, she thought, there is more goodness in the world than I guessed. And it seemed to her that this giddy little woman, with her passionate desire for the welfare of her children, this woman who had struggled through the disadvantages of hereditary weakness and corrupt training, was a sort of a hero.

CHAPTER V.

AUTUMN turned to winter, and at last Hamlin's long−expected, much−talked−of book of new poems made its appearance. In her gradual estrangement from Hamlin, in the gradual replacing of the ideal creature whom she had so fervently loved by a reality by which she was beginning to be repelled, Anne had hung some of her last

hopes to Hamlin's poetry. She would often say to herself that, after all, Hamlin made no pretence to being anything more than an artistic nature; that he was a great artist, born to give the world a certain amount of pleasure, and that she had no right to ask of him to be anything else. What could she, willing as she was to sympathise and to work, what could a man like Richard Brown, with all his self−sacrificing energy and ability, do for mankind that might compare with what had been done by Leonardo, by Mozart, by Keats men as solely artistic as Hamlin? and Hamlin ***was*** a great poet, and would become a greater one of that Anne felt persuaded, for his work was steadily improving, and there were things in this book which she recognised as having the highest merit. So she clung to Hamlin's poetry as to an anchor for his nobility and for her affection. At length the volume was published. Hamlin arrived at Hammersmith one morning and placed a copy of it by the side of Anne's plate at breakfast.

"It is the first copy," he said, "and as such, belongs to you."

"Thank you," said Anne, flushing with pleasure; for, opening the book, she found on the fly−leaf a little poem, imitated from the love−songs of the Tuscan peasants, in which Hamlin dedicated the volume to her; it was beautiful and simple and almost solemn the very flower of that distant and poetic love which he professed towards her.

"You have put in the 'Ballad of the Fens' after all! Oh, thank you so much, Mr Hamlin! You know I always thought it the best thing you have ever done," she exclaimed.

Hamlin did not answer; perhaps because he was aware that this "Ballad of the Fens," rewritten under the influence of Dennistoun, was not the same as the one which he had torn up three months before. Anne soon discovered it: reading through the still uncut sheets, she found that instead of the story of married love, which had called down the wrath of the whole school, Hamlin had set in his beautiful descriptions a ghastly tale which she scarcely required more than to glance at. So this was all that had come of her having mentioned Cold Fremley to him!

"I think I have made the story more tragic and more in harmony with the surrounding nature. I always felt that I needed some more powerful and terrible situation. Like this, I think the effect is sufficiently worked out, don't you think?"

"Yes," said Anne, icily. There was the description of the sunset on the fens, of the broad slow river flowing between low green banks, its clotted masses reflecting the red sunset embers; the description of the whole scene as they had witnessed it; and then a description of the people of Cold Fremley, of their lives and sins, in which she could almost recognise her own words in which she had vainly pleaded for them that memorable afternoon in his studio. A cold terror prevented Anne from turning at once to the sonnets. But after all, had he not, as it were, promised to abide by her choice? had he not submitted, however reluctantly, to the condemnation of those twelve sonnets? Anne felt ashamed of her own suspicions and fears; she boldly turned to the end of the book, peeped between the leaves

"Desire XII. Sonnets."

Anne did not know what was the feeling which filled her. She had never felt it before. It was too cold to be indignation, too self−possessed to be horror: she seemed surrounded by an icy atmosphere, through which she saw Hamlin as through a mist. He had broken his word, and for what? To attribute to himself vicious thoughts and feelings which he had never had. Anne said not a word; the man who was capable of acting thus could not understand if he were chidden for it.

Breakfast passed gloomily, talking little, or of indifferent things. Hamlin was evidently ruffled by this reception of his book.

"Are you going to sit to me this morning, Miss Brown?" he asked with some irritation, as he rose from table.

"I will, if you wish me to."

Anne's voice smote him as if he had opened the window to a snowstorm.

"Have you anything else to do?"

"I always have plenty to do, you know. If you don't want me, I shall go out with Marjory Leigh."

"So much the better. I don't feel as if I could work successfully this morning, and I should be sorry to detain you for nothing at all. I will go and ask my cousin whether she would care to see Lewis's studio. This weather is very depressing."

"Very," answered Anne.

Anne went out with Marjory Leigh, who was on a round of visiting poor people at Lainbeth. They were joined by Harry Collett. He stood in great awe of his future bride's superior wisdom and dogmatic manner; but it was touching to see how completely these two creatures the shy and mystical curate, and the masterful and rationalistic young woman, who was wont to tell him that some day he should be persuaded that only secular work was really useful, and the Church ought to be disestablished understood each other, and sympathised in their best endeavours.

"Hamlin has brought out a new book," said Collett to Anne. "How proud you must be, Miss Brown! he has been quite another man, twice as cheerful and devoted to his art, since he has known you. For a poet like him, so sensitive and easily depressed, it must be a great thing to have a noble woman to encourage him."

Anne did not answer. She felt alone alone as in a desert, without an ear to hear her, or a hand to touch hers.

Often did that sensation recur to her now; a sensation as of dragging wearily and alone along an ice−bound road, under a grey wintry sky, weary and solitary, but with the knowledge that the more solitary and weary she felt, the more was she bound to plod on. Things that happened seemed spectral. Here in London she saw less of Hamlin than in the country; he was going about with his friends, he was at his cousin's. She did not know or care where. People talked a great deal about the new book; and only Anne was silent.

"You don't like Hamlin's new book," said Richard Brown to her one evening, fixing his eyes upon her in his ruthless way. He came often now; he had apparently got to believe in her, and he even held out a possibility to her, if she continued to work steadily, reading and attending lectures, that she might by the summer−time be able to offer herself to teach the elements of political economy at the Working Women's Club.

"You don't like Hamlin's new book."

It was not a question, but an assertion, and Anne felt it as a taunt.

"I like some things in it extremely," she answered boldly; "but I dislike and disapprove of some others."

Brown made a characteristic upward movement with one of his big black eyebrows.

"I thought that you æsthetic folk never disapproved of anything that it was against the canons of art to disapprove."

"I am not an æsthete, Richard. If I were, I should not be trying to learn the things in which you take interest."

"True. And does Hamlin know that you dislike and disapprove of some of his poems?"

For a moment Anne did not answer. Brown's question was like an insolent attempt to see into her heart. Yet what right had she to hide anything?

"He knows exactly what I think about all his poems; but he does not, naturally, agree with me in all my views."

She was determined to keep her cousin at a distance. He had hated her ever becoming connected with æsthetic society, and he tried to force her to admit that she regretted it.

But Brown had an inveterate hatred which he could not put aside.

"Have you seen the review in the 'Saturday Gazette'?" he asked.

The review was one of the few bad ones which Hamlin's book had had, among a chorus of good ones. But it was written by a rabid enemy of pre−Raphaelite poetry; and who had taken the occasion of this book to show up what he considered the pestilent moral condition of the whole school.

"Yes; I have. It is a very unjust and violent attack, and quite indiscriminating."

"So I thought. Still, what it quoted from the sonnets called *Desire* seemed, so far, to bear out its statements. What do you think?"

"I think," answered Anne slowly, and choking her pride and emotion, "that all he says about those sonnets is quite correct. I think it is most regrettable that they should have been published. But I think that in writing them Mr Hamlin was merely following the vicious traditions of his school; and I know that he is, in reality, a perfectly pure−minded man. And," she added, as if to put an end to the conversation, "he is the man to whom I owe more gratitude than any woman ever owed to any man."

Brown did not press the conversation. He understood. He had of late been getting to comprehend Anne's character; he recognised her serious unselfishness, her indomitable desire for good; he saw in her a strange straining dissatisfaction a something which was as the beating of a bird's wings against its cage. And now he understood whence it came.

"She has made her choice and must abide by it," he said sternly to himself, remembering that scene when he had tried vainly to dissuade her from accepting Hamlin's offer, and she had answered, "I love him!" "She has sold her soul into bondage, and must accept the isolation and silence and uselessness of a slave." But then, as he said good night and looked at that noble face, whose tragic intensity of rectitude was now revealed to him, Richard Brown could not help feeling a pang. "Poor child!" he said to himself; and wished he had proved less of a prophet than he believed himself to have done.

He began, in consequence, to feel a little ashamed of himself, and came oftener to see Anne. He was a brilliant man when you got him on his own subjects, warm−hearted, self−sacrificing, ambitious, eloquent; and he had always a number of practical schemes at heart. Originally a hand at a foundry, he had for some time, like Anne's father, been smitten with communistic theories; but instead of being tempted into becoming a socialistic demagogue, he had, when he was about twenty−five, given up the little workman's newspaper, of which he was editor and chief author, and deliberately set to work studying economical and social questions in the intervals of his work, carefully suspending his judgment during the while. To a man as impetuous and ambitious as Brown, to whom the easy and tempting path of party leader lay open, such a course must have meant a terrible and

long−sustained effort of self−control. But his indomitable conscience and will had carried him through it; and now he was reaping the unexpected reward of his forbearance. While slowly working his way in business and studying the subjects which were dearest to him, he had managed also to cultivate a mechanical genius, which seemed in some way hereditary in the family of Anne's father, who, in happier circumstances, might perhaps have been a brilliant inventor instead of a starving expatriated workman. He had made valuable im− provements in the foundry of which he had become the foreman, and had now, for the last two years, been the chief partner and virtual director of the business, with a fair livelihood in the present, and a large fortune and great influence in the immediate future. But money and influence were nothing to Richard Brown; or rather, influence to him meant merely the triumph of his own philanthropical schemes. Selfish he undoubtedly was, but his selfishness, his vanity, his pride, his ambition, were drafted off into the service of others. Anne listened with enthusiasm, but not unmixed with sadness, to her cousin's projects for educating the lower classes, for bringing home to the upper classes their own responsibilities; they had the charm of dreams, but of the dreams of a man who seemed able to make what he desired into reality. Even in this æsthetic society, which had looked upon him with suspicion and loathing, Richard Brown got a certain importance. He would spend hours with old Saunders the painter, and his daughter, the enthusiastic Mrs Spencer, discussing the way of introducing more beautiful patterns into trade, and of getting up schools of design and loan exhibitions for the poorer classes.

"He is a man of the middle ages!" Mrs Spencer would enthusiastically exclaim; "if only we had a few more like ***him*** , we should soon build cathedrals and town−halls like those of the fourteenth century."

"He is a canny Radical," answered her father, "but a gude sort of man. For my part, I don't much believe in educating the lower classes up to art, but there's no harm in trying, and, at least, we shall get better−made chairs and tables for our money."

Chough was equally enthusiastic. Richard Brown was anxious to get up some concerts at a kind of workman's union at which he presided; and Chough yes, the great Chough himself, who hinted mysteriously that his father (who was an apothecary at Limerick) was a duke, but that he would rather die than succeed to the title was prevailed upon to take the musical direction upon himself. While these schemes were going on, Madame Elaguine met Richard Brown.

There was something in this big, burly, rather brutal man, which immediately fascinated the nervous little Russian woman: she sat at Brown's feet, she listened with rapture to his theories, she threw herself headlong into the plan of the concerts; she offered to perform, to teach, to do whatever Brown might wish.

Hamlin was thoroughly disgusted with his cousin Sacha, who had hitherto known no divinity save him and pure beauty, when he saw her devoting herself to humanitarianism, personified in what he called "that shoddy philanthropical black brute." He became vehemently devoted to Anne. He seemed to repent of his book. He declared himself sick of London and of æsthetic society.

"I must turn over a new leaf," he said. "I feel I must, or sink into being no better than Chough or Dennistoun. But I am too weak to turn it over alone. Will you help me, Miss Brown?" and he looked at her with his slow, beautiful glance of Platonic love.

Anne smiled sadly. "No one can help any one, I am beginning to fear; and I least of all." She had got so accustomed to these sudden returns of Hamlin's, to these false starts, these longings after a healthier moral and intellectual atmosphere, which came to nothing. She saw so plainly the hopeless weakness and thinness of his nature; and yet in such moments she could not help feeling some of that old love for this beautiful, delicate, idealistic, chivalrous creature whom she knew to be mere selfishness and vanity. If only he would remain thus at least.

"Perhaps you are right," answered Hamlin, leaning over the piano at which she was seated; "but I feel myself sick of this life, this poetry. All is false, false, hollow, and empty. My verses are untrue, my pictures are mere Christmas cards; even with you as a model, I feel I am always repeating the same wearisome insipid trick of eyes, and mouth, and neck. Oh, I don't know what to do!"

It was but too true. That school of mere beautiful suggestion, which scorned reality and mechanical skill as a bird scorns the ground, was fast sinking into nullity. Anne had often remarked it in comparing the works of various masters; she had noticed the stray sentences, not meant for her, dropped by painters of other schools.

"Go to Paris and study for a year or so under Bastien−Lepage, or Henner, or Duran," she said, with a smile at the vanity of her own words.

Hamlin could not even conceive that she was in earnest, that any one could dream of seeing anything in modern French painting, that any one could be so mad as to think of ***his*** studying.

"Yes," he cried, "that is the only art that can live in our day! Ours is a mere phantom; our poetry is a phantom; they come round us imploring us to give them life, like the ghosts round Odysseus's trench. But who shall give them life? Where shall we get the life−blood of passion whereon to feed and revivify them?"

And he suddenly turned round and looked at her with great yearning eyes. Hamlin was genuinely unhappy, though he did not guess that his unhappiness was due to vacuity, to slighted vanity, to the sudden infatuation of Madame Elaguine for a shoddy philanthropist. He longed for passion as, in hot climates, after months of faint sultriness, one longs for rain and wind; and he looked at Anne as one might watch the dark clouds hanging on the hills, the dark clouds which hold the storm for which one is thirsting. Oh for a strong passion! it would revive him, revive his art. Hamlin did not say it to himself in so many words, but he felt it.

He talked long and vehemently about the necessity of going outside one's self, of transmuting one's consciousness into that of another, of having something beyond one's self to live for. He told Anne, always with those yearning eyes fixed upon her, that what was wanted to revive the world and art (and by the world he meant himself) was passion; but not the mere sultry passion which his school had sung about, which merely enervated and sent to sleep, but the clear cold air, the whirlwinds and thunderstorms of ideal love of love such as Dante had felt for Beatrice, and Heathcliff for Cathey. It was very eloquent and beautiful what he said about this love, which was something vague and quite unselfish and outside one's self, a sort of act of adoration and purification and renunciation, a meeting of two souls which vibrated in unison in their desire for the good and the noble. While he spoke, Anne almost believed that he was sincere; sincere, indeed, he was, but according to his nature, not hers. She felt the tears coming into her eyes, and a vague wish to throw herself into his arms and implore him to cast aside his selfish habits, to live for the life of other men and for her love, came to her heart. But when, suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by the entry of Edmund Lewis and Madame Elaguine, it all ebbed back, till her whole nature seemed to burst. She felt that he did not know what he was saying, what he did not comprehend what he was wanting; she felt the uselessness of saying to this man that the world and herself were waiting for him to love them, that her whole nature was sickening for want of one with which to vibrate in harmony of desire for the good and the noble. Cold Fremley, the sonnets, a hundred little words and looks which had made the chasm between them, returned to her. She felt once more alone, terribly and hopelessly alone.

And still, when she met her cousin Dick, and realised how different he was, how genuine and strong and passionate for good, she could not help experiencing a sort of repulsion from him, and a melancholy, hopeless throwing of herself back on to the unreal Hamlin. She felt that Richard Brown, with all his nobility and energy of nature, would never have done for her what Hamlin had done, would never have been for her what Hamlin had been; that he would never have singled her out, her a mere servant, and guessed that in her there was a soul which could love and could aspire. But after all, why had Hamlin singled her out? and what had he guessed in her, what had he hoped from her? That line of Rossetti's, which Hamlin admired more than any other, which he so often

quoted
"Beauty like hers is genius," returned to her with a chill; and she felt that Hamlin wanted, expected from her that sort of passion which he had spoken of to revive him and his art. It seemed to her as if she had been sold in the slave−market, and were being told "now love."

CHAPTER VI.

RICHARD BROWN did not let Madame Elaguine sit at his feet very long. After about a fortnight of extremely assiduous visits at the Russian lady's house at Kensington, during which he poured out to the enthusiastic little woman all his philanthropical schemes, Richard suddenly gave up calling, and even avoided meeting Madame Elaguine at other houses.

"Why have you deserted Madame Elaguine so suddenly?" asked Anne of her cousin. To confess the truth, Anne was rather malicious in her question. She had speedily recognised the vanity, or rather the self−sufficiency, the belief in his own irresistible uniqueness, which was the leaven of Cousin Dick's virtues, and she had been amused from the first at seeing how this earnest philanthropist had let himself be caught by Madame Elaguine's conscious or unconscious instinct of flirtation; and now, she thought, Dick has suddenly awaked from his dream of having fascinated and converted her. Anne smiled as she asked the question, but there was sadness as well as amusement in her smile. In his way his blind, self−satisfied, unselfish way Dick was as vain as Hamlin: wherever she looked vanity and hollowness met her, and she herself could not even conceive what vanity was.

"Why have you deserted Madame Elaguine?" repeated Anne.

Brown suddenly raised his big, rough, black head from the review which he had been mechanically looking at, and answered, looking straight in front of him

"Don't speak to me about Madame Elaguine; she is an odious woman."

There was something brief and silencing in his tone which surprised Anne and precluded further questions.

"In fact," added Richard Brown, "if it were not that a woman like you will never even understand what Madame Elaguine is made of, I should peremptorily say that she is not a person for you to know."

Anne was indignant, and yet, at the same time, a little shocked.

"Why, what has Madame Elaguine done?"

"Done!" answered Brown, half waiving the subject, and half insisting upon it, as self−important men frequently do. "Why, she has ***done*** nothing. But that makes no difference; she's an odious woman."

Anne laughed bitterly. The whole world seemed so awry, every one seeing everything through the crooked spectacles of his own vanity. Now here was Dick insinuating evil against a woman because he had been such a big baby as to fancy her in love with him.

"Men are very unjust!" cried Anne; "they always trump up some mysterious sin to justify their unreasonable aversions."

Brown reddened, and was on the point of saying something. But he checked himself, and merely remarked

"Oh, of course women always fancy that they understand each other better than a man can."

"So they can! A woman can always understand another woman better than a man can, who attributes all sorts of nasty masculine faults to women, or suspects imaginary feminine ones, when he doesn't see clear. Oh yes, I know: every woman is weak, vain, a creature of impulse and passion, something half−way only between the man and the child, as I read in a French paper, with a kind of sham character, like the backbones of cartilage or jelly of some lower creatures!"

Brown shook his head.

"Most women are like that, but not all; not you, Anne, for instance."

"Thank you," answered Anne, scornfully.

"But all women, at least all noble women, are unable to judge of other women. How should they judge? It is only a man, or a base woman, who knows of the mud out of which many women, like many men, are moulded."

"One does not need to be base to know that," said Anne, half to herself; and she thought of the mud which she had discovered in her own silver idol.

"I don't think we are alluding to the same thing," said Cousin Dick, turning off the conversation.

"Mere vanity, and the injustice of vanity," said Anne to herself, and her pessimism became more confirmed. But later, although she continued to believe quite equally in Richard Brown's vanity, she began to suspect that there had been in this coarse−looking man a movement of modesty, an unwillingness to let her eyes rest upon some nasty thing which he had seen. But of this, at present, she had no idea, and Madame Elaguine, although she did not find much in common with her, became for Anne another victim of the vanity and injustice of the world.

They saw a good deal of the little woman now. Anne thought she understood her thoroughly, and owned to herself that she had not understood her at first. She recognised that the little woman had much more character than she had at first imagined; and the impression of frailness, childishness, and helplessness which something in Madame Elaguine's appearance, manner, and voice had at first given her, wore away so completely that she could scarcely believe it had ever existed. Eccentric and irresponsible she still seemed, always rushing from one enthusiasm to another, always thirsting for excitement; but Anne found that instead of a childish girl who could lean upon her, she had to deal with a woman, undisciplined and capricious indeed, but still, in many respects, more of a woman than herself. She was flighty and giddy like her own little girl in many respects, and fully as ignorant of many things; but she had a knowledge of sides of life which Anne instinctively guessed, and from which she re− coiled. With an extraordinary love of the beautiful, the fantastic, and the ideal, which, as it made her dress herself in queer *ingénue* little costumes, also made her mould her conduct, ideas, and words rather theatrically in obedience to a conception of something striking and pretty, Madame Elaguine had, at the same time, a vein no, Anne thought it must be a mere exterior dab, not due to her inner nature, but to her Russian and Continental education of coarseness, which surprised and pained Miss Brown. Once or twice, in Anne's presence, she alluded to things in a manner which gave Anne a shock; and Anne, who, half Italian as she was, and wholly fearless and unprudish, would ask herself what right she had had to feel like that; she would analyse Madame Elaguine's words, and find them, when measured by a Continental standard, very harmless; yet somehow, though she told herself that she was stupid and unjust, something of the painful impression would remain. Also, she could not conceive how a woman could like to sit for hours, as Madame Elaguine did, on the score of spiritual *séances*, with a man like Edmund Lewis. She never heard him talk on anything objectionable to the Russian; and yet there was something to her inconceivable in the endurance of this man by a young woman. Anne came to the conclusion

that she must be growing horribly prejudiced and unjust; and the less she could sympathise with some of Madame Elaguine's tastes (though there was nothing really objectionable in them) the more did she force herself to try and understand, and make allowance for, and help the little woman. And one day Anne's sympathies were really enlisted for her.

It was about Christmas, and Anne had prevailed upon Hamlin to accompany her and Madame Elaguine to a pantomime, to which the Russian was taking her little girl, and Anne the two Chough children. Anne amused herself heartily, as she always did, at every sort of theatrical performance, with the love of shows and acting in her Italian blood; she was so happy laughing with the children, while Hamlin talked with his cousin and Chough in the back of the box, that that evening long remained a sort of oasis in the dreariness of her inner life. There was a tremendous crush in the lobbies and on the stairs;. and while Chough shoved on his two children, and Hamlin tried to make way through the crowd for his frail little cousin, who looked as if she would be knocked over and trampled like a feather, Anne, towering through the throng (and people turned to look at that magnificent pale face, set in crisp black hair, and said to each other, "Look there; that's Miss Brown, the famous pre−Raphaelite beauty"), held Sacha Elaguine's little girl close in front of her, calmly making the crowd divide as a ship divides the water. They were fairly out of the theatre, on the steps looking out into the street, with the gas burning dim in the fog, and the long splashes of yellow light on pavement and wet cab−tops, waiting in the damp cold, while Chough called their carriage, and Madame Elaguine, leaning on Hamlin's arm, the two little Choughs by her side, had heaved a sigh of relief, and exclaimed

"Oh, how delicious it is to be in the cold, and fog, and dark, after that theatre! "

When little Hélène Elaguine, who was holding Anne's hand, and see−sawing from one leg to another while staring at the men in opera hats and comforters, and the ladies and children huddled in furs, and the policemen and cabmen who passed in front suddenly gave a piercing shriek, and threw herself into Anne's arms, clinging to her and burying her head in her pelisse.

"Good heavens! what's the matter, child?" cried Anne, mechanically clasping the little girl round the waist.

"What's the matter?" cried Hamlin, who had not seen this action.

But Madame Elaguine had let go his arm and darted forward, white as ashes, and seized her child from Anne, and cried "Let us go! let us go!" in an agonised voice.

The carriage came up, and she jumped into it, scarcely giving Hamlin and Anne time to follow, and leaving Chough and his children amazed before the theatre door.

The carriage stopped at her door in Kensington.

"I cannot pass this night alone with only Helen and the servants! I cannot, I cannot!"

And Madame Elaguine burst into tears, strangely intermingled with hysterical laughs.

"They want to take my child away; they are trying it again!"

"What is to be done?" asked Hamlin.

"I will stay to−night with Madame Elaguine," said Anne, with decision; "if you will go to Hammersmith and tell Aunt Claudia's maid that your cousin was feeling ill, and I am staying with her till to−morrow. Help Madame Elaguine out, will you?"

Hamlin lifted his cousin out of the carriage, while Anne took charge of the child, whom its nurse carried up in a condition of lethargic sleep.

When they were in Madame Elaguine's drawing−room, the Russian took the child in her arms, and flinging herself on a sofa, burst out crying, her sobs interrupted by moaning complaints that some one wanted to take her child away.

"I will go to Hammersmith now, and leave you with her," whispered Hamlin to Anne, who had knelt down by the side of the sofa.

"I will come to−morrow morning for news; good night."

"Good night," answered Anne, under her breath.

But Madame Elaguine heard. She started up, and looking wildly about

"Oh, don't leave me alone yet!" she cried.

"Miss Brown will remain, Sacha," said Hamlin.

"Oh, don't leave me yet, Walter!" repeated Madame Elaguine. "I am afraid I am afraid of Miss Brown."

"I think you had better remain, Mr Hamlin," whispered Anne; "she will probably be quiet in a minute or two."

Hamlin took a chair near the table, and looked on in surprise. Madame Elaguine was stretched on the sofa, her sleeping child pressed close to her; her little head, with its short pale curls, thrown back; her eyes half closed, moaning and gasping and sobbing; and Anne, kneeling by her side, looking anxiously into that curious, convulsed face.

"Do you think she is going to faint?" asked Hamlin of his cousin's Swiss maid, who stood by, the picture of self−satisfied composure.

"Oh no Monsieur need be under no apprehension. Madame often had *de ces crises*; Madame was often frightened like that. It was the first time since Madame was in England, but it was quite common. Madame," added the servant quietly, "has probably seen her black man "

"What black man?" asked Hamlin.

Sacha Elaguine had suddenly raised herself on her elbow, as if she had heard the maid's words.

"Take Mademoiselle Hélène to bed, Sophie," she said quietly.

"Shan't I take her?" asked Anne.

"Sophie knows how to manage her," answered Madame Elaguine; and sitting up, she drew the half−wakened child close to her and kissed her with convulsive passion. Yet she let the maid carry off the little one, and merely let herself slip down on the couch with a moan, putting aside her heavy fur and passing her hands through her pale blond hair, and moaning.

"Don't you think you had better go?" said Anne to Hamlin. "I will look after your cousin." She would loathe to have Hamlin sitting there, looking at her, if she were in Madame Elaguine's condition.

Hamlin rose.

"Stop a minute," said his cousin faintly, turning round and fixing her vague northern blue eyes on him; "stop a minute, Walter."

Hamlin remained standing, his eyes involuntarily fixed upon the curious spectacle of this prostrate little figure, panting and gasping as if going to die, and half unconscious of any one's presence her cloak thrown back on the sofa, her hair tangled, her bare arms and neck (for it was one of her caprices always to go the play, even to the pantomime, full dress) half covered by the fur of her pelisse and the lace of her dress.

"Stay a minute; I want to explain," repeated the Russian, in a faint voice. "Anne dear Anne where are you?"

"Here I am," answered Anne, in her cheerful strong voice; "do you want anything, dear Madame Elaguine?"

"I want ***you***," and Sacha flung her arms round Anne's neck, and drew her dark head close to her own little pale yellow one. Anne felt her arms tighten passionately round her, her little hand tighten convulsively round her neck, as if the half−fainting woman would throttle her, but she felt no fear, only a vague, undefinable repulsion. Madame Elaguine sighed a long sigh of relief, and loosened her hold; but she kept Anne's face near hers, and kissed her with hot lips on the forehead.

"Dear Anne," she said, "forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Anne, trying to get loose and to rise to her feet. But Madame Elaguine kept her down in her kneeling posture, her arm always round Anne's shoulder.

"I must explain it all to you," she said, in a slow, vague tone, fixing her eyes upon Hamlin. "Don't think me very foolish or mad; but I thought they were again trying to carry off my little Helen, they have tried before, and they keep writing to me, telling me that they will carry off Helen or kill me. I don't care about that, but Helen!" and Madame Elaguine hid her face in Anne's iron−black hair.

Hamlin looked on as in a dream. It was a curious sight, these two women, so different, and yet both so young and beautiful, the one clinging so to the other; and of the two, Madame Elaguine, whom he had never thought regularly handsome, with her thin, strange face, and red lips, and wild eyes, seemed to him at this moment the stranger and more beautiful of the two.

"I want to explain it all," said Madame Elaguine. "Walter, give me that box the little Indian inlaid one on the writing−table there, next to the palm−tree."

Hamlin brought the box; and Madame Elaguine, without letting go her hold of Anne, pressed a spring and opened it. It was full to the brim of letters some large and folded in their envelopes, others mere scraps of paper. She took some out, and spread them on her knees.

"Look," she said, letting Anne go, so that she could, while still kneeling, see the papers.

Anne raised herself, and Hamlin approached.

"Look at these," said the Russian, carefully handling the soiled and crumpled pieces of paper; "these are to me what love−letters are to other women, they are my life my past, and my future." And she fixed her eyes wildly on Hamlin. "As other women have lived on knowing that they were loved and would always be loved, so I have lived, ever since I was twenty, knowing that I was surrounded by invisible enemies, who would either put a sudden end to my life or protract it with their tortures. Ah! I know you think me giddy, and fickle, and childish;

but you don't know that I try to lose my wits in order that I may gain some peace!" her voice burst out hot and passionate.

Anne and Hamlin were shyly fingering the papers; they were all in the same hand a curious, crabbed, left−handed character some in French, some in English, some in Russian, but all brief and to the same purpose: initials of which neither Anne nor Hamlin understood the meaning at the head, and below a threat of something terrible, sometimes left vague, sometimes outspoken, as death, to what was styled the traitress. Many of them said that what could not be visited on the mother should be visited on the children, and all concluded with saying that wherever the traitress went she would be followed by invisible eyes and footsteps.

"It was all my fault in the beginning," began Madame Elaguine, covering her eyes with her hands; "but I was very young, ignorant, and lonely; and after all, what harm did I do? I had been married when I was only seventeen to a man whom I thought of as a father; and little by little, when I found what sort of man he was how base, and coarse, and cunning I began to feel very lonely and empty−hearted. I was too young to care for my children, who were babies, and I was a baby myself. But it was all so lonely, and the world so mean about me. I longed to be of some use, and able to sacrifice myself for something. And a man was sent across my path, twice as old as myself, whom I looked upon as a father, and who treated me as a child; and this man used to talk to me, when my husband left me all alone to run after low women, and tell me all about the miserable condition of Russia, and how all the good was being stamped out, and only selfishness, and injustice, and corruption triumphed. He was a Nihilist himself, and one of their chief men a wonderful man, who seemed so cold, and just, and honest. So, little by little, he converted me to his ideas, and I got to know other Nihilists, men and women, and heard a great deal about all sorts of terrible doings. I felt so happy and heroic I was a fool, you see. Then I suddenly discovered that my hero was quite different from what I thought that he had gained all this power over me only in hopes of making shameful use of it, and had cornpromised me with his party merely to make me his mistress. When I understood it, I drove him away, and threatened to tell all to my husband; and then he swore to get the better of me, and to use all the power of his society to bring me, as he called it, to reason. For two years, while my husband was alive, I struggled with him, and he kept on threatening and hoping to frighten me. But when my husband died, I sold all the Russian property, and was preparing to leave the country, and then that man who hated me, just because in his way he had loved me, denounced me to his society as a traitor to the Nihilist cause, and as a person to be hunted down. And so, ever since, I have been persecuted with all the might of the Nihilists wielded by this man; and although I have been hundreds of times on the point of denouncing him and his associates to the Government, I have never done so, because I am still a Nihilist at heart, and hate the Russian Government as much as I hate him; and he, who knows it, knows I cannot defend myself, and employs his power in tormenting me."

A convulsion passed across Madame Elaguine's face; it dropped, like that of a dying person. But she started up suddenly, and went on with her story. For ten years nearly she had been persecuted in this mysterious way; threatening letters had come to her by all manner of conveyances, brought by the post, found on her table, dropped by invisible hands at her feet. Attempts had been made to poison her, stopped just in time to let her know of them for the object seemed rather to make her life unbearable than to take it away; burning spirits of wine had been poured under her door; twice she had been shot at. But the most terrible part of the persecution had come when they had discovered her passionate love for her little girl (the boy, now at school, they had somehow let alone). Several times, in various places (for she was always on the move, flying her enemies), attempts had been made to carry off the child; once, at Cannes, she had gone to the window just in time to see a man snatch up the child, who was playing in the garden, and to fire off a revolver at him.

"If I had killed my child," said Madame Elaguine, savagely, "it would have been better than to see her carried away from me."

The individual who had made these attempts she described as being very dark, as if his complexion had been altered by overdoses of nitrate of silver. And this man would every now and then, at unexpected moments,

reappear, and his reappearance meant some fresh outrage. Poor little Helen had suddenly seen him, or thought she had seen him, among the crowd coming out of the theatre; and this had produced the child's sudden fit.

"Ever since I have come to London," said Madame Elaguine, "I have been comparatively quiet. I was almost forgetting all about my misfortunes, or thinking I was forgotten and here it begins afresh;" and she burst into tears.

"Oh why, why cannot I be permitted to be happy for a little while only a little while?" she cried.

Anne had listened awe−stricken. She had always thought there was something mysterious about this giddy little woman. This frightful undeserved calamity struck down her imagination; what right had she ever to feel unhappy in the presence of such misery as this?

"Perhaps," she suggested timidly "perhaps it may have been Helen's fancy. As she is used to the idea of this black man, she may have imagined, being tired and overexcited from the play, that she saw him among the crowd."

"Oh no, no, it was he, really he," moaned Madame Elaguine, turning over on the sofa and burying her face in its cushions.

"You must go now," whispered Anne to Hamlin; "there is no earthly use in your staying. I will sit up with her till she be quiet. Good night."

"Good night;" and Hamlin, as he noiselessly opened the door, cast a last glance at that singular group in the rose−coloured light of his cousin's lamp, Sacha, with her fur and lace all in disarray, gasping on the couch, her bare throat heaving, and one of her thin white arms hanging loosely by her side; and Anne Brown, in her long plain white dress of high art simplicity of cut, stooping over her. For some time Anne sat by Sacha's side, holding the Russian's hot hand.

"Is Walter gone?" suddenly asked Madame Elaguine, turning her head.

"Mr Hamlin went some minutes ago."

Madame Elaguine raised herself and sat up on the sofa, and passed her little hands through her disorderly yellow hair.

"Give me a kiss, Annie," she said.

Anne stooped down and kissed her.

"Perhaps I had better go to bed now," said Madame Elaguine.

"Shall I help you to undress?" asked Anne, who feared that Hamlin's cousin might have another fit of hysterics.

"Oh no; call Sophie she will undress me."

On Anne's call, the Swiss maid emerged from the next room.

"Put me to bed," ordered Sacha, rising and leaning on the arm of the sofa.

"May I really not help you?" asked Anne, for the maid looked so indifferent, nay, so sulky, and she seemed to handle her mistress so roughly, that Miss Brown wondered how Madame Elaguine, in her state of nerves, could

endure to be helped by her.

Anne waited till Madame Elaguine was in bed.

"I have made up the bed for Mademoiselle in the spare room," said the maid, looking at Anne with a curious insolence; and she led her up−stairs. Anne did not put out the lamp, and she did not undress. She could not sleep; and she felt miserable at the notion of Madame Elaguine being left all alone on the first floor. What if the little woman should wake up with a panic, if she were to fancy that some of her mysterious persecutors were hiding in her room? Anne took the lamp, and silently descended into the drawing−room. All was quiet. She sat down in an arm−chair, and made up the dying fire. She felt very restless and unable to sleep. The whole scene of this night and Sacha's revelations had shaken her nerves and gone to her imagination. In her half−drowsy, dreamy condition, everything seemed to her strange and eerie in this room, which was so unlike her own at Hammersmith. It was full of pretty things, but in great confusion; Sacha's piano was still open, with a book of Rubinstein's songs on it. There was a heap of dog's−eared French novels and recent volumes of poetry on the table, and the whole room was heavy with the scent of some Eastern drug and of Madame Elaguine's Turkish cigarettes. On the table by Anne's side were some books: she took up one, and opened it at random; it was Hamlin's new volume. At the head of the page was the title, "Desire XII. Sonnets," and all along the margin was a faint line in pencil, and the words, in a childish hand, "How beautiful! and how ***TRUE***!"

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER I.

THE notion that a man was waiting, thirsting for her love, would have been enough for many a woman in Anne's position many a woman more gifted than Anne, and more conscious of her gifts, especially if the man who thus tacitly implored her to love and kindle love in him, were, like Hamlin, the former object of passionate worship. But with Anne Brown it was different. Some few women seem to be born to have been men, or at least not to have been women. To them love, if it come, will be an absorbing passion, but a passion only of brief duration, the mere momentary diversion into a personal and individual channel of a force which constitutes the whole moral and intellectual existence, whose object is an unattain− able ideal of excellence, and whose field is the whole of the world in which there is injustice, and callousness, and evil. Such women may be very happy if they love a man with their eyes open love him as a mere secondary concern, as a mere trusty companion in the struggle after the ideal; but if they love in a man what momentarily seems to be that ideal, if they love with all the force of their nature, a terrible reaction of vacuity and despair must soon come. As with their lovers and husbands, so also with their children: they cannot blissfully concentrate all their passion upon them; such love will soon become narrow and bitter for them. They are indeed sent into the world (if any of us is ever sent for any purpose) to be its Joans of Arc to kindle from their pure passion a fire of enthusiasm as passionate, but purer than it is given to men to kindle: they are not intended to be, except as a utilisation of what is fatally wasted, either wives or mothers. Masculine women, mere men in disguise, they are not: the very strength and purity of their nature, its intensity as of some undiluted spirit, is dependent upon their cleaner and narrower woman's nature, upon their narrowness and obstinacy of woman's mind; they are, and can only be, true women; but women without woman's instincts and wants, sexless women made not for man but for humankind. Anne Brown was one of these. She had no idea that she was of this strange, rare stuff of heroines; she had no notion that she was at all superior to the ordinary run of her sex; indeed it was her perfect ignorance of her own exceptional nature which caused most of her wretchedness, making her at once more impatient with the weakness of others, and more impatient with her own difficulty of being satisfied. Love, therefore, was not for her a happiness, nor an ideal, nor even a compensation.

In an intensely earnest nature like hers, a few years are worth a lifetime: everything is understood, endured much sooner; all that can be felt, for pleasure or pain, is rapidly exhausted, and the character remains early, with all its human lusts and vanities burnt out like the gases in green wood, ready to become the fuel for unindividual ideal passion. So at twenty−three, Anne had, so to speak, loved out her love, her passionate adoring love, as she had dreamed out the dreams of her life; anything that might still come would be but a faint momentary flicker of sentiment, a detail in her life, and no more.

So when Hamlin had, in his veiled way, made her to understand what he hoped, what he desired, what he expected, what (she could not help saying to herself) he had bargained for, of her, the thought of this love, which she could no longer feel, and which she was expected to give of this love which was to be merely the highest selfish pleasure, the most precious (because the most refined), æsthetic lust of a selfish æsthetic voluptuary, Anne experienced a sense of horror and self−debasement. So this was what Hamlin was waiting for this which made him play that comedy of respectful distant adoration, of freedom of choice in her, of absence of all rights in himself this that her solid mass of soul should slowly take fire, and smoulder, and, leaping up in inextinguishable flame, set him also ablaze.

Hitherto Anne had been unhappy from her isolation, from her gradual discovery that the man whom she had loved as an ideal of nobility must be scorned as a mere weak−spirited and morbid−minded artistic automaton, a mind creating beautiful things from sheer blind necessity, as a violin gives out beautiful sounds, but soulless, like the mere instrument of wood and string. She had been unhappy because she was alone, terribly alone; but now she was unhappy because she had discovered that she was in bondage, surrounded by walls, a slave. And now that she yearned for the icy sense of isolation with which she had lived a few weeks back, as a prisoner in a fortress might yearn for the desert, she found also that she could no longer drift on indifferent, enduring the present, and hoping for the future. She could no longer vaguely say to herself, as she had so often said before, that Hamlin might be redeemed, that he might yet become once more an object of her love: for it had become plain to her that her future was settled; that whatever Hamlin was, he was her master, her proprietor; and that, lovable or not lovable to her nature, he expected, counted upon her love.

This new feeling made Anne's life that life which was so completely a life of the world within, not of the world without insupportable in a new way. Isolated she could live, but not caged. Her whole soul sickened; she no longer thought of trying to influence Hamlin, of trying to help others; all her energies were concentrated upon helping, upon freeing herself.

"There is something the matter with Anne Brown," said Sacha one day to her cousin. "What is it?"

"Miss Brown always looks very serious," answered Hamlin, affecting indifference. "She has a tragic sort of face even when she is quite happy. It is one of her great peculiarities, and to me her charms; but for some time I could not realise that she was really happy."

"That's not it," cried Madame Elaguine, impatiently. "I know Anne when she's happy and Anne when she's unhappy. She doesn't look merely grave and tragic as she used to she looks perplexed, and pained, and worried; she's not happy in her life."

"Miss Brown," said Edmund Lewis, in his drawling, clammy voice, fixing his conquering eyes on Madame Elaguine with a quiet, insolent smile "Miss Brown is a woman, although she looks like a goddess; and even goddesses, you know, could not help being women too."

The Russian laughed. "Always the fatuity of these men!" she cried, and turned contemptuously on her heel.

Hamlin did not answer, but a feeling of satisfaction came over him. Anne was unhappy; and in a nature like hers, he said to himself, love must be unhappiness. But when he saw Lewis and his cousin alone he felt annoyed; and

he fell upon their spiritualistic practices with a perfect rabidness of scorn.

Anne little knew that she was watched; she did not care what might or might not be thought of her by Sacha Elaguine, by Chough, by Edmund Lewis, by any of these people whom she despised; and as to Hamlin, an instinct told her that he would never guess what it was that troubled her. So Anne kept her pain to herself; but sometimes the despair of being thus enslaved became too strong for endurance, and she longed for some one to whom to confide it. Every word, every look, every piece of attention, every show of indifference on Hamlin's part, seemed to mean the same thing: that he expected her to love him everything seemed to allude and point to that. The only women with whom she was at all really intimate were the Leighs; but Anne could not say a word to them, could not ask their advice. She could never, she thought, make either of these girls enter into her situation, comprehend her feelings, make her understand that she was not ungrateful, and that Hamlin was not ungenerous. Yet she felt the terrible need of some one to counsel her to take some of the frightful responsibility either of ingratitude or of degradation from off her to show her either how to get out of the situation, or how to submit to it. Such a person there was a person who might help her, who might even understand her; but something told Anne that she must not have recourse to him, to her cousin Dick. Perhaps it was vanity, perhaps a knowledge that Richard Brown would triumph over this miserable ending to what he had always opposed; a fear lest he might misunderstand Hamlin, and bespatter what was the one beautiful thing in his life his raising up of Anne. For it was a curious point that, contemptible as Hamlin had become to Anne, and unworthy in her own eyes of her love, she could not endure the idea of any one else understanding this, of any one else attacking Hamlin. None of them, she felt, could understand what Hamlin had done for her; what he had been nay, what, as a beloved piece of the past, he still was to her; only she could measure what she owed to him, and only she, therefore, might weigh the bad in him against the good. For even when she was most overcome with the sense of the moral prison which was closing round her, to cripple her life and break her spirit, Anne could not wish that the past had been otherwise that she had never met Hamlin, never contracted a debt towards him, never loved him. Bleak and dark as might be the present, she would not ever have given up that past, that sudden flaming up of her life, that one spell of hope and trustfulness, and admiration and love, which must serve her for all her existence: to have had that was always sweet, to have been given it was always a reason for gratitude. Moreover, Anne could not now contemplate what she would have been had she never met Hamlin. To her stern and idealising nature, to have remained without knowledge, with− out responsibility, without sympathy, without sense of right or wrong, morally only half developed, only half alive, as she had been during her earlier girlhood, was unendurable. She would not, for all the pain and humiliation which it might cost her, have forfeited the finer fibre, the clearer vision which had shown her that she was indebted therefor to a man whom she despised. No; she could not, even in thought, relinquish the past. But what of the future? The question laid hold of Anne's mind, and for some weeks rode it like an incubus. How many of us have thus let a hopeless problem get hold of our whole nature, and make it move, day after day, week after week, in the frightful treadmill of its vicious circle?

Every night Anne lay down to sleep with her doubts half solved, her mind half made up, only to wake up the next day with all her doubts reinforced and all her resolutions scattered. Such a condition is not due to weakness or indecision of character; nay, it is probably only the earnest minds, the most capable of serious decisions, who can thus go on living in suspense, resisting the temptation of a decision, enduring the monotonous recurrence of a struggle of motives and of thought; it is the effort, this frightful mental instability, at retaining moral life where life would easily be extinguished; it is the weary tramp up and down with cold cramped limbs of the prisoner who knows that were he to stop, were he to lie down, he would have rest, but also death. Almost unintentionally Anne kept asking herself what steps she could take to be free. She used, in moments of weakness and weariness of heart, to go over schemes of independence, to indulge in day−dreams of self−supporting liberty. She who, a few months ago, had dreamed of raising the lower classes, of spreading higher knowledge and ideals among them, of awakening the more fortunate parts of society to their sense of responsibility, she whose whole energy had been taken up in silent projects for bettering, no matter how little, the world, bettering the poor by making them think and enjoy, bettering the rich by making them feel; giving the shop−girls of the Women's Club a glimpse into the world of imagination, and giving Hamlin a glimpse into the world of reality, she was now thinking of how she might earn her bread, how she might live as a teacher or a governess. Talking with the Leighs and her cousin, she

used shyly, and with a desire to deceive very foreign to her, to put questions, seemingly purely abstract, as to what a poor girl with a certain amount of education could best do as to what was required of a schoolmistress or a governess. And, while telling herself that it was all useless that she was bound by the past, however much she might try and cut herself loose from the present Anne mechanically gave her time to studying, no longer to be more worthy of Hamlin, or more useful in the world, but to enable herself to gain a livelihood if . . . Ah! well, when she asked herself plainly what that "if" meant, she had to answer that she scarcely knew: if the slave−owner should say to his slave," Go I am tired of you;" if the man who had bought the precious statue or picture should weary of it and wish to exchange it. And Anne had to admit to herself that Hamlin was not the man to feel or act like this. Nay sometimes, when she had indulged in a day−dream of freedom when she had let herself go to the vain belief that Hamlin would one day awaken to the sense that this woman was not his ideal, as she had awakened to the sense that he was not hers when she had worked out the details of her half−starving life of independence, her return to her old drudgery (but with a freer spirit), her hard struggle as a teacher of little children, or a shop−girl, or at best a schoolmistress, the recollection of the past would suddenly overpower her the recollection of what she had been, what she had hoped the recollection of her love of that debt which she was now devising a means of paying off, and poor Anne would burst into tears. But that debt, she felt, could not be paid off. She might support herself in the future, but how could she get rid of the past? If she lived on dry bread for the rest of her life, Hamlin would still have done for her what she believed that no other man had ever done for a woman; if she could save up every penny of earnings and place before him all that he had ever spent for her education, would it not be the basest, vilest mockery and cheat, and could she repay the love which he had felt, the trustfulness which he had shown? Repay it she never could; for love and trustfulness she could not give in return; and she must ever remain in his debt, remain his to do his bidding. And yet at times the question arose in her, What right had she to pay a debt at the price of her honour? To become Hamlin's wife when she did not love him, to pretend love which she did not feel, this was in Anne's eyes, measured by her stern measure of right and wrong, a prostitution; and could it be honourable to let herself be dishonoured? But Anne cast this thought behind her; Hamlin, by binding only himself and leaving her free, had by his chivalrous generosity really bound her; if to possess her, and as much of her life and love as she could give, would make Hamlin happy, he had a right to it.

The strain, Anne felt, was becoming too much for her; this question of her own future, of her own dignity and undignity, was swallowing up her whole nature, neither more nor less than the nature of Hamlin and his friend was swallowed up by their æsthetical feelings. Anne recognised, with terror, that she was deteriorating; that she was beginning to care nothing for others in this preoccupation about herself; and that such a thing should happen that she too should lose her more generous feelings was a greater degradation than any other which could come over her. This shame and this misfortune alone it was in her power to prevent, and she determined to prevent it. She did her best to put aside all questions of her own future, to accustom herself to wait for what might happen, what she might be summoned to do, and she threw herself with more ardour than ever (trying to escape from the contamination, not merely, as before, of the selfishness of others, but of her own) into such studies and questions as concerned wider interests than her own.

Anne's earnest nature, lacking the happy faculty of being absorbed by present feelings, had always been very subject to a dull moral pain at the evil in the world, storms from the great Sahara of misery which would lower over her own oasis of happiness, clogging its atmosphere and blighting its greenness. But now her efforts not to brood over her own unhappiness, resulted merely in her brooding almost unceasingly over the unhappiness of others. And gradually, to the sense of the misery of the world, became superadded the terrible sense of the injustice of that world's arrangements: from being indignant with the callousness of men, Anne became indignant, with the same cold and sombre indignation, at the callousness of God. She felt herself alone, isolated, separated not only from the men and women surrounding her, but separated in spirit from the whole scheme of things. And to her, the greater part of whose life was in her aspirations, this gradual removal of anything to which to aspire, this gradual destruction of every ideal with which to sympathise, such a condition of moral loneliness was, as Anne once said to her cousin, worse than death.

Richard Brown had somehow, that day, been more sympathising with Anne than usual. Had she not been too much engrossed, she might have noticed that he watched her face, listened to her words, not merely now with gentleness and friendliness, but with a kind of suppressed admiration and wonder.

"Nothing is so bad as death," answered Richard; "because, once dead, we can no longer feel, we can no longer judge, or sympathise, or strive."

Anne looked up from the frock which she was making for one of the little Choughs, whose wardrobe was getting into a lamentable condition.

"I don't mean that we are so useful when we are dead, but we are less unhappy. You talk of feeling, and sympathising, and judging, and striving: what can we feel, and sympathise with, and judge, except the miserableness of men, and their weakness and badness, and the horrible arrangement of the world which makes them such? and after what can we strive, except vainly to release ourselves from that abominable order of the world?"

Richard Brown looked at Anne for a moment in silence. He was a singularly unæsthetic man, and confusing beauty with mere utility, he had never well understood the beauty which artistic people chose to see in this strange, uncommon, sombre face, so unlike that of any one else, and which seemed to have no prototype either in man or woman. But now he felt that Anne was beautiful, and very beautiful.

"All mankind is gradually releasing itself from what you call this evil arrangement of the world," he answered; "or rather, the very perception that such an arrangement is evil is teaching mankind, I mean all that much of mankind which makes the rest move on, to rearrange the world, and out of the bad to make the good."

Anne shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"Why was the arrangement made if it was evil?" she asked.

"Because," said her cousin, watching her face as he let his words drop "because there was no sense of good and evil at the beginning; because it is only man who has conceived that the pleasure of others is good, and the pain of others is evil; and because, therefore, only man can be expected to reorganise the world so that the good of others be sought and the evil of others avoided. It is only man living with men, and feeling their miseries in his own, and their happiness in his own, who can be anxious for justice and impatient of injustice. How can you expect it of nature?"

Anne did not answer, but remained for a moment with her hands folded over her work, looking out of the window. Outside there was only yellow fog, and leafless spectral branches; yet her onyx−grey eyes opened slowly, as if she were taking in some faint but glorious vision.

"What right have you to expect such feelings except from men and women?" went on Brown; "the gods, you know, have other things to do. I suppose," he added bitterly, "that they had a godlike life like their representatives, the poets and artists, on earth, creating only for their amusement, and keeping every disagreeable sight, or sound, or feeling, or suspicion away from them."

Anne was accustomed to such hits at Hamlin; they were too true to be refuted, and too spiteful to be accepted; and now she was too much absorbed to notice any of them.

"I don't know exactly what you are driving at, Dick," she said. "I don't understand your theory about man and God, and right and wrong; it is misty to me. But still it seems I don't know how as if, could I only understand it, it would make a great difference to me."

"It must make a great difference to every honest person. You have no religion, Anne."

"No. I thought religion was all bosh; merely a sort of silly pretty delusion, like love and all that;" and Anne thought bitterly how her own only religion, her love for Hamlin, her desire to become worthy of his goodness, had lamentably betrayed her.

"Without religion life is death," said Brown, with his positivistic solemnity.

Anne looked at him contemptuously; she had so often heard people talk solemnly like that. Did not Hamlin talk in that way about the religion of beauty, and Dennistoun about the religion of love, by which he meant lust?

"It is all very fine; but I don't much be− lieve in religions. There is nothing worth worshipping; all is fetish, at best half silver and half clay."

"You don't believe in any religion, Anne, because you have never tried to find one."

"I have looked in the Gospel, and in the 'Imitation of Christ,' and in my own heart, Dick; and what I have found there is ignored in the scheme on which the world is made; because I have read there of love and justice and mercy, and I have not found the love and justice and mercy which presided over creation."

"I told you that the world was not made by man, and that it is man who has conceived good and evil. I always told you, Anne, that it was a great pity that you should read only books upon details of science, like political economy and so forth, and refuse to get general ideas of what is and what is not the belief of our age."

"Detail knowledge I mean knowledge of political economy and physiology and so forth is useful; it can be applied, it can serve to make people a little less wretched. What is the use of your general ideas? Oh, I know; the religion of truth, the worship of ideas, &c., &c. I don't see that it is a bit nobler to worship truth than to worship beauty; your religion of science is only another form of selfish æstheticism: your friends hanker after knowledge, as my friends hanker after beautiful pictures, and music, and poetry, and women; and as my people dignify their appetites with the name of religion of beauty, so do yours sanctify theirs as the worship of truth. All that merely makes the world more cold and black in my eyes."

"These general ideas," answered Brown, "are what prevent me from being as wretched as you are. Do you call that useless?"

"That is just what Mr Hamlin says about beauty, and Chough about the Eternal Feminine. But I don't see that the world gains by this devotion."

"I know nothing of Hamlin's or Chough's opinions," interrupted Brown, impatiently; "but I know that if you permit yourself to continue in this kind of pessimism you will enervate your soul, Anne. It seems very noble and austere, and all that sort of bosh; but there is just the same fascination in it as there is in any morbid excitement, and just the same debasement of the individual in indulging therein."

His words seemed to go through Anne. Was she becoming selfish, weak, self−indulgent? The terror of it sickened her. And was everything, however noble it seemed love, beauty, nay, even her indignation at the world's evil only a snare?

"Will you teach me, Dick?" she said, after a moment. "I don't much believe in your religion positivism, I suppose it is for all religions seem to me to turn out, oh, so empty, after promising so much. But if you will tell me, or give me books to read, you know I will do my best to understand."

"You are a noble girl, Anne," said Brown half audibly, fixing his eyes on Anne's. "I did not think there was a woman so strong, and truthful, and fair−minded as you well in the whole world."

"You always think people base, Dick," she answered sadly. "It is a wretched mistake, but not so bad a one for yourself as always to think them noble."

Richard Brown lent Anne a number of books, and he often came of an evening when Hamlin was gone to Madame Elaguine's spiritual *séances* (for despite his scepticism he found himself attracted by the mysticism with which Edmund Lewis had easily infected his cousin), and talked them over with her. He took her also to hear the lectures of a friend of his, a red−haired young man of genius, dying of consumption, who had for truth and righteousness a passion such as other men may have for sport, and who was the chief preacher of the secular and scientific religion with which Brown was imbued, and with which he was seeking to imbue Anne. Anne was not so quick in being converted as her cousin had expected; she was slow of thought, and her earnestness, her honesty, perhaps also a painful remembrance of so many other deluded hopes, made her sceptical. But, little by little, Anne was converted; and, as her cousin had foretold, she was happier. The world and its contradictions became simpler in her eyes, and she became once more confident of good. Moreover, what Brown never guessed, her new faith in the triumph of right, her new belief in the necessity of doing one's duty for the sake of mankind and of progress, had at once given her a more serene determination to accomplish her duty towards Hamlin; and, what was more important, it had taken away her thoughts a little from her own position of impotence and isolation and probable degradation. And perhaps, unconsciously also to Anne, she felt less isolated now: she felt as if in this rough, brutal, vain philanthropist, who was so honest, for all his petty vanity, and who was so desirous of her good, despite all his former contemptuousness, she had gained what she had never had, and had yet always vaguely wanted, some one for her to understand and to understand her, to help and be helped by not an ideal being to adore as she had adored Hamlin, but a good, wholesome, strong reality whom she could love as a brother.

"I owe a great deal to you, dear old Dick," she said one day, taking his hand; "I am so glad I would not let you continue to despise me."

Brown flushed, and his cynical smile failed him. "Despise you? Oh Anne, how could I " he exclaimed. But suddenly he checked himself.